

Episode 100: Why You Can't Stop Working (even when you know you should), with Dr Claire Plumby

Mandy: In nearly 20 years of executive coaching, I've heard a lot of people tell coaches things that they sometimes haven't said out loud to anyone else, and there's one confession that still makes me stop in my tracks. These are high functioning, highly successful people. People with big jobs, big responsibilities, big LinkedIn energy, and they're quietly admitting that they fantasized about a short hospital stay.

Maybe a broken leg or a mild, but entirely legitimate illness. Nothing too dramatic, just enough that nobody can ask anything more of them, and they don't have to have that awkward conversation or set the boundary or explain why they cannot possibly absorb. Just one more thing. It's so sorry. I just can't right now.

And I get it. I've been there too. What has to be true about your life and what have you come to believe about yourself for this fantasy to feel like a relief of all the fantasies you could have. It's like there are two gears for this person full on, and the deep desire to be fully off. But not seeing how that's possible.

Hence, the hospital fantasy. There's this hot little motor burning beneath oversized drive, the thing underneath, the competence underneath the, of course, I'll handle it underneath that safe pair of hands. Identity that motor. Can create extraordinary things like promotions, influence, money rooms you once just dreamed of being in.

And here you are. And it can also drive you straight into frenetic burnout. That push, crash, push, crash pattern where you keep going, keep delivering, proving even when your body is waving a series of tiny red flags. I recently commissioned research for my book with 2000 professionals across the UK and the US, and over half said their self-worth is tied firmly to productivity.

They feel most valuable when they're busy, most credible, when they're stretched, and most themselves when they're needed. Which sounds impressive until you realize there's no off switch. Or rather there is one, but apparently it requires a minor medical event and a note from a consultant to be able to access it.

I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Leto, and this is enough, the podcast, a show for the ones who can't stop who somewhere along the way, confused, exhaustion with effort, pace, with purpose, and being needed. With being enough and before we get into today's conversation, we need a little pause because this is episode 100, 100 episodes of circling the question of when is enough, well enough, and apparently the answer is.

Still not quite yet. Mandy, keep digging if you've been here from the beginning. Truly, I'm so grateful that you're here, and if you're new, well, you've walked straight into the deep end. Excellent decision making. My guest today is Dr. Claire Plumley, clinical psychologist and author, and we're getting into insecure striving, frenetic burnout, and the seduction of being the reliable one, and why knowing you're stretched often changes absolutely nothing.

Let's start there.

Imagine we have a person who's coming to coaching. They're very overloaded. Their diary is completely jammed. This person is acutely aware that they're stretched, so there's, there's no question of their capacity is full sleep isn't great. Their partner at home is noticing that they're, they're constantly distracted.

Maybe they should take some time off. So this person has an awareness of all those things. It's not a knowing challenge, it's not a knowing problem. And the next day the boss says, can you just take on this

one project? No one's gonna take care of it the way you will. You're such a safe pair of hands. I know I can leave this with you and I know it'll get done.

So freeze frame. What exactly is going on in the mind of this person? Let's call her Sarah. Sarah's overloaded. Sarah's partner is noticing that she's a little bit fried. She's not sleeping. She gets that she has no capacity. Her boss says this to her, what's going on inside of her in this moment? So we can see that hot little motor actually in action.

Claire: So the thoughts will often jump around all over the place from escapism thoughts like I could, if I could just break a leg, if I could just like something that is beyond my control to stop me having to be the one who gets pulled in here. It's almost like the boundary here isn't for me to give and set.

It has to be taken away from me somehow. I don't have the control. So it's a lack of feeling of control. So I think that feeds into the escapism thoughts, but as well as that, you'll have all the other thoughts. Which are very much in the content of all the things you've got to do. And yeah, and I think they, you struggle quite often to then finish a thought because they're jumping around so much.

And this is part of the, the frenetic nature of this burnout is that your problem solving capacity is reduced to actually work out well, what does really need to happen. And I find that when you're holding space for someone in therapy, you probably find it in coaching as well, that actually creating that space to work out what are all the things.

