

#55: Chasing Productivity



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With Your Host

Marissa McKool, MPH

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Hey, you all, I'm Marissa McKool, and you're listening to the Redefining Rest Podcast for public health professionals. Here we believe rest is your right. You don't have to earn it, you just have to learn how to take it and I'm going to teach you. Ready? Come along.

Alright you all, so I want to ask you, I want you to think about how many times a day or a week you either think or say the word productive or productivity? I bet it's a lot. I bet you think, I haven't been productive, or I was so productive today, or I'm struggling with productivity. Do you know what productivity, the definition of it is? A definition, which if you've listened to me for a while you know I always say, "You've always got to look at dictionary definitions with an eye of critical thinking." Because you've got to remember who's writing those definitions.

From various dictionaries or publications, you've got to question, are the people writing that definition representative of my community and of everyone who uses this word in the various ways they do. So that's a caveat. I'm going to read to you the definition in the dictionary because I think it's important to talk about what this word originally meant and how we've now morphed it and evolved it into a different way of thinking about it that I don't think is actually very helpful.

So, the original definition of productivity which is still in the dictionary is the efficiency of production of goods or services expressed by some measure. So, what we have done with this definition as a society and individually and even as a public health community, we have taken this definition and applied it to ourselves as human beings. We talk about being productive as if we ourselves are machines.

The concept of productivity really started during the industrialized revolution where mass production really became part of global economy, and the new innovation, and the new way to make money. And in the future I'll probably have a whole episode on this and the unintended consequences of that or

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even the intended consequences and talk more about how that's impacted us, but this is one way. And I want you to just sit with the fact that now we talk about productivity which is a word initially used to describe machinery producing products as a measure of ourselves.

And actually, this week I happened to coach a lot of my clients on this, on chasing productivity and why they are doing it. So, I was like, you know what? It is about time I talk more deeply about this on the podcast and here we are. We have absorbed this idea that productivity makes you feel a certain way and we operate from that belief. If you grew up in the US or a country, region heavily influenced by the US or by western capitalist ideas, and ideals, and approaches then you have absorbed this belief to some degree.

The idea that if you get a certain amount of things done then you will feel good. And getting a lot done, checking all the boxes inherently feels good so we chase that. We are constantly striving for that. And we believe it deeply. And on the flipside of that you believe if you aren't getting a certain amount of things done then you feel bad, that not checking all the boxes makes you feel frazzled or overwhelmed, that not getting it all done makes you stressed and anxious. When you believe these two things you will always be chasing productivity to feel good and to stop feeling bad.

But you all, productivity doesn't deliver your feelings. If you have listened to me at all, if you've read any of my work you have heard me say this over, and over, and over again. And for many of you I think you kind of nod your head in agreement, but you don't really do the work to go inside of your brain and your beliefs to understand it so deeply that it detaches. And that's not a fault of yours or a shame or blame. But that's what we're going to do here today on the podcast. Because you believe it so deeply and unconsciously that you operate from that system.

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And your system doesn't want you to find out that its operating functions are broken. So, your brain's going to avoid doing that work. This is how human brains work. Human brains hate change. But funny enough very, very good at change. That's how we have survived. So, it's this little bit of a tug and pull that we have to manage. And this is your operating system right now. All day you think about what you have to do, what you haven't done, telling yourself you should be further along, that you don't have enough time, that you have too much to do, that you need to get more done.

And you have this vision in your head of if you just got it all done, if you just had the perfect calendar, if everything went to plan then you would feel so good at the end of the day. And this is the case the way you're thinking about it whether we're talking about work, or home, or chores, or social commitments, or anything else, or the combination of them all. You think the act of getting it all done makes you feel good. You think the lack of getting it all done makes you feel stressed, and overwhelmed, and shitty. No, this is not how it works.

Getting actions done, completing tasks, getting a certain amount done does not make you feel anything. Not getting things done, not completing tasks, not doing actions does not make you feel anything, your thoughts do. When you are chasing productivity you are really chasing a feeling. You are trying to action your way out of feeling bad, or action your way into feeling good.

