



Conscious Life presents

Achieving Goals Through an Anxiety Lens

Guest: Britt Frank

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[00:00:00] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm speaking with Britt Frank, a licensed neuropsychologist and author of *The Science of Stuck*.

Britt received her undergraduate degree from Duke University and her master's degree from the University of Kansas, where she later became an award-winning adjunct professor. Britt's work equips audiences with powerful and simple science-backed tools to help them get from stuck to go. Her new book *The Getting Unstuck Workbook*, is out now. Britt, thank you so much for joining me today.

Britt Frank

So good to be back with you. Thanks for having me on.

Meagen Gibson

I loved the workbook and noted that you could have started it in a lot of ways, but you began it with tackling procrastination. Why is that? Did you write that chapter first or last?

Britt Frank

I procrastinated on the procrastination chapter. It's one of the first things that is... One of the easier things for me to write about and speak about, because it's so universal. Not everyone has a mental health challenge, or at least not an identified one.

But we all know what procrastination feels like, the shame of being stuck with it. And not that it's easy, but when we understand procrastination is self-protective and not intended to be destructive, it flips the switch and the shame thing goes away, and then we can get moving again. I love dismantling all the myths and shamey stuff around procrastination.

[00:01:40] Meagen Gibson

You dismantle a lot of myths and shamey stuff throughout the whole book, and we're going to get to a lot of that. You talk about consistency over intensity. I took so many notes in this book because I was like, absolutely. What is procrastination a sign of around your nervous system? You said it's protective, so what's it trying to tell us?

Britt Frank

Consistency over intensity, it's a relationship principle. I first heard that phrase from James Clear in *Atomic Habits*, it's so true because we attack these goals of ours with this huge intent, and we try to bite off more than we can chew.

From a nervous system standpoint, what our brains think shouldn't be a thing might be a very big deal. The don't sweat the small stuff doesn't work if your nervous system thinks small stuff, it's big stuff.

Procrastination is often the dissonance, this intersection between what I think I should be able to do, and what my nervous system thinks it can do. The nervous system's interpretation will win every time. Procrastination is a sign of nervous system overload. Why? I don't know, we don't always know, and that's okay, that's the nice part you don't need to know why.

But if you take it from a nervous system perspective rather than a moral, what's wrong with me? I'm such a lazy person, there are changes that can be made here. If it's just who you are, then there's nothing to be done, end game. I like this approach, 1, because it's based in science, and 2, because it produces change rather than the shame cycle, which then produces more stuff that creates more shame, and onward we go.

Meagen Gibson

Now we understand what's happening in us when we're procrastinating and how it's protecting us, some of the things that you talk about around that are systems. Why are systems so important when we're trying to meet our goals?

Britt Frank

Without a system, most things don't get done. You would never build a house without a blueprint. You would never launch a business, well some people do. It doesn't tend to go well when big things are done without some system or plan to contain the requirements of them.

But again, we approach goal setting with, well it's January 1st, so I might as well start trying to do the big thing, ignoring the fact that in the fourth quarter, likely chaos, holidays, family obligations, breaks from school, and kids. You're probably at the lowest bandwidth on January 1st of the entire year, plus the hangover if you're a drinker.

Systems are the, let's get this work done ahead of time before you try to do the thing, let's create a system so we can set you up to do the thing based on your specific... Because not every tool, or technique works for everybody, but the idea of creating a system that is U-shaped, can work for

everybody, because it means whatever you need it to mean. Systems usually have to come before change in order to make the change last sustainably.

[00:04:55] Meagen Gibson

I love how you introduced systems. You talk about the intention action gap, it was so funny I have to share this with you, while I was reading it I was envisioning that famous photo that was in the Patagonia catalog of the two parents throwing the baby over the crevasse. If anybody hasn't ever seen it just Google parents throwing a baby across the canyon, and the image will come up.

That was the intention action gap imagery that I was getting as I was reading that part of the book, we're not often modeled in our personal lives, sometimes in our professional lives, but we're not modeled in our personal lives how to bridge the gap between our intentions and our systems, or our goals and our systems.

