

*She Said/She Said Podcast With Laura Cox Kaplan*

*Episode 245 (Encore)*

*How to use behavioral science to break bad habits and make your goals stick!*

*Guest: Dr. Katy Milkman, author of "How to Change"*

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:07](#)):

Hey, friend, welcome to the podcast. Ever find that those goals you set for yourself back in January have become a distant, or make that very distant memory come May? Well, it turns out that there are some pretty significant reasons why goals that we set, and frankly, the way that we set them might be undermining our progress. Now, at this almost mid-year point, it's a great opportunity to take a minute and reflect on our goals. If you're like most people, you may have even forgotten about the goals that you set for yourself in January. This week's conversation will give you some great tools to help you understand why some of the goals that you've set are easier to achieve than others, and why goal setting at the beginning of the year might not actually work that well for you. I'm joined this week in this encore conversation with behavioral scientists and award-winning Wharton School of Business professor and author Dr. Katie Milkman. Katie joined me here on She Said, she Said Podcast just after the publication of her terrific book entitled How to Change. The book is based on Katie's research into goal setting and why it can be difficult to break bad habits. Katie is also the director of the Behavior Change for Good Initiative, which she co-leads with Dr. Angela Duckworth. And of course you will remember Dr. Duckworth is the author of that fabulous book, grit, which I know that you've probably read. Katie is an expert on how to spur positive and lasting change. She shares her perspective on what we should understand about the process of setting our goals in order to actually turn them into lasting habits. Now, one area of this conversation that I especially love relates to the role that confidence and mindset play in goal setting. I talk about these topics on this podcast a lot as it relates to influence and self-management, and ultimately the investments that we have to make in ourselves in order to make goals stick. So I think you're really gonna love that part of the conversation. Also, Katie shares some great perspective on accountability and her own approach to creating her own board of advisors, and I know you're gonna love that as well. Okay, friend. For now though, here is my encore conversation with Dr. Katie Milkman.

Laura Cox Kaplan:

Dr. Katie Milkman. Welcome to She Said, she said.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([02:49](#)):

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

Laura Cox Kaplan ([02:52](#)):

Me. Well, I'm so happy to have you. I was delighted when Dr. Samantha Boardman, um, 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 ([03:07](#)):

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

Laura Cox Kaplan ([03:14](#)):

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Terrific. So she was my guest a couple of episodes ago. Uh, I urge folks who have not had a chance to hear that conversation 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 ([03:33](#)):

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, uh, 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, uh, and thought sort of like those, 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([04:22](#)):

And so I was dreading this class, but then I took it and, um, I, I took the class at Harvard, which is where I was doing my degree in Harvard, was at that time sort of a hotbed of a new rebellious group of economists who were bringing psychology into the field. And they were drawing on the work of Danny Kahneman Nobel Laureate who, um, who discovered some systematic ways in which people make errors. For instance, we, um, weight losses much more than gains when we're in our decision calculus, and we're pretty bad at doing probability calculations in general. And, 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 bias decisions.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([05:16](#)):

And I was particularly intrigued because I thought it, it suggested there might be ways to improve decision making, which is what I now study. And so, um, that's how I first encountered this field is in a very academic context. But I think what, um, spoke to me about it was that I could see myself and my friends and my family in the re in the research, in the findings, showing people, um, make all of these systematic and predictable errors and judgment. Uh, 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, right? Why they don't save enough for retirement, um, 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. <laugh>. Um, so

Laura Cox Kaplan ([06:09](#)):

Binge watch Netflix, I imagine?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([06:11](#)):

Exactly, exactly. Yeah. So that, that's, um, that's why it drew me to the field and um, it's an amazing, it's an amazing community of scholars that's really grown in the last 20 years since I sort of joined the ranks. Yeah. Um, it's taken off in popularity, in, in part thanks to the work of Danny Kahneman 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 ([06:39](#)):

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, that there is one, right? What was the benefit to having that diversity of perspective?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([06:59](#)):

