

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - EMMA J. BELL (Katie Elliott & Emma J. Bell)

On today's show my guest is Emma J. Bell, author, coach and founder of *The Global Resilience Project*. Emma has travelled the world interviewing extraordinary people who have thrived in the face of adversity to discover common resilience strategies that can help us all to thrive, every day.

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Emma J. Bell, welcome and thank you for joining me today.

Thank you, Katie. It's lovely to be here on your show.

I'm curious to know what's led you to the work that you're doing today as a coach and an author?

So my most recent project is *The Global Resilience Project*, where I travelled over 35,000 miles around the world to interview 50 people who had faced 50 different kinds of trauma, but each of whom had one thing in common and that is that they didn't just survive the trauma, but they are thriving despite the trauma. And I wanted to understand whether there were common resilience factors that these '50 Thrivers', as we call them, were using in order not just to survive, but to thrive - and there are. We found, through this research, that are nine 'Secrets to Thriving', as we call them, and that's the subject of my next book. But what led me to do that particular work, and I see that as the pinnacle of my journey so far, was that as a litigator in court, as a judge, you know, I would deal with clients who had faced traumas and difficulties and I would notice that some were thriving, they'd bounced forward, whilst others were barely surviving, Katie, they had allowed their life to be defined by their experience. And that reflected what I had seen in my own personal life. So like many of your listeners, I have had a fairly challenging upbringing, but I noticed that myself and other family members were reacting to those challenges differently. Sadly, my brother, for example, became a heroin addict. And on the face of it I looked like I was thriving, being in law and being a part of a law firm, but in fact I wasn't thriving, I was only just surviving. So really from a fairly early age, I've been really interested in what is that enables some of us to thrive and that ultimately has led me to this point and the work that I do today.

That's fascinating, so broadly speaking, is it the field of post-traumatic growth that you're exploring, around how some people grow through trauma?

It's what those people who have bounced forward after trauma can teach about how to thrive everyday. So what we found is there are these nine 'Secrets to Thriving', but these are secrets to thriving that you, I and your listeners can apply every single day of our lives, whether we've fallen out with our boss, had an argument with our teenage daughter, you know, are feeling low, you know, are suffering from anxiety. These are strategies that don't simply apply when we're in the midst of adversity of the most traumatic kind. But rather when we're just riding the bumps in the road that we all encounter everyday.

And I know you said that this will be the subject of your next book, but are you able to tell us anything about those secrets?

Well, okay, then, I will.

Just one, maybe?

Well, I'm sure your listeners wouldn't be surprised to hear that the first secret to thriving is self care - you know, this idea that we need to apply our own oxygen masks before we're able to support others. But what our Thrivers told us is that there are actually particular self care practices that can really enable us to thrive, so things like setting boundaries, things like being really clear about what your needs are and articulating those needs, things like - one of my favourites is - do something you love every single day, even if that's just getting up 10 minutes early before everyone else in the house is up and enjoying the warmth of cup of tea in your hands. Others are - commit acts of self love everyday (again, another one of my personal favourites) and they go on and on. So the self care practices that our Thrivers told us about were just incredible. And one of my passions at the moment, I'm touring about, talking about the nine 'Secrets to Thriving' and sharing these amazing stories of our Thrivers, some of whom have survived terrorist attacks, others who have survived gang rapes, who lost limbs - almost any kind of trauma you can think of, one of our Thrivers has encountered that and yet is thriving. So self care is what each one of our Thrivers identified, that came through unanimously in our research as being a primary secret to thriving.

Isn't it interesting that so often we feel that that's a corner that can be cut? Particularly people who do a lot of caring for others can easily imagine that they can not look after themselves well - and I speak as someone who's done that for the majority of my life - and think that it's okay to get away with not taking good care of oneself while attempting to take very good care of people without realising that that's kind of back to front.

Absolutely. And that came out doing the research. In fact, Helen Connolly one of our Thrivers said, "You wouldn't expect a mobile phone to work if you didn't charge it". And I love that analogy. I think that's so powerful. Of course, your mobile phone works best when it's fully charged and is ready to go. And that applies to every single one of us. Otherwise, resentment creeps in, lack of energy, we get emotional, we're overburdened. And the trouble is that many of us, and I count myself in this, we have rescuer tendencies, and those rescuer tendencies undermine our ability to put ourselves first.

