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THE PERFECTIONIST MYTH

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Hey there, my friends. How are you? Thank you for coming back and listening to The Highly Valued Leader Podcast. I am so grateful for you and I enjoy bringing you this podcast so much.

I'm really excited about this week's episode called *The Perfectionist Myth*. I made up that title and I love it so much. I want to say before you run screaming because you're not a perfectionist and you don't consider yourself a perfectionist; I want to say that this episode is for both the perfectionists who know they're perfectionists and may want to make some tweaks to that, and it's also for the folks who don't know that they're perfectionists. It's basically for all human beings because perfectionism shows up in so many ways.

This isn't just for people who try to make their work perfect or get upset when there's hair out of place, or whatever that is. It's for people who have a goal that they just can't seem to achieve. It's for anyone who lets fear of failure stop them from taking action. I feel like sometimes everyone has that initial fear, but some people can work through it, and some people let it stop them from taking action. If that's you, then you might be dealing with the perfectionist myth without even knowing that you are. It could be getting in the way of your career potential without you even knowing that it is. So we're going to talk all about this today.

Let's talk about this week's topic, which is the perfectionist myth. The goal of every one of my podcast episodes is really to help you reach your career goals. That's what we do here. We help you reach your career goals, whether that's giving you ideas to push you forward, or helping you understand what's holding you back. In every episode, I tried to talk about both. The perfectionist myth is often something that holds people back, in general.

We're going to be talking out there to people who are already self-identified as a perfectionist and maybe they want some help to stop being one. Then there are those of you out there who don't think you're a perfectionist, but you actually may be one, without you even realizing it. At least, if you know, you're a perfectionist, it's like admitting that you know what you're dealing with, admitting that you don't want to, I don't even want to say have a problem, because it's not really a problem to be a perfectionist unless you think it's a problem. But at least you know what you're dealing with.

Then there are those of you out there who actually have no clue that it's perfectionism getting in the way of you reaching your goals. That can be a problem, too. Because for some people, the idea of being a perfectionist is so unacceptable to them, that you're not dealing with it, or you don't want to face it. You don't want to admit that

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that might be with what you're dealing with. So I just want you to come into this with an open mind and say, it doesn't really matter, whatever you call it.

Even if you find out that you're a perfectionist, it's just a title. It doesn't have to mean anything. You get to decide what it means to you. It doesn't have to mean. I have an identity attached to it. It's just, that this is something that is a problem. And now I can solve it because I know it's a problem. That's the way that I would really encourage you to think about this. Don't get caught up in the title of being a perfectionist. It just helps me articulate to you where the problem might be coming from.

So we're going to break down this perfectionist myth and how it's getting in your way and talk about how to break that cycle. The first thing I want to talk about is the terminology of myth. The way I talk about myth is that it's a thought error. A thought error is simply a thought that you have that you think is going to get you one result, but it actually gets you a different result.

As an example, you might have thought that if you do everything perfectly, you're never going to fail. If you do everything perfectly, you are never going to fail. That's a thought error because we know that doing things perfectly, even if you could do them perfectly, does not guarantee that you're never going to fail. Even if you think something is perfect, it's not going to be perfect for everybody. Doing all the right things or the perfect things doesn't mean that you won't fail. So thinking that is a thought error.

A perfectionist myth is not really a myth that you can't be perfect, or that you can be perfect. When I'm talking about the perfectionist myth, it's really the myth that if something was perfect, in some area of your life, then you could finally be happy. That's the myth. That happiness comes from perfection in some area of your life.

It could be like, If I get everything done on time with no mistakes, I'll be successful and then I'll be happy. If I never say anything wrong in a meeting, people will think I'm smart, and then I'll be happy. If I'm always an inspiring leader, my team is going to like me, and I'll be happy. If I eat exactly what I'm supposed to eat, I'm going to lose weight or I'm going to be healthy, and I'm going to be happy. These are all thought errors. These are all perfectionist myths.

The reason they're perfectionist myths is because they're very absolute. We're using words like *always* and *never* and *everything* and *nothing,* that kind of thing. We're being very absolute in the way that we think about things. The reason we have, believe it or not, we perpetuate this myth is for pleasure. It's pleasure, believe it or not. We perpetuate it for pleasure. That's hard to say. Because we were hoping for happiness. We think happiness comes from perfection.