What are all the stresses coming in? What are all the options? And you're slowing down the pace of how you speak with someone so that you know, you're not allowing that like pattern of jumping thoughts and to be ruling the roost the whole time. We can kind of, um, I can almost feel an out breath, you know, just in the slowing down of, of, you know, capturing those thoughts or what are the things, what are the options?

This is compassion. Like where are the options for allowing support in? Because we know people with this insecure striving pattern or um, tendency towards competitiveness, the research shows that they really do often struggle with allowing compassion to flow in from others to show themselves compassion as well.

So that's always a big part of the conversation too.

Mandy: So tell us first, before we go into the episode, what does that actually mean? What is the frenetic pattern of burnout?

Claire: So this is when we just work harder and harder and push past and we are not able to take in and listen to what our body needs. So demands of work completely outweigh the resources that you've got in order to do it, and that might be internal resources as well as external resources.

So it depends a little bit on your, on your role and where you are, whether you're self-employed or in an employed position where you might have less choice around access to resources.

Mandy: I'm curious if there's a few traits or if there's a profile of a personality that is this individual who is going full throttle or nothing.

What do you see in your practice?

Claire: I think. Like you were saying, there's a lot of external stresses that will create that. And so I often see those types of industries, like you say, where there's been a lot of emphasis on your job, almost becoming like your identity because you've, you've, you've had to, early on you had to do your work experience when you were 14 in like the local legal firm or like, so it becomes like really important to maintain your foot on the gas.

Yeah. 'cause otherwise what happens to your whole identity? Any of those roles as well where you're just fully passionate about what you do, it's your baby. Like entrepreneurs for example, or you know, the industries around charitable areas like where again, it feels quite identity and like you can't put your baby down for a moment, otherwise there's risk there.

So like external stresses like that. Any kind of high demand, low resourced kind of workplaces. And then the internal pressures. That we put on ourselves, they will be the traits maybe around perfectionism, around

needing to get things just so for others, people pleasing. And I also see a lot of people who struggle with emotion regulation or understanding and tolerating difficult emotions, perhaps as a fairer way of putting it.

So they might use busyness to avoid those difficult feelings, what they dunno, what to do with if they haven't learned those skills early on. And so. Those are things you can learn how to do, but you gotta know that those are underneath, keeping you pushing through. We talk in the book about insecure striving and that's I think, what this episode is all about, actually, insecure striving.

Mandy: Can you define for us briefly what you mean by insecure striving, because I think that's really key here.

Claire: So it's where you are striving for achievement, but where it's coming from a place that's fueled by fear in some way. Quite often there'll be some linked, for example, external shame being seen in the eyes of others in a way that you think is negative.

So, um, all of this I should, um, say is work that comes from Paul Gilbert, who is a big researcher and practices compassionate mind therapy, and I find his work on this really helpful. Uh, yeah, so. It's linked to low social safeness, so if you don't feel a sense of belonging and connection with those around you, you're more likely to have insecure striving.

And like I said already, if you struggle with the flows of compassion inwards from others and towards yourself or even towards others, then. You're more likely to get engaged with the insecure striving. So striving isn't bad, but it's good to be connected with your positive motivators as well. Like that care for others. Um, willing to do a good job because you enjoy it. 'cause it is. Mm-hmm. It's enjoyable to do a good job, but quite often if you feel like it's coming from a negative place, if I don't achieve this, I'll be laughed at or I'll lose my job, or I won't be able to afford the bills. Like there's some really. Good reasons for insecure striving in the world as, as well as kind of coming from those kind of earlier life things that I described earlier.

Mandy: When I'm coaching someone, and I know very much my lane that I'm not a therapist, I'm not a psychologist, I'm not a psychiatrist, but often people will refer to some kind of a backstory and here's a couple of them. So maybe you were the first kid in the family to make it. The first woman in your family to ever go to university or the kid who quite never felt they belonged and never had much expectation around them.

