Episode 64 - Emotion at Work in Unpacking Rules and Expectations of Emotion Expression

Phil Willcox: Hello and welcome to the Emotional at Work podcast, where we take a deep dive into the human condition. And regular listeners will know that I am fascinated by the unspoken rules and expectations that sit around emotions. And if you go back to Episode 45 with Arik Cheshin, you'll find a researcher's perspective on the phenomenon. And today, my guest Melissa Doman is an organisational psychologist, former clinical mental health therapist and a mental health at work specialist, who's the author of, Yes, You Can Talk About Mental Health at Work, Here's why … and How to Do it Really Well. And I'm excited today because Mel's going to give us a practitioner perspective on this phenomenon around the unspoken rules and expectations on emotion. And what I think is particularly interesting is that during our off air conversation, Mel was sharing with me how having lived in multiple countries and travelled extensively, and I think there's both a workplace and a life experience around emotional expression. So, let's get our guest on the air, welcome to the podcast, Melissa. Hi, Melissa.

Melissa Doman: Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Phil Willcox: Thank you so much for coming on, I'm so excited for our episode today it's going to be really, really good.

Melissa Doman: I've been looking forward to it as well.

Phil Willcox: Good. And then as usual for this podcast we'll open with an unexpected and innocuous question. So, my unexpected innocuous question for today is, what are the little things that bring you joy?

Melissa Doman: Oh, what a good question. Laughing so hard that I start crying [laughs].

Phil Willcox: Oh, wonderful.

Melissa Doman: Just that good deep belly laugh that you only get to have maybe a couple of times a year. Gosh, what else? A really good taco. I love tacos.

Phil Willcox: Oh, do you? Okay, nice.

Melissa Doman: I do. And then because I'm a salsa dancer…

Phil Willcox: Are you?

Melissa Doman:I am, I have been a salsa dancer for 18 years and I would say another little thing that brings me joy is when I dance with a really good lead and neither of us make a mistake during the song and it all goes flawlessly [Laughs].

Phil Willcox: Oh, fantastic. Oh, that sounds brilliant.

Melissa Doman: Yeah.

Phil Willcox: That sounds brilliant. And the laughing till you cry one, that happened to me…well, it didn't happen to me personally, I was in a meeting with my team this week and we were talking about something and a member of my team was laughing so hard, she was like, I just need to turn off my camera because I'm crying because I'm laughing so much.

Melissa Doman: Oh, it's just so wonderful.

Phil Willcox: It is wonderful and it was all to do with like a product in the UK is called Crackin, which is something like a chocolate sauce that you pour on ice cream and then when you pour it onto the ice cream it's meant to set, so it's meant to set really hard, so you then crack it and eat it.

Melissa Doman: Ooh.

Phil Willcox: But the current version of the product is a bit more like sludging rather than cracking.

Melissa Doman: [Laughs].

Phil Willcox: It just doesn't freeze, it doesn't set, when you pour it onto the ice cream. And she was reading the reviews of the products and she was in absolute fitness of hysteria.

Melissa Doman: [Laughs]. It's just this, oh, gosh, it's such a form of cathartic release that is so unexpected, where you have such a deep, like core shattering laugh that you didn't realise that you needed. And then after you just feel like this incredible release where it just went through what feels like your soul and you just laughed so intensely hard that it feels like it could have purged anything that had been sitting with you for the last few days.

Phil Willcox: Oh, yeah, definitely. Yeah, definitely. I do love a good belly laugh, it's fantastic.

Melissa Doman: I do as well [Laughs].

Phil Willcox: And then the salsa dancing, that's not something that came up when we had our conversation off air, that's fascinating.

