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SUCCESS INTOLERANCE AKA SELF-SABOTAGE AT WORK

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Hello there, my friends. Mel Savage here at The Highly Valued Leader podcast. It is so great to have you here.

I have another meaty topic for you this week. If you haven't noticed, a lot of what I talk about is really about helping you have a great career. That is my MO. And specifically, I want you to achieve all of your career goals with so much less drama. I say that so dramatically, I know. I feel like these days, especially in 2020, between the virus, a pandemic, a civil rights movement, and a US election is very stressful for a lot of people. There's so much going on in our lives. Working from home, schools closed, and all the things. There's all this drama that's out there if we want to make it dramatic.

I think that your career can be something that is really fulfilling for you, that is not sucking the life out of you, and you're not letting it suck the life out of you. It can be awesome. That's my MO. I am so committed to helping you be your best self, show up for yourself in your career, help you get what you want out of your career, and help you learn how to deal with the obstacles that show up in your career. The best way that I know how to do that, or I've learned to do that is to help you learn to manage your mindset and all that messiness that goes on in your head.

When I say mindset, a lot of people go to the *woo-woo* spiritual stuff. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about hardcore cognitive behavioral mind management, and emotional intelligence to the nth degree. I've been trained in that. I married that with 25 years of experience actually working in the trenches of the corporate world. That is really what I'm focused on. One of the big mindset challenges that I've been meaning to talk to you about, and that comes up all the time is something that I call *Success Intolerance*. That's really a terminology that I made up.

Another way of saying it is self-sabotage. I like success intolerance because self-sabotage sounds like an action that you're taking. But success intolerance is actually what goes on in your head. So for me, it more perfectly describes what is actually happening. First, your brain has an intolerance to success, and then you sabotage yourself. I like to get to the cause versus dealing with the symptoms.

We're going to talk about success intolerance this week. And it shows up, just as you would imagine, something like self-sabotage would show up so you can recognize it in the actions. You have an opportunity that comes up, and you know what you want to do, but you're just not doing it. When that happens, you think, *I must not want it*

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bad enough. Or *I'm so weak.* Or *Why do I hate myself so much?* Or I *don't know why I'm doing this to myself.* All of those things come up. You start questioning yourself, you start questioning who you are, and what your abilities are because of this success intolerance. It's happening in your brain.

You're like, *I see my success right there in front of me. The opportunity is being presented to me, I'm just not taking advantage of it. It's like something is stopping me from really capitalizing and giving my best effort toward whatever it is. Instead of taking advantage of this opportunity, I'm totally crashing and burning. I'm choking, I always choke.* You have a hard time following up whatever it is, and you see it happening. It's like a car crash, it happens in slow motion. And you can see it happening. You can see yourself letting go of the opportunity, but you just can't stop it from happening. That's what it feels like.

You're like, *What is the deal? Why am I doing this to myself?* We're going to talk about that today. We're going to talk about why you're doing it to yourself, where it comes from, how you can start to get aware of it, and what you can do to hack that process going on in your brain and start making some change in terms of how you handle success intolerance.

The first thing I want to say to you is there's nothing wrong with you. Success intolerance happens to everybody. Some people are just more used to handling it than other people. It's the way your brain is wired to work. We're going to talk about that. We're going to talk about what you can do about it.

Success intolerance. Basically, it literally means that your brain can't handle the idea of success. It is intolerant to the idea of success, and then it will take actions that sabotage you out of that. Basically, you want to do something or you want to have something and then you don't do it, or you set yourself up for less than ideal results. You might say, *I know I have to call this person, or I need to reach out, or I need to send my resume, or I need to negotiate this deal, or I need to get our Q1 plan sorted, or I need to put my pitch together or get prepped for this interview, or whatever.* But you don't do it. You leave it to the last minute, or you do a half-big job with it or you just don't show up for it. That's the outcome of what success intolerance creates.

That sounds like self-sabotage but it's really the product of success intolerance. We're going to get to exactly how that shows up. But I just want to be clear about what it looks like so that you can recognize it as it shows up. Success intolerance will always undermine your goals. It will always undermine your dreams and all the things that you want to do. It's going to make you do these actions that are super unhelpful. I talked about it like it is its own thing, like its own entity. It's not. It's just crap that's happening in your brain.