You talk about the four S's, I would love it if you could break those down for us so that we're not throwing the baby across the canyon.

Britt Frank

Such a great metaphor because it's true, it's set the goal, now jump, but if you jump you're going to fall because jumping a 100-foot canyon, no. Maybe some people, maybe some babies, but no. So instead of just jumping, it's let's build the bridge.

Creating structures like systems, and finding cheat codes to starting, that's a big one. We talk about how we need to get started, and it's so hard to get started, once I get to the gym, I'm fine, but getting myself to go, let's solve that. Rather than focusing on the finish line, how do you solve for the starting line?

I haven't seen a ton of material on that, it could be as simple as practicing putting your clothes out the night before, or driving to the place so your nervous system can get oriented to it. We want to solve for the entire canyon, when we need to just put the first brick of the bridge into place.

I have the same response as most people, but that takes so much time, how am I supposed to get anything done if I just don't do it? It's like, well, you can do it and then fall, and then climb back up and try again, and then fall and then climb back up. Or take the time to build the bridge that will sustain you as you're making changes because our nervous systems don't like changes.

A predictably negative outcome to a brain is preferable to possibility or some unknown maybe it's going to be a good situation. We have to solve that.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I love the acronym that you made, especially when you're talking starting, which is small, easy, truthful, I love that last part, the truthful part. I think we all understand what small means, we all understand what easy means. What do you mean by truthful?

[00:07:40] Britt Frank

I love acronyms, in the goal part, I'm like, SET, S-E-T, small, easy, and truthful. Because how often do we lie to ourselves? I went to an early morning Pilates class, or I signed up for an early morning, I knew I wasn't going to go when I signed up for that class, I knew this is not going to happen. I'm going to wake up tomorrow at 5:00, get really annoyed, turn my alarm off, and go back to sleep.

If I had been truthful with myself the day before, I could have solved that. There's no point in trying to do something that you're not ready to do, or unwilling to do, or can't do. We have to not only make our goals small and easy, but they have to be truthful.

That's where shadow work comes into play, it's like, I feel ashamed that I'm not a morning person. Okay, but that's a bigger problem, right now we're just trying to solve your morning workout routine. So small, easy, truthful, we have to start there, we don't have to, it helps to.

Meagen Gibson

Talk about self-compassion we don't have to accept the shamey labels. Lazy is one of those shamey labels you talk about in the book. Are we lazy? Or are we just valuing rest, restoration, or accepting the characteristics about ourselves?

I recently hurt my leg, and I've been in a walking cast for several weeks. In order to get in some cardio, I started to swim. I've had to admit to myself that I don't want to get in a giant cold body of water in the morning, even if it's fashionable, I don't want to do it. I can do it at midday. I can do it in the afternoon, but I'm not going to wake up at 5:00 AM and go swim laps. Just being truthful with myself about that, I didn't have to book a class, but the alarm is going to go off and my body is going to go, Hell no. Let's be truthful so we can succeed, and then I can plan around my own truth.

Britt Frank

It's truth without shame. If you had sat there and beat yourself up, you would have created more nervous system overload. I'm very yay self-compassion, but not from the just be nice to yourself, because there's a chemical pathway that truth without, shame follows. Then the chemical pathway that truth while beating yourself up for, what you find this one produces change, this one produces more of the thing that we don't want. Getting rid of shame isn't making excuses or cosigning, it's creating a very different chemical pathway to get us where we want to go in the first place.

Meagen Gibson

I think that's the work that people avoid the most, it's sitting with the shame of it, teasing it apart, admitting it, and then being like, okay what work do I need to do in order to not feel shame around this and get past it? How do we even begin that?

Britt Frank

I have an answer to that, and I'm very fond of this answer because it's such a hot take, it's so true. And as a therapist, I'm saying, don't start with why. Starting with why is great if you're launching a business, starting with why is brilliant in that realm of work. But when you are stuck and you are

trying to solve for starting something, why can't I start it? It's not usually helpful. Sometimes can it be helpful, maybe.

