Uncover How To Break Free From Toxic Productivity Patterns Transcript

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Introduction to Toxic Productivity

Our sense of self, our self-worth, how much we value ourselves in our own eyes and other people's eyes becomes tied to doing, contingent on our outcomes, on out productivity.

And so the absence of productivity becomes an existential threat, my entire existence. Obviously, not being productive becomes very scary. It becomes a scary place to be in.

This is Dr. Talks. Estra, what a pleasure to meet you and to have you on Doctor's Talks. I'm very excited to talk to you. You cover a topic that is going to touch everyone's hearts today and that's toxic productivity.

We live in this era of wearing busyness as a badge and it's just so bad for us. And you have a wonderful book that you've just released that really dives into this topic.

and I am excited dive in with you, you're a psychotherapist, based out of New York. you just release this book. Welcome. So excited to talk to you. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Well, thank you for having me. I think this topic is really near and dear to my heart because it's something that I struggled with for a long time without really knowing that there is a name for it, that they're that it's not the norm, that we don't need to glorify being tired.

And so I think I am very excited about this book, Reaching People and Helping Them Redefine Their Relationship to Productivities. By background, I'm a therapist and I've practiced in various different locations.

community mental health, hospital, private practice, and most recently working within the digital health space so that we can actually leverage technology for positive health outcomes and as a benefit to us instead of as detriment.

So that's kind of a little about the work I do, but My passion really in all of the different things that I do is how can we give people information so that they can make better choices for themselves when it comes to mental health and mental wellness.

So important. I've been in this field for 38 years now and I watched the trajectory of going to very biomedical models and forgetting about the whole person and getting caught up in validation and getting away from the internal locus of control.

And I think that contributes a lot to this toxic busyness environment. We just, we feel like we have to be constantly wearing the badge of honor of busy-ness.

So let's define, let start by defining toxic productivity. Can you define that? And then while you, when you've defined that, I'd love to, you have, it's in your introduction here.

I just want to find that you reference a Greek myth. So maybe start there, start with that, because it's such a great launchpad into this concept and then let's define toxic productivity.

Defining Toxic Productivity and the Sisyphus Myth

Yeah, I can't even remember where I first read about this, this Greek myth. I think it was like probably some time in school. And what it always struck me as just doing things doing things and just doing them and then doing and kind of very similar to the Hades Reveal.

But the myth is there is this Greek king who gets banished and his eternal task now is to roll up a boulder, a hill. So he had to push this giant boulders up the hill and as soon as he gets to top, to peak, It falls down again, right to the starting point.

They go down, again and push it back up and again. And that is his eternal task. It really felt at one point, it felt like that's what my life had become.

That I was just doing things to get to finish line and then doing it all over again to go to finished line. Doing it over and over. I think that this mental image was one of the first needs of this book.

And it's funny like how things happen, but I genuinely remember saying this to a friend of mine over dinner, like, I just feel like I'm doing stuff because I am doing style.

And that's really what toxic productivity is, that you are so focused on the finish line. And you're not really pausing to appreciate what you are doing.

You're potting to reflect on why you were doing it. Your not poting to reflected on whether there's alternate ways of getting it done. Or if you should even be doing, you just in the process of doing so you constantly activated, your constantly moving towards a goal post that is forever moving.

Like the goalpost is moving, so your moving behind it, And it really speaks to this productivity culture that we're trapped in where everybody has to optimize.

Everybody has some maximize. We have to be hyper efficient all the time in every domain of our life. But no one is really stopping to think about why they're doing the same they are doing.

And so, the second part of toxic productivity is as we are just doing for the sake of doing, what's happened is our sense of self, our self-worth, how much we value ourselves in our own eyes and other people's eyes becomes tied to doing.

And, so our selves- worth becomes very contingent on our outcomes, on a productivity. And so the absence of productivity becomes an existential threat.

It becomes a threat to my very value that I bring to this world, to our relationships, and to just, you know, my entire existence. And, so, obviously, not being productive becomes very scary.

it becomes this scary place to be in. We can be very mean to ourselves. and it just becomes the self-feeding cycle. So we become the exorcist. while it's only going up and down the hill, dropping the boulder or picking it up again.

And honestly, it just becomes a very lonely place. And lonely is almost strange that it's lonely because there's everyone, not everyone but most people are in this cycle.

So it was like we were all kind of, I just have a vision of all these hills and all of these people just pushing the boulder up and not even connecting with each other but just doing this over and over again, kind aware of each but not really connecting.

