

sunshine and everything. It's usually a slow, grueling process full of doubt, second guesses, and in many cases, we often don't even realize how much we're changing as we're changing. So, my work is very much just about the gritty, realistic aspects of personal growth.

Jen: So, let's talk more about that because you say that you give life advice that doesn't suck, and I think that we all need a little bit of life advice right now that doesn't suck. So, tell me more about that.

Mark: A big part of my work is irreverence and humor and also, I'm a little bit confrontational. I've just found that if you're asking people to think about really uncomfortable topics in their own lives, why did your marriage fail? Why do you always doubt yourself? Why do you always feel insecure in every business meeting that you're going into? These are not fun things to think about. In fact, most of us spend most of our time avoiding thinking about these things every chance we get. So, I've found that humor and a little bit of that attitude is...it's the sugar that helps the medicine go down. If you want people to confront these difficult conversations, if you can make them laugh a little bit first, it's much easier to get them to do it.

Jen: I think it also, at least from my perspective I mean, it humanizes it a little bit. These are issues that are part of being human.

Mark: Fore sure.

Jen: These are issues that we all face in one way or another. Maybe not everybody's marriage fails, but we all have things that we need to deal with or insecurities or different things in our life that we probably rather not deal with, but in order to live a good life and move past them, we need to deal with them.

Mark: Yeah and that ties back into improving the just general conversation or the public perception of self-improvement is that these are unbelievably normal experiences that we all have. We shouldn't treat them as these special cosmic events. It's like maybe you didn't lose a marriage, but everybody has lost a relationship, everybody has felt deeply insecure in certain situations, everybody has had massive failures in their life and the more you can normalize that, the better everybody is for it.

Jen: So, walk me through the nitty-gritty of your philosophy around self-help, if you will. I mean, you talked about it a little bit, but how does it differ in terms of putting things into action?

Mark: Well, I actually conceptualize my work as...there were actually a couple years there where I conceptualized it as negative self-help because I tend to come at things...instead of coming at things from the positive angle, I tend to come at them from the more negative angle, which sounds dreary and unexciting on the surface, but I actually think it's much more helpful. So, one of the main ideas of my work is that we are all flawed and screwed up. So, let's not even start at the baseline expectation that we shouldn't be screwed up. We're all screwed up and we've all got baggage and messes in our past and horrible, horrible insecurities going on inside of us. So, let's use that as our starting point, and instead of trying to be spectacular and amazing and perfect all the time, let's just try to be less awful. Take it one step at a time. Another tenet that I preach a lot is 'Pain is inevitable, but our reaction to that pain is not. Life is always going to find ways to hurt you and trip you up, but what you do with that is completely up to you.' I think this plays out in all sorts of different dimensions. Whether it's your career or your relationships or just figuring out what you want in your life, you're always going to go through periods where you feel a little bit lost, where there's lots of conflict, where something that you really, really

believed in for a long time doesn't work or turns out not to be the thing that you expected it to be. Again, I think, it's resetting the expectations that this is the norm. In business, nobody thinks they're going to get the product right on the first try. You do prototypes in beta tests, and you get customer feedback and you iterate a dozen times before you get close to something that even resembles a successful product. For some reason, we don't adopt those assumptions for our own lives. Your first relationship, 99% of us it's not going to work the first time. It's going to fail. You're going to have to work at it. You're going to have to go date other people, whatever. So, in a nutshell, that is just the dead horse I'm beating all the time.

Jen: Do you think that your style and this philosophy is just reflective of you and your personality or is it something else?

Mark: I mean, I'm a cynical dude for sure. I'm a millennial. Millennials are famous for being cynical and disillusioned with everything.

Jen: Rightfully so.

Mark: I think that was my initial audience early on. I started blogging in 2008 and that's where it caught on. I mean, now it's every generation is reading my stuff, but early on that was the bread and butter. It's just a bunch of disaffected millennials who were upset with the world.

Jen: Well, it obviously resonates because you have millions and millions of people reading your stuff now. So, I guess when you talk about like what are some specific strategies? So, you said, 'Look, life is going to trip you up. That's life. There are parts of life, regardless of who you are, what you do, what your title is, where you live, who you're married to or not, life is going to trip you up. There's parts of life that suck. That's just a reality, but it's our reaction to these things or how we choose to deal with them.' So, talk to me about some of the strategies that you share with people, or you help people to cultivate and develop that help them deal with the suck of life.

