## Introduction to Toxic Productivity

Israel, what a pleasure to meet you and to have you on doctor's talks. I'm very excited to talk to you. You know, you cover a topic that is going to touch everyone's hearts today and that is toxic productivity.

You know, we live in that 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'm excited to dive in with you.

You're a you're a psychotherapist. You based out of New York. You've just released 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've struggled with for a long time without really knowing that there is a name for it, that there, 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 product categories. My background, I'm Sarah Quest and I practice 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 and set up as a detriment.

So that's kind of a little about the work I do, but my passion really, and all of the different things that I do is how can we give people information so that they can meet, 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've watched the trajectory of going to very biomedical models and forgetting about the whole person and getting caught up in all this external validation.

And, you know, getting away from the internal locus of control. And I think that contributes a lot to this toxic business environment. We just we feel like we have to be constantly wearing the badge of honor, of busyness.

So let's define let's start by defining toxic productivity. Can you define that. And then when you define that I'd love to you. You have I think it's in your introduction to trying to find a reference, a Greek myth.

And I love that it's going up. Yes, yes. So. So so maybe start this I there because it's such a great launchpad into this concept. And then let's define toxic productivity.

Yeah. I can't even remember where I first read about this. This Greek mess. I think it was like a so probably sometime in school. And, but it always struck me as just doing things, doing things and just doing them and doing them.

And kind of very similar to the hamster wheel. But the myths. And there is this Greek king who gets banished and he has eternal teeth now. It's to roll up a boulder, a hill.

So he has to push this giant boulder up a hill.

## Defining Toxic Productivity and the Sisyphus Metaphor

And as soon as he gets to the top, to the 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.

And 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 the

finish line and then doing it all over again to get to the finish line, doing it all over again.

And I think, I think that meant that that this mental image was one of the first needs of this book. And, and it's funny like how things happened. But I genuinely remember saying this to a friend of mine over dinner or like, I just feel them doing stuff because I'm doing stuff.

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're doing.

You're not pausing to reflect on why you're doing it. You're not pausing to reflect on whether there's alternate ways of getting it done or if you should even be doing it.

You're just in the process of doing so. You're constantly activated. You're constantly moving towards a goal post that is forever moving like the Gold Coast is moving, so you're moving behind it, and it really speaks to this productivity culture that we're trapped in, where everybody has to optimize, everybody has to 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 thing they're doing.

And so the second part of toxic productivity is, as we are just doing for the sake or 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 self-worth that comes very contingent on our outcomes, on our 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 my relationships, to to just, you know, my entire existence. And so obviously, not being productive becomes very scary.

It becomes a scary place to be in. We can be very mean to ourselves and and to indigenous become the self feeding cycle. And so we become the excess of this constantly going up and down the hill, dropping the boulder are picking it up again.

And honestly, it just it's becomes a very lonely place and lonely. It's almost strange that it's lonely because these everyone's still not everyone. The most people are in the cycle.

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

So, you know, these are the people there, but you're not connecting with the loneliness becomes in the. Can you talk more about what does that look like for you in your practice?

You say that you actually working with people that are stuck in this and you actually help them through it. So what does it look like? What's it like?

Where does it come from? And then we'll get to the what they will get to the what can we do about it? Yes. So what it looks like in day to day is very small innocuous things.

So if you're not intentional, if you're not paying attention, you're going to miss it. And most people realize they're trapped in toxic productivity when they steal that outcome of it, like they feel the negative impact of it.

So this can look like prioritizing outcome and achievement over everything else. It can look like being laser focused on a goal at the expense of your health, your wellness, your relationships.

It can look like extreme perfectionism that 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 they are absolutely hyper focused on presenting a productive image of themselves.

But the reality is, they're spending 40 minutes an hour on an email that is making them less productive traditionally. Right? And so it can look like being trapped in your own mind.

It can look like playing it safe because you don't want to rock the boat because you're just so concerned with one specific outcome. And so taking a risk, applying to a new job and starting a new 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're pursuing. You know, I share some vignettes in that 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 what you want in a partner, not even knowing what you should be like and what you will be like in a relationship.

But just having this mindset that I need to check this box, I need to be married before 30 and so I need to have kids before 31, right? Having this checklist, but it's not really aligned with who you are, what you want, what makes you happy, what brings you joy?

What are the things you don't like? We just have no sense of that.

## How Toxic Productivity Shows Up in Practice

And that's kind of what it looks like in real life. Is just working towards that goal because you think you have to achieve this goal where it begin. What's 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 complement and to love you right as a parent. And, you know, no parent explicitly says that.

And I don't think parents are, you know, evil when they when they do that. I think this is just parenting, right? Like 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 acknowledgment within my family system, and that over time develops into a very unhealthy dependent on achievement and an unhealthy relationship with productivity in practice.

Great answers. What about the environmental law? Society is very different. It's changed in the last 40 years. It's, you know, there has been a shift.

I mean, I've been in this field for 40 years. I'm 61. I have watched how productivity is always been a thing, but it's definitely there's been a shift as we've become more biomedical, more neuro reductionistic, more focused on 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. We

can leverage the technology. But, you know, it's got good and bad.

