

# 349. Sustainable Exercise with Michelle Segar

[00:00:00] **Michelle Segar:** weight loss as a reason for exercising or, or initiating any type of behavior that we hope to sustain long term. Inherently means that we are defective, that we're not good the way we are, and it turns whatever behavior we're trying to start with.

Weight loss is our primary goal or why it turns it into a chore. And so I'm sure everyone understands that as soon as you turn a behavior into a chore, you engage, uh, a rebellion system, um, reactance theory, if you will.

And so from the get-go, before you start, you are creating this tension and angst and resentment of the very thing that you think you want.

That was Michelle Segar on psychologists off the clock.. We are four experts in psychology here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

[00:01:11] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

[00:01:21] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:29] **Michael Herold:** Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

[00:01:38] **Jill Stoddard:** And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

[00:01:44] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:48] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

[00:01:57] **Debbie Sorensen:** Hi everyone, this is Debbie and I'm here with Jill. Today we're introducing an episode I did with Michelle Segar, who is an expert on sustainable exercise and sustainable health behavior. She really is looking at trying to help people maintain exercise and healthy behaviors for a lifespan.

Not just a really hardcore blitz in the new fizzle out in, you know, a few workouts or in a few days or a few weeks, but, but really how can we keep some of these types of behaviors going? For life for the long term. And Jill, I would love to hear your thoughts about the conversation because I know that this is something that you have been really putting into practice in your own life in terms of making exercise more sustainable for yourself.

[00:02:44] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, I will say I think I've had a very complicated history and relationship with exercise. You know, um. One of the things Michelle says that I think we all hear is, for exercise to be sustainable, it matters that you like what you're doing. And she acknowledged that. Sometimes you'll talk to people who say, I don't like any kind of exercise, and I was one of those people.

And part of that was, you know, she also acknowledges that, uh, which I really appreciated, that sometimes living in a larger body, it can be really hard to enjoy exercise.

And that was definitely my experience for a long time. Um, but the other thing is I just hadn't tried a lot of things yet. You know, I was doing the things that I knew to do, like getting on a treadmill, you know, and, um. I more recently have discovered Pilates. I discovered yoga. I've hiking. Now that I'm in New England, I'm downhill skiing.

You know, I never set foot in a gym. Right. And you know, and I also wanna acknowledge that a lot of those things take resources. And not everyone has the resources, right? Like Pilates is very expensive. And so, you know, she was talking about how it's important to find things that you like, that you enjoy.

Also acknowledging that that can be a challenge, but that has been huge for me. Um, I think the other things that really resonated with me in this episode are like the tendency to get really rule governed, like the, the shoulds.

And I know what would happen for me is I would get a lot of these thoughts and feelings like sometimes. if I wasn't on my treadmill a certain number of times a week for a certain number of minutes running at a certain speed, it like didn't count right? And I had to really get flexible.

And so sometimes, including this morning, I got on my treadmill in my pajamas, like just to go for a stroll because I just wasn't feeling motivated to like go through the rig roll of getting on all my exercise clothes and my sneakers and.

In that moment, it was like, what is it? That is my goal here. I just wanna move my body. I just wanna get my heart rate up a little bit and I wanna get moving. And moving is better than not moving. It doesn't have to be perfect. She talks about that perfection frame or fixed frame and how important it is to be a little bit more flexible.

Now, that said, I've also noticed for me that I have to schedule it. Into my calendar or it won't get done. I think as busy people who always have people asking us to do more and right that like it's way too easy to all of a sudden look at your calendar and be completely blocked off for the whole entire week.

So I schedule out my exercise a month in advance and I don't schedule over it unless I, unless I really have to. And that probably happens maybe like 10% of the time, but I even schedule a little extra knowing that that's likely going to happen. So what about you, Debbie? What was it that that

[00:05:38] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, first of all, I mean, I just wanna piggyback on what you're saying a little bit because it's so interesting. I could never schedule exercise a month in advance. I mean, I might schedule a walk with a friend or something, but just people are different. Right.

[00:05:51] **Jill Stoddard:** Right.

[00:05:52] **Debbie Sorensen:** as you're talking about that, and I, I know this about you because a lot of times we'll be.

Scheduling a meeting and you have Pilates on a certain day or something like that. I just don't operate like that, and I think for me, one of the big things that she helped me see is.

Ways of just getting those little bits of exercise into your day. Sometimes you can be creative. So I was talking to someone on the phone and it occurred to me, it's nice outside. I'm gonna go for a walk while I'm talking to this person. And little things like that that actually do make a difference. You, she talks about counting everything, you know, that's movement.

And

[00:06:28] **Jill Stoddard:** We've been taking our dog for walks more frequently as the weather's been getting nice, and I have that conversation with myself like, this counts, right? You're moving your body. This counts. Yeah.

[00:06:39] **Debbie Sorensen:** There was one day, this is a kind of an extreme example, but I really didn't have a chance to do any kind of movement all day. And I noticed at the end of the day, my body just felt kind of stiff and tense from stress and it was almost time to go to bed. And so I just did a little bit of stretching and it was so, it was not much, you know, but it just felt really good to take a moment to do that.

And I think I might not have even thought of that.

[00:07:04] **Jill Stoddard:** And that's connecting it with that pur or that, that why, right? That like she says that when you, you know, if you're like, oh, I need to do it to be healthy, like losing your health feels so far down the road, there's no immediate kind of consequence. So it's not actually very, I. Motivating. And you know, what was she?

She was saying the main reasons for exercise that people give are losing weight and health, and neither of those are very good motivations for long-term sustainability. Right. And you know, what you're pointing to is I. My body feels uncomfortable and when I stretch, my body feels better immediately. And being able to connect that more.

And you know, for me, it's funny, health has become a good motivator for me because it no longer feels far away. Like for me, in an immediate sense, I. I am thinking I want, I don't wanna be an old, old lady. I wanna be a young old lady. And when I'm sick or I'm traveling, you know, if I ever have to take a couple days off, I feel stiff and terrible and uncomfortable.

