

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



The disciplined pursuit of less

Jen Fisher (Jen): Have you ever asked someone how they are doing? and they answered with the phrase super busy. Many of us wear that busyness like a badge of honor. The busier we are, the more important we feel, but is busyness really how we want to live our lives? Maybe it's time to step back and reflect on what's most important, maybe it's time to ask yourself, "am I really focusing on what's essential?" This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I am Jen Fisher, chief well-being officer for Deloitte and I am so pleased to be here with you today to talk all things well being.

{Teaser} Greg McKeown (Greg): *What I think, if I could put it this way, I think we have been conned into thinking that if you do it all, you're going to get it all.*

Jen: *And that's not true.*

Greg: *Well, if it is true, you just ignore of everything else I say, right?*

Jen: I'm here with Greg McKeown, Greg is the author of the bestselling book, *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. He is also the CEO of THIS, Inc, a company whose mission is to assist people and organizations to spend 80 percent of their time on the vital few rather than on the trivial many.

Greg: Essentialism is the disciplined pursuit of less, but better. It's the antidote to a problem that everybody feels, which is feeling stretched too thin at work and at home by being busy, but not productive, for feeling like your day is being hijacked perpetually by other people's agenda.

Jen: You are describing my life right now.

Greg: Well, that's good, it's not good, it's not necessarily good, but it is how a lot of people feel now.

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: So, this is in the zeitgeist. A lot of people listening to this know exactly what that challenge is and essentialism is a solution to that and it includes figuring out what's essential, eliminating what's not essential and making it as easy as possible to do the things that matter the most.

Jen: So, I think most people including myself have a fear of doing less makes you not as engaged or a slacker or not caring as much?

Greg: Well, yes, I think for a lot of people life is fast and full of opportunity, but there is a complication which is that we think we have to do everything.

Jen: Right.

Greg: There is a consequence to that, which is that we start to plateau in our progress because we are just making a little bit of progress in too many different directions and so what I think if I could put it this way, I think we have been conned into thinking that if you do it all, you're going to get it all.

Jen: And that's not true.

Greg: Well, if it is true, you just ignore everything else I say right? If it's working for people. I will say this, when I first came to America, I used to say, "how are you?" And people said "great!" That was their answer. "Great," it was fantastic. It was like they were saying, "well, I'm American, of course, I am great!" I love that optimism, fantastic! Twenty years later now and when I ask people how they are doing now what they say is "busy." In fact, there's whole flavors of busy, I am busy, busy. I am great, but busy.

Jen: I am crazy, busy.

Greg: I am crazy busy. I mean there is a whole museum committed to all the different versions and pictures of busyness we have now, and so I was talking to this this person, after saying "busy" she said "I'm sleeping on average 4 hours a night for the last two weeks" and she thought I would be impressed because I think what she was saying, she didn't say, but I think she was saying, "Greg, I hate to break it to you, I'm just a little more important than you are, I am under such great demand you see I can only sleep 4 hours a night." I think it was like a badge of honor.

Jen: Of course.

Greg: I am so busy, look this is marvelous, how busy, and busyness itself has like maybe no value at all. I'm not advocating laziness either, if you're not doing anything then okay, this book is not for you. This is the other side of the equation. This is where you are working hard and you've given a lot and you're giving a lot and you want to break through to the next level, but you can't actually do more and the attempt to try to do more is fatiguing, exhausting, stressful, so what actually happens isn't that you go get more...

Jen: You are doing worse than the things that..

Greg: You do worse at everything. And I am just riffing on this example of this person I spoke to, if you are sleeping 4 hours a night, I mean that is psychologically and physiologically the same as if you are drunk, really.

Jen: Yeah, that is. You're right.

Greg: We would never say, you would never say, I would never say "this employee is fantastic, the way they make decisions inebriated like that." We wouldn't praise that...

Jen: But we do celebrate the person that stays up all night to get a project done.

Greg: Yeah, that's right. That's what we do and when it becomes the dominant way of doing things, the executive function of your brain is shutting down. You are simply making worst choices and that means that you continue and perpetuate the sort of busyness without thinking that got you in that situation in the first place. And so what I say to anybody who says "well, I am not sure if this, if I buy this whole thing, disciplined pursuit of less, but better," keep doing what you are doing, double down on it, don't sleep at all...

Jen: See how that works.

