

WorkWell

A Deloitte podcast series to empower your well-being



Lessons in Recovery: A conversation about addiction

Some parts of well-being are easier to talk about, like fitness, nutrition, and sleep, but stigma still stands in the way of having some of the tougher, more vulnerable conversations about our health. You've heard me talk about mental health stigma and today we're going to have an honest conversation about substance use disorder and the strength and resilience we can learn from those in recovery. Substance use disorder is a mental illness that affects over 19.7 million Americans aged 12 and older, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health.

Jen Fisher: This is the WorkWell podcast series. Hi, I'm 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 Laura McKowen, the author of *We Are The Luckiest*. She is a former public relations executive who has become recognized as a fresh voice in the recovery movement, beloved for her soulful and irreverent writing. She now leads yoga-based retreats and courses that teach people how to say yes to a bigger life. She hosted the iTunes top 100 podcast, *HOME*, with over 1.5 million downloads, and has been featured on *The Today Show*, in *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *WebMD*, and even more.

Laura McKowen: I started working in marketing and advertising after college and I just sort of fell into it. I had graduated with a business degree, but I was attracted honestly, to like the fun aspect, things change all the time, you know, the deadlines are usually crazy and the people are really fun, and it kinda came to me naturally. And I remember getting 10 or so years into working and someone asking me, "How did you choose this career?" And I thought, do I have a career? Because, and this has a lot to do with my drinking, I was just very in the moment. And not necessarily considering...I wasn't necessarily making fully conscious choices all the time, not because I was drinking all the time, but because I just didn't have the capacity to do that. I always start by saying, I, I grew up in a family that were drinking was just absolutely normalized and not just drinking, but kind of over-drinking. And I didn't really understand that or see that until later when I was, say, around my husband's family or my friends' families as an adult. And I realized, "Oh, not every family drinks every night, and every time someone walks in the door they're offered a drink," and you know, I just assumed that's what adults did. And I came from divorced parents, which isn't necessarily unique, but I learned really early to sort of shapeshift to figure out what I needed to be in any situation to make things okay. And I think, I was young. I was five or six when they got divorced. So I started to internalize this message that it was my job to make everybody feel comfortable and make everybody feel happy and just smooth out rough emotions, you know, and anticipate them. And that plays significantly into my drinking story because I realized, I mean, for one, you really lose yourself, your center as a kid when you, you know, when you do that. And so I didn't really feel comfortable with who I was. I didn't really know who I was. And I, you know, carry that. It's a, it was an intelligent coping mechanism, but I carried that all through my life and really until I got sober, but what that meant over the years was, I was very uncomfortable in my own skin. I was very uncomfortable with conflict. And, I was a people pleaser and that causes extraordinary

