

Ali Schultz:

Awesome. Hi Liz, hi Mollie. I am, I'm so glad to have you back for another conversation about *Big Feelings*, um, which I know is the title of your newest book. And, um, today we'll be talking about, uh, that nagging compulsion to- to work. But I'm glad to have you with us, and, um, to be kind of fostering this conversation for us.

Liz Fosslien:

Thanks for having us back.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah, happy to be here.

Ali Schultz:

Where shall we dive in?

Liz Fosslien:

I can kind of kick things off with my compulsion to work (laughs). This topic we touch on a bit in the book, I think mostly under the perfectionism chapter, and then somewhat in the burnout chapter. Um, and it's, you know, I think one of the big things in the book is always, it's much easier said than done. So Mollie and I even flag this, but a lot of moving through compulsion to work, perfectionist thoughts. It's a recovery process. It's not like you find one thing, and then you're cured for the rest of your life. And so it's very much something, I'll stick to me personally, but I still struggle with, which is this, you know, even in... Mollie and I wrote this book together, and had full-time jobs. And so already it's like we're doing a lot. Um, and it's been... Like, we've both had to learn how to balance all that.

But I still find myself on a Saturday or a Sunday, when I've wrapped up all my projects on Friday, and for whatever reason we have this magical weekend where there isn't anything book-related (laughs) that we need to do. Um, I find myself sometimes feeling like I'm drifting, like I just, I just want that dopamine hit of getting through a lot of emails, and feeling really productive, and feeling like I'm proving to everyone around me that I'm capable and dependable. And without these... What- what I think in our modern society truly is, like, minute-by-minute opportunities to validate yourself by getting back to someone really quickly, or phrasing an email really well. Um, yeah, and sometimes I just find myself being like, "Well, maybe I'll, like, start a new project now," as opposed to doing what I know is best for me, and just staying away from the computer (laughs), and not piling more things on my plate.

Um, but... And this... The- the... My compulsion actually comes from a friend who was telling me that, you know, she's a very high-achieving person. She does really well at her job. And she says that, yeah, when she has a spare afternoon she knows that she should exercise or call a friend, or do something that's more restorative, and yet she can't stop herself from, like, checking her work email, and checking Slack, and maybe again generating more things to do. So it seems like a common thing that people experience. And again, from my perspective, one of the things I've noticed is just that it is addicting to respond to things, to have a lot going on. It's like this... You know, we live in a culture that really puts being busy on a pedestal, and makes you feel important, makes you appear important to other people.

I always say when I have taken longer periods off, whether it's, uh, for a vacation or a leave, the first day I always have this day of depression, which I think is just my body getting used to not having

that, like, frantic (laughs) energy. And then two days later I feel really good. I actually feel way better, because it's kind of my brain has had a chance to settle down. I've started to detach my worth from my work. I'm rediscovering kind of my identity outside of this busy bee. Um, but it's always that first day where I have this crash of, what do I do now? Like, what- what am I supposed to be doing, if not responding to this endless onslaught of notifications?

Ali Schultz:

Yeah. I have a feeling a lot of us have our own version of that compulsion, especially, like, as a founder, as an owner, you know, like, the work never really goes away. Like, you're always thinking about the business. I know I'm always thinking about the business.

Liz Fosslien:

And a lot of people now, you know, are working in more creative roles, or we have some entrepreneurial element, whether you're a founder, or you're doing something on the side. And th- there's never an end. You know, like, I remember I had a friend who worked as a lawyer for the government, and he could not take his computer home with him, and he could not, he was not reachable outside of the office, because of all the security measures they, and privacy measures they had. And that was so foreign to me. You know, it was just like, you know, he would leave the office at 6:00, and that was it for him (laughs). And for me it's like, I- I don't, there's never an end to any of it.

Mollie West Duffy:

I think it- it very much is a- a compulsion bordering on an addiction. Um, I've certainly been there. I think, you know, we've, the word workaholics comes to mind. Um, it can feel good sometimes to get things done, to check things off of my list, to get through my email, and get a little hit of dopamine from it (laughs). Um, one of these that I've been trying to do is- is come up with some replacement activities, because I think it's very easy to say, "I wanna work less," but then what do you do with that time?

