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BURNOUT

Interview with Anna Doecke (journenez.com.au)

Anna: No one is immune to stress and burnout. The expectations are so much connected to comparison. Don't compare your life to someone else's highlight reel.

Celia: You're listening to Messages of Hope, and I'm Celia Fielke. Today I'm talking with Anna Doecke, a counsellor, speaker, and workshop facilitator, who helps people recognise and deal with burnout and stress.

Do you find yourself torn between those competing demands? It can be especially hard when you're a working mum trying to balance family and work. I've struggled a lot with that, when you're trying to do more than one thing and feeling like you're not doing anything well enough. I didn't work full time, but just that juggle, and that conflict.

Anna: That's right. And a lot of working mums really struggle with that conflict because they feel guilty that they're not being everything for their kids.

Celia: Yeah! But it's not just that, it's also for your work. You don't feel like you're being good enough there either.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. I think the expectations are so much connected to comparison. We compare ourselves to other people. So, you know, social media is a huge one. We hear it all the time, "Don't compare your life to someone else's highlight reel."

Celia: But we do. We still look at it, even though we know, we still look at it and think, "Oh, that's so much better."

Anna: Yeah, that's right!!

Celia: You have had to deal with unreal expectations which at one point in your life led to burnout. How did you know you had reached that burnout stage?

Anna: I didn't. I was working in ministry, in Christian ministry and there was a huge unsaid pressure - You just keep going, going, going, right? So I'm a people pleaser in recovery, I call it. Because I will always be a default people pleaser.

Celia: But you're aware of it.

Anna: Yes, I'm aware of it and I'm not as much a people pleaser as what I used to be. I didn't have the beliefs, knowledge, skills, to know how I was living my life was actually not serving me

well. So that's why I hit burnout and crashed. So what I say to people "how do you know?" There are a lot of bits and pieces that could indicate that you might be heading towards burnout. Things like, "I used to love my job and now I don't anymore. I don't even want to go to work anymore." Feeling dizzy and hazy, and just kind of like, "I don't even know which day it is." That's a sense of overwhelm often.

For me, I know it's a red flag when someone says, "How did yesterday go?" I may have had a big meeting or something like that. I go, "What was yesterday?" I don't even know! So that's a red flag for me, personally, still!

Celia: I'm panicking here.

Anna: You're panicking? Are you relating to that?

Celia: Too much. So what do we do about it?

Anna: It sounds really basic but I totally believe it as truth. It's all just a choice. Everything that we do, we're choosing to do. Even the things that we think we don't have a choice in, we're still choosing to not make a hard decision to get out of them.

Celia: So how do we make good choices that give our life balance?

Anna: When we have clarity of values, it helps to direct our life. So values are not just what's important to us. We can say family is important, work is important, exercise is important, but it's also about who do you want to be. For example, one of my key values is care for myself and then for others. One of the biggest things that I discovered in my burnout recovery was the fact that I need between eight and ten hours of sleep every night. Otherwise, I don't function to my best. I need to have at least three nights at home. I'm not very good at doing that at times. I'm very good at accidentally over scheduling and that's because when life gets busier, we default back to old patterns. So when I said I'm a people pleaser in recovery, my default when I'm not conscious of keeping all of those values in check is I start to go, "Oh, I can't say no to those people because ..."

Celia: Yeah, we think to ourselves "I can fit that in."

Anna: Exactly. That's right. For me, this year, I've had many crazy months. I would push it to the next month and then all those things that I've pushed, now the next month is busy as well. So instead, if I can keep in check my value of caring for myself, then I can say something like, "I would really love to catch up with you but I have this rule that I've made for myself that I can't be out more than twice a week and I've actually got something on this week. So let's have a look at next week or can we do next month if it doesn't work for you." All those sorts of things.

Celia: Yeah.

Anna: The challenge with that is that most people don't do that, right?

Celia: Right. You say, "Oh, it will be all right, I'll do it for this time."

Anna: Yeah, that's right. So the values' thing is really important.

Celia: Have you ever come across that concept of - I'm a Christian, I shouldn't be stressed because I should be able to give that to God, so I'm not a very good Christian if I'm stressed? You're smiling at me and nodding and I'm thinking, "Okay, tell me about that!"

Anna: It was a huge thing for me, personally. When I was still working in ministry before I stepped out, I was in my 20s. So quite young and as a Christian I thought I shouldn't feel stressed, I should just be able to do everything I need to, especially if it's serving. Then if I do that, I shouldn't feel stressed because I'm doing it for God.

