

# Existentialism

**Robyn Walser:** [00:00:00] Since you're here anyway, you're here and you're conscious, you know you're here. What will you do? You can, close down and shut down and hide and be afraid.

Or you can take risks and open up and taste life as much as possible. And I'm voting for the latter when I'm working with my clients

then if you think about parts of what existentialism is about, it's not just exist. It's exist authentically. Let's be here fully and authentically, making choices that are about meaning. And, I can't think of a more rich and colorful way to engage in life than from that space.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:00:45] That was Dr Robyn Walser on Psychologists Off the Clock.

**Diana Hill:** [00:00:50] We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:00:57] I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado.

**Diana Hill:** [00:01:01] I'm Dr. Diana Hill, practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

**Yael Schonbrun:** [00:01:05] From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

**Jill Stoddard:** [00:01:11] And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, director of the Center for Stress and Anxiety Management.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:01:17] We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Diana Hill:** [00:01:21] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock. Today, we have an interview with Dr. Robin Walzer, who's back on the show again. She's made multiple visits to our show. She's talking about a chapter from her book, *The Heart of ACT: Developing a Flexible, Process-based, client centered practice using ACT*. And Robin has a chapter in that book about meaning and purpose and existentialism and sort of exploring existence, which I've, I found to be a wonderful chapter.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:01:52] So I was really happy to have the chance to talk with her about it in this interview.

**Diana Hill:** [00:01:57] Yeah. It's a topic that I think we often tread lightly in as therapists, and she gives us the courage to actually go there, and particularly right now existentialism is up. For a lot of a lot of people in terms of thinking about their own mortality. What is the meaning of their lives? What is the meaning and purpose of all of this, and what role am I playing?

And I love what Robin had to say in this episode, especially around this idea of waiting that a lot of times we spend a lot of our lives waiting for some future thing to happen. And maybe we're even doing that right now, waiting for X, Y, and Z to

be over. But we lose out when, when we're waiting, as opposed to really harnessing the now and, and diving in to what can we do to make our lives more meaningful right here, right now.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:02:44] You know, we talked on the podcast in the past about posttraumatic growth. We had an episode of wa quite awhile back about it, and I think one of the things that can really come out of adversity, and it takes some effort though sometimes though, is this greater sense of meaning and engagement with something that matters. And I think that that's something that has been coming up for me a lot right now is around, you know, okay, I'm having this experience. It's hard and how can I find meaning in my daily life? But also how can I, what does this tell me about what's important to me and how can I create meaning, even in the middle of this difficult situation? There's a perspective shift. I think that can happen.

**Diana Hill:** [00:03:25] What's it take for you.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:03:27] Well, I think that, you know, speaking of existentialism, it just, it's been this reminder that life is short and some of the things that I stress out about all the time are actually not really that important in the big scheme of things.

Um, but it's connecting me with, you know, I'm really missing and worried about. My parents. Diana, I know we talked about that you, you're kind of feeling that too. I think just recognizing the importance of my family and they're just right here with me, my clients, and just kind of supporting their mental health.

This is just such a tough time for people and it's really reminded me of the importance of the work that we're doing. As I see stories about just people who are really suffering right now. How about for you, Diana?

**Diana Hill:** [00:04:11] Yeah. I think it's also for me, maybe opening up some spaces that I didn't know that I had yearnings around or longings around because I was so busy and they were so filled in with. Maybe sorta like junk life. Life that wasn't so meaningful that just filled in its way to make me super busy. And so when everything got stripped down, the basics of just us and our dog and our kids and figuring out our family life and safety and caring for each other and caring for our planet, some things really rose to the surface for us. And I also think of this time as, um, sort of like a get out of jail free card to make shifts in your life that you want to make that maybe, at least for me, that I didn't have the courage to make. And I really appreciate that there's something about the limited resources that in some ways opens us up

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:05:04] Yeah,

**Diana Hill:** [00:05:05] to new opportunities.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:05:07] Yeah.

And, and maybe that's our hope for folks, is that you can take a look at your own life and what's meaningful and what matters. And think if there's a perspective shift happening here.

**Diana Hill:** [00:05:18] It makes me think of this exercise that I'll often do with clients. And you and Robin talk about, um, the funeral exercise from ACT. There's another exercise called "a year to live," and it's a writing exercise where people write about if they had a year to live, what would they do? And then the next prompt is if you had a month to live.

And the next prompt is if you had a week and then a day, and then a minute. And what happens naturally as you get. Closer and closer and closer in on that life is limited and time is limited, all of a sudden the most important things start to show up for people. They're like, Oh, I call this person, or I just put my hand on my heart and breathe, and I think that's been part of what we're experiencing right now is coming up right against that., like, what is really what really matters here and what was all the fluff.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:06:06] It's a values exercise. It really is. And I think being ,Robyn writes in her chapter about how being in touch with some of these really existential kinds of questions, just noticing that life is short and that we're going to die really puts us in touch with our values, and I think reading her chapter and hearing her talk in this way, just helps me bring it into the clinical work that I do more. And I think, for instance, it's helped me just be a little more courageous about, about kind of going in with that. So for example, if a client's having problems with a family member and it's, you know how it gets kind of caught up in all that, "well, they said this and they do that and they're so blah, blah, blah." And, and if you just occasionally just remind them, like, this person's not going to live forever. What does that. Teach you about what you want out of this relationship and what's important, and it can just help people take a step back and to really shift their perspective around what matters.

