

Episode 72: I achieved my life goal (and it was disappointing), with Callum Wilson

Mandy: Welcome to Enough, the podcast. I'm your host, Dr Mandy Lehto, ex- investment banker turned executive coach. This is a show for high achievers and those with fast paced careers who, in spite of their stellar achievements, never feel quite good enough. Sound familiar?

You might be secretly thinking, is this all there is? You're someone whose bar is super high and you're really critical of yourself. Oh, and you're tired, bored, and maybe even burnt out. But almost nobody would know because you're an expert at managing your image. You've had enough of navigating the world like this. But you don't know how else to be. You've got one gear, overdrive.

And I feel you because I've been there too. I started a healing self-awareness journey after leaving the corporate world about 16 or 17 years ago. I was bedridden with burnout for about a year. And in these episodes, I'm sharing the expert techniques and insights I have encountered along the way, as I've changed my way of relating to my overachiever.

We talk about things like perfectionism, people pleasing, imposter syndrome, and detaching your identity from your achievements. The aim here in the show is to explore a more sustainable way of working and to deepen your self-understanding in the process. I'm so glad you're here. So, here's some setup for today's conversation.

Think about a time when you achieved something big. Maybe you got a promotion or a book deal or you actually lived out a massive goal. How long did that satisfaction last? A day? A few hours? And then how did you feel? Well, I suspect you felt empty and wondered, now what? It's such a bummer because you were so darn sure that this was going to be the thing that changed everything, and it didn't.

Dr. Tal Ben Shahar, a Harvard trained positive psychology expert, calls this phenomenon the 'arrival fallacy', or the illusion that once we make it, whatever that means, we'll find lasting happiness. My guest today is ex-England rugby player Callum Wilson, who knows the arrival fallacy firsthand. From the age of 12, Callum knew that he wanted to play professional rugby, but when he actually put the jersey on and he was on the pitch playing for his country, it fell far short of his expectations.

Oh, by the way, this is not an episode about rugby. It is a powerful and tender conversation with a tattooed 6-foot, 113kg professional athlete, and how he overcame the self-loathing and 'not enoughness' that drove his success for much of his life. Now a coach, Cal shares how he learned to achieve and feel enough without falling into the arrival fallacy.

You'll also learn how he disconnected his identity from his career, and you'll get a technique to shift you out of your not enough thoughts. If you've ever felt empty after a big win, this episode is for you. Before we dive in, there's a mention of suicide, and some spicy language throughout. I drop you right into the conversation, as Callum shares where he suspects his feelings of not enoughness started.

Ready?

Let's dive in

Callum: I felt very different to everyone and I always felt less than. I love the name of your podcast in respect to that feeling because I understand that and so I had to find a way to make myself as different as I felt. Red hair or maybe untraditional parents. My parents are together, but dad's a gunsmith making pistols.

In England that's not a normal thing. We were rocking up in like beat up cars to school in a really, really nice area. Everyone's got their new BMWs and we're in some old Renault. And I just remember from a really young age feeling all like, everyone else has got these like really normal things in their life and I'm less, and I don't know why I felt like that, but I did.

And then a few people picked on me for my hair colour. Not a lot, but my immediate reaction to that was to be very physical. I'm gifted physically. I've probably got three strengths. The third one is my physical strength. And I guess the great thing was that my strength allowed me to be exceptional and even more than, not just average. But people would be like 'oh, geez', like kind of really good at something.

So it worked for me, being really physical worked for me, my athleticism worked for me. In some ways, even academically, I excelled. I don't know if I'm really the brightest, but I can muscle my way through anything, like anything in life you put in front of me, I will muscle my way through it somehow.

I use a lot of force in my life. I knew that and it, because it works so well, it put me, it felt like I was above people in a way. I spent my whole early life figuring out which sport it was going to be that I was going to go professional in. And I thought it was absolutely crazy that you could get paid for something that you loved.

So, there was a deep want and desire there, but there's also this, it's my way of making up for my perceived lack. I want to preface that by saying like, it's crazy now I look back. I understand that childlike thought, but it is bizarre for me to have that thought.

