

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Hey, friend. Welcome to She Said/She Said. Here on this podcast, I'm joining forces with a broad array of top-notch guests to share important life and career lessons, always with an eye toward insight, inspiration, and the drivers that help us build influence. I've spent three decades studying and learning the art of influence. Whether you are starting a business, raising money for a cause, advocating for a promotion or running your own household, understanding influence will increase your chances of success whatever your goals may be listening to. She Said/She Said podcast may just be the smartest, most efficient investment you can make in you. Hey, friend. Welcome to the podcast. So we are hitting that end of the year stretch and our Instagram feeds are filled with daily reminders that we only have a few short weeks before the holidays and the start of a new year. And if you celebrate Hanukkah, you have even less time.

You're going to barely have digested your turkey before it's time to light that menorah. So it's coming. That is a long way of saying that it's the perfect time to think about not only all the things that you need to accomplish, but which habits you might want to work on in the new year. And once you've decided on those goals or maybe a habit that you want to break, what are the best ways to make that commitment stick? How to Change is the title of a new book by this week's guest, award winning Wharton professor of behavioral science, Dr. Katy Milkman. Katy is the co-director of the Behavior Change for Good Initiative, which she co-leads along with Dr. Angela Duckworth, who wrote the terrific book, Grit, which many of you are familiar with. It's fantastic, as is Katy's book. Katy is an expert on how to spur positive and lasting change. She's going to share with us her perspective on what we should understand about the process of setting our goals and turning them into lasting habits.

Her podcast is called Choiceology, and it's a product of Charles Schwab. And in it, she explores the many dimensions of the fascinating field of behavioral science, but she does it in a way that incorporates tremendous storytelling. So if you're looking for another great podcast to add to your list, Katy's podcast, Choiceology, is a great rate one. I've included links to both her podcast, as well as her fabulous books in the show notes for this episode, episode 169. But in this conversation, Katy and I will talk about the science behind why it can be difficult to stick to our goals and how we can think about maybe reverse engineering things to increase our chances of success and also the role that fun over efficiency can play. One of the surprising areas that Katy tackles in her book and in this conversation is the role that confidence plays related to our goals. So we do a pretty deep dive related to that and into this concept of mindset. We also talk about the best ways to motivate others. And news flash, it's not about giving them our best advice. I love this perspective that she shares.

She also talks about a really great concept where she gets her best advice and it's a group that she has assembled called the no club, NO, and she'll talk about that in the conversation. We also talk about the link between building influence and self-management and closing the delta between what we know we need to work on and actually doing it and sticking with it. There are some very good reasons why we develop bad habits and why we have trouble breaking them. So don't even think about starting or setting a new year's resolution until you've heard this conversation with Katy. We're going to dig into all of that and it's coming up right now. Dr. Katy Milkman. Welcome to She Said/She Said.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here. Thanks for having me.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Well, I'm so happy to have you. I was delighted when Dr. Samantha Boardman introduced us after she and I had our chat a couple of weeks ago, and I was really delighted to be connected with you because I've loved your book. So welcome.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Well, thank you. And it's an honor to be connected via Samantha who also just has a fantastic book out and really exciting.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Terrific. So she was my guest a couple of episodes ago. I urge folks who have not had a chance to hear that to do so because she's truly fantastic. But the topic for today is all about behavioral science. To get us started, if you'll just level set, what intrigued you about this field of study?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. Behavioral science is a field that sort of lies at the intersection between psychology and economics, and it involves the study of how people make decisions. And I first got interested in this as a graduate student when I was getting a PhD in computer science and business, and I was required to take a microeconomics sequence at the graduate level, which was something I was dreading. I had hated microeconomics as an undergraduate. I was an engineer and thought sort of like the hard and fast assumptions made in engineering problems, they made a world of sense to me, right? Like this is the distance between point A and point B, this is how much gas a truck consumes between point A and point B. Now let's do some optimization. That made sense. The assumptions made in economics about how people are perfectly rational optimizers didn't. And so I was dreading this class, but then I took it and I took the class at Harvard, which is where I was doing my degree and Harvard was at that time, sort of a hotbed of a new rebellious group economists who were bringing psychology into the field.

And they were drawing on the work of Danny Conoman, Nobel laureate who discovered some systematic ways in which people make errors. For instance, weight loss is much more than gains when we're in our decision calculus and were pretty bad at doing probability calculations in general, and we can find systematic ways that people deviate from optimality in that domain as well. So there was this group of people talking about these ideas. It was incorporated into my class and I was like, wait, this is fascinating. You can actually model and understand the ways in which people are suboptimal in which we make biased decisions? And I was particularly intrigued because I thought it suggested there might be ways to improve decision making, which is what I now study. And so that's how I first encountered this field is in a very academic context. But I think what spoke to me about it was that I could see myself and my friends and my family in the research and the findings, showing people make all of these systematic and predictable errors and judgment.