And I think sometimes it's important to do that even though it takes a, it's a little bit of a provocative conversation that can take a little bit of courage, I think, to go there. It can also be really powerful.

**Diana Hill:** [00:07:14] I'll do that with teens sometimes when I would, they're like in their senior year and they're going nuts with their parents. And I'll say, this is your last year for it ever to be this way again. Your mom's not going to make you dinner next year, and you know, your dad's not gonna do your laundry or whatever it is.

And I think it can be, yeah, a bit of a reality check that everything is changing and everything that we love, we will lose.

Yeah. And maybe that's something our listeners can think about is, you know, this time period that we're in is so unusual and it too will pass. And so what can you do to make meaning in your life right now, today, this week, this month.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:07:54] One of our sponsors is Praxis, which offers continuing education for therapists and mental health professionals. Praxis is a great way to do some online learning and you will be happy to hear that none other than Dr. Steven C. Hayes, the cofounder of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and guest of the show is doing an ACT Immersion Training online. It's a deep dive into Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. He offers 10 modules and the registration is open now, so you'll want to be sure to check that out. You can get 24 hours of CEU credits, and I've heard from folks that this is a great training, so you should check it out.

You can link to Praxis through our website. So go to [offtheclockpsych.com](http://offtheclockpsych.com) to our sponsors page and you can find a link there.

**Diana Hill:** [00:08:43] Another affiliate that we're really excited about is the dear

Rick Hanson, whose book on Neurodharma is coming out in the first week of May. We're super excited about it and Yael and I have both shared about our personal experience of doing his online program on Neurodharma. It's an eight week program that I cannot recommend highly enough. It's saved me this last period of time. You can find out more about his neurodharma program through our sponsorship page as well. And there is a \$40 off code there, so make sure you go through our page [offtheclockpsych.com](http://offtheclockpsych.com) and get \$40 off neurodharma. Robin Walser, welcome back to the podcast. So happy that you're here again.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:09:25] Thank you for inviting me again.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:09:27] I wanted to sort of set the stage for our listeners in your latest book, *The Heart of ACT*, which is a wonderful book about doing ACT therapy in this powerful and effective way. You have a chapter called "Engaged: Existence and Purpose."

And to me, this chapter felt very important and meaningful and had a big influence on my clinical work. Some of the things that I maybe hadn't been thinking about, um, came to mind. These big picture kind of issues about existence and purpose. So I'm really delighted that you came back on the show to talk to us about this idea and to delve into this topic a little bit.

I think it's an important one.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:10:08] I'm happy to be here and happy to talk about existence and existentialism. It's probably one of my favorite topics.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:10:16] Well, why don't we start there? What do you mean by existentialism? For people who might not be familiar with that topic?

**Robyn Walser:** [00:10:23] Sure. So existentialism is a philosophical approach to understanding humans or being, and essentially what it's about is the focus on responsibility and choice, uh, that the human that humans being have. And that's because we're here and we're aware. So that consciousness, uh, is pointed to inside of that philosophy.

And essentially what people are being asked to do is. Choose, uh, that you are free and responsible. And so what will you create in your life with that notion or that awareness?

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:11:06] Well, and I am so appreciative that you connect the dots between existentialism and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and bring this sort of abstract, philosophical idea into the room and into , the day to day existence of people. And I think it is really meaningful and powerful. I just want to take a quick segue.

Why is this so interesting and important to you? You just mentioned that this is one of your favorite things. What is it about this.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:11:37] Well, it's, I think that's a really great question. Uh, even as a younger student, when I was an undergraduate, I was. Interested in existentialism when I was working in or taking psychology courses and always thought it was really fascinating. And when I got into graduate school, I actually did a, uh, behavioral interpretation of his existentialism as one of my comp exams.

So I suppose that's more of the sort of academic answer about it. but I've also, you know, had to contact death myself. And I remember once as a young child, a

gentleman that was living with our family, a friend of my parents, Dick Smith, was his name. He was hit by a train. And on his motorcycle and it basically killed him. Right. And I remember feeling, uh, very, very upset by that experience and the thought of him not being around anymore. And what does that mean? Somebody not being around anymore? I was quite young. I was probably about six years old when that happened. And it is about six or seven when children start to wonder about death.

And that has carried forward with me through to, um, all the losses that I've experienced in my life is, you know, what, what role does death play in our own lives? And each time I've touched death, and I write about this in the book, my mother's own death. And you know, why didn't the world stop spinning when she died was sort of hit me quite hard because it didn't, it just kept going.