Greg: See how that works, if nonessentialism, the enemy of our story is delivering on it's promise that means by doing more you're getting better relationships, you are progressing in your career, you are making higher contributions, you are having more joy in that journey, great, I mean don't listen to me, keep doing it.

Jen: Do you think we falsely convince ourselves that that's true when it's really not?

Greg: I do think there is something in this pattern we describe in this undisciplined pursuit of more, that seems to keep us so busy, we don't often pause. I think it's easier for people to face their phone than is to face their life.

Jen: So, you think the technology has a lot to do with where we are today?

Greg: I think that the problems I'm articulating in essentialism predate this last sort of 20-year extreme connectedness, but I think that all of those normal human tendencies to be distracted or to progress or to feel to stressed or to do too much, are all exacerbated by this.

Jen: Okay.

Greg: This technology era has shifted us so far towards the nonessentialist way of living and assaulted so incisively and so I think that it has the power of relevance now because this has gone from being an issue to being either THE issue or certainly sort of top two or three issues, as anxiety rates have now taken over the mental health space surpassing depression, but that's a really significant change in the human condition and I think this is related to this endless interruption, the endless change, anything can be changed so many times constant through the day, I don't think humans are particularly good at this, but it all adds up to the same thing which is that it's a basic con that's been going on.

Jen: So when you are on version 40 of your PowerPoint presentation, you should probably step back and say?

Greg: That's enough.

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: Yeah, I mean that's an example, technology promises endlessly something that it doesn't deliver. And I am not a luddite, I'm not anti-technology, but so often it promises, I mean we do a game with my children, and we look at an advertisement on. And I will say, they actually quite enjoy the game. Okay, what is being sold and what is really being sold? Here is this new time saving technology, as to what is being sold. But what is really being sold is you will have a happy life, you will have time to play in the back yard with your kids, you are going to make memories together, I mean that is the promise, but that isn't being delivered. Why is it not being delivered? Because there is a dominant assumption underneath that we have to address first, the assumption that if I do more and more and more, I will get more and more life, and that isn't what happens. It turns out to be a false assumption. We used to call that a lie, it's a lie, it doesn't deliver that and so out of necessity we should look for a way out of that madness and I am arguing that the type of leader needed in this particular reality is to become an essentialist.

Jen: So, take me on the journey of how you became interested in this topic?

Greg: There was a jewel experience. I was working with Silicon Valley companies and noticed this predictable pattern and so what I was observing professionally is the Silicon Valley companies early days they would have clarity, led to success, led to options, and those options if they weren't addressed correctly led to the undisciplined pursuit of more and so there is a paradox there because it undermines the very things that led to success in the first place. Success can in fact become a catalyst for failure and then that connected with something that happened personally, I get an e-mail from a colleague, the time says Friday between 1 and 2 would be a very bad time for your wife Anna to have a baby. I mean...

Jen: Can you schedule it?

Greg: So, we are in the hospital Thursday night, our daughter was born Thursday night, and Friday morning we are there, and I am quintessential nonessentialist at this moment, how can I do both, the logic is if you do both you keep everybody happy, if I can just leave quickly enough, be very efficient about this and I can quickly go to this meeting and everybody knows when they hear that story, that's how you are making a fools bargain. You know that you are violating something more important for something less important, you are saying you are going to get both, but you are not going to get either. They look on the faces of these people didn't evince the sort of confidence that I have made a good choice. I violated something essential for something nonessential, and what I learn was the simplest of lessons which is, if you don't prioritize your life someone else will.

Jen: Okay.

Greg: So, that was really in hindsight a defining moment in identifying what I wanted to give perhaps the rest of my professional life to that issue, why is it we make the choices we

make, why do we violate, I think most people listening to this know the kind of moment I am talking about, where they did do something less important and said something more important and there is a nontrivial question to understand why that is, and it's a mission worth pursuing to work out how to reverse that and change that and make that different.

Jen: I think anybody listening can definitely get behind this idea of doing less better, but that's hard, I mean how do you actually go about that?

Greg: Yeah, we'll you see, I have been thinking a lot about what you just said. Exactly the language you just gave and this idea that the essentials are hard.

Jen: It's a story we are telling...

