



Conscious Life presents

Getting Explicit About Boundaries at Work

Guest: Melody Wilding

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Melody Wilding, best-selling author of *Trust Yourself: Stop Overthinking and Channel Your Emotions for Success at Work*.

Named one of Business Insider's most innovative coaches for her groundbreaking work on Sensitive Strivers, Melody is a licensed social worker with a master's from Columbia University and professor of human behavior at Hunter College in New York City. Melody Wilding, thank you so much for being with us today.

Melody Wilding

I'm so excited. Thank you for having me.

Meagen Gibson

I want to start off by framing for people, what does it mean to be a highly sensitive person?

Melody Wilding

I think there's a lot of misconceptions about what it means to be highly sensitive. In society, we think of it as a character default. You're too soft, you take things too personally, when in reality the term highly sensitive person refers to a biological trait. And that in research has been called sensory processing sensitivity.

What researchers have found is that just like any personality trait, there's a certain percentage of the population that is more sensitive in terms of how reactive their nervous system is and others are less sensitive. It really just is a term to describe people who are on the higher end of that nervous system reactivity spectrum.

[00:01:38] Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. I love setting that frame before we go down this rabbit hole that I'm going to invite you into that I got your consent for before we started. I love this framing because I've interviewed you before about high sensitivity in the workplace, and so definitely check out Melody's other interview to see that.

But today I want to talk about riding the line between personal and professional development and accepting how we're biologically wired. How do we know what is our responsibility to work on and what is something we should work on accepting about how we're wired in our biology?

Melody Wilding

It's such a fine line. I think at the end of the day, so much of this comes down to developing the skill of personal discernment, because we live in a time, especially now, where there's no shortage of information about things you could be improving about yourself, how you should be improving that, and there's conflicting information a lot of times.

What I find is that highly sensitive people tend to be seekers. They tend to be people who are really invested in their own personal and professional growth because they want to be better. Or many times they have been told that you're not good enough as you are. You need to change who you are.

They end up seeking out a lot of that personal growth and personal development in order to improve themselves and change themselves. What we're talking about today is that there's a line there. There's a line where you can only change your biology so much. For sensitive people in particular, I like to think of it in terms of balance, that you have certain qualities. In my research, I found there's about six key qualities that most highly sensitive people have, and they're like a scale.

When those are very out of balance, that is where you have the opportunity to take courses, listen to podcasts, and you can start to put yourself back into balance. But there comes a point where you do have to accept that I have a certain baseline of reactivity, responding to situations, even reflectiveness, that is just wired into you as someone who is more sensitive because the trait evolved and has persisted for millennia, because it was helpful to have certain people in the group that were more observant and that were more attuned to danger.

But what happens is that socialization comes in, trauma, negative experience comes in. All of that then layers on to our biological wiring and can throw us out of balance.

Meagen Gibson

Everything you said is fantastic. I'm thinking of a hundred things. I want to talk about those six qualities specifically, but just to validate other people's experiences, I've come to the conclusion over several years that I am one of these highly sensitive people. As many of us, I'm sure, watching this, are being seekers.

I recently had an experience that inspired this questioning of you, where I've been in deep psychological and self-improvement work for 20 years. And really hyper focused in the last six and

have done a ton of growth and have seen all of these things come into root in myself in a way that I love.

[00:05:19]

And then I got a shot of cortisol for a foot injury and had all of these biological responses and symptoms that looked a lot like some of the ways that my hypersensitivity used to show up, which was anxiety and nervous system dysregulation and a little bit of panic. Because I had the knowledge of okay, I know this isn't because I'm psychologically unwell or because there's something actually going on.

This is just a biological response that I cannot think my way out of. I cannot train my way out of this. This is out of my hands, literally. I just have to surrender to my body's response and be like, oh, okay, I guess this is what we're doing for a little while. I'm going to ride it out and support myself.

Melody Wilding

I think what's important there is that for you, it's become the exception, not the norm, and that you had the presence of mind and you had the emotional and mental maturity to put that situation in perspective and to not blame yourself and say, oh, look, I've done all this work and I'm still right back at square one.

All of that, again, is skirting that line of yes, we're going to have - I can certainly relate to your situation even after the years of work and everything I've done. There are still moments where I'll get an email and I feel my heart just start racing out of my chest or I get surprised by something and I quickly become very overstimulated. We're all going to have those moments.

