



Wake Up Happy with Dr. Mitchel Adler

HOST

Kym Yancey

SPEAKER

Dr. Mitchel Adler

PRESENTATION

Kym

I have a great guest. Let me tell you about him. His name is Mitchel Adler. He's a licensed clinical psychologist, certified group psychotherapist, and the director of MindBody Intelligence Consulting. He has served on the faculty of the UC Davis School of Medicine and is coauthor of the book, *Promoting Emotional Intelligence in Organizations* and other research articles.

As a professional speaker and organizational consultant, Dr. Adler has worked with numerous organizations, including the USDA Forest Service, the Public Health Institute, the UC Davis Graduate School of Management, and the city of Sacramento. Now, he speaks nationally on

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a wide range of topics, including leadership, emotional intelligence, communication and group facilitation, wellness and stress management.

Dr. Adler also has a private psychotherapy practice in Davis where he sees individuals and facilitates psychotherapy groups. He's an avid film enthusiast, a weekend warrior. I hear he's a cold blooded basketball player, and a doting father of two daughters. Dr. Adler, great to have you a part of *Wake Up Happy* this morning.

Mitchel Such a pleasure to be here, Kym.

Kym Let's jump right into this. How did you get interested in emotional intelligence?

Mitchel Well, I guess it started back in 1997 when I was getting ready to go to Indonesia where I was hoping to propose to my wife and I was in the airport and I saw this book called *Emotional Intelligence* that was sitting in the airport. The title just really struck me in a way that I hadn't been struck before.

I thought of myself grown up as a relatively smart guy, but I don't think I blew anybody away with being smart. I mean I went to a pretty good school. I went to the University of Michigan and did pretty well, but I

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thought there was something about me that was maybe a little bit more unique in the way that I can connect with people on a deeper emotional level or read situations or listen and empathize real well.

This book, and I picked it up, started reading it, realized this is speaking my language. So, it really touched me in a very deep way and it was the summer before I started graduate school for clinical psychology. So, the timing was perfect.

Kym

Go ahead.

Mitchel

I was going to say the beautiful thing is when I got to graduate school, I ended up having a professor named Cary Cherniss who happened to be co-running the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations with none other than Daniel Goleman. And so, I ended up getting to be a part of that consortium and through that consortium did some work with them, which eventually helped promote this book or create the book that I wrote.

Kym

That's fascinating. Tell me, what are the core components to emotions? What are emotions? What are their roles in our lives, and how can we use them to help us? I'd like you to really break that down for us.

Mitchel

Oh, sure. Yes, so emotions, they're kind of complex and also simple like most things in life. So, emotions are these mental states that arise or occur spontaneously rather than oftentimes through conscious effort. They're accompanied by some kind of psychological change in us. So, they're really like a mix of our thoughts and our physical sensations.

The reality is that they just happen to us. You can't really control the onset of emotions. We have a lot of choices once we recognize that our emotions are emerging in us, and our emotions are also really subjective; that is what makes one person feel angry or sad doesn't really necessarily make someone else feel that way. It's really a very subjective experience.

Our brains are wired to look for stimuli, things out in our environment that gives us data to tell us something is a threat or a reward. And so, when our brain detects it, we release chemical messages in our brain such as hormones and neurotransmitters and these go throughout our body in the central nervous, in our blood and our emotions that we experience are the effect of these chemical messages.

So, emotions are really data. They're data to inform choices about how to navigate the world. So, they have a very important role, which historically, before maybe the 1950s, we thought emotions were more getting in our way. But now, we're discovering that emotions are actually

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the key to almost the sixth sense. It's another field of perception that we have to help us make sense of what's going on in the world.

Kym Yes, do you ever hear—I mean I remember hearing someone saying, “Oh, he or she's very emotional,” or “Get a hold of your emotions,” that kind of thing. Can you discuss that role? Like from my understanding, there are four basic emotional groups or four basic emotions.

