

FEATURING NATALY KOGAN & ANNA MAIER

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Emotionale Intelligenz & Verletzlichkeit

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FRÜHLINGSAUSGABE 2022

Nataly Kogan

Don't Believe What Your Brain Is Telling You

Nataly Kogan is a “kick-ass woman” and leading expert on emotional fitness. Nataly is an entrepreneur, best-selling author, and keynote speaker on a mission to help millions of people struggle less and thrive more in work and life.

Nataly immigrated to the U.S. as a refugee from the former Soviet Union when she was 13 years old, still a child.

Her career can be compared to the American Dream. She worked for McKinsey and Microsoft, as Managing Director at a venture capital fund, and as founder or executive at five start-ups and tech companies.

But after years of chasing a non-existent state of nirvana, Nataly was not only unfulfilled, but she also suffered a debilitating, almost devastating burnout that led her to find a new way to live and work. This is exactly what we nowadays define as “Antifragile,” as “Resilience 2.0” or “Post Traumatic Growth”. Her burnout led to an even bigger career and even more happiness.

Today, Nataly helps what she calls “Awesome Humans” live and work with more connection, joy, and meaning by sharing her science-backed skills and practices with hundreds of top companies and teams through her Happier @ Work and Leadership programmes. After her first book “Happier Now”, “The Awesome Human Project” is reaching another level. Her new book is already a must-read. Her art is available as NFT. And her insights are not only an eye-opener but also an exciting energy booster that unveils all the happiness that has been dozing inside of us. “We can all learn to be happy and we all have the capacity to be an awesome human.” Don't believe her? Then, follow her lead. You won't regret it.

INTERVIEW: SANDRA-STELLA TRIEBL



PHOTO: JONATHAN GERSHON STARK

Ladies Drive: Nataly, compared to your first book “Happier Now”, this second book “The Awesome Human Project” seems to be more personal. Maybe it's because we see a lot of your paintings and illustrations.

Nataly Kogan: Maybe. Part of this entire journey of the book and its launch has also just been about taking the artist who was in the background and bringing her to front and centre. I illustrated the book (smiling). Plus, I'm launching my first NFT art collection of awesome humans. It's 100 abstract drawings of awesome humans and the whole idea is what makes us awesome is our uniqueness. So, it's a big moment for me. I teach everything through a personal lens. It's about embracing all the pieces of yourself.

But why launch a book and NFT art collection simultaneously?

When this idea was presented to me, my first reaction was, “I don't understand crypto. I think it's stupid.” When we don't know something, we think it's stupid, right? As I used to be in tech for almost 20 years, I read a lot about crypto and NFTs and I just tried to understand what this buzz was about. I still don't get all the details, but to be honest, this whole idea of what everyone was talking about, this web 3.0, it got me. Once I understood we are going to open everything up, to own our information, I knew I wanted to be part of this. My book launch about awesome humans, meaning to embrace your humanity, your wholeness and uniqueness, was also about owning what was mine. And I have been painting mostly faces for years — and that's how everything came together. I have to admit, I just love it that two of my passions come together now. So, it's not just about NFTs selling jpgs, which is what I thought it was about. The web 3.0 is a place where we own our information and we own our creations and we don't have centralised bodies like Facebook, Twitter, banks, or UBER that control our information. When I read my first article about this, in a way I really felt hopeful about the world.

Why?

I inherently believe that humans are good. And I believe that when people have the structure and the freedom to contribute to each other, versus being controlled by centralised institutions — remember, I grew up in Russia, so centralised control is difficult for me — that tremendous amounts of opportunities can be created. And I think NFTs is one of them. As an artist now, for me to really sell my art, it's not really about the money, but how to get my art into people's lives to bring them joy. If you look at art as an offline experience, as a physical painting, a potential buyer has to find my art, then we need to ship it, which is expensive, plus all kinds of other things. With the NFT art world, I can share my art with people across the globe. They can experience it anytime and in any way. And I think that there is an opportunity to create beauty in our lives in more meaningful ways. Again, I just want to say to you and your readers, a year ago, not only did I not understand crypto, NFT and Web 3.0, but I dismissed it all, as if I was the expert. I was like, “Oh, this is a pyramid scheme, this is stupid.” And it has been a really humbling experience to realise how often we dismiss things we don't understand.