But the key is, is it the exception, not the norm? How quickly are you able to get back to your normal state? I often talk about this when I'm coaching people, is how do we decrease the delta, the delta of the time between when you start to spiral and when you're able to regain back control. How do we close that gap and make it smaller and shorter?

Because it's going to happen. You have to accept that if you're living in this ideal state of I'm above everything and I'm a perfectly enlightened being, you're going to be very disappointed. To some extent, recognize it's going to happen and also recognize you have agency in those situations to put it in perspective, to choose different thoughts and behaviors that actually benefit you.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so glad you said everything that you said. I also want to validate for people that I remember distinctly when I didn't have all of this knowledge and when the delta was much, much larger and I would get dysregulated for days, not moments or hours and have no clue what was going on. So much of the inner critic or bad self talk, I can't remember the phrase, but somebody else said just thought battering.

I have just a ton of empathy for anybody that's still at the beginning of that journey. I just really want to name it. You're not going to self-help your way out of being you. Your orientation will always be a certain direction or a certain way, but there's a lot you can do to steer that, as I think you were saying with having your own agency.

[00:08:40] Melody Wilding

Absolutely. You know what's interesting too is that as sensitive people, I find that we experience so much richness with the human experience. We're able to experience the high highs and the low lows. Sometimes you need those tough moments because it gives you a comparison.

It gives you a contrast point to the positive moments. I'm sure for you, when you went - well, let me ask you, when you went through that situation and you were able to react like you did, how did you feel on the other side of it?

Meagen Gibson

Oh, it was so gratifying. I was so grateful. I think that's why I want to talk about it with other people now. Not to make it about me, but because what I want people to hook onto is that on the other side of the work is this gratifying experience where you're like, oh, my gosh, I feel how this has paid off.

I feel how compassionate and gentle and understanding I am with my whole self, and that my expectations aren't that I be unaffected by everything, but that when I am affected, that I can respond with compassion and give myself grace.

Melody Wilding

100 percent.

Meagen Gibson

I think what you said earlier, too, about nervous system regulation, if you could talk about just the point of your nervous system. I think it gets a little bit mixed up, especially on social media and how people look at it, that we sometimes get confused that having a regulated nervous system, being in tune with your sensitivity level, whatever it is, means that you're just like, all the time. That wouldn't be good for survival either, would it?

Melody Wilding

Exactly. Your nervous system is there as a monitoring system. When you're sensitive, you're taking in more information from the environment. You're able to sense greater subtleties and nuances and changes in people's body language or something that's moving over there.

I remember, actually, you and I were talking. I moved recently. I used to live in this place I'm living in. Several years ago, probably going on about ten years ago now, I was sitting at this very place and out of the corner of my eye over here, I saw something just flickering or something like that. I dismissed it at first and went back to what I was doing. It kept catching my attention.

It turned out in our neighbor's yard, there was a brush fire that started just spontaneously. It was hot and dry and all that. I was able to catch it and prevent, potentially, their whole backyard catching on fire. That's the function of your nervous system, it's meant to draw your attention to things that are important. Even negative emotions have value in them.

[00:11:31]

Guilt might mean, especially if it's well-placed guilt, it might mean that you have to make amends for something. Or if you feel lonely, it can be a call to action to connect with people. There's value in those responses and what your nervous system is trying to tell you. If you try to override that or just dull it, that's not going to be a great place to be. You're not going to be able to trust yourself to hear your own intuition come through.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you mentioned intuition too, because that's been such a gift of all of the work that I've personally done and that I've learned from so many of the experts that we have at these conferences, is that when you do this work to understand your nervous system, regulate what you can, get tools to cope with it, understand your orientation naturally, biologically.

Then all of a sudden, what becomes clear is the difference between your anxiety and your intuition. Suddenly those voices, the feelings, the messages that you're getting and receiving all the time as a highly sensitive person, become much clearer and you can discern much better. I don't know if you want to say a little bit about that.

Melody Wilding

Oh, definitely. I have an entire chapter in my book about intuition because it's your sensitive sixth sense. Again, because you're taking in more information, you have more of a wealth of knowledge to pull from, because that's what intuition is. It's that snap judgment. Your brain is quickly pulling from that encyclopedia of your experiences and what you've sensed in the past and making a prediction or giving a hunch about what's to come next or the situation that you're in.

