

# Enough Episode 96: What's Driving Your Drive? With Anna Runkle & Sarah Madigan

**Mandy:** There's a clientele called Sharon, who worked for a venture capital firm. Her boss said he wasn't sure Sharon could cut it in VC after she struggled to get a complex project over the line. So Sharon doubled down working nights and weekends to prove herself to a boss who could never say thank you or recognize her effort.

The harder she worked, the more anxious and frustrated she felt. I refused to be seen as someone who couldn't hack it. She said to me, she bent over backwards to change his mind. She finally left when burnout took her down, and she said she felt ashamed that she'd buckled and quit as though looking after herself proved her boss's point.

Sharon wasn't just fried, she was frustrated and mostly with herself. Ever since she was a kid, she said she couldn't just let it go when someone failed to see her value. I stay in things too long and make myself sick and exhausted. She said, why can't I just let it be? I have permission to share that story by the way.

So maybe this resonates. If you're used to pushing through your body's red flags, you're somebody who endures. In fact, you secretly pride yourself on how much you can handle. It's like a badge of honor. No one's gonna underestimate you. Ha. So here's what I'm curious about. What if that drive isn't just grit, but an injury to your nervous system that you picked up a long time ago?

When you think about how childhood trauma might manifest in adulthood, you might think of drug abuse or alcoholism or gambling. What you probably don't think about is someone who appears to have it all together is high functioning and is even out achieving everyone around them. But here's what I've learned from my guests today.

Outsized drive can be rooted in complex childhood trauma that even decades later might be playing out through overachievement. I am joined today by Anna Runkel, AKA, the crappy childhood fairy who's got about a million followers on her YouTube platform. Has a book entitled Reregulated Set Your Life Free From Childhood PTSD and the Trauma Driven Behaviors that Keep You Stuck. And Anna has also hustled for approval. An over-function to hide the shame related to how she grew up. She's pushed herself to burnout more than once. She's also had a history of staying in dead end jobs and relationships too long, determined to make things work and tolerating a lot of pain and bad behavior.

In the meantime. And because neither Anna nor I are psychologists, I've also brought clinical psychologist Dr. Sarah Madigan in for a couple of cameos. On the bits where I really wanna geek out a little bit, I wanna poke around beneath relentless drive to explore what might really be going on. What's the motivation or that hot little motor to use Anne Lamott's brilliant phrase that burns beneath our outsized efforts.

Is it a drive that feels truly nourishing or is it a protective kind of prove yourself pattern? Or maybe it's a bit of both. It's not about getting rid of your drive, it's about getting curious about it and making it more sustainable and therefore more effective. Before we dive in, welcome. I'm your host, Dr.

Mandy Leto. In every episode of Enough, the podcast, I'm in discussion with a guest whose life looks shiny and successful on the outside, but inside they never feel quite good enough. Even with a track record of stellar achievements, we dig into what's going on underneath the impressive surface, to the raw, real, humbling, and very human moments of how they've learned to live and work in a more self-compassionate, easeful, and sustainable way.

So let's get into it with Anna Runkel. Speak to that hyper organized over prepared person who commands the room that never even saw it coming, that this relentless drive that is praised, that is validated, that gets us good bonuses in corner offices, could actually be a trauma response. Let's go in there.

**Anna:** Let's explore there. Okay. When I got started with my work in crappy childhood ferry, first I had no idea anybody was like me.

I was describing my experience with my trauma symptoms, and I was very high functioning. I had my own company, a video production company. It had taken me a lot of. Huge moves in my life to get where I could do my dream job. And I was doing pretty well, very well, really never good enough for me. And, uh, I started putting my experience with how I got here, the techniques that helped me, the struggles I had, especially at work and connecting with other people and well, okay.

Romantic relationships. Okay. And health. I was having a lot of problems on the side. I started putting this online and I got this chorus of comments back, especially when I put it on YouTube. I didn't even know I was going to be a YouTuber, but I was putting some of my blog posts as little things on YouTube, and one day I discovered I had way more subscribers there and people were relating so much to what it was like to live and apparently functional life with total symptoms of complex PTSD.

And I thought I was the only one.

**Mandy:** So I'm really interested to have this conversation with you to explore what is that hot little motor that is burning beneath the outsized drive that we often get praised and validated for, and therefore think that is the lock the key that's gonna turn the lock to my enmeshment.

Let's go into that hot little motor because it could, if I'm reading you right from the book and from watching you on YouTube, this could be a trauma response.

**Anna:** Well, yes and no. I mean, one thing we know is that a lot of major leaders and entrepreneurs were traumatized as kids. There's a higher proportion, you know, when you compare great leaders to the average population, there's a lot more trauma there. There's a really high incidence of having lost a parent or a parent who discarded them. So there's this huge component there. But it's also a way that trauma plays out, like when TRA trauma plays out as being totally dysfunctional and having addictions and losing control of your relationship or not being able to care for your kids.

Oh, it's very loud. It's recognized immediately as trauma. But when you're functioning well and this, you know, almost everything we do as a survival strategy or starts out that way, then, you know, I think, I don't wanna totally dis it. I'm so grateful. I'll tell you in my family. The adults were addicts and alcoholics.

Half of the children were addicts and alcoholics. Most of my family has died of drugs and alcohol. I'm so grateful that my coping strategy was overachieving because I'm alive and because I have a bank account and I have a husband and a house, and those are things that I really, really, really wanted. I grew up very poor. We were on welfare. There was constant chaos. Our house was shameful to me. It was like a hoarder house. There was rotten food. You never knew when my mom was gonna walk in drunk, so I couldn't bring friends home from school. So it became deeply important to me to have it together, to have it look together.

