

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ERIC ZIMMER (Katie Elliott & Eric Zimmer)

At the age of 24, my guest on today's show was homeless, addicted to heroin and facing long jail sentences. In the years since he has found a way to recover from addiction and build a life worth living for himself. It's my pleasure to welcome Eric Zimmer, author, behaviour coach and host of the podcast, *The One You Feed*.

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Eric Zimmer, thank you for joining me today.

Thank you for having me on.

I've just been catching up on some episodes of your podcast, *The One You Feed*. I'd love to ask you, what inspired you to start the podcast and do the work that you do?

Well, that's actually a pretty long story, but the short answer is: I had started a solar energy company that I had been running and decided for a variety of reasons it was time to shut that down and I was bored and I was noticing that my mind was wandering into sort of a negative headspace, which is what my brain will do left to its own devices. And so I kind of came up with the idea that if I started this show and I was interviewing people about what it means to live a good life, you know, I'd be reading their book every week, I'd be talking to them, it would make me sort of, by default, have to really be in a more positive headspace. And my best friend Chris was an audio engineer and I thought, "Oh, I could get him to help and then we would spend more time together and it would be something fun to do together". So that was kind of the initial impetus.

And now 270-something episodes later, how does that feel?

Well, it feels great. I mean it's what I do now full time and it's helped tons and tons of people. I think, you know, I get lots and lots of emails from a lot of people about how the podcast has changed their life and it certainly has changed mine. And so my initial desire to keep me in a more positive mindset has worked. The fact that I spend a lot more time with my friend Chris has worked. So kind of success all around.

So your interest in behaviour and human-ness, where does that interest come from?

Well, I think some of it is a native interest and some of it comes from, you know, at 24, I was a heroin addict, I was homeless, I had Hepatitis C, I was really, really sick. And so I got into recovery, and recovering from addiction regardless kind of of how

you do it really does take a deeper opening into who you are and how you function and how you think and the views you have about the world and all of that. And so, you know, for me some of that interest was native, like I said, and then some of it was, you know, for lack of a better word, forced upon me by recovery. But I realised that I really loved it and was really interested in it.

Are there things you can share with us that have been useful learnings along the way?

Sure. I mean, I think there's so many of them, but a few of the key ones that I think have been really important to me, you know, one is this basic idea that what we *do* really matters. The actions that we take make a lot of difference. There's a phrase I love, which is, "Sometimes you can't think your way into right action - you have to act your way into right thinking". And I have found that to be so true for me; that there are times that I just need to take positive action regardless of how I'm feeling or thinking. So that's been a really big one for me. An example would be depression, right? I've suffered with depression kind of all my life. And what I know is there are behaviours that help my depression: things like exercise and eating well and being outside in nature and listening to music. So there are these things that I know that help with my depression, but those are the very things that when I'm starting to feel depressed, I absolutely don't feel like doing. It's the very nature of depression that in a lot of cases it just sucks all the energy out, right? And those things all take energy. And so, you know, for me, learning like, okay, just one foot in front of the other, one foot in front of the other with stuff like that really makes a difference. Like, you know, a very simplified example of this is I mentioned that music really helps.

Yeah.

And yet when I start to feel depressed, I think to myself, "I don't know if I want to listen to music". And then if I decide, "Oh yeah, music helps" and I go to my, you know, say my Spotify and I start looking around, nothing looks like it would be good, "No, I don't want to listen to that, I don't want to listen to that, I don't want to listen to that". Right? So what I've done is just created a playlist of music that I know makes me feel better and so all I have to do is simply go to Spotify, hit shuffle on that playlist, like I've kind of taken the thinking out of it, knowing that in certain cases my thinking is not going to be very clear. It's not going to be working very well. So I think that's one big piece: action and behaviour, right? Doing the right thing. And then on kind of an opposite spectrum of that, you know, another big lesson that I've worked with and continues to be reinforced to me in how profound it is, is this idea of sort of letting everything be exactly the way it is.

Yeah.

Which is very contradictory to me just a minute ago saying, "Well, you got to push through". And you know, they may be paradoxical and I can't quite explain the relationship, but they're both there for me. And so if we want to take depression as an example again, right, another part of depression for me has been just sort of letting it be. So I often use the analogy, I talk about depression like the emotional flu, right? And when we get the flu we go, "Okay, well I better, you know, I need to make sure I'm resting and I should probably take some more vitamin C and I should eat well and drink lots of fluids" - and whatever your thing is, when you get the flu.