Melissa Doman: Yeah, it's funny, a long time ago I was like this looks really fun, I have no idea how to do it, I'm just going to turn up at a salsa club and see if someone takes pity on me. And that's exactly what I did. I turned up by myself and there was a very, very kind gentleman who ended up being my very first salsa partner for quite some time, who took one look at me and was like, I need to teach this person the ropes. So, I just turned up and he showed me how to do the basics. And the really nice thing is that every city I've lived in I have found a salsa partner who's levelled up my dancing. And what I love about Salsa, Bachata, other types of Latin dancing is that it's my form of meditation because I don't actually like to do traditional meditation and yoga. I'll do for the fitness but it's not really my way of relaxing and being present. So, when I'm dancing, my brain shuts off and my body is just focused on following a hopefully good lead. And I physically cannot think of anything else other

than what's going on right in that moment in front of me. So, when I do a couple of hours of dancing, I feel like I've been meditating because you're so present and just not thinking about anything else.

Phil Willcox: I love that. And I think for me that's one of the, I don't know, misunderstandings maybe of meditation in terms of that, I don't know, there's that sort of stereotypical sat down, legs crossed, arms in front, and that's what meditation is, and I'm with you. So, running for me is one, I can just go and run and just be gone for, I don't know, 45 minutes, an hour, hour and a half, and just don't think of anything while I'm there apart from running and how it feels to be running. Yeah, how the movement feels as you're moving along and stuff like that. So, yeah, no, I'm with you completely.

Melissa Doman: Yeah, and it's funny because when speaking as a former therapist [laughs] when I tell people that I don't like to meditate or do yoga, it's like sacrilegious, but like, no, no, no, there's a different way that I do it. And I basically just explain that I do what works for me, which is actually part of a concept that I created a number of years ago and I trademarked called the Mental Wellbeing Non Negotiables. And the reason I did that and I recommend it when I do my talks and things like that, it's not because I created it, but rather people tell me that it's actually useful. Because the wellness industry has often, we'll call it a preset list of recommendations of what should make you feel mentally well, and it works for lots of people but not for everybody. And so I think it's really important to think about what are the things that actually make you feel good that won't bring harm to yourself or other people that you actually enjoy doing? So, it actually motivates you to do them instead of doing things that you feel like you should do, but you actually avoid because you don't enjoy. So, for me, salsa dancing is one of those mental well-being non negotiables that I have to have in some form in my life or I just start feeling really icky. And so when the pandemic happened I said, well, salsa dancing is not exactly COVID friendly, so I have hardwood floors, salsa music and a mostly willing husband and that's going to have to do [laughs]. And for me my mental well-being non negotiables that help with my mental health are that, being in nature at least once a week and making sure that I play with my dog every day even on the days that she doesn't want it. And I think that people just need to find what works for them that they actually like doing and doing it at a cadence that they decide that they'll be accountable to do barring extreme circumstances or death, dismemberment, hell or high water and not being afraid to just choose whatever that is. So, if it's going running a couple of times a week or it's colouring into colouring books with your kids on Sundays on the carpet or if it's dancing in your underwear to Abba in the living room on Saturdays, I don't care what it is, but just find whatever that is that makes you feel good and do it.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, I agree, absolutely. There's a researcher called James Gross, I he's in Pennsylvania, I think, and he talked about emotion regulation and how there are, in his model, there are five families of emotion regulation and one of those is called situation selection. But most people use that as a, right, what situations can I select out of so that I don't have to go and feel whatever it is that I want to feel? And one of the things that he and I discussed when I had him on this podcast was how was the importance of selecting into things to say, right, I know that helps me, I know that's really restorative, I know that's something that's really beneficial to me, so I need to select into that as well as maybe selecting out of those, I don't know, that relationship that brings me sadness or that meeting that I find really frustrating. Yes, select out of things if you can and select into things too because that can be really helpful as well.

Melissa Doman: I totally agree. And while I have a lot of, how do I say this, acknowledgment and respect for the power of the mind and how incredibly strong that can be when you are choosing to have a certain mindset or choosing not to think about certain things, But at the same time humans don't exist in a vacuum, we exist within the context of our environment and how we respond to stimuli. And so I think that when you can, trying to select into situations and environments that are conducive to making you feel good is great. And I think it is a balance of both where you're trying to be in those scenarios that you will feel good and thrive, while also trying to have some sort of influence over your mindset during that process.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, definitely. I think that probably takes us usefully into the conversation about emotion expression in particular, because I think that, especially for me anyway, that restorative thing I find really helpful when maybe I haven't had the opportunity to express what I might be thinking or what I might be feeling as I work it out, I suppose, maybe in a different way. So, what makes you really interested then in these rules or expectations that sit around emotions and emotion expression?