But what was funny in my case is I was a little bit feral and a lot of the posts that I did, especially in the early days, were about like growing up. I had no idea how you were supposed to act. I literally had to teach myself how to use a fork and a knife together when I was 12 and I got invited to a dinner at somebody's house. At a friend's house, and they were proper people who sat down at the table together and were cutting things with a knife and fork, and I had to watch how they did that. I really cared. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to get out of, you know, the muck that I had come from, but I had so many painful lessons to learn.

And, um, I'm working on a book for the future about the funny, the etiquette book for people who grew up feral. So making a living to me like my mom couldn't pull it off consistently. My biological dad lived in a garage the last seven years of his life, you know, on unemployment and arguing with my mom long distance about money.

I knew I never wanted to be like that, and if I was going to transcend it, I'd have to try really hard. But what that looked like, like when I was in, uh, I, I sort of got my executive function maybe when I was 19 or 20, like for a while I was just sort of at sea. I went, I went to college, but a year late. I graduated from high school a year early.

I went to college a year late. 'cause I didn't know how to go to college. Even though my parents were highly educated, nobody like, talked to me about that. I was that neglected. So I had to go there and they said, well, you have to take the SAT. Which in the US is the test you take here to go and, uh, or used to be, and I think it is.

Again, I didn't even know what it was and everybody just assumed because I was trying to look okay at high school. I was a white kid. Everybody was like, surely someone's talking to her about college. But I had no idea. So I lost a year there. And so I had to go to community college for a while and it was actually fabulous and I had a really good teacher there who ended up encouraging me and going, you need to be in a four year school.

And you know, I was at the top of my class graduating a year early, and uh, somebody had to come along and tell me, what do you even do to do that? So I developed this very deep desire to like get control of my life. And while it did end up creating problems and burnout. Just so many digestive problems. I got chronic fatigue in my twenties.

I'm still grateful because it was, it, it's like, I don't know, like a rocket has to have a huge amount of thrust to get outta the atmosphere, and that was what it was like to come from my family. Hardly anybody in my extended family got out alive, let alone, you know, functional. So I'm grateful. I'm grateful, but then now my life is so much about tempering that.

**Mandy:** As you just heard, Anna's drive developed from a deep desire to do things differently than many others in her family of origin, and it worked. I visited Nassau in Pasadena earlier this year and Anna's thrust story. Really resonates. So think about it, when a rocket launches, it burns the most fuel right at the beginning just to break free of the earth's pole.

That's the hardest part. The liftoff, the escape. But once the rocket's in flight, those giant tanks and engines, while they're just dead weight, so stage by stage, they're designed to fall away. Because carrying them any further would only slow the rocket down. So listening to Anna's story, I can't help thinking of how much thrust it must have taken her to break free from a childhood like hers, and how along the way she's had to let go of old patterns, thoughts, behaviors that would only have weighed her journey down.

She's come to realize that her compulsion to achieve her thrust, if you will, was trauma driven and unsustainable, which is why she pays such close attention to tempering it now, or it will drive her to the ground again and again and again. I wanna pause Anna's story for a bit and explore the science behind our achievement patterns.

Our drive is shaped by loads of different things, our culture, work conditions, past experiences, for instance, and all of these things influence whether our ambition feels energizing. Or more like a protective pattern, which may have been an intelligent response to an environment like it was for Anna during her childhood.

So this stuff is really complex and I don't wanna flatten it here. But what I do want to do is get you thinking about what might be driving your drive and that may change in different circumstances. This is about curiosity. By the way, I made you a quiz, which is linked in the show notes. It's also on my website, [mandylehto.com](http://mandylehto.com).

If you wanna dive deeper into what might be driving your drive. I also wanna bring in clinical psychologist Dr. Sarah Madigan into the conversation right here to see what she suggests we be thinking about as we consider our own achievement patterns.

**Sarah:** When I was, you know, thinking about this conversation Monday, I think there's two key areas. One is safety. So when people experience trauma, they, and it might be actually the case that stillness and rest. Not

safe, you know, that people learn to associate danger with rest rather than it doesn't feel rest, you know, it doesn't feel like it actually restores anything. It's not restorative, it's it's dangerous.

Stillness and rest make people feel really vulnerable to harm because, you know, and, and it doesn't have to be extreme. It could be that somebody at nighttime when they're supposed to be safe in their bed. Experience abuse. It could be extreme like that, but it could be if you are not hypervigilant to.

The the people around you, you know, to their facial expressions or to their moods that you are deeply shamed, which can feel really harmful and traumatic. So there can be all these different types of it. There's something about safety and there's absolutely something about worthiness. So. When people have experienced, um, trauma, they often, you know, repeated trauma through childhood.

They can often develop a sense of themselves in the world, which looks like I'm not okay, but also you are not okay. Right? So I'm not worthy and you are not trustworthy. That's the most dangerous type of way that we make sense now. Love making it really simple. 'cause it can be this simple and it's really helpful to understand that when you.

Feel that you are not worthy. You are. You can either shut down and shut off completely, or you can think, right, if I really achieve and prove that I'm worthy, then I will guarantee other people's love. I will guarantee other people's approval and I'll be safe. So, I mean, it still comes back to safety actually.

But for me they did feel like too quite, um, important cornerstones that. Something about safety and worthiness, you know, and the thing with trauma mandate, you know, as babies we're brought, born with very small, you know, our brains are quite small in terms of like the percentage of, you know, 25% of how big they will become.

And that makes us as humans really, really adaptable to our environments. Which has its pros and cons. It helps us survive very difficult environments and adapt. But it also can really hardwire our neurobiology, our brains, and our nervous systems to be very, very hypervigilant. And like you say, sometimes it might be that someone thinks, well it wasn't that bad, my trauma.