Mark: Well, the first one and probably primary one that I believe very strongly in is a sense of radical responsibility. Taking responsibility for every experience in your life. Where people get tripped up on that is we often associate responsibility with fault, or we associate responsibility with justice. It's if I'm walking down the street and a car, a drunk driver runs off the road and hits me, it's not my fault that that happened, it's not fair or just that that happened to me, but it is still my responsibility to recover, to recuperate, to process the experience, to decide what is that experience going to mean in my life, how is this going to affect my future, what am I going to learn from it, how am I going to respond and bounce back. Those things are still my responsibility regardless. I think the example I use in my book was if somebody leaves a baby on your doorstep, it's not your fault that the baby is there, but it is sure as hell your responsibility to do something about it. I think most problems in life are like this. Many, many problems that happen or struggles that we're faced with, they're not our fault and they're not fair, but that doesn't mean that we don't get to be responsible for them. I harp on this a lot because until you take ownership of whatever you're going through, you're essentially just giving away your personal power to others. So, if I decide, 'Well, it's not my fault the car hit me. There's nothing I can do.' Then, I'm just going to sit on a hospital bed and wait for something to happen. It's by taking ownership of our experiences and deciding that, 'I am responsible for this no matter how sucky it is,' it opens the door to making better decisions, to planning better futures, to constructing better meaning from our experiences.

Jen: So how do we do that? It just sounds fabulous, but conceptually, yes, absolutely, but that's not the natural human tendency.

Mark: Sure. So, one way I think this concept actually plays out in our brains is I talk about this idea that we are always choosing in every moment. So, we may not choose what's happening to us, but we are always choosing how to interpret and react to what's happening to us. We're always choosing the meaning that we ascribe to what's happening to us. So, I think the first step is simply just becoming aware of those choices that we're making because once we're aware of them, we can start that process of choosing something different. I think this is just the probably the most fundamental thing that we all continue to struggle with because, like you said, our default setting is that, 'Our life is happening to us. It's not something that we are proactively creating.' Once you become aware of all those micro-choices happening in every moment, then you can start to develop that sense of like, 'OK, I am actually creating the life that I have.'

Jen: So, let's talk about happiness and this constant pursuit of happiness that so many of us are always chasing, I guess. I guess are we just trying too hard to be happy and what's the fine line between caring about what really matters and then being able to let all the other stuff go?

Mark: You're right. I personally believe that happiness is a bit overrated as something to pursue or something to worry about particularly. In my opinion, it's if you get the other things right, happiness will naturally happen as a byproduct. Again, I think this is the advantage of coming at things from more of a negative angle. I think it's more worthwhile to ask...well, first of all, no emotion ever lasts. So, even if you are happy, if everything in your life is going great, it's not going to last. Something is going to happen. Something is going to change. It's inevitable. So, I think since happiness is a moving target, we need to ask ourselves, 'What are we willing to be unhappy for? What are the things in our lives that we are willing to sacrifice or struggle or suffer for? What are the things in our life that are actually more important than our own happiness?' For a lot of people, that's something like their kids, their family, maybe a particular cause, maybe they believe really strongly in their career, but most of us, we don't have many of those things. We're lucky if we have more than one or two and a lot of people have none. What I find is that the people who have none, there's nothing that they're willing to give up their happiness for. They're the ones who are constantly struggling to be happy because if you have nothing that you're willing to give up happiness for, then it becomes like chasing highs.

Jen: A false promise.

Mark: It's like an abstract addiction. Like you're always looking for a new distraction, a new thrill, a new escape. And so, I think it's one of those paradoxical things that the more you find that you're willing to be unhappy for, the more happiness just starts to happen naturally as a byproduct.

Jen: So, let's talk about social media and the role that social media plays in this constant pursuit of the perfect life or happiness. We're all aware that what we see often times or all the time on social media is a curated version of somebody else's life, and although we know that it's still triggers a very human response of comparing it to my own life or my own happiness. And so, what is the role that social media plays where we are now and are like constant pursuit or desire to always be happy?

