

# How to Manage Multiple Life Rolls Skillfully with Sarah Argenal

[00:00:00] **Sarah Argenal:** You have to be able to zoom all the way out and see, okay, all these pieces and how are they all working together and how are they impacting each other and how we let go of one for a little while cause it's not as important while we zoom in and focus on this other one.

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**Diana Hill:** I'm Diana Hill practicing in seaside, Santa Barbara, California.

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

**Jill Stoddard:** And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard author of Be Mighty and The Big Book Of Act Metaphors.

**Debbie Sorensen:** We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

**Diana Hill:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock.

[00:01:00] We really value our continuing education here at Psychologist Off the Clock. That's why we're thrilled to be partnered with Praxis Continuing Education and Training. Praxis aspires to set a new standard and evidence based professional development for behavioral health professionals. They offer live and online workshops conducted by top class, peer reviewed trainers and contemporary behavioral therapies, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, Compassion Focused Therapy, Radically Open Dialectical Behavior Therapy and others.

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**Yael Schonbrun:** We also want to share with listeners that we're partnering with your parenting mojo podcast. They're offering several annual memberships. [00:02:00] One we wanted to share about helps parents struggling with children's difficult behaviors to find new tools and another is to help parents support their children's love of learning.

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**Yael Schonbrun:** This is Yael here with Debbie to introduce an episode on working Parenthood. I interviewed Sarah Argenal who's just come out with a new book called The Whole Self Parent, and we talk a lot about work, family conflict, and her approach is one that is really in line with my own, which really suggests that work-family conflict can't be simple-solved because it's not a simple problem. It's a really complex multilayered problem. And I just wanted to mention a recent essay that I had published in The Wall Street Journal, the title of it was Work-Life Conflict Can't be Solved. The conversation that I have with Sarah goes into detail [00:03:00] about why it can't be simple-solved, but also some strategies, ways that you can use to manage it more skillfully. And I think in this time and space. The reality that work life conflict can't be solved is, is one that's really hitting working parents, but really anybody with multiple roles in ways that are really profound and really at times quite crippling. And I know Debbie that you've been working a lot on parenting burnout, and, the kind of burnout that people feel in their work lives as well.

**Debbie Sorensen:** Well, I really appreciate your work on this topic and also the interview for just acknowledging that it's, there's no quick fix to it. I think so many of us are just exhausted and burned out right now, as we're balancing all of these multiple roles. Or I don't even know if I should say the word balancing. We're just trying to do them all at once on, on hyperdrive. Um, which is always a challenge. But I think with the pandemic, I mean, we've had some recent episodes on pandemic stress and parental [00:04:00] burnout during, during the pandemic. And I was just thinking for myself that it's such a mixed bag, because for instance, yesterday I was running up and down between doing my work, seeing clients and trying to work on my computer while I was, I have the kids and you know, my partner and I are toggling back and forth with who's on kid duty and you're just task switching so much. And so it's really hard and exhausting. And at the same time, actually, it was my birthday yesterday and yours you and I share a birthday

**Yael Schonbrun: (interjection)** twins.

**Debbie Sorensen:** And I, so, you know, we had some new, really nice family time together. And I was just reflecting on how it's like the best of times, the worst of times, because as a family, it's really wonderful and it's really hard. And I just think looking at it, as something that's kind of a, just something to explore within and to do your best as you talk about in the episode to kind of just see the maybe big picture and acknowledge that, and then just [00:05:00] do what you can to live your values. It's like, yes, it's exhausting and it's fulfilling and meaningful at the same time. So I loved the conversation. I think any working parent can relate to what you're talking about.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I think that a lot of what it takes to more skillfully manage this chaos that we're all living with is being able to zoom out, to see the bigger picture and then zoom in and decide what we're going to do, which value we're gonna commit to acting on in that moment and being really compassionate with ourselves as we do it, because it is it's, it's a real tall order of all the things that we need to be accomplishing in any given moment on any

given day. And in this conversation, Sarah gives a lot of really useful on the ground tips for what you can do. So we hope that you get a lot out of this conversation.