[00:11:07] Britt Frank

But more often than not rather than why am I stuck? It's, what are my realistic choices here? Of those, what am I willing to say yes to? That will get you moving a lot faster than analysis, doesn't get you across the canyon. I can sit there and think about the canyon, how the canyon came to be, and what tectonic plates needed to shift. It doesn't help. Where's the brick? What do I need to do next? What am I willing to do next? What's available to me? Is a great way to get around the shame problem.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, I love that, what not why. What, what, what? All right, we're dancing around it, but let's talk about safety and stuckness. Why is safety important when we're trying to achieve our goals or make change?

Britt Frank

The safety issue is interesting because unless you're actually in a physically or biologically unsafe environment, most people who are stuck, in the type of stuck we're talking about, are logically safe. There's not a lethality to not going to the gym, or to laying on the couch. If you feel bad, it's not because you're unsafe, but our brains don't know that, because our brain's operating systems don't upgrade.

So instead of this shouldn't feel unsafe to my brain, which is the argument, usually when we talk about fight, flight, freeze, and the nervous system's shutdown safety responses. Well, why is it doing that? It shouldn't do that. Okay, well we're not going to ask why, we're not going to do that.

It's doing it because your brain is braining that's why. Rather than, well, why is it feeling unsafe when it shouldn't? A better question is, what are the things that cue safety? That's a question I never was asked growing up, I never learned to solve for safety. It was just implied, you're safe, get over it, what's wrong with you?

But practicing noticing what people feel safe to my nervous system? What places? What songs? What shows? What food? What does safety even feel like? Because we can't solve the problem of safety if we don't know what safety even feels like. That takes time and practice because I don't know about you, I lived in a floating head. Where do you feel safe in your body was a strange... I didn't understand the assignment for a long time.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I spent years in therapy with that question floating in the room, what does that feel like in your body? And I would be like, I don't understand. It took years.

[00:13:41] Meagen Gibson

The question of what feels safe to you? We'll get to this in a few minutes. I've got some questions here about relationships because you spent a lot of time in the relationship realm in the workbook. But I'm not there yet, we're not going there yet, a teaser for everybody watching at home.

When we talk about safety, I want to talk about positive thinking. Why is mindset not enough to change your mind if you want to change your mood?

Britt Frank

No shade to the cognitive behavioral therapy people, CBT is like the ballet of the mental health world, it's the basics, you need the basics, and the basics are important. But if mindset was the sole issue, we'd all be good to go, because we all know how to say, "Come on, get up off the couch and do the thing, I am a winner." We can do affirmations all day. But mindset is limited because there's only one part of your brain that does mindset, and that's the newer part. That part is very easily shut down by the safety parts of the brain, which have been around for a lot longer than the modern demands, of a modern-day world.

Meagen Gibson

It's that part of your brain, the safety parts of your brain, are like the bouncer outside that won't even let you get in to hear the band you came to see. If you don't assuage the bouncer, make sure that your ID checks out, and you don't have anything in your purse. You have to get checked out first, and then those higher-thinking parts of your brain can get access. Am I understanding that right?

Britt Frank

I love that, I haven't heard that analogy yet, and I love it because the bouncer is big, scary, and mean. But you're the club owner, you own your inner space, and so the bouncer works for you. When we're fighting with ourselves and thinking, my physiology is out to get me, I'm self-sabotaging, and my brain is attacking me, we forget our brains are on our side. Brains are not wired for peak performance, brains are wired for don't die.

We can change the default settings, but we have to start with, this isn't a mortal thing, this isn't a character thing. Mindset is limited because the brain, and because the brain is attached to the body.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I was thinking of another analogy when you're talking, who knows if these are helpful to people. But it's like when you're in a car and the seat belt gets locked, it's too tight and you're just like... And no amount of pulling is going to loosen it, you have to chill the heck out, take a breath, and relax, and then magically the seat belt will loosen and you're like, okay.