I've heard that one loads of times. Or somebody who's come from say, a blue collar background or parents were immigrants or whatever else, and then they've. Kind of made it, air quotes, made it and gone to an Ivy League school, or had opportunities that their ancestors would never have had, and there's this proving energy.

Underneath, or some people referred to as like, oh, I was always driven by a chip on my shoulder. I was always driven because I had this teacher in the seventh grade who said, I'll never amount to anything. So this what I call to use en Lamas phrase, this hot little motor burning beneath that outsized drive that will.

Push somebody through to create incredible results. So I, I want to first of all ask, do you see any of that backstory, connection with people who end up with that frenetic pattern of burnout in your practice?

Claire: Yes, totally. And I think it's such a helpful piece of work to do for yourself, either through self, you know, learning through, listen to your podcast, for example, but in therapy.

When you can understand how all the dots connect, you can understand why you respond to the current present day pressures in the way that you do because it feels too risky in some way. And so, yeah, some of the things you've described your role in the family, and you can go right back pre-birth, you know, what were the pressures on your families?

When, you know, you were just a, a twinkle in their eye before you even came along, because that can all play a, a role in terms of how they parented, what they prioritized, what they noticed about you when you were at school or with your friends, or, you know, showing them, you know, your achievements and what they noticed and paid attention to will have become important to you.

And so also, you know, there will be times where people have been bullied or put down for things and they will want to, like you say, want to avoid criticism or humiliation again. And quite often the best way of doing that is to be the top of the social rank and be the best in your field, because that feels like the safest place to be because people can't point and laugh anymore.

Mandy: Yeah. I'm so glad you said that, and I really want to go there because it's something that's so obvious in hindsight, but I never understood that. Thanks to therapy, thanks to a lot of coaching, thanks to a lot of somatic work, I understood that was such a driver for me to push through all of my body.

Screams for rest was the thing that I was pushing for or running from. Felt so much more important, although that none of this was conscious, and that's why I think I want this conversation to exist in the world so that people start to connect the dots, as you said. So I wanna probe underneath that frenetic burnout pattern.

So let me show you what that actually looks like in real life, because otherwise this can all sound a little bit abstract. So imagine it's 10:47 PM you finally sat down, the kitchen's cleaned. Your brain is still worrying, but you've told yourself tonight I'm not doing any more work. Then your phone lights up.

It's Trevor. Trevor who seems to think that end of day is more of a creative interpretation. His message says something like, quick one, are you happy with this direction? Which of course is never a quick one, and you feel that little surge of action in your body. Then the thoughts come in fast and they sound completely.

Reasonable. It'll just take two minutes better just to clear it. I don't want this hanging over my head in the morning and before you've really decided anything, you're up. Your laptop is out of your work bag and on the kitchen table and somewhere in there, and this is the bit that's easy to miss.

There's a quieter thought running underneath it all, which is, this is why they rely on me. If somebody asked you why you did that, you'd probably look puzzled and say, um, it needed doing. But it didn't just need doing at 10:47 PM It's something about being the one who did it, the one who was needed at that hour.

If this feels uncomfortably familiar, welcome, and this is how this thing tends to work. This is where I wanna unpack things. Next with Claire, she's going to take us into attachment styles.

Claire: So attachment is the relationship you have with your primary caregivers. And a secure attachment means they met your needs and were attuned most of the time.

But if you had an avoidant or a insecure attachment, anxious avoidant, then that will all mean some way that your caregivers maybe weren't so attuned or anxious themselves or didn't really pay that much attention to you. And so that will create. Difficult patterns that you relate to yourself, and work is one of those things where you might try and be trying to secure an attachment with those around you through overworking or through hyper independence.

You know, I don't need anyone. I can just be there for myself. I don't need to rely on anyone if I can be the best in my field or make sure I can provide for myself and my family. So that's something else I think is also worthwhile taking a look at.

Mandy: So what starts off as survival becomes a strategy and that strategy works, which is what makes it so effective.