But these unconscious things that are happening in your brain that I would list under the heading of success intolerance, are really undermining your goals and undermining your dream, and then creating thoughts and feelings that are making you take these self-sabotaging actions where you find yourself saying things like, *I just can't help myself. I really don't want to be a controlling manager. But at that moment, when I see someone on my team not doing the right thing, or someone asking me a question, I just find myself telling people what to do versus actually helping them think for themselves. I know I'm supposed to help them think for themselves. I even know what questions to ask them. But I just can't help myself.* That kind of stuff comes up. That's an example of success intolerance in action.

Or you say, *I really want to apply for that job. But then, I got so busy with myself and all this stuff going on, I completely forgot to get ready,* Or *I didn't leave myself enough time to research, put the right resume together, or*

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write a really awesome cover letter, Or *I really want to meet with this person. But I find myself panicking and not setting up the appointment, or just canceling an appointment, or making up an excuse to cancel the appointment.* These are all actions that you take because of success intolerance. And it becomes a very frustrating process.

So what happens? Why does success intolerance happen? As I said before, it's normal. This is your brain doing its job to survive. Success intolerance is the way your brain is wired. Your cerebellum, people call it your *lizard brain*, which in Latin, actually means *little brain*. It's the part of your brain that was the first one to evolve. It's your server. I call it your *survival brain* because its modus operandi is to help you survive. It has been there from the beginning of evolution. When you are doing things that are pushing you out of your comfort zone towards success, like calling that person who you're a little nervous to call or taking advantage of an opportunity that you've never had before; when you're doing these things that take you out of your comfort zone, your brain thinks it's in danger because it is in uncertainty. What will happen? I don't know.

Because it doesn't know it doesn't want you to do it thinks it's in danger, it tries to find very tricky, very slick ways to get you to stop. So this survival brain of yours has a motivational triad. It was evolved to do three things – avoid pain, seek pleasure, and conserve energy. That's what your survival brain is focused on. You conserve energy so that you can go hunt for food and survive and not be too exhausted so that you can run from people who are chasing you and avoid pain from dinosaurs and all the things back in the day when our survival brain had it going on.

These days, we don't need that survival brain as much. But what it's trying to do now is to serve energy from emotional exhaustion, if you will, physical and emotional exhaustion. Pain, more often than not, these days, comes in the form of negative emotions. We don't have other animals trying to kill us and people hitting us with rocks on our heads and trying to steal our food. We don't live in caves. We have lots of great medicine. We have nice comfy homes, we drive cars that are Bluetooth connected to our iPhones, and all the things. Most of our pain comes from emotional pain.

Our brain is trying to avoid emotional pain. It's trying to conserve energy by not pushing ourselves outside of our comfort zone. It's trying to seek pleasure by trying to get you to sit on the couch and binge-watch NetFlix and eat SkinnyPop, basically. That's what it wants you to do. Love this brain, totally get it. It's not very helpful when you're trying to grow as a human being or in your career.

When you try to push yourself out of your comfort zone, you use more energy because you're creating a new pattern in your brain. It's like you're risking something. Your brain is used to doing things one way and now you're trying to do something another way. And because that takes more energy, your survival brain fires and says, *Wait, you're using up too much energy. I have to get you to stop.* And also by that, not only are you using up too much energy, but you're risking and causing yourself pain because you're about to do something that you don't know what's going to happen. You could fail and you could hurt yourself. You could feel these emotions like judgment, humiliation, and shame. What if it goes wrong? You start freaking out.

There are two basic concepts. Again, I've made up names for them. There are two basic concepts here that I think occur when your survival brain fires when you're pushing yourself out of your comfort zone. I call them pre-emptive failure and controlled suffering. Let's talk about pre-emptive failure. *Pre-emptive failure* is basically

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you saying unconsciously or consciously, but usually unconsciously, *I'm not good enough to do this so I'm not even going to try.* So you're going to fail ahead of time.

I know that I want to send my resume to this thing. But oh, no, I got so busy that I completely forgot. Your brain is tricking you. But really, behind that whole thing is you weren't so gung-ho on doing it because you didn't think you were good enough for that job, anyway. You see opportunities, maybe. Even in your organization, to join a task force, put your hand up, say something, share an idea, or pitch something innovative that you're not sure that your leadership team might accept, or whatever it is. Grow your business in a certain category, whatever it is, and you're not sure that it's going to work out so you just don't do it. That's what I call pre-emptive failure.

