

Episode #205 Availability is not a Skill

David Lee, Dr Susanne Evans & Me

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Susanne: Hello everyone. and welcome. today I've got my lovely friends and colleagues, David Lee and Susan Rein with me for one of our regular conversations. And today we are going to be talking about burnout. So this came as a result of a number of conversations that we had, not just about personal experiences and things that we've heard about from other people, but also 'cause we felt we were starting to see a lot more conversations about burnout in our various platforms and social media that we are involved in.

So we thought it might be an interesting thing to talk about. So that's what we're gonna talk about today.

Let's first of all take a bit of a deep dive into what burnout actually is, what our understanding of it is from the outside and also the inside. So David, I'm gonna go over to you first. how do, would you define burnout if you had to explain it to somebody?

David: Yeah. speaking from personal experience, like feeling exhausted and loss of [00:01:00] interest in what before was something I was really passionate about. so a feeling of going through the motions. And I remember like, it was yesterday and it was a long time ago, I was doing a workshop and I, I can't remember what the topic was.

and I said something like, the majority of people in America live for the weekend. And as I said that, I thought, oh my God, I'm now part of that majority. And I was sort of like the last one to know until I said it. so that, I mean, those are a few things that, come to mind, especially the exhaustion.

Like there's no energy, no mojo to do anything, be curious, be creative, really care, et cetera.



Susanne: And that is obviously a really different [00:02:00] way for you of being, because my experience of you is that's not you. that obviously was very different for you. Is, is that something that resonates with you, Susan?

Susan: Yes. and like David, it's quite a long time ago that I went through, what I only realized long after was called burnout. I mean, at the time I had no idea what was going on. And I think for me there was a, perhaps a loss of identity. Mostly, I was a bit listless and without a purpose, I think perhaps, but not conscious of that.

And I also had a really tough year. There was a lot of things going on in my life, but it, manifested in just complete exhaustion. And I was doing a course at the time. I remember, and it's funny how something [00:03:00] stays with you, isn't it, Dave? It's something that somebody says or, but there was somebody talking about how to spend a good day or how to get stress relief or something like that.

I can't remember the topic exactly, but they, asked us. In the group, what we do to relieve stress at times. And the thing I remember thinking about was chopping vegetables. And I still do, I still find that quite, 'cause you have to think about it. So it, focuses your mind, it's very good to use your hands and stuff like that.

But after that class seminar or I began to cry 'cause something, I don't know if that's what tipped me over the edge, but something, I just began to cry and I cried that whole night pretty much, and into the next day. And I didn't know what was going on. I had no idea what was going on. we talk about being grounded and feeling grounded.

That there was no ground, I think is the best way of [00:04:00] describing it. And I remember I sent an email to the head of hr. And said, look, there's something wrong and clearly I don't know what's going on. And they said, you can go in and talk to somebody. So I went and sat in front of a, a counselor and, like it was a week or two later, perhaps by the time I got an appointment. And it was a horrible experience.

This person just did not help in any way, shape or form. I think the relationship means so much in anything like that, that all that person seemed to want to do



was to line me up for the next conversation. and I remember coming outta there and I walked for about four miles after that, session, and I was so lost. But I remember just having this sense of, I have to find myself. now it was a really [00:05:00] long way back and I'm sure that I got back into doing things, I took time off and all of that before I was ready because I did it all alone. And it took me a really long time to be able to talk about this without crying, without my whole body kind of going into a state of shock almost.

But I remember people saying to me afterwards, you know, we knew there was something wrong. We didn't know what to do. I've read about that since that one of the things we do as humans when we most need other people is we push them away and it's very hard to break in.

And I would say that that is probably a very strong sign on the outside of burnout when there is someone that won't let you in, that usually does, or you can't tell what's wrong with them. And, a couple of people tried and I can remember just like, because I [00:06:00] didn't know what was happening and that was my only way of protecting myself, I guess at the time.

The one I know we'll probably come back to this later, but the one benefit of all of that, I would say, from my perspective now is my body never, ever let that happen again. So anytime that I was in a stressed state at work or things were getting to be too much, and when we start using those two words, I would get sick.

So my body would stop me prior to going down that slippery slope into to nothingness. and I don't think I've spoken about this like this before actually, and I didn't write about it in my book even because I still don't know really where it came from. I have ideas and I, I don't know that I have the words always to describe the [00:07:00] experience.

So thank

you

Susan: for letting me attempt that here today.



David: I'm curious, I think it could be really helpful to people if you're able to like, revisit the HR person not being helpful. Do you, oh,

Susan: sorry. It was, it was the counselor, the HR person, I'm sorry. Oh, I'm sorry. The counselor.

David: do you remember like some of the specifics of what she did that wasn't helpful and what could have been helpful?

So like, for people who wanna be helpful to a, in this case it was a client, but a loved one.

Susan: I remember I went in and I sat down and I can't remember what she asked me first, but I just started crying because I didn't know what was going on And she looked at me and she said, well, you're very tearful, aren't you?

I was like, oh my God, what is wrong with this person? Like, you know, really? And then she kept, there was a clock behind me and she kept looking at her clock, like she [00:08:00] kept glancing at her clock and I really felt like she was not listening to me at all. That's what I remember. David, I don't remember anything else about the conversation.

I just remember every time I say something, she'd say, well, we'll pick that up another time. So I felt very dismissed of my experience, not really able to just talk or cry or whatever I needed to do, express myself and being kind of pushed along. Mm. And, and that was a sense for me. Now, again, I think a relationship is so important.