Mitchel Yes, sure. I can talk about that. So, we do have—the research is showing us that there are four basic emotions, and I will admit there's some debate in the research about whether there are six, but the newest research is showing us that there seem to be four basic emotions that we are hardwired to have from a biological perspective. Those four basic emotions are mad, sad, glad and scared.

Understanding those four basic emotions helps us to really get a grip, as you were saying, sort of get a grip on your emotions. A lot of times, we become emotional and we can become deregulated. That is the emotions become so powerful because there's some perception that we're having about what's going on in the world that the emotions that we're perceiving can overwhelm us and unless we sort of can start to understand how we regulate our system, how we can calm ourselves

down to pay attention to what the emotions are, that's how we glean the data about what's happening.

If we're not able to regulate ourselves to actually notice what the emotions are, it's much more difficult for us to use the emotions effectively and then they run us rather than we run them.

Kym Go ahead.

Mitchel No, go ahead.

Kym I was going to say, it's really—as you're saying this, I'm looking at mad, sad, glad and scared. It's just interesting. Out of those four, one is kind of happy. You've got three others. So, it's like three are ganging up on one, but go ahead, continue.

Mitchel No, I think it's a great point because when we think about it, emotions are also an evolutionary thing. So, we've developed emotions over the course of human history and other mammals have this, other social mammals have emotions. Many other animals have emotions, but emotions have an evolutionary purpose and Darwin talked about this back in 1872. He wrote a book called *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animal*, which would be great if he said "woman" and animal,

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but back then who knew; but that emotions were used for communication and survival is what he thought.

The fact that there are three sort of negatively valenced emotions really speaks to I think the evolutionary purpose. These emotions were helping us to stay alive.

And so, I can go through the four basic emotions and just give you a little bit of a sense of what each of them really mean because it's helpful to know, so what does "mad" really mean?

Kym

Yes. Yes.

Mitchel

So, when you're mad—so, some people will say, "Oh, I don't get angry. I don't get angry. I'm not an angry person," and I think what they're mixing up is the feeling of anger and a behavior of aggression. I'm interested right now in just talking about the emotion.

So, the feeling of being mad is when we perceive something as unfair or unjust. So, it makes sense that if you experience something that's unfair or unjust, you're going to feel angry. Now, what you do with that feeling, how you manifest that emotion is a different story. We could talk about if we want a little bit later how we can manifest our feelings in ways that are

more adaptive. But, to recognize, “Hey, I’m feeling angry” helps us to motivate ourselves when we feel like something is unfair or unjust.

When we feel sad that’s because we’re experiencing some kind of loss. So, if you feel sadness, most likely there’s some kind of loss you’re experiencing and it could be anything from a beautiful day that you were hoping you were going to have to the loss of a loved one. But, any perception of loss is going to make you feel sad.

Glad is when we feel like we get the things we want. We have some pleasure or gratification. We’re engaged in activities that are meaningful to us. We feel like our lives have a purpose. When we’re doing those kinds of things, eating ice cream, that’s pleasurable; helping someone, that’s also pleasurable, but also has meaning; these are all ways that we can feel glad.

Then the last one is scared, which is the experience that something negative is going to happen to us at some point in the future. It could be one second from now, or it could be 30 million years from now. But, we perceive that something is about to happen and then we have the experience of feeling scared.

Kym

Yes. Let me ask you; can one of these emotions dominate your daily experience? I mean what do you find in that? I mean how do you find that these emotions interact on a daily basis? I mean I know for myself, when I think about this, I mean I can't really remember the last time I would say that I was mad, and I know I was. I just don't—maybe I was mad one day last week about something perhaps, but I don't remember.

I'm just curious. How do these emotions, these four basic emotions interact with our day, our daily lives?

Mitchel

Yes, so, that's a very good question. When I think of mad, and I think this is—I think it's a challenge, a semantic thing in our culture that when we think of mad or we think of anger, we think of this as a negative thing. Actually, when we feel angry about something or mad it just means that what we're seeing doesn't feel like it's right.

