

Ep #254: When Independence and Self-Reliance Turn into Isolation



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Maisie Hill

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This is episode 254, and today we're talking about something that's a strength until it isn't: independence. More specifically, that line between being resourceful and being self-isolating. We're going to explore why doing everything yourself can feel safer than asking for help and what to do about it.

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*.

Okay, my loves, welcome to the podcast. I have been off sick with a cold, flu thing, so I'm a little bit late recording this episode. I'm also still a little bit snively, so my apologies if that affects your listening experience, but I was just so determined to record this episode.

But before we get into today's very juicy topic, I want to invite you to join the membership because on November 26th, that's a week after this episode airs, I am teaching a power class on boundaries inside the membership, which is going to be followed by a whole series of coaching calls dedicated to boundaries. I know this is a hot topic, and it kind of breaks my heart a little because I see everyone trying to do work with boundaries in their lives, which I'm so impressed by, but I see these common issues coming up in how people are trying to set boundaries and hold them.

And I know I can help you with that, and I just want to course correct this conversation that's going on with boundaries, particularly on social media and give you all the support you need so that you can have amazing boundaries that really serve you in your life.

So please, please, please come and join us because this is going to be our focus as a community in the run-up to the holiday season. So this is a really great time to join us and do this work in your own life, but with the support of the entire membership behind you

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And I'm telling you that the impact of everyone doing this work together is tangible, right? Not just the calls, but the posts in the community, all the coaching that happens in there, as well as all the trials and tribulations and then the celebrations. It's so cool when you see someone posting, asking for coaching and support, talking about how they're working through something, and then they come back a couple of days later and celebrate how it went. And when you get to see that happening with other people, it has an effect on you as well. So head to maisiehill.com/powerful and sign up.

Today's episode is the first part of a series where we're looking at resourcefulness and independence, as well as asking for help and being able to receive help. This is something I think about a lot. It comes up in coaching calls inside the membership all the time, and it's something I come up against in my personal life, too. So these few episodes are going to be particularly juicy.

It makes me think back to the first year of the podcast, where I recorded a series about responsibility: being overly responsible, underresponsible, as well as being self-responsible. If you haven't listened to those, go and check them out because those episodes were really popular and transformational, and some of you even got in touch to let me know that you set up discussion groups with your friends about them. And I'm going to suggest that you do the same for this series.

And those of you who are in the membership will know that these themes come up regularly on our coaching calls, but I really encourage you to continue the conversation over in the community and take this deeper.

So I'm going to be exploring the benefits and the downsides to each of the themes in this series because, as with everything, it's about relative balance, and you all know I'm not really a fan of the word balance, but I reckon it's an appropriate word to use here, but we're talking about relative balance.

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So as you're listening to each of these episodes, really consider if you feel deficient in the quality I'm describing in some way. Would it feel good and helpful to you to turn up the dial and have more of this quality in your life or is that quality already overemphasised, and it would be useful for you to turn the volume down a bit and lean into one of the other qualities?

And this might vary depending on the environment or the context of your life that we're talking about, right? You might notice that at work, you tend to be like this, but in your personal life or with your family or your friends, you tend to go in the other direction.

For instance, I am hugely independent and resourceful. I do really pride myself on those things. So being able to rely on myself is a really large part of my success throughout my life. But I am less experienced and less skilled with asking for help. And I will be honest with you, most of the time it doesn't even occur to me that I can ask for help. So my continued work is on one, receiving offers of help, and two, asking for help. I don't need to work on being independent and resourceful. I have got those covered. I don't need to work on those at all.

But for some of you, it might be the other way around, right? Some people are really great at asking for help. Like, there's some people I know, and I watch them ask for help, and I'm just fascinated. But for some of you, you're great at asking for help, but there might be a lack of self-reliance and resourcefulness in some places in your life.

So this series is very much about bringing awareness to your most automatic patterns of behaviour and deciding if there's anything that you want to change.

So you can think about this in a broad sense of where you fall on the scale, but I encourage you to think about specific areas of your life. Are there places and situations where you veer one way rather than the other?