So true! Coming back to what you said that you believe people are good. Well, sometimes I believe people are good — but only in smaller groups, but not in larger ones. As soon as there are many people, they act very different from when you're meeting someone 1:1.

That's a good observation and it's a big topic.

If I look at what's happening now on the streets, that people beat each other up — I ask myself, why is this happening? Because if you could talk to these people 1:1, maybe you could have a dialogue, maybe you could find some kind of solution on how to get along with each other.

You just got to the core, to the why. I come from Russia. I'm Jewish. We left Russia because they persecuted us. I'm sharing that because I don't come from a culture of trusting others. I don't come from a culture believing other people are good. In Russia, they taught us to mistrust our fellow citizens. I grew up looking for a way to get out of this country. It has been my kind of inner revolution to come to believe that we are all good. Here's how I think about it: I believe that ultimately on an individual level we are awesome humans. Don't get me wrong here. I don't believe we are all awesome, but I do believe we are awesome humans. What I mean by that is, we all have the capacity, the potential to have a positive impact on the world, to create things that are meaningful, and to live a meaningful life. But we are also human. What I mean is that we, or rather our brain, get in our own way. In the book, I spend half of the time talking about how our brain works. Because our brain just cares about protecting us

from danger, it is not here to help us thrive or to have a positive impact. It really gets in the way of our awesomeness. It creates all kinds of mental constructs, beliefs and fears that hold back our awesomeness. It makes us act in such unpredictable ways based on fear, which can then turn into anger, hate and all kinds of things. The reason I wrote the entire book and the reason for my inner transformation is to show that it is our own responsibility to do the inner work, and this is what I teach. I call the practices emotional fitness skills. They help remove our mental barriers. These practices also help create a more supportive relationship with our brain and help transcend that survival instinct. So, to your specific question, I think that most of the horrible things we do to each other are rooted in fear. It's when we are acting from that place of fear versus a place of understanding, compassion, human connection, or love. I really believe it's that simple. It's easy to say that it's not easy to change. But that's why to me, everything I teach begins with yourself. You know so many

people tell me like “Oh you know, I feel it's selfish to work on my well-being, my happiness or my emotional fitness. There are so many problems in our world.” Well, the people who solve problems are people who are at peace with themselves! And the only way for us to unleash that capacity within us is to first do the inner work so we can connect to our own goodness. We must believe that we can do it and begin to remove those mental blocks. Fear, fear of being judged, fear of other people having more, and all that kind of stuff. To me, that's why ultimately, the first part of our work is done on the inside.

Definitely it is. Now we are touching a lot of topics that are really super interesting. But if you are okay with this, let's go one or two steps back. I can recall our last interview after your first book “Happier Now” very well and your keynote during the League of Leading Ladies conference some years ago. You said, “Happiness can be learned. It's a question of training.” Yes, absolutely.

What happened with you, as a human being, as an author, as a writer, between the first book “Happier Now” and “The Awesome Human Project?” It's a great question, Stella! I so appreciate talking to you both as a friend and in this way, because you are so thoughtful. I actually write about this in my new book. I still fully believe everything I have said about

happiness. It is a skill. I wrote “Happier Now” three years after I suffered a huge burnout and frankly a breakdown in my life. I don’t think I had enough distance or not even perspective during this time. I don’t think I had gone all the way to where I could look at all the things within myself to get at some of the core issues that underlie our ability to experience happiness and give meaning to our lives. The place I had not gone to is the place my second book begins, the place of struggle. In the most simplistic way, “Happier Now” was incredibly well received. It’s still selling a lot – even more during the two years of the pandemic than the three years before. For this new book, I realised I wanted to begin with a struggle. I wanted to help people struggle less. And when you struggle less, even when life is challenging, and that is one of the core principles of this book, then the awesome human manifesto begins. One of the first things in this manifesto is “You can struggle less, even when life is challenging.” For me it was a huge insight, that challenges are on the outside. And life is always full of challenges, always! That’s a feature of life. It’s always challenging, right? But struggle is something that comes from the inside. Struggle comes from the ways we treat ourselves, our mindset, our relationship with others. And so, I realised I needed to start with the concept of struggle. I also needed to realise that all these skills that I was talking about in “Happier Now,” I needed to show people how to use, so they could struggle less. When you struggle less, you have more of that capacity I was talking about to make the changes you need to make; to live with more joy, to have more meaning, and to create that positive impact. Unleashing your awesome human gives you the capacity to do all the things that are meaningful to you.