It doesn't have to be that you actually directly experienced trauma. You know, I was, I was reflecting on this this morning, say your grandparent experienced some severe trauma. Then they model all of these behaviors to your parents and they model them to you. So I think it's really important for your listeners.

'cause often, you know, in my community, people will say, well, my trauma's not as bad and so and so's and it's not, you know, we don't need to worry about that. But what we can do, um, you know, even with all of our experiences being different from one another's is think about the motivation behind drive, right?

And when it is trauma driven, we're trying to avoid danger. When it's trauma driven, we're trying to avoid danger. We feel faithful, we feel angry. The chem neurochemicals, adrenaline, and cortisol, you know, and the Three Circle model by Paul Gilbert, Google it guys. It's really brilliant. But the drive, you know, when we're driven and the motivation is that we feel motivated and happy and excited.

And yet we, you know, we can pursue dopamine and we don't need to pathologize that, but it's, it's very, very different where we can feel excited and motivated and it can align with our mission or our values. That is very different from trying to avoid danger.

**Mandy:** I found it really useful hearing that trauma didn't have to be big T trauma. You might be thinking, listening to Anna's story. Wow, my childhood was nothing like that, so this doesn't apply to me. I love what Sarah was saying, that it could even trickle down intergenerationally. It doesn't have to look like what you think trauma is. I also found it useful understanding that the intense drive like Anna demonstrated, and I have done that too for decades.

This isn't a personality trait, but a protective pattern. I'm really trying to avoid grossly simplifying it into good drive and bad drive. As Anna said, though, her drive burnt her out and had negative consequences in her life. She was alive and she had a bank account and a job. So let's get back into the conversation with Anna who's going to share how she sees this playing out with her viewers and readers. And she's also going to share some examples from her own life.

**Anna:** Well, I get the privilege of seeing a lot of cause and effect or things I can presume to be cause and effect because I get, I receive thousands of letters from people. I read some on YouTube and I read a lot more than I share on YouTube. You know, I hear a lot of stories.

I learn so much about people and so I learn like, what are the pairings of like when you're having this problem in adulthood, what happened when you were a kid? And there are some very strong patterns. And Oh, share some of those. I can't wait to hear more. Well, you know, being the oldest daughter is a huge predispose Yeah.

Oldest daughter. Yep. Is um, somebody's gonna have to take care of the kids. Somebody's gonna have to manage the image of the family with the neighbors, you know, and try to handle things. And the public relations. And a lot of people who grew up with trauma had grew up in money problems, other didn't, but there's a kind of neglect that goes on, and so it's pretty easy to.

Um, well, I, I wanna go deeper into that. I think there's a huge deficit in us of learning how to honestly connect with other people because we're so deep in survival. There's a couple things we do. So, one common symptom of neglect and abuse, what is often diagnosed as complex PTSD. Now, I'm not a therapist.

I'm very careful. I don't diagnose anybody, but I refer to this thing that we know, and I often call it childhood, PTSD, because just colloquially the, our folk wisdom, we all know. It's like, oh yeah, childhood, PTSD, you know, the sorts of things that become trouble for people who grew up with trauma. Well, we get dysregulated.

We get this nervous system, vulnerability, and it's, it's basically an injury. It's not, it's not a personality, it's an injury to the way our nervous system functions, and this is the most simple word I can. Use to explain why there's such a huge correlation between early trauma and later problems with.

Heart disease, cancer, diabetes, obesity, stroke, reproductive disorders, I autoimmune diseases, as well as the things that we've known for decades are associated, like addiction, depression, a propensity to be in relationships that are abusive. So there were those obvious ones that people could see from the outside, but what they couldn't see until they did more careful research is that trauma changes our endocrine function and it changes our nervous system's ability to carry blood.

And to our capillaries in a, in a healthy way that takes care of infection. We get sick often, more often, and I got, when I had chronic fatigue, it was an autoimmune disorder and it was the first of three that I've had. And I used to think I must have bad genes, but maybe, I mean, maybe there was a genetic component, but I do know that there were huge periods of time in my life.

It didn't end in childhood when I was under terrible stress if it wasn't my, my child, my family of origin. It's the relationships I got into. It was the jobs that I. Accepted and stayed in even though I was miserable and I was being overlooked and cast out and mistreated and competed with in a negative way.

And I always had poor judgment about like, is it me or could I do better than this? And I was always terrified of making positive changes in my life. I would just try to like, I will win their approval. I stayed 10 years in a boss who just. It was very similar to my stepdad, would not approve of me no matter what.

And I just kept trying and chugging away. And at one point there was a year I wrote a book and there was a conference on the subject of my book. And, and, uh, everybody but me went to the conference and I was supposed to stay home and like transcribe the recordings or something. And I was like, I feel like Cinderella.

And finally a woman colleague said, you are Cinderella. You should be speaking at the conference and they're actively keeping you out. And um, there's some really wonderful people out there. I'm thinking of Natalie Martinek. She's out there talking about narcissistic patterns in the workplace, but I couldn't detect that at all. I would fall right into it. Try to make it work and try to prove myself. And I ended up in that job, and that was the last time it was a job. It was mostly a contracting job that was supposed to turn into a job with benefits. And I went through this whole thing. I was a single mom. I never had health insurance.

I had to buy it myself. And they kept promising and promising. And what I ended up being was like a professional ghost writer or ghost competent person for people who were out there getting all the credit for everything, and I was behind the scenes. Making these really good programs and presentations for them.

I mean, I was good and they relied on me, but I was never allowed to have the spotlight. And um, you know, probably my trauma driven behaviors, which I can't really remember what they were, but a part of me always wants to go. I'm sure I played a role in that besides just putting up with it. But I had no red flag detector to go, this is bs.