Uh, and in that, realizing it wasn't going to stop spinning for me either when I die and not going to stop spinning for anybody. Indeed. Um. Reminding me that we're not special, that none of us are special. None of us will defeat death. And so if we can come up against that awareness and be connected to it, um, then maybe tasting life will feel much more valuable and important.

And, uh, so that's my thought about. Just a personal take on it is I only have so much time here and I really love life. I really enjoy birds and flowers and nature and interacting with people, and I want to taste as much as I can because I realize that there will come a day when I will not be able to do that anymore, and I want that for the people that I work with as well.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:14:21] Yeah. And that's, that's one of the things that you focus on in that chapter in, in *The Heart of ACT*, is encouraging therapists to help their clients be in contact with that sense of mortality. Um, I have a very good friend who has found this thing called a death meditation as a way to contact this sense, because sometimes it's elusive, right?

We don't always. Connect to that. Um, what do you think we there is to be learned by contacting mortality in this way?

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:14:52] well, I, one thing I think that we learn is that we don't, we can't create forever. And so. Quite often when people are suffering or maybe even just living in general, they're waiting for something. They're waiting to feel better. They're waiting for the environment to change. They're waiting for somebody else to do something and you know, they're not really paying attention to the ticking of the clock and that, um, each moment you wait is how you are spending your life. You are responsible for that. And so there's a question here. Do you want to spend your life waiting, waiting for something that may never arrive? You know, things like waiting to not feel anxious or waiting to not feel fear or waiting for happiness to arrive so that you can then have meaning. The tragedy there is that time is just ticking by and you're actually creating your life. And what would, what I would call it is "a life full of waiting". And so I, I wish for my clients and for other people, everyone I know, not to be there. That's a personal stance that I take. And did I, did I actually answer your question?

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:16:11] Yeah. I mean, well, I can relate to this. I think sometimes it feels like, Oh, as soon as I catch up on all these things I need to get done. As soon as I have more resources, more money, more time. Soon as my kids are older. My job changes somehow. There's just all these things where it



feels like, Oh, and then I'll do all these things I really want to be doing. And so I think what you're saying is that by contacting the sense of the clock is ticking. We don't have forever. It brings us more into what can I do now.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:16:41] Precisely. What actions will I take today that are meaningful, engaged, alive, connected? What conscious choices will I make now rather than unconscious choices to wait. So they're hoping for something that's gonna happen in the future. So I think helping our clients to get present to that doesn't have to be a morbid exploration. It can be very compassionate and thoughtful and be about touching into what it means to only be here for a period of time and to think about how you want to spend that time, rather than whittling away at will I stop feeling something or will I, stop sensing something and then I'll finally be able to live?

I mean, as you know, Debbie, I work with folks who have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and I can't count the number of clients that I've worked with who are waiting for their PTSD to go away. Like once this, I finally get this under control, I'll finally live. And these are folks who have been saying that for 30 years. And the deal is, is that they have been living, uh, just sort of a unconscious or captured living, unattached living to an idea rather than to a sense of their own freedom and their own responsibility.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:18:12] Yeah. Well, and I find sometimes that that therapists, when. I've talked to other therapists or trained other therapists, they're often, they worry a little bit about that death aspect, right? That it's going to be morbid, it's going to be too provocative. But I think what you're saying is that it really points toward life.

It's not really about the details of death. It's more about how do you want to live in the time that you have that points toward values and day-to-day meaning

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:18:42] precisely. So things like your friend's death meditation, or things like, in the ACT world, you know, we have the funeral exercise where you visit your own funeral. Those things, people get caught up in the death part of it rather than the, looking at the other side of what do you want to create, giving, given that death will happen?

I don't think of it as a morbid exercise at all. I think of it as an awakening exercise that what we're helping our clients do is wake up to this notion that not a notion, even this reality that we, that we will pass one day and we don't know when that day will be. And you'll hear people do things like, I contact this, I get it when somebody close to them dies cause it puts you in touch with your own mortality. But we lose that sense pretty quickly afterwards. And there might be some healthy things about that, but we should probably stay in touch with it to some degree and be conscious of it to some degree so that we can engage fully and take responsibility for our lives in ways that are, we care about. bring meaning to us.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:20:02] I like that idea of the awakening. I think it pulls us out of sort of just going through the motions or this certain numbness that we can get into.

So I've, I was talking to someone a while ago who said that he doesn't ever think about his own death, just never thinks about it. And that to me, I was a little

surprised by that cause I think for me it pops to mind from time to time. But I actually think that's the case for many people. It's just not on their radar. What do you think is going on there? Why do you think certain people might have difficulty with that, or just might never occur to them? I'm a little terrified of my own death, frankly. So it kind of pops to mind sometimes in this scary way. Um, what do you think is going on there?