So it is, it's become more immediate. So that, that has been a motivator to make sure that I'm keeping all the joints lubricated, right?

[00:08:12] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, just, yeah, I immediately feel, you know, you do the kind of stretches that feel good to you. A lot of times it's my neck, so just stretching my neck and kind of moving helps a little bit. It's, you know, that's, that alone is not a big deal, but it does help you to tune into that. Right.

Oh, this feels better in my body. And to tune into some of these things you're saying about what's enjoyable to you, because there, You know, I'm never gonna get up at 5:00 AM and go for a run. I, there have been times in my life

when I would do stuff like that. It's just too punishing to me. But then there are other things that actually feel pretty good to me. And

[00:08:45] **Jill Stoddard:** Right. And if it feels punishing, you're not gonna keep doing

[00:08:48] **Debbie Sorensen:** exactly,

Well, this episode I think will inspire you and will help you be a little bit more creative about getting movement into your life. And so I hope you enjoy,

[00:09:01] **Debbie Sorensen:** Michelle Seger is an award-winning NIH funded researcher at the University of Michigan who studies how to help people adopt to exercise and other self-care behaviors in ways that can be sustained in the real world. Michelle has a PhD in psychology, a master's degree in health behavior and health education, a master's degree in kinesiology. And Fellowships in translational research and healthcare policy from the University of Michigan today we're here to talk about her two books. The First Is No Sweat, how The Simple Science of Motivation Can Bring You A Lifetime of Fitness. And Her newer book is The Joy Choice, how to Finally Achieve Lasting Changes In Eating and Exercise, which was named one of the best health books experts read in 2022 by the Washington Post.

Welcome, Michelle. I'm so happy to have you here today.

[00:09:50] **Michelle Segar:** Thank you for having me.

[00:09:52] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I'm really excited about the conversation because I've read both of your books to get ready for today's conversation. And I honestly think I will never look at exercise and health behavior change in exactly the same way again, both for myself personally, with my own attempts to stay active and take care of my own health and also the work I do with my clients. So I hope our listeners feel the same way.

[00:10:17] **Michelle Segar:** Thank you. I hope so too, and hopefully we'll get into some really interesting conversations.

[00:10:22] **Debbie Sorensen:** We will, and I'll share some examples even of what I've noticed as I put this into play in my own life, um, as we have the conversation. 'cause I'm already seeing an impact and so listeners can stay tuned

to hear a little bit more about that as, as the conversation unfolds. Um, so to set the stage for listeners, I wanna start with a two part question, and the first part is probably pretty straightforward.

What are the main reasons people give for wanting to engage in exercise and health behaviors? If you just ask them why do you wanna exercise? What do people usually, say?

[00:10:55] **Michelle Segar:** Well, I'll say that there's one that people say 90% of the time, and then there's another one that people say about 10% of the time. And I bet you can guess what the, what the 90% of the time is. What do you think it is?

[00:11:10] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I know from reading your books and I probably would've guessed before reading your books, it's weight loss.

[00:11:17] **Michelle Segar:** yes. And then better health in some way, shape or form, avoiding a disease, improving our health. Now placating our clinicians, you know, um, and there are other reasons, but those are the two big ones.

[00:11:32] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay, so weight loss and health.

Long-term health. Um, and I mean, I think many of us want those things and care about those things, but they aren't necessarily helpful when it comes to what you're writing about here, which is really lifelong sustainable

exercise patterns, you know, really making this part of our regular lives.

Could you talk a little bit about why these reasons kind of get us into some trouble here?

[00:11:58] **Michelle Segar:** Yes. And you know, I didn't start my career. To, you know, undermine these reasons for exercising, you know, to, to get them outta the, the way the, my research is what taught me that these were really non-optimal reasons. I mean, the weight loss reason for exercise is, is pretty clear and there's a few different reasons.

The, the first one that, you know, I focus on very a lot in the book is that weight loss as a reason for exercising or, or initiating any type of behavior that we hope to sustain long term. Inherently means that we are defective, that we're not good the way we are, and it turns whatever behavior we're trying to start with.

Weight loss is our primary goal or why it turns it into a chore. And so for, you know, I know you have a lot of, um, mental health, um, professionals who listen to this. And so I'm sure everyone understands that as soon as you turn a behavior into a chore, you engage, uh, a rebellion system, um, reactance theory, if you will.

And so from the get-go, before you start, you are creating this tension and angst and resentment of the very thing that you think you want. And the second really important reason is that.

30 years ago, 20 years ago, I would say this changed about 15 years ago. People understood, scientists thought that, um, when you wanted to lose weight, we both needed to exercise and change our eating. And that those were basically equally, um, important as contributors to the weight loss goal. But through research across many different disciplines, we now understand, and I'm gonna make up a stat, but the point is correct.

The stat might be incorrect. Our weight is determined by, you know, 75 to 85% of what we eat. And the other part, our activity level. So if you're using exercise to try to lose weight. You're not gonna see a lot of benefits. And I wanna go a little further psychologically with why weight loss is a harmful reason to sustain a physically active life.

And all of my work is only about sustainability. That's all I care about. That's what I've been studying for 30 years. Um, so any comment I say is not about making a change, it's about how do you sustain it for the rest of your life. The other reason is that I think in today's world, and even 30 years ago when I started, when I started coaching people in these processes, um, we're all busy people.

And this was before social media kicked in, right? And this is before the pace of life, you know, went into a supersonic speed. If you wanna sustain a behavior for the rest of your life. You have to learn about that behavior. You have to learn about how does it fit into your life, what gets in the way? How can you overcome those things?

And if you're trying to change two behaviors at once, exercise, if you're trying to lose weight and you wanna both exercise and change your eating, well, that would, that would be a superhuman cognitive lift that most of us just don't have the bandwidth and the wherewithal and the energy level to do so that tho, you know, if you wanna lose weight, the cl the answer is clear.

Focus on your eating and changing that. And there's ways to do that psychologically and strategic way. So I don't wanna get into that right now. Um, but focus on one behavior at a time if you wanna sustain it.