Probably the one that I saw myself most in was something that economists call present bias or the tendency we have to focus much more on the instant rewards we'll get from an activity than the long term returns it will provide, right? So this can help explain why people smoke, why they don't save enough for retirement, why they don't eat healthy foods, why they yell at their kids, even though they know that's not the right thing to do. So-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Binge watch Netflix.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. So that's what it drew me to the field. And it's an amazing community of scholars that's really grown in the last 20 years since I sort of joined the ranks. It's taken off in popularity and in part, thanks to the work of Danny Conoman popularizing the field, Richard Thaler, who won a Nobel Prize in 2017, helping to popularize the work through bestselling books and so on.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Maybe talk for a second about the value that you see in approaching this field from a slightly different vantage point. Because your academic background started in a different place, what was the benefit, assuming that there is one, right? What was the benefit to having that diversity of perspective?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. I'm a big fan of interdisciplinarity, although it is hard to make a go of it in academia when you don't fit into a bucket. But my background in engineering, I think, gave me a unique way of looking at the world, which was as a problem solver rather than someone who simply describes things. And I think economics and psychology, sometimes they venture into sort of policy advice, but often are descriptive as most basic sciences are sort of this is how the world is. And I think you go in a really different direction as a behavioral scientist or someone studying decision making once you aren't just describing it, but instead trying to improve it, which was my angle and sort of what I brought from engineering. And specifically, I think one learning that came from engineering that was really important is that when we want to solve some problem, we really need to analyze not only what could work, but we need to understand what the obstacles are.

What's standing in the way of success. So if you think about something like building a skyscraper, to do that, you don't just need to sort of start building up, you need to understand like what forces are going to be trying to push this thing down. What kind of wind obstacles am I going to face that's going to try to topple this tower? And once you start understanding all the forces working against success, that's how you can build, oh, this will withstand an earthquake or this will withstand gale force winds and so on because it can be robust to that. I think kind of thinking turns out to be really important in behavioral science problem solving as well. And one of the things that I have, I'd say, discovered throughout my career and that is really a centerpiece of the book I wrote about behavior change and how to change our behaviors for the better is understanding that we have to do the same thing if we're problem solving when it comes to human behavior.

So when people are trying to build good habits to change their lives for the better, when organizations are trying to encourage employees to have better outcomes, customers have better outcomes, a step that's actually often overlooked is this sort of diagnosis of the obstacles phase or this step, what might be holding change back. And I've found that actually spending time digging into that can really be an asset in terms of advancing the science and success. So that's sort of a central promise of the book I wrote. And then of course, I talk about many different research studies showing different ways of doing that and how productive it can be.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. The book is fantastic, as I've already said. So let's get into the meat of the book a bit. It's entitled How to Change. And essentially, you're breaking down the idea of how we set goals and ultimately stick to them or don't. And the reasons why that ultimately may be the case. Bookshelves are lined, any self

help area of a bookstore is literally chalk full with books on how to set and accomplish goals. What makes this one different, Katy?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

I think what makes it different is that it's science. So this is not a typical self-help book where someone is sharing their life philosophy and how it helped them achieve so much. But rather it's a book about scientific inquiries that have made it possible to prove strategies that work. And at its heart, it's also not advocating for a single approach, which is typical in this genre to sort of say, look, set big audacious goals. That's all you need, or visualize success, or this particular kind of habit is the kind of habit you want to build and it'll change your life. My read of the evidence, both evidence from my own research and others is that there is no such thing as a one size fits all solution, and rather through the sort of engineering like approach to thinking about what specific obstacles stand in the way and then trying to match scientifically proven solutions to those obstacles, that's how we can do the best and that's really the central premise of the book.

And we're going to sort of go through in a very systematic way each of the internal barriers that research suggests can obstruct change. And it presents the evidence and stories hopefully that make it fun so that it's not painful to read, because goodness knows, that's so important. And I know we're going to talk about how important it's to make things fun at some point in this conversation. It's true also books that convey knowledge.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Books and podcasts and all-

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Exactly. It has to be fun or else everybody quits. So that's the structure of the book and that's a central goal. And I think it's quite different than anything else out there.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I loved that you organized it around these human tendencies, right? Including some that I think maybe are not always thought about as it relates to goal setting and sticking to goals. And one of those is confidence. That's a big one. Maybe talk about why it was important to include confidence in this list.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. Thank you for asking about at confidence. I think that might be my favorite chapter in the book where I dive into the research on how we can boost this. And I will admit that when I'm not studying behavior change around goals and helping people achieve their goals, I actually study the barriers that women and minorities face in their careers and ways to overcome those. And I think part of the reason this chapter is important to me is that I think it's a barrier that's more often a challenge for groups that have historically faced negative stereotypes about their achievement. And so it's particularly important to me that we think about how do we help people who are facing that particular obstacle, right? If you've been told your whole life you don't have what it takes in math and science or you can't be a leader, your confidence is going to be lower than that of your peers and that's going to be a real barrier to success.

And of course, it can be the case for anybody in any group, but I think it's particularly pernicious in cases where I do other research and have a particular passion for making a dent. So confidence can

keep us from even trying. A lot of other barriers, we're trying, but we're not making progress, but confidence can hold us back from even giving it a go. And happily, there is evidence that there are things we can do to boost confidence, to boost our own confidence and to support other people's confidence, which by the way, I should say in behavior change, there's two ways to look at it. One is, can you help yourself? But another is, all of the same scientific principles apply to helping your kids, the people you manage at work, the members of your team if you're a coach, your students if you're a teacher. So it's really all the same lessons apply, and we'd want to build the confidence for those that we care about as well as our own confidence.