So, what do you teach us in your new book?

In a nutshell, what I teach are science-backed skills to help you improve your emotional fitness. Emotional fitness is about creating a more supportive relationship with yourself, your thoughts, your emotions, and other people. This means editing our thoughts and recognising that our thoughts are not facts; it means learning how to shift those unhealthy fear-based thoughts, it means creating a more supportive relationship with our emotions, and finally learning how to embrace all our feelings, including the difficult ones. Creating a more supportive relationship with others means moving from anger to compassion and from frustration to kindness. When we do these things internally, we improve our ability to get through challenges; we improve our resilience; we improve our ability to be positive forces of good. So that is what the book is about. I teach these five core emotional fitness skills that are science-based: gratitude, acceptance, kindness, self-care and connection to your bigger why. But I also talk a lot about what I call qualities of awesome humans. There are skills and there are qualities. I did not expect to be doing that when I started writing the book, but then I realised we can’t talk about awesome humans without talking about leadership, without talking about courage, and also without talking about self-compassion.

Maybe we can give the readers some hints regarding emotional fitness skills? Are there maybe two or three top things that people who read the interview can take away as a concrete input on how they can work on their emotional fitness skills?

The first skill I would like to talk about is the skill of having the courage to edit your thoughts. If I may do a quick neuroscience lesson. As mentioned, our brain just wants to keep us safe. And there are two things that the human brain does to do that. The first is what we call a negativity bias. We are all much more sensitive and we remember better and focus on what is wrong, what could go wrong, what is negative....

What might be a deadly threat?

Exactly! But the brain does that because danger usually comes with a negative stimulus. So, the brain is trying to protect us and just looks at what could go wrong. The downside of that is, it drains our energy, and it lies to us about our reality. That is just a fact. It ignores a lot of things in

our lives that are good, kind, meaningful or joyful. These things are familiar and familiarity is really boring for the brain because there is no danger in “familiar”. So that’s the negativity bias. The reason I mention that is that we need to understand that a lot of thoughts in our brain are distorted by this negativity bias. And we need to correct it. The second thing I want to mention about the human brains is that it hates uncertainty. The worst thing for the human brain is uncertainty because it does not know how to react.

Research has actually shown that human beings would rather experience physical pain than face uncertainty. Can you imagine that? (*laughter*) So, what does the brain does when we experience uncertainty – and by the way, life is uncertain by definition – so the brain is doing this all the time! It does this especially when we are starting a company, launching a project, going for a new job, or dealing with a deadly virus. Our brain creates the worst-case scenario. It’s like the brain would say, “Okay, let me think of the worst thing that can happen and I’ll prepare for it.” It tries to give itself a sense of control. Again, that is not helpful because it drains our energy. It actually prevents us from making rational decisions. It gets in our way. Please keep these two things in mind and work on your skill of learning to be the editor of your thoughts.

Shall we then learn to question what our brain is telling us and what we think is real? Shall we question our inner voice, our own thoughts about reality?

Exactly, but your thoughts are not an objective reflection of reality. Your thoughts are your brain’s stories about reality that in turn dramatically affect your actions. So, here’s the practice that I teach in the book. First, start being aware. I spent most of my life with no awareness. I was kind of just on autopilot. Awareness begins with just hearing your thoughts or observing your thoughts like an outsider would.

So don’t believe everything your brain is telling you!

