

Ep #3: Self-Doubt



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With Your Host

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Sylvia Plath wrote that the worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt. Based on my own creative endeavors and in my work coaching other creatives, I do understand why she says this. Even Shakespeare seemed to share a similar view. And measure by measure, he wrote, "Our doubts are traitors and make us lose the good we oft might win by fearing to attempt."

So if literary giants and creative geniuses like Plath and Shakespeare left us with this kind of cautionary tale about self-doubt, can there be any hope for the rest of us? Yes, there is. And even better than hope, it is absolutely possible to live full, flourishing, creative lives and achieve your dreams without being chronically plagued, beaten down, or crushed by self-doubt. And just how to do that is the subject of today's episode.

You are listening to *The Art School Podcast*, a show for artists and creatives who want to become the next greatest version of themselves. Learn how to cultivate an extraordinary way of being and take the mystery out of making money, and the struggle out of making art. Here is your host, master certified life coach, artist, and former lawyer, Leah Badertscher.

Oh boy, everyone, hello. I am excited to be back recording this episode for you, which is entitled Self-Doubt. I thought about titling it The Self-Doubt Solution or The Self-Doubt Solution part one of like, 843, because I do have so many ideas and coaching practices for helping people approach self-doubt more creatively and more effectively.

But I don't want to state there is just one solution and one size fits all, although that being said, at the same time, the things I'm sharing with you today are some that have proven to be greatest hits, both in my own life, and then also according to the feedback I get from my coaches. And I'm also excited to share this with you right now because I have a quiet house, everyone, which usually does not happen. But right now, my husband and children are currently at a tailgate for Notre Dame football game - go Irish -

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so I have a quiet house and no time to waste in recording this for you. So let's dive in.

What's worth noting right away is what I didn't call this episode and in addition to not calling it The Self-Doubt Solution, I also did not call it The Self-Doubt Eradicator because while I do think there are plenty of times when you can uproot, eliminate self-doubt, and they're usually all limiting, you can do that through coaching, self-inquiry, or just the process of following through with a goal and pushing through the doubt along the way and proving something to yourself along the way so that it dissolves.

I do think you can uproot these self-doubts, and I also think though, that if you're creative, you don't ever really get to that place where there is no more self-doubt. And I don't even think that's a productive goal to shoot for, and so let's talk about that.

Here's why I don't think becoming doubt-free is the goal. Being creative implies doing things that you've never done before, which implies uncertainty and growth and evolution, all desirable things in my mind, and if you're listening to this, I'm guessing in yours too. And while I do believe it's entirely possible that you can become more comfortable being uncomfortable in those space and processes of creation, uncertainty, and growth, from all my studying, training, personal experience and coaching, it's been the case that notwithstanding cases of spontaneous enlightenment, which to be clear, I have just read about in that experience to myself or witnesses directly, I just don't think self-doubt ever leaves the mind entirely.

And I mean, look at Plath and Shakespeare and the heights of creativity which they reached. So while we may question the purpose it serves, what I know for sure is that it is not useful at all, at all, at all, to make yourself wrong for having self-doubt. And I see too many people do this, and I was

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guilty of it for years myself, and once I didn't do this, I had released a constraint, a major constraint in my creativity.

And that was that when you view yourself as being somehow flawed or wrong for having self-doubt, you don't have the opportunity to look at it objectively, and you don't have the opportunity even to see it for the truth that it is. And that truth is that self-doubt seems to just be a part of the human condition, and it's particularly acute in creatives and visionaries. If you're a mover and a shaker, anybody who takes on a dare or dares to go for their dream or takes on a big goal, you put yourself out there.

And so feeling badly then for experiencing the self-doubt that comes with putting yourself in the terrain beyond your comfort zone, I like to tell my clients self-doubt is like - think of it like mountains. It's part of the terrain that comes with being creative. It doesn't mean anything is wrong with you any more than mountains, mean anything is wrong with explorers. But feeling badly for experiencing self-doubt is heaping suffering on top of suffering.

