

Ep #233: Stop Chasing Calm: Emotions to Aim for Instead



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With Your Host

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This is episode 233, and today I'm covering a topic that has been quietly but insistently nagging away at me for some time. It's something that comes up in my coaching calls all the time, and it's going to be really relevant to you if your go-to desirable emotion, like the emotion you want to feel in a situation, is calm. If you're prone to thinking or saying, "I just want to feel calm," especially in the middle of a hard project or struggles with your kids, or in any situation that's stretching you, then this episode is for you.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen, then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author of *Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Welcome back to the podcast, everyone. I'm just feeling so excited right now. I'm excited to talk about today's topic of being calm, but I'm also excited because the last couple of weeks have been really big and amazing. We opened the doors to my membership for the first time in a year and a half and transitioned all the existing members over to our new platform.

So I want to take a moment to celebrate that and to celebrate my team and all the members, everyone who has been involved in this. And to say welcome to everyone who has joined. I couldn't be happier with how this whole massive project of mine has gone, and it's so great to be on this side of it now, rather than living in Google Docs, to be actually seeing and taking part in the coaching and all the conversations that are happening, both on our calls and on the app. I mean, it's just outstanding, the quality of conversation, and we haven't even officially kicked things off with our summer workshop yet.

Solstice is later on this week. Well, it will actually have happened by the time this episode comes out. And the topic is Rewire Your Brain. So I'm just feeling really excited to teach that workshop and see how it unfolds, see how you'll respond to it, and then the ripple effect of it in the coming months

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and years. We've also had so many former members sign back up. And we've had existing members who don't use Facebook, which is where our community chat used to be, but now that we're on Circle and it's very accessible through the app as well as desktop, they're getting involved again and enjoying themselves, and of course, all the new faces. So I'm just feeling really great over here. So welcome to all of you. It's great to have you.

Now, today, we're talking about something, as I said, that's been on my mind for a while, and it's something that might sound counterintuitive, and it's why calm is often the wrong goal and what to aim for instead. This is a conversation I've had countless times with clients. When I ask them how they want to feel in a tough moment, so they come to a call or they're posting in the community, there's a situation going on in their life, and they explore why it's an issue, what the mindset stuff at play is all about, and then how do they want to show up to that situation? Like, how would they like to feel in it? And the most common answer by far is calm.

And I get it, okay? Because when you're stressed and everything's feeling urgent and frantic, and you're overwhelmed or you're feeling frustrated and angry, calm seems like the antidote to that. And it kind of is. It's that desired destination where you don't feel any of the discomfort and the stress that you're currently experiencing with that situation.

But calm might not actually help you. And for many of you listening, especially if you're thoughtful, driven, self-aware, emotionally aware, then chasing calm might actually be holding you back more than it's helping you to move forward.

So that desire or need to feel calm is very understandable, but it's misleading. And it usually comes from one of two places. One is that you're overwhelmed and you want relief from that, relief from the stress and intensity of what you're experiencing. And the second one is that you've internalized a belief that calm equals control, and that's what equals success.

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And in our culture, especially on social media, calm has been idealised. I'm thinking about all the serene voices and Instagram quotes about peace and balance, which are always set against an image that's minimal and absent of colour, and there's certainly no piles of stuff at the bottom of the stairs in any of this stuff. And there's parenting books that talk about a calm presence like it's the holy grail. I'm not saying that's not beneficial to have.

But when calm becomes the emotional gold standard, when it's the only acceptable state, you'll find yourself failing over and over again, not because you're doing anything wrong, but because you're aiming for something that might not even be accessible or even useful in that moment. So when you focus on feeling calm and that's your goal, you're setting yourself up to fail.

Especially if you're navigating a tough work project that has moving deadlines and human messiness, if you're parenting small kids whilst running on broken sleep, if you are experiencing relationship issues that you're trying to navigate or repair, but the emotions are high, or just doing anything that matters to you. If it matters to you, you will care, and because you care, you will feel.

So in those moments, calm is unlikely. I'm not saying it's not possible, but it's less likely, and it's unhelpful to strive for that as a first port of call. I'm going to get on to what's more useful in a moment. But calm has become this shorthand for not feeling anything, and certainly not feeling anything that's disruptive in some way or uncomfortable.

So we want to question, like, is that useful? Is that what we actually want, even if it, you know, the idea of relief is good? You know, I understand that. But I think you can start to see how there are issues with doing so.

So if you're in a stress response, like fight or flight, there's that go, go, go energy where things feel very pressing and urgent, and you are mobilised and you need to do something. And if your experience of that is that's quite

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intense or uncomfortable in some way, of course, calm is going to be very appealing, right? You're probably desperate for that relief.

But interestingly, when you're in that place, you might even reject the possibility of feeling calm, especially if someone else suggests it, because the other part of this is that your body has learned to equate high arousal states and activation with safety through productivity or just being in that survival place. So even though you long to feel calm, you also fear the idea of feeling calm because of what you think will happen if you do. Like the wheels are going to come off in some way. So you just have to keep going.