So it doesn't become a problem until it does. So these individuals, myself included, get promoted. They get rewarded, they get referrals, they get the glass box office. So that hot little motor burning beneath becomes what feels like an edge and. This is the piece I find fascinating because there's people who feel close to burnout and they know, okay, this is unsustainable.

But they've pushed through it before. They've pushed through those feelings of utter exhaustion and scooped outness, and they were fine. Again, they've bounced back again. So there's this thing of like, see, I can handle it in this pushing through, and I'm curious. Of what is actually going on there in the kind of coming to the brink and almost taking pride and we'll get into that later, but almost taking pride of being able to walk that edge without ever really toppling over and then thinking, okay, I just need to pull back a little bit.

Then being able to get back into the game. So dialing it down to 95% or 90% and then a couple days later sort of bouncing back and almost playing chicken with one's body. Like how red flaggy are the red flags and how much can I push myself? So there's a, an interesting, almost adversarial or competitive relationship with one's body.

And this just this thing about pushing through. I can just push through. If I just push through to the Easter holidays, if I just push through to the summer holidays, there's almost like this internal negotiation knowing that you're circling the drain, but just seeing if there's any reserve left in the tank.

So if you, with your clinical hat on, what, what is that? What is going on there?

Claire: I think there's very much an idea that it, well, it won't happen to me, and it can be a real shock. Yes. When the body does then stop, there's a real loss for a lot of people that actually it can happen to anyone, but you don't believe that.

And if your body has always managed to push through and you've always just like teed on the edge. I listen to your episode with Joe Rodriguez and she talks about this, doesn't she? And it was part of her identity. And other people would say, wow, you, you are the one with the pram. You're the one. Running around with your twins in the pram, pushing and like, so we get all these rewards around us, like I said earlier, becomes part of our identity.

And so that dance becomes very familiar and you're kind of almost waiting for the next steps in order to take, you know, you're very familiar steps of kind of pulling back just a little,

Mandy: there's something here about the reinforcement of it, right? Like if I can get right to that edge and then pull back, it's like I've honed this system of knowing just.

How to do that dance, as you say, and. I in hindsight, having done that myself and having spoken to others who have been in this situation who did eventually topple over the edge, there can be this almost arrogance towards the body. Like, I can do this. My body will bend, I'm in charge, and sleepy roads and irritability creeps in, and you're at your kids' football game thinking about businesses or thinking about your to-do list, but that performance is still solid.

So you tell yourself that you're fine. You've always been before, so I think there's that, that piece too around it won't happen to me, which. I think is, is huge. And that's what I mean by that arrogance there.

Claire: Yeah, totally. And I think, um, after a burnout, after clinical burnout where the body's forced a stop, part of the trauma of it is realizing that you're not, you can't keep going forever.

And that you have an end point just like everybody else because you have to let go of that kind of myth of the super hero fallacy. Kind of just, you know, it is not possible.

Mandy: I'm glad you went there because when the body said sending signals and you're identified with being able to go this fast or being identified with this job or being identified with, like you said from Joe's episode of like people reinforcing that by being so ama like, I don't know how you do it.

You're so amazing. So that pattern. Self-destructive pattern in some ways is getting reinforced every time, and it's getting stronger because of the bounce back ability from it. And I think the real need to slow down does not feel available to somebody who's so over-identified with that, because there's, at least for me, there's this belief that if I slow down.

If I down tools or if I take evenings or weekends off, or if I take a month off in the summer or whatever else it might be that I will lose my edge. So there's this conflation of the frenetic activity and the pace. With success. So success always feels like exhaustion. This is what the imprint in my body is that unless I'm entirely depleted, say at the end of a project, I haven't given my all, I've held something back.

So there's this interesting Velcro of like in, in inside someone's mind that, okay, this is what it feels like. Although again, none of this is conscious. I've just spent. Way too much time thinking about this, but this fear of losing one's edge if they slow down, is that something that you see when someone who's had frenetic burnout turns up at your door?

Claire: Yeah. I mean, that is one of those threat based thoughts and our thoughts when we are in our sympathetic threat based mode, become very rigid, very catastrophic, very negative. I'm curious what happens to those thoughts after you've had a two week period of leave. Are they still as intense or do they soft or go somewhere else?