And you think the key to either of those things, feeling good or no longer feeling bad is getting 'enough' done. No, the only reason you feel like shit is because of what you are saying to yourself all day in your mind as you do or do not take actions. Not getting all of your to-do list done is not what makes you feel bad. Telling yourself all day, I need to get more done, I should have gotten more done today, I have to do more, I'm so far behind, I'll never be able to get to this, that is what makes you feel like shit, those thoughts, the way you're talking to yourself.

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It is not the lack of action, it is the negative narration in your head. It's how you are speaking to yourself in your mind all day long no matter what you're doing. And the only reason you feel good when you get 'enough' done is because that narration in your mind changes. You finally stop saying mean stuff to yourself. You stop saying, "I should do more. I need to do more. I haven't done enough. This isn't good enough." The absence of those thoughts is what feels good. The absence of those thoughts creates relief and that's what feels good, relief from your negative self-talk.

It is not getting everything done on your to-do list that creates relief, it is you no longer saying those things to yourself in your mind. And right now, you think those thoughts first, are true, and second, are harmless. No, and listen, by harmless I don't mean they're hurting you, because thoughts can't necessarily hurt you. But by harmless I mean not having an impact, but they are, and an impact you don't want. You are not narrating the truth of the world, the truth of what's going on with your thoughts.

I have more to do is not the truth, it's not a fact. It's just a thought. And it's not helping you. When you think, I have more to do, how do you feel? For most of you listening when it's 12:00pm and you're supposed to be taking lunch and you think, I have more to do, I have too much to do, I can't take lunch, you think you are just narrating the truth of the world. No, these are just optional thoughts you're saying to yourself. And when you say them to yourself, you don't feel empowered, you feel dread, or obligation, or resentment, or stress, or something else. It doesn't feel good.

And those thoughts they seem innocent but they're not. They're not helping you. And in fact, they are ways in which you are beating yourself up all day in your head. The other reason you feel good when you get 'enough' done and I'm putting 'enough' in quotes because that also is completely arbitrary. And I have a whole podcast episode on talking about what is enough. You should go check it out after this. But the other reason you feel good when you get 'enough' done is because you finally say nice things to yourself.

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It's not just the absence of these mean thoughts. It's that you're also finally nice to yourself. You finally say, "I'm proud of myself. I did a good job." And you finally give yourself permission to take a break or do something you love. This is not because the action of doing all those things makes you feel good. It is simply because your thoughts change and you're now thinking nice thoughts about yourself. It is not the completion of your checklist that allowed you to take a break or do something you love. It was your thoughts that you were thinking that gave yourself permission to take those actions.

Feelings are created by your thinking, by your thoughts. You can choose to feel good any time with how you talk to yourself. You can choose to feel like shit any time with how you talk to yourself. You can choose to get rest any time with your thoughts. You can choose to deny rest any time with your thoughts. It is not productivity. It is not doing something or not doing something that does this, it is your thinking. And we have all been there. Listen, think about this.

You and everyone else, all of us have had a day where you did nothing all day long and you felt great about it. It was not because you earned it, not because you had 'nothing to do'. It was because during that day you had a thought that allowed you to feel great. You were thinking, I'm so proud of myself, I love this, I just want to relax, this is great, I deserve this. We have all also had a day where we did nothing and felt like shit because you were thinking thoughts all day like, I should be doing more, I'm lazy, I'm wasting my time, what am I doing.

You are beating yourself up in your head creating shame, and anxiety, and overall shittiness. It is not productivity or the lack thereof that created either of those emotional experiences, it was your thinking. You believe you need productivity in order to give yourself permission to think nice things about yourself, to rest, to do something you enjoy. You do not believe that you can give yourself permission to think nice things, to get rest, to do

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something you enjoy without productivity. And that is an outcome of socialization.

Our society is steeped in toxic capitalism and toxic productivity. And capitalism, the idea of making money, or an exchange of free market to make money, or buy things, that in and of itself is not toxic. It's the way in which it has been implemented and the way it functions, specifically I'm talking about in the US, that makes it toxic. And the same with productivity which we talked about a few weeks ago. It is when we believe that making as much money as possible and producing the most possible is what creates your value, your personal value and worthiness, that's what's toxic.