So when you say, "I just want to feel calm," what you might actually mean is, "I want relief. I want a break. I want someone to come in and save me. I want to stop feeling like I'm failing at everything, or like I'm about to make a mistake that's going to have really serious negative consequences," whether that's actually true or not, but that's what your mind is going to tell you in those moments.

But when you're trying to change how you feel in a situation that is charged for you in some way, aiming for calm immediately is often unrealistic. And I don't think I've ever heard a client tell me that they want to feel calm, and I've felt that they were setting themselves up for success by declaring that.

And please know that I believe in my clients and I do think that in some cases it's appropriate and possible for them to get to calm. But I don't know how useful it is to aim for that as the starting place.

If you're overwhelmed, of course, your system craves relief. But the issue is that calm might be the end destination that you do get to, but it's not the first stop. And trying to go straight there often leaves you feeling like you failed again. Like you're doing it wrong, like you're never going to get it right because you're not magically peaceful on command. And I think it sets you up for shame because you're chasing a state that's contextually inappropriate, and also ignoring the value of other emotional states that are probably more doable and more useful.

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So think about parenting. One of the most common things I hear from clients is, "I just want to feel calm with my kids." And look, if that happens, brilliant, but as a parent myself, my thoughts on the matter is that setting calm as the standard for parenting is a setup. Have you met kids? Kids are not calming. Parenting isn't calm.

Can there be moments of calm and peace and quiet? Yes, possibly, but expecting it and aiming for it and being attached to the idea of it is setting you up to suffer. And that's on top of any quote-unquote "suffering" that comes from the hundreds of micro-stimuli every hour and trying to meet your own needs, their needs, maybe even getting a warm cup of tea in the process. You know, calm just isn't usually on the menu when you're sleep-deprived, overstimulated, or being pulled in five different directions.

So, of course, you're not calm. But that doesn't mean you're doing parenting wrong. It means you're alive, you're a human, and kids are kids. I get the urge for calm. I have been there myself in those moments, and it is admirable that you're a self-aware parent and willing to work on this. But is trying to feel calm setting you up for success? And is it the most useful emotion for you to aim for and to create?

There's what actually matters more than calm is connection. Because connection allows for a range of feelings, all jumbled up inside it. There can be tenderness, there can be playfulness, there can be frustration, there can be empathy whilst being connected in your parenting, connected to yourself, connected to your children, and what's going on.

Whereas calm becomes this rigid standard that actually blocks real presence and connection. So instead of aiming for calm, I want you to ask what emotional state is more doable as a first port of call, or maybe it's the first and the final one because it works so great and you realize, actually, now that I'm doing this intentionally, I don't need to get to calm because this is great as it is.

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So what would actually serve you in this moment? Would it help to feel more connected, to feel grounded or curious? What about determined or flexible, or courageous? You've got so many options here other than calm. I want you to liberate yourself from the idea that you need to feel calm, even if you want to.

Because all these other emotions still allow you to show up with presence, but they're not setting an impossible standard. They don't demand the equivalent of emotional flatlining, which is actually when people talk about feeling calm, what I think they're talking about, talking about not feeling anything.

So all these other feelings that I've mentioned, they allow for movement, for the texture of the experience, and your responsiveness. And sometimes, what we need isn't calm at all. What I mean about there's other emotions and feelings that are more useful, because sometimes what we want to bring is a bit of heat and a bit of fire, not necessarily to burn everything down and to damage things and people, but to bring some clarity, to fuel action, and to change things.

There are moments when activation, arousal, adrenaline, even anger, are the right response and they are useful when you wield them responsibly, because those states, when they are honed and used responsibly and with intention, that's more useful than suppressing them, because it's going to help you to take action, to speak up, to advocate for yourself or for others, to protect someone you love, or draw a necessary boundary.

A lot of the time, we label these states as bad or undesirable because they're uncomfortable or we're used to expressions of them that aren't self-responsible and that are harmful. But they're part of your emotional repertoire for a reason. And that fire in your belly is trying to help you to do something. And your job becomes discerning how to use it and when to use it. It's like a blade that you sharpen rather than just wildly swinging it around.

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For example, if someone crosses a boundary, do you want to feel calm about it? Or do you want to feel clear and grounded with a charge in it that helps you to say, "That doesn't work for me," and actually mean it.

Same goes for work. You don't need to be calm to give a great presentation. But being focused, being clear, and a state of arousal is actually useful because it helps with your performance. Whereas if you go for calm, you know, how likely is it that you're going to get there? But also, you're going to bypass the benefits of arousal. And this matters especially if you've been socialised to be emotionally low-maintenance because calm can get coded as the correct state.