Now I look back because I really had everything that I needed. Unconditional love. And, so, I was very privileged, but my perception was that I was behind. And I tried all sorts of things. I rode motorbikes, skateboarded, played hockey, and football. And then I was at school one day and I had an option between a detention or playing rugby and I thought, right, I'll go to rugby and yeah, I just got loads of praise for hitting people really hard. Like everything that I've been told off for most of my life was suddenly being praised. So, I thought, right, well, that's where I'm going to go with it.

So probably after my first game – I remember my first game very clearly – I remember I committed about 12 years' old. I was like, well, I'm just going to be professional with that then. I mean, like in the first game, that's when I was like, yeah, that's me, it's not going to stop. So, there was this mixture of desire, but compensation to it. Like I really like it, but also it's allowing me to feel normal and like, in some ways better than others, cause I still definitely felt lacking.

Not many people know this about me, but I actually felt kind of ugly a lot of my life and clunky, but being exceptional at something made me feel like, well, it doesn't really matter. It doesn't matter what you look like because you're fucking good at something else.

Mandy: Callum was devastated not to make the youth rugby team at 16. His determination went into overdrive until a family tragedy added a new angle to his inner story of what his career success was going to solve. I'm always curious when I'm working with a high performer about the hot little motor that's burning underneath their outsized drive.

Often it's a deep desire to win, of course, and I notice there's often other things at play. It might be an unwillingness to feel something, or there might be a proving energy like I'll show you. Going on, Callum shares more about what was driving his relentless efforts.

Callum: My cousin killed herself. She was very much like a sister to me. We were very close. And she killed herself. And I made a commitment that I would make everyone in the family proud by playing for England. Well, not even playing professional rugby, but in my mind, I said that would be for England because I still had that chip on my shoulder about not making it when I was 16.

And, so, there's this other idea that got thrown into the mix that like, you know, if the family felt bad because she killed herself, then I can make them feel good by being successful. So, there's this new storyline there. And I managed to represent – my first contract leaving university was in the England seven-a side team and I managed to get a cap for England. I actually remember saying on my way to playing professional rugby,

like, I think I'd be able to die happy if I signed my first professional contract. I actually had that as a thought that my life would be complete. You could kill me the next day. But my experience of all of this is that every time you get there, the horizon just moves on.

So, you're just chasing, chasing, chasing. And even when I represented my country, finally it was a very empty, 'dead inside' feeling like "Oh God, I'm still me", as if I thought that I'd suddenly be on the other side of this and feel amazingly happy. But I still cared how many likes I was getting on social media. I still cared what people thought about me. None of it went away despite the fact that in my mind, I'd reached some sort of pinnacle. I went chasing the next thing, which was to try and play in the top leagues in fifteen-a-side rugby. And I did that over in France, I only touched my pinnacle for a very short period.

I got one or two games at the top in seven-a-side, and then in the fifteen-a-side club game. I wasn't there for a long time, but both times I had this sense of, oh, I'm still me and how sickening that all this effort had gone in. And yeah, I still felt how I feel, still feel. So, rugby didn't solve anything.

I remember being in the airport coming back and I received a cap. That's something you get if you play for England, you get like a little cap. Like a posh, 1800s looking cap. And I got it in an airport as I was picking my bags up, just sort of like, oh, by the way, here's your cap. And I was like, fuck, you know, I imagine this being different. And I went back to my hometown and no one gives a shit. Like everyone's just got their own stuff to worry about. So yeah, I think I thought people really cared. And I think people did and they don't as well. Like, apples still taste the same the next day, tea still tastes the same.

Like, life doesn't actually change.

Mandy: This is a textbook case of arrival fallacy. There's a mismatch between how you expect an outcome will feel, and how it actually does. There can be a yawning chasm, particularly if your efforts have been outsized, because of all the stress. So, the outcome rarely feels amazing enough to match that ideal that you had in your head, meaning it's easy to continue pushing all the proverbial poker chips towards another future win.

This win wasn't it, so it must be the next big win, and so on and so on. In episode 57, I spoke with Katherine Morgan Schaffler, author and former onsite therapist at Google, and she talked about how perfectionists are pursuing an ideal rather than a goal, which is why they never feel satisfied. So even when the goal is won, the ideal has already moved on.

