

Episode 101: Why Relentless Achievement Still Doesn't Feel Like Enough, with Cory Allen

Mandy: Have you ever wanted something so badly, and then finally achieved it, only to find yourself emptying the dishwasher later that evening thinking, “Huh, I thought I’d feel different after achieving this, and, um, I’m still, well, me”? That’s the strange thing that nobody really tells you about achievement. You accomplish the thing, but your internal world barely gets the memo.

You’re still you, overthinking, weirdly checking your phone, and wondering why the relief never fully lands. I think part of the problem is that high achievers quietly start asking achievement to do something it was never designed to do. Not just impress people or open doors, but somehow make the background noise disappear for a minute.

Today, I’m talking with Corey Allen, author, musician, and meditation teacher, about why so many driven people end up trapped in this exhausting loop of striving, arriving, and then immediately emotionally upgrading the requirement. And what surprised me is how quickly this conversation stopped being about achievement and became about the emotional machinery underneath it.

Welcome to Enough, the podcast. I’m your host, Dr. Mandy Leto. This is a show for people whose lives look shiny and successful on the outside, but no matter what they achieve, they never feel quite good enough, and almost no one would know. Here’s my conversation with Corey Allen.

Recently, I had a newsletter reader reach out to me, ‘cause I publish a newsletter every second Sunday, and they reached out, and they wrote me this really heartfelt email that said, “I just read your newsletter, and it was the best newsletter I have ever read.” Not just the best I’ve ever written, but the best newsletter they had ever read.

They said, “It really shifted my thinking on something. Like, it’s truly life-changing.” So I felt warm and fuzzy for about 30 seconds. Then I was deeply curious ‘cause I load these things up in advance, so I didn’t even remember which one it was, and I looked it up. I was like, “Huh, that one. So average.” Was, like, not really any big deal.

So that’s a small example, and now there’s a bigger example. If we go back circa 2002, I was graduating from Cambridge with a PhD, which was kind of a big deal for me ‘cause I grew up in the sticks in northern Ontario, and it was just, like, nobody in my f- a woman in my family had never gone to uni before.

And I remember graduating, and I was on my knees with my hands clasped, and the woman who was speaking Latin to me, which I didn’t understand, and I was like, it was a moment, and then we stood outside on this card table green lawn, drinking prosecco out of these plastic flutes. And then we went to Pizza Express and had a sloppy Giuseppe pizza, and it was all fine.

But the thing is, because of the sunk cost and because I had these outsized expectations of how much work I had done, and I had this big vision I was gonna walk into this amazing job, and I hadn’t got a job yet. So it was kind of like, well, what was it all for? It felt like it took the wind out of the sails of that achievement.

So these are two really different moments with almost a quarter of a century in between, one big, one small. Two moments, but kind of the same feeling, where there’s this Grand Canyon-sized gap between the thing I wanted to feel and the thing I actually ended up feeling at the end. So I’m curious, do you know this one, and do you have a version of this for yourself?

Cory: Oh, yeah. I mean, I've, I've lived through that many, many, many, many times. I used to really not be a good celebrator at all. I'm still not great at it, but I'm much better than I was in terms of even wanting to try to feel the thing that you're talking about. You know, my- I was like, "I'm just doing this, w- and on to the next thing, on to the next thing."

I'm not interested in even feeling good about it. I have a vision and a goal, and if I get wrapped up and enamored in the outcome, then I will... that will start to feed back into my sense of self, my sense of worth." Um, it might also warp my intentions subconsciously, because if I'm doing something to feel good as opposed because it's being driven by purpose, then that gives a, a little crack for the ego to slip in and start making choices that might not be aligned in a way that they would've been, uh, prior to a certain level of success or advancement.

So that's kind of why I, I tried to inoculate myself from feeling good, uh, in the early days. Uh, I've, I've had a lot of experience with that. I mean, I think that if we zoom out a little bit and look at the, the issue, one of those is that it's the hedonic treadmill, of course, is that as we get used to something, you know, a type of pleasure or a type of success, it ceases to be pleasurable because it becomes normalized.

And now we forget what we felt like or we were, you know, five years ago or even a year ago, and we're like, "Well, sure, this isn't great because I'm experiencing this. Now I want the next thing and the next thing." And it kind of no mat- it doesn't really matter how big you get or how successful you are or, um, how much you accomplish, because it always feels neutral to you because it's where you're at in that moment.

That's one phenomenon that is certainly due to it. Another is that, and I kind of touched on this a moment ago, another is that we're, we're often driven extrinsically because you know, and if we grow up, we're told that we should want X, Y, and Z. We see and kind of model ourselves after people who we, we like and who we might want to be like, and that starts to build this story in our minds that we should go after a certain thing or try and become a certain type person.

But it's really often done because we're trying to imitate someone or we're trying to imitate a type of status or a cultural value or reciprocity through what we're doing. And so then, of course, once we get into the flow of working towards one of those things, then what happens is a type of identity fusion, where now what's happened in this narrative is that, let's say it's a form of mimicry.

Oh, this person got a PhD from Cambridge. I'd like to do that because look at them. They look happy and successful. And I'm just using this as example. I'm not by any means trying to put a story in, you know, in terms of, uh, or suggest what your story was, just using it as an example. But then you go, "That looks, that person looks successful."

That's exciting. They're respected by everyone I'm observing. I want to feel that." And so you start doing that, and then, then once you're in the process, now you become the, the how you relate to your own identity shifts to where now you go, "I'm the person who is going to Cambridge. That's who I am now."