**Robyn Walser:** [00:20:47] Well, I think you're describing it to some degree, not, not for everyone, but for many people it's terrifying to contact the idea of their own death. And so they simply just avoid it and don't think about it. And I think that's part of it, is it's too awful to recognize, or too fearful to contact. For others it could be just a learning history where people didn't talk about it, but even see their, like, mass avoidance around it. I think as a culture, at least, in our Western culture, you know, we're pretty afraid of it. and we, uh, you know, are expected to get over it pretty quickly. We have ideas about death that are like, cry for a bit and then move on.

And, you know, I mean, I'm glad we have rituals and things like funerals and that sort of thing, it's helpful. But I think people are afraid to think about their own death in general, or maybe they just, it was never talked about and they don't in their family. And so it's just sort of a learning history that leaves them sort of separate from the idea of death.

And I suppose ultimately some of what you're talking about, too, points to other kinds of notions that have to do with religiosity, or spirituality, where people think that there is no death. So they don't worry about it either. It's only a change in your state of being from being alive body to the spirit or an energy or an entity of some sort.

And so that, a fair amount, number of people don't worry about death for that reason as well. It doesn't mean they're not afraid of death. It just means they don't dwell on it because they don't see it as a, a final, , aspect of life.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:22:35] Yeah. That's a good point. Depending on your view of what happens next, it makes it, maybe it changes the way that you think about it.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:22:43] Absolutely. So that extension that we have of in self-as-context and perspective-taking, right, that we can extend ourselves into the future, I think can relieve in some ways that sense of death is if I can see myself. You know, far into the future and, uh, and I know that I've been here long into the past, then you can get into a space of there is no end.

Um, until, I mean logically you can say, I know that one day I will die, or something like that. But because of that extension, the capacity to extend ourselves into the future, I think sometimes it makes it the illusion that we will not die or that somehow we will. Extend beyond ourselves.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:23:31] Yeah. There's something experiential about what you're talking about because I think we all know logically. You're like, yes, there is going to be a death date at some point. We don't know when that is typically, but I think what you're talking about is just really experientially contacting that sense of mortality.

How might people do that? What are some ways that people can just bring that into sharper focus if they are having difficulty contacting, whether it's it's yourself

or a client who's, who's not contacting that, what, what might people do.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:24:04] Well, I think some of the exercises that are in ACT are helpful. A death meditation, visiting your own funeral. I'm talking, just simply talking about your own passing can bring that to mind and maybe talking with your, with other people about it, like how many times in your life do you recall talking about your own death with somebody?

Probably not very often,

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:24:33] Yeah, maybe occasionally, but not too. Not too often.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:24:37] And it's probably the practicals, right? Like my will is here and my insurance policy is there and you know, people can do those kinds of things cause it feels sort of practical and problem solving. We don't often talk about our fear of that space or whether or no fear or the fear that we have of how will impact others and what will it mean for others.

And even the notion that, um, there will, we will be remembered in some way for a period of time, but then we will cease to be remembered, right? There's like there's a real kind of existential angst in there about meaninglessness. And. Is this life, is it meaningless? You know, will I be gone? And then shortly after being gone, I'll be fully gone.

Like, people won't even talk about me anymore. And I will be a grave site somewhere that's not visited. Right. So, uh, cause that happens too. Like even after people pass, we visit the grave site for a while and some people are dedicated and committed, but as time passes, there's less and less visits. And, there's, a, you know, thought about you now and then, and so there's, there's really sort of a painful process inside of exploring your own death. And again, I want to emphasize that it's not morbid. It's about knowing so that you can engage now like that consciousness is important. And since you're here anyway, you're here and you're conscious, you know you're here. What will you do? You can, close down and shut down and hide and be afraid.

Or you can take risks and open up and taste life as much as possible. And I'm voting for the latter when I'm working with my clients because I know that they can get so closed off and so . Afraid and rigid that life is just passing them by and they're like sitting in their homes or afraid to love or afraid to create deep and meaningful relationships.

Then if you think about parts of what existentialism is about, it's not just exist. It's exist authentically. Let's be here fully and authentically, making choices that are about meaning. And, I can't think as a, as a psychologist who's interested in the wellbeing of my clients, I just can't think of a more rich and colorful way to engage in life than from that space.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:27:28] I love that. and I just wanted to kind of explore something a little bit more that's embedded in what, what you said. During the start of this, , Corona virus. , pandemic. I have a, a friend who said at that moment we were sharing about how we're feeling and that in that moment she was really connected with a sense of "what's the point of anything?"

Like, why? Who cares? What's the point? And I think I've heard that sometimes in my clients as well, when, especially when they're very depressed, it's just the sense of purposelessness. So Robin, just imagine that you had a client who



came in and was in that place where everything seems so pointless. How would you respond to that? Almost like an existential crisis, if

**Robyn Walser:** [00:28:15] yeah, yeah. No. Let me just say, when clients ask that question, what's the point? It is my favorite question, and typically people are like. Oh yeah. Let me think about what to say here. But I love this question. When clients ask it and I, I'm like, yes, I'm so happy that you're asking this question. What is your point?

