

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - SHARON DANZGER (Katie Elliott & Sharon Danzger)

My guest today is Sharon Danzger, founder of Control Chaos and author of 'Superproductive: 120 strategies to do more and stress less'. She's a consultant, coach and guest lecturer at Columbia University's Executive MBA Program.

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Sharon Danzger, it's wonderful to have you join me today - hello!

Hello. So happy to be here.

I'd love you to tell me a little bit about what it is that you do at Control Chaos.

Sure. So I started Control Chaos at the beginning of 2016 and my focus has always been on helping people to get more done with less stress, primarily through making small, little changes in their daily habits. So most of the people that I work with are very busy, working really hard, working long hours and so I know that they don't have hours and hours each day to try to develop new habits. And when I tell people what I think my sort of 'special sauce' is, you know, where I add value, it's taking what seems inaccessible to people, like the idea of having some control over your time and breaking it down into very simple, small changes in daily habits that can have a big impact.

It sounds right up my street. I've got to ask you more about this. So how did you get into doing this kind of work? Have you always been interested in psychology and how to get the best out of yourself?

Not really. I think I was born naturally organised and always took it for granted that everybody was wired that way and then at a certain point - I have four kids, and when the youngest went back to a full day of school - I really wanted to go back to work and I wanted to do something on my own and so I actually started as a residential organiser helping people in their homes with clutter, time management, but still that underlying theme of small changes having a big impact so you can get more done with less stress. And I started reading, because I started to understand early on that people are all wired differently and so for me to best help my clients, I needed to understand different learning styles and what made different people tick so that I could help them develop a system that worked for them, because if I developed a system for them that worked for me, that's useless. So over time that evolved. I became interested in Positive Psychology because I kept getting articles,

you know, in my Google alerts, that connected positivity and productivity and when you think about it, it's like, "Well duh!" Like, you know, when you're positive and happy and optimistic, of course you're getting more done - but now there's all this research behind it. So most of the time I'm working in financial services or corporations and it's far more credible, some of these small little habits I'm suggesting that they adopt, when there's data behind it as opposed to, "Oh, I think this would be a good idea". It's more like, "Here's what the research shows and this can really have a significant impact and it's a couple of minutes a day, you know, it might be worth a try".

So can you give us an example of some of the kinds of small changes that you encourage people to make, or you support them in making, in their daily lives? Can you give us some practical, real life examples?

Absolutely. So, one of the simplest things is when you open up a new computer and you load the email platform, the default on any computer is to have like a little notification pop up, right? Everyone knows it. Most people just leave it there. There was some research actually done in the UK I think about 10 years ago that said that that little pop-up, whether or not there's a chime with it, the effect it has on your brain is as if you've been up for 36 hours or as if your IQ has dropped 10 points. You know, there was a time when people needed a reminder to check their email. I think that time is long gone, right? So, like one of the simplest, easiest things that people can do is just turn your notifications off because what's happening is it's distracting you. You think that there's no consequence to the work, but your brain is distracted for that micro moment and then you have to go back to the work that you're doing and it's not as inconsequential as we think.

In fact, that's a lot of evidence now, I think, that multitasking isn't really an achievable thing for pretty much anybody. I think I read that possibly a few people can do two things at the same time. Of course we can all do things that are powered by our autonomic nervous system so we can do breathing and having a conversation at the same time, fortunately, but we imagine that we can be checking our emails and making the dinner and having a conversation with a child and feeding the dog and actually that's just not what's happening, is it?