You are deciding to fail ahead of time and your brain is throwing up all of these excuses. Sometimes it's very obvious like you're just saying, *I'm afraid. I don't know if I can do it. I don't know if I'm good enough.* Or it's feeding you these tricky thoughts like, *Oh, I just forgot.* Or *I'm so busy.* Or *I'm going to do that next time. I'm just going to do this other thing first and get really good at this before I try that*. It's basically deciding you're going to fail ahead of time, so pre-emptively. That is one way success intolerance shows up in your brain.

The other way is something I'm calling *controlled suffering*. Basically, what I mean by controlled suffering is, choosing the suffering that you know versus the suffering that you don't know. You might say something like, *I'm going to stay in this job, even though I hate it, and I'm miserable because the next thing might be worse.* Or *I'm going to blow this up right now and fail because I know how to handle that feeling*.

I remember when I was in my 20s or something, if I got a zit or something, or if I was having a bad hair day, or if my outfit wasn't right; the minute I would see someone and they're like, *Hey, Mel. How are you?* I'd be like, *Oh, I'm great. But look at this awful zit.* Like I would want to blow it up. I would want to point out my failures. Or, *Hey, Mel. How's it going?* I'd be like, *Great. But look, my shoes are so dirty. I'm so upset.* I would want to blow shit up and let people know that I'm aware of my failure and control the feeling versus thinking that someone could actually look at me and see that zit and judge me behind my back.

That was more scary to me than just blowing it up and pointing out my flaws to everyone That is controlled suffering. Or *I'm going to blow up this meeting and not be prepared because I know how to handle the feeling of failure in that capacity. I don't know how to handle the feeling of failure. If I actually stand up there and perform in the meeting, and maybe it doesn't go well; I don't know how to handle that feeling. But I know how to handle the feeling of not even trying.* It's like your brain wants you to stay stuck in the drama that you know versus the drama that you don't know. That's what I call controlled suffering.

I want you to know that this shit happens to everybody. Nothing is wrong with you. Pre-emptive failure and controlled suffering, are just both examples of success intolerance. Both are examples of your brain just doing its job. It's trying to stop you from using up too much energy by creating new patterns or trying hard things. It's trying to stop you from feeling the pain of failure, humiliation, or some kind of negative emotion. That's all it's trying to do. It's trying to protect you. It's trying to be your friend.

But here's the thing with your survival brain. Your strategic brain is your prefrontal cortex, which is the one where you can reason, think, plan, make conscious decisions, and do all of the smart things. You could rationalize what's going on, get informed, and then make an informed decision. Your strategic brain is the part of your brain

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that you actually want to activate. You don't want your survival brain driving the bus, because your survival brain is always going to keep you small.

When that happens, when your survival brain activates, you just really want to stop and ask yourself, *Do I really want my survival brain driving the bus right now? Is this the right thing for me? What am I really thinking?* When you are trying to change how you think and stop letting your survival brain drive the bus, here's what happens, basically. An opportunity presents itself, whatever it is, and then you have a thought. You have a thought about the opportunity. The opportunity itself has no power over you. It's just a thing.

I see a job posting, I see an opportunity at work, and I'm supposed to call this guy; Q4 is coming up, and I don't have my plan yet; 2024 is around the corner, and I don't have my career plan sorted out yet. I haven't even looked at my career plan; My review is coming up and I haven't done anything; I haven't pulled my career plan out of my top drawer for the last six months…, whatever it is. You have these unproductive thoughts or excuses or beliefs in yourself that you've just let go unsupervised or unrecognized for all this time.

When your survival brain is activating, it's doing it in the background. It's doing it unconsciously. It's creating these thoughts that *you're not good enough* or *don't even try* or *the suffering you know is better than the suffering you don't know*. It's creating these thoughts and beliefs behind the scenes that you've just let go unsupervised or unrecognized. Oftentimes, what happens is you believe these unproductive thoughts as facts. You don't see them as thoughts, you see them as facts. You don't even know they're there.

Some people might just believe that nothing ever really works out for them. You might actually just believe that's a fact about yourself. That's just the case. That is an indisputable fact. But that's not true. You're not really someone that nothing ever works out for. Because I think if I pressed you, you could find a ton of times that things have worked out for you that you've done really well in your life; a ton of times, and I'm sure it would not take more than two minutes to figure that out.