And so coming up with some things that... You know, and Liz, you mentioned, like, you can call a friend, exercise. And- and for me it's- it's actually been about trying to come up with even less productive things than that. Um, like, I recently bought a hot tub, and I know that not everyone i- is in a position to buy a hot tub. It's an expensive purchase. But that is such a nice way to stop working, like, after I, you know, eat dinner, and I write, do- do a little bit of work. But then I'm like, "Okay, I'm gonna go get in the hot tub." And that really, like, ends my night for me in a nice way. Um, I've been getting into reading romance novels, which is, like, not a productive (laughs), book to be reading at all. But there are many different genres of romance novels, for anyone who's interested. There are so many different variations.

But it just feels sort of indulgent. And in a way, it's- it's reminding myself of some of those creature comforts, and saying, like, "Okay, you know what I'm gonna do this afternoon? Is one of these things that's just gonna make me feel really good that- that isn't productive." Um, so having some of those, like, replacement activities for me has been helpful.

Ali Schultz:

I love that. I just wrote, joy versus productivity. Um, and that- that, it feels like that choice is, um, it's- it's that choice to invest in yourself versus invest in this thing outside of you that somehow is going to give you a reward, or that you will be rewarded for in some way by some person in your, um, you know, work hierarchy, or your working network. Um, it's a really lovely way to change that addiction, uh, or that compulsion, I guess, into something that's, um, nourishing versus depleting.

Liz Fosslien:

Mm-hmm.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah, I'm curious, Ali. What are your, what are your nourishing or joyful activities?

Ali Schultz:

That's a really good question. Well, I have a very expensive horse habit. I kind of joke that as chief manure officer... That's my full-time job. And then, you know, coaching just is my hobby. But, um, I do, I do have plenty of time to take care of myself amongst the three, uh, horses that I have. And, um, that's kind of a full-bore, um, thing that really feeds me. And just bridging off our last conversation on chronic illness, it's- it's been one of those things that, um, you know, when I, when I ask myself the question, how do I wanna spend my minutes, and/or if I was gonna die tomorrow, what would I choose to be doing? Um, you know, I'm gonna hang out in the barn with, you know, my- my really good friends that really just make my heart explode in a good way.

And then when the weather's bad and I can't ride, I- I set up a little bit of an art studio in our laundry room. Um, so I have, I have that creative outlook kind of on the ready. You know, all the shelves are stocked with paints and, uh, canvasses and whatnot. So I can work on a small piece and- and have a sense of completion and productivity, right? But it's, but it's from a moment of just pure creative flow, just to see what's happening, you know, in the intuitive space. So really unstructured and- and equally as nourishing, um, to me. Um, because the- the locus there is, like, what feeds me, right? So that's- that's my metric, versus what might I gain in terms of gold stars or accolades, you know, from some sort of external- external metric.

Mollie West Duffy:

I was just gonna say, that's a really nice distinction, which is what's... It's like, what- what can I do that's just for me, that feeds me, that, right, doesn't require any sort of external validation, versus doing things that are in service of status, another person, productivity? I like that distinction.

Liz Fosslien:

One thing that I've struggled with, and Ali, we've, I think, touched on this in a call at some point, is that I get... So I'm a huge homebody, and my favorite thing to do to recharge is to just have a very quiet, like, minimalist white bedroom, where there's loads of space.

Mollie West Duffy:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

(laughs) Just, like, me, and I don't hear street noises, and I can just kind of, like, cocoon away from the world. And I live in the Bay Area, where it is extremely expensive to buy literally a two to three-bedroom house that is quiet. And so I find... I- I love living here. My friends are here, and yet I think part of my compulsion comes from that scarcity mindset of I just, I need to be advancing my career, I need to be doing more things in order to, like, one day be able to afford this house (laughs) that will allow me to finally rest. Um, and that- that has, I think... Yeah, just something I think about a lot, is living in a place with a lot of high achievers, whom I love dearly, in a beautiful place that's also incredibly expensive.

And so it's this balance of I think this is where I am happiest, and yet also there are structural elements of the city in which I live that sort of contribute to my unhappiness. I don't think I would have the same compulsions if I... Like, I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, where you can have a four-bedroom house and a basement and a huge yard, and it's not cheap, but it's reasonable (laughs). You know, it's like, when you compare it to what houses cost here, it is absolutely affordable. Um, and I... You know, there are many reasons I don't necessarily wanna go back there, but I think it speaks to this internal struggle that I often feel, which is this sort of, like, ambitious, achieving self that has this, lives in this really, you know, go, go, go fast-paced city that's really enlivening. And yet there's, like, this dark underside, which is, it's really hard to step away and to feel good about it, when sort of the basics of what help you recharge are actually really expensive and hard to attain.

