

# WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



## Following Your Gut

**Jen Fisher (Jen):** Life can take you to unexpected places, and despite your best efforts to plan your future sometimes life has a different plan. Adapting to change can be challenging, but resilience and agility can help. And in the end, you may just find your purpose and passion in this new path.

This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, Chief Well-being Officer for Deloitte, and I'm so pleased to be here with you today to talk about all things well-being.

I'm here with Julie Smolyansky, humanitarian, survivor, warrior, mom, and the CEO of the company, Lifeway Foods. Julie, welcome to the show.

You describe yourself as a humanitarian, a survivor, a warrior, a mom, and a CEO. That is a lot of roles and I want to learn about each one, but can you start off by just telling me who you are? What's your story and who's Julie?

**Julie Smolyansky (Julie):** Well just like it says, a warrior—my family and I were refugees and immigrants from the former Soviet Union. My parents came with just \$116 in their pockets and no language or money. I grew up with one foot in Russian culture, Russian community, here in the United States. When I go to school, have to change the way I behaved or interacted with American friends, teachers, and the world. So, I learned how to navigate kind of an interesting existence, and at the same time grew up watching my parents build life from scratch. As entrepreneurs—my mom opened the first Russian deli in Chicago, and her store became town square. Community and culture became very important to me and entrepreneurship became very important to me. I really picked up a lot watching my family build and create a life for themselves. Then saw my father start Lifeway, which is the company that I run today, overcome a lot of adversity in that process as a girl, as a woman. My father had a sudden heart attack and passed away. I became the CEO, which I'm sure we'll get into this further, but that was another moment of survival and warriorship and having to run and lead Lifeway at the age of 27. Already a publicly traded company at the time, it put me into this position of being the youngest female CEO of a publicly traded company, which is a great platform. They're lots of other opportunities that I've been really honored and privileged to take part in and lead very challenging conversations around safety of women, equality, access to representation, and a whole bunch of other things along the way. I have two beautiful daughters that I fight to create a better world for, and the core mission is to help reduce suffering in our world. I think that's

where I gravitate from based on my experience. Both the life experience that I've had, the stories that run through by DNA and my bloodlines, and my ancestors basically.

**Jen:** We will dig into some more of that as we continue to talk, but obviously you mentioned that you became CEO at 27 of Lifeway Kefir, which is a public company. Can you tell us a little bit about what that was like? I mean were you already a part of the company? Was it something that you had planned on doing and what was your experience like? In addition to that, throughout your journey and as you continue to be CEO, how do you take care of yourself and your own well-being knowing that Lifeway is a company that really promotes health and well-being on so many levels? I know that it's kind of core to the company's mission.

**Julie:** Well, we are laser sharp focused and passionate about Kefir, which is a probiotic, cultured, yogurt-like drink. My ancestors in the Soviet Union area, what is now Russia and Ukraine, formerly Soviet Union, in the Caucasus Mountains—my ancestors, for over 2000 years, were making Kefir. It is like a fermented, cultured, tangy effervescent drink that's loaded with good bacteria. My ancestors, when they consumed it, experienced a sense of well-being. They said that they felt better. They called it the "champagne of dairy". They used it medicinally for thousands of years. Cleopatra bathed in it and Marco Polo wrote about it in his travels. This product existed by word of mouth through great grandmothers, and great great great grandmothers passing down this ancient art form of fermentation and telling the stories of how it has helped their well-being. It's just really cool because in the last several decades gut health and probiotics and Kefir is finally receiving the notoriety that it should have. Up until my family immigrated, Kefir was unknown outside of the Soviet Union, only in Europe, Eastern European countries. Even yogurt in the United States was very much in its infancy in the '70s and '80s even. So, this product really came to be here in the United States because of immigration, because of our nomadic lifestyle, and ability to be travelers and explorers and take risks and following our gut, like my parents did. We were the first of 48 families that were allowed to settle in the United States in Chicago in 1976. They paved the path and trailblazed and brought something that was this healing product. Everybody in the Soviet Union, when my parents were growing up —this was a staple. This was central to wellness and well-being and health. Kids, as soon as they were born, were given Kefir all the way through until they passed away. A typical lunch in the Soviet Union was a quart of Kefir and a loaf of bread. It was very humble, it was very basic, but the amount of healing and well-being that was received from the bacteria was really life sustaining for so many people. It reduced symptoms of so many other gastrointestinal issues and what not. In the last handful of decades, the science has really caught up to what my ancestors, our ancestors knew, which was that Kefir can help you feel better. We now know that it even reduces stress, depression, and anxiety. We know that the gut has 90% of all serotonin cells, all of the feel-good chemicals in our body. So there is really this mind gut connection that we're just starting to uncover now. We know that all of our immunity, 70%-90% of our immunity cells sit in the gut. It is critical that we have a healthy functioning gut, one where we're constantly restoring all the good microflora, because our modern lifestyle really kills all of that good microflora. People who take antibiotics — all of your flora gets wiped out when you're on antibiotics. Stress, travel, although we're not doing lots of traveling, we do have a lot of stress these days. So, we now know that even we can manipulate our stress and depression and anxiety through how we eat. So that's really at the core of what we're doing. Bringing awareness to people around gut health and the impact of Kefir and how you can really be empowered to take control over your health.