So, I've got two beautiful daughters. They're 9 and 12 years old; great kids. Every once in a while, they get frustrated because maybe they don't have the right clothes that they want to wear that morning and so we're running a little bit late. So, I might notice myself feeling irritated. Irritated is just on a continuum of anger. It's a feeling like, "Ah, this isn't fair. We have to get going and it's just clothes."

But, but recognizing that I'm having that emotional reaction I can then make some choices about what I want to do about it. So, instead of being angry, that is acting in an aggressive way or acting in a way that doesn't feel supportive of my loving relationship with my kids, I can slow myself down, take a couple of deep breaths and say, "Oh, I think I'm just feeling frustrated that we're not moving fast enough. How can I support my daughter to get us to move more effectively?"

Oftentimes, my response is going to be love. Even though I'm feeling mad, my response to it is going to hopefully be love because I'm a believer that it's love that's going to heal us; it's love that's going to take us there, but the emotions that we have can lead us to knowing how to tap into love that gets us where we need to go.

Kym Right. Right. Yes. It's interesting that you made the statement about love. Can you say more about that because I agree with you, but I mean is there something that got you to this place of recognizing the importance and the power of love getting us there?

Mitchel Oh, yes. I think so. So, when you were saying before that maybe you don't notice yourself getting mad, I think I've spent a decent amount of my life being mad at times. Within the last 20 years, I've done a lot of work on recognizing what those triggers are because the emotions that

we attend to, the emotions that we spend time with actually promote neural wiring in our brain.

Donald Hebb, who is sort of the father of neuropsychology says that neurons that fire together wire together. So, I would spend time in anger and my interest is spending time in love because I think when we're in love, we feel love, we can promote love and then our neural network starts to promote more of that. I think that being able to access our emotional state once we are aware of we're feeling. That's when we have the choices, and that's why I think emotional intelligence is so important because I think many of us don't recognize the emotional state so that we get to the point where we have choices.

When I'm feeling scared, I don't have to stay in the fear. I can start to reach out to people who make me feel safe to build healthy attachments who can help soothe me and then I can soothe them and through that, again, accessing more of that love, more of the care, more of the compassion that I think helps us be the people that we all want to be.

Kym

I particularly like what you just said when you said, "When we are aware of what we are feeling." That's a huge statement because really, Doctor, with everything that you've gone through and the teaching that you do, awareness is a huge part of this. I mean people will ramp themselves up,

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right? They'll really get themselves in a state. There is this part where you want to say to that person, "Think for a minute on what you're doing, what you're saying, what you're feeling, bringing that awareness into the moment of what's going on with you" and then I like the other part where you said, "And that's when we have a choice."

Mitchel That's right.

Kym That's powerful. Can you say more about the power of choice, the importance of choice? By the way, making that shift from "I'm aware I'm mad, I'm upset" and making that choice in that moment to say, "I choose love." I'm just curious about did it take you a while to get that? As you teach and train other people, I mean how do you get them to recognize, to move into that state that they really want?

Mitchel Yes. So, what I'm on a mission to do in life is to get people to have a personal mission statement. Every organization worth its weight has a mission statement, guiding principles and vision of what they want their organization to be about. Really, it's not just the goals. It's the guiding principles, the values and the beliefs, the purpose and the meaning.

And so, about 20 years ago, I wrote a personal mission statement for myself. It was basically who do I want to be and why do I want to be that.

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I have a number of different categories in it. Some examples are I endeavor to be honest, direct and open minded and flexible and compassionate while honoring my own feelings, my limits and my boundaries. That's an example of maybe 30 sentences that are part of my personal mission statement.

By going back to what our core beliefs and our core values are; so, if I have a core value that I want to treat people with respect and I want to treat myself with respect, that's going to [indiscernible] all of my interactions. So, when I notice myself feeling angry and I recognize I could yell and I could spit venom, but that's actually not who I know I want to be. By having a mission statement that I can commit to, that I'm putting all of my energy and life into, that allows me to go back to something when I get lost and when I get disregulated about who I know I want to be. That helps foster me. I train folks about how to develop these personal mission statements.