What will your point be? What will you, what point will you make? And so I want to, you know, pull, you know, pull it back in their direction and say, you know, you've got two feet. And you can move them. Like what direction do you want to put them in? I'm curious, I want to know about your point. And they'll say, well, it's pointless, it's meaningless.

And I said, okay, I'll give that to you. Now what? Now what are you going to do? All right, so the next step you take is going to be with, with a point to it. And so what point I just this, I love this question, so it doesn't throw me off when clients ask it. It doesn't sort of send me down the road of like scratching my head and wondering what to do.

I, I just, let's explore it. What point will you make?

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:29:25] You know, I love that because I think the pull is to like give them a point to say, Oh, here's the point. Or to kind of try to convince them that there is a point. But I think you take more of the stance of like, well. Maybe there isn't one. So now what? So what are you going to do? And it helps them sort of create, create it for themselves because you're not trying to impose it on them.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:29:49] Well, and I'll often say, well, I can't wait to, let's answer the question. I can't wait to hear your answer. Right. And if the audience could see me, they'd see me like rubbing my hands together going, yeah, let's, okay, let's explore the point.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:30:01] Yeah. Your face got excited. I see you on the video, like you can't wait to dive in there and kind of grapple with that question. That's kind of the fun part. The juicy part of therapy.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:30:11] exactly. Let's get that question on the table and see. What choices do you need to make a, about creating a point? Because here's the thing, you know, when you, when you look at, um, existentialism, uh, there's a meaning that Heidegger gives it, and let me just see if I can pronounce this right. So Heidegger says the individual is Dasein, and da means there, and sein means being. You're there and you're being.

And so if that is the case, you're alive and you're conscious, it's not that we're going to undo that, unless you're going to take your own life, which hopefully no client will do because there's so much, colorfulness to see and be with in life. but if you're there and you're being, and you're aware, then let's move, let's do something, let's create, let's... And even in the time of COVID-19 you can see people doing things that are engaged, authentic, creating, and grateful. I mean, there's a lot of terrible things happening. But people are creating meaning by showing up to the hospital and taking care of COVID-19 patients when they themselves could get sick.

Um, people are at seven o'clock at night in New York City, coming to their

windows and clapping and blowing horns and playing music to say, I appreciate you, uh, I care that you care and I'm grateful for what you are doing. And there's people that are reaching out to each other across the world and meditating together.

And trying to think about how they can overcome in a way that is helpful and supports us. And I was just looking at a video yesterday about how fast we move in the world and how we've lived our lives. And we move through life so unconsciously. So many of us are moving through our lives just unconsciously, day after day after day, the same sort of do this, do this, do this, and we're not asking what is meaningful.

Like I am struck, I am struck by that. now that isn't about authenticity and connection and alive ness. But we had this slow down. We had to be knocked off of our feet in order to make that visible again, we had to like have a death of busy-ness in an order to, wake up to what's available to us in the world.

And I think, you know, we can do this in therapy as well as, you know, wake up to what's visible and there to create. As we move forward and even in times of , coronavirus and in fact, it might even wake, knock us off our feet enough to say, Hey, we got to start living differently, living more with awareness and less with being in the present moment in the here and now and less in the future.

Where am I going to be? Okay. It's okay to plan, and I'm, I'm okay with, you know, the practicalities of thinking about what your future looks like, but we spend way too much time in unconsciousness. Um, or you know, if people are not quite gleaming to that word unconsciousness, then present moment or here and now, however you want to say it.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:33:56] Yeah. I mean, I think often adverse life events, so pandemic, but it could be other, you know, it could be the loss of somebody or some other major life change often really is a way of contacting something about meaning and purpose because I think it takes us out of that day-to-day thing we get into where we're just not thinking on this scale and I think something about this just shakes us right out of our typical day-to-day concerns.

I can really relate to what you're saying. All this stuff that I cared about two months ago, all of a sudden it just doesn't feel all that important anymore

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:34:34] Yay. Yeah. But what is important? Yeah. What is important kind of emerges out of that, and I sometimes I say this to people that I'm consulting, and maybe you've heard me say this, Debbie, is that for some folks, you got to kind of rattle their cage a little bit to get them to wake up and sometimes contacting death does that.

And I think in the time of COVID, all of our cages have been rattled and I'm hopeful that we'll wake up a bit more and see what's important in the world. I mean, I'm, I think about these kinds of things both at, like in the room with my client who's sitting in front of me and what I'm hoping for them in terms of growth, meaning and being responsible.