Get out of this job. And finally I did. I went and got a job that paid way more and. Started doing different work and started my company and. Uh, you know, started getting actually really good at this, at pacing myself, but starting a company as anybody here on this, on, on, on your channel knows, you know, that's not like stress free and sometimes you have to be amazing.

You have to pull a rabbit out of a hat and, but I get a lot of joy out of that. That's kind of how I, that's who I am. I love, I'm entrepreneurial. I like to sort of invent things on the fly and um, and when I start to feel that burnout coming and I had a really bad episode, episode of burnout just last fall, when I feel it coming and I, my whole job now is to listen to it and pull back, and I still find it very hard to do that.

**Mandy:** I resonate with that too. So if we go back to all those thousands of letters that you're getting and some of those pairings and some of those patterns that you're seeing in some of these people who are. Who look like they're winning at life, but still feeling some sort of internal void. So I'm hearing first daughter, first oldest daughter.

I'm hearing money problems. The thing I would throw into the mix there is definitely some, and you also alluded to that from your own story, is this idea of some sort of shame around the family of origin and therefore almost like over-functioning to compensate for that. Then getting pulled into relationships that.

Maybe one was tap dancing for worth or see me acknowledge me. Recognize me. Are there any sort of telltale signs that that you're seeing for people who are high functioning and high achieving, but this might be that hot little motor burning underneath.

**Anna:** Well, I see there's like a disconnect sometimes that's easy to see when you're not, when it's not you and you're on the outside.

There's a disconnect there where they're describing some like, um, often people write to me about their romantic relationships. So a woman, uh, for example, it's not just women, but women for example. Will write and say, I'm with this guy. And um, you know, he's incredibly rude to me in public and I know that I shouldn't really talk about certain topics in front of him with my friends.

And I was really careless about that. And there's this weird disconnect where. There, there's a piece missing there where it's like, you know, nobody should really like shame you in front of your friends. That's, I, you know, I could hardly think, I can think of a few examples that are quite extreme where somebody would really have to intervene and control your behavior in front of your friends, like you were getting violent or, I don't know.

That's, that wasn't it. But there's a disconnect there. Or the partner is. Not committed and maybe has cheated before, maybe not, or maybe there's worries about that, but the partner isn't committed and is always holding them. Often an avoidant, frankly, you know, somebody who's tends to be avoidant and the person who's writing me is saying that my partner had had.

Childhood, PTSD. So I know that it's very hard for them to be close to somebody or consistently kind, or, you know. And so I bought my partner a book and I'm trying to get 'em to take your course. And I have this rule, like no one is allowed to take the course 'cause someone made them. The, the refund will come immediately. Like it. My course is only for people who feel like they want to learn it and change, but there's this fantasy. Um, and I hear it a lot about therapy too, like. He refuses to go to therapy and it's like, well, there you have it. He's not interested in therapy. He's not interested in that right now. And so there's this,



we have this capacity, I think when we were really neglected as kids to imagine how great things could be and to be a little out of touch with how things actually are.

And so we get very driven to try to push it right up there where it could be in our mind. And one of the most painful kinds of relationships I had in the past was with somebody who turned out to have a secret drug addiction. Even though I knew better, even though I went to Al-Anon, the drive was so deep in me and especially having grown up with that, I was just like, okay, well we can make this work.

You're gonna go to treatment and then you're gonna go to X number of meetings and then you're gonna do this and we're gonna have all these rules and we can make this work and I won't have to lose you. And um, that. Needless to say, didn't work for either of us. And I ended up so exhausted and with such severe PTSD symptoms from, you know, that person's inevitable decline into addiction.

Um, who he, he was people pleasing me to go, oh yeah, yeah, sure, I'll do all these things. And in my mind, like, yes, I can make this work, but it's, I, I liken this and I've, I've heard this before in, uh, 12 step programs. It's like when you're a passenger in a car. And you feel like the person is driving too fast, the driver.

And you've got this like phantom break on the floor. Yeah. And you're pushing your leg into it so hard. Your leg hurts at the end of the ride. And you know, just trying to control the car on a floor that has no pedal. And that's what it's like to be with somebody else who's. Out of control and not who you want them to be and who you need them to be.

And so we end up just like pulling all the tricks. We've got to try to make it work and make it fit. And some people, like the partner says, oh, we're polyamorous now. And the partner will go, this is devastating to me. I don't want it, but I'm gonna do that because I know that I have to. And you actually don't have to do anything.

So that's, there's this over-functioning to try to make these things work. And in my program we call it crap fitting. We fit ourselves to crap.

**Mandy:** Yes. I love the word that you just used. Tricks as well. Of all the, the ways in which we can contort ourselves to continue on a path that somewhere deep inside we know isn't good for us.

But there's the sunk cost. Of all of it. There's the lack of alternatives to know what else I could do and will I just be reeling through space disconnected entirely from everything I've invested, whether it's a boss or a romantic relationship, and I think. These, these tricks are often like I, I'll just work harder.

I'll show you there's this, that can be a hot little motor to this proving energy. I'll show you by sheer will. As you said, that might be that reality gap of, I know this could be possible, whether it's in my career or with my physique or in my relationship, and I will push myself relentlessly. There's something about that outsized drive here. That for me is definitely one of those burning motors. Is is that something you see too?

**Anna:** Yeah. Burning motor and I, that's such a good analogy, Mandy. 'cause I, I can smell the burning motor. Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's like a burn rubber smell sping up on the highway. Yeah. Yeah. That's one of my PTSD triggers, by the way.