And so that bit, that layer of suffering, that layer that is caused by our self-reproach for having doubt, for being human is the layer that is needless. It's needless suffering and we can address that and eliminate that, and that improves your experience of yourself, of creativity, of the creative process and of life in general immensely. So this is part of the reason why I don't think eliminating self-doubt is a productive goal to have. There are a few other reasons.

When people make that the goal and they make doubt mean something negative about themselves or that they're not good enough to reach their goal, or they make doubt mean that they must have been wrong about that goal or dream or vision in the first place, then they're just set back and they're not their own best ally. So maybe you've heard you need to get out

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of your way, or you are your own worst enemy, but you've thought, okay great, but how do I do that?

This is how you set about doing that. And the second thing I see people do is that when eliminating self-doubt is the goal, they set about trying to fix themselves and make themselves a better person, a person who doesn't doubt. And they dive into the work, they dive into self-development work, which I love, but this is a wild goose chase if you're aiming for eradicating self-doubt. And so then they just spend so much time and energy and then constantly are evaluating themselves, waiting for this blemish-less self to arrive or be perfected before feeling worthy of pursuing their dreams, rather than just diving in, rolling up your sleeves as we are, and doing the work while feeling the doubt.

Much like feeling the fear and doing it anyway. And maybe you're somebody who has done that and you hear me say that, feel the doubt and do it anyway, or feel the fear and do it anyway, and your heart just sinks or you get all clenched up because you've done that, that's been your MO for years, and you're just tired of forcing yourself that way. It feels almost violent, or you're scared of it or dreading it. So to that I want to say like, hang with me here, stick with me because we're going to talk about how to improve your experience of doubt and fear so that it's not such an angst ridden or torturous experience that that is entirely available to you and part of a lot of the work I do with my private clients and my art school students.

So that will be coming, we'll talk about that later in the episode. But just to wrap up what I wanted to share here first about why I don't think trying to eradicate doubt is the best goal, and that's because there's this other problem with becoming fixated on that, and that's that the more you try to eliminate doubt or anything really, the more attention you give it and the more power you give it. Because when you need to get rid of something like self-doubt in order to feel better about yourself or your work, in order to

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be able to carry on, you are essentially agreeing that it does have power over you.

The thing is though, you're actually the one giving it that power. And you're plugging into it more with your attention and focus about trying to get rid of it. So that's the irony, but so true. A more effective way to focus your mental energy is to observe that you're experiencing self-doubt. And when you're experiencing self-doubt, ask yourself, eavesdrop on yourself, what thoughts are you thinking? Write these down. Don't skip the part where you write them down.

Observe what thoughts you're thinking when you're doubting yourself, and then notice how those thoughts make you feel. And not feeling as a thought, but feeling in your body. Emotion, the Greek root of the word emotion is literally a movement through the body. Your emotions are physical sensations, vibrations moving through your body. So becoming more emotionally fluent in terms of knowing what your physical experience of an emotion is essential to setting yourself free from the power self-doubt has over you.

And then you want to observe that when you are experiencing those emotions, those emotions drive certain actions. And what do the emotions created by self-doubt, what kind of actions or inaction do they create in you? And an action here can be also just in the way you show up in the world or don't when you're feeling this way, and then you want to notice what results those actions or showing up or inaction produce.

So again, it can seem like the solution would just be to root out the doubt, and again, there are times when you can do that and times when that is precisely what you should do. And through self-inquiry, coaching, or by pushing through, you can prove the doubt is false and it falls away, maybe for good. So the time when you didn't think you could ride a bike and then you learned to ride a bike. You pretty much don't doubt yourself on that

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anymore. And there are other times when you can use the strategy, it's part of self-inquiry, of doubting your doubt, and when you do that, you see that it dissolves or falls away. And again, you can also use the strategy of just keep going, just keep swimming, just keep swimming, and before you know what happens or how it happens even, you look back and you notice you've outgrown your doubts.

But what do you do about those self-doubts that are persistent little buggers? And they just seem to be so very effective at keeping you from your best efforts to stay with your just keep going strategy, and maybe there are other doubts that you thought you'd dealt with already and got rid of until you started working on a new project and then it reared its little demonic head again out of nowhere and you were like, wow hey, hold on, this again? I thought I was over this.