Sarah Argenal is the host and producer of the working parent resource podcast, author of the book, *The Whole Self Lifestyle for Working Parents* and founder of the Argenal Institute. Sarah's writing has appeared in *thrive*, [00:06:00] *Healthline*, and *working mother*, and she's here to talk with me today about strategies to escape survival mode and instead find fulfillment and contentedness in our individual roles and overall lives. Welcome Sarah.

**Sarah Argenal:** Hi, how are you?

**Yael Schonbrun:** I'm good. So Sarah and I are old podcast friends by now. We actually met because I got addicted to the working parent resource podcast and ended up reaching out to Sarah a few years ago and very cleverly got myself invited onto guest on a couple of her episodes, and we were just chatting that I haven't spoken to her for two years. And since that time she's launched the Argenal Institute, she's written a book, she's had another child, and she is full in on helping working parents manage what can be really challenging at times more effectively. So I wonder if you can just sort of, um, talk a little bit to us about what, where you are with working [00:07:00] parenthood right now. And I'll be interested to hear a bit about how you coach people differently now than how you might've coached them before the pandemic.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah, what I do, I kind of took a step back when I launched the Argenal Institute about a year ago, I kind of stepped back in the whole process of dealing with working parent issues. Whereas, you know, before it was the working parent resource and so much of it was like, oh, you're dealing with a specific problem. Let me help you with that specific problem, whether it's relationships or time management or self care or parenting or whatever, there were so many aspects of that. And I know that's a lot of what you do and so many other wonderful therapists. And I found that my role I'm like this is not the best fit for me. I think, we're like I'm hitting people or I'm kind of connecting with people at the wrong stage. I would prefer to step back and kind of triage with them and be like, what is the actual problem here? Because so much of what people understand their problems to be and for me at the time he, this is five, seven years, years ago was time management. Everybody was just saying, I don't have enough time. I'm crazy busy. Okay. I need more [00:08:00] time. I need more time. I need more time. And so I found that a lot of my work, once I connected with people was around time management or, you know, integrating self care or simplifying their schedules, things like that. And I'm like, but often these people are actually dealing with so much just the, the issues are a lot deeper and the root cause of their struggles was a lot more complex than they were understanding. And so I really took a step back and that's the basis of the work that I'm doing now is really kind of triaged like, okay. When we take your life as a whole and look at it, What are the main struggles, and that is something that I'm working with people to do in the moment. And it changes all the time. You know, this isn't something that one time, and then we move on. Okay. And, you know, our circumstances of our lives are changing all the time. And so the work I'm doing actually still fits it. Doesn't, you know, it's like the circumstances change, but the. The framework that I help people with is the same. It just as the circumstances and what they're looking at, the

problems, their stressors, all of that has changed. And so then the solutions change based on that, or, you know, where do we go for support or where do we [00:09:00] go to look for solutions? And then I kind of send them on their way and go, okay, I would focus here if I were you, or let's not worry about these issues over here. They're not as pressing these over here are the big ones. And right now, like you're saying, a lot of people are dealing with burnout, for sure. And stress related to having kids home or not being able to focus on their work or having just expectations out the wazoo that they can't meet. Um, the, just the mental health issues that are rising for so many people. So yeah, the issues are changing, but I had kind of already stepped back and been like, that's the thing about working Parenthood is we never just had, Oh, it's always about this one thing. Let's just focus on solving that one problem with parents. It's always, the problem is that we have too many things, always that we're juggling and we can't. Always figure out where to focus our time and energy and focus to start solving those problems and get through our lives in a way that we actually enjoy at night. Just like I'm just getting through it in survival mode, you know?

