

Episode 104: It's Not Laziness: Why High Achievers Struggle With Simple Things, with Dr Emma Offord

Emma: She opens my pantry and she just falls silent, and she's just staring at it with her hand on her hip, and then she kind of shakes her head. She wasn't shaming me. She was really, really thoughtful and kind. And she said, "Emma, I'm gonna have to come back to you on this." So she had no solution for my cupboards

Mandy: There's a question I've been sitting with. Why is it that some of us can do genuinely hard, complicated things like leading a team, closing a deal, delivering a presentation to hundreds, maybe thousands of people without batting an eyelid, and then be completely defeated by something that seems dead basic, like chaos in the pantry, or sending an email that you just can't get yourself to send, or my personal favorite, dealing with a bag of salad in your crisper drawer in the refrigerator before it turns into a weeping science experiment?

And here's the part that stings. The more capable you are in one part of your life, the more brutal that inner voice gets about the rest. "So hang on a minute. You can do a talk to 1,000 people without being super nervous, but you can't open your post? What's wrong with you?" If you've ever had that conversation with yourself, this episode is for you. Before we dive in, welcome to Enough, the podcast. If you are the capable one, the one who delivers and holds it together and everybody assumes you're fine, and somewhere underneath there's this quiet hum that continues to say, "Yeah, in spite of all you've achieved, you're still not enough. Keep going," you're in the right place.

I'm your host, Dr. Mandy Leto, and I coach senior leaders who have that hum. To keep it real, I'm still on that journey of figuring it out myself. Every episode, I sit down with high achievers who have lived that relentless pursuit of enough, and they share what it's cost them and how they have found a new way of being.

These conversations are real, raw, and more often than you'd expect, funny, because it turns out that the people who look the most sorted on the outside often have the most relatable stories when we look beneath the shine of success. Today, that person is Dr. Emma Offord, the clinical psychologist and founder of Divergent Lives, a practice that specializes in what she calls high-masking neurodivergence.

Now, to be clear, this is not an episode about ADHD or neurodivergence. Emma's experience and the fact that she does have ADHD just gives us another lens through which to look at this question of why capable people can get flattened by basic things. Everything she shares today applies whether or not you have ADHD or suspect you might. So how can we do the most incredible, complicated, difficult things and then be seemingly defeated by unopened mail or emails or 28 tins of chickpeas in your pantry? What's going on there? Let's find out with Emma.

Emma: Yeah, I've got a lot of thoughts. I think the first thing that really comes to my mind is how I notice people often think of individuals in this kind of binary way. Like you're either brilliant or you're, you know, I don't know, a failure, something like that. These really binary encapsulations of what a person is or what it is to be Emma or Mandy.

And, um, I- we just are much more complex than that and much more dynamic. So we have such a complex neurobiology that is always interacting with the environment, always interacting with our sensory world, other people. There's change happening within us all the time, and so in one situation we might be brilliant, and in another situation we might really, really struggle with what seems to be something very ba-basic, that people consider to be basic.

So, um, I can tell you a bit about some of the thoughts I have about what those components might be.

Mandy: Yes, please. Nerd out with us here. I really wanna go into like-- get into the brain, get into the nervous system. Yeah. We are here for it. We are strapped in.

Emma: Great.

Mandy: So take us there.

Emma: So one of my favorite concepts, I don't know if you've heard of this, is, um, the idea of bore-out. Have you heard of that? Yeah. So bore-out- Yeah, I've,

Mandy: I've done a few episodes on bore-out, actually.

Emma: Oh, okay.

Mandy: So it's, yeah, fascinating.

Emma: It is, isn't it? So bore-out being akin to a f- a kind of burnout, but that's because the task at hand or the situation is so boring that the nervous s- the nervous system just switches off.

It's under stress, and it isn't coping. So to other people, that's a very, very kind of basic situation. It's a basic topic in a meeting, or it's a basic task that should take five minutes. But to that other person, gearing up to engage in that, they know how boring it's gonna be. They have no intrinsic motivation.

There isn't any novelty. It's repetitive. There's no creative spark. And so that bore-out experience starts to happen to their nervous system, and that makes something what on the surface appears very basic, actually a real challenge for people. So that's something that I experience all the time. And certainly when I used to work in the NHS and, um, in other big corporations, when we'd have these meetings about things like health and safety or just, you know, the sort of-- even taking the attendance, would...

I, I would start to switch off almost immediately. And being somebody who can't even nap in the day, like I'm always high energy, but those kind of situations would be like a light switch, and I would physically have to pinch my skin to keep myself-- Like, I'd have to give myself a sensation of pain or a sensation of sharpness or aliveness in order to be able to stay engaged, because I would just be falling asleep, just nodding, or my attention would be completely somewhere else and, like, a whole story would be developing in my head, or I'd disappear somewhere.

So it's like a real phenomena that I don't think is validated in the same way that burnout is validated, but for some of us, it's Like a really, um, intense experience.

