E13: Bouncing back from burnout with author, podcast host, and burnout expert Caitlin Donovan

I'm a stress management expert by design. Chinese medicine is all about how different stressors internal and external affects the body. So how did I end up here? And I did what I do, and I dug into research and I spent two and a half to three years, both recovering and doing research. And then people started to ask for my help, saying I feel this too. You're writing about this thing. I feel this too. Can you help me? And I was like, I don't know. I don't know. Can I? So I worked with people for free in the beginning because I didn't know what the heck I was doing. And now I built an entire business around saving female entrepreneurs from the grand success of their own businesses.

This repetition is why 'bouncebackability' is so important to me. It's not just even about if you're going to burn out again, or if you do burn out again, it's just about life in general. Things are going to happen. No matter who you are, no matter what circumstances you have, things are going to happen. And this was a really big thing for me, because I was working with people who were at the top of the financial chain. And they were struggling and suffering so much. And then they were feeling guilty that they were suffering and struggling because they had money and they thought as long as I have money, I shouldn't suffer because people have it worse than me. And so we all get stuck in at every different stage of life and every different set of class circumstances and financial circumstances. We get stuck in these moments of life that really get us down and understand that. But deep down, we do have the ability to bounce back is more important to me than anything else.

When I first was crashing and I didn't know it was burnout yet. I had gained weight. I was real angry all the time, Poland is sort of an angry country anyway. So I absorbed that energy. And I was really down on myself for being that person. I expected more of myself and so I was digging my hole even deeper because I was in a hole. And then I was saying your shit for being in a hole, which was obviously not helpful. And then when I left Poland and I had a little bit of recovery time, but still didn't realize I was burned out. So it wasn't actually focused on recovering from burnout. I just skated through the same motions all over again. I over gave to my patients. I was overly concerned with giving people more than they were asking for. I was trying to be everything to everyone. I was taking care of old ladies on the tram who were not asking for my help. And I was so busy being the same person that I was and not adjusting my own behaviors. That I ended up in the same place a couple of years later. And that's when I finally read the word burnout and thought oh, okay. Time to do something about that.

It's much more prevalent now. Because of the pandemic, this sort of sense of uncertainty that we've all been living through is a huge factor in how our stress system works in our bodies. So there's not really a lot that any of us could do about that. This was an external circumstance that took over a lot of fear responses, anxiety responses, control responses. And so we're all living in it together right now. I don't know too many people that don't feel burnt out at the moment.

I would classify it as a syndrome. Because there's a lot of different aspects that can be attached to it that possibly has other multi-layer diagnostics involved in it. There could be some other mental disorder. You're more likely to burn out if you have some sort of neurodiversity right. There can also be some sort of physical disorder because when your body doesn't have the same strength as a typical body, then you're going to be more prone to burn out because you don't have the same energy reserves as other people, but your job still expects the same amount from you. So I think that we really have to create a lot of space for what the definition of this word is going to be. As we move through.

**Cait:** To me, it's about actually practicing and implementing. The things that you're reading. So it's just practice. It's nothing more than practice because you can read a book like mine and not do any of the exercises in it. And it might make you feel better while you're reading it. But if you don't actually take the time to do the thing. You're not making forward progress. You're just finding a thing that says, oh, thank God. This sounds like me. I'm not alone, which is helpful on a neurological level. It makes your nervous system feel safer. So that's not a terrible thing. And it's not, it's not awful, but if you don't actually practice any of the things, you're still doing the things that you've always done.

So this is practicing yoga nidra. This is taking the time to look into your filters. This is taking the time to find out what your values are and values is one of these things that once you state them in the right way. So there's a lot of values exercises that are like circle the value kind of thing. And in my book and in my website I ask you to create an action statement out of your value. So if your value is freedom, when I read your action statement, I need to know and understand on a very deep level, what freedom means to you. And when you start to unwind what things mean to you? So what do I mean by family? You have to start digging into yourself a little bit. So for me, freedom is the opportunity to have lunch with a girlfriend in the middle of the week, because I built a business that allows me to do that. Freedom is the ability to, say one of my in-laws is having some sort of health trouble. Freedom is my ability to hop on a plane and get to Poland and take care of them and not worry about having to adjust too many things in my life. That's what freedom is to me, but that's not what it means to everybody.