So if that wasn't the right person now, I would've gone and found somebody else. But at the time there was kind of stigma as well associated with it. I didn't really tell anyone that I had gone to talk to somebody. It was all a bit hush hush under the radar, and there wasn't much choice either.

people weren't talking about mental [00:09:00] health. I would say this is probably 20 years ago now, so it's quite a while ago. Yeah.



Susanne: Well, thank you so much, both of you for sharing that, but particularly for you, Susan, if that's the first time you've spoken about some of these things, I think it's really interesting.

I'm glad you told the point about people notice, because that was gonna be my question about in for both of your cases, did people notice and, and what did they try and do? And, and I guess that's from two perspectives really. One is how can you know if someone is going through this?

So if people are listening, how can they know, but also how can they help? And I think that leads on to what you've just been talking about, Susan, which is listening, isn't it?

Susan: Hmm. And what about you, Suzanne? have you had a similar experience or have you witnessed somebody as well?

Susanne: I would say for me, it's been never total burnout.

I certainly don't think that's happened for me. I think I've veg close to it on a couple of [00:10:00] occasions and I've managed to. Escape. when I was doing my PhD, I reached a point with it where I, I fell out of love with doing it. Totally wasn't interested. and I was overwhelmed with work and family life, not anything in particular.

It was just too much, just too much to do. I couldn't have put my finger on what the issue was really, but just overwhelming. And, I took the decision to stop and I took a leave of absence for a year from my studies and just focused on everything else. I didn't even look at any work that I'd done.

I put it in a cupboard and shut the door on it for a year, and that for me was my own decision to do. but it felt awful, because it was the first time I'd ever walked away from anything. it felt like utter failure because I just thought, I can't do this anymore, and if I don't stop, something's going to happen.

That was kind of the feeling that I had. So I walked away from it. I had no contact with anyone at my university for a year, and I just carried on living my life like a normal person. and it [00:11:00] was fine. and I did go back to it, but



the first day I walked in, and met my supervisors again. They both said, we didn't think we'd see you again.

We thought that would be the end. 'cause they could tell that I was finding it so difficult. but during that time, I got some support and I went and I saw a coach and we did a lot of work together and, and she was the one who helped me understand all of the things that had been going on for me and gave me the ability to get back on the horse, so to speak. And so that was invaluable.

And then the second time is actually more recent. So I think after my book was published, I started to struggle again. And I, I've spoken to you about this before, but like, finding it impossible to switch off and, and I could feel it, that kind of stress and kind of, I can't stop.

Coming back, that sort of feeling of everything's urgent. I've gotta deal with everything straight away. I feel overwhelmed by all of this stuff. and when I did stop, I took an extended break over Christmas last year. [00:12:00] I found it really difficult to just stop and I thought, I'm really glad that I have stopped and that I can just rest.

So that by the time I came back to work three weeks later, I did feel a lot better. But I was really interested in what you said, Susan, about your health and how your body kind of stops you. So I suffer from migraines and my migraines are stress related. And I know when I start getting a string of them that that's my body telling me something's not right and do you need to stop?

And as I've got older, I've got a lot better at at dealing with that. And I have treatment. So I have acupuncture for my migraines, which makes the world of difference. anyone listening who gets migraines, please investigate acupuncture. but I also think I'm just better at recognizing when I'm starting to go down that slope.

So I start waking up in the morning with a feeling of like existential dread. like I'm dreading the week ahead. That's a sign that I need to just relax a bit and get some [00:13:00] treatment. I used to have IBS, so 20, 30 years ago when I first started work, I had IBS. And I think that was also me being very stressed, working long hours.



And again, my body Was telling me to stop, but I didn't take any notice. So, but now I do. So I just think as I've got older, I recognize that feeling and my body tells me enough already, Suzanne, come on, you need to take a break. So yeah, over Christmas, loads of migraines. So yeah, it was, inevitable.

I think.

David: it's interesting when you talk about, Suzanne, about intentionally taking the year off and then both of you about your bodies letting you know it's time to like turn off right now. It makes me think of like one of the most useful concepts I've ever come across in terms of resilience.

And I had forgotten that the origin of it was with burnt out senior [00:14:00] executives was, Dr. James Lahr, L-O-E-H-R, and Tony Schwartz's work. they published in 2001 in Harvard Business Review, working with a corporate athlete model and their work and helping burnt out, like C-suite executives get their mojo back.

the model for it was based on their work with elite, athletes who were burnt out and realizing the first step in their recovery was literally recovery. And doing the challenge recovery cycle and gradually increasing the challenge and making sure there's commensurate recovery. and so one of the terms they or talked about was, the, like the sine wave oscillation and how human energy systems oscillate, just like breathe in, breathe out, wake, sleep, et cetera.[00:15:00]

And over the years, what I've been really conscious of is like, how do you embed in throughout the day those little recovery moments so we don't have to crash physically and, be out of commission and then like, how do we design those into the week, et cetera.

Susanne: and I, I do think

David: that.

Susanne: There, we'll probably come onto this in a bit more as we talk about it, but modern life in particular, post pandemic life of that constant zoom calls,



rushing from one to the other because we don't have to go anywhere you can overschedule yourself to a ridiculous degree. You know, I had a day a couple of weeks ago when I had 10 meetings in a day.

I mean, that's just insane. I know and I am the worst for diary management. So, part of that's my own fault. But, I had a day last week when I started at seven in [00:16:00] the morning 'cause I was doing something with someone in Mar in Australia and I finished at seven o'clock at night 'cause I was doing something with someone in the States, you know, but you can do it because you don't have to travel.

And I was listening to something earlier on today actually, about how there's that constant cortisol up and down 'cause you are rushing, rushing, rushing to go from one thing to the next, which can just lead your body into this constant state of fight or flight. Everything's urgent. Is that something you've experienced?