One of my favorite insights from the literature is that you can actually foster a mindset that increases the likelihood you'll succeed. And this comes from research done by Stanford's Carol Dweck on-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

One of my favorites. Yeah. Talk about her a lot on this podcast.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

She's done such an important work and her work on growth mindset is a really important thing to keep in mind as you're approaching your goals to. And what it shows really is that there's different mindsets we can have about, when we get feedback from the world, negative feedback, for instance, we can think of that as diagnostic of something fixed about us and that's a fixed mindset. This says I'm not good enough, I'm not smart enough, I don't have what it takes, or when we get that negative feedback, we can see it as an opportunity to learn and grow and we can recognize that we're all works in progress and every time that something bad happens, it's an opportunity to just get better. And that growth mindset, that latter mindset seems to be much more productive and predictive of positive outcomes and it can be fostered. So you can teach people a growth mindset and you can try to have one yourself by recognizing that that actually is a better representation of human nature that almost nothing is fixed.

IQ isn't fixed. These things that we think of as traits are typically things that actually can be fostered through hard work and effort.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Is there a big difference between establishing habits as it relates to emotional growth? And you're talking about establishing a growth mindset versus other habits like working out more or setting other types of goals to accomplish other types of things. Maybe it's weight loss, maybe it's eating healthier, whatever. Is there a difference between those two things and how we approach them?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. That's a great question. Actually, the wonderful thing about mindset is you can sort of change it in a moment, right? So I can tell you, hey, did you know IQ isn't fixed? That it's something that you can work to improve and grow, and that through reading and learning and being around other people who stretch your mind, you can increase your IQ? Done. We just changed your mindset because I gave you information and it updated your beliefs. So mindset is more akin to a belief rather than a goal. And on the flip side, something like I need to get to the gym is something where you actually have to change behavior, not just a belief that can be flipped like a switch. So mindset changes are usually quite easy, I think, relative to behavior changes. And of course, some mindsets can be ingrained. We know that patterns of thought can be difficult to change, but this is one that doesn't tend to be a huge challenge

and there's nice research studies that show it's normally sort of a revelation that needs to be provided or coaching and mentoring along these lines.

And then once someone thinks more along these lines, it can actually help them change their behavior more effectively. But I don't think that's always true of patterns of thought in this particular, right? Because there can be clinical challenges with patterns of thought.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Sure. Yeah. I mean, of course. I mean, we're not talking about mental illness per se, we're more like talking about patterns and behaviors and sort of ingrained behaviors, right? And we've been talking about on this podcast the stories that we tell ourselves and how sort of crafting our personal stories is really important from the standpoint of building and sustaining our influence, but those stories are also important in terms of the messages that we're sending to ourselves. And that's kind of what you're talking about a little bit is sort of the narrative that we're putting in our own heads and what we believe, right?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

That's right. That's exactly right. And often it's shaped by what others around us are communicating, but it can also be shaped by knowledge that we obtain, right? So things like social norms, which is an academic term for what you observe others around you are doing typically, right? So it's a social norm to have a smartphone these days, it's a social norm in my community to wear your mask indoors, right? So there's these different social norms that we observe and those can also change our mindsets and beliefs. And so other people, what they say and what they do on average has a big impact on that.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. So we're approaching the holiday season and the end of the year. It's traditionally a time in which many of us who are big goal setters set our goals. Is it helpful or hurtful to tag our goal setting to those milestones? Is it helpful to actually pick that end of the year or first of the next year to set those goals?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah, it's a great question. Well, the first thing I want to just say is that it's normal. So of course, you know that it's normal to have new year's resolutions, but interestingly, it's also normal to be more motivated and more likely to pursue goals at other dates that feel like fresh starts, which my collaborators and I call this the fresh start effect. That on Mondays at the start of a new month, at the start of a new year in your life, after you celebrate a birthday, at the beginning of spring, there are all these different moments that to us signify fresh starts. And in general, people are more motivated to pursue their goals at those moments. And if they're reminded of an upcoming fresh start date, people get more excited about pursuing their goals than if they aren't given that kind of a reminder. So it's very natural and my view is that it's very positive because it tips more people towards pursuing goals than would otherwise and of course, you can't achieve, if you don't pursue.

People might do it a little bit more casually, which is part of the reason they may not always succeed, but again, you have to try in order to get anywhere. So I'm kind of a big fan of new year's resolutions. I just think that if we want to see more our success, we need to use more science to actually help us on the journey from setting that goal to actually accomplishing it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I've heard you talk about and it's in the book as well that there's some caution around those reset moments and why those resets may not work for everybody. Talk to me about that.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. This is, I think, really important and it's based on work by my former student, Hengchen Dai, who's a professor at UCLA's Anderson School of Management and who I am very proud of. And she did this fantastic dissertation work on resets and fresh starts after the two of us had, along with Jason Reese, another senior fellow at Wharton studied their benefits. So we had shown that all these moments, this is when people are more motivated to pursue their goals, but Hengchen and I both had a sneaking suspicion that there might be an ugly side to fresh starts because so far what we had been studying was the benefits they have for people who were falling down on the job, right? Who weren't getting everything they wanted out of life, who had some goal that was lurking. It motivated people to get up and try again and it seemed like basically what it does is it creates this clean slate feeling where you have this sense that, oh, it's a new chapter in my life. It's a fresh start.