Yeah, I'm a big fan of interdisciplinary, although it, it is hard to make a go of it in academia when you aren't, when you don't fit into a, a bucket. But, um, 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, um, I think, you know, economics and psychology, sometimes they venture into sort of policy advice, but often are descriptive as, as most basic sciences are sort of, this is how the world is mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And, um, 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, uh, what could work, but we need to understand what the obstacles are, what's standing in the way of success.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([08:05](#)):

Um, so if you think about something like, you know, 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 gonna be trying to push this thing down. Like what, what kind of wind, um, op obstacles am I gonna face? Mm-hmm. <affirmative> that's gonna try to topple this tower. And, and once you start understanding all the forces working against success, that's how you can build. So you know, oh, well this will withstand an earthquake, or this will withstand gal force wins and so on, because it can, um, be robust to that. I think, uh, that kind of thinking turns out to be really important and 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([08:54](#)):

So mm-hmm. <affirmative>, when people are trying to build good habits to change their lives for the better. Um, when organizations are trying to encourage employees to have better outcomes, customers have better outcomes, uh, a step that's actually often overlooked is this sort of diagnosis of the obstacles phase or this step, uh, what might be holding change back. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And, uh, and I've

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found that actually spending time digging into that can really be an asset in terms of advancing the science and, and, and success. So that, 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 ([09:34](#)):

Yeah. The book is fantastic, as I've already said. So let, let's get into the meat of the book a bit. It's entitled *How to Change*. And essentially you're, you're breaking down the idea of how we set goals and ultimately stick to them or don't <laugh>. And the reasons why that that ultimately may be the case. Bookshelves are lined. Any self-help area of a bookstore is literally chock full with books on how to set and accomplish goals. What makes this one different? Katie?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([10:06](#)):

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, um, made it possible to show to prove, um, strategies that work. And, and at its heart it's also not advocating for a single approach, which is typical in mm-hmm. <affirmative> in this genre to sort of say, look here, set, set big audacious goals. That's all you need. Or, you know, visualize success or, you know, this particular kind of habit is the kind of habit you wanna build and I'll change your life. Um, my, my read of the evidence, both evidence for my own research and others, is that there is no such thing as a one size fits all solution. And rather through this sort of engineering like approach to thinking about what specific obstacles stand in the way, uh, and then trying to match scientifically proven solutions to those obstacles, that's, that's how we can do the best. And that's really the central premise of the book. And we're gonna sort of go through, um, in a very systematic way, each of the internal barriers that research suggests can obstruct change. And it, it presents the evidence and story, so hopefully they make it fun so that it's not painful to read. Cuz goodness knows, that's so important. And I know we're gonna talk about how important it's to make things fun at some point in this

Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:31](#)):

Conversations too.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([11:32](#)):

It's true also a book that convey knowledge

Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:35](#)):

Books and podcasts and Oh, exactly.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([11:38](#)):

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

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Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:50](#)):

Yeah. I, I loved that you organized it around human tendencies, 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 ([12:12](#)):

Yeah, thank you for asking about confidence. I'm, 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, I will admit that when I'm not studying behavior change around goals and helping people achieve their goals, I actually study, um, the barriers that women and minorities face in their careers and ways to overcome those mm-hmm. <affirmative>. 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, uh, a challenge for, uh, groups that have historically faced negative stereotypes about their achievement. And, and so, um, it's particularly important to me that, 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, um, your confidence is gonna be lower than that of, of your peers.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([13:08](#)):

And that's gonna be a real barrier to success. And of course, this can be the case for members of, you know, it can be the case for any, anybody in any group. Uh, but, but I think it's particularly pernicious in, 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 still, 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, you know, there's, 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, um, your kids, your, you know, the people you manage at work, the members of your team, if you're a coach, uh, your students if you're a teacher. So it's really all the same lessons apply and, and we'd wanna build the confidence for those that we care about as well as our own confidence. Um, one of my favorite insights from the literature is that, uh, 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 one of my

Laura Cox Kaplan ([14:25](#)):

Favorites. We talk, talk about her a lot on this podcast.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([14:28](#)):