The smell of a burning motor, because growing up we had a hippie, uh, a VW bus that. We lost the engine 11 times and lived in Arizona. So you'd be like, you'd be in life threatening highway heat in the middle of nowhere and it'd just be like, Ugh. So, or the gas cage going down, that's where, that's where my like drive kicks in. Like, that's it. We have to get gas now. And my husband knows finally, like, just get the gas, you know, just put, put me at ease because it's not worth it. Uh, if we're like under a quarter of a tank of gas. I can hardly stand it. And those are a few of the things where I'm not, it doesn't cause huge life problems, but there are so many things like that I did have to heal.

I think two, the two big drivers that I see in people who, um, are pushing themselves till the burning smell comes is, um, one fear of abandonment. And the therapist, Pete Walker, came up with this word that just. Totally opened my world called Abandonment melange, and it's this really toxic emotional mix that is unique to people who have been actually abandoned as kids, where it feels life-threatening.

And so no matter how bad a relationship or a job is, it's like I can't leave or I'll die. That's what the nervous system is reacting as if. And this terrible depression comes at the thought of it. So even when I was thinking of leaving the the addict guy I mentioned, even when I thought of it, I would get very depressed in this weird way that matched how I might've felt when I was two or three years old.

And my mom would take off for a month at a time and nobody knew where she was about that level of like. Rage and panic and, and worthlessness would come in. And so it's a crippling fear of abandonment. And when people talk about fear of abandonment, who don't have this. It never quite met me with how severe it was for me.

I'm sure people have had it all throughout history, and my theory is that the idea of Adam and Eve getting cast out of Eden, that's what it's about. That's that's what it references, that depth of despair where you're not dead. But you have nothing good anymore and you can't get back in. And, uh, it's a, it's like a core primal feeling in the human race, and it's triggered by actual abandonment.

And it's, it can be very crippling when, you know, there's e even a word for it. Almost half of the problem evaporates, and then it takes, you know, conscious effort to go, oh wow, I'm in abandonment melange. I'm thinking it's worse than it is. I bet there's a pathway out of this, even though it feels like certain death right now. And that's a, that's really helpful to know.

**Mandy:** So for somebody who's high functioning. And pushing themselves at a very high level. How would they even begin to recognize, like how would that behavior play out in a fictional executive who he or she is going a hundred miles an hour, things look great from the outside.

How might that play out in real life?

**Anna:** I have found that people need to be connected to tools that work for them and connected to other people who completely know what they're going through because they've gone through it too, or they're in the middle of going through it, and we're very short of those two things.

When I was going through my, you know, dark Night of the Soul 30 years ago and totally in crisis over this and didn't think I would make it. There wasn't really good help available. I had ample therapy, I had health insurance and saw a doctor. The crisis had been precipitated. I, somebody broke my heart earlier in the year my mother died and I was attacked on the street randomly, quite severely, and they broke my jaw and teeth and all of this happened at once and I had severe PTSD, which did not, it wasn't diagnosed.

This was 1994. I think they could have known, but they just didn't. And then my state, California pays you if you are a victim of a violent crime, they give you a big pot of money to get therapy. And I was going to one of the best therapists there was. But at that time, and still to some degree, it's like this, people believed you needed to talk about what happened.

It broke my mind and the doctor said, here, take benzos. The therapist was like, come three times a week and keep talking about this assault and how you feel and how sad you are. And I almost died and I hit a point where I had to find a different way to go through this. The story of what happened to me is certainly relevant and needed to be talked about in certain measure at different times, but it wasn't the solution for me. And what it was was I needed help to start processing the pain that I was carrying the um. Triggered reactions that were going on and basically just the fundamental injury to my nervous system. That would go into what's called hyper vigilance, which is definitely relevant to the executive, where if you were trained as a kid, you better watch out.

You gotta pay attention. Did your dad just walk in drunk? Listen to the way the door opens. You can tell by the way he puts the key in the lock. Where your nervous system is tuned to threats all the time. I mean, it's just terrifying running a company. When you're in that state, one person gives you negative feedback.

You know, I'm a YouTuber. I get negative feedback every day. Somebody says something nasty in the comments and or they want their money back because of something that we didn't actually do, but they thought we did. And maybe it's best just to give it to them. But my nervous system would just be like, eh.



That's it. It's all over. It's all over, and it just, it tears you down. You start getting sick all the time. When I had no better way to control, just unevenness, the unevenness of life the way. Sometimes it's scary and we lose things and bad things happen. Sometimes I would become very controlling. I would start to have this very stern voice and try to bring out this character within myself who had managed to make sure that the little kids, my siblings, had food and make sure, you know, we didn't like where I grew up.

I'm hearkening back to this. We didn't have hot water for two years. We never had a washing machine and dryer, and so in high school, you know, to have like the hair and the makeup. Clean clothes to wear and all that stuff. It took so much hyper vigilance. I had to really keep it together, and then I had to dodge the relatives who were not safe to be around and nobody was gonna help me.

So this core feeling like I have to do everything. So this is another wonderful word that I learned in my work, and this one's also from Pete Walker. As it happens. He calls it an emotional flashback of total helplessness and going into an emotional state as if this terrible thing is happening now, but it doesn't actually match the external circumstances and everybody around you can tell you're overreacting.

And even if you can behave beautifully and you look nice and you're being appropriate, the thing is. We can feel each other's nervous systems. So unless people are zonked on drugs and alcohol themselves, they can tell when you're running on panic. And if you're leading a company and you're full of panic, even though you're saying everything's great and we're gonna handle this, they feel it and it feels, it makes them just trust you and it makes them feel, you know, worried about things and it changes their priorities in terms of how should they invest their energy.

So it can be very disruptive to the entire team and to the direction of the company when things are sort of panic driven decisions. Rather than having a means to reregulate your nervous system every day, again, as many times as necessary to be able to do your thinking and your communicating and your leadership and your connecting with people.