Greg: The nonessentials are easy. I think it is a story and that story is part of actual systems and structures, there are assumptions, a system, structure, all that make it actually true that essentials are hard for people and nonessentials are easy and also they believe that it is true and if you believe that it is true it's like somebody puts up a slide, it's got 500 words on it, you don't read the first two hundred and then give up, you do the pre-scan, you go I am never going to read that, that's too much and that's what I think happens with a lot of the essentials in our life. We say, have a look at that, no I am never going to do that, that is just too much I can't do that today, I will do that later. And so a combination of the assumption that it is going to be hard plus we haven't figured out our lives in such a way that it becomes easy, means we don't do it and so we get caught between this false dichotomy, between things that are important, but overwhelming on one hand and things that are easy and pointless on the other. And as we face decision fatigue by 11 o'clock in the morning, we just slip without really have a meaning to into the pointless, but easy things. What the argument I am trying to make is that it doesn't have to be as hard as we think it will be and here is what I think we should do, I could talk about how to do it, I told about how we ride a bike for a long time, but I think we should just apply essentials right now with you. Are you game for that, that's the question?

Jen: I think I am game for that, let's try and see?

Greg: You are feeling nervous?

Jen: I am very nervous.

Greg: Why are you nervous? What's nervous about this?

Jen: Because I don't know that I have figured this out in my own life.

Greg: Right. because it is real.

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: And that's just a great place for us to begin, because we are all in that category, there are people who are lost and then there are people who know they are lost. To be in the second category is really important, I mean that takes courage to admit it, to face it, and it's also of course the beginning of the right journey. If I'm lost in the car, pre-GPS, if I'm lost, and I don't admit that I'm lost, I'm never going to figure this out, as if I'm lost and

I admit it, well, you know what to do, stop, ask directions, you get back on track. Okay with that as context, I'm just going to ask you few questions. Very simple.

Jen: Okay.

Greg: Give me first thoughts as I ask? What is something right now in your life that is essential that you are underinvesting in? First thoughts?

Jen: My family.

Greg: Okay. Tell me a little more about that what does that mean, when you say family there are other things you are thinking of with that, what?

Jen: I think that many of us, I mean certainly me, we assume that family is always going to be there, so we make other decisions and assume that they're going to be okay with it and then a lot of times they are, right, but...

Greg: You are saying that when you face those tradeoff moments, there are times and maybe even repeated times, a habit even of saying "okay, this I will keep on putting work first because their commitment is longer term, so it's an okay tradeoff," but what you are saying is, the reason you have mentioned this, is some concern about it, what's the concern for you?

Jen: If I'm showing up as my best for them, I mean my job is the chief well-being officer for Deloitte, so I also have to serve as that role model right that I'm showing up for my family and I am also showing up for the job that I am doing.

Greg: You feel in addition to the personal desire to have the kinds of relationships you want with your family, the responsibility to model that this life is possible, that wellness isn't just a tag line, that it can be done. And so when you feel well, maybe I am not doing that, there is a double whammy reason to try and reexamine this?

Jen: Absolutely, you got it.

Greg: Help me understand a little more about this if you don't mind, what does success look like for you in this family area, how would you know that this wasn't an underinvested area for you?

Jen: I think there are times when I feel as if I should be more engaged with the people that I'm with, my head is thinking about sixteen other things and I am just not as present as I would like to be.

Greg: In terms of time you're there?

Jen: Right.

Greg: But in terms of presence, you don't feel like you are fully there?

Jen: This isn't feedback they have given to me, this is...

Greg: It's you?

Jen: Yeah, it's me.

Greg: Yeah, but yourself you feel too often I'm there, but really my mind is somewhere else?

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: So, help me identify the delta, like what shift would make you feel like I've made meaningful progress in actually improving this?

Jen: I mean an hour a day, I don't, you know.

Greg: Okay. What would that look like for you, let's try and make that as tangible as possible, so is it an hour, okay dinnertime I'm with them for an hour, and no technology. I don't know if there is no talk about work, I don't know whether that's even the goal...

Jen: No technology, no TV, just talking about how life is going, what's going on, what's on your mind.

Greg: Check-in, catchup?

Jen: Yeah. Planning our next vacation, talking about hopes and dreams.

Greg: Talking about family, with family. Not talking about work with family, that's important, but you are saying really specifically talking about us, what we want to do and invest in each other, that's what you are saying?

Jen: Yes.

Greg: How much do you think that you are doing that right now?

Jen: I would say few days a week, for sure.

Greg: Okay. So, give me numbers?

Jen: Three days a week, four days a week.

Greg: What you want is to be at?

Jen: Seven days a week.

Greg: An hour a day, totally focused, phones away, yours and everyone else's...