She is so she's done such important work and, um, her work on growth mindset is a really important thing to keep in mind as you're approaching her goals to, and, and what it shows really is that, um, there's different mindsets we can have about, uh, you know, 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. You know, 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, uh, every time that that something bad happens, it, it's an opportunity to just get better. And that growth mindset, that latter mindset seems to be much more productive and predictive of, of positive outcomes. And it can be fostered. So you can teach people a growth mindset, um, and you can try to have one yourself by recognizing that that actually is a better representation of human nature. That, that almost nothing is fixed, IQ isn't fixed, you know, these things that we think of as traits are typically things that actually can be fostered through hard work and, um, effort.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([15:36](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, 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, um, working out more or setting, 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 ([16:08](#)):

Yeah, that's a great question. Actually. The wonderful thing about mindset is, um, 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, and grow. And that through, you know, reading and learning and being around other people who stretch your mind, you can increase your iq, done. We just changed your mindset cuz I just gave you information and it, it updated your beliefs. So mindset is, is more akin to a belief rather than a goal. And, um, on the flip side, something like, you know, 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, um, behavior changes.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([16:53](#)):

And, uh, you know, of course some mindsets can be ingrained. You know, we know that patterns of thought can be difficult to change and, but this is one that doesn't tend to be, um, a huge challenge. And there's nice research studies that show it's normally sort of a revelation that needs to be provided or are coaching and mentoring along these lines. And then, um, once someone thinks more along these lines, it can actually help them change their behavior more effectively. But, but I don't think that's always true of patterns of thought. It's mm-hmm. <affirmative> in thi in this particular right. Because there could be clinical challenges with patterns of thought.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([17:28](#)):

Sure. Yeah. I mean of, of course, I mean, we're, we're not talking about mental, mental illness per se. We're more like talking about patterns and behaviors and sort of ingrained behaviors, right? And, you know, we've been talking about on this podcast the stories that we tell ourselves and how, you know, sort of crafting our personal stories is really important from the standpoint of building and sustaining our influence. But it, all those stories are also important in terms of the messages that we're sending to

ourselves. And that's kinda what you're talking about a little bit is the stor sort of the narrative that we're putting in our own heads and what we believe, right?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([18:04](#)):

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

Laura Cox Kaplan ([18:42](#)):

Yeah. Is it helpful or hurtful to tag our our goal setting to those minds? To, to those milestones? Is it helpful to actually pick that end of the year or first of the, the next year to set those goals?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([18:56](#)):

Yeah, it's a great question. Um, well, the first thing I wanna just say is that it's normal. So, uh, 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, um, my collaborators and I call this the fresh start effect that mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, on Mondays at the start of a new, um, month at the start of a new year in your life, after you celebrate a birthday, uh, 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, 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([19:43](#)):

So, um, it's very natural and, 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. Um, people might do it a little bit more casually, which is part of the reason <laugh>, uh, you know, they may not always succeed, but again, you have to try in order to get anywhere. So I'm a, I'm kind of a big fan of New Year's resolutions. I just think that if we want to see more 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 ([20:18](#)):

Yeah. I've heard you talk about, and, 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 a little bit about

Dr. Katy Milkman ([20:29](#)):

That. Yeah. Yeah. This is, I think, really important and it's based on work by my former student, Hank Chenai, who's a professor at UCLA's Anderson School of Management, and who I, um, am very proud of.

And she, uh, did this fantastic dissertation work on, on resets and fresh starts. Uh, after the two of us had, along with Jason Reese, another, uh, senior fellow warden studied their benefits. So we had shown that all these moments, this is when people are more motivated to pursue their goals. But Hank Jen and I both had a sneaking suspicion that, um, 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([21:19](#)):

And it seemed like basically what it was it does, is it creates this clean slate feeling where you have, um, the sense that, oh, it's a new chapter in my life. It's a fresh start. And, you know, yeah, I didn't quit smoking last year. I didn't get in shape last year. That was last year. And this, that was the old me. This is the new me, the new me's got it all, um, 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're, you've hit your stride when everything's lined up, um, maybe fresh starts can be harmful. Then in fact, I had done a study that showed, um, 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([22:02](#)):

So that seemed at odds with what we knew from this new research on fresh chart. So Hank Chen for her dissertation decided, okay, she was gonna go and study whether resets can be harmful when people are, uh, 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 constructed where she could artificially change people's performance and create disruptions. Um, 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, um, 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 fresh.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([22:51](#)):