Mark: To be honest, I think social media is kind of a favorite punching bag these days, and rightfully so. Like, I do think there are some things that social media deserves to be kicked around for. I'm not

convinced that is so much one of them. Keeping up with the Joneses has always been a thing. And if it wasn't social media, it would be TV commercials or magazine ads or radio shows or whatever.

Jen: So, is it just us looking for something outside of ourselves to blame?

Mark: Yeah, I mean we're human, right? So always we're naturally going to compare ourselves to others, and when we see somebody who has something that we don't have, we're going to be a little bit envious and have those questions of like, why don't I have that? Am I not good enough and I think that's just kind of a universal experience? Social media might make it more frequent, a more frequent experience for people, but I don't think it is necessarily causing it or changing it. To me actually the big threat of social media or the problem with social media is that it's a fun house mirror reflection of reality like it's the same way. Obviously, it's not all those like I'm in my mid-30s. So, when I get on Facebook, it's just nothing but weddings and babies. Like top the bottom weddings and babies and you would think that just everybody is getting married and having kids right now when the reality is life. I'm just not seeing all of the boring mundane things or people aren't posting the boring mundane things from their lives. And I think this goes both ways. We get over exposed to the extremely positive events and we get overexposed to extremely negative events and points of view as well. And meanwhile it's like 99% of life is happening in this humdrum middle. And we're not being exposed to that, so our perception of the world I think gets very skewed in both directions.

Jen: Yeah, that really resonates with me. And one of the other things that I know you talk about, and you've touched on this a little bit is that we aren't gonna feel amazing all of the time and this expectation that we are leads us down, a bad path. Like not every experience is going to be positive. You talked about that already. But like, can you dive a little bit deeper and talk about like why do we all need to better understand this or what can we do to better understand this and help one another. I think for me like logically yeah, I get that I understand that, but when it comes to like my own life or practices in my own life, it doesn't necessarily seem to feel that way.

Mark: I don't remember where it was, but I saw an interview of an Olympic athlete recently and I think she was a gymnast. And she said that one day she went in and had a horrible practice, was just like missing all of her jumps or whatever and she was really upset with herself. She thought her coach was going to chew her out and he didn't. He was actually really nice to her, and she was surprised. And she said that her coach was like, oh, it's just the one third rule. And she was like, what's the one third rule? And he said, well, if you do something long enough and frequently enough a third of the time, you're going to feel great about it. A third of the time it's just going to be whatever, okay, a normal day. And a third of the time you're going to feel like you're sucking and that it's not good enough. And it doesn't really matter how hard you're trying or like you could try to hack everything you want, but it's just that's how you're going to show up mentally each time and I really like frameworks like that because it basically resets our expectations. One of the things that I say and one of my articles is I said that even if you're working your dream job, it's still going to suck about 10% of the time because no job is perfect all the time.

Jen: I can attest to that.

Mark: Yeah, right. Me too. Actually, to give you a concrete example, earlier this week on Monday I woke up with the sniffles, started coughing, turns out I'm sick. It's not COVID, but it turns out I'm sick. I'm in the middle of a really big business rebrand with my team. I'm working long hours. I'm like wow, this is

the worst time ever to get sick. I struggled through the morning. Afternoon comes, I get the mail. I've got a big envelope from the IRS. I'm like, oh God, here we go.

Jen: That's never good.

Mark: I open it up. Yeah, guess what I'm getting audited and I'm like seriously, of all times like you could have done this three months ago or a year ago. And it was a pretty crappy day and I sat down before dinner and I was like, you know what this is just part of that 10% like this is just. And the last month has been great. I've been on a roll lately. I've been super productive, been like really energized and this week has just been the pits and I'm like, it's just part of it. That's part of it. It's how it comes. There's nothing I need to fix. I didn't do anything wrong. I'm not a bad person. This is just part of that 10%.

Jen: So, I have to ask, I guess you take your own advice?

Mark: I try, I try.

Jen: So then, of all the topics that you speak and write about in terms of giving advice to others, what's the one that you struggle with the most?

Mark: That's a great question. Most of this stuff I write about it because it's I joke that it's my form of therapy.