Yeah.

You take care of yourself, right? And then at that point you just kind of go, "Well, I'm sick, I don't feel great, I'm sick". But what we don't do when we have the flu is we don't start doing things like, "Oh man, my whole life is just a disaster". Like, "I've wasted my life. You know, nothing I do is worth anything". Right? When we have the flu, if we start to think that we go, "Ah I'm just sick". And so depression for me is a similar thing. I make sure I'm doing the things that I know take care of me. So I'm, am I exercising? Am I eating well? Am I sleeping? Am I talking to people, blah, blah, blah? Am I doing those things? And then once the answer to that is yes, then I try and just let it be. I try not to make it into an existential crisis about the quality of my life at every minute because it's not. And so, you know, that's an example for me of, on one hand taking action and on the other letting everything be exactly the way it is, right? And so those are the two that came to mind is sort of orienting principles for a lot of different things for me.

And does that come from the idea of being able to tell the difference between what you can control and what you can't? Cos what you're saying is that you do your best to take control of the things that you know help, that are actually controllable for you. And then beyond that you don't attempt to control every little detail.

Yes, very much so. Like what can I actually do something about? And then what do I just need to let go of? And the problem is that that's very simple for us on some things. Like it's very clear, like I can't change the weather, I need to let that go. But I can change what I choose to eat for breakfast. But there's this massive grey area, which is why the Serenity Prayer, you know, really talks about the wisdom to know the difference. And that is really where wisdom is knowing, you know. So with depression, like I said, there's parts of it that I feel like I can change and I should. And then there's parts of it where I just have to let go. And all of life is that way. And oftentimes the same thing needs both. Like if I think about building a business around the podcast, there is an amount of work that needs to be done and there's

an amount of letting go that needs to be done, really the same exact thing. And so yeah, it's tricky. It's tricky. But yes, I do think you kinda hit on, that's the fundamental distinction. What can I change and what can't I and at what point is my attempt to change everything, making me unhappy? Because at a deeper level I think there's a lot of that constant desire for the moment, my experience, everything to be different than it is.

Yeah. So much of what you say resonates with me. I'm just noticing that when I've been really unwell, when my mental health has been poor, I think I get that control thing round the wrong way. So I think I expend a lot of energy trying to control things that really I can't, like how people respond to me, and not very much energy at all trying to control the things that I could do something about like getting to bed a bit earlier. I think in the past I've got that very much back to front - controlling and letting go, but kind of the wrong way round.

Actually that it's very wise. If I think about a lot of the people that I work with, you know in the coaching, that's exactly right. It is kind of all reversed around. There's a lot of time and energy spent on things that aren't really controllable and a lot less time and energy spent on what we can. And that goes back to Stephen Covey's 'Circle of Concern' versus 'Circle of Influence'. He basically says, you know, if you picture two circles, there's a big circle, which is our circle of concern. Everything that we are concerned about or care about, right? And then there's a smaller circle inside of that, which is our circle of influence. And the more time that we spend in our circle of concern, but not in our circle of influence, the more our circle of influence actually starts to shrink. The more that we worry about things that we can't do anything about, the less energy there is for the things in that circle of influence. But when you flip that around and you start to put your energy into your circle of influence, it actually starts to grow and you realise, "Oh, I can influence more and more and more by focusing truly in that area instead of dissipating my energy out in the circle of concern".

This is so interesting. I really want to go back to something you said earlier because you couldn't see it, but it really made me smile. When you talked about your Spotify playlist - so you've designed that in advance because you know from experience that when you are feeling depressed, making good decisions is more difficult and actually choosing at all is difficult, isn't it? When you're in that state, it takes energy and it's really hard to see anything clearly. So you've designed an intervention for yourself and the only decision you need to make is 'press play'.

Yes.

That is inspired! Like, music is a really big thing for me and I'm very, very conscious of how it can influence my mood, and my energy levels actually. But I'd never thought to do that thing, I mean I've created many playlists, but a playlist specifically designed to help you feel better is a wonderful idea, I think.

It definitely has helped me a great deal. And you know, one of the fundamental concepts I work with people in my coaching practice on is separating decision from action.

Yeah.

You know, if we can, if we can decide ahead of time what's important to us, what we're going to do, what matters. If we can look for where the roadblocks are, if we can, if we can be clear about that, then you know, as we go through our day we just need to take the action. But when we get those two things sort of mixed together, if we have to decide what we're going to do and then do it, boy we can wander fairly aimlessly a lot of the time.