And yeah, I didn't quit smoking last year, I didn't get in shape last year. That was last year and that was the old me. This is the new me. The new me has got it all figured out. So that seems good when things aren't going well. But what we were wondering about is, well, what happens when you are doing really well, when you've hit your stride, when everything's lined up. Maybe fresh starts can be harmful. And in fact, I had done a study that showed really great potential for helping people create healthy habits, where we saw this giant disruption at a fresh start moment to the positive change we'd help people create. So that seemed at odds with what we knew from this new research on fresh start. So Hengchen, for her dissertation decided, okay, she was going to go and study whether resets can be harmful when people are sort of at the top of their game, as opposed to helpful, which is what we already knew they were. And she studied this in multiple ways.

She studied it in laboratory experiments, like little survey studies or little games she did where she could artificially change people's performance and create disruptions. And she also studied it in major league baseball, looking at players who had been traded either within leagues or across leagues. And what was fun about that study is it turns out if you're traded across leagues in major league baseball, all of your season to date statistics get wiped out and you have to start afresh. But if you're traded within league, you get to hold on to those season to date statistics. So both groups of people have like this big change in life, they move to a new team and so on, but one gets a fresh start on their records and the other doesn't. And that's the only thing that really differs between both moving to a new team, both moving to a new place. She thought it would be really neat to see if that reset, that wipe clean had differential effects for players who were being traded when they'd had a great season to date versus a weak season.

And that's exactly what she found. So she compared sort of statistically identical players, both of whom get traded, but one of whom is traded across leagues and gets this fresh start, this reset, and one of whom is traded within league. So that's what everybody's traded. And the players who are doing great and get this reset, it turns out to depress their performance relative to players who are doing great and get to hold onto their statistics. And it's actually just as you'd expect, fresh start effect is the opposite for players who were having a rough season. They benefit from having their slate wiped clean. So it just suggests that fresh starts are very useful when we are not achieving our goals and we can harness added motivation to jumpstart progress, but when things are going well, we want to be really wary of them and try to plan to avoid the disruption or at least, if you're going to have a disruption, right? You're going to go on a vacation or there's going to be a holiday break or it's January one and you're sort of planning for a new semester if you're a student.

And you need to think carefully about how you're going to hold onto that momentum because it is going to be broken and disrupted by that change.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So for the vast majority of us, I would say, who will set new year's resolutions, it's because we want to address something that we feel like we're not doing as well.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Exactly.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

So we've got great optimism. We approach that end of the year, beginning of the next year full of optimism and possibility. And three months in, maybe not even, we're kind of falling down. What happens? Why is it so hard to see a goal through to the finish? What happens to us when we take that reset that we need, set those goals and then have a difficult time achieving them?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Well, the answer is it depends, but a lot of things are working against us. And one of the biggest barriers I think and most common is that it's typically not fun in the moment to do the things that are aligned with our goals. The payoff is normally down the line, right? So eating the pizza is fun now, having the great fit perfect body and good health, that's great, but you don't get it for a long time, right? Many pizzas you have to resist before you get that reward. So the here and now rewards aren't aligned with our goals most typically, and that's really difficult because of something I mentioned earlier, which is present bias. This tendency, we have to focus on here and now to overvalue that relative to the long term reward. So that's a major barrier, but there are others too. Habits can be a barrier. We develop habits often, they sort of go on autopilot that aren't super positive. And that can be difficult because we rely on them unthinkingly, unwittingly.

We tend to take the path of least resistance. So if it requires more effort to pursue our goals than to do the opposite, then that's going to be a challenge. We can be forgetful when we're prioritizing and that is another barrier to change. Confidence, which we've already talked about is a barrier. So there's a lot of things that could be working against us. And when you add it all up, it's probably no surprise that most new year's resolutions fail, most goals fail. And most people aren't thinking strategically about those barriers that they're about to come up against. Instead, they just say, I'm going to do it and we have this optimistic belief that it'll all work itself out, but to achieve a goal or anything else in this world, it really does require sort of careful planning, strategic thought and using hopefully some of the tools that science shows can be particularly well suited to overcoming the barriers I just mentioned.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Let's talk about what some of your favorite techniques are for overcoming those barriers.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Well, I think my favorite has to do with present bias, because I think that might be the most pernicious of all these barriers. It's certainly the one that bites me the most often. And I think the wonderful finding there is that most of us think the right thing to do when we're trying to pursue a new goal is just look for

the most efficient solution. So say your goal is I want to get fit. I'm going to start going to the gym, you think, and I'm going to head for the maximally efficient machine, say the StairMaster. I'm just going to push right through. But research by Ayelet Fishbach of the University of Chicago and Kaitlin Woolley of Cornell University actually shows that is a mistake. Most people think that's the right path, that sort of maximal efficiency path, but a small subset of people take another approach, which is they look for a more fun way pursue their goal. They go for fun over efficiency.

So they may not be getting as much progress toward their goal in every bit of effort, but they're enjoying it. So instead of maybe that StairMaster, they go to Zumba class with a friend. And it turns out that if you prioritize fun over efficiency, you actually get better results because you persist longer. So in random assignment studies, they've shown that when people are encouraged to take a fun path, when it comes to their diet, when it comes to their study habits, when it comes to exercise, they keep at it because it's enjoyable in the moment. And it turns out because we're present bias, we overweight that. We think it won't matter. We think, of course, I'm going to just stick to and I'm going to grind through and push through, but if the instant experience is unpleasant, we quit. So one strategy I have studied for making it fun besides what they talk about, which is sort of just select a different way to your goal, do with a friend or study while eating snacks, whatever it is.