Like what's been your experience of that type of losing edge thought?

Mandy: I think it depends on the person. I can only speak from experience here, but even as somebody who societal is up to that line, even though I know better. It's, it just shows how sticky some of these behaviors are, even when you're hyper aware of them.

But I find like, oh, I'm gonna bring some work on holiday, or I'm gonna just, I'm gonna get through those emails. True, yeah. Or I'm gonna write that chapter, that kind of thing. And then I actually get on holiday, I'm like, oh, hell no. I don't wanna do any of that. So I know that some of those. Seemingly, uh, urgent thoughts.

They have a shelf life. I've learned to see that play through, but I think for somebody who hasn't necessarily hit the wall and gone through that, I'm speculating here, but it can feel like the, that binary thinking that you were talking about, that all or nothing like I'm either entirely on or I'm off, or I'm full throttle or I have to quit my job.

That black and white thinking is something that I definitely see a lot of. Like I can't find a way to shift gears, but this piece around going into that threat based thinking, so under stress, our nervous system narrows its options. Speak to us a little bit about that.

Claire: So it's watching for signs of trouble, and if it's interpreting that there could be a problem, it wants to be able to act quickly.

So the nature of our thinking, yeah, shifts gear as well as our body, as well as being focused on the outcome and the goal. It's also thinking it'll be catastrophic if we don't get there. So. Our estimation of risk and the probability of the bad thing happening goes up, and our estimation of how well we'd cope if it didn't go, just so goes down.

So all of that just creates like the perfect storm for keeping your foot on the gas and keeping going. That fear because of, because I, I just wanna add here, competitiveness is not bad. It's just making sure we're keyed in with the right level of the right motivations and not always just being pushed by the negative motivations.

Also queuing into the positive motivations that might be there as well. I think that's important just to add in there.

Mandy: And I think once we hear what people do when they actually come into your practice and how you work with them, I really wanna go in there to see if it's possible to change. 'cause as I said, this stuff is so, so sticky.

So in real time when someone's experiencing this fear-based thinking like, I can't slow down, or I can't stop, or I can't not work on holiday, or I can't take weekends off, there's almost like a clutchy fury. Panic drivenness to this, that it's, it's like, well, I can't do that. It's almost like a dismissiveness, even when I invite somebody to play with that idea.

So in real time when there's the thought of a project being taken away or. Say, putting something aside temporarily because it's a really busy season. I'm hearing also from your book and from hearing you on other podcasts and stuff, it's like this, this hot little motor fires up very, very quickly and it feels very insistent and it feels very authoritative, and it's not like, at least for me, I was never thinking if I slow down, I'm losing authority, I'm losing status, I'm losing.

Power, and I'm gonna slide into a place where I felt ridiculed, humiliated, powerless, unimportant, not valued. None of that is conscious, but really I just want your take on how fast this thinking moves, how insistent and how compelling it is in real time. Speak to that a bit.

Claire: I mean, yeah, I think once you're caught up in it.

If you don't have any practice mindfulness or aware self-awareness, it can be really hard to unstick yourself and see it as a pattern of thought. And so that is, yeah, a direction of travel. We might go in therapy to support someone, but often when you're in the thick of it, what I say to people, if you.

Struggle with the idea of even pausing for a moment that says to me where you are in your nervous system, that you're in your sympathetic mode. So that is okay. That's the red flag for where you are, that you can't pause for a cup of coffee or to, to stretch in between meetings and it all just feels urgent.

And are, you know, just out of curiosity, are you an emergency service like. That. Is that how your job is set up? Sometimes these questions can help a little bit just to get a tiny bit of wiggle room in there.

Mandy: Good point.

Claire: For some perspective, because you know, maybe they are, but quite often that's not the case.

But we are being made to feel like that is the case because of the way our lives are set up and we're constantly being stimulated and pinged and at with emails and texts. Read me do this. It's, it's so incessant, isn't it?