When we talk about this rationally, we probably know that no one really believes that you can be perfect. Not even the perfectionists out there believe that they can be perfect. But at least, that's what the conscious rational mind is telling you. There's no such thing as perfection. But your less rational, survival brain, which is your primitive brain is telling you another story. And the other story isn't always blatantly telling you that you need to be perfect. It's not coming out and saying, *Hey, you need to perfect here.*

That's where your brain gets really tricky. It tries to drive you towards perfection without you thinking that it's driving you towards perfection. It's saying things like *People who get promoted rarely make bad decisions, or*

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never make bad decisions. People who are successful are always positive. They're always looking on the bright side. Good leaders always let their people make their own decisions. Organized people have empty inboxes.

It's not always so obvious like *Never make a mistake. Never say the wrong thing*. It could just be, *If I really want to be successful or organized, here is the checklist of things that I have to do, or that means that I'm organized. Organized people have empty inboxes. Now it's getting really tricky now. So I'm either organized or I'm not.* We set these perfectionist parameters or these definitive visions of what it means to be what we want to be. And these definitions are so perfect, it's like black and white.

There are only two options. Either your inbox is empty and you're organized, thus, you're happy or successful, or whatever; or your inbox has emails in it, and you're disorganized, which means you're not good enough, thus you are unhappy or unsuccessful. You either had a good meeting or a bad meeting. You know how to do something or you don't know how to do something. You're perpetuating this perfectionist myth by telling yourself that you can only feel a positive emotion when you achieve perfection, when you get it right, or when you do well.

So it's not always about the word perfect, it's about being right or being wrong or doing well or doing poorly, that sort of thing. One of the perfectionist myths that I harbor, and that I work through all the time is that I am more confident when I weigh less. That is a perfectionist myth. I'm going to be more confident when I weigh less. Which means what I'm telling myself essentially is that I can't be truly confident at my current weight, which we know is bullshit. I can be confident whenever I want to be confident.

What cognitive behavioral science tells us is that our thoughts drive our feelings. This is the crux, the seed of the self-coaching model that I share with you in this podcast that I use with all my clients. We are always talking about how our thoughts drive our feelings. But a lot of the time, people think that other things drive how they feel. They might think the weather drives their feelings, or Coronavirus is driving their feelings. But that's not the case.

In my case, my weight is not driving how I feel. It's how I think about my weight that drives how I feel. I weighing 180 pounds have no power. What I think about weighing 108 and 80 pounds has power. If I wanted to, I could think that my weight is really incidental to who I am. That my weight is incidental period. It doesn't have to have any bearing on my self-belief. I can be confident right now if I want to. My ability to be confident has nothing to do with how much I weigh.

But the perfectionist myth is that I cannot be perfect, happy, or good in my life until I weigh a certain weight. And that can make you feel very desperate. It's a very desperate way to live because you're like, *I want to be happy. I want to do all these good things. I want to live my best life but I can't until I lose this weight.* And that thought can make you feel very, very desperate.

For some people that can be, *I can only be successful if I never fail.* I know a lot of people who would not call themselves perfectionists but they're afraid to fail. They think, *If I fail, I'm not going to be successful. If I fail, I can't be happy because I'm not going to be able to achieve the things I want to achieve.* Then that keeps them small, that keeps them afraid of failing. It's a very stressful way to live because you're always on your back foot.

So that's my first challenge to you. Is there something that you are putting off believing about yourself or allowing yourself to feel until you reach a specific result? That is the perfectionist myth at work. Whether you know it or not, it defers pleasure. It needs proof before it will allow you to believe something or feel something, which is kind

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of weird. Why would your survival brain, your primitive brain instigate this type of suffering? Because the survival brain is supposed to avoid suffering. It's supposed to help you help you avoid pain.

I've mentioned this before on my podcast. It's a very simplistic way of talking about how your brain works. But you have two different parts of your brain at work. Sometimes you have your primitive brain, which is more of your animal brain, or what I call your *survival* brain. People call it your *lizard* brain, I call it the *survival* brain. And you have this human brain, which is our more evolved brain, your prefrontal cortex, which I call your strategic brain. That's the part of your brain that can reason, that can plan. But the purpose of your primitive brain or survival brain is to keep you alive.