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So we're starting with an episode for those of you who are perhaps like me and pride yourself on being capable and independent, right? I am highly resourceful and that is a great thing, but we have to talk about when that strays into the territory of hyper-independence where you can end up feeling stretched and exhausted from doing all of the things and either not asking for help or not allowing others to help you, and that like they're making offers of help, but you're not allowing them. I see that quite a lot as well.

So for a lot of us, being the capable one was how we earned a feeling of safety or how we earned praise from others. And if you learn early that other people were unreliable or unpredictable or inconsistent, then it makes a lot of sense that you decided it was easier to just rely on yourself.

Or if you grew up in a home where asking for help got you shamed or where the adults really just needed you to hold it all together for them, like if you were parenting your parents or your siblings, then of course being independent and reliable would become fundamental to your existence. And listen, that doesn't have to be a bad thing. I'm not talking about describing your actual experiences; you get to do that. I mean in terms of how you became as a result of them, who you became as a result of them.

And independence is, of course, also part of healthy development, right? Learning to do things for yourself, to think for yourself, to become capable and autonomous. That's a normal and desirable part of growing up, right? It's how we build confidence, our identity, and that all important sense of agency. So all super important.

The problem is when that developmental milestone hardens into a permanent identity of some kind, when "I can do things for myself" becomes, "I must do everything for myself." And for me, that's the difference is this hardening of things where it starts to exclude others and prevents connection.

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So just remember, independence and resourcefulness are incredible qualities. I value them deeply in myself and others, but as with everything, there is a tipping point. And it's worth zooming out for a moment to see how much of this isn't just personal, it's also cultural. So countries like here in the UK, also the US, I'm sure others as well, self-reliance can be treated as a moral virtue. There's this myth of the self-made person, the pioneer who builds their life entirely from scratch, who doesn't need help, never has, who earns success through sheer grit.

And listen, that's not to take away from someone's grit and their ambition and determination and perseverance. But it's the notion that needing others is a weakness that I'm talking about here because it can be so deeply ingrained that it shapes how we judge ourselves and each other.

But it's not like that myth just came out of nowhere. It's tied to things like capitalism, austerity, and a lot of the systems that shift responsibility from governments and communities onto individuals, because when those social safety nets are weak, people are told to just work harder as if the systemic issues are somehow their personal failures. And this is how you end up with the cult of the self-made person and a culture that glorifies doing it alone, all whilst eroding our sense of community and collective care.

So, although I'm a huge fan of self-reliance, I think it's a really valuable quality, its overemphasis can be used as a tool to shift responsibility away from societal structures and onto individuals. Because I think that being someone who's resourceful and independent is fantastic, but that exists on a scale and at one end of the spectrum, we've got over relying on others and at the other, not relying on anyone at all.

So everyone in my immediate family is very independent. My mom was, my dad is, my brother is, I am, Paul is, and Nelson certainly seems to be growing into someone who is, too. So I grew up in that environment. There was no enmeshment going on, and I'll speak more about enmeshment in the next episode. But I also grew up in a culture where independence is greatly valued.

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But when I first went to China as part of my acupuncture degree, my eyes were opened to a very different way of being, where I saw a much greater reliance on family members and interdependence that's built into all different aspects of life. And it was really striking to realise that my version of quote-unquote "maturity," doing it all yourself, wasn't universal, and there was this cultural conditioning.

And for women especially, this starts to get a bit more nuanced, right? And a bit tricky because we're socialised into this double bind where we're expected to be both fiercely independent and endlessly self-sacrificing. So this idea of being independent, standing on our own two feet, but also being accommodating and helpful and low maintenance. It gets even more nuanced than that because we're told to be independent, but only within the limits that keep us pleasing to men and non-threatening to men.

So be strong, but not too much, don't be intimidating, and be capable, but don't make anyone feel redundant or like they're not important. And be self-sufficient, but not so self-sufficient that you stop needing men or approval or permission.