I'm going there." And then that identity fusion happens to where now a lot of momentum, a lot of Self, capital S, goes into this whole story of who you're telling your- you yourself are and your identity of like, "I'm going to be a PhD graduate." And that builds up a ton of momentum to where you end up just kind of becoming, that becomes your goal, and you stop examining why it ever happened in the first place until you achieve the thing, and you don't feel the revelation or the excitement that you thought you would because it might not have really been what you actually wanted to do or what felt right from the inside, you know?

So I, I think that can happen in a lot of different ways, and I think it happens to everybody. I think it, it really does.

Mandy: What Corey is describing here reminds me of Luke Burgis' book *Wanting*, which talks about mimetic desire. Translation, we don't always want what we think we want. We've often learned what to want by watching what other people want: the degree, the best-selling book, the outfits, the platform. None of that is wrong, by the way.

Ambition is not the villain, so put your pitchfork down. Burgis makes this useful distinction between thin and thick desires. Thin desires are borrowed. They often come from comparing ourselves. They come from status, rivalry, or proximity to people we think we should be more like. Thick desires, on the other hand, are more rooted.

They're more quietly, well, yours. This gives us another way to understand why achievement can feel weirdly disappointing when we finally get there. Maybe you're not ungrateful or impossible to please. Maybe the disappointment is data. So if you got the thing, maybe you're not feeling fully jazzed because it wasn't really yours to want.

It was something you thought you should want. Or there's this angle. Maybe the fantasy attached to it was never fully realistic. It's an ideal. The clue is in the name. Sometimes we don't just borrow the desire, we borrow the imagined feeling of arrival, too. So here's two inconvenient questions for you to noodle on before we get back to the episode.

When did I decide I wanted this? And who taught me that this was worth wanting? Okay, let's get back to Corey, because what we start exploring next is the strange emotional gap between anticipation, achievement, and why the feeling we expected still somehow doesn't arrive. There's something I call anticipatory disappointment, which is like this preemptive dampening of the excitement as soon as you start going on this journey, and you're all gung ho, ready to go.

And I want you to talk about your book in a second of how that may have played out. But there's this mismatch between how easy it's gonna be, how good it's gonna be, all those things that feel... Again, those outsized feelings at the beginning that can get that turbine of motivation going, and then you sit at the blank page And then it starts happening.

I mean, I don't know how that... I mean, maybe it was easeful and your writing path was candlelit and easy-peasy lemon squeezy the whole way, and you turned it in and it became an instant bestseller. Something tells me that wasn't actually what happened. So make it real for us, this whole idea of there being this gap between the anticipation and the end result, 'cause it is a brilliant book- Oh, thanks and it has done super well. But take us on that journey a little bit to make it real.

Cory: Yeah. Well, thank you, and I love that. What was the phrase you used? Pre- uh, preemptive disappointment? What was it? Preemptive

Mandy: dampening or Preemptive ... anticipatory disappointment. Anticipatory disappointment. I think when it's not even getting to the end and having the sad trombone. Yeah. I think there's a drift that starts to happen whilst you, you know, whilst you're at sea, so to speak, of like, "Oh, this is not what I thought it was gonna be." And it's sort of a, it can be a kind of partially checking out when it doesn't match with how great it was gonna be.

Yes. I mean, your book might be... That may not be a good example of your book, but you see where I'm going with this.

Cory: Totally. I just love that. It's such a great descriptor because, you know, that is the whole process of creativity. It's a p- just a part of the process in my opinion. You know, I, before I was an author, you know, this is, that was, that's my second book that you held up there, Brave New You, and then I actually just finished my third, which will be out later this year.

But before that, uh, 10 years before I even started a podcast, for 10 years I was a music producer and composer, and I also had a record label and I released, you know, a dozen albums and wrote a bunch of music and all this. And so my whole... And before that I was in bands touring as a teenager, you know?

So my whole life has been basically studying Eastern wisdom traditions and music. So that process, I get used to it, or not used to it. I suffered through it and learned from it early on in life. Okay. Um, so that's helpful. Yeah. And so basically with all of those, those records that I put out over the years, especially in my 20s, each one was a total hellacious.

I mean, it's like, it's, and it's exact as you described. What happens is you get an idea for something, and then as you said, I think the wheels of motivation start churning. I love the way you described that. And you get this huge feeling of excitement and rush and momentum, and you start visualizing the possibilities.

And then you go start working on it, and maybe it's going well. Maybe you're, you're crafting something that feels good. But what happens at a certain point is, you know, to make anything good, it, it takes a long time, and whenever that initial surge of energy gets worn down, because just inevitably you're gonna get fatigue while you're working on a project, you're left with the vulnerability of being an artist.

Because that might not have been opened up prior to starting the project. And so inherently, all creativity comes from a place of immense sensitivity. And the deeper we can get into our felt sense of the world and how clearly we see what's arising within us, the more articulate our piece of art's going to be.

And so because of that, we have to open up and really feel things within ourselves and within the world that we normally protect ourselves and guard ourselves from because we don't need to be dilated like that, 'cause we're not receiving to try and form it into the artwork, right? 'Cause that's how we kind of draw, we're drawing in material through our sensitivity, and that generates into the ideas, the feeling, the, the, the passion that then we can use to create the thing.