I also want to teach people three primary tools. I call it TMC. They're understanding your triggers, how they manifest and how you cope. So, what I mean is your emotions emerge because of triggers, and we all have subject triggers. I challenge people to think about what makes you particularly angry; what are your buttons in your life because the more you're aware of what your buttons are, the more you can proactively

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respond to something rather than react to them based on the visceral reaction that emerges when an emotion kicks in.

Knowing what triggers your emotional states, your mad, sad, glad and scared, as well as how do they manifest in you; what kind of thoughts, physiological responses; what behaviors manifest? How do these emotions manifest in you? Do you get tightness in your chest? Do you tend to withdraw? Do you tend to get aggressive? Do you tend to sort of shake all over? What ways do they manifest?

Then finally, how do you cope with your emotions? How do you manage them? Do you withdraw? Do you assert yourself? Do you shut down? Do you reach out? Do you express yourself? Do you drink? Do you eat? Do you exercise?

I encourage everyone to have a list of self-care tools so that they can have at least ten things that you can go to when you feel overwhelmed or disregulated by your emotional state that can help get you in a state of homeostasis so you can have the cognitive functioning to help you get back onto your personal mission statement of how you want to be in the world. That's where our choices I think emerge.

Kym

Let's take a couple of things that I know that are big. So, first one, I just want you to give me your thoughts about people who are dealing with issues such as betrayal, trust. These are things that are rampant. They're checking their mate's phone. What numbers are they calling? Who are they texting? So, let's take some emotions like that.

First of all, where does that fall and then how would you apply some of these new principles and thoughts around, as you said, the triggers and coping with that kind of situation?

Mitchel

Yes. So, yes, I'm a clinical psychologist and I have a private practice. So, I see a lot of folks who struggle with a lot of the things you just mentioned.

The first thing I start to think about is what are the underlying feelings going on here. I will say that a lot of times, the things you just described, a lot of that sounds like it comes from fear. Oftentimes, it's fear and shame; shame that we're not good enough.

I think that most of our real deep problems emotionally come from fear and a shame, a sense that we're not good enough, we're not okay. And so, my hope in helping folks is to slow down the process. What's going on that's making them feel this way?

So, if they're acting veraciously or Facebook stalking their partners because they haven't heard from them in days, I want to first understand what's going on for you. What is the thing that's scaring you right now? What are you afraid of losing because there is something that is scaring you and helping them to get to the deeper sense of what it is that they're afraid of, that's going to help them to start making choices about their behavior because maybe what they need to do is maybe they're actually scared, but they're also angry and they need to find out what they're angry about. Maybe someone said something that was upsetting to them and they need to be able to talk about it with them, to talk about it in a way that is respectful to the other person while also honoring their own need and make themselves, unfortunately and fortunately, at times vulnerable because you cannot have intimacy and connection unless you're going to be able to be vulnerable.

That can be scary and hard. And so, helping people provide a safe environment for them to access what their vulnerability is and then find an adaptive way of communicating that vulnerability can help them more often than not get their needs met in a much more healthy way.

Kym

Do you find that one of the big issues in our culture, male or female, is lack of appreciation, lack of—really, maybe even feeling somewhat

diminished, that you're not as significant, you're not appreciated, you're not valued enough? What are your thoughts about that?

Mitchel

Yes, I have a lot of thoughts about that. I have this idea of living not just the good life, not just the best life or the perfect life or fantasy life or a dream life, but rather a good enough life. I think that in some ways there's been a misunderstanding in our culture about what the good life really is, that in some way we're supposed to have this perfect life. I think what we really want is a healthy, realistic and sustainable life; a life that we can enjoy and savor rather than feeling like we're always lacking and needing.