Jen: It's a reflection of your own experience.

Mark: Exactly, it's like this was my bay. If you find an article, I wrote in 2017, that was probably what I was struggling with in 2017. The thing that I'm bad about, I still get distracted a lot. It seems to be a constant battle. I've written a lot the last few years about something I called the attention diet, which is kind of like going on a fast, the same way you would to like lose weight as you just like block or unsubscribe to a bunch of things. Yeah, it's just part of mine, I think it's just the nature of my profession is that I'm sitting in front of a computer screen with an Internet connection all day, every day that things seep in. My brain seems to always find a way to like some shiny new thing to look at.

Jen: Yeah, well and I also am part of your success and what you do is tied to being online, right? So, it's hard not to be. I think we all struggle with that, and I mean whoever is curating it is doing a great job because we're all struggling with it. So, one of the other things that comes through loud and clear in terms of like a theme in your philosophy is self-awareness. You talk about this all the time or write about this all the time. And in particular, I think like in terms of us defining what success looks like, what our values are, we have to have self-awareness and what choices and decisions that we make. So, talk to me about self-awareness like many things that you talk about is hard because it means we have to get real with some of the things that aren't so great about ourselves in order to get to the things that are so great about ourselves. So how can we better align our actions with those things that are good about us, I guess, but just talk to me about self-awareness?

Mark: Yeah, self-awareness is hard because we are all experts at lying to ourselves. But look, I mean, if you lack awareness around something, nothing else is going to happen. Nothing else is going to work. Like if you aren't aware that you're having a certain emotional reaction, you can never change that emotional reaction. If you're not aware that you have an insecurity, you can't change that insecurity. If you aren't aware that you have a particular definition of success, you can't question or potentially change that definition of success. So, the first step to really anything I think is doing a deep dive into,

you start with the behavior. I used to call it the “why” game? Like 3-year-old just walk around saying why, why, why, why. You want to become like that, but with yourself. So, you look at a behavior that maybe you’re not particularly proud of or don’t feel great about and ask yourself why. Why did I do that? And start looking at all the different elements and influences. Probably you were overwhelmed by some form of emotion. Maybe you’re under slept, maybe you are around people you don’t like. And then you take all those reasons, and you ask why again. Okay, why am I around people I don’t like. Why am I under slept? Why was I overwhelmed by this emotion? And you get another set of answers. And usually, they’re particularly deeper answers. Maybe I’m in a job I don’t like, or maybe I am not taking care of my health, or maybe I’ve always struggled with anger and I’ve never addressed it. Then you ask why again, and you basically just go down these rabbit holes. A journal is a great medium to do this, but therapy as well, obviously, or just talking to a loved one or partner. But just follow those rabbit holes as deep as you can take and just see what comes up because just a simple thing of like noticing. Wow, like the last three or four times I had outbursts like this, I was with this one person like that’s probably not a coincidence. What is it about that one person that it like brings this out of me? A realization like that can be really pivotal for somebody. And I just think it’s really important mental process to develop on yourself.

Jen: And can that help us also in speaking from what I struggle with in my own experiences? It’s just the title of your most famous book. Like how do we actually go through the process of like not caring about things? And it’s not as simple as that I get it, but.

Mark: Of course, of course. The short answer is you have to care about things. It’s question of what you’re choosing to care about. The short version of the how to stop caring so much? The trick is to find something to care about. That’s just way more important. I did a video recently and I used the example. I said let’s use the hypothetical situation that a lot of people experience of like, so and so there’s people like at school or at work or something who are mean to you or like saying bad things about you and you’re really upset about it. And it just consumes you and it like eats you up and you’re like what did I do wrong? Like why is this such a problem? Why don’t people like me and you are having the whole pity parade and everything.

Jen: Oh yeah, I’ve been there.

Mark: Yeah, we’ve all done it. We’ve all been there, and I said now imagine that your mother has cancer. How important is what those people are saying? That’s right, it’s not important at all. You don’t care anymore because you’re like so consumed by this other thing that’s hundred times or million times more important.

Jen: And is actually important.

Mark: It is actually important, right? So, the problem isn’t that like, oh, I care too much that people say bad things about me. The problem is that you don’t have something that million times more important than people saying bad things about you. And so, the trick is to find that thing that is a million times more important, and then suddenly you’re like okay, whatever people are saying bad things about me, who cares.