And when I was preparing for this episode, I was even thinking about the way women's clothing is designed, right? You know those back zips that are on dresses, the ones that you can't reach without someone, i.e., a man helping you? So the idea is you can look incredible, but you weren't meant to actually function without the assistance of a man to help you get into the dress or get out of it. It's insane.

So yes, we're encouraged to be independent, but not fully. And that's what creates this tension, this push to do it all yourself mixed with the subtle conditioning that says you shouldn't really be able to and you don't really need to be able to because there's going to be a man there.

And then for me, when I think about myself personally, I also just need a lot of time alone, right? Being around people taxes me. Even people that I love deeply and whose company I really enjoy, and I like spending time with

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them, I still need to recover from doing that. So I often spend Monday mornings recovering from the weekend, not because I'm hungover or I've been up all night partying. It's just because of the peopling involved. So that matters, that comes into it for me as well.

And then we can add in things like temperament, neurotype, personality. I just need a lot of solitude to rest my body and just reset it after spending time with other people. So that time alone gives me that space to do that, and that ties into independence as well.

Paul and I certainly have our independent lives in addition to our life as a couple and as a family. For me, that is to do with our appreciation and respect for each other as individuals, that we don't need to claim or have a hold on each other. We've both retained who we are in our relationship, and that's partly why, after 12 years, I think, we're rocking on for New Year's, it'll be 12 years. We're still attracted and interested in each other.

We could actually do with being able to do things together more often, but we struggle with childcare. Paul actually went to a gig recently in London. We've had tickets for ages to see Saul Williams and Carlos Niño. So we were both meant to go, but we were struggling to find a babysitter and then Nelson made this team selection for the football academy he's been playing for and it's the first time he's made the team and so between wanting to support him, struggling to get a babysitter, and the prospect of getting home at 1:00 AM, I opted not to go.

But by and large, we have our separate lives as well as our life together as a couple and as a family. So there's independence there for me that is important. It's not just in how we live, but in how we trust each other. So I don't project emotional insecurities onto Paul when he's doing the stuff that he's doing. So I'm not grilling him when he gets in about what happened and where he's been and who he's been with, and I also don't get in a huff and puff because he's gone out or got home late.

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I was telling someone recently, they were kind of amazed and also laughing about it. They thought it was very cute, but when Paul goes out and I know he's going to be getting home after I go to bed, I make up the sofa bed for him, and I make a human shape out of his pyjamas and leave a lamp on for him. And partly it's just a little act of love in our relationship, but for me, I think there's a deeper thing there that's saying, "I'm happy for you to go out. I'm happy for you to come in late, as long as you don't make noise and wake me up," which is also partially why I do these things because I don't want the sofa bed clanging to wake me up. But I also don't text him 27 times whilst he's out, and he doesn't do that to me either. We just let each other be out doing our thing.

I have an ex who was really pissed about me going out one night, not about me going out, but he was really pissed off that I didn't let him know that I got home okay. Which really amazed me. I was very surprised by this because he'd never asked me to do that. And if he had said, "Hey, can you let me know when you're home safe?" I would have just told him, "I'm not going to make that promise. Please don't expect me to do that because that's just not how I roll. I will forget." And if we've agreed that I'm going to let you know, you're going to think something's then happened to me.

And I know that came from caring for me and worrying that something would happen, but dude, you got to manage your own mind, your own fears. Don't put them on me. And also, how about learning to make some explicit requests instead of putting your shit onto me?

And then what happened is he then held back on communication with me the next day in an attempt to show me what it felt like. He actually told me that's what he did after when he was explaining it. And that was actually the beginning of the end of that relationship because I lost so much respect for him in that moment and started recognising the gaps in his emotional maturity.

So independence does matter in relationships. That's my point of view. And I can see where independence can become hard and brittle and isolating

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because when your identity is built on the idea that you don't need anyone, then when you do need someone, which is going to happen by the way, that is going to threaten your identity and your sense of self. And it will bring up all the fears about what depending on someone means about you, as well as whatever reactions and whatever might happen in the actual situation.