For some people, it means money, which is cool, but let's be specific about what that means. So part of getting into your body is practice. Paying attention to what you feel when you're doing things. How's my body feeling now what's happening in my stomach. Oh, I just had tightness in my chest. Was it because I feel anxious? What did this person say to me? Why did I feel unsafe? So it's about exploring, but part of it is just practicing things in a deeper way is asking the question. I think this is one of the most important questions you can ever ask yourself is what do I mean by insert, whatever word you're thinking about here. I ask this question to my coaching clients constantly because they say I would love to have whatever it happens to be. And I say it, but what does that mean? How are you going to know when you get it? What does it feel like in your body? Where is it located?

The first time I did a values exercise, at least 10 years ago and it was nonsense. I was like, so generic with my values. They had nothing to do with what I really wanted and everything to do with what I thought people expected of me.

So it took probably three or four times for me to start getting honest. And that's where this sort of idea of freedom comes in for me. Like I really had to dig into what does that mean? How do I make it safe? What does that mean about my other values? How does that affect this, that and whatever? Like you have to take the time to really dig through. You can have freedom as a mother while you're next to your children. Freedom doesn't have to mean that you're separate. Maybe it does for you. That's okay. So then the question comes down to, when you say and feel freedom, what are you thinking of? What are you picturing? Because maybe the thing that you're thinking of in picturing is not actually something that you want. So it sounds nice on a values list, but it's not your real desire based on what you think that word needs. Not be someone I think that word needs.

**Cait:** I practice habit stacking because that's the easiest way to get things done. So for people that don't know what habit stacking is it's taking something that you are already doing and adding one more event to it. So if every morning you make yourself a cup of coffee and you then sit down and enjoy your cup of coffee. And you'd really love to add in, two minutes of breathing before you start your day, but you can't seem to fit it in, then you build it into your coffee. So either while the coffee is brewing or as soon as you put it in your hands, your first, 120 seconds are breathing while you're inhaling your coffee through your nose, which is fine. You can sit there, you don't have to be in a Lotus position to get the benefit of a breathing exercise. So you can sit there and hold your coffee. And just before you take your first sip, take two minutes to breathe. So we work on cues like that. So what cue are you going to use? That's already a part of your day that we can add things to, I don't subtract behaviors, especially in the very beginning because it's too hard and it's not successful and it doesn't work.

I also don't usually go at things directly. So let me think of an example. If you're trying to reduce your level of fear, so you've decided to use an affirmation that says, I am brave in the face of whatever. I haven't found that to be really successful for people, especially people that are burnt out because the research keeps showing that there's a disconnect between our animal brain and our executive brain. And when that disconnect is there, we're not really processing our emotions properly. We're not filtering our emotions properly. So just saying, oh, I feel brave. It's not actually connecting in your brain. So it's not really doing much is the same reason that gratitude is such a hard thing. When you're burnt out, you don't actually feel it. So it doesn't have the benefit that it can have on a nervous system level when you're burnt out. So instead of saying, I feel brave and trying to push your way through to a new way of being forcefully. We ask questions, like what could you do in this situation to feel 5%. So we go in through the back. We don't make you courageous. We make you feel safe so that your fear becomes lessened. Does that make sense?

**Cait:** Yeah, yes, it is reverse engineering. It's the back door method. And I don't hear a lot of people talk about this, but I feel like it's one of my most successful techniques as a coach, because we're taught so often to go straight into something, we're always like just stand in the mirror and tell yourself that you feel beautiful. Maybe sometimes for some people in certain circumstances. But when your brain is not primed for that kind of action, our first step is always we need your nervous system to know that you are safe. And in order for your nervous system, to know that you are safe, we need to make your internal speak as safe as possible. We need to make your exterior, your environment as safe as possible. And what safety means to you is going to be different than what safety means to somebody else. So then we have to explore that. How do we add safety to your life so that your body is not on high alert all the time so that you can actually start to hear and move on with your life?

**Cait:** I think since we were talking about the gratitude, I think it's important to give people something to do in its place. So if you're trying to do gratitude exercises and you feel like you're lying to yourself and it's not making you feel any better, then instead of gratitude, the focus should be on resentment. And this doesn't mean you should be venting. It doesn't mean you're just supposed to spew out bile in every direction, but it does mean that if you take the time to notice where you're feeling resentful, that will clue you in as to where your boundaries are being broken, either by yourself, mostly by yourself or by someone. And then you can decide what you need to do in order to adjust that. So either you'll need to adjust some sort of internal over-giving mechanism or meddling mechanism. That was the truth for me. So I don't say this as an accusation. I say this as a vulnerable spew of what happened in my life. I was so over involved with doing a lot for other people, because I thought that was what made me valuable. That I was tired all the time because I couldn't give myself what I wanted, needed, desired, preferred, because I didn't know what those things were because my energy was always up in somebody else's business.