What happens is you start the, the creative process, the vulnerability opens, kind of the heart of the artist is exposed, and then you run out of the ego energy. The self-enamored is what that, that early energy is. It's like, "I had an idea and it must be great because it's in my mind and I had it." And when that burns off, you're left with just the open, vulnerable artistic heart, and that's whenever the whole carnival kicks into high gear is 'cause you get feelings, you get the full spectrum of emotion.

You get, "This is beautiful. I'm so excited to be working on this." Then you get, "This is terrible. I'm awful. Everyone hates me. This is going to be horrific." You know, it's a real part of the process. Then what happens, of course, is ultimately you then beat yourself down into feeling like you're kind of - it's going to be terrible and it's not gonna work.

And as you keep working on it, you will have a little breakthrough, and the pieces of the project will start to connect, and that then builds a humble form of energy and a humble form of excitement because you've been humbled through the process of big ego idea destroyed by vulnerability. Then you build yourself back up again, and that, that process is what in- ultimately lifts the piece of work into existence.

It gives you enough self-trust and I think it gives you some, some enthusiasm and belief in the project that lets you finish the process. And then of course, there's the, what I call putting it into the wild. There's the releasing it into the world, which is another part of this process too. Um, but it, it's amazing how, you know, that seems to be a pretty universal thing.

And for me, going through working on all the music, I went through that just like a real cra- it's like a, I don't know, it was just so ridiculous. It was like I was like a character in a movie, like the amount of how frustrated and emotion and intense I would get all the time, and it was so serious, you know, this stupid piece of avant-garde music I, uh, I was writing that no one wanted to listen to.

But, you know, it felt so serious. And so by the time that I got to writing my first book in 2019, I was already really mature as a creative person. So for the first book, uh, I have a real, um, or I, I should say I developed a very non-attached approach to creativity over the years because what I realized is that, um, most ideas that we have initially we feel are really important and great, but as I mentioned earlier, they really only feel like that because we had them, you know? And so, uh, later they might not feel that way, and an idea that's more subtle may be better than the one that we felt excited about to g- to begin with. For example, your newsletter. We never know th- that person liked. We never know the perceptual entry point that another human being is going to find into something we create.

Oftentimes, we can only see a very thin margin of those things, and that's a whole nother part of the conversation we can have that's really interesting. And so I'm very quick to cut things. I'm very quick to, to start over, to just kind of m- put stuff in the compost bin, to throw things away. And so for my first book, my,

my story with that was kind of, was kind of a, a weird thing because I've been an avid reader my entire life. Uh, as I said, I created a lot of records, but I never tried to write a book before. I never really tried writing, but it's what I always wanted to do. And I'd basically just out of the blue wrote a - I had a literary agent come to me out of the blue right as I was thinking when I wanted to write a book. I wrote a book proposal without knowing anything about them, without ever reading one, ever seeing one.

I had this idea for a book. Uh, I wrote this book proposal and I thought, "Wow, wouldn't that be amazing if Shambhala or some small kind of imprint, you know, wisdom publisher wanted it?" And then two weeks go by and my agent said "We have meetings with the big five," you know, Simon & Schuster, Penguin Random House, Macmillan, et cetera, Harper.

And I was like, "Oh, wow, okay." And so then I had meetings with all those publishers, and then Penguin made an offer on my book within, like, two weeks or something. And so I, I likened it to basically, like, if you liked music your whole life and you're obsessed with music, and then you made your first attempt at making, like, a crappy demo, and then Capitol Records is like, "Well, here's a deal," you know?

That's kind of what it felt like to me book-wise. And so it was kind of an interesting, uh, whirlwind like that. And so I got really thrown into this process of, like, uh, I didn't... Like, like, my book proposal, the chapters that I wrote was really my first attempt at writing. And so then it was like, "Okay, now write a book."

And so I thought, like, I, I respect the craft of creativity so much that I'm like, "I gotta really put in my reps," because I've spent 10,000 hours composing music or producing music easily, at least, probably 20,000, but I had spent maybe 10 hours writing text. And so I go, "I gotta go in the lab." And so I basically, every single day for five hours a day, I just wrote and wrote and wrote for probably three or four months.

And I would write 2,000, 4,000 words a day of completed material, all knowing that I wasn't gonna use a dang thing. I just respected the craft, and I wanted to decode and understand the process of writing. And, and in that, I began to develop my voice. I figured out how the whole thing worked just from, like, immersing myself. And so then I wrote my first... The manuscript, and I read it. That took about three months, and I was like, "This is terrible." And so I just threw it away and started again.

Mandy: Can I just pause you for a moment and say I'm so glad? This, this sounds terrible to say, but if you would've said you wrote for 10 hours and then you went into the lab, somebody who's been writing since I was a child in my closet, I thought, "This is not a good interview topic for Corey."

It all just worked. Bada bing, bada bang, he got a book deal with the big five after wr- So I, I, I say that in just a little bit, but this feeling of creating something, and you have this idea in your mind, and then you go, you have the motivation, and, and you do the reps. And the thing that you produce, again, there's this Grand Canyon- Grand Canyon-sized gap between what you hope it looks like because you've done the reps-

Mm-hmm and what you actually produce. And I think this is where we're at a fork in the road where we can either kinda tap out because obviously I suck or I'm not good enough or, you know, there's all of those stories on tap that are available to us that are ways in which we take ourselves out of action, which is exactly what we talk about on this podcast.