Mandy: So I'm hearing this is happening for you with ADHD, but I'm sure that you're also seeing this with people who don't identify with having ADHD.

Mm-hmm. So bore-out can be a thing for all of us.

Emma: Of course it can, and I think this is what's starting to happen is people are realizing that, and, and identifying with current constructs and, and diagnoses such as ADHD because there are components of it that we all share. So some people might identify with all the components of something like ADHD, but others might identify with a select few, but that doesn't mean it's more or less unreal for them because they don't fit the entire ADHD label.

But bore-out can apply to anybody potentially if you have a very interest-based nervous system and a certain thinking style.

Mandy: What does that mean?

Emma: It's where you're very kind of novelty-led. It's not a nervous system that always prioritizes or can engage in something that's important. So you might see that finishing a task is really, really important, like paying a bill or, um, being in that health and safety meeting, but the fact that it's important and that you understand that it's important does not spark your nervous system, does not mobilize your nervous system into a fight energy, so you don't go into sympathetic.

You don't move or shift in terms of initiating or engaging or your mind switching onto that task. An interest-based nervous system needs to have, hold meaning for you as an individual, and it has to bring on that sympathetic energy so that you can mobilize, mobilize and move into the task or the conversation or whatever it is that's in front of you.

Mandy: So I'm wondering what this looks like in real life for a listener, whether or not they identify as having ADHD, is, "I know I have to do this important thing. I know it's gonna suck. It's gonna be boring. It's probably gonna have loads of steps that are gonna turn my eyes into pinwheels. I really don't wanna do the thing, but I must do the thing."

And I know I have a few tasks like that I'm not necessarily proud to say, but keeping it real, like there's some big chunky projects that just feel too big. You know, if you look at your to-do list and it says, "Write book," it's obviously enormous. But even if there's like more boring things like, you know, as you said, paying a bill or following up some kind of administrative snafu that has happened, it just like, I look at it and I just feel like I feel my shoulders drop, and I just feel my face sort of drop, and it feels like I know I have to do this, but I don't really wanna do this, and then I sort of start negotiating with myself.

And I'm, I'm wondering how that would look that somebody who's listening could identify that they're in that place, that this is not just an academic concept.

Emma: Absolutely. I mean, what you're describing to me is how I would describe what happens to me and other people that I've worked with and spoke to.

It is a literal sense of dread, that it's a very physiological experience, like wading through mud or quicksand. A heaviness really sets in, and I would describe that as people's nervous system traveling into the dorsal vagal part where they're almost shutting down, like I described where I was falling asleep in meetings Uh, you know, I wasn't tired.

It was just that I needed to escape, and when you're, when you have to do things, when they're part of life, and we have to pay bills, we have to attend meetings if they're a requirement of our job. There are certain things of life that we have to do or else things start to fall apart. But you, you don't want to, you can't, it's not interesting, it's not meaningful.

So there's something in that, "I can't escape this," that starts to be very stressful to the nervous system and to the body, and that's where you get this sense of dread, that you-- the build-up to engaging in it is often the hardest part. Sometimes doing it, once you're there, you can do it. But gearing yourself-

Mandy: And sometimes it takes, like, five minutes, right?

And you think, "What? Why did I big that up so much?" But it's so interesting, this mechanism that you're talking about, because it becomes another way in which we can be horrible to ourselves and say, "Oh, I'm not enough," and, "I'm so pathetic," and all of that inner dialogue that can be so unhelpful, that can lead to even more procrastination or, "What's the point?" But I think this switch, as you said, into that, is that what's common, in common parlance known as the freeze state?

Emma: Exactly. Yeah, exactly. Okay. And, and over- Lots of sighing, and heaviness and-

Mandy: Yeah tiredness all of a sudden.

Emma: Yeah, and, and almost dissociation, being apart and disembodied, being away mentally and physically from the task, finding it hard to make that connection, being quite fragmented. Even though, again, we're talking about some of the most basic things that take five seconds, five minutes, um, they have this really overwhelming experience, and the very fact that they're an everyday part of life, that they're always there, means that we're constantly encountering this experience.

And so it's like a wall of shame or a wall of awful, we call it, builds up. And so, you know, like you say, the self-criticism or other people criticizing us. "Why haven't you done that, Emma?" You know, people opening envelopes for me and leaving it on my laptop, and I just push it to the side because I still can't do it.

Because I, you know, yes, the envelope's now open. That's a step towards it, but the engagement in it is something that my nervous system is really trying to run away from. So that, there's a lot of shame there, isn't there, with people labeling something as basic. They can do it really quickly. They don't have this experience. These are important things of life. Why aren't you doing it? So yeah, that's part of-- that then becomes part of that response. Like, this is going to feel shameful. I'm gonna have to deal with the shame of not doing this as well.