Yes, because this story might cause you to struggle. But there are two questions everyone can ask. The first is, is this thought true? Is it supported by facts? And I want you to practice doing that with your thoughts. What you think, what somebody else thinks, those are not facts, those are thoughts. I cannot tell you how powerful this is!

I just want to zoom in on something in particular. I work with a lot of women executives and imposter syndrome comes up a lot. This feeling, people are going to find out that I’m not as good as they think I am. So, I ask them this simple question, “What are the facts to support this?” There is a story in the book about one of these women. She got a huge promotion in a large company and was thrilled about it. She was in my leadership group. And then she started telling me, “Nataly, I just think I’m a total imposter. They are going to figure out I’m not good enough for this promotion.” And I said, “Great, let’s do this practice. Are there any facts to support this? Have you gotten any negative reviews?” She said no. I asked, “Have you got any feedback from your boss that is negative?” She said no. I said, “Are there any facts to support the opposite?” She said, “Well, I got a big raise, and I got great 360-degree feedback. And I keep getting invited to really big powerful meetings.” And as she was listening to herself, she started to laugh. She was like “Wow.” And I said “Here’s the thing. Either you are really good for this position because there are no facts to the contrary or everyone who has promoted and given you good feedback, is really stupid.” And she just started to laugh.

The second question is – and this might be even more helpful, more powerful – is this thought helpful? My thinking about this, does it help me move forward in the best way? Does it help me bring out my best in each situation? Let’s say you are an entrepreneur. “Happier” is my fifth company that I’ve launched so I’m very familiar with these negative thoughts. Let’s say the thought that you are having is that this is not really going to work out very well. This project is going to fail. Ask yourself, does thinking about that make you better? You are laughing, of course. Because of course not! But we have to ask that question. So that’s the practice. Is

this thought true? And really do a good job as editor please. Be pretty strict. What are the facts? I find it helpful to write them down. Ask yourself for each thought, is this thought helpful? Does it actually help me move forward in the best way? It’s a pretty life-changing practice. And the more we do it – what I find in my case and a lot of the women leaders I work with – the more natural it becomes.

And one more thing and I want to go to a completely different place. It’s what I call self-care. I define self-care as a skill of fuelling your mental, emotional, and physical energy. A car needs fuel to do its job of being a car. Right? When your car is out of gas or electricity, it cannot do its job of being a car. You don’t sit there and think, does the car deserve more gas?

Hey car, do something to deserve it!

(*laughter*)

Exactly, but how many times do we treat ourselves like this? We think, “I don’t know if I deserve time for myself”. Your human being energy is your fuel. Do you know that 2/3 of the things you do during your day require emotional energy? Not just physical energy. So, self-care is a skill of fuelling your emotional, mental, and physical energy.

Schedule 15 minutes every day. I call it a daily fuel-up. And, by the way, everybody has 15 minutes. And if someone says I don’t have 15 minutes, this is what I like to call “bullshit” in a very kind way. Less social media, less reading the news and there you have 15 minutes. Everybody has got 15 minutes. Put it in your calendar. I do mine usually in the late afternoon, like at 4 pm because that’s usually when my energy dips. But it does not have to be at the same time every day. And when the time comes, two steps. First, just check-in with yourself. We check-in with our friends all the time. “How are you? How are you feeling?”. How often do you do that with yourself? This is part of creating that supportive relationship with yourself. Check-in and see how you are. “How am I doing? How am I feeling? How is my physical energy? How is my emotional energy?” And then, based on your answer, ask yourself, “What is one thing I could do right now to refuel and refresh?” We all do that differently and for me what I most often do and I recommend is to take a five-minute walk outside, it’s really, really powerful. Some days, when I’m feeling really frazzled, I use those 15 minutes to get a cup of tea and just hang out in a chair in my office.

That’s why I have a really cosy, big chair in my office.

Exactly! Take 15 minutes to fuel yourself up daily. It creates such a powerful commitment to your energy. And just committing to doing that every day has a tremendous impact because – the phrase I use a lot in the book – you cannot give what you don’t have.

That’s wonderful. Thank you so much for sharing that with us. Should we treat our brain, the centre of fear, the record of the past, should we treat our own thoughts as if they would be another entity?