**Jen:** Was this your father's vision and your vision? I have to give you so much credit because I feel like your company, in particular, has really helped bring this mainstream in a really positive way and educate all of us as to the importance of what you and your ancestors have known for hundreds of years. When your dad started this company as an entrepreneur and when you took over, was that the vision?

**Julie:** Yes, it was. For my dad it was. He was so passionate and believed so strongly in gut health and Kefir. He couldn't believe that he had been in America for about nine years when the idea came to start Lifeway. He could not believe that there was no Kefir in America, the largest marketplace. The most highly desired marketplace that had everything. He said America has everything but it doesn't have Kefir, and it was a shock to him. He felt like it was an incredible opportunity to bring something to the marketplace and educate Americans about this product that they didn't know, which was also a challenge because he didn't have a Harvard Business School degree. He had broken English. He didn't have the strong network. If you grew up in America, you'd have your college friends, you'd have other workplace friends, friends that you could connect to and learn about how you even write a business plan. My dad went to the local library in our hometown and researched that from the Dewey decimal system, like how do you write a business plan? How do you go public? Like he did all of that very grassroots, without any support or access to help. He was passionate about that and for me, I actually did not want to have anything to do with the business. I didn't quite understand yet how helpful Kefir was to the body, but what I always did want to do was — well it sounds so cliché and especially as a teenager growing up, but I wanted to change the world. I wanted to help people and ultimately, I did want to reduce suffering in the world. I thought that I would be a psychologist. I started grad school. I spent a lot of my work and internships and whatnot as doing a lot of trauma and crisis work. I was a rape crisis counselor in college. I worked as an in-home family counselor with kids that were removed from their homes, abused kids, very heavy stories. So I did have that passion for health and, I guess, reducing suffering. It was very serendipitously that I was in my father's office during grad school and was listening to how he was talking about Kefir. All of a sudden like a light went off in my mind that I realized that all of the ways that I wanted to help, like I could channel that into helping my father build his business but also help people make those positive choices around lifestyle. That I could maybe step away from some of the trauma work, which was just really hard on me personally too, and still leave that imprint on the world that I saw in a for profit manner. So I got to work with my dad. I left grad school. I didn't come back for my second year, and I worked with my father for five years side by side, and really learned everything that he had to teach me. I feel like it was one of those follow your gut moments as well, because I spent five years with him, working with him, learning the business. He empowered me all the time, you know, put female role models in front of me, constantly invited me to give presentations at board meetings. I did due diligence during our largest transaction when Groupe Danone made an investment into Lifeway, just a few years before he passed away. I mean I was right out of college doing due diligence and leading a transaction with the CEO of the largest multinational food company in the world. That was because my father just believed in me, and I had tremendous amount of emotional intelligence just from all the work I did in psychology. I was able to use that, marrying up some of the psychology and the tools around how people make lifestyle food choices, all of that coupled with this intuitive sense of following my family's entrepreneurship path. So that was just really, I guess, magical. The other piece was that I was always interested in health and food and nutrition — I grew up as a figure skater. I skated for 15 years, which was, you know, as a Russian girl that was