Mandy: Here's a funny example from my side. I'm gonna ask if you have any funny examples of this, but opening the vegetable drawer in the refrigerator. Maybe I have just coached an incredibly in- you know, amazing CEO on some complex problem, and then I go into my own kitchen and see that there is this, a bag of salad that has turned into a science experiment that I now have to put on yellow rubber gloves and take a pair of tongs and take this thing that is now weeping brown juice out, and I think like, "Oh my God, I can do these brilliant things," but then like the most basic things...

Oh, and the sweet potato experiment that is happening under my kitchen sink in a pa- brown paper bag. I don't even wanna look at it. I know it's there. I don't wanna look at it.

Emma: Yeah.

Mandy: So

Emma: So it stays there longer because- It does ... you don't wanna look at it.

Mandy: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. Until I get- Yeah ... so fed up with myself or until somebody else, so like my husband or the cleaning lady or somebody goes like, "Mm, there's new life form now under the, under the sink in the kitchen."

But it's like this shame that needs to... It's almost like if I go into that freeze that you've just described, then it's like I have to feel so bad about myself that that almost kicks me in the butt to take action. It's almost like needing to hit a bottom to then-- because that's how I'm familiar with getting myself into action, is feeling bad about myself and saying terrible things about myself.

I'm getting much better, but I rem- that used to be a cycle that I would go through a lot. Like avoid, avoid, avoid, procrastinate, hit a rock bottom, get disgusted with myself, and then it's like d- you know, going into a pool where your feet hit the bottom and you push yourself back up again. That propulsion required was often the shame. Does that resonate with you, and do you have a funny moment to share?

Emma: Yeah, it does. It's moving through the nervous system from, um, like I, like I, I can't, and then like I have to, I must. Yeah. Yeah. And so that's the motivation then is like this is, this is unlivable. This, I don't know, vegetable drawer is now probably getting dangerous, so we need to sort this out.

Um, oh, I have so many, so many like that, Mandy. I, I now mainly buy frozen vegetables that are prepared so that I, I'm not throwing things away, um, because the shame of the waste, 'cause I'm also really conscious about the environment. So all of this, you know, inter-interlinks. But yeah, I recently had a declutterer.

I hired a declutterer to come round to my house 'cause I just couldn't engage with my piles of doom, the family's piles of doom. No one else, you know, being a very similar household, this was, you know, more than my chaos. Um, so she comes round, and, um, she's a professional declutterer. She works with ex-military who are ex-experiencing PTSD, you know, in, in places of trauma where they really need support to be organized because of the effects of their trauma.

She works with people who are diagnosed and who consider themselves to be hoarders, right? So really extreme disorganization and chaos in people's lives. She opens my pantry, and she just falls silent, and she's just staring at it with her hand on her hip, and then she kind of shakes her head. She wasn't shaming me.

She was really, really thoughtful and kind. And she said, "Emma, I'm gonna have to come back to you on this." So she had no solution for my cupboards, and I didn't know what she was talking about. And then she says to me, "Do you cook?" And I said, "Yeah, I cook all the time." And she said, "But how do you cope? How do you do it?"

And I didn't really understand because my chaos was my norm, and to her, with fresh eyes, she was completely blown away. She couldn't think about how to organize this. She, she had to come back to me. And then we, we did take a- things out of all the other cupboards, and when we put them back in again, there was 28 cans of chickpeas and about the equivalent of, of tinned tomatoes.

She said, "Why have you got 28 cans of chickpeas?" And I said, "Well, I do this thing where I think I'm being organized. I book two shops a week, and then I just transfer the last shop into the next one, and then I take out what I don't need. But then I forget to do that, and then three days later, the exact same shop comes again, and then I think I'm gonna be on it.

The next week, I do the same thing, and then I've got no time to organize, so I shove e- everything in, and that's how I end up with 28 cans of chickpeas and who knows what else." Just piles and piles of things just getting shoved and shoved and shoved, and then I can't deal with it, can't engage in it. So yeah, uh, it's not that funny, but it's definitely, you know, something that I think a lot of people either relate to or would just find baffling about somebody who, like you say, can do very intense work, very intellectual work, that can really be very creative, but then s- struggle with this kind of experience.

Mandy: That literally happened not long ago, where I had come out of this, this hear me roar meeting that was so profound with this, with this C-suite person, and then I'm like, literally like the comedown is going and taking that bag of salad out of my fridge and feeling like hitting the wall of shame. Like these-- it's, it's a real-- it's a very interesting phenomena.

It's very humbling when that kind of thing can happen.

Emma: Yeah. And, and it's a seeming contradiction, isn't it? Because you've, you've just excelled maybe a few minutes before the f- like, the collapse happens about something else, and you're constantly navigating these- You know, it's not like this perfect picture of like success all day long.

It's just a really spiky experience being pulled all over the place and not being able to rest long enough maybe in this kind of celebration of yourself because you've then got the rotting vegetable or the- ... chickpeas that you can't find even though you've got 28 cans of them. But-

Mandy: So this is clearly not an issue of laziness.