Ali Schultz:

Yeah, I've- I've- I've felt that. I- I sometimes still feel that. And it is hard. And- and I'm not in the Bay Area. I'm just in Boulder, which is, it's almost like the Bay Area inland, but maybe a little, a little less. But I mean, the housing market is insane here. And I remember moving here for graduate school, um, almost 20 years ago, and, um, uh, you know, we were, we were just renting at the time, and, um, we were lucky enough to get a home. Um, you know, god bless my ex-architect who was really driven in that way. You know, like, we, you know, we have to get a home, we have to build equity, and all of that. Um, it was still a squish just to be house-poor.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

And to have that be driving my own sense of, I need to be working harder. I need a career. I need to have all these things in place. Um, that was, like, one stressor. And I think there was another parallel lane that was an equal stressor, for at me at least, which was, um, you know, I know what kind of space makes me really happy, and what things I need in my life. And I'm a f- like, a far cry from being anywhere near being able to buy that for myself, or have that for myself in this location that I'm choosing to be a part of. Um, and it's such a mixed bag, because this location, like you experience in the Bay Area, right, like, it's got all these other opportunities. For me it was the mountains and- and the outdoor stuff right outside that, you know, my hometown in the Midwest does not have. Um, we had a nice river running through it, but we also had insane humidity and bugs, and all kinds of unpleasant things. And, you know, the- the cultural, um, stuff, you know, that you thrive off of in the Bay Area, and even in L.A., like, you know, it's- it's those areas-

Mollie West Duffy:

Oh, yeah.

Ali Schultz:

... and those things that are so close and so handy, that even if you don't do them every day... Y- you know, it's just a, um, you know, a short drive for entertainment or super nice restaurants, or whatever it is. Um, it's a, it's a real inner battle sometimes when you- you're living with those choices, and almost weighing the pros and cons. A- and the stressors, I think, are real. Because sometimes those needs, like, especially the need for rest or space or, um, like, the kind of space that doesn't make you feel like you have that compulsion, or you need to keep up, or if you don't keep up, you're gonna be irrelevant. Um,

it's a... I don't know. It's a real thing. But I know when I go back home, or think about having the life I have now, you know, in the Upper Midwest, it, something just feels really, um, muted, but in a good way, right? Like, it would be so quiet, a little disconnected. And how welcome might that be, you know? Um, I don't know that I would be working as much. Or... I- I don't know. But- but I know my life up until, you know, my wor- my- my prime working years, like, um, it was different. The feeling was different. It was driven by different things. Um, and it just felt like there was space, or a whole different relationship to work even.

Mollie West Duffy:

I think our environments affect us so much in relation to that, and I think finding that right balance... I mean, uh, I live in New York City for six years, and to me... I grew up in Seattle, so the pace of that city was always a little bit faster than I think I naturally exist at. And many good things come out of that. I mean, I think the publishing industry is there. I worked for a fantastic job. Like, there's so much that I think I was pushed to do, and yet ultimately I think, really, like, burned out hard of that city, and my nervous system was really not doing well at the end of living there. Not that L.A. is that much, you know, different, but it's enough different that I can inhabit my more natural speed of living.

And when I go home to Seattle it feels even different. And Seattle's changed so much, but it- it feels a little bit more like, um, people are doing their jobs, but also doing a lot of other things outside of their work, and their identity is- is not as much tied up into their- their work. And it's, sometimes I feel even a sense of, like, blame of, like, how come I can't be, you know, that person who just works a 9:00 to 5:00 job, and, you know, is happy with that, and lives in a suburb, or lives in a small city, and, like, that's enough?

And I think that's what many people who are creative or entrepreneurial grapple with, is, like, on the one hand you want this simple life, and on the other hand there's a reason that you left that, and there's a reason that, you know, you're- you're dabbling in whatever it is that you're dabbling in. Because that keeps the creative flame alive, and, you know, you want that. And... But- but I think it's very easy to get out of whack a little bit, and- and especially in an environment where being, like the Bay Area, or other, you know, New York, where we're being pushed to do that even more so than just our natural interest level, because everyone in the city is doing that, makes it really hard.