Melissa Doman: So I take it down to really basic levels. And so I think about our ancestors, I'm talking before the advent of language, before social rules had developed, before biases or expectations had developed. And how much of all of that we have put on ourselves [laughs] in the last few 1000 years and go, gosh, how far did we evolve, both in ways that are helpful and lots of ways that are destructive and unhelpful? And so if you think about again, with our ancestors, when they felt certain emotions, emotional regulation wasn't really a thing because they weren't aware of it. They were self-aware to some degree, but they weren't trying to regulate their emotions really at all, because there wasn't a purpose to like there is now. And so if you think about the rules and expectations that are surrounding emotional expression, it's a modern day invention. When I say modern day, I'm taking into account hundreds and hundreds of years of history, longer than that. But I find it incredibly interesting how we evolved from nothing at all, act as you please because that's how we're wired, to thinking of all of the ways that things could go wrong depending on what we do or do not display? That's so interesting to me, all of the rules that we're constantly thinking of, some people more so than others and how it just used to not be that way. I find that incredibly interesting as a social construct.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, definitely, me too. So, I suppose I'm wondering if I take myself back to that kind of ancestral or the ancestor frame around it, I guess, I suppose they must have had to do some kind of emotion regulation do you think? I suppose I say do you think, I'm thinking they must have had to do some kind of emotion regulation. So, maybe not the social expectations or the status expectations or the gender expectations or whatever, I agree with you that are more modern and by modern, we're spanning hundreds of years construct. I suppose I'm thinking about maybe if I didn't regulate my fear then I might not freeze and stand still, which means I might get caught by a predator. If I don't regulate my anger, then I might end up harming one of my tribe type thing.

Melissa Doman: Yes, most definitely.

Phil Willcox: Yeah.

Melissa Doman: I think from a survival perspective and from a collaborative survival perspective, absolutely. I think I was more poorly trying to explain from a moment to moment social interaction in a more granular sense. So, when it comes to being in a tribe or trying to avoid danger or threat or trying to maintain the rapport and safety in those basic social relationships, absolutely. I think that where we are now in comparison to that is light years ahead from that.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, I agree, the contrast is huge.

Melissa Doman: Extremely significant, yes. But from a basic perspective for survival and social bonding, absolutely, I agree.

Phil Willcox: Mm, okay. So, a question that has occurred to me, I guess, now in this moment then is and I suppose I'm asking it from a slightly biased point of view, because part of what got me interested in emotion was when I did something that went against those rules and expectations. So, I did something in a job that I really should have been fired for, because what I did was against the, I suppose, not just only the rules and expectations, but also the, not the societal ones, but also the rules within the organisation, basically I swore at a customer and told her to shut the something up and stop crying like…

Melissa Doman: Oh boy, oh boy.

Phil Willcox: Whilst I thought I was on mute and I wasn't. So I should have been fired.

Melissa Doman: Oh, no. Oh, no.

Phil Willcox: But I wasn't, but what that sparked for me was like this quest, I suppose I could describe it as to understand more about emotion. So, for you and your interest in this area then, is it something that you've kind of fallen foul of in the past, where you have, I don't know, broken those unspoken rules or expectations and maybe either got yourself into trouble or maybe been better as a result from it?