Again, intuition is not perfect. It can have biases. But what research shows is that the most powerful decisions, ones that people feel are most successful and that they are most satisfied with, are ones that combine left-brain thinking and right-brain thinking, that combine data and your emotions, your intuition.

Like you were saying, going back to the idea of discernment, being able to tell the difference between what is anxiety and fear talking and what is your intuition talking. Very important. In the book, I actually have a comparison graph and a few key ways to tell the difference is that fear tends to feel like a constricting sense, minimizing so you almost feel like you're getting smaller and everything around you is getting tighter. Whereas intuition tends to feel a bit more freeing, relaxing, expansive, possibility focused.

Fear tends to come with a push motivation, where you are trying to avoid some sort of rejection, disappointment. You're trying to please others. It comes from that place of I should, I have to, I must. Whereas intuition is more of a pull motivation. Whatever decision you're going towards still might freak you out. It might be very intimidating, and you might be anxious, but deep down, you know that it's for your best interest in the end, even if it's going to be difficult. It tends to have a calmer, more nurturing you got this inner coach voice to it.

[00:15:11] Meagen Gibson

I love that you framed that for us. It's so clear. I listen to you talk about it like that and it's exciting. I can't wait to be looking and listening for pulls versus pushes. I used to talk about it as screams versus whispers. My anxiety screams, but my intuition whispers, and it's patient. I think each person would have their own relationship, so I would encourage them to buy the book because I'm sure that the things that you're noticing about intuition versus anxiety will come up in that table and in that chart, I'm sure.

I know from a trauma-informed perspective, many people who are highly sensitive, not to over-generalize, but can over-give themselves and may lack boundaries. In the work context, I know you talk about boundaries a lot. What are some of the signs that we might need to start defining some boundaries at work?

Melody Wilding

Yeah, well, to ground this in everything we're talking about today, too, the nervous system response. You were talking earlier about the fear reaction. We often talk about fight or flight. Most people know that fight, defending yourself, flight, running away from the situation. What doesn't get talked about as much, but probably in this community much more than everywhere else, are two other responses.

Freeze and fawn. Freeze is when you're caught like a deer in the headlights. You literally just shut down in the moment. Fawn is when you get into people pleasing mode. You try to keep everything copacetic, try to make everyone happy, bend over backwards. That is probably the most common response I see highly sensitive people fall into. It's an extension of our empathy and our deep caring, but many times, it's more just a coping mechanism for us to deal with our discomfort.

As you were saying, a lot of the people I work with struggle with setting boundaries at work, saying no. They've overextended themselves. I always like to say, use your emotions as a guide. Look for situations where you feel an outsized sense of resentment, where you feel like you've let a situation go on for too long, you feel taken advantage of. Because most of the time, highly sensitive people, we haven't developed that muscle of even discerning for ourselves.

When am I giving in a way that I feel good about? When does that become over giving? But resentment is a pretty clear signal of that. Even just taking an audit of, is there a project that you agreed to six months ago on a trial basis and you're still doing it now? Every time you see the calendar invites and the emails for that, you just get that seeding sense deep down inside. That's a good idea that expectations need to be reset. You need to set some limits in that situation.

Meagen Gibson

I love resentment as the red flag. I think of those little red flags that the survey people put out when they're coming to your property. I literally saw it waving. Resentment is such a huge signal. I think that we can really, or at least I can really think of all the times and all the ways in which that happened in my personal life and at home. I think we often overlook it in the workplace because it's a different job and we're being compensated.

We make all these excuses, but we do the same thing at home. If you're the primary caregiver, regardless of your gender, in your household, you're prone to resentment because you pick up a

lot, you assume a lot of responsibilities, and you're just the default person that does house management and crisis management and person management.

[00:19:12]

Do we have mayonnaise? You know, in the back of your head, exactly the quantity in the jar of peanut butter or whatever it is that you all need. I think that that sometimes follows us into the workplace. We're just so good at it that it follows us into the workplace.

I remember the moment that I knew I needed to work on boundaries at work. I was at a different job that I'm in now, and we were in a big team meeting, and something came up that someone needed to assume responsibility for. I remember the discomfort I felt in my whole body at not just immediately raising my hand.

No one volunteered me. No one told me, Meagen, you should really take this. It was literally an imagined and made up stress response I was having, just at the discomfort of not solving this problem for everyone.

Melody Wilding

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

Agony. Total agony.

