**EPISODE 1: Sharing my burnout journey and learning to embrace change**

The first question I ask my guests is about their journey. How did they get to where they are at? So it seems only fair that I also share my journey. As you listen to the episodes that follow you will hear snippets of that journey. But I put it all together here. I still struggle to accept that my story matters although I realize that it may help others. So many working moms experience burnout. And if you weren’t experiencing burnout before Covid 19 the chances are you experienced it during or after the pandemic. In some ways I was so lucky to have burned out and left my job in academia pre-Covid. I was not managing a large research team or leading million dollar research projects during that time when my kids were also home schooling and my husband was out of the house running his business as normal. I helped researchers who were going through that. It was brutal. I was more flexible and for that I am ever grateful. Perhaps if covid had been the cause I would have not delved as deeply into the issues that plagued me. Because of the timing pre-Covid, I was more inclined to ask: how on earth did I get here? I have spent the last 3 years trying to understand my burnout and in that process have learned so much about myself, the world of work and gender inequality. I learned from books, reports and research papers, life coaches, and workplace experts. I also learned from stand up comedy and improv comedy classes how to show up as my authentic self. I am still learning and the interviews I present here are a way to share what I am learning with you. But also so you can hear that you are not alone. I am sorry to say there is not a silver bullet to solve burnout, and no one solution will work for every situation. But if you’re game for learning with me and trying new behaviors along the way, I can show you how behavior change works and what types of goals might help us move the needle.

Some of you might not be willing to even claim you are experiencing or have experienced burnout. Burnout is now included as a WHO *occupational phenomenon*. Even as a public health professor I had to look that up. Basically, it is a reason for seeking health services but it is not classed as an illnesses or health condition in itself. Dr Christine Maslach first wrote about burnout, in 1976, almost 50 years ago. It is not a new phenomenon. She describes burnout as a state of being chronically tired, cynical, and discouraged. The causes are work overload, lack of autonomy, lack of collegiality, injustice, and value conflicts with the organization. This combination differs substantially from just beginning the workday feeling tired. And self-care does not solve it. There is also emotional burnout, caregiver burnout and parental burnout which might be affecting you as a mom.

I did not know I was burned out at the time. I was experiencing exhaustion and chronic stress but this felt like the norm. I saw no end in sight, nothing seemed to get easier with time, just more got added. I was overwhelmed at home and work. I cared deeply about being present for the kids. They were 4 and 9 years old. I managed their schedule and the household. I valued making home cooked meals and having dinner together. My son was diagnosed on the autism spectrum and was struggling to fit into the public school system. I was trying to find behavioral and educational solutions for him, but also carrying the pain of him not fitting in, sharing his feelings that he did not belong. We had two dogs, one of them a puppy. He had giardia which resulted in orange diarrhea throughout the house. My usual centering morning run became stressful trying to control this ball of energy. My husband and I were fighting. I was losing patience with the kids more often. My employees were dissatisfied. I get it – first world problems but I was ruminating and resentful. I felt like a bad mom, wife, friend and manager. I was contemplating suicide as a way out. Then I had a major panic attack; it brought me to my knees and I realized I needed help. As a public health Professor I already did a lot of stress management through diet and exercise, but I did not pay much attention to my mental health. My body was telling me to stop. I was pre-menopausal so I assumed I was having a midlife crisis or a breakdown. I didn’t learn about burnout till much later. I took a 3 month leave of absence which enabled me to manage my stress levels and darkest thoughts. When I returned to work because I was in a calmer state, the stress hit me like a truck, I could now feel what had been my everyday state before and I had lost my passion for my work. I felt like I didn’t care anymore. Nothing at work had changed. My workload was ridiculous, I had taken on leadership positions to try to prove myself and they had not only resulted in more responsibilities but more conflictual relationships and less autonomy. My values for community empowerment were not respected by the institute I was housed in and I felt like I did not belong. Although I was successfully bringing in research grants to fund our group, this financial uncertainty was not sustainable. And I didn’t know how to ask for help. At work or home.

I was able to leave this job because we were a dual income family. I also had paid vacation time from the university to help until I set up my own business as a grant writer. We were privileged and I was well educated. I was able to choose to leave where others are not. I experienced relief and sadly no regret. But I did not expect to feel such a loss of my identity. I questioned everything. I lost confidence in my ability to communicate and to trust my decisions. My fierce inner critic, a Scottish witch like the ones in Macbeth, emerged in full force. And I felt very alone. To quieten the negative voices in my head, I started reading self help books not only on my personal issues, but also on how I could have been a better manager. I started realizing that women are disadvantaged in many ways at work and home. And when I interviewed moms from previous generations about their work life experiences, I realized so much was still the same for working moms today. I read that it would take 200 years for global pay equity. 200 years. And that was before Covid, when hundreds of thousands of moms left the work force, or went part time, or missed a promotion opportunity. And then I thought about my daughter and how I didn’t want her to experience the same biases. And I discovered burnout and realized that overcoming working mom burnout was what I wanted to spend my precious time on.

