

Episode 62: I'm successful, middle-aged, and kinda bored. Now what?

Mandy: You've spent decades striving and making personal sacrifices to become this successful version of yourself. To the outside world, you've made it. And in so many ways, you actually have. You've got the status, the job title, the lifestyle. But work feels less rewarding than it used to, doesn't it? Maybe you've lost your mojo, but nobody even notices because you can do this job in your sleep.

You're bored, maybe a bit jaded and burnt out. Now what? You flirt with the idea of taking time off, maybe exploring what else you might do. You're not done as in you're ready to retire, but you're wondering if you're done with this role, this company, this pace. When you consider making a change, you feel this tingle of excitement, and then the practical side of you slams it down.

Ugh, there's decades of sunk cost. Maybe there's still so much money you'd be leaving on the table tied up in the system if you left, and asking for a sabbatical, well, it's messy and it's never a good time, is it? Chronic busyness usually mutes this little niggle inside, but if you slow down enough, say on holiday or in a coaching program, that niggle is definitely there.

Maybe you even dream of being made redundant so that the decision will be out of your hands. Before we dive into this very topic today, it's a solo episode. I want to welcome you to Enough the podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Lehto, ex-investment banker turned executive coach. This is a show for ambitious strivers, whose lives look shiny and successful on the outside, but inside, no matter what you achieve, you never feel quite good enough.

Success never feels as rewarding as you anticipated, or as long lasting. Sound familiar? I feel you, because I've been there too. This show says enough to relentlessly efforting and defining oneself through achievement and explores what true inner enoughness can actually look and feel like. Today I'm with you partly as an executive coach, partly as a thought provoker, partly as a trusted advisor.

Let's see if we can create some perspective shifts around this sticky conundrum, no resignation letter is required, not today at least. I'm going to offer you three invitations to spur your big picture thinking when you feel the niggle to make a change but you also feel stuck and scared. Ready? Let's dive in.

Every morning I would deliver flower arrangements to dead people. I was 15 and it was my first summer job working in the flower shop portion of a funeral parlor. One day, I had this vase of pink carnations and baby's breath, and I walked into the room and saw that the deceased was being prepped for that afternoon's viewing when the family and friends were going to arrive.

There was nobody else in the room at that moment. The radio was playing, and I looked at this woman laying in the casket. She was formally dressed, her hands were folded neatly, and there were rollers in her hair and cotton balls on her eyes. So I put down the carnations, and I tried taking in the scene.

Any minute now she was going to sit up in that satin lined casket, but she wasn't. Not ever. I got a bit creeped out and then I left without turning my back on her. And over the summer, I lost count of how many dead people I delivered flowers to, it got less weird. But just to keep it real, my other friends were working at McDonald's and Dairy Queen.

Maybe I just got more philosophical as well, I don't know. I remember thinking this, "We all end up here." All of this ends, hearts stop, and the radio keeps pumping out pop songs. I've returned to that scene so many times in my mind. It felt incomprehensible to contemplate not existing, particularly at that age.

And yet, it's guaranteed. We all have an expiry date, just like a jar of olives, we just don't know it yet. So how about you? Do you think about death regularly? I do. I know I've talked about this in the pod before, but I have this app on my phone called The Final Countdown, which tells me, at the time of this recording, that according to statistics based on my age, geographic location, and lifestyle, I am likely to live another 37 years, 310 days, 19 hours, and 30 minutes.

Are you living a life that aligns with your values? For those of us who still have the time and if we have the privilege of contemplating meaning and purpose and how it aligns with our work, it's an inquiry worth doing while you're still on this side of the lawn.

Bronnie Ware wrote a book called 'The Top Five Regrets of the Dying' based on her experiences as a palliative care nurse. So in her years of sitting with people as they passed on, she heard these five regrets again and again and again.