Melody Wilding

It is. Literally, when I work with clients, we work on how do you stay silent longer and not jump in to fix situations, rescue people, be the one who says okay, I'll do it because you want to ease your own and other people's discomfort in that situation. In psychology, we call that overfunctioning, where you're taking on more responsibility than is yours or more than 100% of your share.

That can create a dynamic where other people underfunction, where nobody else in the house is keeping track of anything or stepping up to do laundry or taking out the garbage. Same thing at work, those dynamics still come into play, where if you're always fixing a certain report, your colleague doesn't have to change anything they're doing because they know, well, Meagen will just take care of that.

Setting boundaries, I like to say, is not selfish. It actually serves everyone because when you stop overfunctioning, you are actually teaching other people to take responsibility and to empower them to step up.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'd like to frame it too, all those tiny little things that you volunteer for are taking away from the things that you really enjoy doing or the reason that you are in this job or whatever enjoyment you take. It chips away at that in tiny, tiny little increments. Nobody wants to be around you when you're feeling resentment and overworked and underappreciated. Also, they might not be able to explicitly pinpoint it, but they will feel it when you're feeling undervalued and over taxed.

[00:21:59] Melody Wilding

100 percent. What I see very often is people will come to me and say, in my performance review, I was told that I don't know how to prioritize, that I need to be more strategic, that I can't get promoted because I'm already doing so much. That tendency to say yes to everything can really start to backfire and hold you back, because people will say, well, we're not going to give her more responsibility if she can't already handle what's on her plate.

Actually saying no, and even presenting a trade off of I'm not able to do this, but I can do this. Again, it shows you have self-awareness, that you have a recognition of your own capacity, prioritization of what's important, and that you can have tough conversations, which is needed as you rise higher in your career.

Meagen Gibson

That's a really great point. I'm glad that you framed it like that. We've talked through a few of them, but what are some of the other core pieces of our resistance to considering boundaries and communicating them at work?

Melody Wilding

Yeah, I think a lot of it is other people disliking us. We worry that if we say no or we push back, we'll be labeled not a team player. People will not like us. They'll think we're mean, we don't want to help. I can understand where that comes from. At the end of the day, it does matter how you deliver that no, how you deliver that pushback.

It's called a positive no in negotiation research, where you're saying, I can't say yes to this request, but I can do this. You might offer to change the timeline. Can't get this to you on Monday, but I could do it by Friday. You might change the scope. I can't do 100 percent of this piece of work, I could do 60. You could offer a referral or a resource, a book, a podcast, a help article, another colleague, a freelancer who could get the work done so that you're extending help without everything having to fall on you.

Meagen Gibson

I like that framing as well. I'm so glad everyone's talking about boundaries, but I think so much of the way that people oversimplify them sometimes, even if it's not, they heard it this way, but in their minds, they hear boundaries are like, no, I'm not doing that. Nobody wants to be in a relationship with someone that is just all stop signs all the time and all red flags, whether it's personal or professional.

This growth mindset, solution-oriented, you can have boundaries, limitations while also acknowledging that things need to get done. Let's all come to a solution together, instead of me just assuming responsibility for everybody.

Melody Wilding

Yeah. I think a theme I sense we keep coming back to is this idea that things are not black and white. You could do all this personal development work on yourself, and you will still have moments

where that biological spike happens. You can set boundaries and you can still be a team player. It's a both and, not an either or situation.

[00:25:22] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Speaking of that, I'd love it if you could talk a little bit about the role of value and respect in our workplace satisfaction and our overall sense of purpose and happiness.

Melody Wilding

It's huge. It's everything. When you think about Maslow's hierarchy of needs, you have food, shelter, water, and right above that is belonging. An aspect of belonging, of course, is having positive relationships and knowing people care about you, but it's also a feeling of being respected and valued for the work you do.

I'm actually working on my second book. For that, I did dozens of interviews with people in my audience, highly sensitive people in my audience, who are in corporate settings. By and large, when I ask people, how do you define happiness at work? What are you really working towards at work?

I expected to get answers like, I really want a promotion. I want to increase my salary by 30 percent. I want a better title. It was not that at all. The primary answer I got was, I want to do work that I feel proud of and I want to feel happy and satisfied and relaxed going to work every day. That really surprised me.

To me, at the core of that was feeling valued, respected by others, and doing work that wasn't necessarily flashy, but that was meaningful and fulfilling.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I was thinking back on my career, and there was a time when I was in the television industry where I got a lot of opportunities because the people that I was working for were vacating their positions and they had ambitions. There was a period of my career where my only purpose and value was to support their ambitions.