This being able to do incredible things, but then having the weeping bag of salad or the new life forms with tentacles coming out from under your s- under your kitchen sink or whatever that might be for you. It's not laziness. It's not lack of discipline. What is this really about, Emma?

Emma: Uh, there's a lot of things in the mix.

I would say that, um, I mean, probably I talk more from a neurodivergent, um, perspective. Um, but I would say that it's neurobiology in the wrong environment. I don't think any of us are designed to do all of these things all of the time. So we, we have skills and talents and abilities in many areas. That doesn't mean it translates to every area of our life.

It's a very kind of ableist, um, perspective, I would say, where people think, "If you're good at this, you should be good at everything." So, you know, we kind of carry that, and then I think it's often met with the shame, the relational trauma of ... that, that we also internalize that if we're good at this, if we're capable of that, if we can achieve this, then of course we should be able to manage the vegetable drawer or pay the bills on time.

So we hold that expectation, and that's from a very, very young age, isn't it? That we are told that these basic things are things that should come easy to us, especially if you can excel over here, then there's no reason why you should be finding the basic things so difficult. So I think we carry a lot of shame, and then that whole spiral develops of avoidance, of nervous system responses and, and that's not laziness, that's learning. That's our nervous system developmentally learning over time to respond and, and to scan the environment in that way.

Mandy: I'm really curious if we widen this out a little bit to a, a term that I've seen you using and referring to, and make a link for me there if there is one. You talk about neurohybridity. What do you mean by that?

Emma: So this is, this, these are my ideas around trying to, um, reimagine the medical model, how we think about mental health and how we classify people as sort of mentally well or ordered, and people as mentally unwell and disordered. And it, I mean, that's a very complex area. But when I talk about neurohybridity, I want us to be thinking more about our neurodiversity and what the components of that are.

So, you know, you used the term earlier, you asked me about laziness, like that's starting to shame and to judge people. And I think mental health judges people as different, disordered, in need of fixing, in need of medicating. A whole kind of extreme language comes, and judgment and assumption about those people come from this medical model.

So for me, neurohybridity is about really accepting and embracing and reimaging a different way of looking at how we navigate the world, how we respond to the world, and taking components like our strengths, our challenges, our things like impulsivity, the way we process information, our sensory profile, just taking these different neurobiological components and see how they interact and working out what do they need, where do they thrive, where do they struggle, um, and what does that person need in terms of scaffolding in some areas, and then actually support and trust and compassion and acceptance to be this creative thinker, to think outside the box

Mandy: If we were playing a round of seeing ourselves as, as here's some of my strengths, here's some of my challenges, here's where I'm okay, here's where I feel like I need some scaffolding, coming back to those component parts that you were talking about.

What came to mind for me is like almost like the component parts of a recipe or the component parts of like mixing a cocktail or something together where it's so much more fun in a way to, and, and we can avoid bore out in that way in this conversation, to think about like there's certain component parts to me, and maybe some of those are ones that I want to work on.

I don't think they need to be fixed, but more like applying compassion to them. I'm sure you have those parts too. But shall we play a little bit with like inviting listeners and we'll play with ourself... Pl- play with ourselves, that sounds wrong. We will play, we'll play ourselves in thinking what, what might some of those component parts be, like the- Yeah, the heroic things and the challenges. So I think one of the, one of the things that I notice about myself is like I really love getting stuff done. I get a buzz out of- Mm-hmm ... efficiency, crossing things off of the list, like that is a real dopamine thing for me. Mm-hmm. So I even put things on my lists that I've already done- just for the pleasure of crossing them out and feeling like that yes, yeah, yes, that feeling- Yeah ... of having achieved this thing. So I would say that's definitely gonna go into my cocktail of one of the key components of, I think, what makes me, me. Then there's also the part, there's that go-getter part, but then there's also the part that I'm in a much more problematic, tension-filled relationship with, ch- is the fonder part, that I want, I wanna be liked, I wanna get it right, I don't wanna upset people, I don't wanna disappoint people.

And that's a work in progress because I'm aware of that happening, and I wanna give that... You know, I wanna honor that that served a purpose in my development from childhood. But now as a 54-year-old woman, I d- I feel like it's, it's cramping my style And it's still a part of my current cocktail, but I'm evolving that that is less and less and less, I hope.

That's, that's the objective. Um, there's also like a, a real kind of impatient, frustrated part, that if things don't work quickly or if, if-- I, I can become quite frustrated with others and also with myself. So, and we'll talk later about what actual cocktail ingredients those are and, you know, what I'm gonna call that cocktail, but those are some of the component parts if we're talking about sort of pulling some of our brilliance and some of the other maybe not so brilliant things.

But that sounds judgmental. I don't mean to judge it, if we just look at it. What about you?

Emma: So I'd probably share some of the things coming to my mind are, um, yeah, within that mix. So as, as chaotic as I can be and disorganized, disorganized as I can be, you will find my wardrobe color-coordinated, because that helps me just really pick something out very quickly. And a bit like your to-do list where you're checking things off, I just like to look at the rainbow of colors in order, 'cause I'm a very visual person, a very

sensory, visio- visually sensitive. So that gives me like a really calming effect. So, you know, definitely some routine and organization really holds me and holds my nervous system really well.