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, on their, their records and the other doesn't. Uh, and that's the only thing that really differs between the right, both moving to a new team, both moving to a new place. Um, she thought it would be really neat to see if that reset, that wipe clean had differential effects for players who were being traded, um, when they'd had a great season to date versus a week 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, um, traded across leagues and gets this free, uh, this fresh start, this reset, and one of whom is traded within Le that, so that's what everybody's traded.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([23:37](#)):



And, um, the players who were doing great and get this reset, it turns out to her depress their performance relative to players who were great and get to hold onto their statistics. Interesting. Um, and it's actually just as you'd expect fresh start effect is, it's the opposite for players who are having a rough season. They benefit from having their slate wiped clean. So it just suggests that fresh start are very useful when we are not achieving our goals. And they can be, you know, we can harness added motivation to jumpstart progress, but when things are going well, we wanna be really wary of them and try to plan to avoid the disruption. Or at least have, if you're gonna have a disruption, right? You're gonna go on a vacation or you're gonna, um, there's gonna be a holiday break, or it's January one, and you, you're sort of planning for a new semester if you're a student. Yeah. And you need to think carefully about how you're gonna hold onto that momentum because it is gonna be broken and disrupted by that change.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([24:34](#)):

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

Dr. Katy Milkman ([24:44](#)):

Exactly.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([24:45](#)):

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 <laugh>, we're kinda falling down <laugh>, what happens? Why is it so hard to see a goal through to the finish? What happens to us when we take that, take that reset that we need, set those goals and then have a, have a difficult time achieving them?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([25:12](#)):

Well, it it, the answer is, it depends, but a lot of things are working against us. Uh, and, um, one of the biggest barriers, I think most common is, uh, that it's typically not fun in the moment to do the things that are, are aligned with our goals. Um, the payoff is normally down the line, right? So eating the pizza is fun. Now, having the great, you know, fit perfect, you know, body and, and good health, that's great, but you don't get it for a long time. <laugh>, right? Many pizzas you have to resist before you get that reward.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([25:50](#)):

Amen. <laugh>.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([25:52](#)):

So, so the, the here and now rewards aren't aligned with our goals most typically mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And that's really difficult because of something I mentioned earlier, which is present bias. This tendency, we have to focus on the here and now to overvalue that relative to the long-term

rewards. So that's a major barrier. Um, but there are others too. Habits, uh, 10, you know, can be a barrier. We develop habits often, uh, they sort of go on autopilot that, that aren't super positive <laugh>, and that can be difficult because we, we rely on them unthinkingly, unwittingly. Um, 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 gonna be a, a challenge. We can be forgetful, um, when we're prioritizing. And that is another barrier to change confidence, which we've already talked about is a barrier, right?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([26:47](#)):

So there's a lot of things that can be working against us. And, 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 gonna do it. And, and we have this optimistic belief that it'll all work itself out, but, uh, to achieve a goal or any anything else in this world, it really does require sort of careful planning, strategic thought, and, um, using hopefully some of the, the tools that, uh, science shows can, can be particularly well suited to overcoming, uh, the barriers I just mentioned. Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([27:26](#)):

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

Dr. Katy Milkman ([27:32](#)):

Well, I think my favorite, it 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. Um, and I think the, the wonderful finding there is that, uh, most of us think the right thing to do when we're trying to pursue a new goal is just like, look for the most efficient solution. So, um, say your goal is, I want to get fit. I'm gonna start going to the gym, you think, and I'm gonna head for the maximally efficient machine, say the StairMaster. I'm just gonna push right through. But research by ay Fishbach of the University of Chicago and Caitlin Wooley 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 to pursue their goal.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([28:24](#)):

They, they go for fun over efficiency. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So they may not be getting, as, you know, 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, um, if you prioritize fun over, uh, efficiency, you actually get better results cuz you persist longer. Uh, 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 biased, we overweight that we think it won't matter. We think, you know, I'll, of course I'm gonna just stick to uh, it and I'm gonna grind through and push through.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([29:09](#)):