You know these other people there but you're not connecting where the loneliness aspect comes in. But can you talk more about what does that look like?

In your practice, you say that you're actually working with people that are stuck in this and you actually help them through it. So what does it look like?

Where does that come from? They will get to the, what can we do about it? Yes. What it looks like in day-to-day is very small, innocuous things. If you are not intentional, if you aren't paying attention, then you will miss it and most people realize they are trapped in toxic productivity when they feel the outcome of it, when you feel a negative

impact of So this can look like prioritizing outcome and achievement over everything else.

It can be laser focused on a goal at the expense of your health, your wellness, and your relationships. it has a detrimental impact on your quality of work.

So I know people who can agonize over emails and spend 20 minutes, 40 minutes over one email because they need it to be perfect because there are absolutely hyper focused on presenting a productive image of themselves, but the reality is they're spending 40 minutes on an email that is making them less productive traditionally, right?

And so that's, it can look like being trapped in your own mind. It can like playing it safe because you don't want to rock the boat because your just so concerned with one specific outcome.

How Toxic Productivity Shows Up in Daily Life

And so taking a risk, applying to a new job, starting a relationship, all of that becomes too scary for somebody who is trapped in this toxic productivity cycle that comes with shame, guilt, perfectionism, and a very, very overactive inner critic.

And these mechanisms combined keep us trapped in constantly needing to do more so that we can feel a sense of belonging. And another thing it looks like is being very disconnected from yourself.

So not knowing what you want. Not knowing what brings you joy, not knowing why you're pursuing the things you are pursuing. You know, I share some vignettes in the book about what that can actually look like.

So feeling that you have to be in a relationship by a certain time in your life, but never really wondering why that is. Not knowing what you want in a relationship, not knowing you what want you in partner, Not even knowing, what should you be like and what will you like in relationship.

But just having this mindset that I need to check this box. I needed to be married before 30. So I had to have kids before 31. Having this checklist, but it's not really aligned with who you are, What you wanted, makes you happy, brings you joy.

What are the things you don't like? We just have no sense of that. And that's kind of what it looks like in realize is just working towards this goal because you think you have to achieve this school.

Where it began was the second part of your question. In a very quintessential therapy response, it begins in childhood. It begins with very early childhood experiences that really set into motion this idea that we have to meet milestones at a certain time in life in order to fit in with everybody else.

And you have to be good and productive in order for me to give you compliment and to love you as a parent. And no parent explicitly says that. I don't think parents are evil when they do that, I think this is just parenting.

You get the special cookie if you get good grades. But what happens is if that continuously starts happening, young children learn that achievement and productivity is currency I can barter for acceptance and acknowledgement within my family system.

And that over time develops into a very unhealthy dependent on achievement, and an unhealthy relationship with productivity. Great answers. What about the environment?

Our society is very different. It's changed in the last 40 years. You know, there has been a shift, and I've been in this field for 40 years, I'm 61. I have watched how productivity has always been the thing, but it's definitely there's been shift as we've become more biomedical, more neuro reductionistic, the digital age, which is amazing but also has its drawbacks.

You know, as you said, mental health technology platforms, we work from the same thing. This is wonderful where

we can leverage the technology, but then it's got good and bad.

But there's been a definite shift. So we societally have a different zeitgeist. What about that in terms of toxic productivity? Can you talk to that? Absolutely.

So I think that the digital age has a lot to do with it because it has given us another metric to measure ourselves. Anytime you put a metric or a yardstick, if you have a productivity mindset, immediately you latch on to it.

And so even people look at the health app on their phones and the metric of, oh, how many steps did you get in? How many sets did I get it? And now we're in this comparison mindset.

I'm actually hearing this within the fertility space because fertility tech is a big thing now. I've actually heard people talk about, well, I need to have like 25 eggs.

That person got 40, so I needed to get that. And it's like this, yes. It's a very unhealthy dependent, again, on outcome and productivity that is now coming into every realm of our lives.

We live in a everything needs to be optimized. Yeah. From our blood work to the how functional our furniture is, everything need to optimized, right? And everything is now also performative.

People, you know, our personal moments of life are now on display in social media. And no, I'm a digital content creator. So I am also in this world, like I know what it feels like.

But I go on vacation with friends and everything is about a curated, optimized experience that needs to now be performed on social media. And so I think that has a big impact on how we view ourselves and what productivity and achievement looks like for us.