Ali Schultz:

Mm-hmm.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah, I often think about my friend group in the Bay Area. Everyone is so impressive and so inspiring, and utterly exhausting (laughs). You know, it's like, you have a dinner party, and everyone's doing these amazing things. And then... And- and again, like, I am the same, so I love it. But also, you know, you'll ask... We were looking for a new air purifier, and three people at the table have created a spreadsheet where they like, found all the air purifiers, and compared them. There's a Wirecutter rating and the New York Times rating. And it's just like, we are too much (laughs).

Mollie West Duffy:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

Too much. Um, but then, yeah, it's also, like, kind of delightful and enjoyable. So it's this internal battle. One of the things that Mollie and I talk about in our book... This is actually from the comparison chapter but I really try to remind myself of, is we have a tendency to compare ourselves to this mishmash of everyone we know. And so we create this mythical human being in our head who's doing it all all the time. So for example, I go to lunch with a friend who founded a company, and then I'll have dinner with a friend who, you know, recently wrote a book, and then j- or, just, like, these people who are very impressive. And in my head it turns into this person who, like, just wrote a book, founded a company, works at a company that just IPO'd, has the best clothes, is currently in Italy, has three kids, has the best relationship ever, and owns a beautiful house.

And those are actually 20 different people that have parts of that, but in my head I'm comparing me to this mythical creature that does all of that at the same time, because that's kind of how our mind operate. Like, we tend to compare our weaknesses to other people's strengths, and then only look at everyone's accomplishments, as opposed to the full picture of their lives.

So I also try to remind myself of, yes, I have a friend who worked at a company that IPO'd. I would never want the job that they worked for six years. I don't want the job they have now. There's a lot that they had to sacrifice because they worked long hours. They do have a beautiful house, but I'm actually comfortable with the fact that I made a different choice at one point. Um, but it takes a lot of work to remind yourself of that, and not to just slip into this, why don't I have that? And then that, you know, spirals into, I need to be doing more and more and more and more and more to keep up.

Ali Schultz:

Yeah, and that's exhausting as well, that spiral, the downward spiral, emotionally exhausting.

Liz Fosslien:

I think it's... In these fast-paced places it's, we really don't have role models of people who are living very different lives. You know, like, across some metrics diversity I would say I have a diverse friend group in the Bay, but across many others I don't. Like, everyone's around the same age. Everyone's made similar career choices, is going after similar goals. There's a... You know, there's a lot of hom- homogeneity among this group, versus, like, when I go back to the Midwest it is kinda nice sometimes to see people who have families younger, and are very... It just... There's a lot of different lives that you can compare yourself to and sort of think through. And I think it expands my mind of, like, oh, there's different ways to live. I don't have to be on this, like, constantly going, going, going track. Um, so that's another, I think, just speaks to kind of getting out of your environment sometimes as well.

Mollie West Duffy:

And in the spaces where you- you can do that, I mean, even without leaving your city... I- I- I wrote about this in the book, but, um, I, in recovering from some injuries I've been going to a local public pool, and during the pandemic everyone comes roughly at the same time. And so you sort of get to know people. And just a really nice stepping outside of my normal workday reality to people who are retired, to young kids, to teens, to people who work odd jobs. There's a caterer, um, who I swim next to sometimes. Um, and we just forget. Our lives are so siloed that we forget that, like, all that exists in the same cities where- where all of us live.

Um, I think also of- of places of worship as another way of- of getting across that. I- I'm a member of a Temple, and I think that's another reminder of, like, there's many different generations and- and ways of living, and, um, and all of that. And I think there's a- a couple of- of founders who I know who, um, make sure that they have something like that in their life, um, whether it's a religious group

that they're a part of, or, um, some sort of non-competitive, uh, activity group. Um, you know, if it's a competitive group, it's probably not gonna help you get off of that. Um, but, you know, non-competitively. And- and those, I think, are really helpful for- for staying grounded, and for reminding yourself of that identity outside of work.

Liz Fosslien:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

Yeah. I could just... And we're kinda looping to- to the joy thing too. Um, you know, it's one of those things that, um, you know about yourself, and what are the things that you know bring you joy, what are the things that you know bring you alive, um, uh, you know, where time just kinda disappears, um, and- and you- you leave nourished, you leave feeling so much more like yourself than, you know, spitting out 10 emails, or have a really good PowerPoint presentation. Um...