Yes!

As if this entity would be outside our body?

Not as if it would be outside your body. It is part of you; it is part of us. But it is not all of you. One way to look at your brain, which is what helped me, is I think of my brain as a little child. We know what they are like. One minute they are crying, one minute they are laughing. One minute it’s this toy, and then they are distracted by another toy. That’s the brain. Some people call it the monkey brain. I like to think of it as a little child. And I want you, the bigger you, that wiser part of you, to think of that part of you as a grandparent. Grandparents are compassionate. They don’t yell at the child. When the child is freaking out, the grandparent does not say “You are so stupid.” That’s the analogy that really helps me.

There was an incident that comes to my mind. I remember when my daughter was about 5 years old and she came to the kitchen while I was cooking. She was so hysterical; I was really afraid. “What happened?”, I asked. I thought she was hurt, when, in fact, one shoelace on her sneaker had broken (*laughter*). For her, it was a tragedy. Now, that’s your brain.

This is not about blocking your thoughts or ignoring your thoughts. None of that works. You want to approach your brain with compassion, like a little child. And then I talked to her on the kitchen floor. I was like “Listen, this is not good, I get it. But look, is this the worst thing in the world? We probably can order more shoelaces, right?” And she was like, “Yes but they won’t get here for a week.” And I said, “Ok, but you have other shoes, right?” And so, I was the parent, the tranquiliser. You need to have a dialogue with your brain. This is a really powerful way to think when you have a wiser grandparent in you that can talk to your brain. You can more easily edit your thoughts when it’s done from a place of compassion. We are one being, but there is also a greater, wiser part in us that is not our child brain, so we need to learn how to all work together.

Absolutely. To wrap up slowly. Is our brain the drama queen and our true intelligence comes from the wisdom of the heart?

Well, it’s interesting you bring that up. This isn’t something I talk about in the book, but it’s actually something I have been really thinking about and studying a lot. It’s this idea that our heart produces neurotransmitters. Our heart actually produces dopamine and adrenaline, and so does our gut. There are more neurotransmitters and neurons in our gut than in the whole spinal cord. So, we actually have three brains; the physical brain, the heart brain, and the gut brain. And to me, this is all about learning to listen to all of them at the right time. I just want to say, in defence of our brain, it is incredibly helpful. We cannot function without it as human beings. Its analytical function helps us process information and come up with creative ideas. Let’s give it some credit. It’s incredibly important.

We have an emotional intelligence and mathematical intelligence? The EQ and the IQ? So, we have both and both are in us.

We have both and I would even argue we have even more than two. We have emotional intelligence, intellectual intelligence and analytical intelligence. Spiritual intelligence. And intelligence that we are not even aware of, that is collective intelligence. Absolutely. And you know, we live in a Western world and again I would like to make this point. All these things we are talking about, I was completely closed off from for most of my life. I’m still on this journey. I still just consider myself a beginner. But it’s so powerful to recognise, and this goes back to our awesome human capacity, just how much capacity we have. And so, the inner work that we have to do is to get in touch with all of that and learn how to use it in the right way.

You spoke about trust, about crowd intelligence. What about vulnerability? That’s a huge part of being a great leader.

What we seek in life is to connect with each other as our true selves. And that is what in western words is called vulnerability. Is just showing our true self. Not covered with the fear or the shields. This creates trust and that creates collaboration and creative genius ideas. Because it’s the truest part of ourselves connecting with another human’s truest part. And I think that’s why vulnerability is so powerful. Western research shows that the best leaders are those that lead with openness and authenticity. It helps their teams be most effective. It is because we are actually showing up as our purest, truest self. And that creates goodness in the world. And whether it’s goodness in terms of business partnerships or ideas or a team being effective. Those are just the external results. A funny thing that I just noticed in myself, and in the many people I work with, is just how much effort my brain puts into fear of how others will perceive me or judge me. It’s amazing how much energy this takes. Imagine we would not indulge in that. Imagine you could just do what felt right or what felt true to you. Imagine the creativity and the goodness in our world. I think that is the strength of vulnerability.





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