Melissa Doman: So, I would say yes to all of the above because I [laughs] always joke with one of my siblings that in our family we would talk about emotions not show them, but because I was the one that showed them, I often felt like the odd one out. And so I think for me, even that interest sparked as a child where I would try to show this range of emotions, but when you have primary caregivers who don't, who may only display a couple of emotions, that can be kind of a natural friction or rift in that family system. Where it then leads the individual in the family system who is showing the full range of naturally programmed emotions to feel confused or inquisitive as to why that is an issue in the first place. But you obviously, your brain is still cooking until you're 26 years old, so you're not working that out until you get older, you gain insight and go through all those childhood development stages. But for me, that interest peaked from those situations as a child. But then as I got older and I noticed in different systems, whether it was family or school or work that there were only a certain set of emotions that were either socially acceptable or more comfortable to others to display. And again, I found myself feeling confused as in and inquisitive. Why if we have all of these emotions naturally, why are we only allowed to display 15% of them? That doesn't make sense to

me? Wouldn't it make more sense to display the emotions that we are given for an evolutionary reason and to be able to just have them embedded into daily interactions? I again, go back to feeling confused and inquisitive. And so there have been a variety of occasions where I was appreciative that I just said how I felt or showed how I felt, and there were even others who said thank you for doing that because I didn't have the guts to. Or there were some occasions where, yes, it got me into a challenging situation or hot water, but I don't regret it because they were completely appropriate reactions at the time. And so fast forward to now and I feel incredibly aligned in terms of when I'm honest about how I'm feeling, granted honesty in some occasions is not always the best policy, but that is an episode in itself. It is [laughs].

Phil Willcox: Yes, there is.

Melissa Doman: It's funny because there are, I'm sure many AI programmes that would agree with me that honesty is not always the best policy when you're dealing with humans. But I feel incredibly aligned with not hiding how I feel, being honest about how I feel, because it leads me to outcomes that are meant to occur and also helps me rest my head at night that I know that I'm being myself, I'm being authentic, people are not left guessing with me hardly ever. And I'd say that on all the occasions where I felt I was being made to feel like I was wrong for doing that, that I'm very happy that I stuck to what felt right.

Phil Willcox: Mm. And I suppose I'm putting myself in the listener's shoes, partly because I am one because I'm listening with you, to say, how did you get there then? So, what might be some of the, I don't know, the strategies or the approaches or the resources that you've used to get yourself to that place? I've asked a question, then I'm going to say something and then I'll come back and ask the question again.

Melissa Doman: Sure [Laughs].

Phil Willcox: I ask it because I can imagine that must feel quite liberating in a way, to not have to hold that conflict or to hold that incongruence or that dissonance, maybe that might be a better word, that dissonance between what you're feeling internally and what you're then, I don't know, allowed or permitted to express externally. So, yeah, I'll get back to the question then to say, yeah, are there strategies or approaches or resources that have helped and supported you to get to that place? #

Melissa Doman: So, that's a really good question. I think for me a long time ago I would say I definitely, and this is way, way before I went into the counselling profession, I did my own counselling and I went through my own therapy, and understanding that these emotions are healthy to occur, why they occur and just unpacking the unwritten rules and conditioning that I had been put through, and being able to identify which parts of those were unhealthy? What were the functions of why they occurred, et cetera, et cetera? And so really just starting with my own counselling. And I did a lot of counselling, actually as part of my graduate school programme, because it was actually mandated by the programme that every person who's going through that programme needed to do their own therapy. And I thought, man, that's good, that if you're teaching people how to do this skill set, they need to deal with their own stuff too. And so I thought that was a very good, mandated

requirement. And so for me it was that. And then I would also say having different people in my social network as I got older, who would also validate that it was healthy to be aligned with what you were feeling and that they would also be doing that. What else would I say? I think even in present day just talking about why that can still be a struggle to do, but why it's healthy to do? And using my own platform for that discussion. So I, especially in the past, let's say 18 to 24 months have been trying to dig into that even further, especially when I'm posting on LinkedIn, where I talk about why it can be really difficult to have certain emotions, but why it's healthy and constructive to not only experience them, but also to put that outwardly to others who might be going through a similar suppression process and they're looking for explicit permission from others that they don't have to. And so I think that another resource for me is just social conversation about how hard it can be to do that process, but why it's important to continue to do it. And there's a lot of other resources I'm sure I could share but I would say that those are the top three.

Phil Willcox: Wonderful, thank you so much, Melissa, there's some great learnings in there, thank you.