Do you think these things are getting worse or is it just me?

Susan, I'll turn to you first on that one.

Susan: Some of the words we use like overwhelm and too much and all of these things. I think when anything becomes too or over there's a very good clue in that for us. And yet. What do we do to make it, I, I was talking to somebody about this recently. There's no, well word, [00:17:00] it's over under underwhelm, over or under, it's like how do we, well ourselves like, because the extremes too much of anything or too little of anything.

There's great wisdom in that phrase everything in moderation. And we are not really geared towards moderation perhaps because it doesn't give us that buzz or that adrenaline. There's an amazing TED talk, a TEDx, I'm not sure if it's Ted or Ted X, talk about the brain under stress and it's professor Laura Boyd and she says, because obviously every time there's adrenaline, the chemicals are getting released or whatever is getting released into our brain and it fills up. And if it's a constant thing when you've expended the energy, if they're not matched the level of the [00:18:00] chemical and the energy, then there's excess chemical and it has to find a place to go and there isn't really room for it to go anywhere.



So it starts to do other things to your body budget. I mean, that's a very lay person's way of explaining it, but the analogy or metaphor she uses, which I think is fantastic, she said, imagine you're going to a car park and it's a really busy car park and you drive around for ages looking for a place to park because you just can't find an empty spot.

That's what it's like when your brain is trying to work with too much adrenaline in it, so there's no room for a new idea, there is no room to think about a new way of doing anything or anything like that. It's just constant driving around looking like for a space you don't even think I should go to another car park because you can't.

and I think that's a really simple way of thinking about the stress. [00:19:00]
But that wasn't the question you asked at all, Suzanne.

But I think the thing is, everything's relative was what I was going to say. So 20 years ago, we didn't have this always on culture that we have now. However, I was working overseas in some quite remote, locations.

I responded to an emergency, I responded like to the, tsunami in Sri Lanka and then the earthquake in Pakistan later that year. and I was in a situation where the police broke into our compound, the police to collect tax and basically held us hostage for a day, while they negotiated things.

And so there was a lot of events that had happened and I think all of those put us into, that fight or flight. And we didn't talk about things like that then. So I think we've got a lot more [00:20:00] knowledge now. Common knowledge perhaps, or it's talked about better to help us deal with things.

However, we're the converted sitting here chatting to each other. I'm sure that there are still lots of people out there that haven't come across the fact that there are ways of dealing with this or that burnout isn't normal. Or that overwhelmed. But I think overwhelm can come from anywhere. I think it's a human condition, and I guess it's relative.

It's relative to the situation that you find yourself in, in the time. And you don't have to be always on in a workplace for that to happen. You just have to be always on for that to happen. and that can come from so many places in your



life. And I think our nervous system, if we're constantly in that fight or flight mode anyway, our nervous system doesn't know how to [00:21:00] relax.

It can't, because it just doesn't know how to, because it thinks once we start to relax that we're in danger, so we better perk back up again. So I think we can keep ourselves in overwhelm unknowingly, and then it becomes normal.

Mm.

Susan: and actually you're just getting closer to burnout all the time. I think that kind of answers your question.

Susanne: It does. And actually there's a book, that was recommended to me a while ago. It's called Rushing Women's Syndrome. I dunno whether you've heard of it, it's basically for women, midlife women who are in exactly that situation. So where running around has become normal and they dunno how to stop.

And, someone talked to me about it and I recognize it so much from my own experiences, but also the experiences of a lot of women and men that I know that it's normal now to be like that, isn't it? That's, that's the issue.

Susan: [00:22:00] That is the issue, Susanne. And that's why we're seeing more of perhaps it being talked about as well, because it's great that the stigma is lifted, but actually are we doing something to help people? I think that's the thing I.

Susanne: I wondered on your views about that, David, because one of the things I was thinking about prior to this conversation is that idea that it's being talked about more, which is good, but is it good, is it good that we're talking about it or, are we actually doing anything with what we're talking about?

David: Yeah, man, great question. one of the things in terms of talking more about it, that just popped into my mind was some of the recent, conversations with managers, complaining about the new generation of workers actually. I'll say what the complaint is and then why I think it's great.



so the complaint being the new generation of workers. They're not willing [00:23:00] to work these ungodly hours. their number one concern is work-life balance. And I'm thinking bully for them. Like, that's smart. And, and even though in the short term, I get it why a manager or employer wants somebody to, work unreasonable hours, devote their whole life to them, in a very selfish way.

That makes sense. In the long run, obviously it's not sustainable. And then the bigger picture, the cost to society with, the fallout of burnt out people besides the healthcare implications, the family implications. So I think it's great that there's more, talked about and pushback.

I remember when I first got into the resilience field, it was so frustrating [00:24:00] because employers acted like they were on the cutting edge. If they hosted a brown bag, lunch talk on stress management techniques, which invariably we're like deep breathing and meditation and not much else, and thinking like, okay, good. Check that box. we've addressed stress in the workplace. Like, not exactly.

Susanne: I think there are so many of those narratives that still circulate about long hours and it's almost like a badge of honor. I recognize it so much from my early days in consulting. I. Back in the day when I was a graduate, we worked ridiculous hours, on a regular basis.

but it was seen as a good thing. It was, it was proving yourself and if you wanted to get on, you had to work the ridiculous hours. So there was a certain kudos to having had to be taxied home at two in the morning because it was too late for you to get public [00:25:00] transport. And then turning up the next day at nine o'clock, ready to start work.

Even more kudos if you hadn't actually been home and you had to pop out in the morning to buy some new clothes to put on, these were seen as good things and you went along with it because that's what you thought you had to do to get on. And I think it's great that younger employees are not buying into that.