Mandy: So if we go back to this point about Sarah who stretched, overloaded, her partner notices she's struggling, and her boss, there's also the piece about the boss saying that she's such a safe pair of hands and he knows that she'll handle this. What is that? It, it, you know, it just sounds like a bunch of very nice words, but that's actually quite key into how Sarah will say yes to this in about 30 seconds time.

What's going on there?

Claire: Yeah. I think when. You feel flattered and when you feel like there isn't anyone else who can do this job, it's gonna be really hard to maintain a boundary or, or set a boundary. And I often talk in therapy to clients about this when we're trying to set a boundary, the kind of pushback you might get.

I think some pushback is harder to spot. Like that isn't good. Example of that when you're flattered into thinking. You are not, there's not gonna be anyone else really. That's their problem. If there isn't anyone else, if he's the boss, he should be making sure there's enough staff to man this project or whatever it is that the boss would like.

But the way it's been phrased has made it her problem. And if she's conscientious and wants to do a good job and please, then that's gonna be really hard to separate out and see that as, as. That is what the problem is.

Mandy: That's such a good point. There's so much fear of disappointing others. And I see this all the time, that there's this threat processing that's going on.

So this calculation, what happens if I say no? As opposed to what happens if I say yes, that I'll be even more overloaded? And you know, those things that we take for granted, like our mental health and our relationships and our parenting and all the other stuff. It's this, it's this thinking about what will happen.

If I say no to this, as opposed to what will happen if I say yes to this. So there's the fear of disappointing and disapproval, especially if somebody has this esteemed image of us of how, you know, it's almost like not wanting to let that down. Let them down, even if you know. It might be flattery and it might be a form of manipulation.

I mean, we, I'm sure we've all been there and you know, you can tell the way this person is asked, asking that it feels a bit used car sales mini because they want you to do something, especially if it's kind of a crappy thing that they wanna offload and they know you'll do a good job. But even knowing that doesn't.

Necessarily create space and can I think about it and setting a boundary because there's that pride piece. There's something about like I'm, I'm held in this esteem, which probably harkens back to that status piece that you were talking about. And the belonging. And the being necessary. And the being valued.

But there's also this thing, this pride that I see too, and I'm curious on your take on this, is I can just load more and more and more. On my back because I can hack it. And if I set boundaries and if I say no, I don't wanna be perceived that I can't hack it. So there's this activation of feeling, like you said, the thoughts going all over the place.

There's this flicker of threat. What happens if I say no? There's this protection of the identity. Like, oh, I need to, I need to. Maintain how I'm viewed, even if part of my BS detector is flickering and like this person is totally trying to get me to do something that nobody else wants to touch. But it also gives that hit of validation and but a bang, but a bang. The yes is out of your mouth right away. And there you find yourself saying yes to something and then having those heavy feelings on the train of like, Ugh, I did it again.

Claire: Totally. Yeah.

Mandy: Yeah.

I wanna explore a little bit now about why does knowing so I think both of us in our practices when when somebody says like, I know this is not sustainable. I know in my heart of hearts that I can't. Keep this up, but yet their behavior doesn't change. Why not?

Claire: You can know that something's not working, but not know what the other options are.

So I think that's one piece. I think you need to sometimes rehearse what you're gonna say in front of the mirror and practice the body language. You know, I've done that with people where we do. The Wonder Woman pose up, build your body up and just practice what the words will sound like. Because there's sometimes a misconception being assertive as being rude or aggressive because if you're not used to being assertive, it doesn't feel like the coat that you're used to wearing.

And so it just feels like that's not me. So I You have to practice. Um,

Mandy: yeah. True.

Claire: You als you also have to maybe reframe a little bit. Because what you were saying just there was, it feels like there was a not coping vibe. What if you reframe it as this is modeling to others, maybe more junior staff about good management of time and projects so that I've got the good amount of resources to complete the job in a way that feels good.

I've definitely had that in therapy where people who are more junior said, I didn't know what to say until I saw someone more senior. Setting a boundary, and this is how it sounded. And so, you know, you're doing, you're doing actually something really important there, not just for yourself, but for others as well.