[00:16:25] Meagen Gibson

All of that has to happen before you can then get into rational reasoning with your brain. Before you can start thinking positively, you have to acknowledge all of the stuff that's going on, like, okay, I don't feel safe, and your rational mind is going to be like, that's dumb. It can think all it wants, but you still have to address the safety issue first and foremost, and we talk about safety a lot here.

Britt Frank

This is why I don't like positive thinking because positive thinking ignores the safety problem. Negative thinking ignores the problem of, not everything being bad, unless it is, but most of the time it's not. So rather than trying with positive thinking, let's go with what's true here, and then ask yourself, is this true? Was this ever true? How true is it now?

Meagen Gibson

And positive thinking too, for a lot of people, feels just like the messages they got when they were younger from people of like, oh, it's not that scary, or you're totally safe, or it's not that bad. It's just you doing that to yourself, so it feels really familiar, really easy, and it feels like something that should work because it worked when you were little, to at least change your state, or pretend, or stuff it, or all those things. It's a familiar tactic that we can use, but it doesn't mean it works.

Britt Frank

It's so true. And it's not even positive, "I just need to get over myself and do the thing because there's nothing to be scared of." That is not positive, that's gaslighting. It's like, no, it's scary, it's okay to be scared. Whatever the thing is you want to do, if it's something your brain is not used to, scary is probably going to be the feeling. And again, that's how brains brain and it makes sense, and we can work with it instead of fighting against it.

Meagen Gibson

You mentioned earlier the protective mechanisms of anxiety, and what they're meant to do. You list the four Ps of anxiety, one of them obviously being protect, but you also mentioned prevent, promote, and point. I'd love it if you could tell us a little bit about those.

Britt Frank

We're talking about the bouncer, anxiety is promoting, he's the promoter, she, or they, are the promoter outside the club, trying to recruit other people, because anxiety does promote connection. It is a lot easier to bond with someone in a high-stress situation than on a regular Tuesday.

Flights and air travel is the best example of this. When there's something really wrong, watch how fast you are bonding and making friends with the neighbors. I was on a bad flight and I'm holding hands with the guy across the aisle. I've never met him, I don't know who he is, but I'm anxious because the plane is bouncing and we're missing our approach. I'm holding his hand. Anxiety does promote connection.

[00:19:11] Britt Frank

And in an increasingly isolating feeling world, we need connection. And if we're not getting it through conscious means, our brains will tee up the anxiety just as a strategy to not feel so lonely. Which isn't healthy, and it's not good, but it is functional. Again, it's important to consider, oh, it is easier to bond and connect with people when there's something bad happening. It's harder when there's something good happening.

That's something to consider as I'm thanking anxiety for doing its job. It does point towards areas that need our attention. It's like a smoke alarm, the smoke alarm doesn't attack the house, the smoke alarm is a very unpleasant signal that there is a problem somewhere.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. We've mentioned it over and over again, but I just want to say explicitly, when you respect your brain and your anxiety, and get curious instead of shamey and judgmental about it in yourself, it loosens up. I can attest to it.

We've been talking in these interviews for over three years now, and I hear your voice in my head all the time, in a good way, in a healthy way. I hear the things that you've said to me, and I use them, and it's changed my relationship with my own anxiety, the way that I receive it, and the questions that I ask it. I never ask why, I only ask what. What are you trying to tell me? What am I not getting? What is coming up?

I had an example of this last week where I got triggered by something on a day that I didn't want to be triggered. I had to sit down for 30 minutes with a journal and a pen and be like, What are you trying to get me to feel? What are you trying to communicate? What do you need? What do you want?

Wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote, wrote, and then it was over. I was like, oh, okay, great I can move on now, message received, thank you for your communication, and now I can move through it. Instead of fighting tooth and nail against it, denying it all day, or feeling bad about the fact that I was feeling bad, just went through it.

Britt Frank

And it's terrifying, I haven't had what we used to call panic attacks, because we know panic doesn't attack, but I had one of those recently, I haven't had one in years. And I was like, oh man, I have to now practice all this stuff I talk about. Okay, because it did, it felt so awful, I'm like, what can I do to numb out, to make it go away?