Jen: That feels, I mean that's seven hours a week out of...

Greg: 168?

Jen: Yeah. I should be able to accomplish that.

Greg: Yes, but I don't want to undermine the challenge of it either. I agree, I think should, yes, you should be able, this can be done, but I also understand how much pressure actually is on us to not live that way and the reason that essentials in our life are not easy is because we haven't built a system to make them easy. All right, we are going to get there. All right. Let me ask you now the other side of this question, you are still at game?

Jen: I'm still at game.

Greg: Other side of the equation is this, that was like phase I, that's the hardest part of it. Phase I is what is essential, and that's what we have been talking about. What matters, why does it matter, what does success look like and so on, let's get concrete, and we have identified this. Now, on the other side of the question is what are things that are less essential that you are overinvesting in, first thoughts, doesn't have to be one thing, it could be few things, but be honest anything nonessential or just less essential that you are overinvesting?

Jen: Time on the Internet.

Greg: Time on the Internet, is that what you said? What are your guilty pleasures of choice?

Jen: Social media certainly, I'm definitely guilty of the endless scroll and just keep scrolling because it's mindless.

Greg: Yeah, because we want an escape.

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: Whether it's that escape for the people listening or some other escape we wanted to be rejuvenating. We want headspace and so on.

Jen: But it's not.

Greg: It's part of the con, it doesn't actually deliver on its promise. If you had out of the amount of time you are on social media or what we call less than productive Internet time?

Jen: I don't know, I am afraid to look at my phone and find that out.

Greg: I looked recently, not so recently, but a few months ago and I was so surprised how much time I was spending in news articles, just alone, just news and I thought this cannot be sensible to use this precious time on this and so I identified that, I am sure I was spending an hour a day doing that and okay, so we have identified something. That was a little bit magical because we were looking for not even an hour a day, we were looking for an excess of three or four hours a day depending on the week, that's the delta we were looking for and you have identified something that is relatively unimportant to you, but it's a bit true now and easy and so on. So, we are moving onto the third and final stage. How can we make it easy to do what you have identified as essential and hard to do what you have identified as nonessential, that's it. That's an easy, it's not so easy, right to do that. We have to do that. So, let's start with nonessentials, what could we do to make the nonessentials a little bit harder to do?

Jen: Delete them from my device.

Greg: Yeah, that's right. Digital essentialism. I absolutely feel happy for this, just take every single app on your phone and delete it and then you bring them back one by one as it serves your purposes. There are not plenty, there are a select set of apps that I find very useful, some of them when I'm traveling and I find it much easier than the alternative, so I have those on my phone. This is great, we are using it for our own purposes, so you could eliminate them all, good, enough that friction would make it little harder so we could prepare quite easily a conversation to have with your family, after this conversation you simply say look you are more important to me than this nonsense, but I'm just in this habit, so I need your help just to be able to get into this new habit, this new routine, so now you have social positive peer pressure in your favor.

Jen: So, on the flipside, I mean one of the ideas that I have is schedule the time like you would, any other meeting that's really important to you?

Greg: That's right.

Jen: And stick to it.

Greg: Yeah, and a little plug here for an idea that's I think really important which is the difference between scheduling and routinizing; scheduling you have to keep doing it, think about this week, am I going to do it, am I going to do it, and there is a cognitive cost every time you schedule it, you have to decide and think about when am I going to do it, what meetings do I have? An alternative way and it's a little more work upfront, but you really think through your routines and schedules and you say okay, this is when I'm going to be at dinner at 6 pm every night other than when I'm traveling maybe that's, you know, something that's realistic, if you don't have an hour...

Jen: I was going to say...

Greg: ...unplugged, you don't have a life?

Jen: Right.

Greg: Right, I mean as...

Jen: I mean this shouldn't be that hard to accomplish, but for many of us it feels like it is.

Greg: Well, that's because the people that have been building the systems in our lives were incentivized to keep us plugged in all the time. That's in their interest and that doesn't make them evil, but it does mean that they have outsourced to us the responsibility to create these kinds of space and experience because they've succeeded so well to making their tools ubiquitous for us. So, how confident you feel you could do that, like leaving right now how confident are you right now honestly, do you feel like yeah, I am going to do this 100 percent or is it 50 percent, I don't know, just?

Jen: So, all transparency, this is an ongoing problem, so I have done it before successfully in the end, you know old habits die hard right, so it's been done before, it's not

unprecedented, there's plenty of other people that can do it right, so I feel pretty confident about it.