Melissa Doman: Sure.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, one of the things that really helped me was, and in a way I grappled with it for a while to think was I being disingenuous or was I being…was I minimising the emotion? And to a certain degree I think the answer I landed on was maybe. And I started reading work by the US researcher called Paul Ekman, who's done a lot of research into emotions in general and emotion expression in the face in particular. And one of the areas that he researched, which I found really, really helpful for me was this idea of certain emotion families have certain universal triggers. So, for example, if we looked at something like happiness, it would be something pleasurable. So something that you find pleasurable in whatever way, it could be, a smell, it could be a sight, it could be something you hear, whatever it is. And if you find it pleasurable then that's going to bring happiness forward. If it's anger, then it's obstruction to a goal. There's a goal, there's something in the way, the anger is the emotion that can help you get over that obstacle or around that obstacle or to bounce back up from the knockdown that you've had to get to where it is that you need to get to. And there are seven different emotions or states that he talks about having different universal triggers. And I found that framing of, for example, anger as an obstruction to a goal really helpful for me, in terms of when I could feel that frustration or feel that anger, then I would ask myself two questions and those would be, what do I want and what's in the way? And so when it came to then expressing the emotion, rather than saying, I'm angry because you're in my way, it would be what I really want right now is to get to this outcome, and I feel like this discussion is getting in the way of us getting to that outcome. So, what I'd really like to do is either close this discussion off or take it off line so that we can get to the outcome, which is to finish this meeting on time, for example. What I found quite help was using that language of the triggers to make it, I guess, more palatable or more acceptable for the expression, rather than saying, the obstacle that you're putting in the way is making me really angry, so we need to get the obstacle out of the way or take it off line so that I can be happier again. The framing it in that way seemed to, when I first started reading about it, to be quite helpful for me, because I could feel like I was expressing it and in a way that was, I guess, less likely to make other people uncomfortable or to maybe get me in trouble, I suppose in a way.

Melissa Doman: [Laughs] It's funny you mentioned that, the ones that I tend to, oh and this is actually another quite a big, I wouldn't say necessarily a resource but a practice that I use is, and it's quite related to what you're saying, is emotional contextual framing. So what I mean by that…

Phil Willcox: Ooh, I like the sound of that.

Melissa Doman: [Laughs] If I'm feeling an emotion, very similar to what you're saying, I provide the context as to why. So let's say I'm feeling fearful. I have become very comfortable at saying to someone I'm feeling anxious because, I'm feeling nervous because, I'm starting to feel angry because, and so there is the outcome that I may share depending on whether or not it's appropriate, but also to give the…so, there's something in counselling called secondary process, where it's not about what you're talking about, but it's about zooming out and looking at the dynamic itself of the conversation. So, you're looking at that secondary process in which that content is occurring. So, I'm feeling anxious because, sharing about whatever content has been said or action has been done that has caused me to feel that emotion or the absence of something being done, causing me to feel that emotion. And so it'll give the contextual explanation sometimes with or without the outcome that I'm looking for, again depending on what's going on. But I often feel that giving that context is incredibly helpful because when people will display emotion but not explain why it's occurring, not everybody will know what to do with that [laughs]. Because when we react to other's emotions or to our own, those are really fast processes that occur. For some people it's more of a slow burn depending on the emotion or it's a slow rise and then they're sustained for quite a while, particularly with anger or fear. But for some people it's quite instantaneous. So, developing the practice of trying to slow down to have the, is the term forethought, I'm not sure what word I want to say?

Phil Willcox: Yeah, forethought works I think.

Melissa Doman: To have the forethought to, okay, I'm feeling this way, I have to explain to this other person why, so we can do something constructive with what I'm displaying, instead of having it go off the rails.

Phil Willcox: Mm, I love that.

Melissa Doman: It's a tough practice to develop, but I have been working on it for years and getting others to do it depending on their motivation can be very easy, for others it can be quite challenging, but it's definitely a practice that you have to develop because our brains work really fast. And so slowing down to implement that process takes dedication, especially if it's not something that can come naturally to someone.