It took me a while to recognize what was happening because I was like, why am I so dissatisfied? Why do I feel like I don't belong? That sense of belonging? It was because I'm not respected and valued outside of the way in which I am platforming and supporting this other person's ambitions and goals.

I had to figure out that for me, belonging meant more than that. It meant that you're here because you have unique gifts to give and we respect and value your contributions as you. You're not just a person that's going to fulfill this role to platform me and make me look great. So I can really relate to that. Go ahead.

Melody Wilding

Something that's important, and what you said, too, is really pinpointing what you want out of your career in that season of your life. I have a handful of clients right now. We've seen this great reckoning after the pandemic of what do we want for work and what's the meaning of our lives.

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I've had a lot of people say, I just want a job. I just want work where I am compensated for the value I bring. I enjoy going to work, but it allows me to pursue my passions and personal growth outside of it. Knowing that is really important because I find as sensitive people, we have this drive for achievement and comparison. How am I doing compared to my peers?

I feel like I should be climbing the ladder. I should want that promotion. You get to define success on your own terms, but so many of us have never paused long enough to even ask ourselves, what does success actually look like for me in this phase of my life? Because it may mean money and accolades and titles, but it may not. It's important to know that because then it crafts how you approach your work and how you feel towards it.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I want to ask further, just a couple more questions because I want to come back to. Now I've totally blanked. Oh, belonging. Because I just want to touch on this. I've had so many contributors at the trauma conferences and the other conferences that we do who emphasize belonging. I want you to tease it apart a little bit more because when we think about belonging, I think sometimes people really diminish the importance of it.

I can think of several contributors now who have talked about how belonging is a biological imperative that's been programmed into us for a long time, because nowadays we can survive pretty independently alone, but we're still wired for belonging because that was so integral to our survival. How does that translate into our work lives now in modern society and the modern way that we live?

Melody Wilding

Absolutely true. I think we saw this during the pandemic, people living by themselves. The transition to remote work was really difficult because we lost a lot of that belonging and we lost a lot of the spontaneous interactions, the bonding moments we had with people. All of that disappeared. We have to be much more structured and proactive in our communication because things are siloed now.

Exactly like you said, that drive for belonging is very deep because, again, back in prehistoric times it was dangerous to be rejected from the group, to not be accepted. You were not going to survive if that was the case. That still exists now. We all want to belong, and that can mean a few things. It doesn't necessarily mean that you have to look like or act like everyone you work with.

We know diverse workplaces are actually more successful, so you're not going to look like or act like everyone else. But there has to be some level of connection, or at least psychological safety and respect for differences that you can say, I have this differing viewpoint and you're not attacked for that. There's open dialogue, there's curiosity. I see where you're coming from and I respect that. Let's just leave that there. But there might be connection on other levels.

Maybe you share a passion for the same mission that you're working towards, or you have the same values as someone else on your team, you like the same TV shows or podcasts, or you both have pets. Finding those connection points is so important, as is feeling accepted and understood.

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Especially for sensitive people, this is really important because our sensitivity is often invisible and many of us hide it or we've been conditioned not to let people know that I experience things more deeply than most people. If you are constantly playing that act, you're constantly acting as if that's going to be really exhausting for you and you're going to feel like no one sees me for who I truly am in this situation.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I often joke with people about how I have to go role play like an extrovert every once in a while, because some things look like they feel really easy for me and they're not. I have to schedule a period of time between each interview because this is a performance, as it is for you, I'm sure to a certain extent. There's authenticity, but there's still like, I'm showing up in a role, role playing, cosplaying as this person here right now. The energetic drain versus getting filled up for other people, it has to be taken into account.

Melody Wilding

That all goes back to knowing yourself. Again, you wouldn't do this if this wasn't something you were very passionate about and you cared about. There's certain ways you need to take care of yourself in order to be your best. So rather than fighting against that, feeling resentful about it, like you were saying, you consciously build that into how you structure your day.

For sensitive people, that difference between energy management versus time management is huge because what you're working with as far as your nervous system may not be the same or is different from the capacity other people might have. You have to be a good steward of that.