Jen: Interesting well and I guess hopefully more time. Maybe this is just me being toxic positivity, but hopefully more times than not that thing that's a million times more important isn't always something like somebody having cancer.

Mark: Yeah, right.

Jen: As a cancer survivor, I can say that.

Mark: Yeah, I mean it can be positive or negative. It can be a cause. It can be a mission. Ultimately, mission is a buzz word that gets thrown around a lot, purposes another one. But to me, this is the practical value of those things when you feel as though you have a purpose and a mission in your life then that's what makes all the small stuff just fade into the background.

Jen: And it's true. I mean, it's true what your parents told you. Not everybody is going to like you. I mean, that's part of life.

Mark: Yep, for sure.

Jen: And we don't like everybody, right? So yeah.

Mark: Right, exactly

Jen: Just flip that around a little bit. In your experiences and the people you're interacting with and the millions of people that follow you and that follower ship continues to grow. The world is rough right now. It has been or feels like it's been more rough, at least for the past few years, but it's probably always been there in some sense. But do you think people are struggling more now in the past and if the answer is yes, why do you think that is?

Mark: Oh man.

Jen: That's a loaded question.

Mark: This is yeah. I mean we could do a whole podcast just on this question. So, I'm actually really undecided about this. So mental health statistics have been on a steady march in the wrong direction for basically as long as they've been measuring mental health statistics. So, everything from depression and anxiety and addiction and eating disorders. Like all these things have been and are just on multidecade multigenerational declines. But there's a lot of debate over why that is. One reason is there's just way more diagnosis happening. There's way more therapists and psychiatrists. It's way more socially acceptable. 50 years ago, if you were depressed, it wasn't really socially acceptable to talk about it or to go see a therapist, whereas today everybody has a therapist. Everybody goes talks about a lot of their mental health issues. So, it's a question of like, is there actually more, or are we simply more open about it and measuring it better. Yeah, to me it's an open question. I think it's very easy to become pessimistic because we are so much more aware of problems these days. Again, with the Internet, we're so much more exposed to people struggling and suffering from all over the world. But on the other hand, if you go back a few generations and actually look at how they lived, I don't know about you, but I've had this experience recently where I've watched some classic movies like films that were made in the 50s, 60s and 70s and been absolutely appalled by the characters behaviors. It's just been like horrified at how cruel they are to each other and themselves. How much they drink, how much they smoke, how like the

awful things that they say to each other and in realizing like wow, that was actually normal back then like that was just helping.

Jen: Right, and we tend to. I think human nature is to have this.

Mark: Rosy picture.

Jen: Yeah, exactly of the of the past. And it's also interesting that you say that because Deloitte came out with a study on the C-suite role on well-being and one of the stats that came out is that 50% of the workforce says that they're struggling with their mental health in the workplace. But that also means that 50% of the workforce isn't struggling. And while I'm not trying to downplay those that are because it's incredibly important and we need to focus and pay attention there. We don't often hear about the people that aren't struggling. And Adam Grant recently actually talked about it. And he's like, I wonder why we don't hear that? Is it that the people that are struggling, they're afraid to say something, and the people that are also not struggling are afraid to say something, and so now nobody is really saying anything? So, could the people that are struggling learn from the people that aren't struggling. Is there a way to actually create more of an open dialogue that it's okay to not be struggling because I think we hear so much about everybody struggling? So therefore, if I'm not then I'm not going to say anything because I don't want anybody to know that I'm not struggling.

Mark: So, actually this ties it in really well to how we started the conversation which is, like you just said, it's if we normalize struggling to such an extent that people are just like, oh yeah, I'm always struggling with something, like there's always something hard going on in my life. How useful is that as a metric? I did a newsletter a couple years ago about the expansion of meaning of certain words. So, like for instance, trauma, like 40 years ago, trauma had a very narrow, specific meaning. And then it expanded and then expanded again. And now it's like people will just casually throw around. I was traumatized by that movie was terrible. It was traumatic watching it. It's the words become more common and then there the definition of those words becomes more expensive and cast a wider net of a wider variety of experiences.