conflict internally within yourself to do that. We don't realize how much really. It's like an epidemic...and they are strangers to themselves. And a lot of them end up doing things like drinking, to cope with the conflict of that and have that internal conflict to numb it out and not feel it and not do anything about it, right? And to make it feel like, okay. And it's not the only thing we drink about, but man, that was like, that was a primary thing for me. When you're drinking or recovering all the time, it's like, you're sort of getting through the days and surviving. And five years turned into 10 years, certain into 15 years. And I did really well. You know, I was, when I finally left that work, I was a vice president at one of the agencies in Boston. And I led a huge team and I managed a big budget, millions of dollars for big tech clients. And it was, you know, I had arrived, I guess, in a professional way. There wasn't a lot more room to go up, but I was very disconnected from the work at that point. I also didn't know how to be in relationships without drinking. I didn't, I was not comfortable with intimacy. I was not really comfortable socially. You know, I also know for sure that I'm an empath and very sensitive and being in social situations like large groups, which I was required to do for work, it's like your radar for other people's emotions is turned up like many more notches than most people. So, you're constantly absorbing it. And, you know, it has to go somewhere, it's really extraordinarily uncomfortable. So I had become the fun girl, you know, I had become the party girl and my job, I worked in on the client side of advertising, required me to be on and to entertain and to be hyper social. And that's not who I am. It's just really not who I am. And I used the alcohol to allow me to make that happen. If I was walking into a social situation and there was no alcohol, I would panic or I wouldn't go, like, I just really didn't do anything social. And then it was like, I didn't do anything work related either. I didn't do anything where I had to interact with lots of people without alcohol, like literally for, from the time I was in college until I got sober. So over the years, my drinking sort of looked like other peoples from the outside, but for me internally, it was always, it was an issue for me. I knew that I liked it too much. I knew I relied on it too much. I knew I needed it in a way other people didn't really need it. I could never just stop at one or two. I would do that if I was, say, out with a client, but then I would go home and drink. You know, I was just like we say, I had no off switch. It just, it was never enough for me. And I got started having some outside consequences be because of that. You know, I would black out, I would say things I didn't want to say, do things I didn't want to do. I would have to call in sick for work because I was too hung over. And for me, like, I could power through, and that started to catch up with me where I just couldn't power through anymore. And then when I had my daughter in 2009, things really got bad. And I hear that a lot from women too, that it just changes, you know, your body changes, your hormones change, and your life changes. So, I remember distinctly feeling at that point, like, the alcohol just stopped working. It didn't relax me anymore. It just amped my anxiety up. And so I drank more to try to get that same effect and I just couldn't get it. And my work life started to suffer, too. I mean, I almost got fired a couple of times because of things that happened when we were at like client parties or even just internal company parties. And that was horrifying to me, because I was so, I was so well liked, you know, and, and, and like, that's what saved me. It's like they would see, I was a tremendous actress, like people would from the outside, even today, looking at old pictures, I am horrified that I look so fine and I presented so well. And this goes back to that childhood thing where you're just like, doo-de-doo, everything's fine! Nothing to see here. We're all good. You know, and inside it just got worse and worse and worse and worse. And I had to work harder and harder and harder to keep up that facade. And eventually I just wasn't keeping it up anymore. I was cracking and had a really horrific incident with my daughter where I left her unattended for an entire night. She was four years old at the time, and that's what sort of forced me into trying for sobriety. And I, this is, you know, at that time I was working at this huge agency in downtown Boston. I had recently separated from my husband. Every part of my life involved alcohol, every single part. And I just, I didn't think I could do my job if I didn't drink. You know, I didn't think I could, I would have any friends. I thought my whole life was going to be over if I stopped drinking. And it took me...that's part of the reason it took me over a year. It was such a dramatic shift

and loss. And I mean, I had been drinking really heavily for 15 years and growing up with it for my whole life. I'd been around it in what seemed to be a very normal way. So, I felt like not doing it. I just didn't even know what that meant. I felt like I was going to be an exile. I didn't know any sober people. So, in that year that I started to quit, I did get a taste of what sobriety was like, and work was one of the first things that got better, immediately. And I just remember feeling like I can have a little bit of my brain back and that felt good. And then when I finally did quit, it was like everything opened up, because I had had all that capacity that I was just destroying every night back. It took time and it was the absolute hardest thing I've ever done getting sober. But I got myself back. I figured out who I was after all. And you know, this is over the course of years. And my recovery story is, it's mixed. I went to AA. I still am a member of AA. I love that program and those people, and they saved my life, but it's a really mixed relationship that I have. It's not, I never bought all the way in, meaning I didn't love a lot of things about it. And so I did other things too, and I've learned over time that, you know, I'm not supposed to love everything about it. It's fine. But I'm also a yoga teacher and I'm a seeker by nature. And I read all the books and I'm getting my Master's in Psychology right now. And all those things help and I'm a big fan of therapy. And so, I guess, it's sort of like this DIY holistic approach to recovery that has worked for me. And in that year plus time, I really knew that what I, that I didn't want to stay in marketing and advertising, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. And I didn't really think that it was possible to make a huge shift. I didn't know if I could actually start over. I was a single mom and had just gotten divorced. And so when I started to work toward sobriety, I started writing because it was helping me a lot. And I'd always loved writing and I'd always wanted to write and had this like far off dream that I would become an author someday. Although it seems like something that was just actually a complete dream and wouldn't, wouldn't actually happen. It seemed like that was for other people who are not like me. But I started writing then, and I just started talking about my experience with addiction and sobriety. And I just started building this whole other line of work that I didn't really think of as work. It didn't feel like work. I'm skipping past quite a lot, but in 2016, I reached sort of this tipping point where I decided that I would take the leap and I quit my career. And I had about a 50% plan, what I would actually do to make money. But I knew that if I stayed sober, I was like, just over a year sober at that point, I knew if I stayed sober, I would figure it out. And I did. You know, I've been a yoga teacher for a long time. I started teaching yoga retreats and workshops that were a lot about recovery, just all over the country. And I had built up at that point a platform. I built up a pretty decent social media following. I had a pretty, an okay, email list. And I was lucky because I had a marketing background. So I always want to say that I feel very, like I was able to roll that into what I'm doing now, which is not something a lot of people have. I just happened to, that was my, that was all my work, you know, before then. And then I proceeded into just doing whatever I needed to do so that I could support the writing. And then I eventually wrote my book, and then I eventually found an agent, and then we sold the book, and then the book came out this January. I started teaching a bunch of online courses about sobriety and personal development, but that's a really quick version.

