

Bonus Episode: Regret with Daniel Pink, from A Slight Change of Plans

Jill Stoddard: [00:00:00] Hey listeners, it's Jill here. We're doing things a bit differently today by bringing you a special preview from another podcast that we enjoy, and thank you Will to. It's called A Slight Change of Plans on a Slight Change of Plans. Dr. Maya Shankar, a cognitive scientist who is an expert on human behavior, examines who we are and who we become in the face of a big change.

Maya has intimate conversations with people who have faced incredible transformations, people like Casey Musgraves and Amanda Knox, as well as everyday inspirations like Christy Warren, a first responder who after enduring psychological trauma from helping others in emergencies bravely, sought out help for herself.

We've talked a lot about how we respond to life changing situations here on psychologists off the clock, and we're always looking for science based ideas to help you live better lives. So we think you'll find the stories on a slight change of plans to be relatable and help you navigate the changes in your own life . In this preview, Maya sits down with bestselling [00:01:00] author Daniel Pink to talk about a feeling so many of us have experienced regret. Dan believes that negative emotions, you know, the ones we all try to bury deep down and pretend don't exist, can actually be a force for good in our lives.

He thinks we can take the feeling of regret and reframe it as an instructive emotion. Dan speaks to not only how he came to realize that regret was a valuable emotion, but the two complex mental abilities we have as humans that allow us to feel regret in the first place. so we hope you enjoy Maya and Dan's conversation as much as we have.

You can hear the full episode and more from a slight change of plans wherever you get podcast.

Daniel Pink: I don't think we've done a very good job equipping people with how to deal with negative emotions. I think at some level we've sold them a bill of goods about the need to be positive all the time. And what we should be [00:02:00] doing is saying, yeah, have lots of positive emotions. They make life fantastic, but you're gonna have some negative emotions.

And these negative emotions are adaptive. They're functional if you know how to.

Maya Shankar: That's bestselling author Dan Pink, who believes that negative emotions can be a force for good in our lives. Dan is most interested in the emotion of regret, which is the focus of his book, *The Power of Regret, How Looking Backward moves us forward*.

But it took Dan a while to figure out why regret was such a valuable emotion.

Daniel Pink: You know, reading through all these regrets every day here in my office. Why was I not more bummed? I got these people opening up their hearts and, and telling me the mistakes that they made and how terrible they feel about it.

Why did they not bring me down? And, and I finally over time, realized that when people tell you what they regret the most, they're telling you what they value the most.

Maya Shankar: On today's episode, how to transform our Relationship with Regret to live happier and more fulfilling [00:03:00] lives. I'm Maya Schenker and this is a slight change of plans, a show about who we are and who we become in the face of a big change.

So I guess I'll start Dan by talking about how much I loved this very visceral description of regret that you share in your book. You call it the stomach turning feeling that the present would be better and the future brighter if only you hadn't chosen so poorly, decided so wrongly, or acted so stupidly in the past of all the feelings to study.

Why did you choose this one to examine in part.

Daniel Pink: Because, uh, my stomach was churning my because I had that emotion and I wasn't sure what to do about it. At some level, I was at a point in my life where to my surprise, I had [00:04:00] mileage on be, I had room to look back. And like many people who look backward, I look backward.

And I see, ugh, if only I had been kinder, if only I had taken more risks, if only I had worked harder. If only I had done that rather than that. And my stomach was churning in a way that made me wanna talk about it. And when I very tenderly began mentioning it to other people, I discover. That everybody wanted

to talk about regret and that our perception of this emotion and what it meant to people was very different from how it lived in people's hearts and heads.

Maya Shankar: Hmm. Yeah. I love that. I think you, you probably identified there was something counterintuitive we might discover if you were to go down that path. Before we analyze how regret affects our lives, I first wanna recognize. Just how remarkable it is that we as humans are even capable of feeling this thing called regret.

I mean, as a cognitive scientist, I'm always marveling at human abilities, but this one in particular kind of knocks your socks off. Um, you say that our ability to feel regret [00:05:00] depends on at least two pretty complex mental abilities. Do you mind painting a picture of, of what those are?

Daniel Pink: Sure. The two mental abilities are time, travel, and story.

So time travel is essential in our ability to experience regret. If you think about this, so suppose that somebody has a regret about marrying Steve rather than Bob. Mm. I married Steve and I should have married Bob if only I'd married Bob. All right? So think about that. So what are you doing? You're getting into a time machine and you're traveling back in time to when you first got to know Steve and Bob.

