

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Welcome to She Said, She Said podcast. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I've spent my entire career as an advocate, connector, problem-solver, and master communicator at the highest levels of government and corporate America. With She Said, She Said podcast, I'm sharing what I've learned that's helped me and I'm drawing additional perspective from a broad range of women who are creating amazing opportunities for themselves and others. Their stories hold important advice and perspective about common challenges and the best ways to tackle them. I know your time is precious, but stick around, I think you'll find this investment in you well worth it.

Hi friend, I was just sitting here a few minutes ago and staring at an absolutely crazy long to-do list between gift-giving and trying to come up with creative ways to really re-imagine holiday gatherings that will, for the most part, at least from my family, occur via Zoom or FaceTime. My to-do list, literally runneth over. I suspect you can relate. It's that wonderful, magical time of the year to be sure, but it can also bring added stress, including stress around expectations, our own and others. COVID and different approaches to managing all of this just really adds more fuel to that fire.

As I was thinking about all of this this morning, I was reminded of a conversation that I had back in March, just as we were beginning to get our heads around the idea of a pandemic and working and schooling from home. I was joined back in March by Laura Vanderkam, who is a time management and productivity expert. She's also the author of several books on those topics. Now I've included a list of her books and some other great resources in the show notes for this episode, episode 131, perhaps most notable though is that Laura is the mother of five children that span ages from infant to teen.

So to say she knows quite a bit about time management and getting things done is an understatement. I've pulled my favorite excerpts from our earlier conversation in episode 93, including a tip related to happiness and mindset. Her advice is relevant whether you're enduring, a pandemic, or just trying to get through a regular week. Laura's perspective will remind you of the importance of self compassion, but also practical reality, which I absolutely love. And because I know how busy you are right now, this episode, like all of my She Said, She Said podcast episodes, is tailor made for listening while you're on the go while you wrap gifts or run those last minute errands, or while you just take a few moments of quiet for yourself. Even as busy as we all are, that is incredibly important. Here's my encore conversation with Laura Vanderkam.

You are the mother of five. I'd love to know how you're doing.

Laura Vanderkam:

Well we are hanging in there. The kids have been pretty good sports about all this disruption in their lives. The kids have adjusted to doing some distance learning and some more self-directed assignments. They've been playing a lot together. I guess that's the upside of having five kids. There's always somebody else around. So it's I think been tougher for some people who have one kid, because then there's no play dates and that's a lot harder. So our house is a bit of a constant play date for better or for worse.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Your kids range in age from three months to-

Laura Vanderkam:

12 years. So they're 12, 10, eight, five, and a baby.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

We are in such unusual times to state the obvious.

Laura Vanderkam:

Well certainly none of this situation is ideal and the good news is it won't last forever. So I think while you do need to pace yourself, on the other hand, it's okay to do things now that you might not do longterm because part of this is about getting through the next few weeks and months. I love working from home. I think it's great. I run my business out of my home office. I think for many people doing some work remotely is in fact a strategic advantage. If you don't have to commute, that's all kinds of time you get back in your life, which you can use for thinking and dreaming and planning and being a more energetic person. So all sorts of upsides to that. However, I always tell people it's very important to have childcare. If you are working from home, it's not a great way to save money in that regard.

But of course, for many people, we don't get to choose the circumstances right now. You're working from home without a huge amount of planning and prep for that. You also suddenly have your kids at home because daycare or school is closed. So it's not ideal at all. But that said, it's reality and unhappiness comes from a mismatch between expectations and reality. And if you cannot change reality, which we can't, then you're better off changing your expectations. So this is the way it is. So we're going to set rules, set structures, set routines that work with this new normal.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, Laura give me a few examples for maybe how this is working in your own life in terms of setting those expectations. And I would love for you to talk too about being compassionate with yourself. It's easy for us to be really hard on ourselves, especially as women, if we're not meeting all those expectations that we set out or all those various learning modules that our kids are going to have, or do have, how do you manage all of that?

Laura Vanderkam:

Limiting your expectations is definitely important. I try to set a couple intentions for each day of what I plan to get done professionally. And one of the best productivity tips I've ever learned is to keep that list incredibly short. We're talking three to five things. Now obviously there are many more things in the universe that you could be doing, but let's limit today's list to three to five things. And the reason is that you will do three to five things. You won't do 20. So there's no point in giving yourself 20 assignments and then only doing five of them and feeling terrible.

There's no point in putting something on a to-do list and then not doing it, it's just as not done as if you'd never put it on the list in the first place, only now you feel bad about it. So make a short list. And when you get through those things, great, you can celebrate and you can keep going tomorrow. And yes, it seems like getting through three to five things a day doesn't seem like very much, but if you do this consistently and they are all important things, you're going to be unstoppable.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Laura, how do you get your kids engaged in maybe coming up with their own lists, taking some responsibility and some initiative for their own learning, for their own things on their to-do list? How do you do that?