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, and I love that you both write and talk about [00:10:00] that. We often sort of diagnose the problem as an outside problem and try to fix it with outside solutions, but really there's a depth and a complexity that just get captured when we take that more specific focus and there is a real utility in zooming out and you have this great air traffic controller metaphor that I'd love for you to share, because I think it's a really act one for working parents.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah, it was one of these things where so many people are, they talk a lot about work-life balance, which I I'm fine with that phrase. I actually don't mind it the same with work-life integration and things like that. And I remember I was writing my book and I was kind of just thinking about my life as a working parent myself. And I noticed that so much of what. Works for me, as you know, now I live a life that's so different than when I started as a mom, but I enjoy it. I enjoy every aspect of it. And it's not that I don't have stressors or I don't have bad days, or I don't like yell at my kids or things like that, but it's okay that I am able to see my life from a different lens or different perspective and the way that it like to me, when I've thought of like, How can I describe this or what, what [00:11:00] picture comes up for me, it really is like an air traffic controller. And for me, it was like, I used to be the one and only air traffic controller at JFK international. And I always had to be aware of like the 50,000 airplanes that were flying around, ready to come in the other 50,000 that were like on the runway and ready to like take off other ones were like in the air about to crash into each other. I just, like, I saw all of this chaos up in the sky and on the air. In the airport that I was in charge of keeping track of. And so much of my life as a working parent is you have to be able to zoom all the way out and see, okay, all these pieces and how are they all working together and how are they impacting each other and how we let go of one for a little while. Cause it's not as important while we zoom in and focus on this other one. And so it really has become a process for me of zooming way out. Taking a pulse of the whole picture and then being like, Whoa, this airplane's like about to crash land. Like we've got to go focus, zoom in. We got to forget. What about the other 50,000 airplanes and focus on this one that needs our help right now.

[00:12:00] And I, it really is just over and over doing that, like, okay. Step, pull back, step back. What needs my attention right now? Okay. Let's zoom in focus a hundred percent on that. Get that I'm done. Okay. Zoom back out. And what I feel like that does is it takes away. A lot of the guilt for me that I had before, where I'm like, Oh, I'm focusing on my business right now. Or I'm focusing on my work. I'm now focusing on my kids and my business is falling apart like it before I had kind of this metaphor or this way of approaching my, my life as a working parent, I was. Um, really, I felt stressed out because I always felt like I had to have my hand on all the buttons at all, all the time. You know, I had to be focused on all the airplanes at all the, all the time and I wasn't getting anything really accomplished. I was just stressed out and overwhelmed, but this way I'm able to like, okay, yeah, periodically I have to step back and look at the ecosystem as a whole. And then when I figure out like, okay, where. Is my attention best paid right now. Then I can make that choice and focus in on it and not feel any guilt around that. Just focus on that and do what I need to do there.

[00:13:00] And then step back again and make a different choice next time. So it really has helped me and just in terms of the way I live my life and I feel like it's just, um, for me also, In terms of simplifying my life. It's like, I, I'd kinda like to be like a little regional airport right now. We have really young kids at home. Like I really don't need to be JFK national. I'm going to get rid of a few of these airplanes, or I'm going to hand some of these off to other air traffic controllers right now. I don't need to be focusing on all of that. So for me, it really just kind of explains the whole process. And what has finally started to work.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And I wonder if you could even just share your story of. Having that realization, when you talk about the importance of self awareness and even just being self aware enough to recognize that, you know, you're running an airport like JFK, when you'd really just like to have a regional airport is an, is an essential, critical first step for a lot of working parents because we just get so caught up in the demands of life there are.

[00:14:00] situations where we don't have much control over, you know, running a different kind of airport because there are particular demands, right? We can't absolve ourselves of, but sometimes there is choices. We can't really do anything different if we don't take a step back and make that happen and so you had this really interesting journey into your work that started with, with burnout of your own. And I wonder if you could share that story.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah. I mean, I had built JFK international on purpose for myself. Like when I was in my twenties, early thirties, even that's what really like made me feel alive. I loved the stress. I worked in litigation at the time in San Francisco, I was doing project management. And, you know, when we had our first kid, I kind of went into that feeling like I would have it all handled that I, you know, it's like, I kind of knew the project management aspect of life and time management. And I could really fit a lot of things into my day. It was very efficient, all of those things. And then I also had a background in psychotherapy and coaching and teaching and mediation and all of these kinds of [00:15:00] more. Fuzzy feeling kind of personal development type things like relationships and parenting and how do I do this? So I had all of these different skills. And when I went into working parenthood, I kind of assumed that it wouldn't be as hard as it really was. And I, again, I had built this whole world for myself, very consciously. I knew who I was. I was very clear about my identity as a professor. Rational as a career woman, as somebody who wanted to be a working mom and was not upset about that, you know, I didn't feel any guilt around that. I just, I loved my career that I