Now that itself is pretty amazing that we can travel through. In our heads. That's amazing in itself. But wait, there's more. Because what we do is we go back and imagine what happened, but then rewrite the story, essentially negate what really happened, overwrite it with our own tale. Hey, I'm gonna marry Bob.

That's amazing too. But wait, there's more because then we get back in our time machine. And [00:06:00] come back to the present, and suddenly the present looks entirely different because we've reconfigured the past. And so that's an incredible cognitive ability. This ability of counterfactual thinking.

Counterfactual thinking is when we imagine a situation that runs counter to the actual facts. . So counterfactual thinking can be, it rained yesterday if only it were sunny yesterday. That's counterfactual thinking. How would my life be different if it was sunny yesterday? Uh, it's one reason why, I mean, as a cognitive scientist, you know that little kids can't do this.

Their brains are not fully developed enough to do this kind of processing.

Maya Shankar: Mm-hmm. . So I'd love to dig into the fact that kids can't do this cuz it is fascinating from a child development perspective.

Daniel Pink: So, so this is, um, an experiment done by a couple of, of developmental psychologists, and what they did is they told kids a story about two boys.

One was named Bob and one was named David. Now these boys live near each other and each day. [00:07:00] Bob and David would each ride their bikes to school and they would take a path that went around a pond. Now you can go around the right side of the pond to get to school, or you can go around the left side of the pond to get to school, and both paths are equidistant.

It's the same length, the same amount of time, but every day Bob goes around the right side of the pond and David goes around. The left side of the pond. Okay, so what they tell the kids is, this is the following story. One morning Bob rides around the right side of the pond, but unbeknownst to Bob, a tree has fallen, smacking itself into the center of the path, and Bob collides with the branch.

He falls off the bike, he hurts himself and is late to school. The left side of the path was fine. Now that same morning. David who gets up, I guess a little bit later, [00:08:00] David, who always takes the left side of the pond. He says, You know what, Today I'm gonna take the right side of the pond. David also hits the branch.

He gets thrown off his bike. He's injured too, and he is late for school. And so the question that these researchers asked these young children is, who would be more upset about riding? Along the path that went around the right side of the pond, Bob, who does it every day? David, who just did it that one day or would they feel the.

So five year olds said, Ah, that'd be the same. They'd be totally bummed out because they hit a branch and fell off their bike and were late to school. But seven year olds realized that it was actually David who would be more upset because he deviated from his ordinary path.

Maya Shankar: Hmm. He'd be more likely to feel regret in this case.

Daniel Pink: Exactly. David would feel more regret because a seven year old is saying, If only. [00:09:00] David had taken the left side of the pond, he would've avoided that branch and gotten to school safely. And on Todd, you

know, five year olds and seven year olds are only two years apart. But a lot goes on in that, Todd, for these young brains to acquire the strength and the muscularity.

To perform this kind of mental trapeze act that we're talking about, where you're swinging back and forth between past and present, between reality and imagination. That's a very hard act to perform. Mm-hmm. . And you need the muscle memory, you need the strength, you need the dexterity. And that happens somewhere probably between the ages of five and.

Maya Shankar: Yeah, man, it's so funny. I'm literally in this moment, I'm feeling starstruck by our own minds. . So pardon me while I just have a moment.

Daniel Pink: It's incredible though.

Maya Shankar: I'm such a nerd. .

Daniel Pink: I'm with you. I'm with you a hundred percent. It's actually just astonishing. It's amazing what our minds can do. I mean it, it should honestly, my, it should.

Take our breath away. Mm-hmm. , that is when I was reading [00:10:00] the neuroscience and the cognitive science, it's like, wow, our brains are awesome. They're, they're a little glitchy in certain circumstances, but it's a pretty good piece of equipment. You know, like I'm not returning it to the factory.

Maya Shankar: I've said. I've said before, I feel like we as humans are so hard on ourselves, but actually we should just feel like we're crushing it every moment of our existence, just by virtue of existing and doing like 99% of the things we do on any given day.

So, you know, who needs celebrity sightings, Dan? When you got the human brain, that's what I say. You can

Daniel Pink: absolutely just, just pull up your, just pull up your, uh, your MRI and you'll, and you'll see that's, that's your celebrity sighting for the day.

Maya Shankar: That's exactly

Daniel Pink: right.

Jill Stoddard: That was a preview of a slight change of plans from Pushkin Industries. Hear more from a slight change of plans wherever you get podcasts.