It takes courage to create from nothing. As you said, to open that aperture of vulnerability and to sit with your own magnificence alongside the inadequacy and somehow make those two things and all the other multitudes of options dance together, and to see that this is not what I expected it to be, and to make a different choice not to tap out.

Because I think this thing about smartly, wildly intelligent, capable people feeling weirdly unsatisfied after achieving things, this gap is a big thing of how they make a choice. I think it also is very hard when you've been really good at something before to suck at something new, because it's like this skill should be immediately transferable. That's why I had that look of relief, that there's something about the respect of being a beginner, and I'm glad you didn't tap out and say, "Oh, this writing thing isn't for me." You obviously persisted.

Cory: Yeah. Yeah, for sure. I'm relentless, like creatively relentless. Good.

Mandy: That's helpful.

Cory: Yeah. Uh, but no, you're, you're totally right, and I think, you know, people that are listening that start to get deflated with their creativity, I would say that projects, they, they really crystallize over time.

And if you were to write, you know, even a poem and read it at that... And when you wrote it, it would feel and, and mean one thing to you. And if you put it in the closet, or I don't know why the closet, but it's or in a drawer or wherever, you put it away, and then a month later you read it, it's gonna feel totally different because a month worth of life has filtered through your mind in that time.

You've changed, your perspective has changed, and now this thing has a different type of resonance that it didn't have before, and it's gonna mean something and feel very different to you. Like for example, I'm like that with videos of myself. When I see a video of myself talking, as it just occurred, I'm like, "I look weird.

I sound, you know, weird. I, I don't like it." But if I see a video of myself from six months ago, I'm like, "Oh, I look great and I sound great," you know? But it always happens, you know? So if you're in that process of... Well, so I'm, uh, I don't look great. I'll say I look acceptable. Um, but if you're in that process of creativity, you know, maybe take a break, and you could work on something else, or you could kind of set it aside and come back to it maybe in a week or a few days and just see if it feels any different, because you may just be too fatigued and too close to it, and giving yourself a little space often clarifies a lot of the things in a project and helps you see it differently.

Because really, like, in your creative journey, anything is possible, right? And, and your project, whatever you're working on, whether it be a book or it's music or a film or whatever, like-

Mandy: Or leadership, which a lot of people listening to. Yeah. Yeah.

Cory: Great. Definitely leadership is a very creative, you know, heavy, uh, role It can be anything, right?

It's a matter of making your, like being curious enough and continually expanding your mind and looking at the thing through different perceptual lenses, like rotate the prism and look at different entry points into it. Everything exists inside of every project. Every possibility exists inside of every music composition or every book. It's up to you to be open enough to see it.

Mandy: Quick pause, because this prism thing Corey just said, I think this might be one of the reasons that achievement can feel so strangely disappointing. So you do the thing, you land the role or publish the piece or launch the business or whatever your version is, and then your brain immediately produces this completely savage internal TripAdvisor review.

Three stars, expected way more, would not emotionally return. And what's fascinating is how quickly the mind turns on the thing it once desperately wanted. Because I don't actually think the disappointment is about the achievement itself. I think it's about the fantasy we quietly attached to it. Not just that it would feel good, but that it would change something fundamental inside.

That it would mean you finally arrive somewhere emotionally. That you feel somehow different, solid, more certain, more enough. And then instead, you achieve the thing, and by 4.30 PM that day, you're still replying to emails in a slightly itchy bra, wondering why everything's not awesome and shiny and different, and yeah, you still have to make dinner.

Which is honestly such a normal experience of achievement, and yet we treat it like evidence that something's gone wrong. And this is where sneaky perfection comes in. Because what we often call, and I'm air quoting here, "high standards" is sometimes just garden variety suffering. This constant self-criticism, this inability to let anything actually land, the moving goalposts five seconds after you get there.

It feels really disciplined and serious and responsible to be so hard on yourself, but sometimes it's just a way of paying emotionally for the gap between the fantasy and the reality. And then Corey goes and says this beautiful thing about rotating the prism, looking at the exact same experience from another angle. Not through the harshest interpretation your nervous system can generate at 2 in the morning, but through curiosity instead. Because maybe the question isn't, why doesn't this feel like enough? Maybe a better

question is, what did I secretly need this achievement to do for me emotionally? Oof. Okay, back to Corey, because this is exactly where the conversation starts opening up next.

I had author Meg Josephson on a couple of weeks ago. She's written this fa- fabulous book, "Are You Mad at Me?" And we were talking about something that she said that really stuck with me. We were talking about why it may not feel safe to feel enough or to feel what you're creating is enough because there's a, there's a crafty mechanism at play.

And what I think she meant by that is if something actually did feel enough, then that hot little motor burning beneath that outsized drive that it can often take for us to jump into something with such gusto, if it felt enough, if, if we were willing to let ourselves off the hook and say, "Well, that's good enough," for somebody who's wired in that way where there's that proving energy or that I must constantly be in action, she, she just brought up this interesting idea that what if it didn't feel safe to feel enough, not just as a creator, but as a person? That that might then remove some of that steam engine that's, that's propelling that outsized drive because there's this connection between being in perpetual motion and the becoming or the achieving or the striving, the, the idea of the, the doing, then what I call nexting. I'm curious what comes up for you as I share her idea.

Cory: Yeah. I, I think that that's not a problem. I think that feeling like enough and losing that, the steam, as you put it, to, to move forward is, uh, can be a good thing because-

Mandy: Okay, say more

Cory: Yeah. Yeah, 'cause what happens is that that steam is... or, or that, that kind of being possessed to create to, to, you know, high- be a high performer, to do all, whatever it is that you're doing, that's a survival response.