Back in the day, there were a lot of things out there that could kill us: cave people, dinosaurs, all the things. The purpose of your survival brain was to instinctually help you survive. This is the brain that most animals have. That's why I call it the *survival* brain. It's very descriptive. It's very obvious. Your survival brain has three things that it's focused on doing: avoiding pain, seeking pleasure, and conserving energy.

So if your survival brain is motivated by avoiding pain and seeking pleasure, then why is it deferring pleasure and constantly sending you this message that you're not good enough, that you can't do it, that you're not allowed to be happy until you do these things? It seems counterintuitive. But the reason it's doing that is that it's trying to keep you small. Because when you're small, when you don't try things, and when you don't achieve success; then you don't take risks that could actually cause greater pain in your life.

It's like having a super strict parent. When you have a super strict parent, like my parents were like, it's not that the school dance wouldn't be super fun; but then you might meet a boy and get pregnant and your life would be ruined, which is ridiculous. It's completely illogical that I'm just going to go to a dance and all of a sudden end up pregnant and a ruined life. But a super strict parent doesn't want anything bad to happen to you so you can't go have a dance.

It's not that playing with your friends isn't fun, or that it doesn't expand your thinking, but you have to focus on homework, otherwise, you're going to fail and your life will be over. It's a very catastrophic thinking that's happening. So your brain was trying to keep you safe, like a super strict parent, it loves you. But no, I do not want you to take chances so I'm going to keep you small. It's giving you some tough love. Stay small, you won't get hurt. The way it keeps you small in this particular case, is feeding you the myth of delayed gratification. You will be happy later, do this other thing first.

Another example of that is what I call the start-over cycle. Let's say you have a goal in your development plan to be an inspiring leader. And one of the indicators that you've identified is helping your team think for themselves that's going to be an indicator to you that you are a more inspiring leader. So you've decided that you're never going to solve the problems for your team, but you're going to help them solve their own problems.

In order to be able to do this, you've read some books, you've listened to some podcasts, and you made some plans on how you're going to show up, let's say on a given day, or in general. Then one day, you're working on this and everything goes sideways, and you end up traffic-copping everybody. You're telling them what to do and when to do it. And you know you're doing it, but you're doing it anyway. At the end of the day, you think, *I've totally failed. I am not an inspiring leader. I suck at this but I will start over tomorrow.* That's the start-over cycle.

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You discount what went well that day. You discount the emergency. You don't necessarily reflect on what you could have done better next time. You just think, *Well, I blew it*. Which is just very absolute and you're thinking the perfectionist myth at work. And you say, *Okay, I blew it. So I will start over again tomorrow.*. Or *I'm going to start over again after this emergency is over because I have to keep traffic-copying everybody until this emergency is over.*

Another example is an easy one. Let's talk about working out. This happens to almost everybody. It certainly happens to me. Let's say, you decide you're going to work out five days a week. You say *I'm going to start on Monday.* So you nail Monday; Tuesday is a bit of a slog; Wednesday, you don't work out at all. Then you think, *Well, I blew it. So I'm going to start over again next week.* Because you think if you didn't make it perfectly for five days in a row, then you have to quit and start over again.

You lose momentum in what you're trying to achieve because you weren't perfect on the five days. Same with your career plan. I encourage people to work on their career plans every day for 15 minutes. People start out with all the *gusto*. They're super excited, they're going to do it every day. They're paying me money and they want to get a good return on their investment so they're doing it every day.

But then, something happens, and then they don't do it for a couple of days. Maybe they stopped doing it for the rest of the week. And then they think, *I'll start over next week. I'll start again on Monday.* Versus just thinking like, *I'm going to miss a day here and there. Not a big deal.* Not being perfect, even if you have these grandiose ideas is just part of the process. A lot of people think that if they can't do it perfectly, then they can't do it at all. We're kind of told this when we're young.

We're actually told like, *If you're going to do something, do it right.* Which is complete bullshit. That is the perfectionist myth. You definitely can do something and get it partly wrong and get it partly right. But that's the definition of a myth. That's a thought error. *If you're going to do something, do it right.* That's a thought error. That doesn't have to be the truth. But it is a thought error that your survival brain is serving up to you to keep you small.