And also just that there are different seasons in work. You know, there might be a season where you're trying to, you've, you've arrived on your new job and you're trying to set it up in a certain way and like. Pausing every so often going, what are, what's the next season of work look like for me? Because I know those old strategies didn't work.

What are my current values now and what is my focus in the next year, for example, going to be? So it's taking stock a little bit and hanging. Then the behaviors that you might need to practice off that piece. That's sometimes something really helpful that we do in therapy.

Mandy: Hmm. So a way in, I never thought about it like this, but the way you've just explained it, a way in to the bigger picture of potential shift might be tactically instead of strategically.

It can be coming in and thinking, I'm just gonna practice what it would sound like to say no, because I think under pressure, here's what I see. Under pressure, we default to our most commonly used strategies. All that thought ricocheting is going on and we're having that, we're, we're, we're in all those things that we've just discussed.

So to do a new pattern is probably not going to happen if the boss asks us to do something or when there's a threat to position, belonging, identity, any of those things. So those tactical. Tweaks of starting to set boundaries, maybe in lower hanging fruit ways, uh, and linking it to this might be helpful.

That can start to be like you're collecting dots, collecting data. Like, oh, there is another way out of this binary black and white way of being where it's either frenetic or. I'm keeled over and you know, I'm laying on the sofa, staring at the wall with my mouth slightly open. So there's there, there's no other options.

But uh, what I'm hearing you say is the tactics for smaller things can be a way of exploring something new.

Claire: Yeah, I mean, in therapy we call it skills training and tactics. I like that word and I think. Like you said, low hanging fruit's important. Spending a bit of time, you know, journaling on, on this or speak with someone close to you about where you'll start trying the boundaries.

Like do it with someone who will be amenable to that. Don't start it with the, the tricky people who might push back and maybe even say to them, I'm doing this work on myself where I recognize this hot little motor is keeping me stuck and I need to start setting boundaries, so I'm gonna set. These boundaries for myself around time, around saying, you know, um, not today, or whatever it is.

So I'm just letting you know that so that when that comes outta my mouth, you don't, you know, fall off your chair in shock because this is something new for me. So, you know, if, if you can have that kind of conversation, not everyone's able to be as open as that. It might just pave the way a little bit before you go and do it.

And the other thing I wanna say is, in therapy we often set up what's called behavioral experiments. Have you come across that idea where you would work out what your prediction is if I do this, and then you go out and you try it and does the prediction come true? And that can be really tricky. 'cause if you think, well, the prediction is, uh, no one will ever give me a project again.

That's, that's feels like a big, um, scary thing to, to do. So often it is helpful to do it in therapy once a little bit. You've done a little bit of the kind of. Contextual setting up to work it all out. But you can set up small behavioral experiments. You know, we might do it like small things like saying, um, no to someone.

It doesn't really make too much difference. And just seeing what happens, like do they change how they behave towards you collecting that data.

Mandy: I do experiments in coaching all the time. It's just that way it doesn't feel so big and all encompassing and like it for somebody who still wants to or feels comfortable in that binary system.

It, it's just, we're gonna try this for the next. Three days or until we speak again, you're gonna experiment with this and you're gonna write down what happens and then the person comes back. Almost elate is like, nobody fired me or nobody cared that much. And because again, lots of those decisions and those behaviors happen, as you said, when the mind is moving super fast and it's scanning for threat and it's using data from the worst possible scenarios.

To make those decisions. Whereas actually if we slow down and we don't commit to changing forever, we just like, okay, three days is doable. I can practice saying no once a day, no one died. It's it's safe. So it's this data collection. Also, another tactical thing, and then we'll get to the strategic piece that I found really, really useful is.

Just delaying a response to things. So that would go back to the Sarah scenario that we were talking about. The words, can I get back to you? Can be a game changer because very often nothing needs to be decided right then and right there. Even if it's, can I get back to you in 10 minutes if it is urgent, or can I sleep on it at night and come back to you tomorrow?