This is not a call for mediocrity, this idea of having a good enough life. It's actually a push for life with meaning and purpose, a life that feels sustainable and one that stems from our core values and our beliefs and our sense of integrity. But, I do think that there are certain messages we get in our culture that can make us feel like we're not doing okay if we're not happy all the time.

I think as you know, we struggle in life at times. I want to sort of support people, that it's okay that you struggle. That is part of life. But, we have choices.

So, I was at the gym the other day actually and I saw while I'm working out, I'm doing something pretty healthy for myself and I'm watching on the screen some kind of advertisement for some kind of get in better shape. There was a before and after picture. The before picture was a picture of a guy and he actually looked pretty healthy to me. I mean he didn't look overweight at all. He looked pretty healthy. He wasn't ripped with a six pack, but he looked pretty healthy.

Then they had a picture next to him of a guy that was completely ripped and he looked like Ryan Gosling and Ryan Gosling's greatest moment. I thought, "Oh, my gosh. I don't want to do this." I don't want to feel that my body, which feels like it's definitely good enough, needs to look like that other body.

Now, that's just me. I don't mind that people want to really have their body chiseled. I think that's wonderful. It's a goal that's intrinsically in you. But for someone like me who also enjoys many other things, I just want to stay healthy.

I think those kind of messages can really do something to us if we don't become critical consumers of conventional wisdom and get in touch with what's intrinsically important and valuable to us, and that we can actually

believe that that's true rather than buying into some of the messages that I think we get in our culture.

Kym Well, I can tell you as former owner of an advertising agency, our entire mission is to make you feel like whatever is going on for you isn't good enough. You need this car. You need that house. You need that blouse. I mean make sure that you feel.

I loved your whole concept around good enough life. Doctor, don't we beat ourselves up emotionally with all of those messages - I'm not good enough or I'm not ripped enough, or whatever it is. It can plague us and weigh us down all day long, right?

Mitchel Yes. I mean my feeling is that without the freedom to be human, with all the fallibilities and the mistakes that come with it, I think we are destined to feel inadequate and potentially ashamed. I love to offer a working anecdote to that fear and shame.

I'm not saying it's going to go away or that we'll never feel fear and shame. I think there are times when fear and not as much shame, but maybe guilt are useful if we do something that feels like—a behavior that we don't really like and we feel kind of bad about, it's healthy to feel some guilt about that, but whereas shame is more of like a global sense

that we're bad. I don't really know that there's a place that that shame is not adaptive there.

But, I'm not saying that these things are going to go away if we accept our humanness. I think if we remember our humanity and the human condition and the fact that we all suffer, maybe life will be a little gentler and we can be a little bit more authentic and we can connect with each other because the reality is that misery doesn't love company as like the old adage says. Miserable loves miserable company.

So, if we're not feeling that great about something, we want to find other people that, "Can you relate to this" and they can say yes and then together we can go, "Okay. What choices can we make now from this place to go to a better place?"

But, if we're just told when we're feeling horrible that like, "Oh, just pick yourself up," I don't think that works so well. People need to feel seen and once we feel seen and understood, then we can move and make choices that I think can be really healthy and adaptive for us and I think the emotional intelligence to know when to push ourselves hard and when to know and accept when enough is enough.

Kym I've got a couple of questions here. One is can someone over the age of 60 change their neural programming from the anger pathways to happier emotions?

Mitchel Oh, that's such a good question and the answer is absolutely. That's one of the other things when you ask me about why I got into emotional intelligence.

Unlike IQ, sort of the general intelligence quotient, there's wonderful research to show us that emotional intelligence is something we can learn over time. We've gotten this even more as we've discovered more about neural plasticity and the way that our brains change based on life experience.

So, it is absolutely possible for us to grow. In fact, people become more emotionally intelligent over time is what it seems to show because with wisdom and life experience, we recognize that we don't necessarily get as reactive and we realize that we have many more choices over time. So, it's looking very good that you can change anything when it comes to your emotional intelligence.