But I also want to see it at a much larger level, right? As a social, global kind of thing. Like what, what do we all need to wake up to in order to create meaning and engage in ways that are. About not destroying that, which is around us . Unconsciously destroying. Sorry, I shouldn't say unconsciously destroying. Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:35:41] Yeah. one of the things I loved about your chapter in your book about this is this sense of that sometimes we really do kind of have to go in there to this kind of question, which sometimes feels like you're going in deep or you're going in somewhere a little provocative with people, but that's a way to to contact this is to shake it up by just asking these kinds of questions that we might normally be a little bit reluctant to get into with people, but we have to find a way in.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:36:11] Well, and I think, you know, it's good to ask as a therapist, what is the reluctance about, what is the function of this reluctance? Because. Sometimes it's not that the client isn't willing to take a closer look, is that the therapist is afraid to take a closer look. So, you know, in, in my chapter I talk a little bit about this, where therapists will ask me, do I have to do that exercise on.

Um, you know, the funeral exercise. And of course the answer to that question is no, but I do want to know why would you not do that particular one? and often it's just like, it just feels too much. It's too, what if I make my clients upset? What if I make my client feel bad? And I'm like. A client coming to see you because they're already in that place.

And this is, again, awakening, not morbidity. And so I've, I think all bringing these questions in with your clients can be quite helpful. Now, it may not always be called for there, you know, I'm not saying just do it with every client you want to be thinking about, you know, what your client's needs are, and you know, how they're functioning in their lives.

but I do think it's a, when you're looking at values in your sessions and how to work with people, helping them to bring their values to life and living a more from a values based space from the feet up, not the head down. Then an exploration of death seems part of that.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:37:46] I want to go back to this concept you talked about earlier related to, well the ACT process is called self-as-context, but it can also be looked at as taking this perspective shift or sort of stepping out of self-story or self-concept. I'll start with this quote. That is something I kind of cobbled together from your book.

It's kind of a string of quotes that I'm pulling together. "Awareness of experience is dwarfed by small concerns and ongoing fears, by entanglement in worry and the past. Presence in the world is taken over by threats to our pride, our egos, or our concepts of ourselves..... Part of the self-as-context work in ACT is about reaching beyond mind to pure consciousness by shedding over and over again, thoughts, desires, hopes, and dreams.... It is the awareness of death that can assist this shift in perspective... As our consciousness stretches over time, we see change, we see the ongoing flow of life." It's beautiful. Yeah. Kind of piece together a few.

Um, can you explain this from the framework of ACT, this idea of self-as-context and, um, what do you mean by this perspective shift that you're, you're writing about here?

**Robyn Walser:** [00:39:02] Well, part of what I think happens for us and our clients is that. We do get captured by ideas of ourselves or ideas about what we

should be. So we're conceptualizing ourselves constantly. And I kind of chuckle a little bit when I think about how caught up we are in words, and there's a, a section in the book where I say, you know, the sun doesn't know that it shines. And the earth doesn't know that it spins and the flower doesn't know that it's beautiful. The bee doesn't know that it bumbles, right, like all of these are conceptual, language-based interactions with our environment that we've created. And so we do that same thing with ourselves and sort of get caught up in a sense of self and I and how we're defined and what we should have in order to be happy and content and what things should be. like for us. And then inside of that, we start to suffer. We get attached to our ideas of ourselves, and we lose contact with that larger sense of self that can observe, take perspective on all of the different aspects of our self, including the words that we say, like I and self. So those are. Only exist because we made them up and they don't, they don't literally exist.

Right. They're sounds that we say about ourselves. And if we could sort of connect to this notion of being as something that's not just about words, about presence. Then it allows us to live more authentically, allows us to live more in the here and now. It's not easy. I mean, minds are ever present and constantly talking to us and conceptualizing, but being able to see that we do that can free us and help us make it, help us put us, put us in a position where we can choose. So if I must be a certain thing or if I must be special, or if I, uh, you know, we have this idea about who I am, then I narrow my interaction with the world. I take away adaptability and variability and become rigid.

In who I can be and clearly says, the world isn't like there to serve me. I'm going to suffer behind that if that's where I'm going to live. And so what this piece is about is shedding again and again and again, the attachment that we have to the ideas of ourselves so that we're more flexible and able to adapt to the environment.

It doesn't mean I don't have a purpose. It just means that I can keep my purpose intact from a values based level, whatever the environment or context is.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:42:11] So I find in my experience that stepping out of that sense of self and getting that perspective shift is a bit fleeting. It's a bit hard to capture that. I think for most of us, we spend most of our day in that kind of self content. How would you recommend that people try to capture that a bit more of like what are some of the things you do with yourself, with your clients to get into that mode?

**Robyn Walser:** [00:42:44] Well. Uh, I do think, um, dropping into the here and now is going to be very important. Becoming aware, and you can do this through meditation, through mindfulness practice, but you can also do it just by showing up to what you're experiencing in the moment. It doesn't have to be, I've got to sit on a pillow somewhere.

It can also be, I see this now, I'm aware here now of something that's right in front of me.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:43:14] You can do it if you're listening right in this moment. Right. Just by paying attention in a different way. Yeah.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:43:20] Yeah. And the only way you can build that muscle is through practice. And so, you know, there's sort of state awareness and trait

awareness of more often inviting our clients to practice state awareness where you do some kind of mindful process, uh, where you, you know, listen to a meditation or something like that.