Regret number one, I wished I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me. Regret number two, I wish I hadn't have worked so hard. Regret number three, I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings. Regret number four, I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends. Number five, I wish I'd let myself be happier. Do any of these hit home for you now? Can you bring to mind your end of life self?

And what does that self invite you to consider now? Remembering that you have an expiry date can be a life-affirming reminder that your niggle is actually worth paying attention to. So invitation number one is to remember that you, dear listener, are going to die, and really owning that is the ultimate perspective shift.

I recently read Arthur Brooks book, 'From Strength to Strength, Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life', highly recommended. Brooks argues that those of us who tend to define ourselves through our achievements and job titles tend to become, and wait for this phrase, withered to ourselves as inevitable decline sets in, which might come sooner than you think. In practically any high skill profession, decline sets in sometime between one's late thirties and early fifties. Brooks says for writers, decline sets in between 45 and 55. Financial professionals reach their peak performance between 36 and 40. Doctors peak in their 30s with steep drop offs in their skills as the years pass.

By middle age, even entrepreneurial ability is plummeting, for those of you founders out there. In other professions, peak performance is something like 35 to 44, for equipment services engineers and office workers. Air traffic controllers actually have a mandatory retirement age at 56, so rapid is their midlife decline.

Wow. Read chapter one of Brooks's book if you want more in depth analysis of this data. But the gist is this, in middle age, our pre-frontal cortex, which is that bit of your brain behind your forehead, it starts degrading in effectiveness. Meaning that rapid analysis and creative innovations start to decline, and skills like multi-tasking become way harder.

Things like recall of names and facts, yeah, are you experiencing that too? I'm definitely noticing that. There are these moments of referring to something as a thingy, or standing in the kitchen wondering, why did I come in here again? Or not being able to recall the name of my acquaintance who is sitting right there.

It's embarrassing, that happened to me last week. Brooke says that by the age of 50, your brain is as crowded with information as the New York Public Library. And, your personal librarian is creaky, slow, and easily distracted.

So why am I telling you this? Well, Arthur Brooks goes on to describe something called the Agony of Irrelevance, a deep-seated fear that one's glory days are over. And here's my add on, maybe in spite of how great those glory days looked to the outside world, maybe they never felt as good or relevant or fulfilling as you thought, even at peak glory.

So for the super achiever, there's this sense of never quite arriving, and shiz, now you're telling me I'm already in decline? Grr! So the obvious response to the hustler is to work harder, get promoted, try being

more impressive and try to hold on to relevance, whatever that actually means for you. Brooks refers to something called the principle of psycho professional gravitation, which is the idea that the agony of decline is directly related to the prestige, status, and importance of what you've previously achieved and your emotional attachment to that prestige and status.

So say you've attained excellence and your identity is deeply invested in being perceived that way, the inevitable fall from those heights is bloody agony. You might be thinking, "Gee, thanks Mandy. This sounds utterly depressing."

I'm not gonna leave you with that kind of a bummer, don't worry. There's research by a British psychologist called Raymond Catel who distinguishes between two types of intelligence. So on the one hand, we've got fluid intelligence, which is the ability to reason, solve problems, think flexibly, raw smarts in effect.

This is what's diminishing rapidly in your 30s and 40s. The good news is there's something called crystallized intelligence, which is defined as your ability to use the vast knowledge that you've acquired in the past. So think about you being able to access that New York library inside your skull. Now, the good news about crystallized intelligence is, it tends to increase with age through your forties, fifties, and beyond. This folks is known as wisdom. Arthur Brooks suggests thinking about how you can repurpose your professional life to revolve more around your wisdom, aka your crystallized intelligence. How can you start looking for ways, even in your existing role, to start to use more instruction rather than innovation?

So more Yoda, less Skywalker. That is invitation number two, applied wisdom over innovation. What could that look like in life and work now? I realize that this is a granola bar of a question I'm leaving you with, so please take some time to chew on it.