Phil Willcox: Yeah, definitely. And have you found, and I'm going to use the example of the emotional contextual framing, only because that's what we're, I say only, I'm going to use the example of the emotional contextual framing because that's what we were just discussing. And what I wanted to ask was more around, how might that be different in the different geographies that you've lived and worked in

Melissa Doman: Ohhh.

Phil Willcox: So, yeah, what differences have you found either with that particular practice of emotional contextual framing or more broadly around emotion expression? What have you found to be similar or maybe different across…? Because I think you said you lived in the US, South Korea, England and Australia I think you've lived in and you've travelled to more countries, is that right?

Melissa Doman: Yes. So I've lived in um multiple cities in the United States, London, Seoul, South Korea and Melbourne, Australia. And I've travelled to, gosh what am I at now? 47 countries. I'd love that to be 100 by the time I die, hopefully a long time from now. And, oh, gosh, what an interesting question [laughs] because you know what's funny, I think that the explanation of why you're feeling an emotion is actually something that you're more likely to see occur in cultures or regions where talking about emotions or emotional intelligence or going to counselling is a potentially encouraged practice. Because when I was living in South Korea, now granted I want to take timescales into account because that was in 2008, so quite some time ago, and in certain cultures displaying some emotions are considered to be socially inappropriate or selfish. So, for example, in certain cultures that are more collectivistic, like many cultures in Asia, where the group comes before the individual or you are constantly thinking of not bringing shame to your family based on public displays out in society, you are less likely to see a wider variety of emotional displays, and therefore also not as much of a contextual explanation if you're not having the displays to begin with. But however, what I do see is that in some cultures, even if you are supposed to be mindful of how you conduct yourself in public, that the one that always seems to come through, and it might be with explanation or not, is anger. So, because anger is something that just really can burst through sometimes without control of said user. I distinctly remember that even though emotions weren't really talked about that much when I was living in Korea, that seeing displays of anger or frustration publicly is something that I did see, and I thought how interesting, maybe that's the one that's more socially acceptable that doesn't need an explanation. And then when it came to living in Australia, and again, this was in 2006, there wasn't a lot of talk about emotional displays or context around feeling those emotions, because I actually felt that at the time, and I didn't recognise this at the time because I was just a university student, there was a lot of unintentional toxic positivity [laughs], which it's, oh, no worries, everything's all right, just do this. And we would interpret it as like laid back, no worries, things are fine, which to a degree is absolutely true, but it also would then prevent other types of displays or contextual explanations that needed to occur, because it was being stamped down by, oh, hey, no worries, like just put it out of your mind. I'm only now realising that as an adult quite some time later. And then when I was in England, which is far more recent, that was 2017 to 2020, the conversation about mental health was starting to bloom. And so that was a very interesting time because historically in the UK, which is historically known/slash stereotyped to be stiff upper lip culture, but that was changing quite drastically, where it wasn't even just talking about general mental health and mental illness, but just talking about emotions and why they're healthy and normal to talk about and give those contextual explanations so that you're not avoiding that process and causing potentially bad outcomes down the line, like substance abuse or disruption in relationships or your career and things like that. So, in the culture where as a foreign national I was expecting it to occur the least, it actually occurred the most [laughs] And I was like, wow, this is incredible. And again, it's not something I ever would have known had I not been submerged in the culture at that time. And so I find that when it comes to emotional display and contextual explanation of said display, you are more likely to see that in cultures where emotions are talked

about, mental health is talked about, counselling potentially is encouraged, and in more westernised cultures. And I will never forget when I was living in London, we had quite a large number of friends who were Brazilian, and with what I had known at the time about emotional displays or how those conversations occur around emotion in Latin America, I had never known that in Brazil in particular, they talk about emotions all the time. They talk about therapy, like they're talking about the weather.

Phil Willcox: Oh, wow.

Melissa Doman: So what an interesting anomaly within Latin America because I had always been taught and when I had been researching in school that wasn't as likely in Latin American countries for a whole variety of social reasons, again, looking at collectivistic culture. Brazil is not like that. And so these folks taught me about discussions about emotion in Brazilian culture, I never would have known had I not met them. And again, based on what I had read in what I thought were academically correct textbooks [laughs]. So, a long explanation but I hope that was a cogent response [laughs].