No. You know, I think for a long time there was this belief that multitasking was a really good thing and multitasking, I think, by definition is doing two things simultaneously and they do say that less than two percent of the population has that ability, so you're absolutely right. What we typically refer to as multitasking is more often task-switching. So you're writing an email and you hear a chime and it's a text and you go and you read the text, and you come back to the email - and there is now just loads of data to support that what happens is it takes us longer to

finish the task that we're working on, we make more mistakes and it actually increases our stress level. In the real world it's really hard to not multitask, be distracted, interrupted, but what I try to suggest to people is when you know that you're doing that deep work, the hardest work that you have to do, schedule it for a time of day when you're freshest - for most people that's in the morning, but not for everyone - and also set up the conditions so that you're not as likely to be distracted or interrupted. So that might mean booking a conference room, putting your phone into airplane mode... And, you know, a lot of my clients work in deal environments and they're like, "Oh, I can't do that, you know, we're in the middle of a deal", but you can tell your colleagues, "Look, I need 45 minutes. This is where I'm going to be. If something blows up, please come get me." So you know everyone knows where you are, but to have that kind of focus time to sit and do your hardest work, you will get more work, better work done in less time with less stress.

Mm. I've been experimenting with this over the last few months quite a lot and experimenting with having periods of focused attention on whatever it is I'm supposed to be doing and I really love it, actually. I hadn't realised how calming it is when you know that what you're doing is the only thing that you need to be doing in that moment. So for example, we're having a conversation right now. I love the fact that I don't need to think about anything apart from talking with you: that's all I want to concentrate on. Whereas if I were trying to do other things, you know, field other inquiries or look at things, or check my phone at the same time, I wouldn't be able to enjoy any of those activities. It's amazing actually how relaxing it is to set aside time for focused work on a specific thing. Is that what you find with your clients?

Oh definitely. And myself. And there's also, you have probably heard of the Pomodoro technique which is 25 minutes and five minutes off. And one of my instructors in the Positive Psychology program, Dr John Ratey, challenged us as basically as a homework assignment to do our work that way, but during those five minutes to be active, have some kind of movement - and you know, for me sometimes I would actually jump rope to really get my heart rate up - but any kind of movement, get up, go get a drink of water, walk around the block. Because what he has found through his research is that we are just sitting way too much. Right? So they are saying like 'sitting is the new smoking', which is a little horrifying because, you know, knowledge workers we're all sitting at computers all day long. So that Pomodoro technique, a lot of my clients have used it, they love it. And there are even websites, one is called Tomato Timer, where you can adjust the 25 minutes to be whatever you're comfortable with. Some people can go longer and some people have shorter attention spans.

Yes, I love the Pomodoro technique actually. I remember when I first used it, I couldn't believe how much I got done that day. It was absolutely incredible because it made me realise how totally ineffective I was most of the time because I was trying to do about 16 things at the same time.

Well, I think part of it is our brains are wired to acknowledge novelty. So the notifications are novelty. Like I always tell people, when you have a dog and the dog sees a squirrel, what does it do? It's like "Oh, squirrel!" and it goes chasing after the squirrel. And that's kind of how, I mean, I know I am, if I hear my phone chime, if I actually have it on, I'm like, "Oh, oh, there's a text, it must be something important". Um, and so that's the way our brains are wired and it's hard to fight against that. But what ends up happening is people start to feel overwhelmed because they're so distracted they're not actually getting their work done. And so there are things that we can do and it is kind of building a muscle to get ourselves used to less distraction, less interruption, you know, less of that novelty, to actually get our work done.

I love the fact that we imagine we are so sophisticated and grown up and essentially all we're doing is chasing squirrels.

Yes.

You're big on helping people to feel less stressed or to feel better about the stresses in their lives. Can you tell me a bit about what you do?