Laura Vanderkam:

Yeah, well kids definitely need to be self-directed these days. If you're trying to work and direct your kid's schooling, you simply can't be there constantly. And I think it's important to have conversations with kids that you expect them to rise to the occasion. You already did fifth grade. The assignment is not about you learning the stuff from fifth grade, it's about the child learning the stuff from fifth grade. And so you can be a resource for specific questions, but in general, "Mom help me with my math," is not the right question for a kid to be asking. And you can have these conversations. You can talk about that.

What we've been doing in our household is creating a checklist for each kid for the day of the things that they need to do, which includes some silent reading, includes the assignments that their teachers have given them for distance learning, includes instrument practice, and maybe another project of some sort. We generally say that they need to be up and dressed by about nine o'clock, they need to finish with their assignments roughly by lunch, if it goes a little past, that's okay, but they're still responsible for doing them. And so having that rough timeline gives some structure to the day and then the afternoon can be used more for quiet time, for outdoor play and things like that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So I've heard from several moms who are listeners about knowing when their kids are particularly anxious, especially in this environment, and striking the right balance between helping their kids get things done but also recognizing that we're in such an unusual place that kids are, some of them, especially younger ones, maybe internalizing what's going on in a way that they're not able to express. Is that something that you've had any experience with or thoughts on?

Laura Vanderkam:

Well yes, this is difficult for everyone in the sense that we haven't been through this before and kids can pick up on that, especially if their parents are anxious. So I think one of the best things you can do is realize that, particularly if you have young kids, they may not remember all the details of people's obsession of how many masks a hospital in Kansas happens to have, and other things that we're all reading the headlines about, but they will pick up on how you handled it. And whether you treated this time as an opportunity to spend a little bit more time together, to get to know each other as a family, or whether you were just a anxious mess.

So I think try to do the work on yourself and then the kids will pick up on that. You can still do some things that are the same as you would at other times. Friends that they would have been seeing regularly, maybe you can do FaceTime with or Skype or Zoom with them. If you normally read stories before bed, please keep doing that right. If you had any other rituals that normally happen, try to keep doing those too. And the goal, and this is really one of the things I've been talking about with my husband is that we want them to look back on this time as more of an adventure than as a time of anxiety. And so if we can convey that, then that will be our gift to them.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

That's a great point. And it's a great segue. I wanted you to talk for a moment about your book *Off The Clock*. I was struck as I was reading it. The advice in the book is so spot on for what we're dealing with now in terms of getting as much true value from the time that you're spending together as possible. I'd love for you to talk a little bit about that and this notion of being very mindful of your time and making it memorable.

Laura Vanderkam:

Yeah, well time keeps passing, whether you think about how you're spending it or not, and that is true for time in the middle of a pandemic as it is for anything else. And so given that we will eventually be on the other side of it, I think it's worth asking yourself, "Well how do I want to look back on this time?" As I am telling the story of this time three years from now, five years from now, 25 years from now, when your grandkids are asking you, "Grandma, what did you do during COVID-19?" What are you going to tell them? What is the story of this time going to be? And when you think about that narrative, which you can actually write now, it helps you be more mindful of the time and think about how you want to plan your days and think about how you want to structure your days and think about any changes you want to make going forward, how you might view this time as an opportunity.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, no, that's really great advice. Okay so Laura, because this is She Said, She Said podcast, I would love for you to talk a little bit about what was it about time management and productivity that peaked your interest, or had you always been somebody who was a big tracker of your time? How did this come about?

Laura Vanderkam:

Yeah no, there wasn't some blinding moment of insights and looking back, it wasn't some moment where I hit rock bottom and then had to redo all my time. I've probably always been interested in scheduling. If I look back and my life as a student, for instance, I was into productivity and getting more done and things like that. One of those incredibly annoying people. But I had a realization 10, 12 years ago now that the really cool thing about time is that we all have the exact same amount of it. We all have 24 hours a day, we all have 168 hours in a week. And so when you find these people who are doing amazing things professionally, and then you talk to them and you realize they are also doing very cool things in their personal lives, they're raising happy families, they're involved in their communities, whatever sort of athletic endeavor they're doing.

These people do not have any more time than the rest of us. I'm not saying they don't have other things going for them. They maybe smarter, richer, better looking than the rest of us, but they don't have more time. And so I think we can learn a lot by studying how they spend those same 24 hours a day that all of us have. And so I decided to start studying the schedules of people who were doing a lot with their time, both professionally and personally, to see what I could learn and just see what I could share with other people as well.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

What was the biggest takeaway?

Laura Vanderkam:

Well we talked about intentionality, about being mindful of where the time goes, and it is so easy to spend time mindlessly, because it keeps passing whether you think about where it's going or not, and that makes it different from something like money, it makes it different from something like food tracking, people who could write down what they eat and the calories they consume. You have to make a choice to put something in your mouth. And in general, when you're spending money, you don't have a rent payment that you were unaware of.