And that's the core thing that I would say is the tell is dysregulation, and this is the. Piece that's been missing the whole time until recently. You know, I started talking about this in 2016 and my blog that turned into crappy childhood ferry. I'm delighted they talk about it on the Oscars. They talk about it on cartoons.

They talk like it's really out there now. People get dysregulated and people who had trauma as kids get dysregulated more and have a harder time coming out of it than other people. And you'll just find sometimes when you start healing your dysregulation. And that's, that's what my book, this one, reregulated.

You know, this is about how it happens, why it happens, what it's like, what you can do. Exactly. And it, it, it can work in conjunction with therapy, but it doesn't require therapy. It's not a process of talking about what happened. It's about dealing with where your nervous system is right now and working on.

How you gonna interact with the world to create, to stop re-traumatizing yourself and to start creating better connection and a more regulated and peaceful way of operating that gets way more done. It's so much more productive. But this is the thing. We start out, we get coping mechanisms to deal with it, and the dysregulation tends to ramp up over time.

And when we're under stress, whoops, we're into it. And you'll know you're dysregulated by signs like you're feeling discombobulated, you feel numb. I'm very lucky. I have a physical sign. I feel numb on my nose and in my hands. And a physical sign is a lot easier to notice when I'm dysregulated than like.

I feel kind of overcharged on adrenaline, like once I'm in adrenaline it just, it doesn't feel like anything except urgency to me, it's, I don't notice it's a body state and so the discombobulation getting lost where you were going, forgetting what you were doing, trying to do a million things at once, but never completing anything.

And then one of the most harmful ones is emotional, dis emotional dysregulation is one aspect of it. It's also happening. The origin is in your nervous system, but it results in lashing out, freaking out, checking out, and the, uh, because it's unbearable. It's like this unbearable overdrive of your nervous system.

And so when there's a little argument or you feel threatened or somebody insults you, instead of being able to handle it gracefully in a way that, um, in a way that has a pathway towards reconciliation and nobody loses face. Which is definitely what an executive needs to do. It's just like you obliterate the relationship.

It feels like the only tool that you've got in your tool belt, in the moment, and then an hour later you recover your senses. You're literally not with your senses. That's what's happening. The rational part of the brain is, is lessening its activity. The emotional part is increasing. It's nothing that we caused, but it's how it's and it can't.

Luckily we can turn it around with practice and awareness. So Disre. Yeah. Well, if I may go on with this dysregulation, I first learned to control it with cigarettes. I, I was a heavy smoker for a while. I learned to control it by eating too much. C, it just doesn't work very well or for very long. Then I learned to control it by overachieving.

Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding. There it is. Yep, there it is. So you have to find a better way to reregulate, and then you have some over exercising. Oh, yes. Those sort of things. Yes. Yeah. Yeah. And some people turn to alcohol and drugs or gambling or it, it also shows up in, um, black and white thinking. People who are dysregulated and who have had a lot of trauma are very susceptible to charismatic controlling people or cult leaders even.

Oh, we're terrible bosses and so that, you know, we get re reg dysregulated and if the only thing you know is just like align with that person, we're just very susceptible to people who have strong opinions. And I think when you see bullying online, as is so common now, people just lashing out randomly at categories of people they're attempting to reregulate.

That's what I think. Doesn't excuse it. Not even for a minute, but I think that's what's going on. And, and uh, you know, a lot of times when I watch the news and I see people just like losing it on this, just screaming at people they don't even know on the street, I'm like, ah, dysregulated, that's severe emotional dysregulation.

It has terrible consequences. For the individual, but also for the people they hurt. And that's what's tricky when people get abusive in a relationship, they're probably dysregulated. And again, it's not an excuse, but it, it's an explanation.

**Mandy:** Anna's just shared how some dysregulation can show up in the body.

For her, it's going numb in her nose and hands. It made me think less about the physical tells and more about some of those sneaky everyday behaviors, ways it might show up in your life. You know, the things we don't really want to admit out loud, like maybe secretly checking your work emails in the bathroom on holiday because you just can't help yourself and you know, your partner would be angry if they saw you or maybe finishing a huge project and instead of celebrating immediately saying to yourself, right.

What's next or that weird guilt trip you give yourself if you work out for 42 minutes instead of a full hour as if the universe is somehow keeping score. If any of that feels familiar, you're not alone. Clinical psychologist, Dr. Sarah Madigan calls this a protective achievement pattern. Basically, it's when our drive and our discipline stop being about joy or fulfillment and start being about keeping ourselves safe.

So here's Sarah with some of the signs to look out for.

**Sarah:** It might look like moving goalposts, right? So you achieve something that you've been working towards, but actually as soon as you've achieved it, you might, you, you might feel celebratory for a second, or like you say, actually you might feel relief, but then there's just another goalpost.

So it's almost like you're not satiated. Because if you think about it from, you know, if we go, if we go deeper. If you still have the belief that you're worthy, it doesn't matter what you achieve. There's almost this fantasy that if you achieve the thing that you are working towards, you'll suddenly feel worthy, but you don't.

Um, people can become very focused on the outcome rather than the process. People can dismiss their accomplishments and sup of your listeners will be resonating. And like I mentioned before this, there can be

a real disconnection from the body. So people can be up in their head, think, think, think, think, thinking, and really not even able to notice.

Exhaustion or signs of illness or signs of, you know, please slow down people. Please go and take a pee. Go to the toilet, please go drink some water. Exactly. Kind of thing. Exactly. But that real lack of attunement with, oh, my body wants to move, or my body wants some sunlight. It can, you know, and then obviously more extreme if people are actually ill or stressed.