And I found those places because of resentment. So I would get a text from a particular friend and I'd be like, God, doesn't she get enough for me? What does she want? Now? She was like, literally asking me to love. And I was getting nasty in my head oh my God, what do you want from me? What do you need from me? When you start asking questions like that, you've usually given more than the other person has even asked for. And you didn't get back things that you didn't ask for. And now you're pissed. But the method isn't to create a new boundary with this person as conventional wisdom around boundaries would say, would tell you like, you need to create a boundary. No, you need to stop giving stuff where you're not being asked for anything. And you need to start speaking up when you need your friends to fulfill something for you. Those are the boundaries that need to be put into place. You need to do less and ask for more, mostly. And resentment will help you get there. So where are you feeling that resentment? What is it doing for you? What's the real message underneath it. So again, we're going backwards. So instead of going through gratitude and trying to force ourselves into this positive place, that doesn't feel real to us at the moment, we actually use the emotions that we're having to get to a place where we're safer.

Unreasonable responses is one of the most common things that people write when they fill out a form to chat with me the first time and say, I'm being totally unreasonable with my family. I know it. And they know it, but I can't seem to help myself. What do I do? Let's get into resentment. Let's figure this out so we can put in the right boundaries so you can adjust the things that you're offering inside. I've been married for 14 years this month. And he decided to do the laundry one day. This is just a few months ago. So I'm talking over 14 years. I let this pile up. He does a little laundry. And when I do the laundry, I get it out of the dryer. I fold it and I put all of our clothes away. Now we just moved into a new home last year. So we have this beautiful walk-in closet that we organized together. So I know where his stuff is and he knows where my stuff is in the past that wasn't the case. So him putting away my clothes was difficult because he didn't know where. But now there's no excuse in my mind. So I do the laundry, put the clothes away. He does the laundry. He puts his clothes away and leaves mine on a pile on the bed. And I was furious. I was like, dude, what the hell I've been putting your laundry away for 14 years. Why would you leave my, where it all goes? We have this closet, it's a walk-in closet, but it's not that big. And neither of us have that much clothing where we are minimalists in that regard. So how difficult can this be? And he looked at me and he said, I never asked you to put my clothes away. And I don't honestly care if you do.

**Cait:** And I was like, this is what I teach people every day. And I stopped. And so the next time I did the laundry, I left his stuff on the bed and I felt awful about it. You're going to feel awkward when you first take that freedom. When you first do that thing, it's going to come with some discomfort. But when you practice, you find that you don't mind leaving the laundry on the bed anymore. I don't even care if he doesn't put it away for a week, you could go on the floor for all I care. I'm not doing it unless I really want it all to be finished. In which case I know that I'm making a decision for myself to get this job done. Not because he expects it. But because I want it done. And that's my boundary that has nothing to do with him, but I blamed him. This is your expectation. He said no, it's yours.

. Unspoken agreements will trip us up every time. There's tons of unspoken agreements, especially in relationships where you just started doing something one day and 15 years later, you're still doing it. And you never spoke about. It's just happening and then you're mad about it, but you've never spoken about it. So what are we doing here? These unspoken assumptions are and unspoken agreements are a massive boundary issue that really don't always involve another person. Like we just we make this stuff up all in our own little space and then we get mad at people for stuff they don't even understand. Didn't you get the rule book that I did not give you?

**Cait:** The very first thing, which is so simple and so not a problem. And we are so concerned about the financial aspects of this, that we don't realize that continents have been doing this successfully for years and years, vacation time and maternity leave, paternity leave parental leave. I don't care whose it is. Everybody's anybody's everybody's anybody's it doesn't matter. This is something that is so easily done in so many places. I was just on a Twitter feed that I had to lay down the law a little bit, because someone was like you can expect companies to just fill a position temporarily by the time the person leaves. And the other person comes in by the time they learn the job, the woman's coming back to work and. Whoa. What makes you think we're hiring replacements for people the day that they leave for maternity leave? That's not how any of this works and because we're so accustomed in Europe to making adjustments for maternity leave, it's just a normal thing that happens. You just tell your employers that you're pregnant earlier, so that there's time to prepare. And then you make adjustments. It's not that hard. That's a thing that I think would save, especially when it comes to mothering. This section of time where you're in the United States, where you're supposed to leave your baby with someone else or stop working when your child is anywhere between eight to 12 weeks old is insane and cruel.