Childhood Roots of Achievement-Based Worth

Secondly, our work culture has evolved a lot in 40 years. And with the rise of email and phone, the BlackBerry, Blackberry revolutionized workplace communication in this incredibly powerful way that has a pro and con, because now you're available at all times.

And now, if you don't respond after hours, there's something wrong with you. Instead of the fact that being reached after-hours is the thing that's the problem.

If you do not respond, now that is a problem." And, you know, I live in New York City, and I'm constantly around people in high-stress work environments.

I am around the people who are very high achieving. And sometimes I say to my friends who work in finance, I'm like, you are not working in an emergency room.

Whatever this deal issue is, can probably wait until after dinner. It could probably, wait, until the next business day. But no, like it needs to be addressed now.

And so this like urgency culture is I think a byproduct of our technology and all of that. When you layer on the foundation of already getting external validation, getting validation from your achievements, you're layering this technology piece.

You layer in this optimizing efficiency culture. And we all live and breathe productivity culture right now. You've said that so beautifully and it just makes me think of these biohacking lifestyles.

I've spoken at quite a few bio hacking conferences and I often stand up and think, I wonder if they really hear what I'm saying because I say things like, listen, your mind is the most important thing.

You can put all those devices on you. But if those are stressing your mind out, they're actually making you worse, so you can't be counterproductive. I know people, and I'm sure you do as well, that every part of their body is covered with something that's measuring something.

And the focus on, I must sleep. Everything's sleep-seeking. If I hear one more person saying, sleep, is it? I am constantly doing damage control with like, I don't practice anymore, but when I was practicing still and in my podcast and just in the work I do is I'm ever doing damaged control and hey, listen, embrace your sleeplessness because you will catch up on your sleep and stop measuring everything.

And so I'd love you just to speak a little bit because the biohacking culture and longevity and all these things are great, that they've really tipped.

It's like they're gone on this side of the road. They're not balanced yet. We kind of need to come back and get a bit of balance again. Feels like it went from.

that side of the road to this side and it's like we're very much on this. Now we need to get some balance back. What do you think about all this? Absolutely.

I think it fits neatly with the thing I said a couple of minutes ago around as soon as you put a measure and stick on something, it's going to fall into optimizing productivity culture.

And I Think our technology really leverages that part of the human brain, right? I mean, we naturally are curious. We want information about how things work.

That's just like the way that human works. And so apps definitely leverage it by putting like, you know, little progress markers on how far you're going in the gains.

Like the gaming industry literally utilizes biohacking format to develop their gains, but when it comes to this bio-hackings today, it gives us a sense of control in an environment that otherwise feels like it's lacking control.

And I think people have definitely weaponized that in trying to make us the most optimal machines. And we've forgotten that we are actual human beings and things ebb and flow, our body moves in cycles, we can't control all of our hormones, We can control our glucose spikes.

And I think what's happened, it has created a wellness culture that is antithetical to self-care. because I have had clients and people in my life who have become so obsessed with self-care in this perfect, optimized, efficient way that it was literally stressing them out.

Yeah, they are good. Exactly.

Technology, Comparison, and the Pressure to Optimize

And so I talk a lot about don't let self care, like don t mask self sabotage as self Because if what your body needs is to rest and sleep in and it needs that restorative time but you're forcing yourself to wake up at the crack of dawn because you need to do an ice bath and then you Need to run for like five miles all before the workday has begun like you are doing yourself a disservice.

Exactly. So wellness for me, and I talk about this in the book a lot, like productivity needs rest. Like we are redefining productivity to include rest and balance is the most important thing that will give us sustainable productivity.

It will gave us a sustainable wellness. And so I do this thing in my life called 80-20, which is 80% of the time I'm going to aim for meeting the mark.

20% of the time, I'm just going to take the L. I want to accept the fact that I am not going meet the mark, might not

do 100% my workout. Might not take my supplements 20 percent of my time.

And that's okay. Giving yourself that flexibility and allowing for balance is really important. We can't optimize everything. we are not machines. Who says what about the body?

Oh, I totally agree. We've become a mechanistic society because of the neuro reductionism, the brain brain, brain focus. And I watched this in my career.

So then you've expanded it beautifully. Let's talk about, we're not mechanical machines, so we can't optimize. You've got lots of ideas and suggestions for people and you started suggesting, like I love the 80-20.

Can you talk us through a couple of techniques, maybe even take us to an exercise in the time we have left together to help us understand how we can shift this start, the shift.