[00:16:01] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and I think that one thing that's, that I've seen in my work as a psychologist who works with health behavior change sometimes and really has this behavioral orientation to my work is that sometimes people get discouraged when they really care about weight loss because they'll say, oh, you know, I started exercising.

I've been exercising five days a week. Nothing has changed. I mean, actually sometimes people gain weight, sometimes nothing changes. So it's like, then they're like, well, what's the point of this? And they get demotivated, right? They're, they're looking for, we talk a lot about process versus outcome. And I think when you

fixate on that number on the scale, first of

all, there's so much tied to weight stigma and shame and that whole

[00:16:41] **Michelle Segar:** that's right. That's

[00:16:42] **Debbie Sorensen:** there's also this sense of, well, why bother?

[00:16:45] **Michelle Segar:** that's right.

[00:16:46] **Debbie Sorensen:** I've been working so hard.

[00:16:48] **Michelle Segar:** Well, and not only why bother? Well, it's what I call health and weight are what I deem the wrong whys. For exercise, and it's because of what it turns it into. And, and it starts a behavioral process that we are not gonna get great feedback. And that's why weight loss, especially weight loss, but even health is the wrong why.

And when I started my career in this topic in 1994, I believed as a practitioner and a scientist that better health was a great reason to exercise. I thought, what's more important than our physical health?

We have nothing. If we don't have our physical health, that should be, you know, the, the, the best, um, intrinsic reason for exercise until my data slapped me in the face and suggested to me that health as a reason for exercise was



almost as detrimental as weight loss. And. You know, so again, research teaches us what we need to know.

And I'm gonna, I'm gonna stop there 'cause I have a feeling we can circle back to this later.

[00:18:00] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. But I, I think your point is really well taken here, which is that as a motivator in the moment, you know, it isn't necessarily effective and, and you have good research that you cite in your books to, to about why that is the case. What do you think? So, so those are the wrong whys. So what are the right whys?

What would be some better reasons that would be more effective to help us get, get up and get moving?

[00:18:24] **Michelle Segar:** Sure. So, you know, I also wanna say before I say what the right wise are, um. Science suggests that our reasons for initiating any behavior, so we can go in, we can step out of health behaviors and we can go into education, we can go into work. It doesn't really matter what the behavior is. Our reasons for doing a behavior, create the whole frame through which we see a behavior, how we experience doing it, and ultimately whether or not we decide to do it day in and day out.

So our wises are absolutely fundamental and they determine from the get go the they have a domino effect and will determine whether we stick with it or not for most, for the most part. Now, and I'm sorry, I have to give one more

[00:19:14] **Debbie Sorensen:** No, please. This is great.

[00:19:16] **Michelle Segar:** I'm gonna be talking about things as if, you know they are truisms and it's important to point out that nothing is true for any everyone, but some things are true for most. So if you think about the bell curve for those you know, who went to graduate school or had statistics, it's like most people fall under the bell curve. And then you've got, you know, then you've got phenomena and other experiences on the edges.

So what I'm proposing isn't gonna be true for everyone. And you might say, that isn't true for me. And I know one person who I work with that that's not true with, or my spouse. It's not true for. So nothing is true for everyone. But when it comes to human nature. I think the science, and I've come to believe that some things are true for most, like most of us are gonna be more motivated by an

immediate reward, something that's gonna gratify us immediately than something we have to wait months and years and decades for.

So that's a truism. I think, again, there are some people who have incredible discipline and are just gonna be super motivated by the long term, but if you've lived for decades in the human body, you know that that's not true for most people. And that's also why we have so many problems in society is because most are motivated by immediate gratification.

It's the unfortunate thing. So one thing I wanna say is people who tend to be very ambitious, you know, I think there's, I think this is a personality trait. Like my husband is like that, but he's like that in all areas of his life.

So I believe that there is a, and again, I don't have data to back this up. I mean, we do know that, you know, conscientious people tend to do certain things and certain people have more self-control than oh others. And not that you can't change skills and traits and stuff like that, but to some extent there are some embedded, embedded inclinations in each of us.

Um, the really unfortunate thing is that society at large, um, the media especially. Feature the people who succeed in this approach. We feature, these are the role models who we should all be like because they're succeeding at this model. And what happens is, is that we think we, because we're told this is the model we should be following, these are the whys we should be exercising for.

These are the ways we should be exercising. We believe by no fault of our own, it's the way simply we've been indoctrinated in society to approach healthy living health behavior change. That if we can't succeed in that model, that there's something wrong with us. That we don't have enough self-control, that we're not athletic enough, that we simply can't do it.

But in fact, the fatal flaw in that story is that society is featuring. The people on the edges of the bell curve, the people who've succeeded in a model that does not align with human nature. So, okay, so we go, that's a lot of context for the right wise,

[00:22:37] **Debbie Sorensen:** No, but that's really helpful if people blame themselves and get into that whole cycle, which is a lot of people. And so I'm really glad you made that caveat.

[00:22:44] **Michelle Segar:** and that is in my, um, coaching model for sustainable lifestyle change. That is where I start, because you need people to

externalize failure or that will just sit there and stay there. So, um, okay, so what are the right whys? Well. It turns out that if you exercise for reasons related to your immediate sense of wellbeing, your immediate quality of life, people are more motivated by immediate gratification than distal rewards they have to wait for in the future.

So what are those whys? It's having more energy and having a lifted mood and, you know, research in, in epidemiology and also mental health and depression. I mean, we know that exercise. In some studies suggest that, I mean, I'm sure it depends on the severity of mental health illness. That exercise is as effective as certain medications in certain people.

I'm sure. Again, the caveat is I'm, I'm sure that's not true. That's your field. That's not my

[00:23:56] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, but I think it's true. I mean, even, you know, I'm a therapist and I think a lot of people, their wellbeing is higher if they exercise

more so than therapy. So, I mean, I'm not saying that's for everyone, but

[00:24:09] **Michelle Segar:** Yes. And so consider the idea that if you are feeling down, you just were having a bad day, and you knew that going outside, for example, and taking a seven minute walk could elevate your state of being, you know, by a point or two on a scale of one to seven. Again, people don't think like that, but in a noticeable way.