**Cait:** And we know that on a neurological level, it's helpful for you as the mother to be with your child. That's its proper neurological development to be near the mother. And you can't do that when you're working eight to 10 hours a day outside of the home. It's just an unrealistic inhumane expectation that we have. So I think that's the first thing that needs to shift. And I think, fathers need the ability to be home as well. Like I, I think it's just not healthy on any level, not for the mother, not for the father, not for the companies, because then you're there and you're only half there anyway, you're still in baby brain. I think that's the first thing that I would change.

**Cait:** And then the next thing that I would talk about is along the same vein is vacation time in the States. Even when you have vacation time, you're not really encouraged to take it. In Europe, if you don't use up all your vacation time after March of the following year, you get paid for those days. So you have to take the time. Companies would rather you take the time, than pay out. So they encourage you to take the time because it works out better for them. And in the States, we have this idea that if people are gone for five weeks, a year, everything is going to fall apart. I never took less than six weeks’ vacation a year when I was living in Europe ever. And it was normal people expected it, it was just like, great have a good time. You deserve the time to recharge. What a different attitude.

But when I talked to, especially the female entrepreneur space, we need to learn how to build our schedules around vacation. Instead of trying to build a business and then try and fit vacations into it afterwards. We need to know that we're not going to be around for two weeks in August. We need to know that ahead of time, because you need to be able to, like you said, plan accordingly for deliverables for taking on new clients. I typically am gone for the last week or 2nd of August, because it's my birthday time. I love the end of summer. So I don't take on new clients past the end of April, beginning of May, usually, unless when I talk to somebody, because they book a call, I say, listen, we can start. But we're going to have to extend the contract because I'm unavailable between this day and this day. So I set it up that way ahead of time so that people know. What to expect, but I can't not go. You have to plan them in , especially when you're owning your own business. You have to plan that time in ahead so that, I do not calculate my yearly expectations for money or my bills based on 52 weeks of work. I calculate it on 45 weeks of work because that's how many I'm willing to do.

**Jacqueline:** And since you mentioned the holidays there, this episode we'll be airing during December. So could you provide some tips for our listeners about how to manage holiday stress?

**Cait:** So this is where we go back to what we spoke about earlier. This is where we go into resentment. Before you go to be with your people, check your resentments and see if there is something that you can do for yourself in your own behavior. That might adjust that relationship a little bit, because oftentimes we fall into patterns really quickly, and we do things that we assume other people are expecting, but they might not be. Learn to ask more questions ahead of time. Get more clarity ahead of time. And not automatically assume that you're always going to fulfill the roles that you've always fulfilled, just because you've always fulfilled them, especially if you hate them. So getting clear on your resentments before you go, so that you have the opportunity to make adjustments is key.

The next thing that's really important is my therapist from the Czech Republic, told me this, and I have not found a study to back it up, but it feels true in my body. So I'm going to share it anyway. She told me that when you are with your family of origin, for anything over two hours and 45 minutes is the average, you immediately revert back to the role that you played as a child. So if you were the clown or if you were the listener or if you were the helper or if you were the, whatever it was that you did, however you acted that system gets turned right on and you start acting in ways that you're like, why do I act like this when I'm with my family? I don't act like this when I'm with other people. And when she said that my heart dropped, because I was like, oh, I can feel that. I know what that feels like that moment, where I'm like, my family's real sarcastic, and I like to joke around, but I'm not that sarcastic anymore in day-to-day life, but when I'm with them, I can be nasty. I don't even like it, but I think it's expected of me to be that sharp witted. So I turn that back on. And so in order to feel comfortable with myself, I have to remind myself that's happening. And that if I need to step away for five minutes to realign myself and recenter myself, so I can act in accordance with who I am today that I need to take off. Even if it means sitting in the bathroom for five minutes by myself.

**Cait:** Thank you so much. First of all, thrilled to be here with you. And second of all, I feel that this really is my work. I'm supposed to say things a little bit different for all the people that are getting left behind by the typical advice. I feel like that's the role I'm supposed to fulfill. Like I don't like no soldier left behind on my watch. I feel like if we just flip the script a little bit, we can be more inclusive and we can be more helpful and we can be more understanding and we can create more safety. So my field, like my job with my information is to make people feel understood, seen, heard, and safe.