I think the problem is a lot of the managers of these people will be people of our age who did have to go through that. And then there's resentment about,



well, I had to do that and that's how I learned to do all the things that I learned to do. So how are you gonna learn how to do these things if you don't?

Well, how do you show commitment? And I think there's that tension which hasn't yet been resolved. I dunno what your experience of it is, but I don't think we've quite squared that circle yet.

David: Yeah. I wonder if it'll end up being simply an age out of the workplace because Yeah. A version of [00:26:00] that that I just experienced last week, were several managers in a seminar talking about how quote soft the new generation was and soft meant.

Hey, when I was coming up in this industry, you were yelled at all the time and you just dealt with it. I'm like, and your point, I'm thinking your point is like, that was a good thing, you know? So I really wonder because I, I definitely agree that there's a, a jealousy and a resentment like, Hey, how come I had to deal with that?

And you're not wanting to, or you don't have to.

Susanne: Yeah. And I think possibly a lack of recognition how damaging that It's not good to have had to have experienced that, you know, to be shouted out, to be expected to work all the time, you know, to miss Christmas. I mean, all these things happen to [00:27:00] me and people I know, because of work.

that's not a good thing. We shouldn't be wanting to perpetuate it. It's, it's good that, that's in the past. We shouldn't be expecting people to still do it.

David: Yeah. one of my beliefs is the, like the psychological processes that have to take place to endure that type of workplace and work experience.

It so numbs a personnel. It's like the only way you can survive that is to be numbed out and pretend to yourself that that's no biggie. And so you get to the point, you know the saying, you believe your own press get to the point where you actually believe that craziness. Mm-hmm.

So,



David: and then I think also, I think Susan, you and I have talked about this, kind of a corollary to that is like the super alpha male hard charger who [00:28:00] raises, rises through the ranks and took a lot of crap rising up in order to rise up and dismiss how humiliating that was like, oh no, that's no biggie.

It didn't bother me. That's just guys being guys, because that's the only way to resolve the cognitive dissonance of allowing yourself to be treated that way. You convince yourself it's no biggie. and so you're so emotionally out of touch with yourself. You can't help but be emotionally out of touch with your impact on others and other people's distress.

Susan: Yeah. and you're going to work from here up. you have completely disconnected yourself from your body and the sensations that happen inside of yourself. Like they're just dismissed. and you've normalized stuff. Like that's what you're saying really, isn't it? If you numb things out or the [00:29:00] behavior you've just seen, or like you said, Suzanne, two o'clock in the morning, taxi back in at nine o'clock.

It was normal. Yeah. Well, everyone did it. Yeah. And like you kind of all got a pat in the back or whatever. So it was like a rite of passage and you didn't question, I mean, maybe you did question it some people had enough self-awareness at, at a young age to question things. I mean, I think that's what happens is if you're not self-aware, you are just blaming others for how they're doing things or whatever, and it takes you a while to look at, well, what's my role in all of this and what have I put up with that I didn't need to put up with?

Or how could I have been a better boss had I understood how to get the best from people in a way that wasn't shouting at [00:30:00] them or whatever. It is one of the things that I, I find really fascinating is I don't know how much money is spent every year. Like it's a lot of money on leadership development and managers and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And yet we seem to get no further along. I mean, I, I'm sure we are, but are we,

Susanne: I think for me, the issue is the model of leadership, which exists is not right.



there's so much of that kind of leader as hero, leader, as a battle. All of this kind of tropes around leadership. What I don't think we have. A is a form of leadership that's recognized as, as universally good, which escaped from some of those old fashioned ways of being.

And I, I think you are right David. I almost feel like there needs to be a, a changing of the guard in the workforce and in leadership because so many people, and I, and I [00:31:00] include myself in this because, I came up through organizations with that model, it's hard to step away from that as, as an approach of leadership because that's, that's what you are taught.

I see it in my work all the time when I'm trying to work with leaders and get them to be a more authentic and more vulnerable and tell a story and they're clinging onto their PowerPoint, like it's the life support machine. I just want to go and do a town hall presentation, Suzanne, and I'll say no, just.

Throw away the PowerPoint, just stand up and talk. And they don't wanna do it 'cause it scares them. and the model of leadership that they've seen is not that. it's this, it's the long hours, you know, you pull yourself up through commitment and, productivity and resilience in the face of difficulties, et cetera, et cetera.

That's the narrative that we're told. I think. I don't know. Do you agree? Is that what you've experienced too? David?

David: Oh, me. Oh, I'm sorry. I'm looking at, I'm looking at both you. I thought, I, I [00:32:00] just say, I, so a few things come to mind. so absolutely. the, hey, that's what I had to deal with and like it worked for me.

I'm okay, kind of mentality. One of the other things though that comes up for me, that helps me, step away from some of my judgmentalness at times, specifically around the almost universal unwillingness to have the hard conversations in the workplace. And so kind of like a corollary to what you're saying, Suzanne is the leader afraid of being vulnerable, is the amount of woundedness and the average person that gets projected onto [00:33:00] people and vomited out and interactions.



I. I get why that leads to leaders not wanting to be vulnerable or have the conversations or open up Pandora's box. It's like, I don't think I have the skills to handle what might come back. it's interesting because bringing this up made me flashback to, something that a psychologist friend to, said to me 20 years ago and he was asking about the work that I did, and he goes something like, do you really think management development, leadership development really makes a difference if those people haven't done their work?