Jen: Yeah. Well, thank you for sharing all of that. You know, one of the things that struck me in your book, you mentioned that everybody has a thing. Your thing at the time was alcohol, but other people have other things. You know, these are our coping mechanisms. I know that I have mine, but what lessons have you learned from your recovery experience that apply to our things, whatever they may be?

Laura: Well, this is what I know is that all of our things serve the same purpose for us. So whether it's alcohol or work or drugs or technology addiction, or whatever it is, it's, it serves the same purpose. And that's to take us out outside of ourselves and things we don't want to feel. It's like, that's pretty much what it's all about, because what happens is a lot of people will just go, Oh, if I lose this weight, I will be

better. Right? Wait, say food is my thing. My body is my thing. If I lose the weight, I will be better. And then what they find out is that scratching, that need to numb or medicate that food was maybe giving them moves on to something else. And it always moves on to something else until we deal with the root causes. And the root causes, unfortunately are always about childhood, and they're always painful and no one gets away with anything. And no one is really that unique. You know, we all, whether it's, it's always trauma, always. And there's like big T trauma and little T trauma, you know, big T traumas like sexual abuse and the death of a parent or a loved one, you know, the things that we typically associate with trauma, and then there's little T trauma, which is anything that exceeds your capacity to cope and leaves you feeling helpless, hopeless, or out of control. So that can be a lot of things, you know, depending on where you are in life and what type of coping mechanisms you have or don't have. And this was something I rejected. I was like, I didn't have XYZ. Right. But, oh man, there was so much going on, so much going on. And then there are people who are like, you know, okay, so what's my excuse? I come from a loving home. And it's like, give me 45 minutes with you. And we'll figure out that your, you know, your story, isn't as sweet as you think it is. And that's not because our parents are awful. It's not because our families are terrible. It's just, it's just the way it is. It's life. Right. So, and we have to deal with those things. We have to because we get to a point where life becomes unmanageable. You know, our internal life becomes unmanageable. Even if it doesn't become unmanageable on the outside, our interior life becomes unmanageable. You know, we're running around trying to control everyone and everything around us. That's a really common feeling. That's unmanageability, you know, the things are really not that interesting. You know, we all have our ways that we deal. The question is just like, what's yours, what's mine. And mine was alcohol, you know, but like I said, once I stopped drinking, which was this huge effort, it moved on to other things until I was finally able to do what I needed to do to, to deal with that root stuff. And it's, and it's a lifelong process too. It's not like we ever arrive, but man, life can get so much better and so much more peaceful. We can get so much better at coping.

Jen: So, speaking of coping, I mean, I probably have a tendency to over-exercise, right? And I'm aware of it. That doesn't always stop me, but we all need to find these ways to cope. And so what does that look like and how do you know when something is healthy or unhealthy?