At the same time, I would have loads of impulsivity in there. I'm a very impulsive, making a decision off the hoof, just not even, not even thinking, feeling a decision actually in my body and emotionally and psychologically connecting on that kind of empathic or sensory level, making a decision that way. I'd say there's also my Labrador energy, which has served me really well, but sometimes people are just like- I love this so much. Yeah. "That Labrador needs some training." Like, there's a lot of intensity there. But I have-- I'm learning to love that Labrador energy because it's a very vulnerable energy, and it's a very embodied energy.

Um, and I think it links to that feeling-led, very embodied, grounded deci- decision making that isn't always an engineering mind or an ABC way of approaching things. It is very energetic. Um, but at the same time, it can be shamed a lot by other people, or I make the decision the wrong decision or too quick or too impulsively.

So, you know, I have to learn to honor and respect that and be really compassionate for when it doesn't really work out, and then that's okay. It's okay if it doesn't work out every single time. Um, and definitely for me- I cannot be in a box. I said this recently to somebody who invited me on a project, and I said, "I'm willing to be in that project."

Do not ask me to be in a box. If, if you're asking me to go down a status quo route or to deviate from, you know, these developing and really, um, safe beliefs that I am, y- you know, bringing into my life right now and into my work, then I can't do it." Like, I can't mask anymore, Mandy. I can't mask to the level that I did before.

Can't do the people-pleasing, the fawning. I want people to be looked after, but I can't put myself back in that box anymore. So definitely liberation and being outside the box would be in my, my mix as well.

Mandy: Take us into your process a little bit. Like, if we're looking at these component parts that we're gonna mix into a cocktail a little bit later, like if we played with this part that's impulsive or if we played with these other parts that you were talking about, how do you actually do something with that?

So if there's somebody who's identifying as, "Yes, I'm impulsive. Yes, my vegetables rot. Yes, I, you know, I, bills don't get paid. Yes, I look at my emails and I feel completely overwhelmed," is it that they're sort of identifying those, those places where they go into bore out or they go into freeze? Like, let's create a process around this.

Emma: Mm-hmm. I think you can really go at this through a nervous system approach. You can think about You know, what, what allows my whole system to be in more of a parasympathetic place, which means safe, engaged, creative, um, kind of socially available, and what are the conditions of that, that, you know, really allow me to flourish the best that I can be?

And then you can think about what are the conditions that pull me into fight-flight, the more sympathetic, but more of a, "I wanna get away, I feel under threat," rather than, "I'm high energy," fight-flight, 'cause that can be a very motivating, mobilizing place. It can be very creative too. But if it's the kind where you want to escape or you are in fight because it feels threatening, then you learn about what are those conditions.

And then of course there's what shuts me down, what, what makes me feel hopeless, like I can't possibly do these things. And I think it really is accepting that ladder of shift and change dynamically within your body. And what really helped me was to learn about these kind of hybrid traits. So when I started to understand my sensory system and where I was sensitive, where I needed more input, and that would help regulate my nervous system or dysregulate it, that was like the most useful information in terms of trying to understand why I travel up and down those different nervous system states.

Other things like how I process information. I'm a skip thinker. I'm not, I'm not a engineering mind. I don't usually work in a linear way. It's a non-linear way. So I know in anticipation of linear tasks or those kind of conversations, that I'm gonna struggle. And so I'm compassionate to myself before I've even entered into that situation 'cause I know that it's gonna do things to my nervous system that's gonna make it really challenging for me.

So that in-depth knowledge about your traits and your wiring and how they interact with the world around you, I think helps you understand your shifting states and therefore helps you bring compassion. And then rather than kind of sear- searching endlessly and in the wrong places for what you need, you're actually looking in the right places, and then you get the right support, and you find those actual things that are supportive to your neurobiology.

But if you're just following what everyone expects of you, then you're probably looking in the wrong place, and you're just gonna be on this endless cycle of failing to find the solution or to meet the expectations.

Mandy: I've lost count of the conversations that start with someone brilliant, someone running teams or doing complex surgeries or signing off budgets bigger than the GDP of many small islands, lowering their voice and confessing like it's something scandalous. One of those conversations might sound like this, "I haven't filed my expenses since March.

It's thousands of dollars of my own money. I just can't. I can't get to it. I keep telling myself I'm gonna do it, then I pull up the portal and I feel so overwhelmed I just end up picking off my gel manicure, reading a couple emails, and then closing my laptop again." Or there's confessions about the two thousand four hundred and seventeen unread emails, and this person, he knows the exact number because it's right there in the little red badge judging him every time he picks up his phone.

Or the conversations about managing an entire complex reorg, followed by the confession that she hasn't booked a dentist appointment, oh, roughly since the Obama administration. It's more like, "I just can't get myself to do it. I know I should. It's not that I don't have the time, it's just I just can't get myself to do it."