the only sport that was really open to me, was figure skating or gymnastics —one of those sports. So I spent a lot of time learning about food and nutrition and if you think back to what that time period was, it was like the '80s. As it relates to food marketing specifically, the messages at that time were all about dieting and fat free foods, sugar free foods, but really a lot of fat free stuff, which is a pretty toxic way to grow up. I just really wanted to find a better way to talk about food and how we communicate the positive attributes. I really wanted the messaging to be not about deprivation and elimination, but about how foods can work for us to fuel our bodies, to help us get to our highest purpose, and the goals that we want to live out versus you can't eat this, this is bad, this is terrible. I just found to be really unhelpful, toxic, dangerous and I've kind of tried to push back against that idea.

**Jen:** It doesn't work. So, did you ultimately wanted to become the CEO?

**Julie:** I did.

**Jen:** At 27?

**Julie:** Exactly. Once I made the decision that I would leave school and come work for my dad, I fell in love with everything gut health, obsessed with learning about probiotics, and bacteria and like all of the ways that it helps our body. I mean Americans did not know what probiotics were like in the '90s and even in 2000. Even after my dad died in 2002, we were still at the very early, early stages of talking about probiotics. In this pandemic, it feels like now the conversation has become even more mass than we've ever anticipated because we're really understanding and making that connection about immunity and mental health. The fact that our health is tied to each other, that our health is linked to each other. So, once I had decided that I was going to come work at Lifeway and help my dad, I was like obsessed. It is my favorite thing to try to talk about. I mean, the most important thing is our health and wellness, and that's what we're seeing. That nothing else really matters, and that all people really want is their health. Nothing else matters, you want your health. So if we can bring that to people, then I think we've fulfilled our mission and purpose.

**Jen:** That's awesome. Let us shift gears, although this is still on the topic of health and well-being, a little bit different spin, but let's talk about resilience. I know that this is a topic that you talk about quite a bit, because you've had a lot of obstacles and you have alluded to several of those obstacles and challenges in your life. It's true that resilience is built in big moments because a lot of times we don't have a choice, but resilience is also built in small moments and in self-care, the way that we live our life on a day-to-day basis in some instances. How have you built resilience personally over the years, and how has that helped you grow as a leader in your company, in your community, as a mother, as a friend, as all the other roles that you play?

**Julie:** I think it is such a great question and I think about it a lot. I mean in part it's going through the hard things and then coming out of it. Touching the abyss, touching the darkness, descending down into that, and then when you emerge and come out of it, you come out a changed person. You come out different with knowledge to share. I feel like maybe that is how things played out for me, and in part I think using my body in a physical way. I mentioned I was a figure skater, I played tennis, I did varsity tennis. In my '20s, I picked up running. I started running marathons, I've done like 13 of them. I really push my body physically. I feel like it's a very great metaphor for mental resilience too. How you can build and make your resilience muscle stronger is by going and doing things that you think

that you maybe can't by forcing yourself to be uncomfortable in other ways. Maybe that's public speaking if you're afraid to do public speaking, you know, raising your hand. When I was a teenager, raising your hand to answer a question in school even if you're afraid, and you think you're going to sound stupid and you're going to say the wrong thing, doing it anyways. Learning that even if you make a fool of yourself, you can get through it. Even if you don't hit the time that you wanted to run, you still did it. Understanding that those challenges are worthy of celebration. Every time you do something that you're afraid of, you come out and you know that you are stronger from it and that you can get through it and that we can do hard things. Those were all ways that I kind of thought about as I grew up. The constant challenging of myself and having power and control in how I move my body. Sitting still with uncomfortableness, meditation, doing yoga, having times to sit with the stillness which is one of the most challenging things for me, because I tend to go do things on my calendar. Make it full, distract myself, those are all things that became survival for me which too much of it is not helpful and being aware of that. Therapy, you know, having access to therapy was a lifesaver. If I didn't have it, I probably wouldn't be alive today. Let's see, you know, finding role models. For me, one of the role models that I look to was Oprah Winfrey. I didn't know anyone who had such stories of resilience or survivorship that had made it, that overcame it. Seeing Oprah, she really hung on for dear life and today we have so many more examples of what strong, women look like. Not just women, I mean men too, but we have a lot of access to a variety of what resilience looks like. I think it's just so important that young people see that they can have concrete examples of how that looks like. So that's kind of why I'm passionate about sharing some of those stories. I even think about the Kefir culture, you know, it's a 2000-year-old living bacteria that has seen war and famine...