That's a fear-based response.

Mandy: Yeah. That's the tightness, right?

Cory: Yeah, exactly. And so it's good if we can lose that. It's good if we can go, you know, "All right, well, this feels like a- enough for me. I can lighten up, and I c- I don't feel like a compulsion to be better and to create this, the next thing or to try to over-perfect something," because that's not a r- that's not where your best work is gonna come from 'Cause if you're not gonna look at any prisms in that place, are you?

Mandy: Yeah, exactly. It's just like this, it's like this, um, obsessive drive as opposed to this, this much more creative loose drive that, uh, that you seem to be describing, that you l- learned. Yeah. So there's a clenchedness, there's a tightness, there's a brittleness to that kind of striving, and maybe that's why it's linked to it never feeling enough.

So I love the, that there's a way to potentially shed this. What she was saying is that I think a lot of this can come from childhood, and if I reflect back, I started to think about where this has come from, 'cause I definitely obs- identify with somebody who's had a lot of that obsessive, brittle, very, uh, you know, being ident- my identity being attached to the outcome, and when it doesn't work out, therefore I'm not enough.

And it just creates this cycle. You jump to the next thing, and guess what? That's not enough either. And you can go into it eyes wide open with that anticipatory disappointment, but you can't stop because the alternative would be to acknowledge I'm actually not enough. All those things that I heard in my chaotic childhood or whatever situation we've come from, then I have to sit with the unpleasant, murky reality.

Like, what if my alcoholic father and the chaotic environment that I grew up, what if it was right that unless I was achieving, I was a nobody? It can be really... Like, none of this is necessarily conscious, but I think after decades of doing deep work, you start to see what that hot little motor of that obsessive drive is.

But seeing it, unless you've done some kind of work to exist with it differently and dance with it differently and hold the prism in different ways and unclench, it's very difficult to let go of that. It's like letting go of a trapeze not knowing that there's a net. And I'm curious if, if this resonates with you, of like moving away from this frenetic, obsessive, brittle drive and how you learned how to shift gears to this place that sounds way more fun.

Cory: Well, you just hit the nail- ... on the head at the end. You know, it's like where does the best creativity or leadership or the, the, the, the best part of you that you can create and be in the world is the part of you that's open, that's having fun, that's playful. Because when you're playful, you're connecting kind of, you're connecting dots, you're kind of joking, you're light, you know, things flowing through you.

Life is flowing through you freely instead of being tense and tight and, and rigid, as you said. And so it's really about, for me I was madly obsessive and like nexting like no other for mo- a, a huge p-portion of my life. And at a certain point, I realized that that wasn't just- it's not the most effective way to do what I wanted to do.

I realized that just after banging my head on the wall and trying to b- like force myself to be better and that nothing was ever enough, nothing's ever enough, that I was like, "Oh yeah, this is, this is wrong." This is kind of like I'm keeping myself from reaching my full potential by being so obsessed with this thing that really is, is incalculable, right?

So if we look at like, "Oh, will, will this book be the best thing I can be? Did I lead this conference at the highest level I possibly could?" Like, we can't know that. There's no real quantifiable way to, to look at a piece of work or something we've done or a way that we've served and say, "Oh, well, this is the best that's- this is the most perfect way it could ever be done."

It's all about impressions and perception and timing and all these different things. The only way that we can do something and feel good and know that it's at like the best of our ability, 'cause it is good to, to drive yourself and to try and, you know, reach higher, it's all does it feel aligned? Does it feel right inside whenever you're doing it or when it's done?

That's the marker for success and I think greatness in my opinion. That's where the best stuff will come from, not from going, "Did it meet all of this criteria or whatever?" And so I think to me, once I just dec-try- decided to lighten up and have fun with what I was doing and to be much less attached to it all, because I'm not afraid of running out of ideas.

I'm not afraid of things not going well because if we look back at the track record of anyone who has been, you know, nexting like crazy, well, did everything that you do, was it all successful? No. Maybe one out of 10 things did well. That's just the math of creativity and success. It's like maybe one out of 10 things will, will do great. Well, you spend all that time beating yourself up and going like, "This isn't enough," and stress and tying yourself in knots and, and conflating your self-worth and all this stuff, and it didn't help. Didn't help, did it? So, so maybe try something else. Try lightening up. Try having fun with it. Try getting curious.

Mandy: How did you do that?

Cory: How?

Mandy: Cause like it sounds like, it sounds so easy when you say it- Yeah ... like obvious, that's the obvious solution. But it wasn't like you woke up one day and you had this realization like, "This ain't working for me, so I'm gonna shift gears." But take us into the mess of that gear shift.

Cory: I'm pretty good at just flipping the like meta programming switches in my brain. Uh, so I will say there's that. For example, at the beginning of the year after drinking like five cups of coffee a day for my entire life, I just decided I would stop drinking coffee and one day I just stopped, and I haven't had any since January 1st or whatever. Um, so stuff like that, it's easy for me to just switch f- uh, flip switches. But yeah, I mean, like I was creating music from 10:00 PM until 5:00 in the morning and then sleeping for an hour or two, and I would like fall asleep while I was in my studio and like would... It was just very unhealthy, completely stressed, like skipping every social engagement possible, isolating, drinking really heavily.