What strikes me every time is the shame around the I just can't face it. The secret corrosive if anyone knew shame attached to it. Because these are people who've just objectively done hard things and now they're frozen in front of something objectively small, calling themselves pathetic in language they would never, never use on another human being.

There's often this contrast. I do this incredible stuff and then I have this shameful secret of not being able to get the basics done. And that shame weighs a ton. So let's make it practical. Picture that person, maybe picture yourself, staring down one of those tasks. The boring, important one. Maybe it's booking the mammogram that was due last summer or replacing the light fixture in the downstairs hall.

That task that sends you straight into the freeze. What do you actually do? Let's find out.

Emma: So if they know that that kind of a task is going to have that effect on them, then they can think about how do I work with my nervous system? Like how, what does, what does my nervous system need to come out of freeze?

So for me, that would probably be body doubling. It would probably be somebody holding me accountable in a very compassionate way. Can I sit with you and help you do this or at least initiate it and then I can get on with it? It might be something like a reward at the end for me, like some kind of sensory seeking activity or something that I can engage in once I've done it.

It can also be about breaking something down. Like you don't have to do the whole thing at once. What feels doable might be two minutes of completing it. And then you, you shift. So you don't stay in that dorsal area for a long time or a sympathetic state. You move into something that brings about your kind of more creative, more socially engaged, more parasympathetic state.

And then you go back. So you are not spending too much time in a place of hopelessness or freeze or shutdown. You are kind of dipping into it, then coming back out of it. So I think people will have to find, you know, very creative ways. And, and I think part of that is also about accepting that you might not do it in the way that traditionally people think you should is to sit down and complete the task and then move on to the next one.

Might not do it like that. You might need a lot of support and accommodations along the way to make that happen. And that that is also okay.

Mandy: Which brings us to the part of Emma's story, which I wanna share with you now, with her blessing, briefly and carefully, because it deserves more than a summary, and you need it for what comes next.

Emma lost her father when she was 12, and she was the one who found him on her birthday. She has spoken to me about how, in the way a 12-year-old's mind works, it felt like her fault that she hadn't got there in time. Nobody blamed her, but she blamed herself, and shame has this way of quietly moving in. Now, I'm a coach, not a psychologist, and I'm not gonna draw a tidy straight line from anyone's childhood loss to a pantry full of chickpeas or, or anything else.

Life isn't that neat, and neither are we. But I'll tell you what I have noticed in myself and during nearly 20 years of sitting with brilliant, highly capable people. Shame that arrives early often stops being about the thing that caused it, and instead it can become the voice, the familiar narrator, so that decades later, maybe it's not entirely about the 28 cans of chickpeas or the envelope somebody opened and left on your desk, nudge, nudge, wink, wink.

Maybe each small undone thing gets handed to that same old voice, which just says, "See? Not good enough." And often, when people are in the coaching sessions, they talk about secretly feeling bad. Somehow they're gonna get in trouble. They're so bad. And here's the uncomfortable part we named earlier: shame works.

Remember the pool analogy, hitting the bottom to push back up? Well, for a lot of us, feeling terrible, feeling ashamed, has been a reliable way to get moving. Familiar, effective, and so darn expensive. What moves me about Emma's story is what happened when she finally learned something true about herself.

It didn't erase anything, but it began to change the relationship that she has with herself, and when that relationship changes, shame doesn't have to be the key that starts the engine anymore. I want you to have some actions to try in every episode, but you know us. We go deeper here. So I asked Emma, when she discovered that she had ADHD, was that a turning point?

Emma: Yeah. It, it was unbelievable for me to have that discovery, not for the label necessarily itself, but the understanding that it brought, so I could think more about my impulsivity and hyperactivity, my Labrador energy, with a completely different perspective. It wasn't shame-led anymore. It was more how I was designed. And, and what was really beautiful for me at one point as well was when, um- I could really link it to my dad, 'cause that's something else that I lost is that he had very similar neurobiological traits to me, and I really lost my, like, my wing man, the person who was like, "I get you." So, you know, he was high energy.

He would take risks. He, you know, um, was highly creative, very successful, and very challenged in other areas. So I really felt like a, like a kind of golden thread back to him through this neurobiology. Like, he's intergenerationally there with me through our traits, and that was a very, you know, lovely experience for me.

Um, and it was also in finding a community, Mandy, where other people were also letting go of shame and embracing difference and seeing how they were being shamed rather than are shameful. And I think in that community, because I'd spent so much time isolated and lost or never had an established community, although I've had lots of friends, um, I was also very good at kind of socializing and masking and kind of being the, you know, the first person to talk, the confident one, and all the rest of it.

But that keeps you at a distance from people because you're not always sharing your emotion or what you're truly feeling. So it was quite humbling to be part of a community where I could really safely connect. I didn't have to keep performing in a particular way. So that really helped with the shame, 'cause I could let it, those feelings in, and they weren't necessarily shameful anymore.