**Jen:** It survived.

**Julie:** Yeah, it survived. It stood the test of time. I really believe like our DNA and all these cells they just regenerate over and over. We've been here before, we've been in crisis before, you know, I have been in crisis before. I've touched the darkness of the abyss before. So now going through this pandemic, racial unrest, and just the uncertainty of everything that's happening, I know that I've been here before. I can get through it and I could lead the ship through very dark and challenging waters. We all can, we all can.

**Jen:** How do you impart that to your teams and in your company? Is there a specific example that comes to mind where something either went very wrong or perhaps very right, where you used it as an opportunity? I suspect you do it all of the time, but how do you do that with the teams that you lead? It requires, as a leader, that you would be quite vulnerable, and I think that's difficult for some people.

**Julie:** I think so too, you are probably right. Well for me, I think because I was a young woman, faking it was not an option. Trying to look like somebody else doing it, and some image of perfection was just not possible for me. I decided to be true to myself and true to my story, and that that would be more beneficial to my team, to the community, the world at large, whoever came across my way or is meant to hear my story. When things go wrong, when there's a crisis I try to look at those moments as lessons to learn from, to do better, to make changes and adjust things. What I'm thinking about is a moment when we potentially could have had like a health issue within the plant. I looked at it as not like 'oh, somebody messed up,' but I looked at it as 'oh, we have a great opportunity to bring in a consultant, to bring in some world-class folks to help us make some changes, and adjust how we're doing things and make sure that we are top of world class in how we handle our

operations.' And we did. I look at those moments as small blessings in disguise. Where this is like a sign and mindfulness. We talk about mindfulness a lot. If you're mindful of that moment that this is a sign and it's not a disaster, it's an opportunity to do better. That's how I've always looked at challenges within the company.

**Jen:** Reframing it.

**Julie:** Yeah, darkest of moments. Just reframe it as an opportunity, a lesson, a sign, and do better. Consistently just go through that pattern of adjusting, being mindful, being aware, seeing it as a sign and saying thank you for the sign. Thank you to the universe for bringing it to my attention, so that I could fix it, so that we can do better, so that we can learn from it. That's helpful to the team because they know that they're not in jeopardy of their job. A lot of people try to hide things or cover things up when they are afraid. When you're honest about whatever issue and you know that your leader, your boss is not going to throw you into the fire, but instead will work with you to make it better, then you have truth and honesty. That's a much stronger position to be in. I try to do that with our team.

**Jen:** I love that, and I think there is a lot we can all learn from that. One of the other roles you play is humanitarian. I mean you are a huge advocate for women, but also sexual assault. You are very involved in that community and in women's rights. How did you become passionate about this and how do you use the platform that you have today to really raise awareness around those issues?

**Julie:** Well, thank you for asking. So yeah, I mean I am a survivor myself. I had experienced an assault early on in my life, and I had really kept it a secret for most of my life, like most women do. I know the statistics that one in three women in the world are rape, beaten, or murdered; one in four women are assaulted. The statistics are really high, and we've seen that as the me-too movement unfolded, that it is all of us. I had conversations with my friends and over the years it became startling that it wasn't surprising anymore. It was like 'Oh, yeah me too,' and that's literally how it was, it was like 'Oh, me too'. I was really sick of this secret that we all carry, and it has tentacles that reach into every aspect of our lives. I decided that I had spent so much time trying to cover it up and edit myself. Just constantly keeping myself from the rest of the world and carrying this burden of a secret. I had, for 30 years, worked in this space, like I mentioned, I was a rape crisis counselor. I helped write the first teen dating violence curriculum in the City of Chicago. The curriculum is still being used today. I have done just so much work in this space, but never said that it was me. I decided when 'I made it' that I had this obligation to not only share my story for others to be able to pick up as an example, but I knew that there were young women that were literally killing themselves, taking their lives after something like this happens. You have 30% greater risk in suicide after a sexual assault. I just knew that I had an obligation to share my story. That maybe there was somebody out there who might hear my story, might remember it, and might think you know maybe if I just hang on, if I hang on today, that I can make it. It was important to help raise awareness around it and use my influence and whatever power, whatever to make changes in the world. That is when I became interested in scaling that idea and joining others who had the same feelings as I did. Then I became a producer and have worked on a number of films, *The Hunting Ground*, which was the one that Lady Gaga and Diana Warren contributed a song to the film. That one highlighted rape on college campus and cover up, which prompted 300 Title IX investigations across the country. Held the highest institutions, all of our Ivy League schools, football teams, fraternities all held them accountable, and created curriculum for students and opened the door for conversations. I think I'm really

