**S2 E35: Befriending your inner critic and finding your inner mentor a key to burnout recovery**

Last week author, podcaster and coach Selina Barker and I spoke in some detail about our inner critics during the episode on a step by step guide to burnout recovery. In particular, Selina, who wrote the book Burnt Out calls her inner critics her shitty committee and I’ll play a little of her description in a moment. I wanted to focus this week’s mini episode on this topic because it has been such a large part of my burnout journey.

I first heard about an inner critic in relation to burnout in the Nagoski sister’s book Burnout: unlocking the secret of the stress cycle. It was so reassuring to hear this mention of everyone having a mad woman in the attic. Often we don’t recognize our inner critic being separate from ourselves, the thoughts that she conveys to us often feel like truths. She is me. But realizing that others experienced this inner critic enabled me to see that she was just a voice in my head, she wasn’t me or the truth, whatever that means.

 I then also read about your inner critic becoming louder during burnout recovery, in Cait Donovan’s book Bouncebackability. Cait is the host of the Fried Podcast and we have interviewed each other. This heightening of the inner critic in burnout recovery was totally my experience, it was as if she was screaming from the roof tops. What had been resentment and rumination about others during my burnout (typical symptoms described by many burnout coaches) was now turned on myself, full volume. I had no one else to blame. I had left my job, I had control of my life again and so I was the focus of my own fury.

When Covid hit, I wrote to Tori Henderson, the host of Supermom is getting tired podcast. She takes questions from moms and turns them into a podcast episode and invites you to have a brief coaching call. Tori very compassionately pointed out that the reason I was dreading having my kids home during Covid was because I was dreading what I would tell myself about my abilities as a mom. I was so ashamed when she pointed this out, although she did it with such empathy. My inner critic, my limiting self beliefs, or the story I believed about myself was hindering my ability to enjoy my life and my kids.

Then I came across Selina’s shitty committee and I felt ready to face this nemesis. So I’ll play a little of what Selina said in our episode then talk a little more about how I befriended these inner voices. And while we often focus on the inner critic, as Selina mentions we also have an inner cheerleader or as Tara Mohr calls it our inner mentor. So in the second half of the episode I’ll focus on that. I was reminded of the power of Tara’s inner mentor visualization recently when I was chatting with another mom who had also done the exercise. So first, Selina’s shitty committee:

So I like to call it the inner critic, all of our inner critics, the shitty committee, because you can have your witch in there and you can have all sorts of characters in there. And it's just a fun way. Whenever I introduce people to the shitty committee, they always laugh and go, I've definitely got one of those. And we all do. We all have a shitty committee. We all have an inner critic that is quick to tell us, that we're not good enough where we've done something wrong, warning us about how we're going to mess up, how are we going to fail? How are we going to look ridiculous how everyone's going to judge us? And it can be really mean and nasty. And we all have one. But the good news is that we can all learn to turn the volume down on the shitty committee. And you really do that by first turning the volume up. And as I'm sure you probably done through your coaching, really tuning into what your shitty committee is saying to you.

And then one by one, sometimes people, I get my clients who I connect with them on WhatsApp between sessions. And sometimes they'll say, oh, the shitty committee is really in town today. And I'm like, oh, the shitty committee is welcome. And I'm always like, bring your shitty committee. And I can't wait to meet them. What are they saying? And though sometimes it's, they're just writing it down and certain elements of it. It's I know this is, I've just, it's ridiculous. Now I'm reading it. And that in itself can start to take the power out of it. As you start to write down what your shitty committee is saying, some of those things you wrote down, you're like, this is daft. I'm even thinking this is so crazy, but other things are still, you write them down and it really gets you in the heart. And you can admit, I really believe that I don't know how I'm going to shift myself out of feeling like that. And sometimes it's deeper healing work you need to do with a therapist, where has that really come from that feeling of not being good enough, which we all have, but sometimes it can be things like it's a sort of limiting belief. And so what you want to look at is both where that sort of came from, but also finding evidence to prove the opposite true. Because the thing is with the shitty committee with that inner critic, is that we believe the, what it's telling us is the truth. And it isn't, it's a belief and it's not a very helpful belief.