I totally own my part in my journey. I did not develop emotional intelligence as a child brought up in a boarding school environment. I did not know how to set boundaries as a girl who had been shamed for expressing her feelings and needs. I was driven by my need for approval and people pleasing. I had extremely high expectations for myself and others. No matter what I did I never felt good enough. I started to understand and address these issues through therapy and life coaching.

1. I learned that to quieten my inner critic, my witch, I needed to make friends with her, to ask her what she was trying to tell me and to sit down with her, and a cup of tea, and ask how I could make her feel safe. I am working on a stand up comedy routine with her now.
2. I learned that coaching is an extremely valuable investment. Coaches have great tools that you can use again and again when you slip into doubt or anxiety.
3. I learned to be a thoughtful parent. To question the parenting practices that had been passed down to me and to learn new techniques that would prepare my kids to be compassionate, confident problem solvers. I had to be calm and let go of control.
4. I learned that the best help I could get from my husband was for him to take the kids and give me a break at the weekends. Asking him to parent more during the week and to parent like I had learned to do through all my books did not work. But when he was not working, he enjoyed Dad time, on his terms i.e. when I was not around to criticize.
5. I learned the limitations of a fixed mindset, a black and white view of the world. I discovered that I could be happy AND sad. I appreciated that sometimes I was a good listener AND sometimes I was not. I learned that ‘Yes AND’ opened endless opportunities to build. And I realized that I could learn anything, I just had not learned it YET.
6. I learned to question what else was going on. Maybe someone’s reaction was due to what was going on in their world. Maybe I was struggling because there were real barriers in the way. Maybe I was feeling like a bad person, because there was some other unmet expectation I was holding over myself. I learned if I focused on me as the problem, there was less I could do than if I focused on the problem itself.
7. I learned that I am in charge of my choices. I am not a victim. I choose my yeses and I choose my nos. I choose my thoughts and I choose my feelings. And if I track those choices I can see how often I don’t make careful choices and how I don’t weigh the cons as much as the pros.
8. I learned to value my time. That working for free did not value my time and that an hour of my time, no matter what I got paid, was as a valuable as someone else’s time no matter what they got paid. An hour was an hour. And I got to choose what I did with it.
9. I learned to recognize, allow, express and process my feelings. From believing feelings were bad and paralyzing, I shifted to understanding that feelings are wonderful sign posts to guide us through the traffic ahead. As one coach said: I love sadness, it lets me move on.
10. I think the most surprising thing I learned was that my love language was positive affirmations. I needed to be appreciated for the things I did. I hated compliments; they made my skin crawl. But I learned to say thank you and explain that I preferred to be recognized for my deeds. I also learned that if no one else said thank you to me, it was my job to say thank you to myself.
11. I learned to eat intuitively. How much I ate, how often, and what I ate consumed hours of my time. I could lose weight but always put it back on so meeting a weight goal was not enjoyable it simply led to the anxiety of gaining weight. When I learned to listen to my body’s needs and only eat what really was appealing in that moment, I began to love food again, and began to trust my gut instincts in other parts of my life.

But I also learned that burnout often leads to people leaving a job because the workplace is toxic and the workload is unreasonable and these are often beyond an individual’s control. As Dr Maslach writes and I quote.

“Conventional wisdom holds that burnout is primarily a problem of the individual. That is, people burn out because of flaws in their character, behavior, or productivity. From this perspective, the individual is the problem and the solution lies in changing the person. But burnout is experienced in response to the social and work environment. The structure and functioning of the workplace shape how people interact with each other, carry out their jobs, and how they feel about this environment. The burnout of individual workers often says more about the workplace conditions than it does about the person. It is not the person but the relationship of the organization with people that needs to change.” End quote.

As I read about the higher rates of female faculty suicide in schools of medicine, like where I worked, and about the gender bias in academia, I realized there was something in those workplace conditions that affected women’s burnout. Women do more committee work, more mentoring of vulnerable students, they make more edits to their work upon feedback, but their work is often judged as less important, they are rated more poorly as teachers, and their work is cited less often. 53% of PhD students are women but less than 20% are full professors, and only 5% of professors are black women. Women are called aggressive, are given personal feedback instead of skills based feedback, and are interrupted more. I was not aware of these barriers but I faced them everyday. Without women researchers, women’s health issues will not be studied. Without female faculty role models, girls will not pursue the education goals they are capable of. So although I understand that universities are an ivory tower of privilege that do not reflect many communities realities, they are also example places of power dominated by men. And there are many of those left in the world.