Yeah, I'm laughing because I think I've spent literally decades doing that, so it sounds very familiar to me. So I would love to know, are there other ways that you've found of designing - I'm using the word intervention, it's probably not a very good one - but things that can be helpful, if you know particular holes that you might tend to fall down, whatever they might be, behaviourally? Are there other bits of your life where you've thought, "Ah, this tends to happen. I'm going to actively design something in my life as a protective factor"?

Well, you know, I'm very interested in habits and routines, right? And habits and routines are predesigned, to use your word, interventions that ideally, if I do them consistently, they start to become easier to do. And so they don't take as much effort and, and that's part of what we're, what we're talking about is trying to get to a point where some of these things don't take so much effort. So things like a morning routine is a very good predesigned, I'll just use your word, intervention, that I know is good for me and so I just do it. Unstructured, mornings are not a great time for me, but when I'm in the midst of one of those periods in my life where I'm like, "Okay, I get up, then I do this, this, this, and that", I do way better in the morning. And so that's an example. And there's an idea in behavioural science called implementation instructions and they're like if-then statements like you would give to a computer but you give them to yourself. If this happens, then I will do that.

Yeah.

You know, "If I start to feel depressed, I will turn on the Spotify playlist. If I feel like drinking, then I will call a friend". There's so many permutations of these, right? But there's all sorts of strategies for how to make changing our behaviour easy. You know, procrastination is a problem that so many people wrestle with or creating new habits or sticking with an exercise routine or a meditation practice. All these things are really challenging, and a big problem for a lot of us is we think it's all because we are flawed, we're like "Well, I'm the kind of person who can never stick with anything". "I'm the kind of person who can't finish anything". Or "I've tried to exercise a hundred times and I start and then I give up". And so we think, "Oh there's something fundamentally wrong with me". But very often, you know, I say, "You know, it's not you, it's your approach". There's a lot of knowledge out there about how to be more successful at doing these things. And so we can learn approaches that make us more likely to stick with things. None of this is bulletproof or flawless, you know, we don't get this stuff perfect, but we can make a really big difference in our ability to do the things that matter to us by really going about it in an intelligent way. And so things like building habits and routines and implementation instructions like I talked about, if-then statements, you know all those things, separating decision from action... Those are all principles that can make this stuff a lot easier and increase your chances of succeeding greatly.

Mm. I can only speak from personal experience, but I know that by building myself a safety net of that understanding and those principles and deliberately designing behaviours that support me in being well, I've been able to transform my mental health. And it sounds from what you're saying is though you have too?

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean I think that a lot of things contribute to mental health, but as I said kind of in the very beginning, I'm very action-focused, I'm like, "All right, what are the behaviours that help? And then how do I structure things in a way that make those behaviors more likely to occur?"

And if there's someone listening who is really struggling, let's say with addiction, since that's something that you have had personal experience of. Is there anything that you would like to share with them as a little bit of hope from your own experience?

Well, I think, you know, addiction is, I mean it's a big deal, right? It's not easy to find our way out of addiction, but I think that the main hope I would give people is if you keep trying, keep trying different things, but to keep trying. The nature of addiction, kind of back to what I said a few minutes ago, when we don't behave well, we think, "I am fundamentally flawed - I am broken", right? And addiction carries such a heavy shame level and that mentality tells us, "Don't bother". Right? It just says it's never going to get better. Don't try. You know, "Look, you failed 10 times" - and the

only answer really is to try again and see what you can learn from each time that you try. Okay, so that didn't work. Let's really go back and look at what happened. What can we learn from it? You know, what could you have done differently? And not in a judgmental way. Most of the time our attempts to look at that stuff is very judgemental. We say something like, "Well you idiot, you could have just not done that!" But that, that's not helpful. Right? So by trying to step the judgment back and become curious, like, "Well, really what did happen yesterday? What really might I have done differently yesterday?" You know as we "fail", if we learn from it by very non-judgementally looking at it, we learn kind of what works, where are the weaknesses and then we come up with if-then statements or implementation instructions for here's what I'm going to do in that situation. And a lot of times we figure out what it is by repeated lack of success. But that's just the way that a lot of this stuff is. You can learn your way to success if you are open to learning. But this judgement that we give about ourselves really stands in the way of our ability to be conscious and curious and learn.

So moving away from judgement in the direction of a kind of, well from what you're saying, it sounds like a really gentle curiosity?