Why wouldn't you do it? So, um, and now in general this has changed, especially since COVID and I can tell you that the fitness industry is very interested in shifting the meaning of exercise in this new direction. But it's a tough ship to turn. Um, people have not been socialized to think about physical activity as a way to feel better about themselves.

They, in fact, they think about it as a way to punish themselves and, you know, it's a chore. So it's really this alternative, 180 degrees, um, flip in the meaning of exercise. No longer is it to achieve something in the future that it actually is never gonna deliver to you. Most likely it is to help you feel your best right now, so that you can have that much more energy and enthusiasm.

For the, you know, the projects and the people that you care most about.

[00:25:39] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I think it really resonates for me personally, and I'll just talk about

myself as an example. I'll get into some details about some of this later when we talk a little. You have some great strategies that I found really helpful, but I think this is actually the main piece that really resonates because I am pretty versed at looking at your long-term values and making decisions in the moment based on what matters to me and that kind of thing.

But I think that this piece about tuning into the immediate reinforcement, the positive associations, it, first of all, as you're saying, it is more motivating for myself. I just feel better in my body when I've had some type of movement, even like you said, something brief, like a little stretching or going for a walk or more of a workout. And I know this really well from experience I, I did. Some walks and some exercise last week. And then yesterday I had a really busy, stressful day and I didn't do any, and I really noticed, I've been really paying attention to it. I just noticed how much tension I felt and I just didn't feel that good in my body.

And so I'm really trying to just pay attention to that. I think, I mean, I've known that all along, of course, but I think that it helps me to just really tune into that. And when I'm stressed, of course the thing I really need and want to do is to exercise, but I feel like it gets really easily backburnered.

[00:27:05] **Michelle Segar:** Yes. And one of the reasons it gets backburnered isn't just because, well, why is this a priority compared to these other things?

But, um, people's ex standards and cri criterion for what they should be doing are so high. Again, here's our role models, here's what they're doing every day. This is what we're supposed to do. when it's too big, it's very easy to keep it on the back burner. 'cause it just doesn't fit. I wanna say that.

Another thing, so I told you about the study where we looked at which reasons and goals were associated with the most physical activity. Other research that I haven't done, but you know, that's out there is that, and this is very counterintuitive. People say, gosh, I just. Why I don't do it more because, well, I hate doing it, but I feel so much better when it's done.

And that is also a pretty normal phenomenon. 'cause being physically active, you know, it just, it does so much for how we feel. But here's the problem with that model research, it, I, I don't even wanna say suggests as we are supposed to

as scientists because it's it, at this point, it's pretty unequivocal that how, how we feel while, while during movement is going to predict our future decisions to exercise or, you know, predicts whether people exercise, not afterwards.

So the model of, if I could just get to the gym that I hate to go to and push through it, I would feel better. Makes sense. And yes, everyone, almost everyone feels better unless they hurt themselves, but. It's during movement. So it's not to say that you can't notice that your stress level and mood is better right after you're done walking, but if whatever you're doing in the moment you feel a disdain toward doing, you're not gonna keep it up.

So we really have to care very much about how we feel while we're moving.

[00:29:13] **Debbie Sorensen:** We'll, we will talk about that more

later when we get into some strategies. Um, I'll also say that another area where I think you turned my thinking on

its head a little bit is around habit formation.

And of course, you know, tiny habits is really big this days, and I think a lot about that. You know, how do you get into a behavioral pattern and start a new habit?

But I think you make a really important point in, I, I believe it's in the joy choice about how. Sometimes we really think, okay, I'm gonna start this habit, hoping that it will eventually become easy and automatic. Like, oh, I'm in the habit of getting up at 5:00 AM and going for a run, and now it's so easy for me. Why does it not? Why is it not so simple

when it comes to exercise as a habit compared to something like flossing your teeth?

[00:30:01] **Michelle Segar:** Sure. So first let me say before I explain why that, um, I am not a habit researcher, but I read the habit literature and I've certainly spoken to habit researchers because it's very important. But the reality is, is that there are some habit researchers. Who have taken the lead on critiquing the value of habit formation for complex behaviors like exercise. Um, and let's just make sure we define for the listeners what we're talking about. Ha. The word habit is used very differently in loosely in society.

So, and sometimes it just means doing something routinely, but what you and I are talking about right now is this, the promise of effortless automatic decisions, which, ugh, sounds so good in theory, and I wanna Yes. Wouldn't it be lovely? And the reality is, is that we do, do, we live a lot of our life on automatic habits, so on autopilot.

So it's not to say that habits are bad, habits are, are great if, they can work for the things we're trying to do. So one of the things that's happened is that the habit literature in general is built on animal models. It's built also on as much of psychological research is it's built using students who live lives that are pretty different than people who are not students.

Right. So while they may have a lot going on, it's different than having children and a full-time job and maybe aging parents and all these other things. So the model I, I think, has been over generalized, um, for its value. So automatic habits are the things we do without having to think. It's like you walk in the door and you put your keys down in a very specific place. You don't think I have to put my keys down in, in a, in a specific place. Um, or it's. Flossing, like for me, the way it works for flossing, I have an automatic flossing habit, um, which I value, and I had to learn it in my twenties, you know, I, I had to actually consciously make it work.

Here's what happens for me. The first thing I do while flossing, brushing teeth, pairing, I floss my teeth and then as soon as I'm done, I automatically reach for my toothbrush. There's no thinking involved. That is an example of a simple behavior with the popular kind of user-friendly way of talking about habit formation.

How does it work? Well, you have a cue for me. My cue is I'm done flossing. Then you have a behavior that you're trying to form a habit for brushing. That would be the behavior. Step two. Um, step three is the reward. While the reward is, you know, feeling a sense of satisfaction, knowing I'm taking good care of my mouth, maybe the feeling of freshness.

