

Ep #276: Giving Up on Your Goals or Cleaning Them Up



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Maisie Hill

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This is episode 276, and today, I'm talking to you about giving up on your goals.

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*.

All right, folks. At the start of this year, I hosted an online event called Design Your Decade. It was a three-part workshop series, very interactive. It was a whole process all about getting you to dream big, have a vision for your life, have a direction, and then have a plan and actually set some goals, both in the long term and in the short term. It was just incredible.

Whilst I was preparing to teach at that event, a Guardian article popped up on my feed, and the headline was, "Want to avoid anxiety, headaches, and constipation? Try giving up on your goals." So it captured my attention. The article was responding to a piece in New Scientist about research suggesting that giving up on goals might actually be better for your health than persisting with them, and that people who struggle to disengage from their goals have higher levels of cortisol and inflammatory markers.

The research was suggesting there was an association that quitting is associated with a lower risk of headaches, constipation, and eczema and could even protect against infection.

So there are some bold claims, and given how my work is about using self-leadership to achieve your goals, I was very curious. So I read the New Scientist piece, which quoted this researcher who said, "We really value people who have goals, and we don't like people who give up on goals. Our heroes are never the ones who gave up and did something else. It's always the people who tenaciously persist."

I read that quote, and I thought, "Yeah, I agree with that. I can totally see that." And also, I guarantee the issues they are describing are about the

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approach to goals, not the goals themselves. Because the Guardian writer, who wrote a very funny, honest article, is clearly self-aware. She lists her goals, which are: write a novel, join the Metropolitan Elite, and do the splits. They're her three goals. And then she says, "I've assumed I'll write a novel since I was a child. I think most voracious readers do, and I don't know who I am if I never manage it."

I can relate so much to this in part. I was actually on Joe Hutton's podcast this morning talking about the very same thing, that books have always been my happy place. I always had a sense that there was a book in me. So I get it. I relate to that aspect of it. But I never made my self-image dependent on writing and publishing a book. I didn't make it mean anything about me.

So, self-image is the perception you have of yourself. It shapes your confidence and how you interact with the world. And when you make the attainment of a goal responsible for your self-image, you will inevitably run into problems, not because the goals themselves are a problem, but because you've handed your self-worth over to a particular outcome. And you're pursuing that goal from a very difficult place.

My goal philosophy is very clear on this. This is what I teach inside Powerful, my membership. Achieving a goal will not fix your relationship with yourself. Will you feel a sense of accomplishment when you achieve it? Yes. Will you experience the internal satisfaction that comes from striving and creating something? Yes, absolutely. But a goal is not going to patch up holes in your self-worth. That is something you have to actively work on yourself. And a big part of why I actually ask everyone in Powerful to set a goal every season is because it provides a way for you to do that inner work and to create a compassionate, respectful relationship with yourself. That's why I love them.

But what actually happens when someone achieves a goal from poor self-image is that they get there, like let's say they actually make the goal happen, they do it. But then they can't feel proud or celebrate themselves

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because the hole is still there. So what usually happens is they're already looking for the next goal and then the next one and the one after that. And no matter what they create, it is never enough because that void is still there. And the goals that they are setting are coming from a place of not-good-enoughness.

So if someone in the membership is in this position, usually when someone first joins, then I always recommend switching from setting external goals to an internal one, specifically working on their relationship with themselves first in some way.

Writing a book is an incredible thing to do. You get to tap into your creative voice, your expertise, and you create something that other people enjoy and benefit from. But when that's coming from a need for recognition, for example, when your sense of who you are is dependent on it happening, you are caught in a bind because you're writing from wanting approval. And if you never write it, your self-image is incomplete. So it's very murky. It's what I call a dirty goal. And it's dirty because the motivation underneath is rooted in not-good-enoughness. And the goal is trying to fix something inside you rather than creating something.

So the research finding makes complete sense to me when I read it through that lens, because of course, people who are grinding towards dirty goals have higher cortisol. Of course, they have headaches and eczema. But that's not what goals do to you; that's what pursuing goals from the wrong place does to you. So the answer isn't to just quit them, it's to understand what a goal is actually for and then to adapt your approach so that you stop using them against yourself.

The Guardian columnist also describes her goal of shining at parties full of Radio 4 famous people. And she describes how both this goal and the goal of writing a novel tap into insecurities, disappointments, and unfulfilled ideas of who I should be. And so she's questioning whether she should call it quits.