Obviously, they need to get your book and get hold of you and learn these things, but how can we use all the great information out there in a way that's more healthier and more balanced?

Yeah. So one thing that I've been practicing a lot in my life, as you know, so many things are happening for me right now, is making sure I don't overcommit.

Overcommitting is a big red flag for toxic productivity. Why do we say yes when we know we don t have the time? Why did we see yes or no, we do not have to resource?

why is the first thing coming out of my mouth, yes, without even me reflecting or thinking about what my capacity is at this time. And why it is so shameful to say no?

So overcommitting is a really big red flag for toxic productivity. And a good way for me to manage my overcommitment is to use something that I've coined the Chanel rule.

As Coco Chanel, the designer had this very famous saying that she talked about accessories, where she said, as you're leaving the house, take one last look in the mirror and take off one accessory.

Because when we get ready, we tend to overdo. And so when you're leaving, just take off one thing. So for me to Chanel rule with my commitments is as I'm committing and looking at my calendar, I will take out one saying, love this buffer.

Yeah, right. Or I'm creating buffer. So if I am saying to myself, okay, you know what, I can get four saves done in an hour, because I, like, in this overcommitted productivity mindset.

I'll say, You know, what? No, i'm actually gonna get three saves down in I want to give myself more time to do less things. And when I changed this mindset, I genuinely found that I was less rushed.

I wasn't operating under less of that false sense of urgency. spread thin. And so I could be more present, more intentional about the thing that I'm doing now, instead of being like, oh, my gosh, I have back to back meetings, like this needs to end right now.

So I can get to my next thing, and I am not present anymore. That has really helped me create buffer. Buffer is really important when we think about over committing.

This is a very tactical Very tactical strategy that you can utilize. Commit to one less thing. Create buffer time between your commitments. If you usually take 20 minutes to get ready, block out 30 minutes for that, right?

Just give yourself more cushion. And I think that's really important. Can I just quickly comment there? I love that. I loved the chenille. Love the buffer time.

Because I'm one of those people that thinks, okay, I've got an hour, and I have four things, let me add on another three. Or let's me on add another four.

You're telling me to go from four to three, but I was going from 4 to 8. That in itself is a massive thing. And then I'll love the buffering time, that is so valid.

Those two things alone, for me, would revolutionize my life. I don't feel like, you know, and it's okay to be busy, but you've got to realistic and balance in your business.

Peri, give us some more techniques. Yes, I think another one that I like to do, and this is also in line with the overcommitment. My instinct is, again, this book has a lot of me in there because I'm right there with people who are reading it.

One of my instincts is to just say yes and be like, say, yes, figure it out later. This is a great opportunity. It'll be fun. I'll get to meet people.

Just say Yes. And so what I started doing is I start asking for time before saying yes. So even if my intention was to say yes, to build the practice, I really, wrote down a stock sentence.

Biohacking, Wellness Culture, and the Need for Balance

And this was very challenging for me. So I had to have a strong sentence ready for myself in my notes app that I could put in an email or a text message and say, Hey, thanks for thinking of me, let me get back to you tomorrow morning.

I just need to figure out a few things. Keeping it vague, so I'm not feeling too trapped by saying something too formal, like, oh, let me look at my calendar, right?

Or coming across this too, haughty as like oh let's just see if I have time for this. Those are the emotional things that prevented me from saying no.

Learning to manage my emotions by buying time has really helped me be more intentional about the things that I'm committing with, committing to, things I really want to do.

And in that time, reflecting on, is this going to actually be aligned with what my goals are, right? If my goal is to make new friends, if this place, this party is going actually give me like the return, like, is there like mingling time?

Or is this just, you know, a seminar? Like really thinking through, Like, Is this ask going to align with my goals in that time. And so that has really helped me also be very value aligned.

Because one of the things that happens in toxic productivity is that we just do things because we have to do them. We think we Have to Do them, I have To go I had to say yes, i have t o be there.

It needs to happen this way. But Having that reflection time has helped me be like, is this aligned with my goal? Is this align with value? And if not, practicing saying no has been really, really helpful.

So just give yourself time by time before reacting to something. And that makes it be intentional. Yeah. Oh, that's fantastic. I love that. That's very good because I think that something everyone battles with.

It's almost like we have these expectations. We said it earlier. There are expectations to do more in the hour, not less. Forget the buffer time, reduce the time just do more.