My research has looked at this strategy I call temptation bundling, which is actually linking something that you find really enjoyable and tempting even with things that would otherwise feel like a chore, that you might not do to help you achieve your goal. So to stick with the exercise domain, imagine only letting yourself binge watch your favorite TV shows, ideally shows that you crave like Bridgerton or Emily in Paris or 24, Game of Thrones, whatever it is, only get to watch them while you're at the gym. And now you have a temptation associated with exercise. Instead of dreading those trips to the gym, you're going to start craving them to find out what happens next in your latest show. You're going to waste less time at home in the bargain watching those shows when you should be doing something more productive and time's going to fly while you're on the treadmill. So we can bundle temptations with chores to make them more fun in lots of parts of our lives, right?

Your favorite podcast, you get to listen to only when you're doing household chores or open that favorite bottle of wine only when you're cooking a fresh meal for your family. Whatever the right sort of combination is for you, it can vary depending on what your temptations are and what it is you're trying to motivate. But by doing that combination, you can create a new equation essentially where present bias is working for you instead of against you because you're going to enjoy in the moment doing a thing that's good for you instead of dreading it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. And then when you add a friend or a peer who you are responsible to, presumably to show up because you've said you're going to show up, what added bit... So that's sort of adding to this idea of making it fun, plus maybe why does that make a difference as well?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. I love that you asked that question. It's funny, this morning before we were talking, I was literally working on a research manuscript about this experiment that Rachel Gershon at the University of California at San Diego led that I got to be a part of where we showed that if you pay people to exercise together like a dollar, but they only get paid if they exercise with a friend, they exercise more than if you just pay them a dollar to exercise, which doesn't make sense, right? It's a dollar exercise either way, but we just added an extra hoop now, it's only if you do it with someone else. But they still exercise more because they felt accountable to this other person and they also enjoyed it. It was fun to work out with

their friend. So you get the sort of double benefit of it's essentially a temptation bundle because now the activity is more fun with someone else, but also you're going to let someone else down. They're expecting you.

If you don't turn up, they lose their dollar and that is more motivating than just getting yours alone. So I think there's huge benefits for making things social. And of course, we've all missed that a lot in the last, gosh, almost two years now, but thank goodness we're getting back to being able to do a lot more things socially.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Absolutely. How about when all of these things with our best of intentions and great plans, we still fail. Let's talk about how to get back on track and how to deal with what is really... Failure becomes an obstacle, right? You sort of think, okay, I've tried it, I've tried all these things and yet I still fail. And so sometimes that might discourage somebody from trying again. Talk about the role of failure and how we can overcome it.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah, that's great. Well, first of all, I just want to actually mention two things very briefly that we already talked about, which are helpful here. One is growth mindset, right? So when you get that negative feedback, when something goes wrong, you think, what did I learn from that? What am I going to not get wrong next time? How can I analyze the situation and grow from it as opposed to just, oh, I'm such a failure, right? So it's a different interpretation, but that can really matter. The second is actually fresh starts because one of the beautiful things about fresh starts is they can help us wipe that slate clean so that we don't sort of wallow in our failures and think it's hopeless, but we can say, okay, I'm turning the page, new chapter. You can look for the Monday or the start of a new season, the beginning of a new month, the beginning of a new quarter sales at work whatever, whatever fresh start resonates for you, a birthday, and sort of pin your hopes to I'm going to start over then.

That's when I'm going to begin again. That's my moment. And that can help psychologically with sort of compartmentalizing this failure. That was the old me, here's how things are going to be different. So those are two strategies that can help. A third one that I actually want to mention though is based on research by Marissa Sharif, who's my colleague at Wharton and also Suzanne Shu at Cornell, and this was based on a strategy Marissa used to motivate herself, anticipating that she would sometimes fail to achieve a goal, and I'm realizing I'm giving a lot of exercise examples. I'm going to give another one. My research and my book are not about exercise. It's a goal. It's a common goal. But anyway, you can use these strategies and lots of the researches in many other parts of life, but I'm going to stick with exercise because this is a story Marissa tells. So her work on this was motivated by wanting to work out seven days a week, ideally, but knowing she couldn't always do it and being very aware she's a behavioral scientist of two competing issues.

One is if you don't set tough goals for yourself, you don't set stretch goals, you won't achieve as much. So it's important to push yourself, right? If you set a low bar like, oh, I'm going to exercise five days a week. She's like, that's too easy. I'll always hit that, but I want to push myself. So you want that high bar in general, but when you set a high bar, you face another barrier which is something called, and I love this, the what the hell effect. The what the hell effect, that's a best named effect in psychology. It is the effect where you have a goal and you have a mess up and you just throw up your hands and give up on yourself entirely, right? And it's often talked about in terms of diet. You're going to stick to this diet on Monday and then you go in to work and there's some donuts because somebody's having a

birthday. You eat the donut and you say, oh, what the hell? And then you have pizza for lunch and cake for dinner and so on. The whole thing is you give up on yourself.