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And the research is right in that clinging to that kind of goal is harmful. Of course it is. If you're grinding towards something that is coming from not-enoughness, in proving something, in becoming a version of yourself that you think you should be, that is going to cost you. So the cortisol and inflammation, that makes sense. That's what pushing from the wrong place does to a body. And that's what happens when you set dirty goals.

So those dirty goals, they come from not-enoughness, comparison, self-criticism, urgency, and wanting to prove yourself. And the thing is, they can sound very reasonable because they can sound like, "If I get this qualification, then I'll be confident enough to do the other things I need to do, do those other goals." Or, "I should be further ahead by now." Or, "I need to prove this, and then I'll know that I'm capable. Then I'll know that I'm confident." And underneath all of those is the same belief that there's something about you as you currently are that is insufficient. And the goal is the thing that is going to fix that.

Whereas a clean goal comes from a completely different place. It comes from sufficiency, from desire, from wanting the challenge or the stretch that's going to be involved. So, "I want this. This would push me in interesting ways. I'm curious to see what I'm capable of." That sounds very different because you're not trying to fix yourself. It's not coming from insufficiency. It's coming from sufficiency. So you're choosing something because you actually want it.

And the thing is, if you identify a goal as being a dirty one, you don't have to abandon it. You can often keep it. You just have to change the place that you're doing it from. So the journalist who wants to write a novel doesn't need to give up on writing a book, but if I was coaching her, I would definitely want to look at her thoughts about it, how the attainment of that goal is tangled up with her self-worth, etcetera, etcetera.

So you can keep the goal, you can go about the same set of actions in how you're actually going about achieving it, but do it from a completely different place. So that is the cleanup process, not necessarily quitting, though it can

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be that, but getting really honest about what's driving it and what you're hoping it will give you on an emotional level.

So it can be a bit surprising when I talk to people about goals because I want you to have goals. I think it would be a terrible mistake to eliminate goals from your life because you think that they are causing you stress. I think it's quite the opposite, but I work with goals in a very different way. To me, these things were just like always quite obvious, but the more and more I talk to other people about goals, I'm like, oh, people tend to just see them as like the thing that you end up creating. And whilst that is important, for me, goals serve a much broader, a much deeper process. So let's talk about what they are actually for.

The most obvious thing is that a goal gives you direction. And that's really important because without a direction that you have chosen, you don't just stand still, you get pulled and pushed by what's going on around you into whatever is most urgent, what's most emotional, or most socially rewarded. So that's the requests that come in, the things other people expect of you, and often the path of least resistance, even if it leads you to the path of most resentment.

But the thing about goals that I find most interesting is that a goal is a mirror. The moment that you set one and start moving towards it, everything that has been lurking underneath the surface starts to bubble up. You'll meet the part of you that needs other people to be okay with what you're doing before you can fully commit to it, or the part that insists things have to be perfect before you can begin. The part that would rather keep everyone else happy and comfortable rather than risk disapproval. The part that waits until you're ready, which, as it turns out, is a very effective strategy for never starting and having to face any of this. Goals are confronting.

But a goal doesn't create these things. These aspects of yourself were already there, running your life just like a piece of software on your laptop that you barely notice, but it also takes up a lot of memory, and it's involved

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in a lot of things. It's showing up everywhere. When you set a goal, it makes all of that visible. So you set a goal, and suddenly you can see the beliefs that have been operating, but there was nothing rubbing up against them. But goals do that, and that's why I love them so much.

And they are great because of the thing that you achieve at the end. I love that for you. I know so many of you set these incredible, meaningful goals that make a difference to you personally and make a difference to the communities that you're a part of, whether that's personally or professionally.

But I also love them because of what they flush out along the way, because once you can see the beliefs that you have about yourself and what's possible for you, you can get to work on addressing them. And that work doesn't just change your approach to your goal, it changes everything, because those same beliefs, the same patterns, the same operating system runs across every aspect of your life.

I'm going to leave you with one question. Is there a goal that you have been carrying for a while, something that you want but haven't fully committed to? And if so, what's underneath it? Just take a peek at what's going on. Is it coming from desire, from curiosity about what you're capable of? Or is it coming from a need to prove something or to feel a certain way or to finally become the version of you that you think you should already be? It can be a mix of these things. But if it's dirty in some way, then I would love to help you clean it up with coaching inside my membership, Powerful.

It can be a mix of both, but if it's dirty in some way, then I really recommend that you clean that goal up. Look at where it's coming from, address it, and then reassess. Do you want to keep that goal but do it from a different place? Or are you just going to let it go? And that can be a really positive, incredible decision. This is the kind of stuff we get up to all the time inside Powerful. I'd love for you to join us. But that is it for this week. I'll see you next time.

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