But if the instant experience is unpleasant, we quit. So, um, one strategy I have studied for making it fun besides what they talk about, which is sort of, you know, just select a different way to your goal. Go with a, you know, do it with a friend or <laugh> well, you know, study while eating snacks, what, whatever it is. My, um, 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, that might, um, that you might not do that 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 know, you crave like, you know, Bridgeton or Emily in Paris, or <laugh> 24 Game of Thrones, whatever it is.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([30:01](#)):

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 gonna start craving them to find out what happens next in your latest show. You're gonna waste less time at home in the bargain watching those shows when you should be doing something more productive and time's gonna fly while you're on the treadmill. Uh, so, um, 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. Um, whatever the, the right or 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, a new equation essentially where present bias is working for you instead of against you. Cuz you're going to enjoy in the moment doing a thing that's good for you instead of dreading it. Yeah.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([30:55](#)):

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 gonna show up, what, what added, so you, 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 ([31:12](#)):

Yeah, I love that you asked that question. It's funny, this morning before we were talking, I was literally working on a, a research manuscript about this experiment that, um, Rachel Ger at the University of California at San Diego, uh, led that I got to be a part of where we showed that if you pay people to, to exercise together, um, like a dollar, but they only get paid if they exercise with a friend, Uhhuh <affirmative>, um, they exercise more than if you just pay them a dollar to exercise. So, which doesn't make sense from right, like the do, it's a dollar to 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, um, because they felt accountable to this other person. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, they told us. And, and they also enjoyed it.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([31:53](#)):

It was fun to work out with their friend. So you get the, the sort of double benefit of, um, it's essentially a temptation bundle cuz now the activity is more fun with someone else, but it, it also, you know, you're gonna let someone else down. They're not gonna, they're expecting you if you don't turn up, they lose their dollar and that is more motivating than just getting yours alone. Um, so I think there's huge

benefits from making things social and of course we've all missed that a lot in the last, gosh, almost two years now. Right? Um, but, but thank goodness we're getting back to being able to do a lot more things socially.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([32:28](#)):

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 back on track and how to deal with what is really at 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 ([32:57](#)):

Yeah. That's great. Well, first of all, I just wanna actually mention two things very briefly that we already talked about, which are helpful here. One is growth mindset, right? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. So if when you get, when you get that negative feedback, when something goes wrong, you think, what can I learn from that? What am I gonna not get wrong next time? You know, how, how, how can I analyze the situation and grow from it as opposed to just, oh, I'm, I'm such a failure, right? So it's a different interpretation, but that can really matter. Um, 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, you know, the start of a new season, the beginning of a new month, the beginning of a new quarter, sales at work, you know, whatever, whatever fresh start resonates for you, a birthday.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([33:45](#)):

And, um, sort of pin your hopes to I'm, I'm gonna start over, then that's when I'm gonna begin again. That's my moment. And that can help psychologically with sort of compartmentalizing this failure that was old me. This is, here's how things are gonna be different. So those are two strategies that can help. Um, a third one that I actually wanna mention though is based on research by, um, Marissa Sharif, who's my colleague at Wharton, and also Suzanne Chut Cornell. And this is based on a strategy Marissa used to motivate herself, uh, anticipating that she would sometimes fail to achieve a goal. And I'm realizing I'm giving a lot of exercise examples. I'm gonna give another one. Yes, <laugh>, we're staying on track. None of this is not my research and my book are not about exercise. It's, it's a, it's a goal. It's a common goal.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([34:27](#)):

But anyway, you can use this, these strategies and lots of the researchers and many other parts of life. But I'm gonna stick with exercise cause this is a story Marissa tells. So, um, her work on this was motivated by wanting to, to work out seven days a week ideally mm-hmm. <affirmative>, but knowing she couldn't always do it and being, uh, 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, if you set a low bar, like, ah, she, she really like, I'm gonna exercise five days a week. She's like, that's too easy. I'll always hit that, but I wanna push myself.