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

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

And so even people look at the health app on, on their phones and the metric of, oh, how many, how many seconds you've got it and how many steps did I get it?

And now we're in this comparison mindset right? I'm actually hearing this within the fertility space because fertility tech is a big thing now. And so I've actually heard people talk about, well, I need to have like 25 eggs.

Oh that person got 40. So I need to I need to get that because wow. And it's like this. Yeah. And so it's a very unhealthy dependance again on outcome and productivity that is now coming into every realm of our lives.

And we live in a very optimized culture. Everything needs to be optimized. Yeah. You know, our it's from our blood work to the how functional our furniture and everything need to be optimized.

Right. And everything is now also performative people. You know, our personal moments of life are now on display on social media. And, you know, I'm a 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 it's 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. 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.

Absolutely. Like in in this like, 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 don't respond now, that's the problem. And you know, I live in New York City, I'm constantly around people in high stress and work environments.

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

Whatever this deal issue is, can probably wait until after dinner. You can 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 and getting validation from your achievements layer in this technology piece, you layer in this like optimizing efficiency culture.

And we all live and breathe productivity culture right now. It's you've said that so beautifully and it just makes me think of these biohacking lifestyles and not this.

I mean, I've spoken at quite a few biohacking conferences and, you know, I often stand up and I 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 those are it's those are stressing your mind out. They're actually making

you work. So you can't be too much productive for me if you can.

So I know people. I'm sure you do as well that they have if if part of the body is covered with something that's measuring something and the focus on a must sleep and there's so much everything sleep.

See, if I hear one more person saying sleep is it? And I constantly doing damage control with that. I don't take this anymore. But when I was practicing still and in my in my podcast and just Nebuchadnezzar, I'm equating damage control on hey, listen, embrace your sleeplessness because you will catch up on your sleep and stop measuring everything.

And so I love you just to speak a little bit, because the biohacking culture and longevity and all these things are great, but they've really it's like they've gone on this side of the road and they're not meant to.

We kind of need to come back, get a little bit of balance again.

## Childhood Roots and Societal Pressures

It feels like a went from that side of the road to the side of the road, and it's like very much on the side. Now we need to get some balance back. What do you think about all this?

Absolutely. And I think. It fits. Neatly with the same mindset a couple of minutes ago, around as soon as you put a measuring stick on something. Yeah, is going to fall into optimizing productivity culture.

And I think our technology really leverages that part of the human brain. Right. I think we naturally are curious. We want information about how things work.

That's just like the way the human did. Yeah. And so apps definitely leverage that by putting like, you know, little progress markers on how far you're going in the game, like the gaming industry literally utilizes biohacking format to develop their games.

But when it comes to this biohacking city, 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't control our glucose spikes.

And I think, what's that done? 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, there you go. Care. It becomes distraction. Exactly. And so I talk a lot about don't let self-care like don't, don't mass self-sabotage as self-care, because if what your body needs is to rest and sleep in, and it needs that restorative time where you're forcing yourself to wake up at the crack of dawn because you need to do it by space, and then you need to run for like five miles all before the workday has begun.

Like you're doing yourself a disservice. Exactly. So, so wellness for me. And this is I talk about this in the book a lot. My 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 give us sustainable wellness.

And so I do this thing in my life called 8020, which is 80% of the time I'm going to aim for meeting the Mark 20 person at the time, and it's going to take the hour.

I'm going to accept the fact that I'm not going to meet the mark. I might not do 100% of my workout. I might not take my supplements 20% of my time. Right. And that's okay.

And giving yourself that flexibility and allowing for balance is really important. We can optimize everything. We are not machines. I don't care who says what about the body, right?

Oh, I totally agree. We've become a mechanistic society because of the new neuro reductionism, the brain being brain focused. And we have what's the point in my in my career.

And so then you expand it beautifully. So let's talk about at least we not mechanical machines. We can't optimize. So you've got lots of ideas and suggestions for people and you sort of suggestion like I love the 8020.

Can you talk us through a couple of techniques? Maybe if you take us through an exercise in the time we have left together to help us understand how we can shift the start, the shift, obviously they need to get your book can get hold of you and learn these things, but how we can use all the great information out there in a way that's more healthier and more balanced.

Yeah. So one thing that I've 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.

So overcommitting is a big red flag for toxic productivity. Why do we say yes when we know we don't have the time? Why do we say yes when we know we don't have the resource?

Why is that first thing coming out of my mouth? Yes, without even me reflecting or thinking about what my capacity is at this time and why is it so shameful to say no?

So Overcommitting is a really big red flag for toxic productivity, and a really good way for me to manage my over commitment is to use something that I've coined the Chanel rule.

So 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 thing for House by far.

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

No, I'm actually going to get three C's down in this hour. So give myself more time to do less things. And when I change this mindset, I, I genuinely found that I was less rushed.

I was operating under less of that false sense of urgency. I was less 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'm not present anymore.

So that has really helped me create buffer. And buffer is really important when we think about Overcommitting. And 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. I love that.