had built. I loved my marriage as well. I knew I would love my child. All of those things were really important to me. And it really just ended up becoming about not only the logistics of how I would set up my life after I became a mom. Because I very quickly found out that the way I had set up my life as a single mom or a single, just a wife or somebody who wasn't married and it was very different than what would be needed as a mom as well.

And so for myself, it took me several months of coming to terms, [00:16:00] the fact that I had this previous identity that was shifting it, wasn't, you know, I didn't, I wasn't losing myself. You know, I, I felt like I was losing myself, but really it was just this evolution of who I was as a human and. And kind of embracing my role as mother and working mother and all of these things that didn't exist before I had my first child. And that was a reckoning for me because I had kind of felt like I became very, very clear about who I was and what I wanted, and I had very deliberately built this life. And then the realization that, wow, okay. I guess this is. I need to maybe change some things, because what I had built now looks different and it doesn't fit for me anymore. And I do want different things and it was hard for me to let go of the identity I had built for 30, 35 years. And. But that was the moment when I started to kind of release my death grip on my old life and start to really open up to what could this look like instead? You know, what, what options are out there, what opportunities could I embrace [00:17:00] instead for now, you know, and maybe in 20 years when my kids are back in college, I'm going back to life. Full time, like JFK international, but for now I really miss my kid, you know, like I want to be home or I miss my husband. I miss having time to myself. I miss a lot of the things that just necessarily went away when I started trying to integrate this crazy, our commute in a very busy, demanding job and motherhood and being a wife and all of those things. So it just started to shift and take a different form for me that just. Fit better for who I am now. And I was able to start to release some of that judgment around it, because I had a lot of it myself around, not anybody else's life or any choices anyone else was making. But myself, I was, you know, I just, it felt like I was betraying a different an earlier version of myself. So that's kind of how it evolved for me and that self awareness piece. That really was kind of the key to allowing myself to open my mind to new things.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. In your book, you have this really, vivid description of going on a date with your [00:18:00] husband and, and sort of it being like a nice date and then just kind of starting to weep and, and realizing aloud to him. Like I. Can't do this anymore. I don't even know what has to change, but something has to change. And sometimes it can even just begin with that. I mean, awareness of something really isn't working and then the journey becomes asking the questions to get some clarification. And as you know, and most of our listeners, there's no, um, a practice, a treatment called acceptance and commitment therapy, and it's, it really falls in line with a lot of things. What you're recommending for working parents, which is to sort of start with, um, noticing, like, what is it that your emotions are telling you? What are your, what's your body telling you? Cause if you're really tired all the time, that's important. Um, how are your relationships and how they're going? What is that telling you and starting to notice what that information is, is a really important starting point. And then starting to ask yourself, you know, given the constraints [00:19:00] of my life, given what's important to me, what do I want? What can I change? What is there to work with? And I, I really do you want to talk a little bit about the constraints you talk