Sure. I'm a friend had suggested that I read Kelly McGonigal's book called 'The Upside of Stress'. She is a researcher at Stanford and she also has a TED talk. If someone doesn't have time to read the book, I highly, highly recommend the TED talk, it's fantastic. And her research and research done by Jeremy Jamieson and Alia Crum, they're sort of the leaders in this field on stress, and their research has shown that our stress mindset can actually impact how our body responds to stress, which is incredible. So for example, if you're a runner and you go running, you are actually putting your body under stress, but your mind is viewing it as like an exciting challenge and so your blood vessels stay open, your heart's pumping, but it's like an exciting kind of experience. When, let's say you're making a big presentation and you're nervous and you think, "Oh my God, like I'm gonna forget what I'm supposed to say and it's going to be terrible and I'm gonna lose my job" - then you're starting to view stress as a threat and the blood vessels constrict. So I grew up in a world where people would say too much stress is bad for you, it can cause cardiovascular disease and result in an early death. So this research basically showed that if you change your stress mindset, you can actually change your body's physiological response to stress. So the research study that they did and repeated a number of

times had two groups and they were both told that they were going to have to do a five minute presentation on their strengths and weaknesses. And this is basically, I think it's the Trier Stress Test that was created in Germany in the 1990s and it's sort of like the gold standard for stressing people out in psychology, right? Because no one likes public speaking - it's horrifying. So these participants unknowingly walk into a research study and this is what they're told they're going to have to do - "and by the way, you have three minutes to prepare your speech and it's going to be videotaped and you're going to be doing it live in front of a panel of judges". Now before they go on stage for this little presentation, one group is shown a short video or slide show that gives that old message of, "Stress is really bad for you. It can cause cardiovascular disease. You need to find ways to reduce the stress in your life". The other group is shown something very similar except for, "Stress isn't bad for you. When you feel your palms get sweaty and your heart race, this is your body preparing you to perform at your best". So stress is really a challenge, not a threat. Then they went and did their little presentation and the panel of judges is giving nonverbal feedback that's like all negative, eyes rolling, arms crossed, you know, all that sort of closed body language, and then they took the recordings and sent it off to a group of people who had no idea what the research study was about and asked them to evaluate which of the presentations they liked better and the group of people who was given the 'stress is enhancing' videos or slides, they performed better. They were more confident. They had more of an open stance. They were less nervous. I mean overall by pretty much every dimension they performed better. And so that research study has been repeated in many different scenarios with the same results. So to me it's just mindblowing that how you perceive stress, whether you view it as a threat or a challenge actually changes your body's response.

That's fascinating because there is a lot of negative messaging isn't there, about the impact of stress?

Right. So if I go into a law firm or go into an investment bank, they are in stressful industries and they know that they are. And truthfully some people really thrive in that fast paced, exciting, challenging environment. So I can't promise them I can reduce their stress. I mean, I wish I could, but what I can tell them is that they can actually change the reaction their body has to the stress if they change their mindset about it. You know, there are plenty of stressful things in life that are threatening, you know, whether it's a health issue or someone close to you dying. Like those are really very, very stressful kind of things that it's kind of difficult to change your mindset around. But there's so many of our daily stressors where we can change our mindset and it can have a big impact. And just, you know, an example that I'll give you is a friend of mine was going for an interview and I knew that she was kind of nervous. It's for her dream job. And so I sent her a text yesterday morning, you know, encouraging her, wishing her good luck. And she

wrote back that she's a little nervous and I said, just remember when you feel nervousness, it's actually the same things you feel when you're excited and if you start to change your mindset about being excited instead of being nervous, your body will know. It's amazing, but your body will know. So it's a small little shift in mindsets. Again, like building a muscle and the more you do it, the more naturally it comes.

I find that really interesting. I'm just remembering that I read somewhere that very often what we say to people when they are nervous, let's say they're going to do some public speaking, they're nervous. We often say, "Oh, you need to really relax. You need to calm down". And that actually, in terms of the energy of the person, being nervous is quite a high energy activity and telling somebody to be calm is actually quite difficult for them because they've got loads of energy coursing through their body. So to try and calm down, is very difficult. But to reframe that energy as excitement, which is another high energy state of being physiologically, is much easier. And so it's more helpful really to reframe it that way rather than to expect people to suddenly calm themselves because, maybe being calm isn't really what's required.