And that's what makes asking for or receiving help feel so charged because it's not just a request for practical help. It can feel like a very existential one. If you are someone for something, then what does that mean about you? And I mean, it sounds ridiculous. I'm laughing about it as I'm saying it, but this is what comes up.

Does it mean that you're weak and needy? And if you've been socialised to believe that those are awful traits to have, then you'd probably just stick with doing everything yourself, especially if you're in an environment where any perceived weakness is going to result in you being pounced on, right? Whether that's at the dinner table with your family or in your place of work.

Or it's not okay for you to have needs of any kind. You know, when you've been criticised, shamed, or ignored as a child or an adult for needing and wanting help, and you want to protect yourself from that experience again, or if you just don't want to risk being disappointed again. If you ask for help and someone says no, then how are you going to cope with that quote unquote rejection?

If you don't know how to interrupt that way of thinking or you haven't built the capacity for those experiences, then of course you're going to avoid putting yourself in situations where that might happen, because why on earth would you sign up for feeling rejected when you don't have the tools to have that experience yet? I was just coaching someone on this the other day.

Or you might be telling yourself that you've already asked for help with this, so you can't ask again because that's not okay. What you've received

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already should be enough, and the fact that it isn't must mean that you're incapable or not smart enough.

And by the way, remember we have a huge tendency to ask for just enough to scrape by, but not what we actually need. I coached someone on this the other day, too, and this client is going through something really significant and in her coaching, I was helping her to identify what she actually needs, not what she thinks is acceptable or enough to scrape by on, but we're talking about asking for enough so that you actually feel cared and supported.

And under all of these things is the belief that you're not worthy or deserving of receiving help. So hyper-independence is often a strategy to cope and to avoid feeling all those things. It's what happens when, for some reason, your body associates dependence with a threat of some kind, and you just go to, "Well, instead, I'll be helpful, I'll be fine, I'll be invisible, I won't need anyone because then no one can hurt me. Or I can't rely on others, so I will just rely on myself."

So when your system has rehearsed independence as a safety mechanism, and listen, independence can keep you functional, but it can also keep you lonely. Because when everything depends on you, that connection with others starts to feel like a liability instead of a lifeline. And it has its toll physically because of the amount of stuff that you're doing and taking on and trying to get done by yourself, but also emotionally.

And then it makes intimacy of any kind in friendships, relationships, etc., makes that tricky because intimacy requires vulnerability, and vulnerability is incompatible with the kind of hardened total self-protection we're talking about here. So then what happens is relationships feel unbalanced or empty. There's just this lack of connection there.

So the goal is to find that middle place where you can rely on yourself and allow others to meet you when you have needs, which we all do as humans.

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So on that note, your mission this week, should you choose to accept it, is to make a request of someone else clearly and explicitly and be open to receiving their help. This is to start teaching your system that it's safe to let support in, that it's okay for you to ask for help.

This is the kind of work that we get up to inside my membership, Powerful. For those of you already in the membership, make sure you bring this topic into the community. Get coached, let's get into it. Those of you not in the membership, what are you waiting for? Come on in and join us.

Next week, we're going to be looking at the other end of this spectrum, the places where you lean too heavily on others to the point where you're kind of collapsing in your own power instead of sharing it. And you might think, "Well, that's not me," but it can show up in surprising ways in emotional outsourcing, over-apologising, and waiting for permission.

So where today's episode was about overdoing self-reliance, next week is about underdoing it, and then in part three, we're going to get into that middle place where your relational power really comes online.

But if you already know you're ready to stop doing it all alone, then come join us inside Powerful. You'll learn how to ask for help, how to receive it, and how to stay connected while you do it, so that you can rely on yourself and rely on others too. Okay, folks, that is it for today. I will catch you next week.

Hey, if you love listening to this podcast, then come and check out my membership, Powerful, where you get my best resources and all the coaching you need to transform your inner and outer life. Sign up to the waitlist at maisiehill.com/powerful, and I'll see you in the community.