So I interview mom researchers to bring their expertise in burnout, in behavior change, in gender equity but also to share their experience of trying to change an old boys club. I also interview DEI and HR experts, because of their real world experiences and understanding of what actually works in companies. And I interview life coaches, career coaches and leadership coaches, who have everyday tools and strategies that can help us define and achieve our goals. I always bring to these interviews my perspective as a behavior change scientist and the frameworks that have been helpful for me in trying to empower changes in communities, schools, workplaces and healthcare organizations. I try to include funny stories from my life when relevant. I also bring an international perspective to my approach. I have lived in England, Australia, Sweden, Nigeria, Indonesia, France, Germany and now the US. Some countries have very different systems and approaches to social safety nets and family supports. I interview expert moms in other countries to see what solutions might work here in the US. At the same time, I approach this knowing from my research days that our international studies on transportation infrastructure and community walkability were often rejected by local governments because what works elsewhere doesn’t work here. Agreed, if the culture doesn’t change I think it will be hard to bring in successful solutions from around the world.

I believe we can also learn from communities of color. Burnout is a chronic imbalance between stressors and resources. There are many communities that live this imbalance every day. In particular, moms of color have a much higher burden of stress and caregiving. Author Dani McClain in her book on black mothering called ‘We live for the We’ makes an import call to action and I paraphrase “you have a lot to learn about the magic of black mothering, we can teach resilience, imagine what we could do if we actually had resources”. This is also why burnout is so central to DEI efforts. Hopefully addressing the current burnout epidemic through mindset and systems change will also result in more resources for communities who have struggled historically.

I know behavior change is hard, so I try to provide examples of how you can set yourself up for success. In my parenting, my business and behavior change I think it is so important to experiment. We won’t know what works until we try, and with every failed experiment we learn what to change and try next. It’s a very deliberate and data-driven learning cycle. I hope you and your companies can start to embrace these imperfect efforts. And even if we are motivated as an individual, we are not alone, we have to work with others to find solutions. How we interact with our kids, partner, friends, family and colleagues all shapes how successful we are. We also are influenced by the programs, policies and resources that are available, or not, in our institutions and communities. And the systems that are in these organizations while baked in, are only effective if people use them. Systems change comes from individuals making decisions, enforcing those decisions, and rewarding people for living by those decisions. We are the system. We can change the system. And even governmental policies that can support or hinder the system come from the leaders who chose to stand and support the needs of their people. To me this helps, we understand human behavior change, we can use these tools in any context at any level.

But you’re burned out, I get it. You don’t have the time or energy to change anything. Can you take time for yourself? Not necessarily in self care, although important, but to take time to discover and prioritize your needs. Can you invest time in doing nothing to give your mind and body a break? Can you take the time to speak with someone, to share your load, to ask for help? And can you spare the time to stand up for another mom at work, to call out the bias and inequality when you see it? I know you are already working hard to be the best mom, wife, colleague and leader. If you can work to keep your seat at the table, that itself is changing the world. When women work the economy and society benefits, and when women lead organizations are more diverse and still profitable.

In the following episodes of this podcast - *overcoming working mom burnout: mindset and managerial solutions to unrealistic expectations and gender inequality at home and at work* – I will be learning from moms from around the globe, and from a variety of diverse perspectives what we can do to change society so that our daughters and granddaughters can work and mother in a reasonable and fair world. And so our sons can be partners in creating a more collaborative and less competitive environment.

We will hear about addressing work-family conflicts through supervisors tracking their behaviors, we will hear how leaders need to ask, listen and respond to employee needs, we will learn about valuing what you bring to the world, about balancing stressors and resources, about giving yourself a parenting break, about changing culture through policies and data, about creating boundaries, about encouraging moms back to work, about female role models, about more diverse representation, about allyship and belonging, about job crafting, about letting go, about creating a village, about integrating change into what you are already doing. Not only will there be key takeaways from each episode but I will also provide a behavior change cheat sheet to help you plan for a behavior change that a guest recommends. I hope you find solace and inspiration in these diverse voices. I hope you hear the caring, curiosity and compassion that drives us to have these conversations so we also can continue to grow. It’s a journey. And I am honored to share it with you. Thanks for dedicating your valuable time to listening today. I hope to provide value in return.