about internal obstacles, interpersonal obstacles, and cultural obstacles to overcoming work, working parent burnout and, and being aware of them is really important to be able to overcome them.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah. When I was talking, I mean, I was working with working parents for many years and a lot of people would come and say, this is my problem. This is clearly the. The issue that I need to solve. And so they would come to me and like you as a, as a psychologist, probably not like people come in with a presenting problem and often through exploration and you find there's a lot more under the surface. It's like, you kind of keep healing. And so that naturally happened. And what I noticed is that so many people, and I think it's just our society right now over the last in 20 years, there's so much to see out there. Like there's so many. there's so much stimuli out there. So whether it's like a busy job or a needy child, or you're not getting [00:20:00] enough sleep or whatever, I feel like it's easy for us to pinpoint these things that we see for ourselves outside of ourselves. That's the thing, that's the problem. That's the issue I need to overcome. And. When I found myself having a lot of have conversations with people because we have these very, very, to me, it's very dynamic and also very complex lives. You know, we're not only dealing with outside external stimuli, it's not just about deadlines or getting a project done at work or getting our kid to sleep through the night or things like that. All of that does exist. Yes. But there are other levels too. And so I really wanted to highlight for people. Kind of the just multidimensional world that we all live in. And so for me, the best way that I've been able to describe it, and I I'm sure there are other people who describe it differently too. But for me, I have noticed kind of these three different levels and they kind of start on the outside and work their way in. And so the external, the most external level is , these, cultural things that are going on, um, where there are systems. [00:21:00] And there are, you know, as we've been seeing so much lately there's systemic racism, there is patriarchy. There is, there are so many of these kinds of things where people are discriminated against, or they are prevented from raising in there. In their careers or, you know, we have so many expectations around motherhood or buying homes or any of these things, all of these things. We're just kind of like swimming in as a community, as a society, as a culture and those things exist.

And I don't think that they're brought up a lot. I think that it's easy to dismiss it. If it's something you're not experiencing. and so I, I really thought that it was important to describe. All of those things and it's it's, I mean, it's around the economy. There's just a lot, yeah. Things that are happening in our world that. Don't make it easy to be a working parent. so I kind of looked at that side of it. So there's kind of that external cultural aspect of things, but then there are also demands on us by people we know whether it's a boss or coworkers or a spouse or a [00:22:00] friend or a sister or brother or a parent, or, you know, A neighbor, a church. I mean, yeah. There's children. Exactly. There are so many people outside of us who we really care about and have kind of a commitment to, as well, to take care of them and to help them and to be there for them as well. And that can be a really tricky balance when somebody's asking us for help or needing something from us. And I'm sure right now, so many people during the pandemic are realizing like, gosh, like. Their survival depends on me, but I'm drowning. I don't have anything left to give. I've got no

energy left. And when, what choice do you make then? You know what? That is a real consideration. It's not something that's just like, Oh, you know, positive thinking your way out of it or whatever.

It's you need to make choices in every moment. And every choice you make is going to either help. Energize you, or it might take away energy from you and, you know, giving to someone else may take time and energy away from what you're able to give to yourself. And those are, again, real considerations. And as parents, I mean, we [00:23:00] have a commitment, or maybe as a child is taking care of an elderly parent, we have a commitment or somebody who has a job, you have a commitment, like there are commitments that are real considerations and real, they do provide real constraints for our time and energy. So there's kind of that aspect of things that I think make it challenging for us to just kind of like coast through working parenthood. But the most in depth, one, the one that I found was the hardest to understand, or to really reckon with, and kind of wrestle with was my, in my personal, like my internal psychology, just the messages that I told myself again, kind of my identity. What, who am I as a mom, as a working mom in life, you know, as a human what's important to me, what are my values? Because all of those things were shifting, but I was so busy and. And kind of at, in my new motherhood years, I was so busy and overwhelmed and burned out. I'd never had time to look into any of that stuff.

I didn't really have time to explore my psychology or Hey, what do I really want? I it's changing, but I haven't [00:24:00] even had it second to sit down and think about. Why is it changing? What do I want it to look like? Instead? I mean, that's hard work. It's emotional work. It's kind of, it can be an exhausting work. And so when you're already struggling with burnout or overwhelm as a working parent, it can be really hard to like, kind of set aside the child who's in front of you going, Hey, I need food that can, or, or your boss get them demanding something from you or whatever. It can be a really hard thing to look at that internal psychology.