Okay, let's recount. Number one, you're going to die, and I mean that in the most positive, life affirming way. It's a prompt to quit farting around in the present. Listen to your niggles. Number two, you will go, or are already in, professional decline. And if you're not yet, it's probably coming for you sooner than you thought.

Well, you can choose to thrash in the agony of irrelevance, or, you can think about where your wisdom, aka your crystallized intelligence, that's the New York Public Library in your head, is a major advantage for you and start living into that. I like working in groups of three, so I'm giving you one more big picture idea to consider before we wrap for the day.

The third invitation is a concept I read about that I've been avidly digging into over the past few weeks, growth without goals. In the last six to nine months, I kind of lost my goal mojo, and there's things I want to achieve, yes, but as somebody who used to eat goals for breakfast, I felt really lost and a bit rudderless when there hasn't been a tangible goal that makes me want to jump out of bed in the morning, nothing is really firing me up in the way that it used to. So after reading Arthur Brooks book, I thought, ah ha! Is it the decline of fluid intelligence perhaps? Or maybe it's a case of middle-aged been there, done that.

I want to talk a bit about growth without goals. So the gist of it is when the mind is still, it's free of seeking and craving and pursuing, all of which are projections of a conditioned mind, so this article will be linked in the show notes. In the past, success was about accumulating accomplishments. So what happens when that suddenly feels meh?

What if personal growth wasn't all about getting somewhere? I don't know about you, but so much of my previous life was optimized for efficiency. I didn't do anything if it wasn't helping me to nail a goal. Everything, even hobbies when I had them, were related to achievement, that was even the purpose of food or rest and everything, it was all helping me to get somewhere.

So enter the idea of continuous habitual practices, things that are worth doing purely for the sake of doing them. Like meditation, or reading and yes, those things might actually help you to achieve goals, but it's not the aim. So you don't achieve meditation, though I did try, I'm going to confess, as a means to hack your success.

What you're doing instead is you're sitting with yourself and it's often boring and chaotic and there's rarely a result which is disappointing if you're outcome oriented, but I've still found it worth doing. What could you

be integrating into your life simply because it feels good right now? Maybe it's about growth, but it's not necessarily aimed at a destination.

I'll share three of my growth without goals practices to get you thinking about some of your own. So number one, as mentioned, meditation, which I do virtually every day and have done for years. So, it's rarely mind blowing, it's often boring and frustrating, I'm filled with distractions and ugh, regrouping, regrouping, regrouping.

And yet, in some indescribable way, I know that it has deeply enhanced the quality of my being, and that was never the goal. It's made me a better noticer and appreciator of simple daily things, like a really good oatmeal latte, or a hug from my teenager, or that moment a coaching client has a breakthrough whilst I'm holding space.

I don't know how, but I'm pretty sure that meditation has also lessened my seeking and craving and living into this constant desire, thinking that there's always something better if I just push harder. Number two are acts of kindness, and I'm big on this. So every day I'm open to opportunities to help and support and be kind to others and also be kinder to myself. It's a practice or rather a way of being that I'm cultivating and it's not done to get somewhere. I want to do good and I want to have an impact with others. Number three, I read, every single day, something from a book or a good blog. I just finished reading Sahil Bloom's newsletter, which I always read, I'll link that in the show notes. And I've just reread a powerful book from the School of Life called 'A More Exciting Life', also highly recommended. So reading and learning aren't something specific to get somewhere, it's growth without goals. So to sum up today's third invitation, is it possible that in this season of your life, some of the mehness and the boredom that you might be experiencing might be that the usual goals, things like promotion, bonus, more power, more shiny things, maybe they've simply lost their luster.

So experimenting with some growth without goals, for inner satisfaction, or for self-knowing, or for the joy of helping and supporting others can also begin a process of finding contentment in more ordinary, less out there, extraordinary things, right? One of the challenges I see with many of my high-achieving coaching clients, and I know this for myself too, is this drive to be exceptional.