And I'm like, good point. and just a quick example that I'm flashing on that, I, I remember working, doing some consulting and [00:34:00] organization where the new leader, who's a great leader, took over from a 30 year tyrant. and the organization was like Stockholm Syndrome, et cetera.

and dealing with this guy, this guy was so unselfaware that when he passed the baton to the new leader, he gave him a copy of the book Nuts, which was, by, was it Bill Kellerher, the founder of Southwest Airlines. And, he was an amazingly authentic leader. created a great culture, and the guy hands the book, he goes, you know, I modeled my leadership after this.

This has been so good. I think you should read, so like totally out of touch.

That is

Susan: amazing. That is amazing because, tomorrow's world's book day and I was, I was trying to come up with a, a post about [00:35:00] books and the things that are left on set, but clearly sometimes things need to be spelled out properly. It's not for you to fill in your own version of how this is meant to play out.

Susanne: Oh, well it links into our previous conversation, doesn't it? About difficult people. And a big part of that conversation was having that level of self-awareness of yourself and your impact on others is key to this as well. So I guess as a leader, it's being able to reflect upon the people around you and noticing how they are, but also noticing how you are with everyone else.

David: And if I could just jump onto that for one second. and this is really fresh in my mind 'cause I had some interactions that I alluded to before we started



recording that really make me thinking about doing some writing, specifically around that. And when you said about looking at your impact on others.

And one of the things that [00:36:00] I've witnessed a few times that really stood out for me, and this is actually not related to leaders, but just fellow humans, is when somebody has a lot of shame about who they are, it's so incredibly painful to acknowledge where you're really like not okay. And like being rude, toxic, a jerk, et cetera, to acknowledge that, or let's say a lesser version is so painful at the so level that it's like no way can they either hear that feedback or self-reflect.

But it's like if you can do the work to where you realize we all have light and [00:37:00] shadow, we all have good stuff and not so great stuff, like join the human race, then we're willing to say like, man, I've been kind of disrespectful to the people that report to me. And my yelling at them isn't me being a tough leader, it's me just being a really rude, disrespectful jerk and it's not okay.

So I'm gonna have to work on that.

Susanne: I, I read something earlier today, which I actually shared with both of you. So it was an article from The Guardian, which Helena Clayton shared on parental burnout, and it was pointing to the root of that is this perfectionism. So this desire for everything to be perfect in one's life.

So, you know, you have to be the perfect parent, you have to be the perfect employee, you have to be the perfect wife, husband, brother, sister, whatever. And all of this builds up impossible standards for people to [00:38:00] live to. And. Something like social media just contributes to that even more because then you see everyone else's perfect life.

You know, comparison is the thief of joy and all that. that it, it just builds up the pressure. And, it really struck me that article, because I've always prided myself on not being a perfectionist, I, I have no attention to detail, I get bored easily and all of that.

So I'm not a perfectionist, but I've thought for quite a long time that perfectionism is at the root of so much stress, that people experience. and in this article, it actually said a key thing that you can do to reduce burnout in



yourself is to lower your standards, which I thought was quite interesting, that actually if you are more satisfied with less perfectionism, your life will be a lot less stressful.

I thought that was quite interesting. I don't think either of you are recovering perfectionists. I'm not, I'm not sure.

Susan: No, but I do have very high standards with [00:39:00] things, I mean, I'm sure everybody does. That's the thing. There are certain things that we will hold ourselves to a very high standard, and that can be self-defeating for sure, and I think can cause a lot of stress if you haven't shared the standard with the person that you're expecting to work to the standard.

And I think that's often the mismatch of expectations that you find in a workplace that I ask you to do something for me. And what I expect back and what you give me back may be very, very far apart and, and both are at fault in one way. One of us for not checking what it is you really wanted from me and the other one of us from not showing you what I really wanted.

I think that causes a lot of unnecessary stress actually in our workplaces. our [00:40:00] language and business are the words that we use tend to be very vague. And there's a lot to be said for precision. And this isn't precision to be perfectionist, but precision about what is it that you actually want me to do and how would you like it to look and when do you need it by?

These kind of things that we tend to just talk around and I bet you that people spend a lot of time wondering. Should I just do it a little bit better so I meet the perceived standard? And it can still be very far off. So I think there's something in that. I think perfectionism.

Sure. I think that drives a lot of people, like very, very far into stress. I, I think mismatched expectations about standards. and I even remember being with a, a team and their, the team [00:41:00] leader kept saying to them, I. Good enough is what I want from you. But the team leader didn't give them any idea of what good enough meant.

And, and it was really interesting because for that person they were like, well, good enough. It just needs to be good enough. But of course, good enough in



their head was totally different from what good enough in everyone else's heads was. And that's the other thing is we all have such a different perspective.

We don't share perspectives. And while we share a language, if we're not precise about the language we're using, then we don't know what the perspectives are. And that's what I think causes a lot of angst in our workplaces.

Susanne: Mm, I think that's so true. I find myself saying a lot success, not perfection to clients, you know?

But what does that mean? You know, how I need to be able to [00:42:00] describe what success looks like. So actually going back to the conversation we had earlier about leadership, there's that noticing, but there's also being precise about expectations and being clear about feedback. You know, I think another thing that's really stressful for people is, someone not giving them clear feedback.

Going back to your point, David, about courageous conversations. We need to be courageous in that when we need to feedback to somebody that they're not giving us what we want.

David: Man, so true. I think the two biggest skill gaps that I've seen over the years, in general with people, but we're talking about leadership specifically is one, creating psychological safety so people with less power are willing to speak up.

And then number two is speaking with clarity and specificity around setting expectations, and giving feedback. So absolutely, and that's one of the things I'll say it, when I'm working with [00:43:00] managers is, two of your best friends if you wanna be a good manager, are, so for instance, or so, for example, and then give an example, give a specific example or tell a short story about what you mean by good enough or show an initiative or being a good team player.