Liz Fosslien:

Some of the best advice I received from a friend, um, was actually when my father-in-law died. So he was ex- My husband and his dad were extremely close, like best... His dad was also just the life of every party. He was a folk singer. He would show up to every event with an accordion and, like, a bottle of something, and would just... Like, when he had cancer he would go to the hospital in the waiting rooms, and start playing accordion, and get everyone to do a sing-a-long. Like, he was just... Like, he just brought so much joy into every single event. It's, like, memorable because he was there. Um, and I've run into people who I didn't even know knew him, and they'd be like, "Oh, that guy," (laughs)-

Ali Schultz:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

... "who would, like, show up to the party. I remember that guy." Um, and so it was just this, like, huge personality, so we also felt like he left this enormous void when he died, um, or especially, like, when he was declining at the end. And I remember I took a week off for bereavement leave, and it was just s- like, I had zero compulsion to work that week. Like, it just felt so crystal clear what mattered in life. And it was not the email. It was not the PowerPoint. It was, like, your family, the people you love, and showing up for them, community, making moments feel magical and special, and so you have something to look back on and remember forever.

And my friend was just, like, "You need to write this all down, because in a month you'll have gone back to work, and you'll be back in this, Slack messages are everything." Like, you just forget so quickly, and so I think, I try to remember that now when there's sort of, like, a big thing happening in life, whether it's good or bad.

Liz Fosslien:

It's just so easy to forget that. Um, and yeah, so ba- back to our conversation on chronic pain too. When I had migraines I remember really vividly thinking, any day that I don't have a migraine, how could I not be radiantly happy that day? Like, I would give anything not to feel this. And then six months after the

acupuncture started working, and it was sort of under control, you know, I was like, "Uh, I'm not satisfied in my career."

It was like, I had all these other things going on. And so I think it's useful to just keep a record of, honestly, some of your harder times, and what you would be so grateful to have. And then later on it's useful to look back at that and say, "Okay, here's what is really gonna be a meaningful life for me. And here's what I have now that I would've given so, so much to have five years ago, two weeks ago," that kinda thing.

Ali Schultz:

Yeah. For me that sounds like, um, moving towards what you love versus, um, you know, kinda living life from that place of fear of what you might be missing, or what you are missing, or, um... Yeah, it's a different kind of rubric in the way of, way of doing life.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah, and it's so cliché, but I always think clichés exist for a very good reason, which is also just gratitude. Like, one question that we write about in the book is, when you feel that you're not enough, asking yourself, like, do I actually have enough? And usually the answer is yes. So when I say, like, "Oh, I wish I had the house in the Bay on the hill that's quiet," yeah, that would be amazing. I would have some really, like, nicer peaceful weekends. But fundamentally I have an extremely good life, and it's just easy to forget that too.

Mollie West Duffy:

I wonder, Liz, too... I- I know, um, you're about to go out on, um, leave, uh, having a child, and I, and I wonder, what's coming up for you around that in terms of identity and identity shift, and taking time off and all of that.

Liz Fosslien:

I think for context too, my dad loves me very much. He's always supported me. But he has very traditionally views of, like, what a woman's role is. And so I've always tried really hard not to make getting married or having a kid be goals for myself. If it happened, great. But it was never, I was never gonna make decisions based on that. And that, I think, looking back, was, like, a very extreme reaction that I think actually caused me to be less happy at some points. Because I love my husband. Like, I, it's, one of the best parts of my life now is my relationship with him. But I very much felt this strong, like, "I don't care about this. It's my career. I'm gonna be Liz, not a woman and a wife and a mom." So I think that definitely factors into going out on maternity leave, and feeling very much like... Especially at the outset. Like, I just wanna be me. I'll be me, but pregnant. Nothing will change. You know, and it'll be fine. It's not gonna be a big deal.

And that's, like, what I've learned, is extremely unrealistic (laughs). Like, I'm tired. Um, things have changed. I have, like, these physical limitations. Um, and I think it's been... Yeah, and it'll... It feels... Again, the scarcity in my... It feels scary to leave... I'm lucky enough to have very good maternity leave, but it also feels scary to leave a startup for five months. I have no idea what company I'll be coming back to. I have no idea what the role will look like. Um, you know, it's just a very long time in startup world. Uh, and so it's this feeling of, like, will I be obsolete? Who will I be? Um, and yeah, it's- it's really being forced to get off of email, and get off of all these, uh, yeah, pieces that, like, I have a twisted relationship with, but fundamentally, like, make me feel good, and make me feel capable, and make me feel like a productive human being.