So you want that high bar in general. That's, uh, but when you set a high bar, you face another barrier, which is something called, and I love this, the what the hell effect.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([35:15](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, the what the Hell Effect is. That's a best named effect in, uh, in psychology. It, it is the effect where, uh, 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 I, it's often talked about in terms of diet, like, you know, you're gonna stick to this diet on Monday and then you go in to work and there's some donuts cuz somebody's having a birthday. You eat the donut and you say, Ooh, what the hell? And then you have, you know, pizza for lunch and cake for dinner and so on. The whole thing is you give up on yourself. So, um, 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?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([35:51](#)):

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, if something goes terribly wrong, right? Like she gets sick one day, or, um, she has an out-of-town friend and she just has to be with them in the evening. And so she can't make her run. She calls it an emergency and she turns in one of her chits to herself and it doesn't count against her. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, she gets two of these freebies a week. Um, and this has really motivated her.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([36:30](#)):

She almost never takes them because she, you know, she doesn't want to, unless it's a true emergency. She tries to save them in case something is really needed. But, um, 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. Um, 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. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, or when you give them the goal seven days a week with no emergency outs, when they're gonna have this, what the hell effect? So I I, you can call it a 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. Uh, and, and not allowing yourself to give up when you do in this way, I think is really important and valuable.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([37:19](#)):

I love that. You know, it's a, it's a, it's a component of the Weight Watchers app as well. I'm a big, uh, 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, um, you know, number of points that you can use any time. It's like sort of bonus points if you will. Um, and it kind of works the same way, so Absolutely. It's really, yeah. Really interesting to learn about the science behind all of this. Maybe talk a bit about how this work has impacted your life. You

know, 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. Like, how do you, how do you, uh, prevent yourself from falling into the trap of being like, okay, I'm an expert in this <laugh>, I can't ever drop a ball <laugh>, how do you not let that pressure get to you?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([38:20](#)):

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

Laura Cox Kaplan ([38:51](#)):

Boring.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([38:54](#)):

Well, you know, they end up in elite universities study, like that's where you want them. They're like got everything perfect in life. Um, 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 like one category of people who studies and 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, the stuff, like if I don't try to figure out what works, I will never get anywhere on this planet <laugh>. So, uh, I definitely have always identified in that ca in that group. Like, I struggle with decision making. I'm the person who at you go out to dinner with and I'm like staring at the menu anxiously until the waiter arrives and I change my mind after I hear what someone else ordered.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([39:38](#)):

Then I call a waiter back and change my mind again. And I teach decision making. Um, but I teach it because, uh, 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, like, how do we do this all better? How can we grow? Yeah. So anyway, I, I don't, 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? <laugh>, how could that have happened? An optimal decision making machine would never have, uh, given into that temptation or, and then, um, and therein is opportunity to do science. So yeah, I think that's how I deal with it. <laugh>.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([40:22](#)):

I love that. And it's such a perfect illustration for why things like perfectionism can really stand in our way. Um, you're talking about the opposite of that. You're really talking and you are at the top of your field. For anyone who 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, um, 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, and sort of getting to this idea of imposter syndrome that sometimes we can be our own worst enemy.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([41:08](#)):

So I love all of that. Another 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 can be all sorts of things, or it's the friends that we pick or the friends that we, 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 ([41:40](#)):

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, um, 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. Uh, and the sort of reason for this is that we look to the people around us to understand what's appropriate, how and what's, what are we capable of too. So they shape our beliefs, they give us information about what's normal, what's possible. And you know, if you see your roommate staying in on Thursday and Friday nights to try to ace their exam, you're like that, that's a smart thing to do.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([42:28](#)):

<laugh> smart people are staying in. If you see them going out and partying all the time, you're gonna 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, um, that the tools that they're using to get ahead in life or, or not to get ahead right as the case may be. So, um, you know, 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. Um, and you get to pick your spouse and you get to pick your, you know, who's in your running club or, and I also want to talk about my advice club or my no club.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([43:08](#)):

Yes. Um, 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. Um, and you can also choose them so that they show you what's possible. You don't wanna be hanging around people who show you you're a constantly a loser. That's also important, right? Like if, 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, like, if your

college roommates are curated to be like outstanding and you're a poor achiever and the goal was to like pull you up.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([43:50](#)):