Abs man, I'm so on board with what you're saying there. Yeah.



Susanne: So there's a big role for leadership and managers here in leading in the right way and noticing how their team are doing. But if we suspect, or if someone listening to this suspects that someone close to them or a colleague is burning out or is on the edge of it, what should they do?

How do they support that person? Susan, what do you think based on your experiences, not just for you, but what you've seen, maybe?

Susan: you somehow have to get that person to open up if you suspect there's [00:44:00] something. And that might be actually talking to somebody else who you think might be better as relationship with them.

not necessarily to behind their backs, but like going to somebody saying, Hey, have you noticed that Susan is blah, blah, blah these days? And can you have a word with her now? I think it's also, I, I suppose it depends. Some people will like a very direct approach, like, what's going on? And other people might just prefer to say, I noticed last week normally you would do this when this happens, but this time you reacted in such and such a way, or you didn't come with us to lunch or whatever.

Is there a reason for that? And I think it's trying to have an open-ended question without being accusatory, because I can remember that that's what people were saying to me was more, You're working too hard or something [00:45:00] is so obvious, like, of course I am. What the hell is wrong with you?

you're kind of saying things to people that they already know. It's already going on your head. I'm working too hard. Yeah, like that's not helpful. it's kind of coming at it from a how can I help? How can I support you? Can I take something off your plate? Is there something going on for you that you'd like to talk about?

If you don't want to talk to me, is there someone else you could talk to? Because I can remember seeing somebody who I worked with and I didn't know well, but I absolutely saw. In that person, what I had gone through several years later, the way they reacted to things, I was, I was almost like watching a mirror of myself.



And, and I did tell their line manager, I said, look, it's not my place to have this conversation. I don't know this person well enough, but you need to look out for them because [00:46:00] there's something not quite right here. Now, I don't know what happened, I left the organization shortly after that. But I think it's finding the person that you know, is the other person's person.

'cause there's always someone in the workplace. and if it's you, if you listen to our stories today, and you start to think, whew, there's something going on for me. Take action. Do something for you. Do something that reminds you. I think of who you are is really important. Get outside.

I think that's a good place to start. Take a week off. That's a good place to start. But do things to start to recharge your battery. Not what anyone else tells you to do, but the things that you know, bring you some joy or that give you a spark in your eyes that twinkle. And I think once you can start finding your way back to yourself, if you can't find that [00:47:00] twinkle or spark, then seek out help.

Absolutely seek out help. And whether that's with a coach or a counselor, or a psychiatrist or psychologist or your GP or somebody the thing is, don't let it go too far because it is a really long way back. It is a really long way back and. Yeah. So take action.

Susanne: Thank you. What about you David?

what things have you learned, in terms of support that you would've liked or support that you've given to other people? what do you think works? Yeah, anything else?

David: before I jump into, I just wanted to respond to some of the really cool stuff you just said, Susan. So last thing you mentioned about don't let it go too far, there's a famous book in the trauma field called The Body Keeps the Score.

Yeah. And it's so important, I think for people to realize. your body will shut you down if you don't do it [00:48:00] first. So better to address this sooner rather than later. also, it's cool that you mentioned about go outside. YouTube just served up a video where this guy was talking about how, foliage reflects infrared rays and because of that, and I can't remember the study, but because



of that, when you're walking in green environments versus like city, you get restored faster

And I'm sure there's other mysterious stuff going on besides that. But anyway, yeah, nothing like going out in, nature. yeah, just everything that Susan said, I'm just like, yeah, check, check, check. And what I try to do. Is have that balance of, like being invitational. so like everything, okay, you don't seem, you're a typical self, blah, blah, blah.

And [00:49:00] also not badgering the person. So like, so if I get either they're directly letting me know, don't wanna talk about it, or I just get the feeling, then it's like, Hey, that's cool, but if you ever want to like, I'm here for you. So that balancing. and I think maybe the only other thing, that comes to mind, and it's been like a theme that we've been talking about before, back to authenticity and self-disclosure is how maybe, like for the listener sharing their own example.

of feeling burnt out and why that makes 'em concerned about them. It can help take away the weirdness of admitting that this is going on. And then actually one other thing, when Susan, you were talking about not sounding like you're judging them, and I think that's also, if we're concerned that the person will misperceive, [00:50:00] why we're bringing it up.

Like it's not because you're no longer a fun person to be around that I'm, calling you out kind of thing. It's just state your intention and you're non intention. Like, I'm not bringing this up because you're a drag to be around or, or I'm trying to criticize you. It's like, I'm concerned because you're awesome and I wanna make sure you're okay.

So. That's all I got to say for now.

Susanne: That's amazing. I mean, that's such great resources and ideas for people who are listening. I think for me, when I recognize I'm starting to go down that rabbit hole of, of becoming too busy, it's reminding myself that I can say no to things. And, because I'm a great one for saying yes to things.



'cause I like saying yes to things and I, I like my work and all of that sort of thing. and my husband always says, availability isn't a skill, Suzanne. So I have to, I have to remind myself of that sometimes. Yeah. And that it's,

David: can you say avail availability

Susanne: [00:51:00] is not a skill.

David: That's brilliant.

That's absolutely brilliant. I love that. I'm not sure.

Susanne: It's one of his originals. he, he, he has some caucus. He may have got that from somebody else. But, I remind myself of that every now and again. 'cause my natural response, if somebody messages me or says, can we get together? Or can I pick your brains for five minutes?