So, there's something to this, even if you don't identify as a perfectionist. If you do hit a goal, new challenges pop up that you didn't even see coming. And that's exactly what Callum experienced.

Callum: I always imagined that when I'd pull on an England shirt, I'd have this feeling of completion, which I guess I imagined there'd be some sort of elation and pride and, and that would almost like an armour that would never come off.

But I remember pulling on the shirt and thinking, don't fuck this up. And, so, the shirt became a threat to me. Rather than an armour, it was almost like a weapon. I was like, oh, don't fuck it up, don't make mistakes. And that was the seven-a-side. I was like, oh I guess I thought I was going to feel freedom.

That's probably what I thought I was going to feel. And because of what I had created in my mind, I had actually created a prison for myself where I'd create these imaginary barriers where you can't make mistakes. Even in the fifteen-a-side, when I played a couple of games at the top in the French league, I had the same feeling like, oh when I go out there and I'm going to see my family in the crowd, that's going to be it. Like I'd have fucking completed it. And all I thought was like, oh no, now everyone's got the train from London to Paris and you got friends watching on TV and now you might mess it up.

Mandy: We humans are a curious species so reaching a goal can fail to deliver the happiness and good enoughness we were betting on and yet setting goals can make us really happy.

Dr. Ben Shahar suggests creating multiple goals at the same time, some work related, some non-work related. You might consider diversifying your goal portfolio, not putting all your eggs in one basket. So those

other goals don't need to be lofty, they might look like, I don't know, spending time moving outdoors three times a week, no Ironman necessary.

Or having a date night and a friend's night at least once a month. Those might not feel like goals if you're a high achiever, they still count. So, let's get back to the conversation. I've had lots of powerful discussions on this podcast with former executives and corporate employees who've left their careers at the pinnacle and then experienced this identity free fall. What was that like for Callum? Going from the highs to the lows? He was a sportsman, but this wisdom stands whatever your business card says.

Callum: If you believe that you are what you do, you are fucked, right? Because your sporting career will end if your identity is wrapped up in what you do.

Then when you have a bad game, you're gonna feel like a bad person. So yeah, as much as it makes you feel good, it will no doubt make you feel bad. So, I was like, if you'd asked me, 'who are you?' and I said, 'I'm rugby player', I wouldn't have thought about it. But that meant that every time I was out of contract in my head, I was like, you're not really anything.

Cause you couldn't even say that you're a rugby player cause you're not getting paid for it. So, what are you? I'm like, oh I'm nothing in between my contracts. I'd literally feel foolish. I'd be out in the park in my hometown, like preparing for the next season without having a team. I'm like, you're just crazy, man.

Like you're nothing.

My career ended with a head injury. Head injuries are, it's not always obvious when you're going to play again and actually with concussion, it can take years to recover. So, you're given a long period. So, I had this period of time where I didn't know if I was going to play again and my identity was being stripped from me.

Everyone knew me for my physicality and how could I possibly express that if I had a brain injury and I couldn't do anything physical on this six-foot 113 kg guy that spent his whole life being rewarded, and even paid, for hitting people - and now I'm told that I'll never hit anyone again. And hitting people is my way of feeling good.

So, there's this moment of like, shit, how are you going to stand out? Because what you do equates to your value. So, if you can't do that thing, are you going to be valuable? How are you going to be seen to be valuable at least? Because that felt more important than anything.

Mandy: The challenge of motivating yourself with deficit energy, meaning I feel less than and I'm going to prove to the world that I'm enough, is that the validation is externally sourced. So, when the wins and the likes and the promotions and deals stop happening, it can unleash some deep-seated fears, including FOPO, fear of people's opinions, that might kick off all the basic anxieties like fear of rejection, fear of judgement, fear of failure.

There can be this deep-seated fear of losing the approval that you're seeking by these outsized achievements, status, and titles. So, if I'm not an England rugby player - that thing that I was sure would solve so many things in my life for me - who am I? If I don't make partner at my private equity firm this year, who am I without that title?

If I leave my fancy editor job because I'm bored and burnt out, who am I then? So does my 'failure', and I'm using air quotes here, take a neon yellow highlighter to my own feelings of lack and inadequacy and surface those? Lots to chew on. Let's go back for a moment to Dr. Ben Shahar's point of creating multiple goals, and not all of them work related.