They don't notice the physical tension in the body. So there can be that real disconnection and it can be isolating for people. Mandy, I'm sure some of your listeners will resonate, that if you are so focused on achievement, your relationships might feel less fulfilling because they're not, as you, you don't get that instant relief or that instant dopamine, you know?

So there's, unlike you, you also mentioned the kind of off switch, you know, that rest can feel so dangerous and almost, you know, like. Almost morally wrong. It's bad, it's bad to rest. It's lazy. So I'm sure some of your listeners will recognize all of those kinds of things, but there's also things like people might experience actual physical symptoms like headaches.

It might impact their sleep. Make it difficult to um, yeah, difficult to sleep, and the kind of sense that. You might feel exhausted, but rest never helps that so rest doesn't feel restorative. Even when you've slept well, you still don't feel rested. So, you know, there's some of the things that people might notice.

There's clearly lots of ways that they might show up in people's thinking. You know, negative thoughts, catastrophic thinking behaviors, rigidity or go, go, go, go, go in and find that hard to stop validation seeking and emotionally. Um, fear, anger, anxiety, irritability, and yeah, like I say, that disconnection from the body.

I think they're the main ones, man.

**Mandy:** I wanna dig into rigidity for a moment because I think I noticed when I was really in the grips of dysregulation Yeah. It felt like that would give me, this wasn't even conscious. It's how I've unprocessed it afterwards with my coach and others, but this rigidity, like, I must exercise one hour every day.

Yeah. And if I don't, it feels almost like I've failed and it's, it's almost like a. Slow leak in the day that the day is not a good day because I haven't eaten this amount of green things, or I haven't done that specific. So there's a real, there's almost like a task master list of this must be done for me to feel like today's been a good day. Kind of a thing.

**Sarah:** I mean, I resonate so much mad, but it's so funny how we teach these things to people, but we, they're sneaky. They're sneaky, and they show up in our lives. You know, I can, even with my meditation, you know, my insight time, it tells me how many consecutive days and I can get attached to that.

Or even, you know, my personal, I've got personal trainer and I've been doing really well with, um, my kettlebell workouts and I've got a, a mild injury, but I've not been able to do it, and it can trigger a sense of unworthiness. I, I, I want to achieve, so, but I do want to achieve, so that can, it's so interesting, isn't it, that I can still, I can witness them, but I think it's, that's the, the first important step is witnessing, oh, there's that pattern of me feeling like I'm not worthy or I'm somehow not whole.

If I'm not achieving or if I'm not, you know? Yeah. Doing X, Y, or Z, whatever it is. Like you say, exercising for an hour a day or. You know, whatever it is, you know, and we like, we like to feel a sense of control in this life where there's so many things that we're not in control of. Right?

**Mandy:** Noticing is a key first step If any of these tells are resonating.

Before we get back to Anna, please remember that these conversations are never substitutes for therapy coaching or any kind of clinical practice. They're here to get you thinking. Anna's going to share her experience of what started working for her as she was healing and shifting to more sustainable ways of working and being in relationships. I hope it gives you some ideas.

**Anna:** I think it's critical to find somebody who actually knows about dysregulation. There's this blanket thing that people say is, you need a good therapist, but who, what is that? What is a good therapist? Like a good therapist for one person might not be the right one for somebody else, so if therapy is the root, they, they must be up to date on newer, newer research.

Wisdom that talking about it is not the gold standard anymore. That dealing with the nervous system dysregulation and understanding the connection between trauma and what's going on in the body, what's going on in brain function, that this is not just about telling the story and. Dwelling on what happened to you.

And even just 10 years ago, it was always like, oh, it's not, it's, it's all about what happened to you. It's not, you're not defined by what happened to you. It injured you, but you're dealing with an injury, and you're working on an injury now. Not the person who hurt you. You can't change them. And you can't change the past, and it's so important to be focused on things you can change.

I mean, just even tactically, to have the experience of a win when you're working on your trauma to be like, there I, I changed it, so now I'm always on time, a win. And those little wins are so empowering to be able to then. Recognize what your next step might be. What's my next step? It's so overwhelming when you're screwing up on a hundred levels.

You, you don't know where to start. So you need a community or a person or an expert who can help you identify, look, here's what's going on. So the first thing to do. You wanna know what? The very first thing I would recommend is go outside and move your body. There is nothing more important or potent to come out of dysregulation than to move and do it and, and outside if you can, and then if you can, then if you can, to do your movement in something that's with a group such as yoga or martial arts or ballroom dancing or singing together where you're, because.

There's, we don't understand it very well, but it amplifies the reregulating effects of movement when we do these things with other people, and especially when a leader is calling out, left, right, left, right. That's how brain centered the problem is. It just needs to be sort of called back into. Get your left brain going, get your right brain going, and, uh, start to have them talk to each other.

And a whole lot of the overwhelm can be lifted just by these physical movements. But in terms of how to get back out, like the steps to get out of dysregulation, it's important to have that movement to move the body. There's, you're dealing with a physical, your nervous system is part of your body. And I tend to avoid metaphors like stored in the body or wired that's, there are no wires.

You know, we, but our nervous system is function. It's glitching. And to use yet another computer metaphor, but it's, you know, it's mal firing, it's misfiring. It's not working in our best interest because of this trauma injury. So movement is one way you can help get it online. Sleep, adequate sleep. Adequate nutrition, eat protein. I would avoid sugar alcohol when I had severe PTSD. It turns out that was what helped me is to start running and you know, they were trying to put me on medication. I got off all medication, I stopped talking about it. I started moving my body and exercising no alcohol. Very limited sugar, and then I started writing about it.

Instead, I was lucky enough to stumble on a technique a woman happened to. I, I confided in her that I, I didn't think I was gonna survive. I was in so much distress 30 years ago. And she, she showed me this thing that was sort of a modification of what she had learned in AA of how to, any time or twice a day, get your fearful, resentful thoughts and feelings on paper.