I'm like, all right, I know what to do. "My brain is on my side, my brain is on my side, my brain is on my side, I'm not being attacked." That at least got it from a 10 to an 8. Then it's there's a message here, okay fine, I don't have to like this right now, but I do know don't ask why, ask what. That got it down from an 8 to a 6.

[00:21:56] Britt Frank

Then once I got it down enough, then suddenly the seat belt loosened and I was like, oh that made sense that I would have got triggered. I was in a city where a bad thing happened. It's like, oh yeah, that makes sense that my body would remember being there, and produce anxiety physiology. But if I had asked why while I'm locked down, I would have felt worse.

Meagen Gibson

It's so funny because when we don't have this information, a lot of times when we're triggered, and especially if you have a trauma history or something, we take our state, and we seek out someone who can validate it for us. That could be a therapist, it could be a friend, it could be a partner who can say that makes sense because of...

And when you learn how to do that for yourself because you understand. Because your higher level thinking isn't available to you most of the time, unless you know all this stuff, and you practice it like you and I do. That high-level thinking isn't available to you, and all you're in is, I feel like this, I need someone to validate my experience, and tell me I'm not crazy, or that feeling like this isn't crazy.

But when you're able to slow down and be like, "My brain is my friend, my brain is my friend," like you described, then the higher-level thinking starts to come back on and you can self-validate. You can hear the voice of your therapist, you can hear the voice of your friend, you can hear the voice of the wise people you listen to at these conferences who are saying, "Okay, what is possible? What is happening? What do I need to know? What am I here to learn?"

Then if you can't get to it, then you use your phone to phone a friend, you text your therapist, whatever support you have in your life, and I hope everybody has at least someone, if not.

You end up being able to self-regulate, that's the word I'm looking for, without having to constantly seek validation.

Britt Frank

Even if you don't know why the affirmation makes sense, I don't know why it makes sense, but I do know because my brain is on my side. It makes sense that you do not need any type of advanced training or understanding of anything to start at least practicing. I don't know why it makes sense, but it does because it always makes sense in context.

It's a great starting place when you don't know what to do, start by affirming, I'm not crazy, because there's no such thing as a crazy person, and this does make sense. Somewhere this makes sense, and I will hopefully figure it out. But if I don't, that's okay, what do I need? What am I willing to do? What are my choices?

Meagen Gibson

I have to tell you when I was reading the workbook, I was surprised when I got to the relationships part because I think in my brain I was like, we're just talking about individual stuff, blah, blah, blah,

and then there was this... I was like, oh, but at the same time I was so excited because you talked about the relationship of counseling and safety.

[00:24:46] Meagen Gibson

It was so funny because my partner came from across the house, he was like, what? Because I stood up and I was like, "Yes!" As I was reading, because it's one of my major points of contention around therapy is that everybody's, "Well, you should go to couples therapy."

A lot of times when people are saying what their problems are in their relationships, people aren't fully disclosing because they also don't understand everything that's going on in their relationships.

They understand how they feel, and they don't understand why they feel it. They can't name or can't say, I'm in an unsafe or abusive relationship because they don't actually know it. They just know there are a lot of things going on that don't make sense. How I feel doesn't make sense, and they need some help.

People say, "Okay, go to couples counseling." Well, if you don't have fundamental safety in your relationship, couples counseling can be really dangerous, unsettling, and unhelpful. So I want you to talk about it, even though I just did a bunch of talking.

Britt Frank

I want to stand up and cheer for you for cheering for this because it's true. The research has shown, and the domestic violence hotline people spend all of their resources and energy into the research, and understanding these dynamics. Couples therapy is not helpful when abuse is present in a relationship. Again, I've had people say that is not true, there's the cultural context, and there are other things, what is really abuse? And which type of abuse counts and which doesn't?