Phil Willcox: Oh, it was fantastic, yeah, it was wonderful. I was lost in listening with you. So, no, that's fabulous.

Melissa Doman: Ah, it gave me an opportunity to say the word cogent, I can't remember the last time I said that [laughs].

Phil Willcox: And I think a question that came to mind then as you were wrapping up, so those principles that you were describing were discussions around things like therapy and/or mental health and when, when those aspects around therapy, mental health and well-being are present in a culture then it's more likely that the emotional contextual framing is going to be applicable or not applicable, appropriate. And I'm then thinking about the different organisations and the different teams that I work with and I wonder if that might also then feed through to the different organisations that I work with? So, for example, I work across a whole host of different sectors. I work in the construction sector, in the financial services sector and a few others. And in a way, potentially maybe against a bit of the norm is the discussion around mental health, and particularly the attachment of mental health to safety. So, in terms of mental safety as well as physical safety, is meaning that in those construction sectors, which is where you might typically say, oh people don't talk about emotions in construction, and I think it's contextually relevant because the construction industry in the UK has had and continues to have a real challenge around suicide. So, it's the profession where people are most likely to lose their lives to suicide. So, there's a lot of work going on to shift and change the culture around, for example, discussion around emotions. Whereas in the financial services sector, sometimes I find it actually it's harder in some of those environments to talk about emotions, because it's all, I don't know, numbers and finance, and performance, and statistics, and those things, and you don't necessarily have those conversations around mental health, well-being, therapy, those kinds of things. So, I'm wondering from your experience is that something, those principles that you were describing in a geographical culture, do you see them as well in organisations that you work with and where you may or where people may or may not be more likely to express their emotions?

Melissa Doman: Oh yeah. So, I think that you have the personal rules that you subscribe to based on how you were conditioned in your culture, your family, any other external influences like the gender you identify as or sexual orientation. But then when you go into a work context [laughs], it sometimes feels like all bets are off [laughs]. So, I think that when it comes to not only certain industries but certain company cultures that can be extremely influential. So, if you're thinking about certain industries where showing emotional displays might lead people to falsely think that you are incapable of doing the job or that you are a bit of a loose cannon or that you are weak for showing struggle, one of my least favourite correlations that people will create in their minds of someone's character based on showing a completely normal human process of struggle, I think it's interesting and really disappointing, you see that all the time. So, for example, and it's really across the board, so it can be very high stakes industries, like law and finance, and medicine, but also you can have more of the industry social expectations of certain displays or non-displays of emotions like in construction or mining or any of the tougher industries, where it's focused on, let's say, a physical result and less on conversation. So it's so interesting how it's not only the expectations from potentially an industry, but also into a company, and how that tone is set by usually most of the people who have visibility and influence. So, I tend to look at it all as systems within systems because my graduate training was from Adler University, and so actually I often make the joke that Adler was alive at the same time as Freud but never got the press like Freud did. And it's true, most people don't know who he is and he's actually the one who is responsible for the concept of birth order. So, how different siblings will act based on where they are in the chronological timeline of being born into a family, that was him. So, like middle child syndrome, that's all him. Or if someone is engaging in compensatory behaviour because they might be lacking in a different aspect of their life, that's him. And so I tend to look at people as they exist in the systems in which they function. So, a workplace is that, so you can have your emotional displays and your family system, and your social system, but then when you're looking at the work system it's the industry and then go one level down it's also the company. And then you can even go another level down into your team. So, it's all these unspoken rules that we are often navigating and it can be quite challenging when there are, we'll say a commonly, commonly agreed upon set of behaviours or principles, and there might be a couple of people say, no, I'm good doing it my own way. And sometimes that can be healthy because other people are repressed or suppressed, suppressing it not doing it, but then there are some occasions where there are some folks that the displays that they are doing at work truly are inappropriate. There is a limitation, just because we can display emotional network and should, there are some and also intensity of some that are also not appropriate. So, it's very situational and scenario based, which makes it even more complicated [laughs].