So she knew that goal failure can lead to this, what the hell effect. So she's like, what do I do? How do I solve these two problems? I want the tough goal, but then I'm more likely to fail. And if I fail, I give up completely. Can I engineer a solution? And she came up with a really clever strategy psychologically, which is she gives herself two emergency reserves a week, but sets that tough goal. So she goes for seven days a week, she's aiming for a run, knowing that some week she won't quite be able to do it. But if something goes terribly wrong, right? Like she gets sick one day or she has an out of town friend and she just has to be with them in the evening and so she can't make a run, she calls it an emergency and she turns in one of her [inaudible 00:38:20] to herself and it doesn't count against her. She gets two of these freebies a week and this has really motivated her. She almost never takes them because she doesn't want to, unless it's a true emergency.

She tries to save them in case something is really needed. But now if she does have something go off track, she recovers from failure. And she's done randomized controlled trials, both in the domain of exercise and also just productivity goals, showing that when you give people a goal of doing something seven days a week with two emergency reserves, they achieve far more than if you give them the goal of doing it just five days a week, which is identical, or when you give them a goal of seven days a week with no emergency outs when they're going to have this what the hell effect. So you can call it mulligan or an emergency reserve, whatever you want. Giving yourself some wiggle room, sort of planning for that possibility that sometimes things can go wrong and not allowing yourself to give up when you do in this way, I think, is really important and valuable.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. It's a component of the Weight Watchers app as well. I'm a big proponent. You can't always tell it, but I'm a big proponent of Weight Watchers because it allows me to sort of speak to the things that have historically worked for me, the tracking piece, but then also having that reserve number of points that you can use anytime it's like sort of bonus points, if you will. And it kind of works the same way. So it's really interesting to learn about the science behind all of this. Maybe talk a bit about how this work has impacted your life. I'm struck as I'm reading this and thinking about it. None of us are perfect, right? We all set goals. We all fall down from time to time. How do you prevent yourself from falling into the trap of being like, okay, I'm an expert, I can't ever drop a ball. How do you not let that pressure get to you?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

It's funny because I often talk about the work I do as me search. I mean, it's research evidence based, it's not research, but there's a selfish motive and an inward looking component to it. And I do think the people who study this topic sort of fall into two buckets. There are the researchers who were unbelievably self-controlled and disciplined and have never made a mistake in anything in their lives. They got straight A's the whole way through and they were star athletes.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

They sound boring.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Well, [inaudible 00:40:52]. That's where you want them. They get everything perfect in life, but some of them are like, who are all these other weirdos wandering around, messing things up. I need to study this and understand the world around me. So that's one category of people who studies this stuff. And then the other category is people like me who are like, I have all the problems. And if I don't study the stuff, if I don't try to figure out what we're works, I will never get anywhere on this planet. So I definitely have always identified in that group. I struggle with decision making. I'm the person who you go out to dinner with and I'm staring at the menu anxiously until the waiter arrives and I change my mind after I hear what someone else ordered, then I call the waiter back and change my mind again. And I teach decision making, but I teach it and I study it and I think about these things because I struggle with them.

And I think it's really interesting that we are designed in a way that we end up with these challenges and I see huge potential benefits from understanding, how do we do this all better? How can we grow? So anyway, I don't feel insecure about making mistakes. I learn from them. It's often where I get my best research ideas is I flub something and I'm like, how did I do that? How could that have happened? An optimal decision making machine would never have given into that temptation. And then this opportunity to do science. So I think that's how I deal with it.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. And it's such a perfect illustration for why things like perfectionism can really stand in our way. You're talking about the opposite of that. You're really talking and you are at the top of your field for anyone who doesn't know and isn't familiar with your work. You're at the top of your field and it can be really easy, I think, for people to hold themselves to a standard of perfection. And I think this is especially true for women, oftentimes. Not just women, but it is often true for us of not instead looking at these as opportunities to really learn and grow and take us to the next level. So I love that you illustrated that so beautifully. And you also talk about this level of self awareness, right? And sort of getting to this idea of imposter syndrome, that sometimes we can be our own worst enemy. So I love all of that. Let's talk a bit about, there was another are topic that I've heard you talk about and I think you mentioned this in the book.

And it is the importance of being mindful of the company we keep, right? Part of this is sort of our surroundings, maybe who we are married to or live with or our circumstances. It could be all sorts of things, or it's the friends that we pick or the friends that we pick and we stay connected to, or maybe it's our family. Talk about the impact of the company you keep and why that matters.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. This is such a powerful force in shaping our outcomes and it's one that I think people often overlook. And I'll just mention one particular study that I think illustrates it nicely, which is just that the roommate who you're randomly assigned in college has a big effect on your grades. If you have a studious roommate, someone who did well in the past, you're more likely to do well. And if you have someone who wasn't so studious, then, well, they may drag you down with them. And the sort of reason for this is that we look to the people around us to understand what's appropriate and what are we capable of too. So they shape our beliefs. They give us information about what's normal, what's possible. And if you see your roommates staying in on Thursday and Friday nights to try to ace their exam, you're like, that's a smart thing to do. Smart people are staying in. If you see them going on partying all the time, you're going to feel like I'm lame if I don't go out and party, right?