Like just totally in this, this wormhole because of what you said, you know, it's a result from childhood. It's, it's hypervigilance and hyperindependence being formed out of having to take care of yourself and having to kind of prove your own value and worth to the world. It turns into the survival mode panic thing of trying to build something around you that, you know, some type of status that will make you feel valued because others value what you're doing.

Of course, our worth doesn't come from what we do, it comes from who we are as a person, and it's not something we gain, it's something we remember. We have to just remember that we are inherently valuable because we are these rich, you know, universes of being and, you know, each and every one of us. But I was doing that, and one day it started by me going, "You know, um, maybe if I'm exhausted and tired all the time, my mind isn't..."

It's not the most clear while I'm trying to work late at night like that and without sleeping at all. So let me try working during the afternoon instead and not working at night." So then I started like working on things during the night or during the day, and I realized, "Oh, my mind is so much more clear and I have so much more energy.

This is a lot better." And so that was like step one in me realizing like this tension, beating my head against the wall thing wasn't working or it wasn't like optimal. And so as I started working during the day, I th- I was like, "Well, this is good," like I'm getting better results. Things are flowing better.

And I thought, "Well, what else can I... How, how else can I change this? What else can I do?" I thought, "Well, being really tense and like beating myself up about everything is just, it's a real waste of energy." Like, I could be putting all of that energy into the work as opposed to just, like, whipping myself, you know, while I'm working on something.

And I just- kind of it hit me where I was just like, "This is why am I even doing this to begin with? Let me just light-" And, and kind of those logical things I, I shared a moment ago of, like, not everything is gonna work. I can't control how good something is. All I can do is show up to it with presence and try and be as available as possible for the work and put into it what I can in that moment and be open with it.

And I started approaching the work like that as opposed to with the, the ferocity and the tension, and I started getting even much better results. And I realized just k- kind of slowly, the m- the, it's not the less I cared, but the less- the more sincere I was and the less serious I was, the better things got.

So the more I lightened up, but the, the more deeply I came to it from a place of really kind of love and genuine care as opposed to fear and tension, the more that everything started opening up and the more free I became in creativity until over... You know, and this is probably over the course of, like, maybe a year or something whenever this transformation was happening.

And it also, like anything like this, it just gets more and more fine and all the- You know, there's big changes, and the nuances just continue to unfold for years, you know? And so that's how it happened for me. And I, and I think that, you know... So now it's like I'm very, very light and just free and comfortable and non-attached to the work I do, but I've never been more passionate about it, you know?

And it's, it's really just all a state of mind. And I think that people that are listening to this that have trouble with that, like, I would say just try. Try, try and experiment. Try to let yourself off the hook. Try to do things for fun sometimes. Like, if you're a creative person, I used to have, like, project-itis where everything I did had to go towards something.

It was all serious going towards... I'm like just if you're a musician, like, just remember, play for fun sometimes. Just enjoy the process. If you're writing, it's not all gonna be a book. It doesn't everything doesn't have to be a social media post. Just write for the joy of writing and- 'cause that's the real heart of creativity.

That's the real heart of, like, human expression. Even if you're in a leadership position, like, have meetings, have conversations with people that, that you lead for the joy of connecting and for deepening and asking them questions and understanding them more and knowing, like, where are they coming from?

Like, what- how are they seeing the work that they're doing, and what matters to them? That stuff is incredible. You don't have to do that But a good leader does that because you understand it's, it's turning the prism. You're turning the prism of the person and seeing into them more deeply, and then you can lead them better.

It's like find the joy in being human in what you're doing, and that will reveal this whole world of possibility, and then you'll learn through the experience that if you come from a joyful, curious place, not only in creativity but just as a person, that that's where you'll be the most effective because that's the only way that your authentic self can really come through.

You know, authenticity is getting your, the story of your mind, all of your reactions, all of your projections out of the way and letting the fullness of what you are flow through in the moment. It's also why I work very fast creative- like, creatively. It's 'cause it's like be present, move all of that stuff out of the way, and get into the cyclical feedback loop of creativity and decision-making in the present moments 'cause life is flowing into you.

And as the ideas and the work is arising, so are the ... So you, you just, like, w- weave those things together, then the, the work changes, and then the ideas change, and you can just develop something really fast because it's fluid 'cause there's no roadblocks. There's no tension. It's just all flow.

Mandy: So for somebody who thinks this is all fine and good and kind of Hallmark card talk that you're talking about, what would you say to that person? On the one hand, they kinda know you're right, but they don't know how to access it because they're still in that frenetic place.

Cory: I mean, honestly, I probably wouldn't say much to them 'cause I'm not in the business of trying to convince people that are assure of something that, you know, life is another way.

But what I do do is I can talk about certain things, and maybe that person over time might f- reflect on those ideas and then hopefully try them for themselves. I would say that number one, if a person is really tense and they're a senior leader, and they feel, you know, that they don't have time or the energy or that it's not important to do any of the things I was talking about, if they realize that their life is

If they're very stressed, which generally people in those roles like to talk about how stressed they are and how tired they are and how they have too much to do and too much on their plate. They do that because they are coming from that place of survival and scarcity, like we talked about. And so they're looking at their achievement as Their identity and their status is based upon how far they've gone in their role in a way that they can signal messages to other people in their life system that what they're doing is not only really hard but important, is by constantly sharing how difficult it is and how much energy and how overwhelmed they are. So then, um, they can kind of become this heroic victim, as it were, and not have to take responsibility for some of their actions, and it will also give them a reason to bypass, uh, self-care and ultimately feeling and looking inward at that, that tension that we talked about. Uh, because if that g- th- there's a fear that if that gets undone, then since there's been a- this process of identity fusion, that they have mixed this way of being with who they are, if they undo that rope and that knot, then it'll feel like they're undoing themselves, and they'll ha- they'll feel lost and scared, and that's a very scary place.