But your survival brain doesn't want you to see all those things. It only wants you to focus on the evidence of when things didn't work out because that's going to keep you small. But you believe it like it's a fact. *Nothing ever works out for me*, or *I'd never get a job opportunity like that*, or *I always choke at the last minute*, or *I'm not a good negotiator*, or *I need to feel inspired to write a plan*. That's all bullshit. All of that is bullshit unproductive thoughts that your brain is serving to you as facts, and giving you all the evidence so that you believe it. But none of that has to be true. None of it has to be true. Because we all know what's happening.

As I said, this is like a car crash. You see it in motion, this success intolerance, but you just can't stop yourself. What I really want you to do first is recognize that it's happening and ask yourself, *What is the story I'm telling myself here?* Is the story that *I can't do this*, or *I'm going to choke*, or *I would never get that*, or *I'm too busy*? What is the story?

I find that there are five key story areas that you can look at. You're questioning your ability. You're questioning your future, like, *That's not going to fit with me, I could never do that. That's not what I want. I don't know what's going to happen*. Those kinds of things. Your environment, which would include time, I would say. Your environment where you are in your life. It could be your family, whatever it is. Your environment that you're in right

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now. You might have stories about that. You might have stories about your boss that are preventing you, like, *My boss would never let me do that. I can't talk to him or her about that. They wouldn't understand that kind of stuff.*

The last one is your people. When I say your people, I mean all the people that you work with; all the work relationships, your peers, your reports, indirect, the relationships that you build, essentially. You have stories around them. Certain people that you like, or don't like, or kinds of people that you like, or don't like. You think that people have to fit a certain format for you to like them or trust them or whatever. So your ability, your future, your environment, your boss, and your people. So what are these stories that you're telling yourself that are keeping you small?

I could never work with someone like that, I need someone like this…there are lots of things. They are just stories that you're telling yourself about what's possible for you. I want you to first, recognize that it's happening. The car crash is about to happen. Ask yourself what you're thinking. If you're not sure, look at one of those five key story areas to maybe suss it out. Usually, within those story areas, it's going to present as *something is either wrong with me* or *something is wrong with them*.

Something is wrong with me, it's normal to feel that. *Something is wrong with them*, you start to blame the external world. You use blame as a tool to escape responsibility for your choices. *I have to quit my job because my company is too political. I can't be successful here…a*ll of that stuff. If we actually think this external world controls our success, a lot of my clients come to me like that; we think that their job role controls their success, or the company controls their success, or what their boss says controls their success, or the kinds of politics and corporate culture controls their success. That's what they think. But none of that has to control your success.

Those are just stories that you're telling yourself. A lot of that is part of your environment and your relationships. I guess when you're 12, when you're a kid, maybe blaming your feelings on others, you can get away with that because you're 12 and you don't get it. But when you're 40, it's a no. You got to start taking responsibility on how you're showing up and what you're doing about it. But your survival brain is telling you *something is wrong with me* or *something is wrong with them*.

How do you fix it? You got to go to that brain of yours. Like I said, you got to go in there. First, you have to notice it. That's the first thing, to notice it. The second thing is, you got to ask yourself, *What story am I telling myself?* That's the second thing you've got to do. Then the third thing is, you have to decide if that's what you still want to believe about yourself. That's it. You have to practice believing something different.

I'm not saying that something unbelievable has to be believable. You can't go from *nothing ever works out for me* to *everything always works out for me*. That's not going to be believable. You can go from *nothing ever works out for me* to *sometimes things work out for me when I…* Instead of saying, *I don't know how to handle this call,* you can say, *I'm really good with people. And I'm just going to bring that to the call and see what happens.* You can just start to shift things from what you believe about yourself, and what you can do to what you believe about yourself that you can do, and start from there. It's just practice, practice, practice.

This is what coaching is all about. We help you find those other stories, those new stories. We help you recognize the stories that are holding you back, and help you create new believable stories for yourself so that you can start

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to move forward. I'm going to give you two questions that you can use whenever you notice it. Just try this as a starting place. They're not really questions, they're more like fill-in-the-blank statements.

The first one is I _____. So I *didn't do this thing*. Or I *didn't say this thing*, whatever. So I _____ because I was thinking _____. Just do that. *I didn't apply for the job, because I thought I'd never get it.* But it doesn't have to be more complicated than that. Once you get clear on that, then you can say, If I had to do it over, I would think _____, instead. *If I had to do it over, I would think it never hurts to try anyway, instead.* That's basically it. I know it sounds dead simple. But if it was simple, everybody would be doing it. It's not. It takes practice.