And the more we do those three steps, the more our brain learns to do it and it becomes automated. But in order for a habit to form, your brain has to learn this process in, you know, in an uninterrupted way. If every time you do it, it gets interrupted, your brain brain isn't gonna learn that automated process. Let's think about this.

I'm in the bathroom. My dog isn't in there with me. My kids, for the most part, aren't pulling on my legs. You know, I'm not trying to stream a Netflix show.

Maybe some people do, but I'm focused alone with the door closed. Nothing much is gonna interrupt it, but let me walk outside of my bathroom door into the rest of my life.

And, you know, there can be mayhem and things I didn't anticipate. And, once we leave the simplicity of a, of a simple behavior and we enter our crazy life, and then we try to form a habit with a behavior like exercise that isn't one step. It's not putting the floss down and picking up.

You might have to plan it into your day. You might have to get somewhere. You might have to change your clothes. You might have to negotiate an unexpected email. That is a completely different situation. So the narrative around creating habits is lovely, but when you look at the assumptions that underlie successful habit formation within the realities of the life that most people live, again, not the people up here who seem to do it right perfectly every time or most times, but us regular folks who may not have wills of steel, who might be managing our kids' lives and our family schedules and our pets, and on top of a nine to five job, that's a lot of unexpected that can, you know, get thrown and interrupt that.

So you can tell I'm pretty passionate about this topic and I'm passionate about it because I really care about helping people change their behavior in ways that they're gonna succeed at. And I think habit formation is misleading most people when it comes to changing their lifestyle behaviors.

[00:35:16] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yes. I'm so glad you acknowledge this. I could really relate to it as I have a job, a busy job. I have two kids, I have, you know, a house and a dog, and the whole, all the chaos, as you say

in the book, you know, a chaos level high in my life. And I think that one of the things that you write about is permission to prioritize self-care and how if you're gonna ask me, do you care about taking care of yourself? I would say, sure, yes, of course. That's important to me. I wanna. I wanna take care of myself and do these things to recharge me and rejuvenate me, and so on and so forth. And yet it often feels like it gets really down low on the list, especially when I'm busy and stressed. And you write really well about that sort of caretaking, whether it's caretaking of like a child or a pet or a person that needs your help. Or even more generally, you know, a job. Like you have to, you have all this work pressure and that kind of thing.

And so it is sometimes hard, I think, to make room for yourself in that. So what, what advice do you have for someone like me who can really relate to that, part of your work?

[00:36:23] **Michelle Segar:** Yeah, well, I, it's a tough one, and I can tell you that this issue is way tougher than the motivation issue. The motivation issue is a snap. When you make the suggested changes in my model, it, it is consistently like this. This issue is much harder and the reason why it's much harder is there are a few reasons.

One is this is related to what is most important in, in living in society and society hasn't prioritized our quality of life and our sense of wellbeing. And now remember, if our self care is related to the wrong why, whys, well, we can't even deal with this other issue because those other whys the wrong whys, which turn, trying to change your eating and exercise into a chore.

We won't really have motivation to even get to this deeper core issue. But really being physically active, getting enough sleep. Changing our eating in ways, um, that would be beneficial on another level, these are all self-care behaviors. So when I started studying how do I help people change their mindset so that they can sustain these behaviors, they start, it was very clear to me that if we did not address this underlying self-care level, it would just continue to sabotage a behavior, even one that you now newly excitedly want to do.

So, you know, we kind of have to ground ourselves to think, okay, so what's going on and what's going on is. You know, we're not valued in society for taking care of ourselves. We are valued for how we look. We are valued for how we perform, whether it's as a parent, as a professional, as a child, we are valued for the kudos we get.

But we're not, we don't get value for taking care of ourselves explicitly. Now, thankfully. I think the conversation, again, these are big ships to change directions. You know, when you think about Ariana Huffington, she really contributed to this conversation with coming out about her own experience. What happened when she realized that she wasn't taking care of herself, thrive Global.

I mean, there are some big organizations that are role models in helping, in supporting their employees and taking better care of themselves. Because the reality is, and this is really the bridge to help people too. It's the business case for it, but it's also the psychological bridge for individuals.



The reality is, is that when we take better care of ourselves, we are that much more. We have that much more. We do everything better when we have more energy and we have more energy when we take care of ourselves.

So it's, it's a very, you know, A plus B equals C, but we have to feel entitled to feel better.

And some people come at this conversation. I mean, I don't think I, I don't know that I wrote about this in no sweat. I certainly explained some people's reactions when we talked about self-care in this way, Michelle, I thought this program was about exercise.

This is about my life. Yes, it is. About

it is. And sometimes people cry because when they quiet themselves down and realize, gosh, I don't know that I feel entitled to feel this way, to take time out of my busy life, to cultivate my own sense of wellbeing. It's a heavy topic, um, topic. And that's kind of, those are the psychological issues, but then there's another pragmatic issue and it, speaks to what we already brought up.

But again, if our ask, if our self-care ask is too big, either when we initiate a plan, this is what I'm gonna do or just. On any given day, if our expectations about successful self-care or the successful enactment of some health behavior is too grandiose, which I would say it often is and fixed, it's, we have very fixed definitions of what success looks like, then we won't do it either. So it's, it's this multifaceted situation

[00:41:07] **Debbie Sorensen:** Right, right. I'll, I'll just say really quickly for me, the word in this that really, that stuck for me was permission. Because if you, if you reframe it, you know, we're talking about sort of transforming the way we think about exercise. And if I think of it as this is the way for me to be kind to myself, even if it's little, even if it's just like a 20 minute something, it is a way to be kind to myself and then I can give myself permission.

Okay? That email that can wait

that the world is not gonna screech to a halt. If I tell my family, Hey, leave me alone for half an hour.

Um, but I think sometimes you almost feel. Guilty. Like, oh, I should be there to do, take care of all this stuff. And it's like I can give myself permission to do that,

and it kind of frees me up a little bit, I think.

[00:41:53] **Michelle Segar:** Absolutely. I mean, that's why in no sweat I explained my MAPS model and that was an organic acronym that came from, you know, studying this problem for years and figuring out like, what do people need to solve it? Well, they need to give themselves permission, and that's the word, the p and maps as permission to prioritize their own self care.