Laura: Well, it's when you're doing it to check out. You know if you're doing it, too. You know it, when you feel it like the sort of panicky, "If I don't reach for this or that, I have to face something, feel something, whatever." It's this, like, almost like this compulsive need, right? Versus something that maybe you just enjoy and it's fine. And you're, you know, I think you have to really look at that internal unmanageability. If you're doing something because your interior life is unmanageable, it's probably veering into the unhealthy place, and addiction, any addiction, is defined as anything you keep doing despite negative consequences. So for example, with exercise, right, I've been so guilty of that, too. In the past, you know, your body's screaming for a break. You feel like you're in a war against your body, you know? And it's that checking out, because what happened to me was when I stopped drinking, that the addiction went to relationships and I would use relationships to, like I did with alcohol, you know, as a way to escape. And when I would feel the pain of a relationship ending or not going the way I wanted or feeling like I was quote, unquote rejected, I would go for a run. And I would notice at those times when I was really unhealthy with relationships, I wouldn't really know until I saw how much I was running. It was like, I would start to log 10 mile runs, you know, like multiple times a week. And it's when you go, okay, like you're not doing this just because you feel like running, you know, more, you're doing this because there's the internal, internal unmanageability that you're trying to push off.

Jen: Yeah. Yeah. So overcoming addiction, it requires self-awareness, which is hard. It requires self-honesty, which is hard, but it also requires like massive kind of an overhaul of your behavior. So, you

know, I guess what did this look like to you and what, what well-being practices did you rely on, do you rely on today to kind of help support you?

Laura: Yeah. What it breaks down to for me is sort of three areas. There's a spiritual practice. I don't think you have to be spiritual or religious in the traditional sense, but I think you do have to be connecting connected to something that is larger than yourself. And sometimes that's just a group of people, right? For me, it is the spiritual practice of taking care of myself. And I don't mean necessarily self-care as it's talked about in wellness circles. I mean, my sponsor has this great metaphor where she says, "Brushing your teeth and taking a shower isn't something you have to think about anymore." It's just your external hygiene. We all have different patterns. And I mean, I think most people brush their teeth every day, but not everybody showers every day, but you're going to shower, you know, a few times a week, most likely. And you don't think about it and it's just something you do. And you've been doing it so long that you don't have to think about it. It's how you take care of your outsides. And a spiritual practice is how you take care of your insides. And for everybody that can be different. But for me, it's some combination of getting great sleep, prayer, meditation, and creative practice of some kind, like writing or whatever – I need to do that pretty regularly. And, like, eating one good meal a day, you know, it's like very simple, but that's sort of what I consider a spiritual practice. And then connecting with other people is absolutely 100% a requirement of healing. So many of us try to do things alone in a vacuum where no one else can see us. You know, we read books and we scroll Instagram and we ingest all the positive memes, but we don't actually do the work to allow ourselves to be vulnerable with other people. And that's where the true healing comes from. You have to connect to other people who understand your experience, you have to. And then service for me, too, is a huge part of it. Being of service to others. For me, it means working with people who are trying to get sober. But it doesn't have to be this huge deal, and trust me, I don't do it out of altruism. I do it because it helps me stay sober. Like I, I don't. So, I think that's important to say, because it's like, you don't do it because you're Mother Theresa, you do it because it helps you stay sober. And yes, and it also brings me so much joy. It's like, there is, that's where we find grace and that's where we find, like, the real juice and the real magic is in giving away what we have been given, whatever it is.

Jen: Yeah. And I mean, you hit on a couple of things that I, that I really wanted to ask you about. You know, you talked about shame, and shame in our society is pervasive, I think, on so many levels, but, you know, especially for those that have been, that have dealt with or experienced addiction. So for you, how did you overcome shame? And especially as a mother and, you know, your own story of your daughter?

Laura: Yeah. It's the hardest part for sure, I think, of anyone who experiences addiction. Because we usually go into the, the shame isn't just about the drinking or the behavior when drinking. It usually starts at the very beginning of our lives. We have this underlying feeling that something's wrong with us. And then we do things when we're drinking that really are outside of our integrity. And then we drink to numb that part out. And then we do more things. I would drink to, you know. And for me, yeah, I say there's like this special vitriol for moms who drink, because it just goes against everything that we are taught to believe about what being a mother means. I thought like, what kind of a horrific person am I, that I would leave my daughter alone in a hotel room? And that was like just the, the one example. You know, I drove drunk with her all the time. I would rush through bedtimes to get back to my drinking. You know, I missed so much, I wasn't really present. And the way I got through that is by a lot of the things that I just talked about. I connected with other women who had gone through what I had gone through. I needed other women who knew exactly how I felt and they could tell their stories and they could make me feel less alone. And that started to sort of lessen this burden of shame, just hearing them. I also