I hear you. I do something very similar. I batch my days where I'll have certain days that are very meeting heavy. When I'm on, I can be on. I have other days that are really heads down alone writing. I need that because it's hard for me to context switch and go from being off to full concentration. I know that about myself, and I engineer that into how I manage myself.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I completely share that. We would work well together. Okay, don't talk to me now. I want to spend a few minutes validating for people. We talked about social safety and psychological safety in the workplace and for people who are doing the work and they're communicating healthy boundaries in the ways that we've already talked about, and yet they're continually, I don't want to use violated, but that's how it feels, where you've communicated a boundary or you're doing this work.

That sense of respect and value at your core, you know is constantly being overlooked or minimized, how important it is to you. I'm just fabricating a situation, but also they can't just up and quit. How do we manage these really difficult situations, and not minimize how important that sense of respect and value is in our overall happiness and purpose?

[00:35:43] Melody Wilding

So many people are in this situation now. I think everybody's more risk averse, not wanting to make a change with all the layoffs and economic uncertainty. So this is really common right now. The first thing I would say is you have to be ruthlessly honest with yourself about whether you have been upfront and candid enough about your expectations and what you need.

Because I've worked with enough highly sensitive people to know that sometimes we think we've sent a message when it hasn't been received on the other side. As sensitive people, we tend to be a bit more passive communicators, and we may be dealing with someone that's a bit more of a dominant and very explicit communicator. Only you can be honest with yourself about have I blatantly said to someone that I believe my boundaries have not been accepted?

That's becoming a problem for me in XYZ ways, highlighting ways that that ties to it's affecting my productivity. I'm not able to make decisions as quickly, or how does it affect them? And then either make an explicit request about what you would like to see change, or ask a question about how can we come to a better arrangement together.

So again, this requires a knowledge of who you're dealing with and how something might land with them. But you really have to be honest about whether you've given that message explicitly in the first place. Sometimes you may not even feel safe enough to do that. Many times when you're dealing with someone who is more toxic or even narcissistic, I like to say that you have to stop going to the hardware store looking for milk.

You have to stop trying to get your needs met by someone who is not able to fulfill them. If you continue trying to bend over backwards, please your manager, get their attention and their validation, but that person is just incapable of giving it, you need to find somewhere else to get your needs met.

You may find a mentor within the organization. You may have a colleague where you can pump each other up. You may have to look outside the organization. Maybe you volunteer or you have a spiritual community where you're able to get that building up of you that you need. But rather than trying to hit your head against a wall, trying to get your needs met from someone else, look for other more constructive ways to have that need met.

Meagen Gibson

You said a lot of things I want to circle back to, but let's start at the end with the narcissistic. It's really interesting because you're absolutely right that the psychological safety of that environment is not great. I think sometimes people with trauma histories or high sensitivity over share our insides in an effort to create and manufacture compassion or understanding. And then it gets weaponized on us.

That's when we figure out, oh, this is who I'm dealing with. Even in situations where you're stuck there, let me know if you found this to be true, but I think this is what you're inferring. If I can't make a change in that situation, maybe I can find my safe circle of people who are also feeling this way so that at least I don't have to feel alone in what I'm dealing with and how I'm being impacted by it.

[00:39:24] Melody Wilding

Yes, completely, because it's likely not just happening to you. Again, that may be within your workplace, it may be outside of it. There's plenty of women's leadership organizations that I've been a part of where I see people all the time sharing experiences of I have this really toxic colleague, and people are able to support one another through that.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I've not had that happen in a professional environment, but I have had it in a personal environment where I sat a few people down and I was like, here's what I'm experiencing. Here's why it's hard. I need you to understand that this is how I'm going to set a boundary. They were all like, oh, yeah.

Now our interactions are completely different because we all understand our understanding of the dynamic that this other person puts into the group. And so we're all freed from feeling like we're the one that's imagining a difficult situation. We're like, oh, no, this is tough for all of us. And then it's not actually that hard anymore. We're like, oh, there goes that again.

Melody Wilding

Yes, sometimes the stewing about a situation is much worse than actually doing it and saying the thing. The worrying about how people are going to react is, nine times out of ten, much worse than how they actually react. Think about what's the absolute worst that could happen in the situation, and how would you deal with it.

Prepare yourself for that. Practice defensive pessimism, and then go to the other side. What's the absolute best that could happen here? Because often people that are wired to look for risk, we don't consider that often, and then think about what's most likely because it's usually between those two extremes. That typically helps us arrive at the most balanced perspective.