Say yes to everything. Those are the kind of the rules, unspoken rules of optimization and external validation and you challenging those. Okay, we've got time for one more, do you have one for us?

Yes, I think another really important part of toxic productivity is we use productivity as a way to manage difficult emotions. Yeah, so this one is a little bit more in the emotional realm.

The other two are very tactical, and you can just employ them right away. But we use productivity to manage uncomfortable emotions when we feel ashamed about not being good enough.

Practical Strategies: Buffer Time, Delaying Yes, and Emotional Regulation

Oh my god, let me do something more. Let me just something right. If we felt guilty about wrestling, oh, lemme do And so emotional regulation is an important tool that helps us step out of this mindset.

And learning to sit with difficult emotions, whether that's through journaling, meditation, body work, going for a walk, exercise, cooking something. We need to learn how to process and let go of difficult emotion so that we don't fall into productivity as a way of distracting and coping.

So I think that is a really, it's a little bit more vague, but I would love to see people to do that. Yeah. I, think it is very good that people do, that because it, is sometimes you need to, do sometimes there's, a, little mini coping thing.

But if you got into a pattern of doing that, I'm very, very glad you raised that you mentioned something right at the beginning. And I'd love, to it kind of links into this.

answer you've given now. When people are so used to being productive and suddenly they do have downtime, let's say that they finish, they actually do get through this stuff because they work really fast.

And suddenly, oh wow, I've got like three hours or I got an hour. What do I do? And they feel kind of lost. They don't know what to do with themselves.

It's almost like, wow. People even experience a little bit of weird kind of depression, but it's not even, you know, just like a depressed sort of state that, wow, I've got this empty moment.

I don't know what to do because I'm so used to being full. Can you speak to that? Give people some advice on that because that's definitely a sign of toxic productivity and not knowing how to unwind.

Absolutely. So I pull that productivity guilt. The moment you have free time, really still guilty for it and still anxious, you feel restless. And to that I'll say, first, if you're in the mental space where you had been able to recognize this that, oh, I feel unsettled the moment I have time or free-time makes me anxious because I don't know what to do.

I haven't encouraged people to create their own hip. So whether that means having some movies on deck already starred for yourselves that are comfort movies or movies you've been meaning to watch.

So I have a note on my phone that is a list of movies that I want to want as a listen of albums I wanna listen to and things I can do. Though when I get into this state, because I do get in to this stage, I just open that app and I'm like, wait, these are things that can actually engage in right now.

I'll do that puzzle that bought last week. So what happens is I have a lift. I essentially have like a backup list of doing my downtime. Exactly. And I had like, a list or movies and I'll put that on.

Oh yeah, I did want to watch this rom-com because I saw a trailer for it. And because what happens is when we're in the productivity guilt mindset, we are not looking at the list of relaxing things.

We start mining our to-do list. So we need to shift that frame and having a very tactical, tangible reminder of what you can do to rest. It's really like, it was a game changer for me.

And I actually ended up watching a lot of movies that I never thought that i would get to watching because I was too busy, right? And having like, exactly, and having a list of your like activities that you can also engage in.

Yeah, like I did buy that Lego or oh yes, I do have this coloring book that can pull out or things like that. I love that. I have an infrared sauna and I sauna every day.

Handling Downtime and Finding Rest

And I try and make sure that that's where I relax, but I often get in the habit of, okay, this is where i'm going to prepare for my next interview or prepare Literally I have to say to myself, okay, if I'm in here for 35 minutes, I can do 10 minutes of work, but then I must do 20 minutes downtime, watch that movie or text a friend.

But I literally have force myself to do that because then you get the full benefit of the whole thing. So I get what you're saying. And it's a discipline.

It's actually not in a scary sense, the benefit is so huge for our mind, brain, body connection, our whole psych and neurobiology that it is really worthwhile.

Thank you so much for sharing this. It's been so lovely to hear your lovely, simple, effective, practical take on this concept. Where can people learn more from you and get hold of your book?

Absolutely. So my website is the hub for getting in touch with me and learning more about the bug. There's going to be worksheets, resources, all of those things there.

If you're more interested in this stuff that can help you, you know, kind of work through this. It will be my full name is threadmaster.com. Everything is there And then we'll put the link and the details in the show notes.

So thank you so much for joining us. It was wonderful and I look forward to talking again. Thank you for having me. Stay connected, stay healthy, and join us next time on Doctor Talks, real talks from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most.