But generally speaking, of course, there's nuance to everything, if there's abuse present, that's not a relationship problem. Abuse is not a communication problem. Abuse is not a relational dynamic problem. Abuse is a problem of an abuser not doing what they need to do so they don't abuse.

I don't do couples therapy anymore. But I would have people come to me for couples therapy, and it's absolutely not... Because when you have couples therapy, we're balancing it out, we're looking at both sides of the situation, and there are many abusive situations where there's not two sides to that story. Abuse is abuse, period. So I will stand behind the other people who are smarter than me, and we've done all the research, that when abuse is present in a relationship, couples therapy is not recommended.

Meagen Gibson

I will say, because I have experienced this personally, that unsafe situations don't necessarily have to be permanent. There could be a dynamic that is initiated by stress, and by other outside mitigating factors, that could make a relationship feel very, very unsafe, so couples counseling will still be unhelpful and problematic.

[00:27:28] Meagen Gibson

What I'm saying is couples counseling can be eventually helpful, once safety is reestablished in the partnership. Once we have communicated here are the boundaries, and here is what helps me feel safe. Once we have engaged in that baseline again of safety, that we allegedly probably had at some point if we even got into a relationship.

Once that is reestablished, then we can go into couples counseling and talk about how we got here in the first place, how we can improve our communication, and how to avoid these pitfalls in the future. It's not all hopeless. There are some situations where couples counseling will be helpful, and where safety can be reestablished, but abuse is not one of them.

Britt Frank

It's really not. And the vulnerability required to successfully do couples counseling then gets weaponized, we see this in the media all the time when people use therapy speak as a way to control and to... It's very dangerous when an abusive partner knows enough about psychology to then be able to say, "Nope, you're triggered. You're projecting onto me." It's like, I'm going to hit you and then tell you you're projecting because I know what projection is.

It's like, no you're being abusive. I get it's complicated, it's nuanced, it's difficult, and I stand by that, abuse is not a situation where couples therapy is appropriate. In a perfect world, everyone has access to good therapy. And if you want to stay with your partner, go to your corners, work it out, and then come together after, like you said, safety has been established.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I wanted to make sure we talked about that. You talk about conflict languages, and it's great, everybody should buy the book so they can see that. Here's what I want to ask you, what about the couples that don't fight?

Britt Frank

Two avoidants together is such an interesting dynamic. The couples that don't fight are strange to me, I think it's problematic, but if you're in a conflict-avoidant relationship and you don't have a problem, I'm not going to create problems where there are none to be had.

I can look and judge people that don't fight and be like, oh, they're so avoidant, and oh my gosh, it would be so much better. But if they're happy being conflict-avoidant, okay.

That could be very detrimental for children who are witnessing the refusal to engage in healthy conflict. But two autonomous adults who want to sweep things under the rug, if children aren't involved, have at it, do your thing. But yeah, not having any conflict is not very human, because humaning is hard and conflict is inevitable. Fighting is optional, but conflict is inevitable. So skillful navigation through conflict is useful.

[00:30:13] Meagen Gibson

I want to talk about codependency because I've never heard it in these terms, which you named as process addiction. I was like, oh my God, I was like, I don't know why she had to attack me. But as someone who's been on a personal codependency unwinding journey, because we learned this over a long time, we don't just arrive in a relationship someday as a codependent. This takes time to learn these behaviors, patterns, and modalities of relationships.

Then when it becomes a problem in our relationships, we're like, oh right that's what that is. How are codependency and process addiction related? And what is process addiction?

Britt Frank

I really believe this, and I get into trouble for saying it, but I can back it up. First, let's define what is a process addiction. There are chemical addictions where you ingest something to alter how you feel or think. A process addiction is a repeated pattern of behavior that's causing problems and continues to repeat despite negative consequences.

Technically sex addiction, you're ingesting a chemical, but we'll call sex addiction because you're not injecting or snorting. Gambling, overspending, or anything where you're not ingesting a chemical is considered a process addiction.

Codependency, and the word is really terrible because we do need each other as humans, but codependency is a process addiction in that, it is a pattern that continues to repeat despite negative consequences and then continues to get reinforced and repeated.