Phil Willcox: Yeah, definitely. As we start to pull this episode together to a close then, I suppose I'm keen to ask maybe a reflective summary question that might be, if you had three recommendations for our listeners then, I know we've covered a lot of ground as well today, from tacos and salsa, all the way through to the different systems that we have in play in the workplace, if you had three recommendations to share with the listener to say, when we think about these unspoken rules and expectations that sit around emotions, my three recommendations would be?

Melissa Doman: My three recommendations would be, it's okay to have emotions but if you're going to show them, context is incredibly helpful. So, that's one.

Phil Willcox: Yeah.

Melissa Doman: The next one is, I want to make sure these are good.

Phil Willcox: Take your time, honestly.

Melissa Doman: So, the first one would be…

Phil Willcox: So, the first one was okay to have emotions and if you're going to share…

Melissa Doman: Giving context.

Phil Willcox: The context is really important, really helpful, sorry.

Melissa Doman: Is critical, yes. The next one would be if you're going to have emotions and display them to others, it's important to understand and think about the moments where it's useful just to let them occur as they are, versus when it's useful to try to regulate them. So, what I mean by that is it can be purposeful or constructive to show anger or frustration, but thinking about to what level you need to do that to accomplish your goal?

Phil Willcox: Okay.

Melissa Doman: And the third one would be if you have any sort of shame or guilt about experiencing emotions and showing them, I would have a very long hard look at where that comes from, why it exists, and whether or not that internal belief set serves you? People carry these rules with them that they sometimes don't even know where they pick them up and they still use them to their own detriment. So, I would say if you're having your own internal rules about emotional displays, I would be very clear about where they come from and if they're actually helpful.

Phil Wilcox: Wonderful. So, can I summarise them or share them to see if I got them?

Melissa Doman: Yes.

Phil Wilcox: So, number one, it's okay to have emotions and if you're going to share and express those emotions, then the context around it is critical. Number two, if you're going to display emotions, it's important to understand and think about when it's okay to just let it happen as it is and when to regulate it, to think about the goals that you might want to be achieving. And then three, if you have any shame or guilt about expressing any emotions, then having a long hard look at where that comes from, why is it there and how it serves you might be really helpful.

Melissa Doman: You got it [laughs].

Phil Willcox: Brilliant.

Melissa Doman: Perfect, yes.

Phil Willcox: Fantastic. That's a wonderful way I think for us to put it together, Melissa, I think that those are three fantastic recommendations. Yeah, thank you so much.

Melissa Doman: Oh, my pleasure, I'm so happy they're useful. This stuff can be really challenging and it's such a journey when it comes to the awareness of these sorts of things and changing how you engage with how you feel and display emotions. It's a lifelong journey and it is never too late to try to learn some new tools, even if you felt you hadn't been exposed to them before.

Phil Willcox: And on that sentiment then I think we'll pull it together. How if our listeners wanted to get a hold of you, Melissa, what would be a good way to do that?

Melissa Doman: So, you can reach me through my website melissadoman.com. I'm also on LinkedIn with my regular name as being searchable, and then on Instagram @thewanderingmel. And if you are looking for any sort of advising or facilitation on mental health at work, team dynamics or communication, with a bit of a real talk, as the kids say, please feel free to reach out, I'd be happy to help.

Phil Willcox: Wonderful, fantastic. And we'll put links to all of those into the show notes as well. So, I think what that leaves me then is to say, is there something else then before we close, Melissa, something else that you're thinking, feeling or would like to say?

Melissa Doman: I want tacos [laughs].

Phil Willcox: [Laughs] Brilliant, love it. And in that case then, thank you so much, Melissa, it's been great to have you on the Emotion at Work podcast, thank you so much for coming on.

Melissa Doman: Thanks for having me.

Phil Willcox: You've been listening to the Emotion at Work podcast and if you've got this far you must be interested in the role that emotions have in the workplace either within individuals, between people in teams or in organisations as a whole. So, head over to the Emotion at Work hub which you can find at https://community.emotionatwork.co.uk/groups. Thanks for listening.