

Ep #294: Redefining Progress When Life Changes



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With Your Host

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This is episode 294, and today we're talking about this idea of going backwards in life.

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*.

So, today's episode has come about because last week I coached someone in the membership on the idea that because their life circumstances have changed, they have gone backwards. So, I've been musing on that quite a bit and it's not the first time that this has come up because it comes up pretty regularly when someone's situation changes. Maybe it changes in several ways at once.

And on this coaching call, we were talking about how things like getting a degree, getting a good job, being in a monogamous relationship, moving in with someone, buying a place to live, getting married, having kids etc, etc. They all form this timeline of so-called success, okay? Success that is largely valued, prized and idealised by society and perhaps by you too, either consciously or subconsciously.

You know, the image that comes to mind is like being stationary on a travelator as it's moving forward and you know just gaining things like job, partner, the seven hours of extra unpaid labour a week that comes with that, if the partner happens to be male, you know, all the fun things. And so, you're on this travelator of life where you are "progressing" and moving forwards. And you might be really happy with that, okay? These things or some of them might be really desirable to you, that's okay, alright?

But some of it might just be subconscious valuing of it. And actually, when you look at it you're like, "Maybe I want to question some of those things." Okay? But let's say you're on this travelator of life and you're just kind of progressing along and you know succeeding at these things that society prizes. And then something changes, maybe you leave your job.

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Or you break up with your partner, maybe you sell the place that you bought together, or you move back home with one or both of your parents, or into a shared house or a smaller flat than you're used to, or you get divorced and you're single again. And you tell yourself that you've gone backwards. The idea being that because you reach these milestone moments of life and now that you no longer have them, you've gone backwards or lost something, maybe even a part of yourself, especially if that has been valued to the point where it becomes like your identity.

But life isn't linear, it's certainly not a straight line and it's also not a travelator where you're either moving forward or backward. So, basing your success on external achievements is a slippery slope. And I hesitate to even call them achievements because what really constitutes an achievement? Are we really saying that getting married is an achievement? Come on. What about divorce, is that an achievement? I don't know about you, but I'm definitely in the camp of thinking that marriage is not an achievement, but divorce definitely is, okay? That's just me personally.

But when you're talking about where you are in life, there can be this measuring up that happens, a comparison. It's like when you were a kid and you had to stand against the wall to be measured and inevitably your height is then compared to everyone else's. But who's measuring stick are you even using, and do you want to keep it? So many of us have internalised ideas of success and progress from society, from our families, our peers, all the magazine covers, TV shows, Instagram, etc.

And when life doesn't align with that perfect picture, you might end up feeling like you've failed or gone backwards. So, is this a measuring stick that you even want to use? Really question that. Maybe it's time to define how you are going to measure and determine things. And you know I prefer to describe it as like sense rather than measure. So how do you sense where you are? How are you going to determine that?

When I think about my life and the significant decisions that I've made along with you know things that have happened to me. And when I think about all the things that my clients have told me over the decades that I've

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been doing this. I think about being congruent, being honest with myself about who I am and what I want and need and desire and honouring all of those things. I think about being in connection with myself and those around me, whether that's my kid, Paul, a horse, a colleague, friend, a complete stranger, am I being true to me? And am I treating myself and others with kindness and respect?

Am I moving through the world with integrity? Am I following what interests me? Am I having fun? And do I like who I am and how I'm being? That's how I want to get a sense of where I'm at, not by ticking off boxes about my relationship status, producing a child, taking out a mortgage. I mean is it wise to base your idea of yourself around whether banks will lend you money in the form of a mortgage? I don't recommend it.

But it's so easy to fall into the trap of seeing certain life changes as negative, especially when others might view them that way. You know that kind of condescending, patronising response of poor you, on your own at 36, that's your life over, isn't it? You're going to just be lonely and miserable for the remainder of your life. No freaking way. Are you kidding me? Let's not do this, people.

I recently met someone and in our very brief conversation she mentioned that she was recently divorced, and my instant reply was congratulations. And she was so shocked because it just wasn't what she was expecting because everyone else had been, "Oh no, that's so hard. Are you okay? How awful for that to happen to you." Right? Whereas I'm like, "Oh my God, best thing ever." And she was so happy that I reacted that way because for her the divorce was really positive, right? Even though it was based on pretty shitty circumstances, still, getting divorced was really good.