But remember, it doesn't have to be a gold standard. And I think that really it doesn't have to be a half an hour. Right. And I, and I can't tell you how often that issue really gets in people's way, that they're like, I really wanna exercise for a half an hour 'cause that's what will make me feel the best.

But we're constantly making trade-offs in life across all areas, like part of life is making trade-offs, right? But we haven't been taught how to make trade-offs when it comes to exercise and eating in more intentional ways.

And I propose, as you know, in the joy choice that learning how to make these trade-offs is essential. And it's not hard to do.

[00:43:02] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Your book, the Joy Choice, focuses a lot on the challenges and the barriers and really dives into that in detail. There are two examples I wanna talk about quickly. The first, I think you've been alluding to this all along, but I just wanna unpack it a little bit more,

is perfectionism, right? Aiming for the ideal. And I'm gonna just tell you a quick story that I read. A lot of times I read the New York Times and I click on these articles all the time that will say. Experts weigh in on the best time of day to exercise, or you should be doing this type of cardio, not that type of this or that.

You know, it gets really nuanced about like the ideal, um, I'm using air

quotes here, right? The quote, ideal things you should be doing. And actually it really bogs me down. 'cause sometimes I don't know, just like the, some of the things I suggest are just not gonna work for

me. So could you talk a little bit about perfectionism and why?

I think, I think we've gotten into this a little bit, but just more explicitly, like why does that become problematic?

[00:44:02] **Michelle Segar:** Yes. So you are asking me to talk about what I call the top four decision traps. Here's another acronym. Temptation. Rebellion, accommodation, perfection. And perfection sets the stage for everything because, and it's not perfectionism, right? It's, I'm not talking about a personality trait or needing things to be perfect all the time.

I'm talking about needing, I just wanna make sure, 'cause I don't

[00:44:30] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay. Yeah, I think I actually said it wrong too, so I'm

glad you

pointed that out. Perfection. Yeah,

[00:44:35] **Michelle Segar:** We've learned to exercise and change our eating in perfect ways, because those are how the role models do it. That's what the articles say, and here's how this all has evolved. It's not just to, to, um, hook into our want to be as good as we can be.

So if we follow what the successful people do, then we can be just like them. I mean, of course that's what companies are trying to sell us all the time. That's what media articles are trying to sell us to. Um. Here, here's how I view it. So it's, it, that's one of the reasons why we have ideals and perfection ways of thinking about this.

But the other reason is just this very organic way that we've, our society has evolved to think about it. So if, if you go back to, you know, for the last 40, 50 years of research on exercise, um, the value of exercise from a governmental funding point of view, is for the physiological and health benefits that exercise potentially could bring human beings.

And so millions and millions we're probably way over a billion dollars of research has been funded to study the potential physiological and health benefits of exercise. Okay, so in order to get your research funded, you have to, your research questions have to be pretty precise and also simple because you have to be able to convince people, oh, this is gonna be worth doing and I'll be able to measure it.

Measure measurement is very important. So you measure something in physiology based on a dose of exercise. You might have two or three doses, and then you measure the physiology. And after the study is published and the

media pick it up, it turns out that people who do this dose of exercise in a laboratory, we're not talking about sustainability.

We are only interested in measuring the dose response of, uh, a certain type of exercise with a change in cellular function. That's what my husband does. Um, or so we hear about a dose and it's precise and what does that translate into? There's a perfect way of doing it to get that, but it's only the, it's only the story that got funded, got told because that was how the study had to be sold to do the research.

So it could be measurable and reportable. So whether we're talking about benefits from eating in certain ways or large epidemiologic studies, the results have to be told in measurable ways. And that in and of itself creates a perfection frame and a fixed frame about what something needs to look like to benefit you.

And that gets back to this very fixed notion. And you know, I'm just gonna jump to the, the alternative that we don't have to go there for the longer picture, but the solution for that is. We have got, just like we live every other area of our life, we've got to learn how to be dynamic in the moment with our decision making around eating and exercise.

Because that is how we make decisions that are consistent, not the same, but that consistently favor our self-care through these behaviors. We have to learn to be dynamic and pivot and improvise.

[00:48:12] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Yeah. And, and as you're saying, as a sustainability, because that's what I think is so important about what you're doing. You're looking at this for a lifespan, not

what's gonna be the most effective thing to do this week, but what's gonna keep it going? And so that flexibility is essential. Um, yeah. The other one I wanted to talk about of your, what the other example is rebellion, you know, that rebellious teenager in us, that if we're told we should do something that just responds, like, you can't make me, you know, and I'll tell you, my clients talk to me about this a lot. Like, I know I shouldn't eat that bag of cookies at the end of the day, but at the end of the day, I'm like. That's my way of breaking the rules. You

know? That's my way of having freedom and so it's really, yeah.

[00:49:01] **Michelle Segar:** I earned it. I

[00:49:02] **Debbie Sorensen:** Iron it.

Yeah. Yeah.

[00:49:04] **Michelle Segar:** Yes. I mean, rebellion is, is kind of the emotional thing, right? Like perfection is more about standards. Rebellion is like, it's like feelings. And you know, on a theoretical level. We can look at reactance theory, which says that human beings are motivated to, um, reclaim their freedom.

so if a way of eating feels like it's taking away your freedom because of, because of the meaning it has for you and the reason you're doing it. And these reasons and meanings are what we're rebelling against.

It's, and, and so that's why it's really pretty easy to flip that switch. Um, So there are all these theories that would help us understand why. But if we just go into real life and we think about, you know, being on a certain eating plan, or I'll use this, pass a word now, diet, being on a diet, and we're doing it because we think we should, even if we decided to do it, regardless of whether a clinician in encourages us.

And, and, and very sincerely says, you are pre-diabetic. And if you keep, putting on this one and a half pounds every year, you are going to get diabetes there. This, well-meaning warning. Regardless if it's just us, I really want, I don't like how I feel in my body. I really wanna, I really wanna lose my weight.