They were something different.

Mandy: I'm hearing that some solutions that worked for you were definitely getting into a community where you felt like you could be open and talk about these things, and also shifting the relationship that you had with yourself. On the back of your, your discovering the ADHD, for example.

Is there anything else that comes to mind that would be helpful for somebody for whom this resonates?

Emma: How I describe it is it allowed me to grow full size. It allowed me to reach into parts that I had exiled. And I think once you become full size, shrinking's not an option again. So whereas shrinking, fitting the box was my relational strategy for a long time, and it worked, which is, you know, the sad part about it, is that this, this kind of masking, people-pleasing, appeasing, suppression, it works.

But when I grew full size, um, with this knowledge and just, you know, f- being more embodied with myself, that I couldn't turn back. And it was like a, I call it a positive disintegration. It was painful. I had to grieve. I had to see maybe some of the choices I made could've been different choices and less of a cost to me.

Um, but, you know, it, the truth began to grow from that so much more, and not everybody likes my full-size self because you know, they would prefer that I sometimes people-appeased a bit more often than again.

Mandy: They prefer the bonsai tree version, right?

Emma: Yeah. It's almost like when people say, "Well, your therapy did nothing for me."

Like, you've become like this full-size person who can now advocate and, you know, somebody very close to me literally said to me, "You've changed," in that tone. I was like, "Yes, I have," and, you know, take it or leave it is kind of how I felt. Rather than that would've shamed me before. Ooh. I would've been like, "What have I done wrong?"

I'm being too loud. I'm being too much. I'm thinking too of, of myself too much." I don't think like that anymore. It's this disintegration of, you know, this previous way of being that is so liberating for me

Mandy: Are there component parts to this delicious cocktail, which is a new entry on the menu, the Positive Disintegration Cocktail? Like, what are some of the ingredients in that should someone wanna mix one of those up with a little swizzle stick?

Emma: I describe it as the, the disintegration can feel a bit scary. It's like your... what you knew before disintegrates, and so you're a bit like, "Well, what am I made of? What is this world made of?"

Where, where do I belong? Where do I go now?" Lots of things that you held onto, whether they were helpful or not, they were known and familiar, and so they were what you relied on. They were your survival responses. They are, you know, patterns that just keep repeating in your life. When that starts to go away, to dis- disintegrate, you've got to rebuild parts of your life, your identity, your relationships, maybe your career.

All kinds of things are rebuilt. You still have foundations, but a lot of what you relied on before is, is no longer there as, you know, what you think you need or what you think you should be doing or relying on. And so that's the positive part, is that you are kind of recreating your life based on this new understanding, this new connection to yourself.

Mandy: So i- is it a feeling? Like, I was just talking about this with a friend of, uh, who had gone through a relationship breakup, and even thinking of my own story when I was in the recovery from burnout, and this friend and I going on our own parallel journeys. We're just like, "I just want it to go back to the way it was."

Like, I just want it to go to the old me, and this friend is like, "I just want it to be back in this relationship and just go to back to the old me." But then all of a sudden, one random Tuesday where you're, you know, going through your usual routine, it's like, "Actually I don't know if I do want that anymore."

And so for me, as I'm trying to re- relate to what you're saying, like for me, that knowing was a feeling. Like, this no longer feels right. I thought I wanted this. I thought I identified in this way, but actually, I don't think I do. I don't know where I fit yet, but I know it's not that.

Emma: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Mandy: That resonates?

Emma: It really does, and, you know, mine was also very physical. Like, I would get a racing heart rate. It was the cortisol and adrenaline of... And, and, and my skip-thinking mind would come into play, and everything felt too fast. Like, that's what the disintegration felt like. All of this is happening too fast.

This, like, new information, this new way of looking at everything, yet it's happening, and I can't stop it. But, you know, wanting to kind of claw back and maybe cling to not knowing can be really appealing. It's kind of that avoidant. You know, it's... That was part of the suppression. That was part of the, you know- Yeah

not being, uh, you know, feeling those feelings. So being really in the deep end with it was physically felt like a threat even though I knew it wasn't. But my, my body was acting like this is a threat. This, like knowing, being connected, understanding yourself, letting go of these things felt like a threat, which wasn't in the end, but at the time, really deeply uncomfortable.

Mandy: Mm-hmm. Yeah, so even in this cocktail, there's a lot of... There's a h- there's a big splash of discomfort, and I'm hearing a little, you know, a little dash of discombobulation as well. But there's, like, a little citrus twist of like, "Hmm, I want something fresh and different." Hmm. And what keeps you going when there's, like, these, these big gushes of discombobulation and uncertainty is there is also some other component there that might feel, I don't know, effervescent or, like, exciting or something...

I don't know if this is where we drop in the maraschino cherry or whatever. But there's, there is something there that's keeping you going forward.