So, society has conditioned us to believe in this linear progression of life, right? School, job, marriage, house, kids, etc. But who says that's the right way? And who says deviating from that path means that you've gone backward? These are just thoughts, okay? They are not truths. So, when you find yourself thinking that you have regressed because of a change in

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your life circumstances, it's a good idea to ask yourself, "What am I making this mean about me?"

Maybe you're making it mean that you're a failure, that you're not good enough, that you're not lovable or pretty enough or smart enough or that you're like too something or other. Have you ever noticed how those self-critical thoughts are based on simultaneously not being enough and being too much? Whatever you're making your change in life circumstances mean about you, remember that these are just thoughts and thoughts can be changed. You can pick different ones.

So, if you're feeling like you've gone backward in life, that is a thought. It may feel very factual to you and like it's a description of the actual circumstances of your life, but it is not. The facts are that you no longer work for that company or that your relationship ended or that you're single or that you currently live with your parents. They are factual descriptions of the circumstances of your life, not that you've gone backwards. That's the thought about them, okay?

And there have been many occasions where my life has taken turns that could have been described as going backwards. I've been married twice, divorced twice. Well, technically speaking, annulled once, divorced once. I've gone from having a boyfriend of five years and living together to living in a shared house. I've lived with my dad for periods of time. I've changed careers and started over multiple times.

At no point did I think I was going backwards because I just don't think that it's possible to go backwards. Well, I do have another argument to this so, you know, hold that thought. But it just makes no logical sense to me. But our brains aren't always logical, especially when we are processing a change and feeling sad or angry, cheated, down or disappointed, okay? Of course, your brain is going to offer you nonsense thoughts about yourself and your life. That is just what brains do but we can counteract that.

We can have that conversation with ourselves through being awareness and being like, "I'm not going to talk to myself like that." Alright? So instead

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of defaulting to societal conditioning and beating yourself up, decide to think differently. What if every change, every twist and turn was just a factual change of circumstances, and you get to decide how you want to frame that change and think about it? What, if there's no backwards or forwards for that matter, there's just different?

Maybe there's new opportunities, different opportunities. And your brain might resist these new thoughts because it's just so used to the old ones. That's okay too, just keep practising. Keep questioning the automatic negative thoughts that you have, those critical thoughts and offering yourself new ones. Because each time you say them to yourself in your head you're also hearing those thoughts and the cumulative effect of that is so powerful. This is how neuroplasticity works and you can rewire your brain.

Whilst we're on this topic we may as well talk about the concept of going backwards. Life doesn't have a forward or backward, it just is, okay? So instead of judging your experience, get curious about it. What can you learn from this? How can this situation serve you? What is available to you? Because in nature there's a rhythm to everything and we are nature, so we have rhythms as well.

You know, when trees are shedding their leaves in the autumn to conserve energy for the winter does that mean that the tree is going backwards? Is the tree regressing because it's shedding leaves? No, of course it doesn't. It's preparing for a new cycle of growth, you are too, that shedding is essential. We don't make it mean anything about a tree, so you don't have to make it mean anything about you either. The tree is just doing what it needs to do. You're just doing what you need to do. And when you shed certain parts of your life, it's not regression. It's preparation for what comes next for your new chapter.

So why are you choosing to think that you've gone backward? I think we've established that it's largely down to societal views but it's really worth asking yourself that question and seeing what else is there. So why are you choosing to think that you've gone backward? And what's the upside of that

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thought? If it's not serving you, you can choose a different one. It really is that simple. Your thoughts are powerful, they create your feelings, which in turn drive your actions and your behaviour as you move through this world, okay?

So, question your thoughts, challenge them and choose ones that serve you because you have the power to think whatever you want about your life, okay? Your life is a result of your thinking, so make sure that your thoughts are on your side. And, you know, if you're feeling like you've gone backwards because your life circumstances have changed, I really challenge you to question that whole narrative. Ask yourself who's measuring stick am I using? What does success really mean to me and am I open to redefining it?

Life is not about ticking boxes. It's about experiences, connections, all of those things, no matter where it takes you. And a final idea to offer you, what on Earth is the problem with going backwards anyway? When you go for a hike in unfamiliar territory and you're following what you think is the route, but then you start to get the feeling that it isn't and that you've gone off track, and then the more you look around you realise that the landmarks around you don't match the ones on your map, okay?

The typical advice is to backtrack to the point where things went off-piste, to go backwards. Going backwards is a really good idea, okay? So why do we have an issue with it in the first place?

Alright folks, that is it for this week. I will catch you next time.

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