What is driving your attachment to needing productivity to feel good is the underlying belief that being productive makes you valuable and worthy. When you believe that what happens is you chase productivity to try to feel valuable and worthy. And for a short time, you do feel good. Again, it's just because of your thoughts, so your thoughts change, you're finally being nice to yourself. But then you are back to feeling shitty. And you believe that must be because you haven't done enough.

Because once you get to the promised land, rainbows and sunshine, the perfect place in the universe where you've done enough then you'll feel good forever. Because all of a sudden you feel shitty again, your brain goes, we must have not done enough, we've got to keep going, we've got to move the marker, we've got to do more. Because if you believe productivity makes you feel good, makes you valuable and worthy then automatically when you feel shitty you assume it must mean you haven't done enough.

And then you get back to the worthiness hustle of your life and you get stuck in this cycle. When you believe this you will always be in the middle of worthiness hustle and systems of oppression know that .Not just toxic capitalism and toxic productivity culture, but white supremacy, the

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patriarchy and all the other isms. Because when you believe that being productive produces your feelings, makes you valuable and worthy, you will end up always chasing productivity endlessly because it doesn't give you those things.

And then you end up, first, burnout, exhausted and don't have the energy to fully show up in your life. And second, you don't show up being your truest, most authentic self. When you believe something outside of you has to make you feel good, and valuable, and worthy, you will always shape shift to try to get that something outside of you to give you that. Yes, productivity is outside of you because remember, productivity means producing goods.

And we have just now internalized it to mean we need to be the machine that produces goods in order to feel good and to be valued and worthy. Systems of oppression do not want you to have the energy to show up as yourself. They want you to keep hustling for your worthiness and making yourself small, and not being yourself. And also, they want you to keep feeling like shit. And we are told by these systems, by socialization, by society, who we should be. Those who are socialized as women should be the caretakers of everyone else around them.

Those who are socialized as men should be providers to the family. Immigrants should pull up their bootstraps and do it all on their own. Children of immigrants bear the responsibility to their family, where folks should not make others uncomfortable. Those are just some examples of the messages we receive from society, and from socialization, and from systems of oppression. What are some others? What are some you have faced based on your identity or your lived experience? And how has that impacted your relationship with productivity?

Folks in public health and helping professions are also told they should put their work, their community, and their act of service and everyone else

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before themselves. And when we internalize these shoulds, these should be this way, should do this, in combination with our internalized belief about productivity, creating our feelings and making us worthy we spend our days hustling to do it all. Being mean to ourselves in our head and exhausting ourselves. We make ourselves small, and hide, and don't do what we love, and don't show up authentically.

This is why that sentence that seems so innocent, and you believe is just a fact you're restating, I should have done more, isn't a fact and it isn't so innocent. It is a thought loaded with internalized shame, expectation, and lack of belief in your value and your worth. It is time you change your operating system.

Once you truly let go of the idea that productivity creates your feelings or the lack of productivity makes you feel like shit and you see, accept, and know that it is your thoughts that create how you feel. And you start to decide on purpose what you will think, what you will say to yourself, how you will narrate your day, how you will think about what you do or don't do. When you decide that on purpose then you have changed your operating system.

And then you have the space, mental, emotional, physical space to be empowered, to make decisions about what you truly want to do, of what is of value to you. You have the ability, the confidence, the certainty to say no, to set and hold boundaries, to put yourself first, to give yourself permission to rest. Essentially you then have your own back. Doing this is about noticing, catching, seeing how you're talking to yourself all day, how you're narrating what you are or are not doing and what you're making that mean about yourself.

And actively engaging and talking to your brain to get it to have a different story that it tells you all day. When I was doing this work deeply, for me it showed up at work for sure, but actually it showed up way more intensely

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at home. I had so much shame and anxiety, and I wasn't even able to recognize that's what it was because I just believed what I was experiencing was just a fact in the world.

But what it was, was I was creating shame, and anxiety, and stress for myself by imposing these internalized expectations of who I should be, and how I should be, and what does productivity mean about me which makes sense. Because for me as a woman, as someone who's socialized as a woman to believe that we have to have a perfectly clean home, with all of our chores and to-do's done without help to be worthy and feel good. And that we have to do that no matter who you are.