There is more active choice in that. Whereas it's going to be 2:00 PM Tuesday on 2:00 PM Tuesday no matter what you do. The time will keep going. And so that makes it more difficult to get a

grasp on it. But the people who spend time well, build in moments where they pause and look at life and say, "How am I spending my time? Am I happy with this? If I'm not, what am I going to do about it? What would I like to do more of with my time? What would I like to do less of with my time?" And if you build in these moments of mindfulness and reflection, you can do amazing things with the 24 hours we all have each day.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah, now do you still track every half an hour? I know that's been a practice of yours for some time and that's something you started doing a few years ago, right?

Laura Vanderkam:

Yeah, it's been almost five years now. I started tracking time in April of 2015. So I do in fact know how I have spent every half hour since April of 2015. I am not going to sit here and bore your listeners with a recitation of it, but it's been a good experience for me. It doesn't take much time. It just takes me a few minutes a day to do. So it's similar to keeping a journal. I tend not to add it up and analyze it in that way much anymore. I did for the first year and then once I had pretty good broad parameter of where my time went, I didn't find it as useful to do the calculations over and over. But at this point, it functions more as a record. This is where my time went and I can look back on a week and cement the memories or pull up a week from April, 2017.

What was I doing in April of 2017? Well I can tell you. And when I look at it, I can remember, and memory is not that good. Human memory is very fallible. We tell ourselves all sorts of stories of the way things went down, that they may not have happened. But this record is complete of exactly what Laura did in that week of April, 2017. And so it's there. I feel like time has been more rich and full because I'm able to conjure these things back up.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Has it changed at all how you work going forward by knowing where you've been spending your time on every half hour increments?

Laura Vanderkam:

It's definitely helped with planning my time and how I plan my weeks. One thing a lot of people discover when they track time is that they aren't working as many hours as they think they do. And this isn't about playing gotcha. It's more to recognize that if I know I'm working 40 hours instead of 50 hours, well then I can be more careful about planning those 40 hours instead of assuming there are 10 extra hours somewhere that aren't there.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

How about as it relates to more creative pursuits? It can be difficult to say to yourself, and I consider what I do now to be much more of a creative pursuit than what I did when I was in a corporate job or in a government job, there was creativity in those jobs of course, but much more so now. And it's much more self-directed. So saying to myself, "Okay, I'm going to write this blog in X amount of time, or I'm going to do ideation in X amount of time." Sometimes you feel more creatively than other times. So how do you manage for that? How do you manage for creativity that sometimes is there and sometimes is not?

Laura Vanderkam:

I think creativity is as much a practice as it is about inspiration. And some days you're not going to be on top of your game and that's fine, but if you keep trying, eventually the good inspiration will come to you. So rather than say, "Am I going to be inspired today or am I not?" You say, "Well I'm going to spend an hour each day working on this project, come hell or high water." And if during that hour inspiration strikes, awesome. If it doesn't, I will do some of the more mundane tasks related to it. But by having that discipline, you are there and available when the good ideas do come to you.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Laura, because you spend your time with other people and helping them to use their time as effectively and efficiently as possible and get as much out of it as they can, what does impact for you mean in your work?

Laura Vanderkam:

I feel like I am having an impact when I hear from people that they have made big choices with their lives to improve their lives because of something they have learned from my books or my podcasts or a speech I gave. And those are really wonderful email to receive. I particularly love the ones where people have decided that false choices they have set for themselves are just that, they're false choices. And say, "Well I didn't think I could go for that promotion because I have young kids." Well who gave you that idea? Why did you decide that it was absolutely impossible in 168 hours in a week, you manage a great career and a family? It's totally possible. And I show people how it is. And then they find out that it's great that they can be in touch with their ambitions and still have a full personal life too. So to me, that is impact. And I love hearing from people about that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So Laura, we also ask everyone who comes on the podcast for a single piece of advice, a life hack or mantra. You've already given us amazing advice. But if you had to boil it down to one thing that you always tell people, or maybe it's something that you repeatedly tell yourself, what is that?

Laura Vanderkam:

Well one of my favorite phrases is whenever you say to yourself, or somebody says to you, "I don't have time to do X, Y, or Z," what they really mean is, "X, Y, or Z is not a priority for me." It's not a priority. I don't have time really means it's not a priority. And often that is true. I'm not saying that we necessarily want to say that directly to people, but if somebody offered to pay you a million dollars for whatever it is that you're claiming you don't have time to do, it would probably rise up that priority list pretty quickly.

Since that's not going to happen, you can acknowledge it's not about time, it's that don't want to do it, or you don't want to do it right now, or there's other things you'd prefer to get to right now. And that's fine. But the reason to keep this phrase in mind is it puts you back in charge of your time and you can sit there and decide, "Well is something a priority for me?" If so, I deserve to have to space in my life. If it's not, let me just be honest about that and move on.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Friends, I hope you enjoyed this conversation. You'll find the original conversation in its entirety in episode 93. It's on the website or wherever you listen to podcasts. And if you have an extra minute and

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you're listening on iTunes, please be sure to leave me a review and let me know what you think of the episode. The more reviews we have, the more opportunities that we have to share this great content with others. I'm incredibly grateful that you joined us this week. And I'll talk to you again next time. Take care.

[Music 00:21:25].