When you say things like, "I know this is a bad pattern, but I can't seem to stop," if that's not the definition of addiction, I don't know what is. Because I have it too in spades. The process of healing from codependency very much mirrors the process of healing from a chemical addiction. I've done both, and they both require detox, withdrawal, discomfort, and just really cringy, unpleasant, uncomfortable realizations.

But looking at it as a type of addiction, even though that sounds bad, to me freed up, because the path forward is very well tread for that. So let's follow that path because people over there seem to have some ideas of how to walk forward, so let's go over there and do that. Then it tends to work because they do mirror each other.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. You said in the book, "When the only currency of connection is helping, you eventually believe that your only value comes from what you do, rather than who you are." I remember I just paused and held the book against me and I was like oh.

I was like, I got to read that in the interview because I really want people to feel that in their chest, in their heart space. I recently had an experience where somebody that I'm in a relationship with, was going through a really hard thing that didn't have anything to do with me.

[00:33:16] Meagen Gibson

It took four days of what you said, the agony and the discomfort, and I could feel all of the things that I used to do, in all the ways that I used to process that, and all the ways that I used to show up. It was a lot of agony to have the restraint not to fall into my regular coping patterns.

It's not comfortable work, but at the same time, the thing that I want people to hear, and that you can say more about, is that you're robbing the other person of their work if you're trying to codependently do it for them and comfort them, especially if it doesn't have anything to do with you.

We're not talking about things you need to make amends for, or grievances, or apologies, or things like that. If you don't have anything to do with the other person's state or stage, you shouldn't be doing the work to make them feel better. Stop robbing them of that incredibly vital work in their own personal development.

Britt Frank

It's tricky because people are like, well are you telling me I should just be mean, selfish, and not care? Aren't we supposed to offer and extend support and care to other people? The answer to that is yes, of course. I'm not saying don't care. I am saying we need to examine how we care, and the ways in which we are showing up.

Sometimes the best way I could care for someone is to not help them, like you said, because if I come in and rescue somebody, I get the credit for that win, not them. So as much as it's awful to see someone you care about suffering and in pain, there are ways to show up that aren't codependent.

I had to have a hard conversation with a friend, "I'm a therapist, I'm not your therapist." This person had a substance abuse issue. If I take your call every time you're in crisis, I'm the one telling you that you don't need therapy, you have your therapist friend who's on standby. But I'm also completely taking away your autonomy and agency. I provided a list of resources, that was a non-codependent way I could help. Here are people who are available to be your therapist. I'm a therapist, not yours. It's not kind or loving for me to help right now.

It's hard because as the helper, we feel uncomfortable when we're not helping, but that's our problem, not theirs. Sometimes the most loving thing to do is nothing.

Meagen Gibson

As you just stated, what is the difference between a request and a boundary?

Britt Frank

This is one of my favorites because I never heard the word boundaries growing up, and then everywhere in the zeitgeist on social media, it's boundaries, boundaries, which great yay, boundaries.

[00:36:06] Britt Frank

When people say, "My boundary is that you can't do this," that's not a boundary, that's you trying to control somebody. A boundary... no one can actually cross your boundaries, that's another one that once you see it, or hear it, you can't unhear it.

A boundary is about me. It's about you. A boundary is a choice that I make in response to your behavior. It's not an ultimatum. It's if you do this, I will choose this. The difference between an ultimatum and a boundary is intense. An ultimatum is I want to control you. A boundary is if you call me after 9:00, I'm not going to answer, and that's not to control you, it's because I like you, I want to stay friends, and if you keep calling me late at night, I'm going to get resentful, and our friendship is going to suffer.

So a boundary is a fancy word for a choice. A boundary is just a choice, what's my choice? You do a thing, now I have a menu of options. I might not like my choices, but a boundary is an inside job, and it never depends on another person.