And so the more that you can build up evidence to show the opposite, to be true, the less you, the less that belief, that some negative limiting belief, the less power it can hold over you. And you're never going to get fully rid of it. And your shitty committee will flare up any time you try something new, anytime you step out of your comfort zone, it will be there. But the more you get to know it, the more you accept it, the more you give it, a little cuddle that Scottish, witch pull her in and give her a cuddle and start to see the fear that lies beneath that actually the sort of quieter it will become. And then the other thing I do is get people to turn the volume up on their inner wise cheerleader, which is that loving, supportive voice that we also all have within us, but that we tend to use, tend to reserve for our friends and our loved ones and people that we want to support and encourage and tend to keep the shitty committee as the voice we use for ourselves. So it's then practicing, turning up that, turning that voice in on ourselves and being our own supportive and loving, cheerleader.

Such great advice from Selina there.

Although I was not aware of my inner critic at the time, one of the first courses I did post burnout was the Happiness Trap, an acceptance and commitment therapy online course. A lot of this course taught you to let go of your beliefs or your thoughts, for example by writing them on a balloon or singing them along to the tune of happy birthday. At that time, I drew a t-shirt in my journal and wrote on it Fat, Ugly and Not enough, with a question mark on the back of the t-shirt. It was shocking to see those words on the page, but also slightly amusing to think I could wear them on a t-shirt and see how the world reacted to it.

Later when I was working with Tori, she asked me to draw my inner critic. Quite often we think of a real critic we have experienced and want to name and visualize that person. And while my inner critic was clearly Scottish, like my parents, with Tori’s guidance I was able to see her as one of the witches, the old croons, from Macbeth. I am not an artist but I drew a picture of a mean old woman. And sometimes she was so loud and mean, it was like she was flying around on a broomstick screaming and dive bombing me. It so helped to name her and see her as I could start to see when she appeared.

I started to learn that I couldn’t just suppress her, as then she got louder. I had to somehow hear what she had to say and accept it for what it was. I started to YES AND her. It was a technique I picked up from Improv Comedy. Somebody steps on stage and starts a scene, and instead of trying to change the direction of the scene or negate the gift they just set on the stage, you say YES AND. And then you build upon that idea. So when she said I was fat and ugly I started to say, YES AND I am fit and strong. It wasn’t really a mantra but it was a truth I believed in. I wasn’t fighting to prove my inner critic wrong I was just adding to my story.

But it also somehow provoked her to go further, she kept saying worse and worse things and I kept playing along. And that’s when I started to see her as this unhinged part of my personality, this voice that said what everyone else was afraid to say. And it made me think of a comedy sketch where I was trying to be reasonable and she just said the most outrageous things. I could see it being funny. That the comedy setting would allow me to say those terrible words out loud.

One time, Tori said my inner critic sounded like a mean teenager cheerleader. And somehow she was easier to quieten. Here have a pink donut and go away. The witch took longer, but the same technique worked, one day I just asked her, what is your problem? And just like that she paused. It was like I had started a conversation with her. She had a lot to say, but like an onery old lady she wanted a cup of tea first. And then I could see she was a part of me that had been ignored, that I had shoved deep down, and she was pissed. She hated sexism, and hated being told to be quiet, but at the same time she was full of fear. It was as if she had been persecuted, like a witch, for speaking her mind for being herself. It was so enlightening to hear her speak to let her give words to that feeling.

So now I realize that my witch rears up when she is afraid, when she feels unsafe, when I step too far. And it’s not that she’s holding me back or telling me to be quiet but she’s telling me to be careful, to be thoughtful. These are things I value. The night before my virtual TEDx talk aired she told me I was a fraud. I felt sick. I didn’t realize it was her speaking. I thought it was the truth. But it stuck with me, why did I have that thought? It was because I recognized that my life was very privileged and that my problems were not the same as others faced. Now before each talk I give, I tell that story and use it to allow me to acknowledge that privilege. She gave me a tool to voice a deep concern I have. So I try not to ignore her, but rather interpret her fear to help me find a safer place to be, more comfortable for her and me.