Callum explored coaching and spirituality whilst he was recovering from his brain injury, so he diversified his happiness portfolio. How about you? I know you're a high achiever and that you're busy, but could you start to pay even a little bit more attention to the parts of your life that you've been neglecting, that you know nonetheless are really important to you?

So, in my coaching experience, it's usually the three F's that fall by the wayside, friends, fitness, and family. What could spending even a little bit more time and attention in some part of your life look like? Maybe your

boundaries need reassessing. I asked Callum to share how he started to address some things in his life, particularly the reframe of the critical voice in his head. That deficit thinking that made him feel less than since he was a kid.

Through his self-awareness journey, Callum came to see that has a choice to see the world through deficit thinking or to explore what it would look and feel like to show up as though he's enough. So, he's choosing to disbelieve the 'less than' thinking. It's not going anywhere for any of us, but we don't need to believe it.

So, Callum is in the practice of using his negative internal chatter as a prompt to re-center. Do try this in your own life. It is such a lovely practice.

Callum: The more aware I am that I have that choice, everything in my life changes when I suddenly realize that that's a choice. And I think, Michael Singer always talks about those moments in your life, like when you get caught up in 'I'm not enough' or the painful stuff, those are trigger moments just to remind you that you've left yourself.

I just remember reading that you know, church bells are actually designed to remind you of God to bring you back into God because you will forget. Right. And I always think like, oh what are the church bells in my life and the thing that brings me back to life, I'm whole and complete. My suffering is wonderful. Isn't it? It's wonderful that I get caught up in the story that I'm not enough because that's just the trigger to bring me back to my innate peace, love, and joy. Just maybe accept that part of you is always going to not feel enough, right? That will stop you resisting it.

And if you stop resisting it, you can see it's a massive, massive opportunity to get you back into the way of seeing the world that would have you feel peace, love, and joy and enough. So, I think it's all perfect.

Mandy: At the end of every conversation, I ask the guest to leave a brick of wisdom, something from their journey that they want to leave for you to ponder.

So, here's what Callum left for you.

Callum: If you think that happiness exists as the result of something outside of yourself, then you're never going to be happy. Nothing outside of yourself is going to make you happy. At least, not how you want it to. It'll be a moment, an empty moment.

What is unveiled to you when you realise you're enough is innate states of peace, love and joy. When you feel like you're enough, you feel peace, love and joy. When people feel peaceful, what do they do? They share peace, they express it. When you feel loving, what do you do? You express it. And what do you feel when you feel joy? You express it, right? Expression is action and action changes everything.

The flow state is an impersonal state. Like you see a professional rugby player who is on form. They're not thinking about how good they look. They're not thinking about trying hard. They're not even thinking about winning. They are just totally there. They don't have any concept of themselves. They are just with what is, totally accepting.

And they express themselves. There's no ego in there. Like go fucking do it. Not in the highest states of performance. The highest states of performance, there is no personal mind in there, there's no ego. So, if you wanted to reach that high performance, then I would start to acknowledge that that voice is happening.

Create a new possibility for yourself. Like the possibility that what if I'm whole and complete and start playing life from there? You won't not do anything. Hey, you sitting out there listening to this. If you felt good enough and you didn't feel like making a mistake would make you look worse. So if you couldn't look worse than you are, like you're whole and complete no matter what happens, what would you do? I'd go and take some risks. I'll start saying what I want. I'd start carving a life that I want. Like you wouldn't sit down. The reason you're sitting down is because you've got in your own head.

Mandy: If there's some goal or career destination that you're convinced will change everything. I hope this episode has got you thinking. It's not to say don't strive for things, but my invitation is to eliminate the 'I'll be happy when' thinking, or the 'I'll feel good enough about myself when...'

Diversify your goals. Add some simple things. Check your three F's for ideas – friends, fitness and family. And experiment. Does your feeling of satisfaction and happiness improve when everything isn't pinned on achievement? If you want to learn more about Callum, his details are in the show notes. And I'm curious who you know who needs this episode in their headphones pronto.

This podcast grows when amazing humans like you share it. So, thank you in advance. Let's do this all again in two weeks.