Right. And on that note, what I will say, another great tip is sometimes the stress or nervousness can create such a rush of stress hormones, of adrenaline and cortisol that you feel, you know, it's gone beyond the point of being helpful. And the amazing thing is by taking three really deep breaths, you actually engage the parasympathetic nervous system, which stops the flood of the stress hormones. It's like an antidote. So when you get a little too nervous or a little too excited and you kind of want to be a little more grounded and centred, taking three deep breaths will get you there. It's amazing. It's a 30 second exercise.

And when you say 'three deep breaths', do they have to be any particular type of breaths? Is it in through the nose out through the mouth, is it longer exhale, or is it literally three deep breaths of whatever kind?

It's three deep breaths where you're expanding your belly, like a deep belly breathing. And I have heard mixed things about whether you should be exhaling through your nose or your mouth, but they do say that exhaling longer than the inhale is supposed to be good. But if you practise it and just try taking those three deep breaths you will feel your system calm. It's amazing and we have it with us all the time; you don't need any special tools or any special instructions, it's just three deep breaths.

I'm constantly amazed how much more control we have over our physiological and psychological responses than we imagine.

Right. It is. It's incredible. We are incredible machines, you know, with all of these things that we usually don't even access basically.

So in each interview I ask our guest for the day what their *Little Challenge* for the listeners would be. So, a *Little Challenge* is something that takes no more than 10 minutes to do. It's incredibly practical. Pretty much anyone could do it. It doesn't require special equipment, it doesn't need you to be physically fit, but it's something that if you do it regularly, it will help you to feel better in your life in some way. So what would your *Little Challenge* be, Sharon?

Oh, there's so many. Well, some kind of mindfulness practice I think is amazing. I will share that when I first started a mindfulness practice a little over five years ago, you know, I had read a book and it was suggested 10 or 20 minutes a day and I thought to myself, that's just way too long. I can't sit that long. And so the way I approached it was I said to myself, what is the smallest amount of time where at the end of the day, I can't say to myself, I was too busy, I didn't have time for that even though it's really important to me? And so I came up with two minutes. And so for two and a half years I meditated for two minutes every single day. And then I had lunch with a friend who is a mindfulness expert and she said to me, "Oh, what app are you using?", I'm like, what are you talking about? I had no idea there was an app. And so she introduced me to guided meditation. It was infinitely easier than sitting there with my kitchen timer for two minutes. Um, and so now I meditate a minimum of 10 minutes a day, but even the two minutes a day for those two and a half years, really had an impact on my ability to react, to stress differently because it gives you that skill to just pause instead of be very reactive.

Do you have any particular apps that you recommend? Have you got a favourite one?

So the one that I've been using ever since is Insight Timer.

Ah yeah.

So it's free. Thousands of meditations to choose from different categories. Um, and at one point I found, right before I went back for my Master's degree, that summer before they gave us a huge reading list and there was so much intellectual stimulation - you know, going back to school at 51 was a little more challenging on my brain than when I was in my teens or twenties - so I would have trouble going to sleep at night because my brain wasn't calm enough. And so I started using the sleep meditations and it was incredible. You know, I tell people, forget about Ambien

or whatever drug you're taking to go to sleep, try a sleep meditation. So now at night I almost always go to sleep to a meditation as well.

I love that. Thank you so much for sharing that. Sharon. I'm hoping that maybe you might rejoin me at some point in the future because I feel like we've just scratched the surface of what we could talk about.

It would be my pleasure.

For now though, thank you so much for joining me today and for sharing all of those ideas. If people would like to find out more about what you do, how can they find you?

Sure. They could go to my website. It's ControlChaos.org and if they're interested, I have a blog that I send out usually every two weeks. It's usually a two to three minute read with some little tips on things that you could do to just make your life better. Things that are just not too hard to do.

Sounds fantastic. Thank you so much for joining me today.

Have a great day, Katie.

Thank you.