This happens to me all the time, and my clients. It's that spiral, the idea of life following a spiral, and it's not that we meet the exact same self-doubt again. We are further along in our journey, but for this kind of self-doubt, if you don't want to wait to carry on with your creative life until you eliminate it, and I advise that you don't do that, that you don't wait to eliminate it, and you also don't want it to weigh you down so much or make you so miserable. If you actually want to enjoy being in your own head and body and life as a creative even while experiencing self-doubt, you will love this tool.

It's what I call the self-doubt protocol, or if you'd rather, you can also refer to it as the inner critic protocol. Sometimes I use those terms interchangeably, sometimes not. But for the sake of simplicity and clarity in this episode, I'll be referring to it as the self-doubt protocol. This is a tool that I use myself and that I practice with my private art school clients because it's very aligned with my overall belief that the way to create extraordinary results in your life is to cultivate an extraordinary way of being.

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And one aspect of that kind of being is that you expand your capacity for what you are able to experience, for what you want to experience, and what you're able to process and handle in terms of emotions. So while Plath and Shakespeare did call self-doubt the worst enemy to creativity and traitors to ourselves, and I understand why they did that, we are going to empower ourselves by taking a consciously different approach.

I believe it's a prerequisite for this kind of extraordinary way of being and let me just be clear when I say that, extraordinary way of being, I'm not at all implying that you'll never again experience difficult emotions. It's just that you expand your capacity for really being able to know that you can handle anything. So when you do this, you learn to live with self-doubt and it's even possible to develop, and I think it's very worthwhile to aim for developing a kind of self-doubt mastery.

And in order to do that, we want to reframe and revolutionize, and it's really helpful to think of it in powerful terms like that. We're going to revolutionize our relationship with self-doubt. This is going to really improve your experience of it when it happens inevitably, and it's going to free up so much more of your energy and release a lot of anxiety because you'll no longer have that part of you that is quietly, silently, or not, maybe overtly just fearing another part of yourself as an enemy, or as there's this something within you that's always going to be standing in your way and shooting down your efforts to create what you really want.

So I'm going to first explain to you how to create a self-doubt protocol, which is essentially a set of steps you decide on ahead of time for how you're going to act in a specific scenario - the specific scenario here being when self-doubt arises. And you want to do this not when you're in the throw of self-doubt. You want to do it before self-doubt strikes and cripples your ability to think clearly, creatively, and constructively, and so then these steps tell your brain, give your brain a simple solution for what to follow when it's feeling that emotion.

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And it's really useful to do this and effective for the same reason that emergency operation plans are essential for us. Because it's proven that the human brain, when it's stressed, has very limited capacity for cognitive load. So in other words, it can only think about so much and we have a really limited ability to access our rational thought, so you are probably familiar with, for example, what we're all taught in kindergarten and upward and that is stop, drop, and roll if you catch on fire. Because without that, the human instinct is to run, which we all now is disastrous. It just feeds that fire.

So similar to this situation, self-doubt can really impair our ability to access our higher thinking functions. It puts us back into survival mode, which we've already talked about in previous episodes is not the prime creative mode. So we need a simple protocol, something our brain knows by memory, by heart, and can access and handle when we're stressed. And you might also have noticed that when you are yourself in the depths of self-doubting despair, you're definitely not able to do your finest work or maybe even feel like a decent human being or play yourself out of that slump, and it might take you hours or days to recover from a bout of self-doubt and due stress.

And I don't think it's a coincidence how so many people, myself included, describe self-doubt as being paralyzing. And literally, I know it feels like, in those moments, I can't think, I can't write, it's like my brain can't see straight. I definitely can't do anything I really want to do except maybe eat M&Ms, brownies, or run away. So to avoid this, to avoid being paralyzed when self-doubt strikes, you'll create this self-doubt protocol because this is what we do when we are cultivating a creative mindset.

We don't hope for doubt to not show up or we don't avoid scenarios that would trigger that. That would be avoiding our creativity. So a powerful creative mindset anticipates that the doubt will show up just as soon as we have dared to venture out beyond our comfort zone.