Exactly, Yup. That's exactly what it is. And we can all sort of think back to school and can realise like, "Ah, when I was taking a test and I was really stressed out about it, I didn't do so well". Because there's all this stuff swirling in our mind and we can see like, "Oh when I was more relaxed I did a lot better at that". Right? And judgement's like an even worse version of being stressed, right? Cos it's a version of being stressed that also says, "I suck". And that just shuts down our ability to learn and be curious very effectively. Kindness to ourselves is one of the most fundamental changes that we can make. If we would just treat ourselves like we would treat a friend, boy, a lot of things start to unwind themselves very quickly when we're able to take that tone. You know, it's not about, a lot of people hear like, well be kind to ourselves, meaning like, "Oh I just let myself do whatever I want" or "I go completely easy on myself and I'm like, everything, whatever you do is fine". That's not really what it is. Cos that's not what kindness is. If you're talking with a friend and a friend came to you and said, "I've got an addiction problem, I could use some help". And then they came to you the next day and said, "Oh, well I used again", you wouldn't go, "Oh you idiot, I knew you were going to use again, you always do". I mean, you wouldn't do that. On the other hand, you also wouldn't be like, "Ah, no big deal, whatever. I wouldn't sweat it", right? Because you would know that that person had said to you, "I need help with this". And so what you would be towards your friend is kind, but you'd also try and provide them with a little bit of structure and accountability, and so if we can take that same approach to ourselves... We tend to go to one of two extremes internally. One is we're incredibly hard on ourselves and we just beat ourselves up. Or the other is we go, "Eh,

whatever". Right? And there's a middle ground between those two that is a kind of accountability towards ourselves. And if we can find that, that unlocks a whole lot of things or at least makes a lot of things a lot easier - just that basic mental change.

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, I would say if there was one turning point for me, in terms of learning how to be well, it was that. So Eric, I love to ask every guest if they can suggest a 'Little Challenge' of their own that listeners could try at home. Do you have a 'Little Challenge' that you could suggest?

So my 'Little Challenge' would be to ask yourself the question, what would it be like right now if there wasn't a problem for me to solve? Another version of that is what would it be like for me right now if I let everything be exactly the way it is? And just try that a few different times a day and just sort of see what happens when you do that. It's about letting go of resistance. There's this idea that I love and an equation that somebody came up with, which is that: $\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$. Another image that I really love is you can think of like having a closed fist in front of you and that's the way we tend to approach a lot of things and this 'allowing everything to be exactly the way it is' is kind of just like opening that hand. And you can, when you do that, you can actually feel what that feels like in an internal sense, that letting go of your grip a little bit. And so I would say just to try that several times a day and just see what that is like for you. And we have to watch because what we'll do is we'll turn that challenge into, "Oh well, when I do that, this should happen", which is just another way of trying to control what happens. So it really is, "How can I just relax my grip for a minute and not expect that anything in particular is going to happen, but see what that's, see what that's like for me". And I find that to be a very important practice as I go through life. That's the one that comes to mind right now.

Just listening to you say it, it was like my body relaxed. There's a really lovely feeling that goes with that question, I found.

Yeah, I agree. I mean, I remember the first time I heard that question, you know, it has not happened the same way every time I do it, but I had a moment of, you know, pretty profound insight where kind of everything fell away and I went, "Oh!" Because what I realised is my brain is always in problem solving mode. That's where it lives. Like I think everybody has different orientations in the way their brain works. And what I realised about mine, particularly after going on longer silent retreats, is my brain is always planning. It is always like, "This and then we'll do that and that we need to do this". You know, the image I got of myself was like this guy walking around with a clipboard all the time, you know? Yeah. So for me the orientation that's helpful is to try and just let go for a minute. And if really there was no problem to solve right now, what would my experience of life be like? And we get hung up on

this and like, "What? There's a hundred problems". But it's just a thought exercise. What if there wasn't? What would your experience of the moment be if you didn't have to solve a problem?

That's beautiful. No one has ever suggested that one before and I love it. So thank you so much for that, Eric. I really appreciate that 'Little Challenge'. I'm quite certain that people would like to find out more. So where's the best place to look for you?

You can go to oneyoufeed.net or [Eric Zimmer.coach](http://EricZimmer.coach).

Great. And I can't recommend the podcast too highly. If you enjoy what we're doing here, I know you will love *The One You Feed*, so please go and check it out. Eric, thank you so much for your time today. It's been a pleasure and a privilege to talk with you. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you.

No, thank you, Katie. I've enjoyed it a lot too.