Yeah, that can be some quite strong cultural and familial martyring patterns and over-caring patterns, I think. I certainly have had quite a few of those in my own life that I've really had to address in order to be well. I won't ask you about more secrets at this point because... they're secrets and we need to come and hear you speak or buy your book! So moving on from there I'd love to know - what's one thing that you personally do regularly that helps you to stay physically healthy?

Well, that was a lovely segue, isn't it? From the self care to physical health. For me it's doing exercise outside. So I have the cutest dog, called 'Buddy' and Buddy is my running buddy. So most days, whether it's raining, snowing, wet, windy, dark or light, I will get out for a short or a medium or a long run with Buddy and that allows me to stay physically healthy. Yoga is also really important in my life. There's this feeling of moving your body. I always say to people, if you're going to do any exercise, make sure it fills you with joy. Otherwise you'll stop doing it. And each of those just fills me with joy.

It's so true, as well, that it should fill you with joy because it makes it so much easier to do it doesn't it? Rather than doing something you think you should do, but don't really want to.

I'm giving up, doing anything I feel I should do, I'm just giving it up for life.

I've discovered that I may be part dog. So if you give me a sport that involves chasing a ball around, I'm perfectly happy and don't notice that I'm getting exercise. But if you expect me to run long distances without a ball in front of me, I just don't seem to be able to manage it very well.

I think you and Buddy have a lot in common.

So what's one thing that you do regularly that helps you to stay mentally healthy?

I get up every morning 45 minutes before I need to do anything, so that I can meditate. And my meditation is a combination of pure following the breath and

visualising the outcomes that I'm focusing on right now. And that allows me to stay calm and connected to my dream. As adults we forget to dream, but dreaming is what keeps excitement in life and I always have a dream that I'm following and my current dream is that we'll touch 10 million lives with this research and I dream about that every day.

What a fantastic dream to have.

Thank you.

I'd love to know. What's one thing that you do - perhaps you've already mentioned it - that helps you to do your very best work?

I think having a dream, because I think if we set goals that are realistic, those are not inspiring. It also means that the actions we take towards those goals are going to be fairly limited. When I set the audacious and completely outrageous goal of touching 10 million lives with this project it made me do things that I wouldn't have done if the goal had been smaller. It made me reach out to people I was barefaced and outrageous to reach out to. So the one thing that that helps us do our best work is set a goal that's effectively a dream that really inspires you that lights you up inside and that makes a difference to the lives of others. And then you'll push through fear and you'll push through embarrassment in order to do what needs to be done to achieve that goal.

I love that expression. I think you said you were willing to be "barefaced and outrageous". I think, and that's what you said.

'Audacious' is my word that relates to this goal, it's audacious.

Fantastic, so many of us will avoid doing things that feel audacious for fear of rejection or failure. I'm curious to know what's the worst thing that's happened as a result of being barefaced, outrageous and audacious for you?

Well, I recognize what you say because I spent the first 30 years of my life not being audacious, and it kept me exactly inside my comfort zone. But being audacious, the worst thing that's happened to me is that someone said no. But I asked in a really nice way and so they said no in a really nice way, and that was great. And I asked them the reasons they'd said no and they gave me feedback that was really useful so that I could adjust my approach the next time. But you know, the things that have been great that has happened from being audacious far outweigh and outnumber those things that have happened that have been disappointing. So, you know, I haven't been shamed, I haven't been embarrassed.

I've been disappointed sometimes, but more often I've been elated, I've been surprised, I've been wowed, it's really worth taking risks.

So the fear of doing new, audacious things is perhaps not justified for many of us much of the time?

It's really understandable. But of course fear is just your body's way of saying, "Are you sure?" And if the answer is, "Yes, I am sure", then go do it.

What a lovely way of looking at it.

It's a very healthy reaction. But you know the fear is just, "Are you sure? Are you bonkers or not?" Sometimes the answer's, "Yes, I'm bonkers", but it's still the right thing to do and I'm going to do it anyway. And the thing is, you only feel fear about something once, and you do it and then you're not frightened again. Not at least to the same level.

So have you ever, have you ever made a conscious decision to change a specific behaviour? And if so, what happened when you did?