So some of these individuals who I work with practice extreme sports while also having incredibly stressful jobs, just trying to make that concept real. So maybe even that feels less exciting than it used to, but the need to be in demand and be impressive and always doing super cool things and the need to stay relevant while it feels so well, necessary, like there's no other possible way of being? Feels totally foreign.

Who would I be without my job title and my high-achieving? That's a question I want you to think about. Who are you without any of that?

All right, let's pull this all together. So number one, you are gonna check out of the hotel of life, right? Number two, in the meantime, there's an inevitable decline to your fluid intelligence, and maybe like me, you're already in it. Number three, chronic busyness and the habit of pushing hard to be exceptional, or even to keep it up and avoid falling behind, might be at the core of how you're living, and there's nothing bad or wrong about that. But, if you're bored, feeling a bit, been-there, done-that, I'm inviting you to turn towards... death and decline. Acknowledge it, even if it feels counterintuitive. It's freeing! None of this is to say that it's all slow and boring and washed up from here, not at all. The temptation is to chase more dopamine, and do what you've always done, probably do it harder, faster, and more. Is there a more fulfilling alternative?

A few years ago, my husband and I went to hear David Brooks, an author and columnist from the New York Times, speak about his new book, 'The Road to Character'.

He distinguishes between resume virtues and eulogy virtues, so as you might expect, the resume virtues are all those things that look impressive on a bio. And eulogy virtues, those are the things that actually, at the end of our lives, give us meaning and a feeling that we've had a life well lived. So what could you do now, long before you're lying in a casket with cotton balls on your eyelids, to start to live from a place of eulogy values?

Maybe you don't actually have to leave your job. Maybe there's a way of tapping into your crystallized wisdom, that New York library in your mind, bringing that kind of Yoda-esque energy in, and starting to look for more people to help, more impact to make. I don't know what that might look like in your particular career, but it might be a way to 'de-meh' or get out of that boredom without having to make a radical life change unless that's what your niggles are telling you, of course.

So the thing about these eulogy virtues is that they might also help you to avoid those five regrets of the dying. They might help you to live a life that's truer to you. They might help you to express your feelings if you're more connected with others. They might help you to do things that you love with people who you care about.

They might help you to help, and make an impact, and make a difference, and also to be in this moment. Instead of constantly living a life deferred for one day, when you get to that mirage shimmering on the horizon, then for absolutely sure you will enjoy yourself, well what about now? Instead of deferring happiness when it's less busy, because that's code for never, what if, in practicing some of these eulogy goals, you would take joy in the simple things.

I hope this episode has inspired you to listen to the niggles. Often when there's an emotion or an awareness that is really inconvenient for us to know, it's so tempting to turn away from it or to smother it with overwork, overdoing, busyness, all the things. But I hope that you're inspired to listen to the niggles and to turn towards the discomfort of acknowledging death and decline, both of which are inevitable.

So I'm curious what happens for you if you start to do that. You might start that by playing with some growth without goals, so that you're disconnecting everything that you do from it having to be valuable or an achievement. Where could you start to lean more into your wisdom, into your Yoda, so that when that decline of your fluid intelligence starts to happen, you've already got something else going on.

And where can you start practicing those eulogy virtues every single day to imbue your existence with more meaning, day to day. This is an episode that I hope you can revisit now and again. I know there's a lot here and I'm curious if somebody came to mind as you were listening, and if so, thank you in advance for sharing.

In case you don't already subscribe, before you leave Spotify or Apple Podcasts today, please go ahead and hit the follow button so you never miss an episode. I'm taking August off to practice self-care, and being in the moment. So please feast on some previous episodes if learning is part of your growth without goals.

And I'm going to send you back to episode 46 in case you missed that one, which is some of the best of moments of the pod, which you might really enjoy. As ever, thank you so much for listening. I'm so glad you're here. I will be back in your headphones with new episodes in September.