So people find themselves in those positions and then stay there and are very unhappy for their, their whole lives. So if that person's listening and they, they're saying, "I'm tense, I'm stressed, and I'm exhausted," well, I'm glad that you understand that. You know, that's good. It's good to, to recognize whenever you're burned out and whenever you're exhausted.

I would say, "Would you like to do something about that?" Because you know that you can- you don't have to live that way. If you would like to, to stop feeling so tense and so stressed, then start to look at your environment, look at your daily routines and your habits and what you're doing. Because peace isn't something that is just like a light switch that turns on.

It's a practice. It's something that you do throughout the day to set up your, the, your environment, the way that you operate, the time that you use on certain things. And really, it's instilling a, a bit of spaciousness in your day so that you have time to expand and to let go and to center again and to release some of that tension. That, of course, can look like doing something simple as, like meditating for five or ten minutes in the morning. It doesn't have to be anything, you know, too technical. It can just be simple breathing and relaxing your muscles as you exhale for five minutes with your eyes closed. Um, you can stretch throughout the day.

You can recognize wherever you- your muscles in your shoulders and your face starts getting tense and you're clenching at your desk. N- notice, use your awareness to notice when that happens, and then consciously exhale and relax that tension, realign your shoulders. You know, whenever you're in conversations and you feel like you're getting frustrated or angry, notice the arising feeling of emotions, and instead of allowing that to just go on autopilot, try to breathe through it, relax, and then take control of your intentionality, of like speak and, and shift the, the tone of that conversation, of how you're showing up in that moment to give yourself more spaciousness and to come back to a place of compassion for who you're speaking with and for how you're showing up in that moment as well.

I think that even, like, if someone says, "I'm too busy for all of that," then I would say there are these- If you look for them, there are these little moments throughout the day where humans are just on hold, right? You could be in line waiting for your coffee. You could be at a red light in your car. You could be on the train if you're on the subway, you know, whatever.

There- You could be in an elevator waiting, going up. There are these moments, they're like thirty seconds, that we just are just kind of existing, right, without any obligation. In those moments, that's when you straighten your posture, when you take a couple of deep breaths, when you exhale and release the tension in your shoulders, when you maybe roll your neck around a minute.

Like, just use those little moments throughout the day to start de-stressing the body and deepening your breathing. And simply by doing that, that will invite a level of softness and spaciousness to your life which might not have been there before. And in that space is where all of the other stuff we talked about becomes possible because you've disrupted the mental narrative and the autopilot behavior that has got you locked into this basically fight or flight, and you've been fighting for thirty years, you know?

And it puts a- it disrupts that, that process so that you can actually make new choices, think and reflect a little bit, and make some changes if you'd like.

Mandy: So I'm, I'm exploring the opposite of the obsessive, rigid approach and what might become available if we go through that lifespan of the achievement that in the rigid way turns out to be a damp squib and never delivers at the end and creating an alternative. So for that first phase of the gung ho energy, I'm, I'm gonna write a book, I'm gonna give the best leadership conference, I'm gonna do the best podcast ever, whatever the thing is, what would you say would be an alternative?

Have I nailed most of it there? What would you add?

Cory: You just have to face the fact that, like, realize you're gonna die. Like, really. And That's something that, you know, I f- I've thought about a lot early on 'cause my friends died from overdoses. My father died when I was really, you know, when I was really young.

And so the, you know, that got kicked into me from a young age. And it's like, think about your life. Like, do you wanna... Like, this thing is so short, and we have so little time. Do you wanna spend this moment of your, this, you know, wave of awareness inside this meat spacesuit floating on a rock in the middle of infinity?

Nothing really matters, right? We're just in this alien form out in the middle of the universe, and it's a very short blip of a moment. Do you wanna spend... W- whenever you look outside, there's beautiful nature, there's flowing trees, there's, you know, love, there's babbling brooks, there's beautiful little animals, there's beautiful sunsets, there's joy.

Like, why would you spend- There's carrot cake. There's bunnies and poppies, right?

Mandy: Exactly.

Cory: It's like- Yeah ... why would you spend a moment being tense, and grumpy, and frustrated, and beating yourself up any longer than you have to? This thing is like your life is this momentary almost, like, hallucination, and it's what you...

It's whatever you make it. And you don't have to be any of the things. You don't have to be tense. You don't have to be a high performer. You don't have to do all that stuff. And also, no one cares about what your

status is. No one cares if you look perfect. No- everyone's just thinking about themselves. They're thinking about how it, they can be perfect. You know? No one, no one cares. So just let go. Enjoy the time you have here. And the things that you do, have fun with them and get curious with them. And the curiosity is going to cr- give you so many more ideas and, and open so many more doors for you than any of that big brain frustration trying to ram it through is gonna do.

So that's, that's kind of my message is, is just like, zoom out and let go and have fun.

Mandy: And I suppose that would also be relevant for the middle part, where there's that drift from where I see this going and what actually turns up on the page- Mm-hmm ... or on the stage or on the mic, where there's that, "I thought it was gonna be this thing, and it so doesn't look like that."