Um, so what's been most helpful to me is actually going back to this list of, like, when my father-in-law died, and reminding myself, like, no, this you made, this is, like, a very clear choice. And it came out of this experience where it was like, in 30 years what am I gonna look back on? Is it gonna be that I was able to lead this project, or that, fingers crossed, I have this person that loves me, and is a good human being in the world? Um, so yeah, it's definitely mixed up a lot with, like identity and being a woman, and what does that mean, and what does it mean that I'm sort of putting my career on hold for a little bit?

I don't wanna say unique, but esp- especially strong reactions to some... Like, when I married my husband I didn't wanna take his last name. It really infuriated me when people would be like, "Oh, you're lucky. You locked him down." I was like, "He's lucky. He locked me down." (laughs)

"Stop talking like that." Um, so yeah, it's, I feel, I feel really scared of just having this massive life and identity shift. And excited, but also it feels very scary to just kind of be ta- be, like, forced out of the work world, basically, for a little while, in which I feel very comfortable and confident, and that I've invested a lot in.

Ali Schultz:

I don't have kids, and I know that my friends that do have such full lives, um, and- and in the process, um, become these kind of, like, ever-unfolding much fuller expansive versions of themselves in the process.

Ali Schultz:

I mean, it's, like, a much more full and intense life. And- and I think in the process you find so many other facets of yourself, and resources, maybe, that you didn't even know you had. I just had this vision of you, like, reemerging, um, or reentering work, um, like, different but- but in, like, the most, like, radiantly full way possible, um, in a way that might not even be palpable, like, from this point, you know? I hope... That sounds great.

Ali Schultz:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

I... (laughs) That would be amazing. I think one thing which is less, like, it sort of hasn't sunk in, that there's gonna be a human in my life, but it's more on the s- on the exhaustion and physical element of it, is being so tired that you no longer care about drawing your boundaries. Um, one thing that's been really nice, especially over the past couple months, is I'll get requests or that something will come in, and before I would just be like, "Oh, I should do this. I shouldn't say no to this," and I've become much better. I've been forced to, essentially, to be like, "I am tired. This... And I can't take this on." And that's also, I think, been a useful muscle to build.

Liz Fosslien:

Is there on the sort of compulsion or feeling, like, it's hard to step away from work, is there anything that you hear a lot from people or at Reboot that you think would be useful for us to chat through?

Ali Schultz:

Yeah. Well, the one thing that's- that's really been on my mind is, um... One of the things that I've, things that I've- I've heard from as kinda, kind of an undercurrent with a few clients, and, is, you know, that shame drives our workaholism, right?

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

So if they stop working, it's not just the lack of the dopamine hit of the getting the things done, and crossing things off the list, and feeling productive, but it's the moment I stop working I then have to feel this awful feeling of, you know, I'm not enough, who do I think I am? I mean, and kind of, like, it's this downward spiral of self-worth and imposter syndrome. And it's- it ends up in a steaming pile of shame. And true, when it drives, you know, behaviors, especially behaviors towards work, um, you eventually, you know, exhaust yourself on some level, because you're operating out of that place where it's out of fear ultimately, right? It's this fear that, oh, someone's gonna find out that I am, like, really awful, um, or as awful as I feel like I am on the inside. Um, and when that's operating, it easily runs coping mechanisms and other behaviors, which are exhausting on many levels, until your body tells you this isn't working anymore, wake up, you know, deal with whatever trauma or, you know, Trauma, trauma, is- is- is fueling this, and find yourself again, find your ground, find that foundation, so that you can choose to move forward in life from a different place. I would say that's- that's kind of one really interesting theme around workaholism. Um, a- and the compulsion to not let go. Sometimes it's a control issue, and sometimes they're all related, right?

Liz Fosslien:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

If I'm not doing this thing, who's gonna do this thing?

Liz Fosslien:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

Um, if I stop working it's all gonna fall apart. Some of that is, um, you know, the false beliefs that we can hold as leaders, um, no matter what leadership, you know, chair we're in in the hierarchy of- of roles in organizations these days.

Mollie West Duffy:

That makes me think there's both, uh, external, um, pressure, so fear around, as you said, um, people are not gonna think that I'm doing well, or this perception of myself is, or the external perception of myself is going to change, um, if I don't work seven days a week, and get everything done on time, and all of that. I think for me, and I'm guessing for a lot of founders too, there's also an internal thing. And I- I know that, you know, the pressure that I put on myself is much higher than the pressure that anyone else puts on me. And what I expect myself to be able to get done in a week is way higher than what anyone else expects me to get done in a week.