But if you're choosing to work in the workforce as a woman then we're also told, "Well, you better do both perfectly. You better earn your place in the workforce by also making sure your home life is perfect." And what would happen for me is I would write a to-do list for my at home to-do's. And first of all, I would write 10, 15, 20 things to try to get done on a Saturday truly believing I could do it. And then when I didn't get it done, when I got only four things done I was so freaking mean to myself.

And even as I was getting things done I was so mean to myself. I need to be doing this faster, you're taking too long, what a waste of time, you have so much to do, you're going to have to get up early tomorrow and do more. What a waste of your weekend. Seriously beating myself up all day. And then if I didn't get it all done which I wasn't going to because I was literally setting myself up for failure by thinking, hey, you can do 20 things on a Saturday, I would beat myself up for not getting it done.

And then every little thing I would beat myself up if I hadn't went through the mail in a couple of weeks. Once I went through that mail it was just a shame storm. And even when I did get it all done, you know what my brain told me? Well, there must be something else you should be doing. You should clean the garage. You should be wanting to do something else. You

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should go do this. That's what happens when you believe productivity makes you feel good and delivers your worthiness.

And we could talk about all the other ways in which in this example we are socialized to do this, from puritan Christian messages that idle hands are the devil's work. No matter if you're Christian or puritan Christian, you've internalized that and all the other messages we've internalized. It's a whole mix. And for you it might be some other messages. So, when I would write a to-do list down I would have to start noticing what my brain was saying and no longer just taking it as a fact, no longer taking my brain as narrating the truth, and catching on and noticing this is a thought.

So, my brain might be saying, "Write it all down, you can do it all today." And I had to really talk to my brain and also just take the reins and be like, "I don't care if you're going to have a tantrum, we're only going to write three tasks down instead of 10." And you all, it felt terrible. It felt terrible. I'm not going to lie to you, it's going to feel terrible for you. And by terrible I just mean uncomfortable. But detaching from productivity, detaching from the idea that productivity delivers your feeling and worth isn't sunshine and rainbows at first.

When you are taking away and reprogramming your operating system, your brain, your brain doesn't like that. Your brain doesn't like change, even if your current operating system is producing results that you don't like. You know what your brain likes? Familiarity. Your brain likes the comfort of doing things the way it has done it. So, when you get your brain to change and you're really challenging it to change, your brain doesn't like that.

And you all might have noticed this in some of the podcast episodes you listen to, if there is a concept I'm presenting that goes against your brain's beliefs, your brain's going to have a little hissy fit. And it's going to do this with the productivity too. And that's okay, that's part of it. Nothing has gone wrong. And what's beautiful is even though your brain resists change, your

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brain is actually really good at changing. So, you've just got to be in the driver's seat and keep directing it and it will change.

And when I was completing my tasks and something took longer than planned, which happened a lot, and which was usually I'd beat myself up over, I had to talk to myself. I had to use my anchor thoughts. I had to tell myself, it's okay, I have the time to complete this. I can finish this and not do one of my other tasks. Or say to myself, "I'm going to stop here. And I'll come back to this task another day." You all, I know it sounds nice, but my brain fucking hated those responses. My brain had a hissy fit and it felt really uncomfortable for me.

And I had the urge to just keep doing it because my brain kept saying, "You're just going to feel so much better if you get it all done." Which I had to come to see as a lie. And I had to manage my brain and sit with this discomfort and allow that urge without acting on it. I had to be okay with my brain's tantrum and the uncomfortableness I felt in my body. And when I didn't get everything done on my to-do list I had to actively tell myself that I was proud of myself, and I did enough.

I had to choose to think the nice positive thoughts that I believed productivity would give me. No, I had to choose to think those thoughts no matter what I did or didn't do on purpose. And when I did that, guess what my brain did? It tried to convince me to do more or to get up early the next day to finish. And I had to sit with that discomfort and choose not to do that. And then the next day when I didn't get up early to do it all I had to remind myself, I'm not a piece of shit for not doing it or not getting up early. And that it's okay to sleep in on a Sunday. It's okay not to get all my chores done.