That can create this whole should chore meaning and why for the behavior. And all we wanna do with those instances is rebel against it. We might follow it for a certain time, but the dynamics of that should eventually is gonna make us rebel. And that's with eating. That's the directionality for eating.

But if we think about exercise, if we should exercise in this way and we should do it this way and for this long, guess what? I don't wanna do that. So the problem with doing anything in out of a should paradigm, and there's many things that contribute to that paradigm, is that we can't fully own it.

[00:51:13] **Debbie Sorensen:** Mm-Hmm.

[00:51:14] **Michelle Segar:** And that's also why the right whys, if we're making a decision to eat in a certain way or to move in a certain way because we know it's going to help us feel better than the alternative that is. ours, right? I mean, we still have to get past the other self-care entitlement issues and permission issues.

But if we can say, this is why I'm doing it, and I will feel better and I'll be better as, as a professional and a parent, and you know, that's ours. There's no should around that. Right? And so that's why it's so critical to, to start out with the right whys

[00:51:59] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. We'll link in our show notes for this episode to some motivational interviewing

episodes that we've done, because I think that's, there is something about someone telling you what to do in that kind of should type of way that, I mean, who really likes to be told what to do? No one. And so I, we've had some related episodes, but I think that this is really important to just be aware of that, that 10 not setting yourself up for that to, to have these standards that you're gonna just automatically wanna rebel

against. Um, yeah, so I think that's really helpful. I do wanna move into strategies and there are so many in your books and you walk through some really specific ones. I highly recommend people who want to learn more about this, check out your books, just there are some super helpful practical strategies that, that I think will really help. But there's a couple I wanna talk about. The first is about making exercise more reinforcing by making it more fun, right? Like you're talking about just needing it to be more enjoyable in the moment. And you had in, um, in no sweat, you have an exercise where you list negative experiences that we have with exercise and things that are more positive and more fun. And so I made both lists for myself and I realized there are some things that sometimes I feel like I should do that I just do not like. I just don't. They're some, someone else might, but I really don't. And then I thought about what do I actually enjoy? And that list was actually longer than I expected but I just wanted to pause there to tell you that I found that really helpful.

[00:53:37] **Michelle Segar:** Well, let me just say that people always ask what's the best way to exercise? You know, and the answer that any, any professional who cares about sustainability should say, and I think they are learning to say, is the very best exercise is the one you're gonna want to do, or the one you're gonna be able to want to do and can fit into your life consistently.

And, and some people would say, well, I don't like any exercise or No ex, right? And so that's important to address it. So I don't wanna sound like, um, something is gonna be the same for everyone. Now there are people in, in, so

sometimes being in a larger body means that people have joint pain when they move their bodies.

And so the challenge with that is to find things maybe like in the pool. Now that can be inconvenient. So this isn't a perfect world. Like I can't give the perfect exercise to everyone. So, but I do wanna acknowledge, um, that it can be challenging for some people. So joints, rheumatoid arthritis, um, those can all be challenging situations.

They're not insurmountable, but it's important to acknowledge that it's not. Easy peasy for everyone. Some people have less sensitivity in their own body, you know, interceptive experiences, they might say, and I've worked with plenty of people who says, you know, Michelle, I just don't really, I don't really feel better, feel anything when I, you know, take that walk.

But what they've learned to appreciate the positivity, the positive experience that they get when they don't notice any difference in their mind and body or sense of wellbeing, is they feel proud of themselves. They know they're taking better care of themselves. So yes, they're not getting that the, the type of body mind related benefits that I think, um, are the most motivating.

But when you teach people to think about it in this way, they can reinforce it through these cognitions or meanings, if you will. Um, so it's taking those more challenges aside. Again, bell curve, most people can find ways of moving when they change the meaning of it. So like, let's just say you had always tried to run to lose weight and you hated it.

It was something you should do, and you didn't like exerting yourself. And then you were in a job and you didn't, and you never kept it up and you didn't exercise because you couldn't, if you couldn't exercise in the right way, why bother? But then you had this incredibly stressful job that you just, I mean, you weren't in a position where you could leave it and you found that running would help you blow off steam and reduce your stress all of a sudden.

Running went from being this enemy to being an ally because it cultivated experiences in you that you needed, but you had to change the meaning of it. So I guess I wanna ask you, when you kind of came up with this list of things that might have been more fun, were any, if you were doing them with maybe, uh, the wrong why or had you ever done them in the past with the wrong why, where you didn't like them, but now you do 'cause you changed the meaning of them?

[00:56:55] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I mean I think that some of the things that I do that I put on my positive list are like, I put Peloton on there because I actually, I wouldn't say that cycling is my favorite thing in the

world, but it's kind of fun. But also I always feel it just helps with my

stress, you know what I mean?

And I don't do super hardcore or anything. Um, same thing with, I have a straight strength training thing that I sometimes do at home that's pretty, like I can do it pretty quickly. Um, but it's like I just, I think it's that association where it helps me with stress is, to me, that's the transformation.

[00:57:31] **Michelle Segar:** Yes, Yes, You know, it helps you with stress and then you feel better.

[00:57:36] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. And I will tell you, lemme tell you my favorite. Thing that I discovered. So I had taken beginner ballet, um, probably five years ago before Covid, and actually, I've talked about it on the podcast before. If anyone's been listening to the podcast for years, they might remember this. Um, but the, the studio shut down during COVID, I put that on my list.

I love it because it helps me with the boredom sometimes of exercise. I just, they're not mentally stimulating, but I like to dance. And also, I like that you're learning a technique, like a skill. And so I looked online at my ballet studio. Broach Ballet now has a lot of online classes that you can do.

They're prerecorded. It's not that expensive and I can do it from home. Um, and so I, thanks to your books signed up, and so now I can do some ballet classes and some, you know, ballet warmups and that kind of thing. And I think it's so fun.

So

it's really helps me reconnect with the joy part that I absolutely, it makes no sense for me to be doing ballet at this point in my life, except that I like it,

[00:58:40] **Michelle Segar:** that, and that is the very best sense, sensical reason

[00:58:45] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm not trying for the ballet anytime soon, you know, to be a ballerina. But I just like the, I think it's fun, you know, in a way that like a bar exercise class isn't to me. 'cause it just feels like boring exercise.