Celia: Exactly.

Anna: But I think that's our warped sense of who God is. That sounds like God won't love me unless I serve my butt off!

Celia: How is that different for you now?

Anna: At the time, that was totally what it was, I just didn't know. Now, I have discovered that I'm a loved and favoured daughter of God. He just loves us so much, there's nothing we can do that is going to make him love us less, or that's going to make him love us more, right? He loves us the most he's going to love us, which is overwhelming.

Celia: That was a really important point - nothing you can actually do will make God love you any more.

Anna: Correct.

Celia: This is a bit of a light bulb moment!

Anna: Yeah, exactly. I think we often say the first part of that phrase which is, 'there's nothing you can do to make God love you less.

Celia: Yeah.

Anna: But the second part is so important, that 'there's nothing we can do that will make God love you more'.

Celia: This is Messages of Hope and I'm talking with Anna Doecke about burnout and how to avoid it. Anna, we've talked about how knowing what's important to us can help us make the choices we need to make to keep us from burnout and stress. Well, I know from my own experience that knowing something doesn't mean you put it into action. To really know your values, that can be quite a long journey before you're confident about that. It's not easy to work out on your own.

Anna: Absolutely, and it takes courage to make the phone call to a counsellor or your friend, or saying that something doesn't feel right, or I can't do this anymore. It's absolutely one of the hardest things that we ever do

Celia: Yeah, people don't ask for help or don't want to because ... as you were saying before, it can make you vulnerable.

Anna: Yeah, exactly. So about that, often when asking for help people think that, "Oh, I can't do that because otherwise it shows I'm weak."

Celia: Yes.

Anna: I love what Brené Brown says about vulnerability.

Celia: Who is Brené Brown?

Anna: Brené Brown is a research professor from the United States. She studies shame, and vulnerability, and courage, and worthiness. She asked people what's vulnerability and it's like a landslide - people think that vulnerability is weakness. But as she went into the research she said, "That's what they said but every time I asked someone can you give me an example of vulnerability, all the examples they gave were connected to courage." So it was things like:

- talking to my boss about taking time off,
- or saying I love you first, or going on a date - on a first date after being divorced,
- or having a hard conversation with my kids,
- or saying sorry to my little kids when I was the one who yelled at them or whatever.

So all those examples are actually really courageous and show strength.

Celia: Yeah.

Anna: So the belief that asking for help is weakness is not correct, it's vulnerable. It is definitely not weakness. It's one of the strongest things that we can ever do.

Celia: If we could all be vulnerable, how much would we grow?

Anna: Absolutely.

Celia: If someone is vulnerable first, that gives you the permission to be vulnerable too.

Anna: Correct, exactly. So courage is contagious. So when we have the courage to be vulnerable, other people will. It's totally what I see in my life. Clients come and they go, "My gosh, I had that conversation with my husband and then he started telling me how he was feeling! I was like, 'what's going on?'"

Celia: Yeah.

Anna: It's such an important thing because otherwise we keep living our life, going, "I think this is what they want." So you're actually doing things that you think are going to please people and you might be doing the wrong thing!

Celia: You're not actually being you.

Anna: Yeah, exactly.

Celia: You're not actually being real. I think that the turmoil and conflict in us is because we know what we want to do but we're doing all these things that we don't want to do because we're afraid.

Anna: Yeah, absolutely. Brené says, "I'm being brave and afraid at the exact same time." So sometimes choosing the brave thing to do is the most scary. Absolutely. It's also worth it. You may have seen the movie called 'We bought a Zoo'?

Celia: Yes.

Anna: It's got Matt Damon in it and he goes and buys a zoo with his kids and whatever. But there's one spot where his son comes in and says to his dad, "I don't know what's going on. I've stuffed up with this girl that I like, I don't know what to do." The dad says to him, "You know what? Sometimes all it takes is 20 seconds of just embarrassing courage. I promise you something amazing will come out of it." It's true I think in the sense of 20 seconds. Sometimes that 20 seconds is saying to your boss, your husband, whoever it is, "We need to have a conversation." Sometimes that's the 20 seconds.

Celia: Yeah.

Anna: It's not even actually what you need to say but it's just saying, "I need to talk to you about something."

Celia: I love that, embarrassing courage, because you don't want to embarrass yourself.

Anna: Yeah, that's right.

Celia: I'm going to have embarrassing courage today!

Anna: Awesome.

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