Or that one as well. And my natural response is to go, yeah, sure. and I, I have to remind myself, no, I manage my own diary and, and I do have some horrific days in it, like the ones I described to you. But they're an exception rather than the rule. And I think it's about. Reminding myself of that when my diary starts to look really mad and I can feel myself starting to get a bit stressed by it is Right.

Okay. I'm gonna say no to some stuff and I, I block out time in my diary, actually, all the time. half a day or a day a week, and I don't put anything in and I write it in my own diary so that I don't start writing stuff into it. And I only change that if I [00:52:00] absolutely have to. And I have to be quite strict with myself.

'cause I know my natural response is to keep saying yes to things. my dad calls it. over enthusiastic volunteering. And I think that's exactly it, reckless volunteering, that's me. So, and I know that about myself. I have to keep a, keep a lid on it, keep a tight reign on it, because that I can easily get out of control and my diary gets ridiculous.



So I think it's coming back to that self-awareness and self-knowledge. I know that about myself, so I, I, I have to make sure I've got the structures in place to make that happen,

Susan: which reminds me of the word that didn't come into this conversation at all, really, which is boundaries.

Hmm. And

Susan: I think setting boundaries is so important and.

Whenever I have a friend or a client or anyone starting a new job, I always say, start as you mean to go on, like work from the beginning the way that you really want to work. Don't put in extra hours to look like you're great at the beginning because it's so [00:53:00] hard to stop that when you've made yourself so available.

And I was very strict with boundaries. Like even the head of HR in my last organization would say, your boundaries are so visible as well to us. We know what to expect because when I took leave, I did not answer my phone. I did not read emails. I, but I told everyone, of course, everyone else said that too, but they always did.

And once you let that go, we all push boundaries because we learned that as kids to push boundaries. So we do it forever with people and you are the only one that can set your boundaries. And I always find people respect them once they know they're there.

Susanne: It's exactly what you were saying earlier about that clarity of expectation.

I think we need to be really open about that. If we don't work on Fridays, we don't work on Fridays, and you won't get anything out of us. If we have an out of office on our emails, you don't respond to emails. 'cause the minute you start [00:54:00] responding to them, people think, oh, well she's on holiday, but she's just responded to me, so I'm gonna keep going.



And I you are right. And I think when you run your own business, as we all do, you have to be even better at that because it's so easy to say to yourself, oh well I can't switch off 'cause I run my own business. I hear that all the time. I never switch off 'cause I run my own business. Well, at some point you are gonna collapse because you can't be on all the time.

Susan: I took my emails and LinkedIn app off my phone just before Christmas when I was going on. I had three weeks off like you, that time Suzanne. And I haven't put them back on.

Oh.

Susan: And I'm really proud of that. I mean, some days I'm a bit annoyed, but mostly it's like I don't need to carry that around with me and be checking it outside of when I'm sitting in front of my computer.

So things will wait.

Susanne: I love that. Are you the same, David? do you have boundaries like that in place for yourself when you are on vacation? are [00:55:00] you off, do you switch off?

David: I check in, but I am really. Super conscious, maybe even over conscious about self-care. So I do that oscillation I talked about earlier.

I do like mini recoveries throughout the day. So, that's kind of more my style. I also have never done email on my phone to have that boundary. And it, it was a long time before I even did text. It's like I just didn't want that intrusion. But, I find that it does make life easier.

So I, I do text, but I, I keep email off my phone.

Susanne: Wow. I need to try this, my next holiday. This is what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna turn it off. So before, well I always

Susan: took do it on holiday. Sorry. I always took email and LinkedIn off before going on holidays, but now I've just not put them back.



Susanne: [00:56:00] Wow. I have taken LinkedIn off of my phone.

'cause I found when I was struggling to switch off over Christmas, I kept looking at LinkedIn. So I did take that off. I mean, why, why do you look at LinkedIn all the time? It's a habit. It's a habit. How do you think gonna happen?

Anyway, so before we finish then, I wanted to ask you whether there's a reason for burnout. So is it our body or our mind expressing a desire for us to change or to create change in our life? So based on your own experiences, did you learn anything from it? Have you changed practice as a result?

Susan, I'll throw to you first.

Susan: Yes, but it took me a long time. there was a few more near, near misses, incident, near misses. And even still at times, like you were describing, I can feel that coming back. I suppose, I don't know any different now, do I [00:57:00] either, what would've happened if I had stayed on the path that I was on? Well, I certainly wouldn't be sitting here. Now whether I would be alive or not, who knows, But I would say in a one way, it was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.

but it was a big price to pay. So there was a big cost to it that I just don't think, we talk about people who help other people. And even at work or whatever, anyone who's in that, you wanna help other people. You don't want them to make the same mistakes that you made and all of that.

However, there's learning in our mistakes. It's how we get through life. I wouldn't wish what I went through that time on anyone, even the people that I really did not like working with because it's just not a nice thing to go through. But I think we all have our own paths that we [00:58:00] follow and our decisions that we make.

And if we're not making the decisions that are best for us and our body, then our body will take decisive action for us. so if you can learn to listen as young as possible, then you're miles ahead of some of us here still trying to figure it out.



Susanne: Yeah. Nice. The process of burnout is unpleasant and, and you don't wanna experience it.

So actually the learning is to stop it before it gets to that point by noticing. What about you, David? Anything to add?

David: Man, I love that your body will take decisive action. That's so well said. Yeah. The analogy that I think about is, with the alarm, on your phone that gets louder and louder. I think about that.

if we don't, pay attention to the early signs, the body will be louder and [00:59:00] louder in letting us know. I guess just two things I wanna say related to that. So back to the MINDBODY connection is. Why not learn how to help your body support your mind versus not taking care of yourself so your body is sabotaging what you're trying to accomplish.

and then the other thing that I just wanted to mention, and I can't remember, I've got it on my notes here. which one of you, were saying something that made me think about our, good old friend David White, when he tells a story about how he had burnt out as the executive director at a nonprofit.