And if you're stressed about a work project, feeling calm might not even be appropriate. A better goal might be focused, resourceful, or committed. These emotions are active, they're not passive, and they're often what creates progress.

Once you've gone through those emotions, once you've used them, then calm might come in, but forcing calm first is like trying to go to sleep by telling yourself to relax. It rarely works, so you just skip setting it up as the goal in the first place.

Chasing calm is emotional perfectionism in disguise. It sounds mature and responsible, but if your internal goalpost is, feel calm or you're failing, then what you're really doing is adding another impossible standard that you're going to use to shame yourself. And I've seen people weaponise calm against themselves just like they do with self-improvement, that I spoke about in a recent episode. Why am I not calm yet? Becomes, what's wrong with me? There's something wrong with me, or I should be able to remain calm no matter what. And it means that I'm a terrible human being that I'm not.

So calm isn't proof that you're doing life right. Calm can actually become a form of emotional rigidity. It's the emotional equivalent of always trying to keep your heart rate the same. It sounds healthy in theory, but in reality, it's

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not. A healthy heart rate has variability. It changes throughout your day depending on what's going on. And the same goes for your emotional state.

So let's get out of this binary where calm equals success and any other way that you're feeling equals failure. Instead, let's talk about the importance of emotional range and emotional agility because your system should be able to speed up, to slow down, to adapt, and recover. And calm is one place within all of that, but there's so many other options that I would love for you to explore.

And if you want to increase your emotional range, that doesn't come from trying to force yourself into feeling calm. It comes from being willing to feel discomfort without resisting it and to expand into it. And for those of you who are in the membership, if you go to the Inner Odyssey course and you go to the module that's all about emotional capacity and feelings, there are some guided audios in there to help you work with the emotions you're experiencing. So you can head there and practice feeling your feelings.

Now, I used to have a tricky relationship with the wind. If you've been around the podcast for a while, you've probably heard me speak about it before. But as an autistic person with sensory sensitivity, wind has a huge impact on me. And for a long time, by the way, I'm not talking about gas that I produce. I'm talking about the wind, the actual weather, just to clarify. And for a long time, I just tried to avoid the wind. So I would stay inside, I'd cancel plans, I'd make adjustments. And there's nothing wrong with that, right? That's a great way for me to take care of myself. But I also wanted to be outdoors more and also, I live in a seaside town in England. It's windy for a lot of the year.

So that autumn, this was a few years ago, I made it my goal for the autumn to change my relationship with the wind. But that goal didn't mean that I was aiming to feel calm about it, and feel this state of calm in the wind. It meant me getting outside and actually being in the wind and using the resourcing techniques that I teach in the membership to settle my body when it felt overwhelmed and to open up to the experience without pushing

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or forcing myself. And over the course of a few months, it actually happened quite quickly, I was able to increase my capacity to be in the wind.

But imagine if I'd set a goal to feel calm in the wind. It doesn't make sense, does it? It sounds ludicrous to expect myself to go from having autistic meltdowns to feeling calm. But that's literally what a lot of you are doing when you set a goal to feel calm in a challenging situation.

Now, that goal, that process worked really great for me and it did increase my capacity to be in the wind. But there's still days where I find it challenging, and that's okay. I'm not going to force myself to endure anything because that wouldn't be me taking exquisite care of myself, which was one of my rocks for that goal, one of the essential things that I was going to do as part of achieving that goal. It had to be through taking care of myself.

But my goal has never been to feel calm when I'm in the wind. Now, has that happened sometimes? Yes, it has, and it's been great. But if you're navigating a toddler meltdown or a big work project, a health diagnosis, a decision that you keep delaying, then forcing calm isn't the move you want to make. Learning to be with yourself in the experience is.

So if you're someone who keeps aiming for calm, I want to invite you to aim for something different. Aim for increasing your capacity, aim for emotional range, aim for connection. Pick a feeling that you would like to feel instead and aim for that. Or think about actually keeping the emotions that you're feeling, but using them with intention, feeling them with intention.

And if and when calm comes to you, amazing. Because it will. I see it all the time. I've had that experience of that in my own life, because at some point, the skills that you've built and the repetition that you've put in means that it will feel straightforward to you. That thing that is so charged for you now won't always feel that way.

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And if you want help with that, if you want coaching, if you want practical tools and an amazing community, then make sure you join my membership, Powerful, the next time we open. But for today, if calm has been your holy grail, then this is your permission slip to just let that go and instead aim for what helps you to show up as the version of you who can handle this, who can be present, who can make decisions, have challenging conversations, and feel your feelings. Because the relief that you're craving comes from developing emotional range and self-trust. That's what it's about.

Okay, folks, I'm so glad that we got to have this conversation today. Let me know how it landed. If you're in the membership, stick a post up, share your reflection. We can coach you on the things that come up if this is something that has landed for you. If you're not in the membership, hit me up on social media, let me know your thoughts, and I'll catch you next week.

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