It's like playing the piano. It's like playing scales on a piano or on an instrument. You suck at it at first. But if you practice for 10 minutes a day, and a month from now, it's going to be awesome. You're going to start to see more and more and more. I'm going to tell you the bad news, basically the only bad news here. The bad news is, it never goes away. Your brain is wired this way all the time. The more successful you get, the more success intolerance you might have. Like your brain is always going to reset its level of success intolerance.

Every time you do something that pushes you out of your comfort zone and moves you toward success, your brain is going to go, *Don't go there. Do not do this. Danger, danger…,* all that kind of stuff. It's always going to take you being self-aware of what's going on in your head. But the good news is, you can get better at this. You can get better at recognizing it and moving through it faster. You're still going to get caught from time to time. But as you practice more and more, it's going to show up. It's not going to last as long.

First of all, because you're going to be able to deal with it and move through it. That's the key thing. Right now what's happening is you don't even know what's happening. You're not even trying to move through it. You're just succumbing to it a lot of the time. Practice doesn't make it perfect but practice makes it better, and more manageable. Let's call it that.

Success intolerance is one of the many things that we talk about, or I talk about with my clients when you work with me. And it's a big part of achieving your career goals. Because it's one thing to set a career goal and write a plan. That takes work, for sure. But the really hard part is staying committed to it and making it happen. That's where your brain goes. It's freaking out. When you actually start taking action against the plan that you've written.

Part of making it happen is getting coaching awareness on where your brain is being intolerant to success and it shows up in so many ways. So if you're interested in setting up the clearest, most effective career plan that you have ever set up in your life, and then also staying committed to really knocking it out of the park week on week staying focused and committed to your career plan, then I want to invite you to book a career strategy session with me. It's free.

We talk about where you are now, where you want to go, what you think is getting in your way, and all the things. Then I give you my observations and my insights based on what you said. We can see if we're a good fit for each other. You can learn more about that. And brushing this off, I think, is a really good example of success intolerance. Because I'll be honest, everyone would benefit from a really good executive coach, career coach, life coach, or whatever you want to call it. I honestly think it's all the same thing.

I, basically, am a life coach who specializes and has a lot of experience in corporate. Everyone needs one, though. It pays off huge because it's going to help you be successful faster. It's going to help you see what's going on in

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your head. Logically, most people get this. It's easier to see we know what's going on in your head and get out of your own way when you have someone who's listening to you 100% on your side, telling you, and showing you the things in your brain that you can't see. That's going to help you get back on track faster.

But even though we don't make sense, we don't even try. Rather, we say things like, *Oh, I don't have time. It's going to cost too much. I can't afford it. It's not a priority.* You don't even know if you can afford it. You just don't make it a priority. Let's say, I gave you the choice. You can spend money on a one-week, all-inclusive holiday to the Caribbean, Europe, or South Africa. You do that, relax for a week, and then come back to work, get to your desk, and fall into the same patterns almost immediately. How long does vacation happiness last after you come back?

So I gave you the choice. You could do the one week holiday, or for the same amount of money that you would spend on the holiday and the same amount of time that you would spend on a holiday, you could stretch that over three or four months with an executive coach, and learn to manage your career for the rest of your life.

One gives you a week of relaxation, and then back to the grind. The other one is the same amount of money and time. You get an executive coach and you learn to manage your career for the rest of your life. Which one is a better investment? It's not even a contest. If your goal is quality of life and increased success, then the coach always wins. Hands down. But so many people don't understand coaching so they don't reach out. They're afraid it won't work. That's success intolerance.

Instead of listening to your brain telling you it won't work, what if you said to your brain, Okay brain, *What if it did work? What if I could find a way to afford it? What if I could find the right coach for me? What would happen then? How would my life be different then? Maybe I don't need to make the whole decision today. Maybe I just need to take the first step*.

Honestly, take the first step, a free session with me. You're going to leave with lots of insight. So go to melsavage.com/chat. Come look at this. This is just stuff for you to chew on. What do you have to lose except your comfort zone?

That's all I have for you today, my friends. I hope you have a fantastic week. I will talk to you soon. Bye for now.

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