And, that evening of that epiphany, like, I can't do this anymore. He got together with Brother David Stens, a Benedictine monk who was sort of like a mentor to David White. I. [01:00:00] When David White asked him, brother David, speak to me of exhaustion. brother David says The antidote to exhaustion is wholeheartedness.

And David White was surprised. I remember hearing, first time I heard the story surprised. 'cause I'm thinking the antidote to exhaustion is recovery, obviously. but then David, white went on to talk about like, you're burnt out in this profession because your heart's not in it, and you've known for a long time, your heart's been in poetry, and it's time to acknowledge that and move in the direction that you're being called to.

And then I know Susie, do you know the wonderful Rilke poem? The Swan were then Brother David. Do you know that one too? Suzanne?



Susanne: no, I haven't heard it. Oh,

David: okay. And then brother David Sten, Reese Reskes, poem, the Swan and the Image. that it depicts is the swan clumsily, [01:01:00] trundling across a lawn looking like super awkward.

But the moment it sets itself into the water, it becomes this regal creature because it's in the environment that it's supposed to be in. and there's a, a wonderful line where it says something like, the swan is pleased to be carried. And I love that because it was passive. It allowed itself to be carried by this current, in this ecosystem that it was made to be in.

It didn't have to like paddle like crazy. And it's like when we put ourselves in an ecosystem that allows us to thrive, we thrive. And so that's such an important part of the. Leaving burnout into thriving.

Susanne: I love that. I need to look that one up. I've got David White's book on your recommendation.

David, it [01:02:00] is just wonderful. we were talking earlier about resources and books we can recommend, but his meditations are just fantastic to read. any other books, resources that you would recommend, David, you'd recommend Your Body Keeps the Score, which is a truly amazing book. Any others that you, would recommend?

Actually,

David: I'm only like about a quarter of the way in, but Oh, is it? Awesome. Is The Art of Impossible by Stephen Coler? Yeah, so he's spent 20, 25 years now being engaged in and studying. elite, extreme athletes like big wave surfers, et cetera, and what they do physically and mentally to perform at such an elite level.

And since I know all three of us love science and good stories, he has the combo there. It is stellar.



Susanne: I thought you were gonna say the three [01:03:00] of us are elite athletes for a minute and now I'm, I just have to pull off my chair laughing.

David: I love it. That's awesome.

Susanne: But yes, we love the science.

Thank you. for those I always leave our conversations with, more books to read. Susan, if you've got any other resources or books you wanna add.

Susan: So earlier on, David, you talked about the work of Tony Schwartz and Jim Lore and that book, the Power of Full Engagement is a great book.

and for what a lot of what we've talked about today. I think they go through that in that book. And then the other one for me, it's funny 'cause you talked about the Art of Possibilities or something like that. Impossible. Impossible. Well, it's the Art of Possibility by the Xanders. For me, I love that book.

and the reason it is, is because what you were talking about, the wholeheartedness David and, and I was saying, look for the twinkle in your eye, or, and he talks about shining [01:04:00] eyes, seek out those shining eyes. And I think when there's something that makes our. Eyes shine or sparkle, twinkle, whatever the word is, there's a message there for you.

Go follow that. Yeah. That's the key to wholeheartedness. And when your eyes are dull and everything's dull, then yeah, time to move on.

Susanne: Yeah, very good. I think one that I've been, dipping in and out of for a couple of years, actually, it's called Conscious Creativity by Philippa Stanton. And that's a lovely book about being more creative in everyday life.

And so she offers guided things to do around different themes. So you can go out and you look for loads of things that are the same color, and then you arrange them on a table and you take a photograph of them. so that's a book that I dip into when perhaps I am feeling a bit too much in my head and not enough out in the world that wholeheartedness and I find that's really good.



[01:05:00] and is things to do when you're out on a walk or things to do if you're out in nature. So I find that really good. And I've just started reading on your recommendation, David. Wonderful. By David Pearl. That's, something that I'm reading. I think that was one of yours and Oh, actually not, no. Was it Su Susan.

Oh,

Susanne: good. But I'm reading that and I think that's, that's an interesting one as well, I think around. Just taking yourself off in a different direction and, yeah, doing that kind of getting outside notion, wandering about, I'm finding that very insightful. So that's a good one.

Susan: Yeah. I think it's great to go out with a question and look for things outside that you just, yeah.

You would never really, you, we think the answer is sitting in one place. It's not really isn't.

Susanne: No, get out, isn't get outta the office. Go and do something else. Thank you both. Availability

Susan: is not a skill. It's not a skill. No.

Susanne: Really. It's not. Take that one with you. it's been great talking to [01:06:00] both of you as ever.

Thank you for all of your insights. Thank you too for sharing your personal experiences of burnout. I think I found it really interesting to listen to very moving and I think other people listening will too. I, I really hope This speaks to people and and helps some people recognize how they're feeling at the moment and get some help if they need it.

So thank you both as ever.

David: Thank you.



Susan: Well, this is what puts the shine and sparkle in my eyes, so good. It's great to have these conversations with you both. I love them.

Susanne: Me too. Yeah, me too. Thank you both. Thank you.

Thank you for joining me today on life, beyond the numbers. If something in this episode resonated with you, I'd love to hear your thoughts. And if you've enjoyed this conversation, Please take a moment to leave a review. It helps others like us. I discover this podcast and join in our conversation. Until next time. Keep exploring the human side of work life.