Well, if the gap gets too big, you, you no longer even identify with these people. Like, who are these weird 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 of, and ability to relate. Um, I have the most wonderful thing in my life and, and it helps me harness the forces, uh, uh, the social forces for good that I've just been talking about. And, um, I I call it my advice club started out as a no club, but it grew to an advice club.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([44:22](#)):

Started out as a what? A no

Dr. Katy Milkman ([44:24](#)):

Club. We called it a no club. So it's a group of women, n

Laura Cox Kaplan ([44:27](#)):

O or k n o W

Dr. Katy Milkman ([44:29](#)):

Oh, oh gosh, it should be K n o W, but n o <laugh>. N o Cause there's this wonderful research your listeners I think will like this by, um, it's been, it was led by Linda ba Babcock at Carnegie Mellon University showing that women much more than men do sort of office housework. Um, so non-pro 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 com, thankless committees, right? Uh, organizing the holiday party, you name it. Women do it more. We're asked to do it more and we do it more. Um, we

Laura Cox Kaplan ([45:06](#)):

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

Dr. Katy Milkman ([45:13](#)):

As we pick it up. And when we're, but when we're asked to do it some sort of volunteer task, we say yes more than our male peers. They say no, right? And, uh, as a re you know, anyway, so this has negative career consequences as you can imagine. And based on that research, Linda was giving a presentation at Pennon, she exp 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, I uh, contacted a couple of my close friends at other universities with similar career aspirations at a similar career stage. And I said, women of course. And I said, let's form an o clubb. This seems brilliant. We're all saying yes to too many things. All of us, you know, 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.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([46:02](#)):

So we did this and, and now whenever we get an optional ask something outside of our, you know, immediate work task, we reach out to each other for advice on is this a yes or a no? Um, it's, it's come to be more than just a no club. It, that's why I say it's an advice club. It's like, it's my life support group. These women are amazing. And, um, it has all these benefits. One of them is just, you know, anytime I need peer support or advice, I have brilliant people to provide it. Uh, we have camaraderie. 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 that I have actually benefited from giving advice when I mentor, mentor, uh, my peers when they reach out to me and say, oh, I've got this opportunity, you know, should I go to Switzerland to do this thing for free with my time?

Dr. Katy Milkman ([46:49](#)):

Does it make sense? I don't know, it'd 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 rate the, the, the decline of that invitation politely. I learn a couple things. One, it builds my confidence that when I face similar challenges, I'm gonna know what to do. I'm gonna be able to figure this out for myself. I've got a clue. Um, and, and second it helps me like anticipate what's coming. And so I've grown both through the support network and the social learning, but also through giving advice. And this is actually a really cool, there's this really cool research by Lauren es Chriss 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, right? Because when you give that advice, you introspect more deeply about how to achieve something. You feel a growth and confidence. If somebody's looking to you for guidance, you must have what it takes. Uh, and once you've told someone else they should do this, you're gonna feel like a hypocrite if you don't walk the talk yourself. So, um, anyway, my advice club is a superpower and I think all women should have one <laugh>.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([48:08](#)):

I love that. I love that. That's amazing. 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 ([48:26](#)):

Yeah, it's a great question. I, I do think that to influence others to, uh, 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're just talking about how important your social, you know, your social environment is and that choosing the people you surround yourself with matters. But, um, 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

*She Said/She Said Podcast With Laura Cox Kaplan*

*Episode 245 (Encore)*

*How to use behavioral science to break bad habits and make your goals stick!*

*Guest: Dr. Katy Milkman, author of "How to Change"*

them achieve their goals, right? If, if you're trying to encourage someone, for instance, and this is literally there's great research to back this, you're trying to get people to save, um, more energy, right? To be more energy efficient. It turns out to be really effective to tell them as an influence tactic you're using, you know, 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 want, they don't wanna be an outlier. They wanna fit in. Uh, 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 ([49:44](#)):

Yeah, I love that, Dr. Katie Milkman, I, uh, it was such a pleasure to have you here. It was really, 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. Katie, thank you.

Dr. Katy Milkman ([50:01](#)):

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

Laura Cox Kaplan ([50:04](#)):

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