Jen: They lose their meaning.

Mark: Yeah, then you wonder, are you measuring the same thing that you were measuring 40 years ago? And that also ties in back to these metrics of like what depression has gone through a similar evolution. 50 years ago, depression was like you literally could not get out of bed. You could not function, and today there's plenty of people who are depressed but still are functional in their daily lives. So yeah, again I don't know the answer to any of this stuff, but I think there's a lot of interesting open questions around this, and it's, I don't think anybody knows honestly.

Jen: Well, maybe we'll loop back in the future for another podcast on this topic.

Mark: Yeah, I'm sure it'll be interesting regardless.

Jen: Yeah. So, one final question for you Mark. You've been incredibly successful. I don't know if when you set out to do what you're doing, you thought that you would impact as many people lives as you have. So first of all, congratulations on that. But really what I want to know, like what have you learned from this success that you've had and like what has actually surprised you about it, like are there any stories from people that have been so impacted by your work or something you did or said, or

something they learn from you? Like is there anything that's just really like touched you or surprised you about the work that you're doing?

Mark: I'm gonna take that question in two parts.

Jen: Yeah, because it was kind of a three part actually.

Mark: Well, so with the audience it's a very interesting experience. I'm going to be very honest here. So, early on, when I'm just a blogger with a couple dozen readers and a few commentors. it's every positive reaction is shocking. It's like, oh my God, this guy in Illinois just said that this article, like, helped him out. Oh, wow oh, it's like that's so crazy. That's amazing, I can't believe it. And then like anything else, though things you become desensitized in a nerd to things and as the audience has grown and exploded over the year, I've heard crazy stories, both positive and negative. I've been parts of people proposals, it's like.

Jen: Like marriage proposals.

Mark: Marriage proposals.

Jen: Oh my God.

Mark: It's like they are really just insane amazing stuff that has happened and continues to happen with readers and it's just such a blessing. And yeah, the first time each one happens, it's surprising, but it's just human nature. It's after three or four marriage proposals, you're kind of like. Like another one. Another one is people have emailed me and they said, 'I was suicidal and then I found your work and I'm not anymore' and like that is always incredible. And the first few times is extremely surprising.

Jen: Do you feel like a huge sense of responsibility when you get something like that?

Mark: Yes, so sense of that is like an occupational hazard of the industry I'm in for sure. So, there's this weird kind of almost objectification of audience experience that you just develop. I've been doing this for 15 years. And so everything it just turns into data, which is sad. In a way, like, I wish that wasn't true. But it's also just when you hear from 10s of thousands of people over many years, I think it's natural. And honestly, if it didn't become that way, I probably couldn't do this job. I would be so overwhelmed with anxiety and emotion all the time that I wouldn't be able to write anymore. So, I guess maybe that's the surprising part. On a personal level, yeah, my success is completely surprising. I often joke that if anybody actually thinks they're going to sell this many books, they're probably an *****.

But what surprised me actually has been the other side, like being on the other side of success. There's a lot of cliches, like money doesn't make you happy, and that's all true. But the biggest surprise for me was I had a dream I worked towards that dream, and I hit it way younger than I ever thought I would. And when I hit it, I lost it. And that really messed me up like still being young and not having a dream anymore. And not knowing what to do next and having this like sinking feeling of like anything you do next is going to be disappointing to everyone, including yourself. That really messed me up for a few years, which is really strange, like I had a year after the book blew up. That was like emotionally difficult. So that was a surprise on the personal level.

Jen: Yeah I can understand that and thank you for sharing that. Well Mark, I have enjoyed it immensely. I know the listeners will too, so thank you again for being on the show.

Mark: Absolutely thanks for having me.

Jen: I'm so grateful Mark could be with us today to talk about happiness and personal development. Thank you to our producers Rivet 360 and our listeners. You can find the WorkWell podcast series on Deloitte.com or you can visit various pod catchers using the keyword WorkWell, all one word, to hear more and if you like the show don't forget to subscribe so you get all of our future episodes. If you have a topic you'd 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 at Jenfish23. We're 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. The information, opinions and recommendations expressed by guests on this Deloitte podcast series are for general information and should not be considered as specific advice or services.