So we follow the norms of the people who surround us. We take cues from them and we also often sort of copy and paste deliberately or not the tools that they're using to get ahead in life or not to get ahead, as the case may be. So often we can't control these things, right? You don't get to pick your

freshman year roommate, though you do normally get to pick your sophomore and junior and senior year roommates and you get to pick your spouse and you get to pick who's in your running club, and I also want to talk about my advice club or my no club. You can choose the people that you spend a lot of your time with and you can try to curate those people so they're people who support you. They give you confidence in what you're capable of instead of cutting you down because the messages other people give us about what we're capable of shape our beliefs, they shape our mindsets. And you can also choose them so that they show you what's possible.

You don't want to be hanging around people who show you you're constantly a loser. That's also important, right? If everybody around you is so much better than you are at whatever it is you're trying to do, it can be really discouraging. In fact, there's some research showing if your college roommates are curated to be outstanding and you're a poor achiever and the goal is to you up, well, if the gap gets too big, you no longer even identify with these people. Like who are these aliens that I've been placed with? I can't even talk to them. So it is important that there be some overlap, some understanding and ability to relate. I have the most wonderful thing in my life and it helps me harness the social forces for good that I've just been talking about and I call it my advice club. Started out as a no club, but it grew to an advice club.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Started out as a what? A no club?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

We called it a no club. So it's a group of women-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

N-O or K-N-O-W?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Oh. Oh gosh, it should be K-N-O-W, but N-O. There's this wonderful research your listeners, I think, will like this. It was led by Linda Babcock at Carnegie Mellon University, showing that women much more than men do sort of office housework. So non-promotable tasks is the technical term. Things that have to get done by someone, but no one values enough to increase your salary or give you a promotion on the basis of this, women do it more, right? Being on thankless committees, organizing the holiday party. You name it, women do it more. We're asked to do it more and we do it more.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

And we notice certain things in a way that our male counterparts often don't. We notice that things need to be done and just do them.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

We pick it up. But when we're asked to do it, some sort of volunteer task, we say yes more than our male peers. They say no. Anyway, so this has negative career consequences, as you can imagine. And based on that research, Linda was giving a presentation at Pennon, which is my university and she was explaining, she had formed a no club, a group of women who helped each other say no more, basically a support group. And I was like, that's a brilliant idea. So I contacted a couple of my close friends at other universities with similar career aspirations at a similar career stage, women, of course, and I said, let's

form a no club. This seems brilliant. We're all saying yes to too many things. All of us, we're on organizing committees for a million conferences, et cetera, that we weren't really being rewarded for and we knew it was a problem. So we did this and now whenever we get an optional ask, something outside of our immediate work task, we reach out to each other for advice on, is this a yes or a no?

It's come to be more than just a no club. That's why I say it's an advice club. It's like, it's my life support group. These women are amazing. And it has all these benefits. One of them is just anytime I need peer support or advice, I have brilliant people to provide it. We have comradery. So those are all good things, but there's this other interesting element which I never anticipated, which is also backed by research and that is I have actually benefited from giving advice when I mentor my peers. When they reach out to me and say, "Oh, I've got this opportunity. Should I go to Switzerland to do this thing for free with my time? Does it make sense? I don't know. It would be disappointing somebody important, but on the other hand, life is really busy." And I say like, "No, what are you thinking? Here's how you [inaudible 00:49:00] the decline of that invitation politely." I learn a couple things. One, it builds my confidence so when I face similar challenges, I'm going to know what to do.

I'm going to be able to figure this out for myself. I've got a clue. And second, it helps me anticipate what's coming. And so I've grown both through the support network and the social learning, but also through giving advice. And there's this really cool research by Lauren Eskreis-Winkler at the Kellogg School of Management that I've gotten to be involved in a little bit, showing that when we mentor and coach others, when we give them advice on a goal and how to achieve it that we too are hoping to achieve, it improves our own performance on the same goal, which is really weird. You think the mentor is helping the mentee, but the mentor is also helping themselves because when you give that advice, you introspect more deeply about how to achieve something. You feel a growth in confidence. If somebody's looking to you for guidance, you must have what it takes. And once you've told someone else they should do this, you're going to feel like a hypocrite if you don't walk the talk yourself.

So anyway, my advice club is a superpower and I think all women should have one.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I love that. I love that. That's amazing. I'd love for you maybe to talk about, does that approach as it relates to mentorship and thinking about encouraging someone to mentor someone else, how does that work with maybe a younger generation? Maybe you as a parent are trying to motivate your kids. Does that same approach work or what's the best way to go about motivating our kids to do what we want them to do and that they should be doing?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. It's a great question. Kids are delicate, right? Because they have this very strong desire not to be manipulated by their parents at a certain age. So you can get reactance, that's a technical term when they say like, because you want me to go to swimming lessons, I refuse, or I'll never play the piano again because it's what you want me to do. So you do have to watch out for that reactance, that desire to buck whatever their parent is pushing for whenever you try to nudge them in a positive direction. But different things you can do, yeah, absolutely putting them in the position of advice giver rather than always just giving advice to them can be really useful for parenting. I find often if I say to my son, what would you tell Max to do if he were in this situation, instead of just me spouting off my advice, it leads to a different kind of introspection. When someone gets to the solution themselves, they value it more and I think that can particularly be useful as a parent.