And I would guess that a lot of that is also zooming out, probably some self-compassion, probably taking yourself lightly. What would you add to that buffet?

Cory: I think that that moment is really important, too. I, we didn't touch on this earlier. That is actually where th- the good stuff usually happens.

That's where an okay project becomes incredible because we usually, like any- In the gap, you mean? In the gap, yeah. Because any- Okay, yeah ... idea you've had, if you think about even for a book, e- even a, a leadership idea, whatever it is, anything you're working on, the end product is always different from the initial idea.

It just changes as it's being created. That gap is where the change happens. It's where now y- you're wearing the initial idea enough to kind of be inside of it, and then you're feeling all these things, good, bad, otherwise. That's where the thing can shift and turn into something new that you wouldn't have been able to come up with had you not gone through that first part, right? And so that first part of the stage is really just an on-ramp to the real meat of the thing where the actual idea comes alive. So don't squander that, right? You're, like, in, you're in the middle of the nucleus in that moment, and it's not necessarily comfortable sometimes, but it's because it's the unknown, and it's like our...

We're programmed to be, to run towards the familiar and run towards safety. But I heard this, and I actually put it in Brave New Year 'cause I liked it so much. This interview with David Bowie one time where someone asked him, like, "Hey, you're always innovating. Like, every album sounds different. You're always breaking ground.

Like, how do you, how do you, how do you know how to do that?" And he said that whenever he's in the studio, he w- looks for a certain feeling, and he described that by being on the beach and walking out into the ocean just enough to where the water is kind of lifting you up, but your toes are still touching the ground or the, the sand.

You feel a little unsteady, you know, a little sca- a little scared, a little not in control, but you have a toe on the ground. He's like, "That's the feeling I f- need to feel in the studio to know that I'm innovating." And I think that that's a really, really, like, apropos, uh, thing for this stage. This is exactly what we're talking about right here.

Whenever people get into that gap of the thing, that's where, that's why it's scary. That's where the, what the feeling is. But knowing that is how you can turn the prism. You can look and, and start to really get into the depth of, of what you're doing there and create something brilliant.

Mandy: And I'm curious as we, as we draw this to a close, what you'd have to say about the celebration piece of how that could be the shift for people.

Cory: Yeah. I think that, you know, everyone has a different relationship to the end of a project or to the real- the fully realization of it or an achievement or something like that. Some people like to have a huge celebration. Some people don't really care for it as much. Um, I think that the size of kind of how you're celebrating your achievement doesn't really matter as much as the feeling that you have inside. Is giving yourself a moment to, to accept that you've done something well. Because all of the stuff we're talking

about is a denial of s- our self-acceptance of worth. That's the r- root core that's run through this entire conversation. It's just been various layers and things on top of it. But whenever you finish something, you can just sit and go, like, "I did it."

Like, and you don't have to tell anyone. You can just feel it and, like, let yourself accept that you did the thing. And that's really all you need to do, and that's what I do because that's really, it, the, the, the root that's driving everything. And then if you wanna have fun, an excuse to have a party or whatever then by all means, but accept yourself and all- allow yourself to receive the feeling of goodness that you completed something.

Mandy: Mm-hmm.

And maybe finding a way to be in acceptance that if this thing didn't change your circumstances or you still woke up as the same person with all of these complex quirks, and foibles, and feelings about yourself, that's also, if I'm hearing you right, a perfectly normal thing that I think sometimes these outsize expectations on projects or whatever that might look like is somehow this thing is going to rescue me from myself.

Cory: Exactly, yeah. I, I can tell you, you know, it, no, no matter how many followers you have, how much money you have, um, how far your work goes in the world, um, it all just s- feels normal to you. You know? It's... And it, it's never gonna, you know, you're never gonna wake up and be like, "Oh my God, I can't believe," you know?

Mandy: All this, like you said. I'm enough.

Cory: Yeah. Finally. Exactly. Yeah. It is, it, it just doesn't happen, you know? Um, that's like a lot of my friends privately that are, uh, authors as well. We'll have discussions, uh, about, like, it's not worth trying to go for the bestseller lists a lot 'cause after you get on it one time, you know, you...

Everyone thinks that being a New York Times bestseller is gonna be the most amazing thing ever, and then once you get it, you're just like, "All right. Well, what should we eat for dinner?" You know? Like, uh, so it's just focus on... That's what I always think is, like, focus on what you're doing in the work. Do it the best that you can in the most honest way that you can, and everything else will flow around that.

Like, all the stuff that we think we have to do to, to, like, be good, to be enough, that stuff is the, the afterglow of simply focusing on what feels right and doing what your instinct and your intuition is d- is drawing you towards. And if you just focus on that thing and do it as, as honestly as you can- then the other stuff will come and you'll see how that stuff as it comes doesn't really matter.

Mandy: One thing I keep thinking about after this conversation is how many of us have spent big chunks of our lives trying to outrun a feeling that we've never actually stopped long enough to examine and how exhausting and unfun that is. What I loved about my conversation with Corey is that underneath all the talk about achievement and creativity and ambition, there's a quieter invitation hiding in there.

What if your life didn't have to feel quite so clenched and frenzied and that sad trombone sound after achieving something you worked so hard for? All of Corey's details and his books are in the show notes. And if this episode landed somewhere tender for you, send it to someone else whose nervous system could probably use the exhale too.

Thanks for listening.