When you're in this start-over cycle or perfectionist myth, like where you're finally doing everything that you should be doing, and you've achieved this happiness, you believe all the things about yourself that you've always wanted to believe. And you feel all the things that you've always wanted to feel when you're in this cycle of believing that this is possible for you. It's a very compelling feeling.

You think it's like this fantasy, but you want to believe like, *Well, I kind of blew it this week.* But there's still this fantasy out there and the fantasy of me being and achieving all these things one day is actually very compelling. And it gives you lots of pleasure. It's satisfying because you have the start-over cycle going. You're like, *Well, I'm going to start again on Monday. I can start again after this.* It's the promise of future perfection that you're deluding yourself with, but it gives you pleasure in the short term.

Remember, your survival brain is motivated by avoiding pain, seeking pleasure, and conserving energy. So you feel a little disappointment when you fail at working out your career plan or working out or on the leadership thing or whatever. You feel some disappointment when you fail. But then your brain immediately serves you up the

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solution. Start over tomorrow. You can start fresh. You can be perfect next time. And it feeds you this perfectionist myth to replace the disappointment that you're feeling by blowing it.

It doesn't want you to feel the pain of disappointment so it feeds you this start-over cycle perfectionist myth. You can do it again tomorrow or next week or next month or whatever. And you start to believe it. You start to believe *I can be perfect next time* versus *I'll just keep going.* But, no. You said I*'m going to stop this now. I've blown it so I'm going to stop trying today or whatever, and I'm going to come back next week or tomorrow or whatever and start fresh* versus just keep going. And you start to believe that it'll be okay one day. *I can stop trying. I can give up as much as I want right now because one day, everything is going to be perfect.*

But you can see the problem with this because when you get caught in this pattern of letting yourself off the hook today because you believe in the fantasy that one day, you're going to nail it; you keep running this pattern over and over and your brain gets used to it. You're running this pattern of you giving up, and then believing in one day, and this pattern gets embedded in your brain, and it's hard to get out of it. You stop trusting yourself, you stop being in your integrity, you say you're going to start over and everything will be perfect next week.

But even when you say it, you're starting to not even believe it when you're saying it. *I'll start eating better on Monday.* But then, secretly, in your brain, you're like, *No, I won't.* You used to believe in this perfectionist start-over cycle dream but now you're not even believing yourself anymore. You don't trust yourself anymore. You kind of even stop trying until you're instigated by something to start over again.

So maybe you have a review coming up and even though you've stopped trying to be an inspiring leader, by this point, this is a review coming up so you sort of, *Oh sh**, I better start doing this again,* or your boss says something to you and you're invigorated again to start trying, or maybe you had a bad day at work, or maybe you missed out on a promotion, or maybe you're feeling overwhelmed and frustrated and that has pushed you into starting to try again. This start-over cycle can con you for a while and then you just stop believing in yourself. You stop believing in your abilities, and you stop trying until something instigates you to try again.

For instance, I'll give you an example of mine. So my productivity process is that on Monday mornings, I plan my week. I plan my free time first and so I plot that in my calendar. I have my appointments with my clients, and then whatever's left, I plot what I'm going to get done in a day. I religiously over-plan all the time. I think I'm going to get 20 things done. I create this mythical calendar that's chock-a-block full of too many things, and I'm unwilling to accept the reality that there is no way that I can get all of that done.

So I got through the first day. I'm super focused and I try my best. Maybe I missed one or two things, and I moved them to the next day. By the time I get to Friday, it is a freakin Gong Show. I have stopped trying to make my calendar work because I haven't been able to do it perfectly. So I've just stopped trying, and I think, *On Monday, I'm going to try again.* Then I go through these cycles where I stop planning for a couple of weeks, then I'm like, *I'm so disorganized, I'm so frustrated, I got to get back on the planning train.* So I overwhelm myself. I think I'm going to be able to do too much and be too perfect and I blow it.