And it's a really specific technique. Anybody who's listening to this. I'll show it to you for free. I have a free course. I'll put, I'll give Mandy a link so you can see it there. And I just, I urge people like do it, learn the technique it takes, it takes several minutes to learn it, and I won't teach it exactly here, but in a nutshell, it's about getting it on paper and releasing it.

Or if you're inclined towards a higher power God or the universe helping you, you ask for it to be removed and then you rest in meditation and. I did not think something so simple could help me when I was in that level of distress where no amount of healthcare or mental healthcare would help me, but I almost instantly felt better.

I had a lot of life problems to solve, but that feeling of overwhelm and distress. Calmed right down. And so now we know writing about stuff. There are several ways to do it. James Pennebaker is sort of the great researcher on it. 2000 peer reviewed studies on the therapeutic value of writing about distress.

Um, now he's my friend, he endorsed my book and I've had a chance to really talk to him about like, so what about traumatized people? And what about the way they tend to. Sort of give up and get overwhelmed if they don't meditate. And he goes, yeah, no, that makes sense. Meditating afterwards. And so we're, we're carving out this other path that's so beautifully simple.

You can carry little pads of paper. I, I'm looking at my desk. I always have these little, the size. They're, whether they're five and a half by. Seven or something, or they're small. And, uh, little pads of paper in my purse with a pen everywhere I go, if I start to get overwhelmed by something, somebody honks at me in traffic, I can pull over and I can just write and get it out out of my nervous system.

So, so the with movement and with dealing with the cognitive overload that is trauma, it just jams up in your mind. We know that early trauma makes it hard to process. Thoughts and feelings process means turn it from a charged thing that's kicking up all your adrenaline and cortisol into a mere memory.

So many of us have trouble with that. It takes too long and there's just a whole bunch of ping pong balls of stress going around all at once. You can't think clearly. You can't discern thing. Things that are important, like is this person trustworthy or. Should I say yes right now or should I wait a day?

And so when you can start discharging all that noise in your head, that is reregulation on a cognitive pathway toward it. The movement is a physical pathway and we all need a little of all of it. And you know, there. More pathways that people have. People tell me about their special ways of doing it all the time, but it needs to be consistent and it needs to be something you can manage yourself every day and not wait for a once a week appointment with a professional, you know, to to talk about it for a while and explain it and then have to leave.

Like I needed something all the time with me. And I recovered very quickly from the the dysregulation. I still get dysregulated easily, but I know what to do and it's a lot less frequent and a lot less intense than it used to be.

**Mandy:** I had a guest, Jessica Waite, who's written a brilliant book called *The Widow's Guide to Dead Bastards*, and she's a fabulous book that just came out recently and we were talking about writing as a technology of healing.

And how that helped her to process the secret life that her husband had been living, that she was trying not to know about. This whole idea of writing, getting it out of your overheated nervous system, it doesn't mean that the hot little motor will go away. Even writing or doing any of those things, but it can turn down the temperature, it can make you less prodded by it to behave in ways that maybe are caught, you know, not serving you in, in this season of your life.

**Anna:** Absolutely.

**Mandy:** I think people used to misunderstand that phenomenon as merely psychological. It's psychological, but it turns out it's neurological too. Yes. The physical act of writing and, and it's more important to do it by hand if you're physically able, rather than typing or voice dictation.

**Anna:** Yeah. It's old school and plus just that. Yeah. The, the physical sensation of feeling the, the, yes. Yeah. It also slows my, for me anyway, it slows my thinking down. Yeah. Which is annoying sometimes, but helpful. It, it becomes what Tony Robbins calls an anchor. You know, the, the act of writing for me and the friction. I, I, I have these, these \$5 mechanical pencils. They're easy to use, they're always sharp, and they have the lovely friction of lead on paper and, and the minute I'm writing with a pencil, even if I'm just making a grocery.

**Mandy:** I start to, yeah, which is incredible and yeah, super simple. I end every interview with this one Question, Anna, what's something you've recently said enough to and been better for it?

**Anna:** Gabe, who's my video editor, who I've worked with for 10 years, um, I was telling him that I had made a bad hire, um, a ti a time back, and I've made a lot of bad hires and I said, I don't know. I just can't sleep. I'm so worried about this. And he said, Anna, when you've had that feeling, and I've seen you have it before, has it ever turned out well?

And I was like, no, actually you're right. And so everything in me thinks it's me. I've got to be a better boss and you know, I've gotta make this work. I'm starting to just go ahead and cut my losses and I give myself permission. They might be a great person, but if it's keeping me up at night, my body is trying to tell me this is not working for me.

And I finally have had enough experience not listening to myself that though there's a risk that I will throw the baby out with the bath water, overall, it's better for me to go ahead and end it quickly after 30 days.

**Mandy:** Remember Sharon from the start of this conversation. She's the one who was trying to get her critical boss to see her value by overgiving and overdoing till she burned out an achievement pattern that had played out her whole life. Through therapy and coaching, Sharon realized that she felt powerless when a situation was escalating, and she felt she had no influence.

The unlock came for her when she realized that for years as a young girl, she was trying to keep her parents' relationship together. And if she could just show she was valuable enough and navigate this tough project, and I use air quotes there carefully, she'd manage. And she didn't. But Sharon has found ways to temper those overdoing and overgiving urges like Anna Runkel said of herself, that noticing and course correcting can be crucial ongoing work.

I hope this episode has got you thinking about what might be driving your drive. Check out, Anna. Run Uncle's book Reregulated and you'll find her info, Sarah Madigan's info and the What's Driving your Drive Quiz in the show notes. Thanks for listening and see you next time.