Greg: So, let's do a couple of more things to at least illustrate...

Jen: Do I not sound confident?

Greg: Well, the question was a genuine question because the goal with this third step is to keep building our system until eventually the ideal scenario is that there is no scenario in which we won't do it. It's like the opposite, it's not like well, in a best-case scenario in a pretty good way I will do it. It's like no, this has now been changed, this is just going to happen because all the incentives have been aligned because all of the people involved have been aligned...

Jen: Challenge accepted.

Greg: Yeah, social contract, one more idea social contract where you actually write up everything we just talked about in specific detail and you sign it, spouse signs it, whoever some of the witness signs it and it sound silly, I mean I know how it sounds.

Jen: No, but these things work, I mean...

Greg: They do work.

Jen: Science has proved that they work.

Greg: Yes, they do because you are making a public commitment, and we have a deep psychological need to be consistent with what we are saying and actively stating publicly, we don't have to worry about why that is the case, we just use these things to our advantage to building a life where the essential things become the default things and then years and years go by, and we have actually lived a life that really mattered where we were set in the things that really matter. That's it, three things, we explored, eliminated, and executed, that was what the three steps are. We have explored what was essential, we have figured out what was nonessential that we could eliminate, we have built a system to make it as routine and easy as possible to follow through on the things that are essential. How do you feel right now?

Jen: I feel vulnerable.

Greg: Do you?

Jen: Yeah, but I feel good. I mean, I think you have brought something that's kind of a continual challenge for me and I mean, I talk about it openly, I talk about it regularly, but I need to do something different with it.

Greg: You are doing something even in being open, in being vulnerable about it? My goodness, I'm not perfect at this, I live in the real world, I'm married to Anna, amazing, four children.

Jen: Wow.

Greg: Not very essentialist of me. Just joking. The reward for this kind of wrestling is that we start to actually have a life that step-by-step really is in alignment with what we state is our highest priority and reward in life.

Jen: So, do I get to ask you questions now?

Greg: Yeah, you get to.

Jen: I passed it.

Greg: You did superbly well.

Jen: In your view applying these principles, the principles of essentialism, how does that impact personal and team well-being?

Greg: One of the examples in the book is of a superbly successful entrepreneur, professional who was traveling all over the world, very successful, had a positive impact in the world, I mean just doing great things, but and after all of his travel he was starting to deplete his reserves, his deep resources, and telling me that in the middle of the night one time he just wakes up like there had been a gunshot that had gone off and he is like well, he sits up in bed, he looks around the whole family is asleep, everything is silent, and he has something weird is up, goes back to sleep, then it happens again, and then it happens in the middle of the day to him and he goes to the doctor and he is like what is going on and after this one of the things that doctor concluded you have burned yourself out, you are burned out. And, of course. he didn't want to admit that, but then what I think great about his story he says well, overachiever. I said look, you know, this is all fine, what do I need to do, the doctor said well, go home, sleep for six weeks, go rest, relax, and he said you watch me I will do this in two, that's what an overachiever would say, wouldn't you? I'm going to heal fast, I'm going to do this sprint, I'm going to sprint to wellness and he said that and he went home, and he said he was like sleeping 16 hours a day, he just suddenly crashed; after two weeks he goes back to the doctor and he says okay, I get it right, I am useless now. So it took him years of recovery as it turns out because he had burned so deeply, these deep resources and when he was trying to make sense of this whole experience he summarized his lesson in three words what he shared with me and lots of other peers and he said here is the lesson protect the asset and you are the only resource, this is his way of saying it I suppose, but the only resource through which you can impact anything else.

Jen: There is only one you.

Greg: There is only one you and you don't want to just go through life, you want to be able to experience it, have a rich experience, live the life in color not in black and white, not to be exhausted all the time, not to be making decisions from that place of fatigue and burn out where relationships start to feel like a pain where we resent everything and anything coming our way because we are so deep down dead tired and so I think that essentialism is certainly a friend of wellness, but I would say...

Jen: It's a path.

Greg: It's the path.

Jen: Yeah.

Greg: I don't know of any other path that actually delivers on this because what we are trying to do is to actually build the life around what matters, not just retire from life, it's not do less for the sake of less.

Jen: Right.

Greg: It's doing less, but better. It's doing a disciplined pursuit of the essential rather than an undisciplined pursuit of the nonessential.

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