And so it's just interesting to think about that from the perspective of, like, where this identity comes from. Because it's- it's somewhat self-imposed. And, but then once it's self-imposed, then you still feel like you have to live up to it. So s- you know, in past jobs I've- I've often felt like, okay, I know what good looks like for my role, like, and I'm doing to make sure that I'm proud of myself, which means pushing myself really hard to get things done, and do things to the level that I want them to be at. And it's really not anyone else saying, "Oh, Mollie, you have to get this done faster or better." It's myself saying this. But then once I have set that expectation for- for myself and others, it's hard for me to let go of that, because I'm like, well, I'm the person, you know? If no one else in the organization is doing this, it's not gonna get done, so I have to do it. Um, you know, or, like, well, no one else is stepping up, so I have to do it.

And that is where I really get caught (laughs), is in those moments, where honestly, my colleagues would probably be fine if I did 80% of what I normally do. But my own identity is so wrapped up in this pace that I have set for myself that it's very hard for me to disentangle myself from it. I don't know if either of you, that, if that resonates, but that's one that resonates for me.

Liz Fosslien:

That resonates a lot. I'm curious where you think that comes from.

Mollie West Duffy:

Some of it I think, it goes deep. My parents are divorced, and there was a lot that I had to take on. I was the oldest child, and so, like, I did all of the, like, packing for myself, and sometimes for my sibling, and shuttling us back-and-forth. And so at a very early age I had to take on a lot more adult responsibilities than most 9-year-olds do. Well, I wasn't driving then. But, um, (laughs)-

Liz Fosslien:

(laughs)

Mollie West Duffy:

But still I was doing, like, a lot of other things. And- and the consequences were very real, right? Like, if I didn't do a good job of managing my time or packing, then I would not have what I needed on a weekend, or I would not, you know, um, be able to do certain activities that I was planning to do. And so the consequences were heavy and real, and I think that just instilled in me a sort of, like, okay, I have to be hypervigilant around taking care of myself and getting things done, because the stakes are pretty high. In- in my, you know, day-to-day job, life, the stakes are usually not that high, thankfully. Um, but I still operate from that perspective of, like, well, no one else is gonna do this, I have to step up and be the parent. That's for me, but I'm sure others have other stories.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

Well, those... It's those- those early parentification stories, uh, that- that totally drive us. They drive us into our careers. And then we arrive and we're- we're aware enough to pause and question, why am I moving so fast, and where am I really going, and what am I running from or towards, and where am I right now, right? And we start to, like, question where we are in space, and try to find a- a different,

um, uh, something to drive us. I mean, it's only then o- once we inquire about it that we're like, "Oh, shit, this was, this was me trying to survive, and I'm still trying to survive." Um, but I don't need to, like, I don't need to do that anymore. So what now, right? So how... What do I do now, right? It's, um, it's kinda like learning a whole new way of- of moving forward, um, which can be just, um, kind of mind boggling to our systems when it's those impulses and those coping mechanisms that have gotten us here, and for good reason. I mean, they got you here. They helped you to survive. It was... They were doing their job. And now the choice is, what do I wanna do now?

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah, I'm at, but what do I wanna do now?

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah, this is... So it's tangentially related, but it's just coming for me a lot, which is, um, Mollie, what you were saying about the self-imposed pressure resonates a lot. And I think for me it comes from a slightly different place, where my parents are immigrants, and growing up I just heard so much about my dad grew up extremely poor, like, had to work his way through school. Um, so just a lot of stories about, like, everything they gave up. And then I'm an only child. They had me when they were both significantly older. Um, they were almost 44. So I think there was just a lot of, like, "Oh my gosh, we finally have a child," and there was always a lot of expectation placed on me of I'm the reason that they came to America, to, like, have the next generation to have more opportunity.

So that felt... I feel extremely grateful to them, and also indebted to them, of, like, I need to really shine, because it needs to be better than my parents. And my parents, you know, they... I didn't grow up poor. They both, um, have PhDs, and my dad's a doctor, so, like, they were fine (laughs). So it was also, like... Which was great for me, but then it was the bar for the next generation was actually pretty high. Um, and so I, yeah, went to school, studied math and economics, because it was like, you could be a lawyer or a doctor or a banker. I hate blood, so doctor wasn't an option. Lawyer was too much writing. So then it was like, I guess I'm a banker. Um, and hated, hated, hated that job.