It's perhaps not so much a behaviour, but it's a causal factor for a behaviour, and that is worrying about what other people thought of me. And again, I spent a good 30 years really worrying about what other people thought of me. And there's a wonderful quote by David Foster Wallace in his book, *Infinite Jest*, which says, "You'll become way less concerned with what others think of you when you realise how seldom they do". You know that so true. We get so wrapped up. And I when I understood that what I think of me is way more important than what others think of me, subject, of course, to having close confidants and family members who I know have my best interest at heart to check in with. You know I value their opinion, but really worrying about what others think of you is such a waste of energy. It holds you back. All that matters, is what do you think of you? Are you living according to your values? Are you living according to your purpose and your mission? And if the answer is yes, then understand that what others think of you is really more about them, than about you.

But the process, I think often we know that we don't need to worry about those things as much as we do, but the reality of actually changing those behaviours, those tendencies can be tricky. Did you find that it was a quick change? Was there a sudden insight that meant that you saw things differently or was it just a sustained practice of remembering that you didn't need to worry as much as you were and testing that out?

Well I, I followed the process I wrote about in my first book, *The True You* and I want to give your listeners a free download of my first book, *The True You*. And, and *The True You* will give them the process for changing that core beliefs, that was a core belief of mine, using neuroscience. So I actually went through a process, which ultimately changed my neural pathway related to that core belief, so it was overwritten with a much healthier core belief, which is 'I'm ok as I am'.

Thank you so much. We'll give links to that at the end. I'd like to know what's a life skill that you've learnt or acquired, perhaps the hard way, that you think many people would benefit from having, but that is rarely taught to us.

I think the skill of being able to ritualise habits. So, you know, if you understand how habits work, and you take one habit at a time and you learn the skill of ritualising that habit in your life so that it becomes part of your subconscious response, that would be a great life skill to teach our kids in school. So you know, if you think of the nine 'Secrets to Thriving' the nine 'Secrets to Thriving' are really a collection of habits, and you take one habit at a time and you ritualise that and you become more resilient. Most people make too many New Year's resolutions and fail because they try to set too many habits and then they fail - so I think the figure is something like 8% of New Year's resolutions are kept. But if you understand how habits work and you're able to develop the skill of ritualising habits, that is life changing. That has really changed my life.

I absolutely agree. What amazes me whenever I talk with people about how habits are formed is how simple and easy to understand that process is. It's not complicated. And we could very easily be teaching it. It's not rocket science and yet it is life-changing.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think if you understand the habit loop, you understand the way it works and you can apply that to every single habit you want to break or every single habit you want to create, it's actually easy. It just takes an understanding and then it does take application, but it's life-changing.

I think what we often don't realise is that we have habits whether we think we do or not. So sometimes we can imagine that we don't really want to form lots of habits and routines without realising that we have them anyway, it's just that we haven't ever chosen consciously. So it's having that power to make conscious choices about our habits and routines that makes all the difference, I think

You're right. Absolutely right.

I'm fascinated to know if you were to come up with a *Little Challenge* for our listeners, what would your *Little Challenge* be?

My *Little Challenge*, falling on the back of habit, would be - what habit, single habit, would you like to create in your daily routine? So if you want to be calmer, if you want to be able to respond rather than react, meditation's a great habit. If you want to get fitter, then your habit might be to walk for half an hour three times a week or four times a week, but you would do that the same time of day, on designated days during the week. Or it could be reading poetry or it could be having a phone call with someone who makes you feel good, regularly, reaching out in some way. Whatever the habit is, start today, but be clear on your why. What's it going to give you? How will it improve your life? How will it create better, deeper connections? Because it's the why that is instrumental in motivating us towards the behaviour we want to create every day.

Mm. So to reflect on something that you would like to change in your life that can be done in just a few minutes a day. I think that's one of the important things that we often, we often miss the idea that just spending a few minutes a day doing something can have a transformative effect. It's so easy to be all or nothing when we think about behaviour change isn't it?

It is. And so many people want to change half a dozen things, which is overwhelming so they don't make a start. But I would say don't worry, just choose one. Just choose one, that's it.

Wonderful. Thank you for that. So where can, where can our listeners find out more about what you're doing and, interact with you online?

So they can hop on to my website, where they'll get a free download of *The True You*. My website is EmmaJBell.com, they can join my Facebook group where they'll get a free audio download of *The True You* book and that's called "50 Thrivers". And they can follow me on Twitter, which is at @50 Thrivers and you'll get access to video interviews with our Thrivers and then ultimately the stuff that we're now beginning to release following on from our research.

It's been wonderful talking with you about this. Thank you so much Emma

It's been a pleasure Katie. Thank you.