passionate about creating vocabulary for young people to learn about intimacy and enthusiastic consent. Helping to frame and change our world so that it never happens again.

**Jen:** Thank you for that work that you do. It is important for all of us. One final question, which is kind of a two-part question. You have a lot going on, so how do you manage everything we just talked about, plus being a mom and making time for self-care? What does that look like for you?

**Julie:** It is a crazy schedule. It is pretty crazy. Well first of all I have a great team, so really relying on the team to help make all those things happen. I guess I just have good boundaries at this point around my self-care is nonnegotiable. Every day there is some way of getting a slot, whether that's yoga, running, doing a bike class, whatever workout, any kind of workout but once a day, every single day. Even on off days it's like a walk then, but something for myself for at least an hour. Then there is other all there like little things that I like to do, but that is a nonnegotiable. Doesn't matter if the world is on fire, I will still get my workout in. It is like so easy to let it slip off and my challenge is more about resting and sleeping. I tend to push myself way hard. The pandemic has actually forced me to be still longer than I've ever been still, that's been hard but so necessary. I think I'll try to keep some of that stillness even as, you know, hopefully we will get out of this soon. Whenever we do, hopefully some of that I'll maintain. Then I love reading, I get so much joy from reading, but making those moments. I think we talk about boundaries; we talk about knowing where yours are and what feels good. Well first of all it's a position of privilege to even say that. When I was growing up and my parents were building their business, there was no such conversation around self-care or wellness or balance or how to find balance in your life. That wasn't a thing for immigrants who were just starting out and building their life. I feel like I've surpassed where my family has been and now, I can be in that kind of place where I say it's nonnegotiable. We're going to do a workout, we are going to meditate, we're going to light candles and take some deep breaths, whatever that is. It's amazing how it really just comes back to breath and taking time to take a breath. I feel like as a world we just sit and hold our breath, like waiting for the next crisis. I guess I just would like to have a life of more stillness, balance, time for reflection, have some of that joy, and connecting to nature. I think now more than ever we are recognizing how important our nature is to ourselves, our well-being. I try to instill that in my teams as well. They should have balance for themselves and to take time for themselves, to check in with their families and their communities. Even when you're the leader, you know, tone at the top. We talk about tone at the top, when people see me taking care of myself, I think that maybe they are inclined to also take care of themselves.

**Jen:** Absolutely.

**Julie:** If I'm talking about mental health and getting therapy and offering it to the team and checking in and saying, 'Hey, just checking in on everyone's mental health and we have resources. Here is the 1800 crisis number. We will cover X number of hours of therapy, if anyone needs it.' Just even saying that helps destigmatize it for the teams. When I am vulnerable, it gives everyone else a chance to be vulnerable.

**Jen:** I couldn't agree more. I can't think of a better line to end on, so thank you for your vulnerability. Thank you for spending some time with us today and sharing your story and your insights. I got a lot out of it and our listeners will as well. So deeply appreciate it.

**Julie:** Thank you so much and it's so great that Deloitte is having this conversation and creating space for this. It's so powerful, so thank you.

**Jen:** I will make it back to Chicago one of these days and I will let you know when I do. We can meet up for some Kefir.

**Julie:** That would be awesome.

**Jen:** I'm so grateful Julie could be with us today to talk about her journey and her passion. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more. If you like the show, don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you would like to hear on the WorkWell podcast series or maybe a story you would like to share, please reach out to me on LinkedIn. My profile is under the name Jen Fisher, or on Twitter @jenfish23. We are always open to your recommendations and feedback. And of course, if you like what you hear, please share, post, and like this podcast. Thank you and be well.

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