Rather than just resetting myself mid-week, getting, or learning from the fact that I put too much in a day, I just give up and start again. I mean, seriously, how many times do you have to learn the same lesson over and over again? But we would rather get the sense of pleasure with this perfectionist myth than actually face the reality

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that it's going to take four weeks, not three *frickin* days to put together this damn video series. And guess what, during those four weeks, you're going to have a bunch of false starts.

You're going to blow it along the way. You're going to have to redo your work. You're not going to hit every deadline and you know what? It's okay. It's tougher to face that than it is to say, *Oh, I can do this thing in three days. That makes me feel much better than knowing it's going to take four weeks. I'm going to fall on my face 10 times while I'm doing it. I don't want to think about that.*

It's tough to break the perfectionist cycle but if you want to break it, the very first thing you need to do is to get real with yourself. How do you deal with a myth? You have to get real with yourself. It's so important. The biggest challenge that people have is not that they're setting goals. They don't have a problem setting goals. It's following through on the goals. That's the biggest problem.

When I say setting goals, I don't want you to think that you need to set realistic goals. Sometimes in business, I guess that's okay. But when it comes to growth, I'm not a big fan of setting realistic goals because I'd like to have people push themselves beyond what they think they're capable of. That's really more for the long term. When I talk to people about career planning, I try to push them past what they think they're capable of.

But there is such a thing as an unrealistic goal for the short term. Like, I can't do 20 things in one day; I can't lose 50 pounds in a month; I can't be the perfect leader starting next week. Those are probably unrealistic goals to set, depending on who you are, I'm going to guess that they are. I find that most people overestimate what they can achieve in the short term and they underestimate what they can achieve in the long term. So you have to get real with yourself on what goal you're setting for yourself and why.

I specialize in longer-term goals, particularly career planning and setting career goals. And what I always tell people is to push themselves past what they believe is possible. Because like I said, people will underestimate what they can achieve in the long term. So when it comes to the long term, I like to encourage people to pick a goal that's nine or 10 on the discomfort scale. Once they have that very uncomfortable goal, then we break it down into small pieces. We deal with the discomfort along the way. We practice believing that we can achieve the goal. We do all the things.

But the perfectionist myth is different. In the perfectionist myth, you think that you can't make a mistake. Once you start, there needs to be no bumps along the way, or else you need to start over. That is not true. You do not need to start over. If you blow it five seconds into trying to start to do it, you just have to keep going forward. That's the uncomfortable part.

So here are some suggestions for breaking the myth and breaking the start-over cycle. The very first thing is you just need to ***give yourself space to be imperfect***. As for me, with the video series, it's going to be four weeks. I need space for that. I need to blow it. I need to be able to rewrite it. I need to write it, record it, think it's awesome, then realize it wasn't and do it again. I need to give myself space to be imperfect. And I need to know that going in saying, this is going to be messy and that's okay.

Because I'm just going to know that going in and expect it so that when it happens, I'm not freaked out. And I don't just stop and throw up my hands. So it's like being an inspiring leader. You know that you want the people to think for themselves. But the first 10 times you try to do that, you actually end up giving direction versus helping

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people think for themselves. That doesn't mean that you are not still learning as you go. So give yourself space to be imperfect.

Number two, ***keep going***. Even if you blow it, don't stop. Don't stop, don't start over. Just keep going. It's like a speed bump, you don't stop driving. When you hit a speed bump, you don't turn around and go home every time there's a speed bump or a stop sign or something. You keep going forward. Of course, you keep going forward. That's what you need to do with every project or every goal that you have. It's okay to blow it. In fact, it's expected to blow it.

See point one, I expect to blow this. I expect to fall on my face. This is about practice. And when you practice trying to do something new, you mess it up. Just like when you are learning to play an instrument, you practice because you're going to mess it up a lot. And then you get better and better over time.

Number three, ***take time to learn along the way***. So, you expect to blow it, then you do you blow it, and when you blow it, think about what you would do differently. Why did you blow it? What happened? What were you thinking when you blew it? What could you have done differently next time? What worked? What didn't work when you blew it?

Maybe you'll have some things even though you blew it. Maybe you learned something that will integrate into what you actually think is how you define what success looks like in the case of, say, inspiring people, or what the videos are, or whatever it is. Keep going if you blow it, and then take the time to learn along the way. Just take five minutes to say, what could I do differently? Reflection is so important.