Emma: There is, and I can only describe it as almost like a knowing. You know? More of an intuition that there is going to be something the other side of this, and it feels like it's guiding me, and it felt like it was guiding me.

I know... And now I look back, I can see there have been other positive disintegrations in my life. But this felt This felt probably the biggest and the most physical, but there's always been like an I, I have to feeling. Like, I, I can't turn back now. I've got this feeling now I've got this intuition. I see something ahead.

I don't quite know exactly where this is taking me or exactly what this is, but I need to go there. So some kind of, yeah, embodied knowing.

Mandy: We spent some time offline having a little bit of fun with putting together, uh, some potential cocktails of how we can see ourselves as mixes of things rather than being in a box. I don't wanna be in a box either. I'd rather be in a long-stem glass- Absolutely ... with a mint leaf. One of the drinks on the menu, if this resonates with you, dear listener, is the Imposter Fizz, which is 50% over-prepared perfectionism as one ingredient, 30% fear of being found out, a 15% charm and sparkle on the surface, a dash of champagne bubbles to mask the panic, and, um, you know, it's a, it's a cocktail that looks glamorous but tastes a bit like anxiety.

You want me to share mine?

Emma: Definitely.

Mandy: Okay. I'm the Mascarita, which is 40% polished exterior, I'm always fine, thanks, um, 30% hidden exhaustion, 20% striving to prove yourself, and, um, 10% silent shame rimmed with salt. Goes down easy, leaves a hangover of burnout.

And, uh, I mean, we are holding this lightly. This is a bit tongue in cheek, so yeah. Some, some things are too important to be taken too seriously. What's your cocktail, Emma?

Emma: Well, mine's the Hybrid Highball.

Mandy: Ooh. Yeah. Tell us more.

Emma: So that's 30% ADHD fizz with it. There's my- ... impulsivity and my sparkle. 30% OCD tonic.

It's needed for the order and the routine. I've got 20% creative grenadine swirl, visionary and arty. Yep. And then 20% procrastination ice cubes, still not done. Um, so it's chaotic, layered, and weirdly delicious.

Mandy: Oh my God, I love that so much. I wanna bring the c- the conversation to a close. Uh, I don't want to, actually.

I really don't wanna bring this conversation to a close. But for someone who's listening right now, who feels that their cocktail has a lot of components of brilliance to it-

Emma: Mm-hmm ...

Mandy: but they're utterly challenged by the basics, so they, they've got a big dash- Mm ... of, like, basics fail- Mm ... whatever that looks like for them.

Maybe they feel like they never truly fit. Maybe they're constantly shoulding on themselves-

Emma: Mm-hmm ...

Mandy: and feeling a lot of shame in private. What's one reframe or one practice that you could leave them with?

Emma: I think it's what we've just talked about, that their brilliance is in the mix, that they are a cocktail, and when you're trying to fix or put yourself in a box, then you're limiting yourself.

You're not growing full size. So, you know, I think it is a really beautiful concept to, you know, see all of these different mixes that are a part of who you are, your hybridity, and to learn to trust that Learn to trust what's inside of you, and to find people on the outside who will see that too, who will embrace all your different parts and not expect you to conform to one way of being.

That, you know, your enoughness is, that's where it lives, really, is in, in the mix

Mandy: We started with a question, how can you be genuinely brilliant at really hard things and yet be brought to your knees by a bag of salad weeping brown juice? Emma gave us answers. It's not laziness. It's a nervous system that runs on interest, not importance. And there are practical ways through scaffolding, body doubling, chunking it down, asking for what you really need, and building that support system instead of white-knuckling it alone and beating yourself up with that inner critic.

Steal all of Emma's tricks. They work. I've been experimenting with them. But here's the deeper invitation of this episode, and I want to say it plainly again. Get to know yourself properly, not the shiny LinkedIn version, but the actual wiring, because you are not one thing. You're a cocktail. Maybe there's a bit of sparkle, a bit of dash of chaos, some procrastination ice cubes rattling around in there.

I'm a massive fan of therapy, coaching, assessments. I hope you also get your fix from this podcast. And sidebar, I'm working on a book too, which is out next autumn. Expecting yourself to be excellent at all things at all times is not a standard. It's a trap. So that's the expectation that might change.

It's not about lowering your expectations. Thank you, Dr. Tara Porter from the previous episode. It's about changing them. And if shame has been your starter motor for all these decades, maybe feeling terrible thinking you're bad is a familiar way that you've always gotten yourself bounced back off the bottom of the proverbial pool.

I'm inviting you to consider that there's another kinder way that's not soft and fluffy, meaning you're never going to achieve things anymore and you're going to be relegated to watching afternoon TV in track pants. No, it's just less expensive on you. You're allowed to be brilliant and have 28 cans of chickpeas in your pantry.

And honestly, that might be the whole point of this conversation. Your enoughness lies in the mix. If this episode landed, send it to the most capable person you know, because chances are their vegetable drawer has secrets too. I'm Dr. Mandy Leto, and this is Enough. See you next time.