So the anti-thesis of this inner critic is the much less talked about inner mentor. Tara Mohr in her book Playing Big starts with the inner critic, and she made me realize that my inner critic probably had more power and had taken over because my job and training had involved so much critical thinking. But in ‘Playing Big’ I discovered the concept of an inner mentor. Someone to balance the inner critic. This was such a comforting thought to me.

Tara takes you through a visualization exercise to help you find and get to know your inner mentor. I had tried visualization exercises before with no image resulting. I was envious when another participant could describe herself in a bejeweled blue dress. So, I decided my first time listening to the exercise would be at bedtime. I hoped my semi-sleep state would keep my reality-focused brain from taking over. I don’t know how much of the exercise I heard but I woke up during the night with a start. My inner mentor was a writer. This may not seem any great revelation since I am a professional scientific writer. That persona, however, is really a researcher (the grant doctor) who uses writing as a tool. Being a writer at heart felt different. An inner mentor who was a writer would be kind to me, would keep me safe within the pages of a book.

I then repeated the exercise a few days later in my favorite new garden swing chair, which in the evening sunlight that makes me feel like a cat luxuriating in the warmth at the end of a day. I was sleepy like a cat. Tara takes you through each step along a path out of your house, out of your neighborhood, out of your country and out of this world. You then come back 20 years in the future. You go to meet yourself in the future, in your future house. Your future self is your inner mentor. I imagined myself on a conveyor belt and when I returned 20 years in the future I was in the English countryside. I knocked on the door of an old English thatched roof cottage. Sounds corny but it wasn’t. An old lady in a flannel shirt with long grey hair like Jane Goodall opened the door. The cottage was small and dark, but warm and cozy. The walls were lined with books. She took me through the house to a sunroom. We sat in two comfy chairs looking at the garden. She gave me a cup of tea and a piece of gingerbread. As directed in the exercise, I asked this older version of myself her advice. She said, “Worry less what people think. It’s ok to be a little eccentric.” We spent a little time together in companiable silence. When I left, she handed me a present of a beautiful leather-bound journal. “Write” she said. “It will make you feel better”. It was such a treat to meet this softer, gentler version of myself who was so comfortable in her skin. I would love to grow to be such an old lady.

Tara provides several ideas how you can continue to engage with your vision and your mentor. You can imagine what she would say when you have a problem. You can imagine what choices she would make. One suggestion was to eat the food that your inner mentor had given you during the visualization exercise. So I started making homemade gingerbread. Another was to dress as she had so I bought a plaid shirt.

I suppose I have always used writing to help me, as an unhappy child I had written endless letters from boarding school. And often when I couldn’t express my feelings verbally I would write. I used to be so ashamed that this was how I communicated. But the inner mentor writer showed me to trust that writing was my safe space. I used to feel uncomfortable writing and sharing personal stories publicly, but she told me to write about those feelings too. She taught me that it is not the writing that is making me uncomfortable but the feelings, and I can write to understand and process them too. So now anytime I feel I am struggling I write and it sooths me or helps me get to the root of the issue that is bothering me. I even wrote a comedy script to express my witch’s thoughts.

And when I was talking about this inner mentor recently, it reminded me of another time, I can’t remember how it came about, I think it was a question about unconditional love. And I thought of my dog Whisky who was always by my side. Coach Tori asked me, what would he tell you to do? And his answer to every question that I ever have is, just relax and come snuggle with me on the sofa, that’s all you need to do. So he’s also my guide dog when in doubt.

So please start to listen to your inner critic, do not ignore her as she will grow wilder. But listen with an open mind. Why is she so upset? What is she trying to tell you to help keep you safe? Don’t believe it but try to interpret how you can use the noise to guide you. And then find that safe space, that inner mentor. Do Tara Mohr’s exercise, you can just google it and find it online. Do it more than once. Another mom I spoke with was given a virgin mother necklace one time, and another time a baby chick. Her inner mentor is a giver of life. It was so fascinating to share our different experiences of this process and to realize what an amazing exercise it was, and what a powerful guide. I hope it will help you too.