Now, we may have some limitations, but this can be learned. The book that I coauthored really talks about that because the training that we were

looking at 15 organizations showed bottom line effects within these organizations that increased productivity, decreased absenteeism, decreased workers' compensation grievances as a result of going through these emotional intelligence training programs.

Kym What is one of the best things we can do to improve our overall well-being?

Mitchel Ah. I would say one of the best things we can do is really build a healthy relationship with ourselves, that is to get really aware of these four basic emotions, to get curious, very curious about our emotional states. For instance, what's happening to me right now? What am I feeling? Am I feeling mad, sad, glad or scared? What's making me feel that way? What maybe in my history is this?

Instead of looking at why everyone else is driving us crazy, think about what is it about us that's making us react to that person because as I said, these emotions are subjective. You could put 100 people in a line who look at once person who's maybe generally irritating, but they're going to irritate these 100 people in very different ways. When you can learn about what your tendencies are as to how you respond, you will have so many more choices to move yourself in a direction that feels more adaptive and positive, in line with what you want in your life.

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So, a personal mission statement would be fantastic and cultivating a healthy curiosity about what your emotional states are.

Kym I would imagine that creating that personal mission statement really brings clarity. It really forces you to get into your thinking, get into—because you're asking yourself questions that you don't ask yourself all the time. I mean you're really putting it in black and white. I would think that the effect of that has to be pretty profound.

Mitchel Yes, it is. One of the questions that I use to stimulate this is, "What would you like people to say about you at your eulogy?"

Kym Wow.

Mitchel Because when you think about it, at the end of our lives, we don't really want everyone to say, "Oh, he made so much money and he built this empire." I think we want to say this person really cared and loved and contributed in the community and gave back to people. They were sweet and loving. That's what ultimately most people want on their death bed. I think that helping people get in touch with sort of the end game helps us learn how to begin in a really healthy, meaningful way.

Kym You are so right. How important are other people in our well-being process?

Mitchel Oh, yes. Well, social support network is considered one of the greatest predictors of subjective well-being, or how happy and satisfied we are in our lives. As social mammals, I mean humans are just social mammals, we're apes, we're hardwired actually to connect and we have these attachment processes that begin from when we're born that last throughout our lives.

Allan Schore, who's actually a really great researcher out of UCLA, talks about attachment as a regulation system, that our relationships are actually the primary way that we regulate ourselves. So, when you get overwhelmed, one of the fastest ways to get regulated, to get more in homeostasis is to connect with someone that you feel safe with, someone that you feel attached to. These attachment relationships don't end when we are adults. They continue throughout our lives. We need attachment relationships throughout our lives to help regulate us.

Sue Johnson, who's another psychologist, she has a great line which is that there's no such thing as independence. There's only adaptive and maladaptive dependency. I think that is absolutely essential for us to

remember. It is important that we remember it's okay to ask for help and to reach out. That is healthy, strength-based functioning.

Kym

It feels like we're just getting started and we've come to the end of this session. I have to tell you, Dr. Adler, you've got to come back again. There's so much that we want to talk with you about and explore deeper. What a tremendous honor to have you on the line.

I also want to say to everybody, you can learn more about Mitch Adler at his website, Mitch Adler; that's Kym-I-T-C-H-E-L-A-D-L-E-R.com, mitchadler.com and Twitter handle is atmitchadler. So, for sure, love, love your sharing, your information and your insight. It really, really makes a difference.

I want everybody to remember that we're here to help you. I think about, to your point, Dr. Adler, about what you once said at the end. I think for us it's really about this message around happiness, around choice, that statement that you made about when we are aware of what we are feeling. That's when we have the power to choose, bringing that awareness, that mindfulness to what we're feeling and thinking, the mad, the sad, the glad, the scared. I love this information and I hope you love it too because our goal here is to serve you and to provide you with information that's going to lift you up.

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So with that, have a fantastic day and remember, above all else, keep smiling. It works. It's contagious. You're going to have a ball with it. Just keep that smiling going. Until tomorrow, bye-bye for now.