started to speak my own story to share, to open my mouth, and have the courage to start saying some of the things out loud that I had experienced. And when we do that, there's something very alchemical that happens when we start to tell our story, because what happens is we start to understand our story as something different than what we thought it was. The story, it turns out, wasn't Laura is just a piece of crap who has no willpower and no morals. And that's the story that I had. It turns out that's not the story. The story is that I was someone who was an extraordinary pain, and I drank because it helped. And I became addicted because alcohol is addictive and I was very sick at the end. That's the story. And what happens when you start to straighten out your story is that you are able to be responsible for it because what happens when we tell ourselves the other thing is that we're just victims, we're victims of life, we're victims of other people, we're victims of whatever, right? And we have very little power or will to change, to change any of it. What happens when I understood my story for what it really was, the bigger, way more complex, way more beautiful story, I could take responsibility for the whole thing, right? And then I'm responsible for my experience of life. I wrote about this in my book, in this chapter called Magnificent Monsters. It's like, there's this beautiful gift in knowing that I am capable of all of the things that I did when I was drinking. And to look at that girl with compassion, instead of just beating the crap out of her. You can't beat yourself into getting better, hate yourself into getting better. And I had to rely on other women to love me and to hold up the vision of what I could be and what I was already, for me before I could get there. And eventually it did happen. I learned this really cool thing about shame recently that maybe will be interesting to you. You know, all our emotions are very old, and they developed really to keep us alive and keep us safe. They have distinct purposes and shame was meant to keep us from doing anything too weird that we'd get ostracized from our community. That's really what shame is for. When it's authentic shame, not manufactured shame, you know, that comes from the outside, which is a lot of what we experience today, but that's the purpose of shame. So, it's not all bad, but first of all, our immediate communities really have kind of dissolved. Like we don't have that tight knit community structure that we used to have. If you go on social media, your community turns into the entire world. And no wonder we're all just swimming in shame, because how could we not think that something is deeply wrong with us by looking at everybody else all the time. People that have, that are way outside our, you know, supposed to be our community. I just thought that was so interesting. It's like, of course, of course we all feel so terrible. Like I have a visceral reaction when I go on social media, and it's not that I don't like it. It's not that I don't see the value. I would not have a career without it, but it is, it can be overdone. And I have to really, that's talking about something that can easily turn into an addiction, you know, and a way to check out. It's like, you just pick up your phone and there you are.

Jen: What can a person do to help support a friend that they work with or a coworker that has told them that they're recovering or they're in recovery, what are, what are some things that they can do to help support them?

Laura: That's a great question. I think one of the things that we just don't do because we're not quite sure how to deal with addiction is largely is, we don't just ask questions and we don't just have conversations about it. It's still this very hush-hush thing, and it doesn't have to be. One of the coolest things that someone did for me in early sobriety was one of my friends, she knew that I was sober, and they invited me and a bunch of other people over for, like, a barbecue one afternoon. And she texted me before. She's like, "Okay, so how does this work? I just have no idea how this works. Do we drink around you? Do you not want us to drink around you? Are you comfortable with it? How does this work?" And it was like the best, just most honest conversation. It was the most honest question just, like, how can I support you? Basically, it was what she was saying. She didn't assume or expect that she was supposed to know. I think that's what a lot of people do, is they just go, Oh, I don't know, I'm going to freeze. I don't know what to say about that. So, I'm just going to not say anything. Maybe as a

colleague, they want something as simple as seltzer being brought to the company meetings, so they don't have to stand there like an idiot with nothing to drink. Or maybe it's something else. So just asking the question, "How can I support you?" It goes a really long way.

Jen: I am so grateful Laura could be with us today and although the challenges we face are diverse, we all have them and that's what connects us. If you or someone you know is struggling with addiction, they can call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's national helpline at 1-800-662-HELP. Thank you to our producers and our listeners. You can find the work well podcast series on deloitte.com or you can visit various podcatchers 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](https://twitter.com/jenfish23). We're always open to your recommendations and feedback, and of course, if you like what you hear, please share posts and like this podcast, thank you and be well.

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