You all, I had to talk to my brain over, and over, and over, and over again. I had to remind it we're okay. I had to tell myself I'm worthy. I had to remind myself I'm in charge. I had to tell myself I was proud. I had to remind

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myself, productivity doesn't deliver my feelings. I had to tell myself that I did enough. I had to tell myself that I get to decide what enough is. I had to remind myself, I don't have to do it all to feel good. I had to tell myself, not doing it all doesn't mean I'm terrible. I had to tell myself, there is no such thing as enough.

I had to repeat that over, and over, and over again every time this happened. And you can do this too. And it does take work, and it takes practice, and it takes intention. And I can't tell you how long it's going to take for your brain to change, that varies depending on your practice. And how strongly you're attached to this and so many other factors. But this is what I can tell you, it is 1,000% worth every minute of the time, and effort, and work it takes to change this operating system.

I am on the other side of it, several years on the other side. And I would go back and do it again, and again, and again. That's how valuable it has been to me. If I could quantify the amount of time I have gotten back from no longer thinking about productivity in the way in which I was before, it would be thousands of hours, I'm sure. If I could quantify the reduction of anxiety and stress, and shame, it has been invaluable. I would pay an immense amount of money for that transition. And I didn't necessarily have to. I did this work, I mean I had a coach, don't get me wrong, I was paying a coach.

But outside of that one coaching hour I did this work every day on my own and you can too. And it's 1,000% worth it. And the amount of value, and time, and enjoyment, and presence I have created in my life because I no longer drain my mental energy thinking productivity is going to make me feel good has been truly the best gift I have given myself. On the other side of this work, you get to be in a place where your brain no longer tells you all day you need to do more.

Or if it does offer you that thought, which my brain still brings up time to time is a like a ghost thought, it doesn't bother me. I don't attach to it. I

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don't listen to it. I know it's not true. Doesn't have an effect. On the other side of this you can choose to do only one task and feel great. You can choose to go through your mail only once a month and not tell yourself you should have done it sooner, which personal experience you all, I hate going through the mail.

You can say no to doing something without your brain feeling like you lost your chance to prove your worth. You can ask for help and hire a housekeeper without telling yourself it means that you failed. You get to use all that extra time and space for rest, for things you love, to make your life easier and so much more. When you do this work you're going to find a treasure trove, a goldmine of benefits, and beauty, and excitement, and fulfillment that you didn't know was possible.

You all, it is time to update your operating system. I am serious. I am on this side looking out on all of you being like, come over here. It's amazing over here, where you don't shame yourself for not doing something, where you decide you feel good no matter what you do. Literally come here, come you all, come on this side. Getting here, you're going to have to challenge your brain. You're going to have to manage your mind, you're going to have to talk to yourself. There might be some discomfort, that's okay. You can do it. You can totally do it, just like a computer. Your brain is a computer.

We have all had computers that are out of date, the operating system's a little slow, it frustrates the shit out of you, it doesn't really work fully, it gets you results you don't like. That is the same as this chasing productivity operating system you have in your head. It is time to change that. So, you get to decide when to feel good, so you get to give yourself permission to rest, so you get to feel proud of yourself all of the time.

Now, this work is worth it. This will change your life. This will change your day-to-day experience. This will change the trajectory of your life, what you choose to do and not do, what goals you go for and don't go for. You will

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unmask so many of these society placed expectations, these internalized expectations and take them off to really let what is already inside of you come out, which is your true desires and wants. And actually, have the mental space to go for them and to feel good while you're doing it. Literally this work is priceless.

If you need help, if you want help doing this work, you see the value of it, you want to change your operating system and you want some support, some one-on-one individualized support, I can help you. I have been through it. I know the struggle, but I also know how important it is and how amazing it is to do this work and what's on the other side of this work. And I can help you do that.

So, if you're interested in getting some more support, reach out to me. You can DM me on Instagram, Public Health Coach, message me on LinkedIn or sign up for a consult with me. We'll leave a link in the show notes. And with that you all, I hope you have a great week. Bye everyone.

If you found this episode helpful then you have to check out my coaching program where I provide you individualized support to create a life centered around rest. Head on over to mckoolcoaching.com, that's M-C-K-O-O-L coaching.com to learn more.