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So to create a self-doubt protocol, you want to do five main things. By giving people five things to think about and remember at once is a big no-no according to podcasting coaching and teaching experts, so I'm going to start today by telling you all five, but covering only three in depth, and the other two will be subjects of upcoming episodes.

So here's a skeleton framework of what these five things are, and later we'll go into more depth. So first, you want to decide ahead of time and intentionally what you are going to make doubt mean when it arises in your life. Second, you're going to decide to do doubt on purpose. Third, you're going to decide how you're going to do and experience doubt. Fourth, I'm going to combine the fourth and fifth points here because it is to have an ongoing practice of cultivating awareness and managing your thoughts. That's number four, and that shorthand would be called thought work. And the fifth would be learning to process your emotions and aiming for higher levels of emotional mastery.

So let's go back to the first point. Decide ahead of time and intentionally what you're going to make doubt mean when it arises in your life. Going back to what we talked about earlier, you want to remember that self-doubt doesn't mean there is anything wrong with you, and it doesn't mean that your dream isn't meant to be. Self-doubt can only mean what you make it mean. So choose to make it mean ahead of time that it is a normal part of the human experience for someone committed to living creatively and courageously.

So also note, it doesn't come up when you're watching Netflix or pouring a glass of water because they're nothing ventured, nothing gained. Going on to number two, even more than accepting doubt as part of the human condition, decide to do doubt intentionally. This means that not only are you going to anticipate doubt as part of your creative process and as part of living a full, ever-evolving life, but you're going to decide ahead of time to choose doubt as part of that experience.

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And part of that choosing to live this way, you're going to invite doubt into your experience as a creative, and you're going to do this because it's going to be there anyway, so it's better to not fight it and better to anticipate it. And secondly, you want to know that doubt is going to help you expand your capacity to believe and become a powerful creator. We're going to talk about that more in a second too.

The third step, once you've decided to do doubt intentionally, you know what to ask yourself how, meaning, how am I going to be? Who am I going to be as I experience going in to doing doubt on purpose? And developing this part is where it requires you to delve more into your own personal experience with doubt and how it manifests for you. So knowing where your own vulnerabilities are, knowing what your own triggers are.

This is going to require you to be very aware and familiar with your thoughts, and this part of offering solutions to self-doubt is kind of where the solutions can be as unique and countless as individual psyches are that are experiencing the self-doubt. And that being said, I do also have two specific suggestions that are usually across the board really popular with my clients.

And the first is to rewrite and recast the role self-doubt plays in your creativity. So rather than casting it as the greatest enemy or traitor, or some other version of soul-sucking, dream-crushing, murderous of creativity villain that you have currently scripted in your own head, turn it into something that you can live with and possibly even develop a good relationship with, like a cute puppy. This is where you're going to have to use your imagination, creative folks, but it works. A cute puppy that nips at your heels, yes, and follows you everywhere, yes, but you're in the process of training it and develop a relationship of affection and trust.

And you also know that with cute puppies, you can always kennel it in its cute, cozy little cage in the corner while you work. It doesn't have to stop

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you from working. Another suggestion, and both of these I want to say were ideas of a mentor of mine, who is brilliant, Brooke Castillo, she talks about how she experiences a lot of severe anxiety, but that she doesn't let it debilitate her. She's definitely not the victim of it, but she thinks of it as her heavy purse.

So on days when it's particularly acute and intense, she thinks to herself, oh well look, I have a really heavy purse to carry around today but it's not something that's going to stop me from going on with my life. I'll just carry my purse along with me. And another example comes from one of my clients that I just adore her - I adore all my clients and she is no exception - she is a brilliant painter and she realized that when she felt doubt in her body, she had a strong visual about it.

So she painted that visual and hung it on the wall in her studio, and interestingly enough, when she experienced doubt in her head, it felt threatening and monstrous and overwhelming, but out on the page, it turned out to be this kind of golden, gelatinous, little blob with a red heart color in the center. So it was actually kind of adorable and not threatening at all, and again, had that sort of pet energy.