And that's great. But throughout your day, living consciously means I think slowing down and being aware more frequently, even if you have to. Just like. Use a bell to remind you, but show up more readily in a day to day and drop into what's happening in the here and now as a sort of ongoing process of awareness.

And it takes practice. It's not easy. Minds capture us constantly, but as soon as you notice it, see if you can drop back into here now. And be aware of what's around you, take in what's around you, take in how you feel and what you're experiencing so you can be aware of the, what's going on out in the outer environment or the inner environment, whichever you want to turn your attention to.

Um, you could do both, but the sort of process of, I'm in a attend in this moment. Two I'm in to observe in this moment, what's here versus living, you know, in what's there, what's coming, and it just takes a steady practice is really what I would say.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:44:56] Yeah. This is all about shifting into that mode of being the observer of your own experience. And I think another piece of it that's really important is sort of observing your experience over time, that, that you've been experiencing all of these, you know, different. Thoughts, emotions, interactions, et cetera, throughout the course of time.

And that kind of allows you to separate yourself,

**Robyn Walser:** [00:45:20] Well, if you spend any amount of time in here and now, which is kind of a funny way to say that if you think about it,

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:45:28] right? Cause we kind of always are, but kind of not mentally.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:45:32] time is, disappears if you're in the here and now in a way, if that makes sense. There is no such thing as time, like time doesn't know to keep itself right, like time isn't an entity, but we treat it like it is and so in the moment you can lose that time. But, if you're sort of aware across time, what you will notice and what you're pointing to is that things are in motion.

Emotions in motion. Thoughts are in motion. Your body's in motion. The world's in motion, like nothing is holding still. Well, this is where clients and ourselves get caught is that we think that this is going to last forever. I always feel this way or there's no way out and collapsed inside of thoughts and experiences.

Instead of if you show up and just observe. You'll see the fluidness of all that we experienced, that anxiety and sadness and joy and happiness. It all rises and falls. Um, that nothing is static. And, uh, that's a very important part of being conscious in the moment in terms of, um, letting go of attachments to it.

Everything rises involves.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:46:49] Yes, that's right. Everything shifts constantly if you are able to look at it from that vantage point.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:46:56] Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:46:56] What, tell us what you mean by the concept of compassionate immediacy and how can that perspective be helpful?



**Robyn Walser:** [00:47:06] well, so I tie that to the notion of our own death because time is short, especially relatively speaking. Sometimes when I get into these sort of philosophical modes and start thinking about how long. The earth has been here and the universe. And then I think, Oh, I might die when I'm 85 years old. So he's here for 85 years, which is probably not even a quark in time, right by would be think about size relative to time. It's just such a small period of time. And so there's that sort of broader part of it. And then there's also this notion, we don't know how long we're gonna live. We don't know, um, how death is gonna lead us. And so it's precious. Time is precious. Um, and so I want to convey that in a kind of compassionate immediacy with clients is like, don't wait to make a change.

Start today. Start now. Start immediately, but I want to do it with a sense of compassion, for the difficulty of changing behavior and facing our fears and stepping towards things that we really care about and all of the stuff that that brings with it. But time is literally running out for everyone. And so, uh, I want to put in this sort of, don't wait quality in there, like we were talking about earlier. Is this like, do something now, today that's about meaning for you and about creating the kind of life that you would, would look back on and say, I was authentic. I was aware, I was engaged, I was loving, I was kind. Whatever those things are that you find meaningful for you, and you can say, yeah, but it's all pointless.

And I'd say, yeah, but what's your point, right? I come right back to that space. And what will you do about it today? That's that immediacy part, and I don't want to, you know, push it on somebody like, Oh, you're going to die and you should get on it. It's more like be aware and I want to come from a very gentle space. That's why it's compassionate is like, time is running out and how will you spend it?

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:49:36] Yeah. There's, I think in the compassionate piece, there's this acknowledgement that this is not always easy to do. Right? And I also think there's something about looking at it in that way. That actually, to me, makes the fear of death a little bit less because there's this sense of, okay, I lived while I could. And I sort of did the best I could and it wasn't always perfect, but at least I'm peace with knowing that I kind of lived somewhat close to the life I wanted. So it almost gives you a less complicated feeling about your own death.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:50:12] I agree. And so you could sort of say, well, I lived with, by waiting, I waited for something to be different, or I lived by doing. I did the things that I wanted to Waiting a kind of doing too, by the way, but uh, uh, it's, um, it can, the meaning can be sucked right out of life in terms of what an individual might hope or want in there to be about.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:50:41] Right. If presented with that choice, most of us probably wouldn't choose a life of waiting. But we sort of do by behavior, you know, behaviorally by accident.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:50:52] Yeah. Yeah. That's a, that's that unconsciousness, right? That's that non-conscious living is sort of caught in stories and content rather than seeing it and choosing, being, being responsible and choosing, be able to respond.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:51:12] Yeah. Well, and speaking of tell us a bit more

about your stance about freedom and responsibility.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:51:19] Well, I might be, um, on the far end in terms of thinking about more close to existentialism than what might, some people might, think about in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy or that theoretical approach. Like if you, we are conscious and aware, we are free to choose, and if we are free to choose them, we are responsible for our lives.