'cause then we can get out of that constriction. That we might be feeling to do the usual thing that we've always done. Yeah. And if we have self-awareness enough to pause in that moment and just to buy ourselves a little buffer of space, that can be so useful to just learn how to get that phrase in your back pocket. Can I come back to you? Do you notice that too?

Claire: I like that and I like, have you heard Brene Brown talk about how she spins her ring three times on her finger as a way of counting to slow down before she responds to something? And I also like adding in the question, what am I saying no to if I say yes to this?

Which is what you were getting at earlier, but we don't frame it like that in the moment. So some like it doesn't need to be spinning a ring, but if you do something practically to kind of break the urge to respond.

Mandy: Does somebody who's got this profile to fall into the frenetic burnout pattern, which is like all or nothing. It's this push and then pull back, push and pull back, and eventually you fall over and it can be surprising. You can be shocked. Does this person need to hit a brick wall to change? What's your experience?

What do you see?

Claire: No, you don't. Usually people will come to therapy for something in their life that's not as they would like, so usually we work from that point. That's their other motivation. That's the reason for change. And, and knowing that this is not gonna be sustainable and someone's listening to this podcast, even if they're not in therapy, they, they, they've turned it on for a reason.

So what's that reason? Why did you. Press play on this. There'll be something that's not quite right. Maybe you are snapping at your kids. Maybe you are feeling like you haven't been to the gym for three months and you can't bend over and touch your toes or like there'll be something. So that's your other, that's your why.

And in therapy. I always support people to think about, you know, the other domains of their life because work is only one quadrant. There are three other quadrants. There's your relationships and social life. There's your hobbies. And health. And if you can think about all of those different areas, how close are you to meeting your values in those other areas?

Because if you've thrown all your eggs into one basket with work, and that's working well, maybe you are hitting your values because you are kind of top of the food chain at work, but you are hitting very few in those other domains then. That will be showing itself in some way. And the problem is you don't have any stress buffers either quite often because if work isn't going well, where do you turn to if you haven't maintained, you know, going to the gym or your relationship because mm-hmm.

So it's important. To think about all four domains and taking that time to do that. A nice exercise that I sometimes do, I dunno if you do anything like this in coaching, is to think about your 80th birthday and who would be there and what would they be thinking and saying about you. There's a really lovely visualization you can guide someone through and that helps you to connect your values and often people will say things that are drawing them back into those other domains.

Mandy: Claire's point about the 80th birthday exercise has really stayed with me. Maybe because a few months ago I was sitting in hospice with my own mother as she was dying and she never made it to her 80th birthday. And there's nothing like sitting besides someone at the end of their life to make a lot of the urgent things feel well, quite ridiculous actually, not meaningless.

'cause work matters and ambition matters, and contribution matters. But the frantic little dramas, the heroic yeses, the just one more thing at 10:47 PM and the private belief that everything will collapse if you're not there to hold it together. Well, sitting in hospice has a way of putting those things under a very different light.

Brai Ware, a former palliative care nurse who wrote the Top Five Regrets of the Dying, famously named one of those regrets as I wish I hadn't worked so hard, and I don't think that means ambition is bad or work doesn't matter, or we should all abandon ship and go and raise goats in Tuscany. Although some days, frankly, I see the appeal and yes, I am that person watching those goat videos on Instagram.

My God, they're adorable. I think it means we need to get much more interested in what our work is costing us while we're still young, healthy, and awake enough to choose differently. So if this episode has landed anywhere, maybe don't make a Grand Life plan. Just notice the next automatic yes. Notice the moment your body knows before your mouth catches up.

Notice what you're afraid might happen if you're no longer the one who always handles it. That's where it starts. If you want more from Claire, and I'm sure you will, you'll find her book and her details in the show

notes. And because this is episode 100 of Enough, the podcast, I'd love you to send this to someone who's brilliant, capable, deeply relied upon, and possibly running hotter than they let on.

Thank you so much for being here, and here's to the next 100.