[00:58:56] **Michelle Segar:** And you know, the thing, you know, I, I think that your listeners might. Relate to, or just an, an analogy that I talk about sometimes, not all the time, but exercise, moving our bodies is inherently embodied, right? And we all have different things that we like to do and don't like to do. And sex is an embodied process too.

And can you imagine if we all had to go to, like, take sex classes and learn how to do it right?

[00:59:29] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah.

[00:59:29] **Michelle Segar:** How, what that would do to everyone's sex drive, there's

a

[00:59:33] **Debbie Sorensen:** the fun,

[00:59:34] **Michelle Segar:** do it, right

So it's, I mean, once you make the analogy with sex, and I have a a, a friend, um, Lori Hollander, who's a sex therapist, and we have always shared this understanding that whether we're talking about sex or exercise, you've, people have to give themselves permission to do, to do it in the ways that are going to feel good to them.

Otherwise they're not gonna wanna do it.

[00:59:59] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. Okay. And I'm gonna ask about one final strategy. And

even though there are so many more in your books, I know that we're running on time here, and that is this idea, actually, I think this is the antidote to the, the. Perfect problem. Right. Um, and that is all movement counts. Tell me about that.

[01:00:21] **Michelle Segar:** Well, um, when I published No Sweat, um, all movement officially didn't count. The powers that be were saying that it had to be at least 10 minutes to count. And, um, I, so I was, I was worried that my book, that, you know, the, the top, you know, my colleagues who are the top exercise researchers all around the world, were gonna really not, um, support my book because I said everything counts back in.

When it was published in 2015, and actually it didn't count until 2018

because,

[01:01:00] **Debbie Sorensen:** curve.

Yeah.

[01:01:01] **Michelle Segar:** it was because it's important to understand why we don't think thing, uh, not everything counts. So again, it gets back to the prescriptive, you need this much, this is how we study the research, you know, and this is what leads to, it's this amount.

Now the, the thing that's also important for people to understand about these rules that we've learned about what has to count is that this 10 minute bout that was clarified in the, the 20, I think it was the 2017, um, maybe it was earlier than that guideline. Maybe it was 2014. I don't know. Is that, I emailed the first author of that paper because I was combing it.

'cause I had already been coaching people both as a exercise at, you know, professional and a health behavior change professional that everything counts. And I'm like, there's no reference that you said that it's gotta be 10 minutes in duration, but. There's no reference for that. There's no data to support that comment.

Can you help me understand why that's in the recommendation? And the gentleman said to me, well, we only had a way of measuring physical activity that was more than 10 minutes. So instead of saying that in the recommendation, they just said anything less than 10 minutes doesn't count.

[01:02:17] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay. Yeah.

[01:02:19] **Michelle Segar:** So, so that's why we think that there's all these rules.

Everything counts. Now, the science supports it. In 2018, the United States came out with a new guideline that took out any criterion. The World Health Organization came out with a new guideline taking, removing, you know, the 10 bout duration. I wanted to give people context because I think context is really important.

Everything counts because he, I'm gonna give you a visual.

[01:02:44] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay.

[01:02:46] **Michelle Segar:** just a, if we're sitting here typing, you know, during the day or we're sitting here listening to people and talking like. This is how much energy we expend. But if we stand up, you know, and we walk over here, you know, we're doing exponentially more movement and we know the physiology of just contracting muscles is that you just contract the muscles.

Muscles. And, and, um, the other thing we know is that the benefits, the physiological benefits of moving our bodies, um, quickly decline. And so what we want to do is be consistent. Again, it's not being the superstar, it's just being consistent. And so everything counts is a physiological truism for most people.

And so with that, it frees us up. To choose to move and take any opportunity to move that we can see and claim. And as you know, in no sweat, I have this very big list of all these opportunities to move that once we, we don't see them because we've been taught to see them. But once we can recognize them, my favorite is the long cut, right?

Instead of taking a shortcut, we engineer taking a longer way somewhere to build in an immediate 20 minutes of moving, um, active waiting while your kids are playing sports. You can do a loop instead of sitting and working on your mobile phone all the time. So everything counts. Free us to find and discover and enjoy the gifts of movement that really are everywhere in our life.

But if we don't believe everything counts, then we will never take them.

[01:04:34] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, I love that. It's like just, you know, if it's taking a little stretch or going for a quick walk with your dog or something like that, you know, it's, it's not this really huge strenuous workout, but it, it's movement and it matters. And some days that's all you have. And so that's

wonderful, right. To, to kind of build in more of those where you can

[01:04:52] **Michelle Segar:** It is a bridge to consistency.

[01:04:55] **Debbie Sorensen:** yes. Michelle, thank you so much. I feel like I could talk to you all day, but we're gonna, we're kind of running long on time here, so we're gonna wind down. Um, so where can people find out more about what you have to offer? Obviously your two books are terrific, highly recommend

those. Um, where can people find out more online?

[01:05:12] **Michelle Segar:** Sure. Well, I have a website and it's my name, michelle.seger.com. Um, there's quizzes for both the joy, choice and No Sweat, so that you can find out kind of where you sit on the different issues that we've been talking about today. And I wanna also let your, um, community know that I am, um, in the final process of creating a certification to help professionals help their clients and patients make these transformations and mindset learn how to do it in very, um, in a, in a full system.

So it's like you do it, you learn how to do it like this, um, and it's easy. So if people are interested in that, they should just go to my website and through the contact form, say, Hey, Michelle, let me know when this is ready to go. I'd just like to learn more. It's not a commitment.

[01:06:04] **Debbie Sorensen:** Great. Well, we'll link to all of these, um, resources on our shows and notes for today. And Michelle, thank you so much. I really appreciate your work and I really am so glad that you came on to talk to us about it today.

[01:06:15] **Michelle Segar:** It was such a joy. Thank you so much. Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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