So no one can cross your boundaries. If my boundary is I don't answer my phone after 9:00, and you call me, you didn't cross my boundary. You just didn't do something I asked you to do. I have to answer the phone in order for the boundary to be crossed. So the only person who can cross your boundaries is you, except in cases of abuse. If my boundary is during a fight I go into the room and you leave me alone, and you break down the door, that's not a boundary violation, that's abuse.

Meagen Gibson

I want to emphasize that, and many people have said this, boundaries are not intended to control other people, they're put into place in order to try to stay in a relationship with people. Because we're breaking down these patterns, it's codependency, if you will, or other relationship dynamics, and we're recognizing, I've had to surrender too much of myself, or I haven't been paying enough attention to my needs, or my self-care, in this relationship.

Therefore, in order to stay in a relationship with you, I need to make this choice. And people hear the word boundaries and they misunderstand it, and I think that it's all about these unrealistic expectations that people are putting on other people. They're like, no, actually, this is me trying to stay in a relationship with you.

Britt Frank

It's about what's true, this goes back to the small, easy, truthful thing. If I have a boundary that is not compatible with how you live your life. For our friendship, if my boundary is I don't like to text and you're a texter, there's going to be some fundamental incompatibility there. It doesn't mean you're wrong for wanting...

This isn't you, for real, this is for example. It doesn't mean you're wrong for wanting to text all day. It doesn't mean I'm wrong for never answering my phone. It just means what's true for me is incompatible with what's true for you, and that's a hard pill to swallow. But it is important as you're figuring out boundaries, to be honest with yourself about what you will, and what you won't deal with, or tolerate in a relationship.

[00:39:10] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, and they can be seemingly silly. One of my work boundaries is that I don't do voice memos. It's a thing that we joke about, we laugh about because it gives me anxiety to see a big 6-minute voice note first thing in the morning. I'm like, oh no, it gives me this existential dread, so once I communicated that, I can't handle it.

In this way, if you do it here because of convenience because you're driving or whatever, then I get a transcript. If you send it to me over here, I will ignore it because I can't stand the anxiety. When you communicate, then the other person is like, oh gosh, I never expected that a voice memo would give you anxiety. I'm like, yes it totally does.

Now, there's some... I'm laughing because I just sent Britt voice memos last week. But it's up to her to express, I really don't like it, I don't want to receive or send voice memos, stop communicating with me like that. If she didn't like it, she would do it. But that's what we're talking about. They don't have to be these big...

They also can be really important and very big. I have somebody in my life who struggles with substance use. My boundary is, I love talking to you, and I love communicating with you, and I love our relationship, but I cannot communicate with you when you are under the influence. That has changed our relationship because they are struggling with active substance use.

It hurts not to be actively in a relationship with that person, but at the same time, I'm also really appreciative of the respect for that boundary. They don't always feel good, but they feel good ultimately to us when we communicate how we feel.

Britt Frank

Someone could look at that and say, well, you're being mean, your friend needs you. And it's like, but if you're being dishonest with yourself, how are you abandoning yourself to show up in a way that causes resentment, how is that number one kind? It's not. How is it helpful? It might be temporarily soothing to that person, but it's not ultimately helpful for anybody to be in a relationship with an undercurrent of resentment and self-abandonment. So even though they feel icky, and they sound mean, the intention is always about love and protection.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely for both of us. So people don't think I'm abandoning people, that is not when there's a crisis. But a crisis is also very relative to the person who's in it. I won't give you the details of all that for this relationship. But anyway, just to say that boundaries exist so we can stay in a relationship, and that's the bottom line.

Britt, how can people find out about your new workbook, about your work, and what you're doing in the world?

Britt Frank

I'm so excited about the workbook because I wrote it the way I like to do workbooks, there's different types of things, you can jump around, it's not all cognitive, it's not all journaling, there are

lots of different types. It's called *The Getting Unstuck Workbook*, and you can buy it wherever you buy books.

[00:42:10] Britt Frank

Find me on Instagram. I don't mind voicemails at all, that is not a boundary for me. It's [@brittfrank](#), or my website, scienceofstuck.com.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Britt, thank you so much for being with us.

Britt Frank

Thank you.