Um, and so what actually has really helped me move out of those expectations and, like, craft a life that is more meaningful to myself is someone once said to me, your parents want what is good for you because they're your parents, but that might not be what's best for you. And so it's really wonderful, like, to understand that they just really want you to thrive and be happy, and they have, like, this very fixed idea of what that looks like. But you can thrive and be happy, and still sort of fulfill their dreams in a different way by finding what you wanna do, and what really brings you lightness and brings you to life. Um, and it's been really cool to see... You know, my dad is a doctor. He's very quantitative. Mollie and I, our books are *No Hard Feeling and Big Feelings*, the draw.

Mollie West Duffy:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

He's just like, "what's is going on your life?" (laughs)

Ali Schultz:

(laughs)

Liz Fosslien:

Um, but he's also just like, in the past couple years especially, just been like, "I'm really proud of you." Like, "You created this whole new career for yourself. You're doing something that I don't know anything about, 'cause, like, I truly don't understand what it is you do." (laughs) "Some people say they wanna listen to you." And so it's been a nice affirmation of it was only once I could step out of those expectations that I actually think I fulfilled what they wanted for me, which was a meaningful, successful career.

Ali Schultz ([52:29](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Again, it's that, like, inner locus, right? It's deciding what is, what is for me right now in this life, and in my career, and- and how do I wanna design this, what's my map? Um, and- and part of the work, which- which I hear that you were doing, was really sussing out that map, and being like, also, like, picking up every little piece of being, like, "Is this mine? Wait. No, no, no. This is from dad. Okay, I'm gonna put this on the shelf," right?

Mollie West Duffy:

Mm-hmm.

Ali Schultz:

And then, and then sorting things out, you know, that way. And that- that's a process that I think we all have to do at some point in our life if we're really gonna true up to, you know, who we really are, and- and, um, really living in integrity with- with that. And that takes slowing down, like, slowing down that kinda frantic, maybe, coping-mechanism-driven pace, and starting to ask the questions, like, wait a second, like, who's got the instructions for this game, and what game am I playing? And like, wait a second, when was the last time I had lunch? So...

Liz Fosslien:

(laughs)

Mollie West Duffy:

(laughs) Well, that's what I think is so wonderful about Reboot, and the work that you all do, and the podcast, which is, I think, helping people connect these behaviors that show up in our work lives, over working compulsions, as we've talked about, with stories of family of origin, and all of that, and- and- and doing it in a way that feels comfortable and accessible to people using, you know, plain language that's not therapized language. Um, because I think that's so important, and I- I think it took me a long time into my adult life to do that to make some of those connections. And it... You know, for me it took a lot of therapy and coaching, but to say, okay, these behaviors that are showing up in me working on a Saturday afternoon, when there's really no reason for me to do that with my parents divorcing when I was nine. Like, that takes... That's a journey to- to make that connection, and it takes courage to make that connection. And I just really appreciate that you all share so many stories of people making those connections between, um, their work selves and their broader human selves.

Liz Fosslien:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

The broader human self I think so often overlooked, because, um, because I think I heard you say at some point, even in this past hour, like, "I just, I just wanna be me. And I just wanna be me. Is that okay? Is that enough?" I mean, that's m- almost, like, a fundamental question from a human point of view that so many of us hold. 99.99% of us heard you. Um, and with that, you know, and it follows us into work. It doesn't, you know, stay at the door. It doesn't stay in a crate in the house when we leave to go to the office.

Mollie West Duffy:

Yeah.

Ali Schultz:

Um, and I also think the beauty of what you guys have written in both of your books is a very accessible roadmap to, uh, self-awareness around feelings. Because I think that language is inherently important to starting to even understand, wait, how am I right now? (laughs) Oh, oh, this anger? Oh, how do I then navigate this? It's like, um, it's like a gateway drug to allow these deeper questions. And it al- I mean, your books alone offer some fabulous frameworks, um, and [inaudible 00:56:48]. They're fantastic (laughs). I'll just say, um, thank you both for joining me again. Um, I love how we've kind of s- like, corralled a few big feelings just around, like, this much larger topic of work and what compels us to check emails on a Saturday afternoon.

Mollie West Duffy:

Well, thank you for having us.