Can I just quickly comment? I love that I love the Chanel rule. I love the buffer time because I'm one of those people that think, okay, I've got an hour, I've got four things.

Let me add on another three or let me add on another four.

## Digital Culture, Biohacking, and the Optimization Trap

I can do all four. I can do eight. You know. Now you sitting you do telling me to go from 4 to 3. And I was going from 4 to 8. So yeah that in itself is a massive thing.

And then I love the buffer time that that is so, so valid. And if we could those, those two things alone will for me would revolutionize my life. And I know when I've done that sort of thing, I don't feel that way, you know.

And, and it's okay to be busy, but it's, it's you've got to be realistic and balanced in your business. Carry on. Give us some more techniques. Yes. I think another one that I like to do, and this is also in line with the over commitment.

My instinct is and this is again this book is that has a lot of me in there because I'm right there with the people who are reading it. One of my instinct is to just say yes and be like, say yes.

Figure it out later. This is a great opportunity. This will be fun. I'll get to meet people. Just say yes. And so what I started doing is I started asking for time.

That's for saying yes. So even if my intention wasn't science to build the practice, I really I wrote down a stock sentence. This was very challenging for me.

So I really had to like have a stock sentence ready for myself in my notes app, that I could put it 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 say something too formal like, oh, let me look at my calendar, right?

Or I'm coming across this to like, hottie is like, oh, let me just see if I have time for this. Like, those are the emotional things that prevented me from saying no.

Yeah, right. And so 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 that 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, is this place is this party going to actually give me like the, the, the return like, is there a like mingling time or is this just a, you know, a seminar like really thinking through like, is this going to align with my goals index on.

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 to 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 as aligned with my 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 sense. Be intentional. Yeah.

Oh that's fantastic I love that. That's so that's very good because I think that's something everyone battles with. It's almost like we have these expectations we see to do it.

## Practical Strategies for Setting Boundaries

It's not almost like they're all expectations to do more in the hour, not less. It's and not take away it's forget the buffer time, reduce the buffer 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 got time for one more. Do you have one more for us? Yes. I think another really important part of toxic productivity is we use productivity as a way to manage difficult emotions and this one is that. Yes.

So this one is a little bit more in the emotional realm. The other two are very tactical. You can just employ them right away. But we use productivity to manage uncomfort emotions when we feel ashamed about not being good enough.

Oh my God, let me do something more. Let me do something more, right? If we feel guilty about wrestling. Oh, let me do something. Let me do something.

And so emotional regulation is an important tool that helps us step out of this mindset. And so learning to sit with difficult emotions, whether that's through journaling, meditation, body work, going for a walk, exercise, cooking something like we need to learn how to sit with, process and let go of difficult emotions 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 that's good. I think, you. Know, I. Love people to do that. Yeah, I think it's very good that people do that because it is sometimes you need to do that.

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.

This kind of links into this answer you've given up. When people are so used to being productive and suddenly they do have downtime, let's say that they finish.

They they actually do get through the stuff because they, they've worked really fast and suddenly they've got this, oh, wow, I've got three hours, I've got an hour.

What do I do? And I feel kind of lost. I don't know what to do with themselves. It's almost like, wow. And and you can even people even experience a little bit of weird kind of depression, but it's not even, you know, just like a depressive sort of state that, well, 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 how to unwind.

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

I have encouraged people to create their own kit, so whether that means having some movies on on deck already, start for yourselves that are comfort movies or movies you've been meaning to watch like.

So I have a note on my phone that has a list of movies that I want to watch as a list of albums I want to listen to and things I can do.

## Managing Downtime and Finding Balance

So when I get into the state, because I do get into that state, I just open that app and I'm like, oh, wait, these are things I can actually engage in right now.

I'll do that puzzle that I bought last week. So what happens is I have a list. I have like a essentially a backup plan. Backup, like a backup list of of yeah.

To do in my downtime. Exactly. And I have, like a list of movies and I put that on, I'll be like, oh, yeah, I did want to watch this romcom 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.

We start mining our products. So the list. So we need to shitz that frame. And having a very tactical, tangible reminder of what you can do to rest is 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 watch because I was too busy. Right. And and having like exactly.

And having a list of your like activities that you can also engage in. Oh yeah, I did buy Lego or. Oh yes, I do have this coloring book that I can pull out or things like that.

I love it, I love it, I love to, I have an infrared sauna and a sauna every day, and I try and make sure that I get it. I love it, and I try to make sure that that way 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 for this. So that and the it literally I have to say to myself, okay, if I'm in here for 35 minutes, I can do ten minutes of work, but then I must do 20 minutes of downtime, watch that movie, or text a friend or.

But it's I can literally have to 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 it's a discipline.

It's it's actually a and not in a scary sense, but the benefit is so huge for our mind being body connection, a whole second year biology that it's really worthwhile.

Thank you so much for sharing. This has 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, learning more about the book. There is going to be worksheets, resources, all of those things there.

If you're more interested in the stuff that can help you, you know, kind of work through that. So it will be my full name is Transcom. Everything is there.

And then we'll put the link in the at the end 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.