Meagen Gibson

Going back to something you said a while ago, which I forgot I wanted to go back to, which is about fight, flight, freeze and fawn. We talked a lot about fawn which I'm really glad about, but I feel like sometimes freeze comes up at work, and this also happens in social situations, but at work, freeze might look like and tell me if I'm on the right track here.

You go into a meeting and something happens, or you have an interaction with a colleague and something happens, and you don't respond at all, so they assume agreement, and then you walk away and it's, I should have said, I should have said this, or I should have responded with this. That feels like a freeze circle for me. I was paralyzed in the moment, and then afterwards, I have all the responses I should have said.

Melody Wilding

Yes. That moment where your mind goes blank, you feel like you literally can't speak. That's very real because when you have a freeze reaction, your system freezes up, your vocal cords seize. Yes, so that is the most common manifestation of it. There's nothing wrong with circling back after

you've had time to calm down, to recompose yourself, to circle back to that person or that group and say, I gave more thought to what we discussed.

[00:42:24]

A few other points that came to mind are, one, two, and three. It actually makes you look very thoughtful and considerate, because most people are just on to the next thing. It can actually help you stand out because you've taken the time to build and reflect on what's been discussed. So don't ever be afraid to loop back and offer additional thoughts.

Meagen Gibson

I love reframing freeze as a superpower, for sure. All right, my body's telling me it's not safe to respond in this situation, but that doesn't mean I can't give this more thought, change my mind, or assert an opinion later. I love the framing you gave us just a few minutes ago about - I can't remember the exact words that you use and phrasing that you use, but it was like radical honesty about how clearly you've communicated.

I have found this in my personal relationship now. My husband and I, we joke about this all the time. He's like, that was you explicitly communicating. I'll be like, I've said. He replays the whole conversation. He was like, that was you explicitly drawing a boundary? Can we talk about the way in which you communicated that?

Just when you're dealing with someone. I wouldn't describe my husband as dominant or explicit in any way, shape or form, but we laugh about the way that we talk about things. Clearly, he's like, I wasn't getting that from what you said. I can tend to not be as clear and explicit as needed when I'm talking about my needs or just communicating boundaries or whatnot.

Would you recommend if somebody knows that they're dealing with someone who's very dominant and explicit, that they almost role play that form of communication if they feel like they're getting misheard or not heard at all?

Melody Wilding

Yes. Because, again, especially if you're just working on these skills, you may feel intimidated or your fear response may happen in that moment, which is going to make it harder to access your frontal lobe thinking, your best concentration and self-control and articulation. So, yes, I am the type of person that will always script out my key talking points, not word for word, but these are the key takeaways, or these are the key points I want to hit so I have anchors to refer back to if I start to get lost.

It feels like I have to hold myself accountable because I've written it down here. I have to say these things. You're having to flex your communication style. When we think of communication styles, there's often two dimensions. There's dominance, which we've been talking about, which is directness, how results-oriented are you? There's sociability, how much do you care about another person's feelings and human interaction, the human element.

Sensitive people tend to be more on the sociable side of communicating. In order to put yourself in a different mindset, that does take a bit of practice to be more direct and even using sentences

like, the key point I'm trying to stress is, or the takeaway I want you to walk away from this conversation is and clearly state your point.

[00:45:51]

If it helps, literally make those fill in the blanks for yourself. To your point with your husband, checking for understanding is huge. At the end of a conversation asking, how did that land for you? What are you taking away from what I just shared? So that you're making sure that the communication was actually received.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. I think reframing our default questions of, did that make sense? How many of us go, did that make sense? What we're really trying to say is, what was your key takeaway from what I just said? Or help me understand your understanding of what I've just communicated?

That's what we want to hear back is the answer to those questions, but instead we say default phrases like did that make sense? Because we aren't feeling that grounded or strong in what we have just expressed. We're expressing our own doubt in ourself, which isn't actual doubt, it's just our nervous system expressing its discomfort with how we're cosplaying as a dominant and explicit person.

Melody Wilding

Yeah, that's right. Phrases like that undermine us because it makes us seem like we're questioning our own delivery. It's subtle, but it can be important.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Melody, we've done really good work here. How can people find out more about you, your book and your upcoming book?

Melody Wilding

You can find more about me at MelodyWilding.com. You can head to MelodyWilding.com/book. Find out all about the book there, get a free chapter and get all of the information about my new book when it comes out.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks again for being with us today.

Melody Wilding

Thank you.