I only have one child, but one of my close collaborators who worked on some of this research as well, Angela Duckworth, who's a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania with me, she has two children and she told me she often used that strategy when they were in high school of, so if one was struggling with something and she'd actually ask that one to advise the other one, what do you think Lucy should do? Could you give Lucy some input on this situation she's struggling with? And found that that was really valuable, built relationships between her kids and also by being in the position of advice giver, whoever was struggling ended up starting to see things a little bit differently.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I mean, that's amazing perspective. Okay. Last question, because influence is a big theme for us on this podcast, how we build it, how we sustain it, how do you think about the concept of influence as it relates to your work and goal setting and achievement in particular?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah, it's a great question. I do think that to influence others to achieve their goals, you can use a lot of the same tools that you can use to influence yourself to achieve your goals. For instance, we were just talking about how important your social environment is and that choosing the people you surround yourself with matters. But if you're trying to influence someone else, that same message applies that you can curate the social information they have in a positive way to help them achieve their goals, right? If you're trying to encourage someone, for instance, and there's great research to back this, you're trying to get people to save more energy, right? To be more energy efficient, it turns out to be really effective to tell them as an influence tactic, here's how much less many of your energy efficient neighbors are using each month. Sending people mailings that tell them how they compare to their neighbors on anything from voting to energy efficiency is highly motivating because people, they don't want to be an outlier. They want to fit in.

And when they learn that others are doing better than they are on some dimension, that influences them to change. So we can use a lot of the same insights that we use to change our own behavior to influence others.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. I love that. I think I would be remiss in not asking you, I'm sure there will be so many case studies written about the approach to getting people to get vaccinated sort of during this COVID environment. Maybe a little bit of perspective on where things went wrong and what really broke down and why was it so hard and why did it become such a polarized issue?

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Oh gosh. Well, I will just say that I started working on this problem in the spring of 2020, which is when we went into lockdown. And might sound early to you, but it was immediately clear to me that one of the most important questions behavioral scientists could think about with the pandemic would be how could we develop communications about vaccines, because that was going to be our way out. And I knew from my past research on encouraging flu vaccination, that a lot of people, even people who weren't really resistant don't get vaccinated because it's a little bit of a hassle and it's complicated and so they don't follow through, even if they intend to. I think so many things have gone wrong. We've done a bunch of randomized controlled trials showing things that do work. And what I'm most disappointed in is that we weren't rolling out best practices from the get go in terms of community about this.

So some really low hanging fruit that we missed was making it completely hassle free to get vaccinated. It is now, but it took so long to get there. Giving every American an appointment the minute they were eligible at their local pharmacy or with their doctor's office, scheduling them for the date and time when they'd get it, telling them it had been reserved for them. These are things that research by myself and others proves that it sounds like you were thinking about the vaccine like true anti-vaxxers, but most people aren't and they may harden into that stance if it's just not easy enough to sort of roll up and get that vaccine. We didn't do enough to make it trivially easy. You didn't even have to think about it, almost didn't have to lift a finger to take care of it and then of course, resistance set in. This will sound surprising perhaps, but the evidence suggests mandates are not only incredibly effective, but also persuasive.

Some people, I think, feel uncomfortable making that decision for themselves, but when it's out of their hands, they say, okay, well, I have to do it. Or maybe they don't want to justify to family members who have a strong political leaning why they chose to get a vaccine, but now they can point to this excuse and they don't have to say it has anything to do with their politics. So I do think that it probably would've been better if mandates had come along even sooner so it was clear like everybody's going to have to do this eventually because that's where we've ended up in the end anyhow. And if it had become a norm faster and it was clearer sooner, I think that could have been positive as well. [crosstalk 00:57:16].

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Absolutely, it is. It is. But I think too the overhang of sort of distrust in institutions regardless of which side of the political spectrum you're on, whichever party is in power, if you're of the different party, then you have an extreme distrust of the other party, right? Or the other people who you perceive to be in control. So it's super complicated set of issues and a really interesting time, I would think, to be doing the work that you and your colleagues are doing.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yes. And it is interesting, but it is depressing as well, I will say, because these are incredibly safe, incredibly effective. It's almost like magic. We're so lucky to live at a time when we have something like this available and-

Laura Cox Kaplan:

[inaudible 00:58:01] vaccine.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Yeah. And it's just sad to me that it's become political. I mean, these vaccines were developed by the Trump administration and they're being offered now under the Biden administration. Why can't we see that that means both administrations were a part of this and everybody agrees that scientists on both sides of the political spectrum, this is the best thing that could have happened. There are interesting questions to be asked, but I also find it deeply sad that to save so much human life, we couldn't come together on this.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Yeah. Okay. We could talk more and we will. I'm going to have you back because there's lots more topics that we could obviously tackle. Dr. Katy Milkman, it was such a pleasure to have you here. It was really,

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really a treat to talk to you. I love the book. The book is called How to Change. I urge my listeners to go out and grab a copy. It's available and it's included in the show notes for this episode. Katy, thank you.

Dr. Katy Milkman:

Thank you so much for having me. This was a real pleasure.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

I loved it. Friend, I am delighted that you joined us today and I'd love to hear what you thought of this or any of our She Said/She Said podcast episodes. You can send me an email via the contact link on our website at shesaidshesaidpodcast.com, or message me on Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn or Twitter. I would love to hear from you. Until next week, take care.