Um, and every choice we make will have its consequences, of course. And our behavior will be shaped by those consequences. Um. We can respond to the rules in our head or the immediate contingencies. My hope is that we will live more in immediate contingency space. Um, but we, we lose freedom when we collapse into content and it looks like we don't have a choice in those spaces. Like it feels like things have been taken away from us. It's not to say that there aren't practical limitations in the world. Can't simply choose to be rich and then do it, but you can work on it, right? You can always work on that if that's something that you want. And there's different ways to define rich.

Rich might mean I'm in contact with nature and it's beautiful, and it might mean I have money. You define it, but you have the freedom. You can, or another way to say it for folks is we, we have a work around in terms of the, um, immediate contingencies that is that we can construct contingencies in our head and move towards those constructed contingencies.

Um, and we have, uh. Responsibility. We are able to respond in this moment. So when I think of freedom and responsibility sort of way out on the end is that you are free and you are responsible. some folks might not agree with me in that stance. And again, I want to emphasize that I know that there are practical limitations.

Your environment does matter. Um, there are places that people live in, there's homelessness, there's poverty and there's cultural kinds of, um, rules about what we should do and how we should behave. And I still inside of all of that would never want to say. You don't have something that you can do. Something can always be done.

This question is what move will you make next? What choice will you take?

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:53:56] Yeah. Yeah. That's a question to sort of ask over and over again each day.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:54:02] of ourselves and our clients.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:54:04] Yeah. Yeah. So a final question to wrap up here. Um, you know, we just have been talking a lot about building more meaning into our lives and just kind of contacting that sense of values and purpose as the clock is ticking. What are some of the ways that you encourage your clients to build more meaning into the everyday, the day-to-day life that they're living.

**Robyn Walsler:** [00:54:28] No. So once we can clarify their meaning or their values, what they want to be about, what they want to create, then it's a great, what will you do each day? What behavioral thing will you do each day? It's not just a, I'm going to contact this with my head and think about it. It's what kind of thing were you, could you do on a daily basis?

That's about creating that thing and meaning is available almost immediately. Like you and I could both walk away from this interview and go do something meaningful that, that's values aligned and it's immediately available. And so I

want to invite people to, each day, be aware, be conscious, and then pick. And just start doing little behaviors every day that grow that meaningful process. That's one way. And for some clients, and for some people it's like. I'm going to make a great big giant shift. I'm going to stop this thing that I've been doing and I'm going to go do something else that's meaningful and important to me. And I've had clients do that, and I was like, I'm going to, I'm going to stop doing this thing that I've been doing that really doesn't serve my purpose. Um, and so the question that you're asking isn't an easy one, cause it. Requires both the practice of being conscious and choosing. So use like conscious and choosing, conscious and choosing as an ongoing process and that you'll find yourself falling away from it. And that's part of the process. And then you come back and then you build this across time.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:56:14] Yeah. Into a broader pattern. Yeah. And for listeners who are interested in, in thinking more about that, I had, I interviewed Dr Jenna LeJeune a few months back, so you can check out her interview on values She's a mutual friend of ours, and she'd wrote this wonderful

**Robyn Walser:** [00:56:32] Great book. Yeah.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:56:35] She did a great interview all about this idea of just. Building meaning, and it's never perfect, right. But we're doing our best. And Robin, I'd just like to thank you so much. I think it's so... Even just talking about this with you is kind of helping me contact that sense, a little bit of, of that kind of higher level of existence and consciousness and purpose. So I appreciate you sharing that with us today.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:57:03] Well, it's absolutely my pleasure and my hope is that it will impact all who listen in a way that empowers them to be free and choose a conscious, aware, engaged life.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:57:19] Wonderful, and I'd encourage any therapists who are listening to check out your book, The Heart of ACT, which is a lot more about how to bring these kinds of ideas into your work as a therapist. So check it out. And Robin, thanks again. We're looking forward to having you back again sometime our frequent, one of our most frequent guests.

**Robyn Walser:** [00:57:40] Well, it's my pleasure. Anytime.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:57:41] Take care Robyn, bye bye.

**Diana Hill:** [00:57:43] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

**Yael Schonbrun:** [00:57:46] You can find us on iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Please help us out by writing a review on iTunes.

**Jill Stoddard:** [00:57:52] We'd like to thank our interns, Dr. Katharine Foley-Saldea and Dr Kati Lear.

**Debbie Sorensen:** [00:57:56] This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're having a mental health emergency dial 9 1 1. If you're looking for mental health treatment, please visit the resources on our webpage. We're at [offtheclockpsych.com](http://offtheclockpsych.com).