Number four, just know this, ***doubt and discomfort are a sign that you're doing it right***, that you are breaking the myth. I was talking about this with a podcast I did about impostor syndrome. If you doubt yourself, imposter syndrome is a sign that you are on the right track. Discomfort and doubt are signs that you're doing it right. If you're doing it right, you're going to feel uncomfortable, you're going to feel doubt, you're going to feel like you don't want to keep going. You want to stop.

Don't stop. It's going to be very uncomfortable. Everything worth doing is hard. That is a thought but it's usually true. It may not be true for every single thing that's worth doing in your life but usually, it can be hard. Doubt and discomfort are the price that you're paying to get to your goals. You're not paying in cash, you're paying in emotion. And the emotion that you are paying is doubt and discomfort.

In fact, if you are on a growth track, think about three emotions that you want to get used to feeling in your life; that you really want to practice feeling. Whenever I say that to people, they're like, *I want to practice being open; I want to practice being confident; I want to practice being accepting,* or something like that. Those are all great emotions, but in that mix of three, pick discomfort. If you can get used to feeling discomfort, if you get used to feeling doubt, nothing can stop you. Nothing can stop you. Think about that and look it down in discomfort as a sign that you're on the right track.

If you have a clear goal that you keep trying to achieve, and you keep coming up against a wall, I want to invite you to book a strategy session with me. it's free. It's 45 minutes. We talk about where you are now, where you want to go, and what you think might be getting in your way. When we talk about it, I'm going to ask you a lot of

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questions. And then I'm going to give you my observations and insights based on what you said and what I actually think might be getting in your way.

We can actually talk about whether you want to work together and if we're a good fit for working together long-term. So if you want to embark on that, there's lots of information to understand what's involved in booking a strategy session with me. You can go to melsavage.com/chat, and see if it's the right thing for you because coaching is so worth it. I wish I had had a coach way earlier in my career.

I want to tell you that true coaching is not helping you write a CV, or giving you a checklist of things that you need to do to get along with your boss or something. It's about helping you manage your mind. It takes work, it takes practice. That's why the best coaches are really trained and certified to help you with your mindset, as well as the actions that you could take.

I have 25 years in corporate. I have a lot of learning and all the mistakes I've made in my life. But I'm also trained to help you manage your mind so it's a good combination. And the most successful people have coaches. Your favorite sports team has a mindset coach who helps them and the individuals on the team realize their goals. Olympic athletes have coaches. Business leaders have coaches. Richard Branson, Oprah Winfrey, Bill Gates, and Tony Robbins, all of them have coaches. I have a coach as well.

Coaching is designed to help you reach your goals faster and more efficiently by keeping your head in the game. When I say your head, I mean your mind. So if you're interested in talking about what that might look like for you, then go to melsavage.com/chat to see what a strategy session can do for you.

Let's go over what we learned today. First of all, the perfectionist myth is a myth that when you are perfect; when something is perfect in some area of your life, then you can finally be happy, then you can finally have pleasure. It's a deferred pleasure tactic that's meant to keep you small. But the reason we're perpetuating this myth is for pleasure because we always have the promise of something good on the horizon, and your survival brain is trying to keep you small and safe. Just like a strict parent, it's giving you tough love. Stay small, it's better for us in the long term.

The other thing is the start-over cycle. It's a pattern that you have, a perpetuating pleasure myth that slowly breaks you down over time until you actually stop believing that you can actually start over. You stop believing that your goals are possible because you keep failing. You keep starting over and you think that maybe you can't do it.

Another thing we learned today is that the truth is you can believe and feel anything you want about yourself right now. You don't have to wait. I don't have to wait till I lose 30 pounds to feel confident. I can feel confident right now. Those two things are mutually exclusive. I can believe anything I want about myself right now. It is not tied to what I weigh. And you can believe and feel anything you want about yourself right now. It's not tied to what you achieve in your career, what your personal life is like, or anything you think about yourself.

The last thing is, the way to achieve your goals is to keep going and allow for imperfection. And give yourself some flexibility along the way. Thank you so much for joining me today. Just remember that doubt and discomfort are signs that you are on the right track. Thanks so much. I'll talk to you next week.

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