Another example that might be useful for you is that you think of self-doubt as a younger sibling that follows you everywhere and tags along everywhere you go, so loud, and with a lot of opinions, yes, but still sits in the backseat, buckles up, still is not driving, and ultimately, still does not tell you where to go and what to do. And you also don't take it personally what it says because you know the age and you know what younger siblings are about and do, and I say this because it works for me because I had younger siblings that I adore and still adore, so this helps me facilitate that relationship of affection with my self-doubt.

Because no offense to them, while they might be irritating at times when they're little, not anymore - Andy, Elizabeth, and Will, talking to you - but

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overall, just the way you can imagine feeling affection and understanding like, hey, that's what little kids do, maybe you can begin to feel affection for the loyalty doubt has for you, and think, hey, that's just what doubt does. So these are examples of rewriting and recasting doubt, but definitely play around with your own creativity and intuition to see how you might reimagine it, its role, and your relationship.

The second specific suggestion I have for you in developing your self-doubt protocol is to on purpose, develop an entirely different response to doubt when it arises. And that's to say if when doubt arose in the past and you reacted to it by wanting to quit and give up, from now on - and listen up because this is one of my favorite of all time, this is so powerful, guys - when doubt arises the next time, instead of taking it as a signal to give up, you are now going to train yourself to take it as an invitation to double down on your belief, to double down on yourself, to double down on your dreams.

I think, in fact, that this is one of the gifts of living a creative life and following your dreams, that doubt does arise. Like, reframing our minds, rewiring our minds so that instead of thinking doubt as a reason to stop believing in ourselves, we think, oh, I must be on the right track, this must be the hot track, and now is the time when I double down and I believe harder. When things are hard, I believe harder.

And when this is precisely when I need to work on my ability to believe and developing that ability to believe, which in other words, is developing your believe ability in yourself and in your dreams. And the more doubt invites you to work on your believe ability, to strengthen that, the more believable your dream becomes.

So we've covered three of the five main areas of developing a self-doubt protocol. Decide ahead of time and intentionally what you're going to make doubt mean, decide how to do doubt on purpose, decide how you're going to do doubt, and for the - the reason I have the fourth and fifth, managing

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your thoughts and managing your emotions is because I know that some of these suggestions might not seem to you like they're going to touch your doubt and the intensity of your doubt.

And believe you me, I have been to the rock bottom of doubt myself and there with many clients, so I'm not at all Pollyannaish about this or underestimating the intensity and realness of your experience. Not about diminishing that at all. And trust me though, I do know that these three practices work and then beyond that, really committing to points four and five, a practice of cultivating thought work as part of your life and emotional processing and aiming towards mastering those areas will also radically revolutionize your experience with doubt.

And we're going to be covering these a lot in upcoming episodes. So here's the part of the podcast where I want you to do more than just listen. I want you to really lean in and work with me. Coach with me. Given that today I've given you a pretty lengthy, detailed instruction set on crafting your own self-doubt protocol, here's the one thing I really want you to commit to today. Actually making one for yourself. Not in your head, but type it up as a document on your computer, print it out, or dedicate a real notebook if that's more your thing so that you have something you pull out in times of distress and review and you add to it as you continue along this journey of creativity and self-discovery and self-development, but please don't just think of this as a great idea. Actually do it.

It's the difference - doing it is the difference between looking at plans for your dream house and then actually going out and building it. So do this real work and get this done so that doubt is no longer an excuse for why you aren't living your dreams. After doing this, after hearing this today, doubt should never again be an excuse. It's definitely not a legitimate one for not going for your dreams and creating exactly what you want. It can still come up but it should never stop you.

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Thank you again for joining me for *The Art School Podcast*. If you enjoyed today's show, it would be awesome if you would take a moment to write a quick review on iTunes. You can do this by heading over to www.leahcb.com/itunes.

When you're there, you can also register to win a free Creative Life Audit Session with me. If you're an artist, musician, writer, or other creative leader and visionary, and you feel blocked in your creative work or in your career, with relationships, health, financially, or really in any area of your life, a Creative Audit Session can help.

We'll identify the root cause of your most frustrating block, and together, we'll come up with a customized strategy to get you back on track and back into your prime creative and abundant flow. One winner will be chosen every week. Thanks again for joining me everyone. Have a beautiful week and I'll see you next time.