But what I have also found is that a lot of. What we experience is working parents. It's like the demands from the outside world and from our interpersonal relationships, all of that stuff tends to take priority over that internal staff. But if we're able to flip it, if we're able to put even a little bit of energy or time or focus on internal stuff and kind of live from the inside out, we, he can let go of a lot of the resistance and a lot of the. Just energy drain and things like that. so that's, that's become what I help people do a lot [00:25:00] more these days is, you know, how do we let go of the overwhelm? Not by managing our time out there, where things like that, but like, Hey, let's start inside and work our way out from there.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And again, that maps on really well to what we talk a lot about and acceptance and commitment therapy, because at least some part of what you're referring to, I think is that we get fused with our own thoughts and it's hard work to get unhooked from them. Thoughts like, and you've talked about a couple of these myths just now and certainly in your writing, but you know, being in demand means that I'm important and valuable or I'm too busy and tired to make anything changes. And when we get really hooked on those thoughts, it becomes impossible to sort of say no, because we don't have an internal compass guiding a different direction. So without our own, you know, sense of

like, what's really important, it's much easier to sort of bow before whatever the demands are. And it's still. I think [00:26:00] even if you do have clarity on what's more important for you, it's still hard to say no to people that you care about or notice somebody who's paying your salary. I mean, for sure that's an important constraint, but it's a little bit easier to navigate through when you have some clarity. And so I think that your work in working from the inside out is super important. Um, well, actually, before I go on, I wanted to ask you what, what are sort of some of the myths that you notice crapping up? More now in this torturous time, in terms of myths that people get really hooked on

**Sarah Argenal:** Oh, well, I know one the other day, I just heard. And I fall in all of these I fall into it's like one of those things . Like I was very codependent growing up. I always kind of felt like, Hey, if I'm not taking care of something, it's going to fall through the cracks or it's not going to be taken care of.

**Yael Schonbrun:** You talk a lot about being a people pleaser and sort of this discomfort with disappointing somebody who's asking something of you and I love this was a while back. You can tell that I've been following your work, but you put out this pamphlet on how to say no gracefully. [00:27:00] , I think saying no, is this incredibly important skill? That is so hard, but again, you have to know what you want to say yes to so that you can say no, but even when you do the saying, no is hard.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah. That's maybe that is one of the myths out there too, is that, Oh, once I get good at saying no, it'll be easy or there'll be no consequence. I'm like, there are real consequences sometimes to saying, no, you might lose friendships. You might get divorced, you might lose a job. I mean, there can be really big consequences. And I think especially now, In our culture again, it's like, there's such an expectation of immediate responsiveness and, just kind of, Hey, and I kind of fell in the trap of training other people to expect things of me. And so it became very hard to sort of extricate myself from that. And then even my children, like my youngest now is three and it's kind of like, I have to remind myself like, Oh, he's totally capable of doing, or even my seven year old, they are capable of doing more. Then they used to be, you know, even six months [00:28:00] ago or whatever. And so it's okay to start training them. Another method is kind of putting the time in and investing the time and teaching them how to do something so that then they can be more independent. And it's not all of those things. Like I really had. You know, even like the deeper psychological stuff was this, I am valuable when I'm doing something for other people. Like if I, you know, when somebody needs something from me, that's, that's where I show my value in the world is if I'm giving and doing for others. And another one is kind of, I am. I can handle it. Like they need me so much that I can put myself on the back burner so that I can take care of them. Like all of these psychological myths that I certainly fell into the trap of. And they're so ingrained. Like, I mean, I think I was starting to get these messages from before I could speak. So it's like, these are things that like under pressure when I'm stressed, when I'm tired, when I'm overwhelmed, that's what.

[00:29:00] Is my natural reaction is just do it, just do it, just do it. Don't think about it. Just try to get through it. Work harder, work, faster power through survival mode. Like all of that is my natural response to just stress or overwhelm or whatever. And I have, I have to

continue to remind myself and it does get easier a little bit. Like you can kind of retrain yourself. It's like my natural instinct is to do those other things, but that self awareness piece is so key because if I'm not at least aware of it, I'm completely controlled by it. Um, and the other one now, too, I I've been hearing is what, you know, the economy is going downhill quickly. I can't say no, I can't. I, you know, I might be fired and my family needs my income. And like we were saying before, like that could be completely true. And so then you need to just take that into account. It's like, okay, I guess my two hour yoga thing I do every morning might have to become a 10 minute thing at night before bed or something, you know, it's like, then.

At least, if you're looking at the reality of your life, the reality of the [00:30:00] constraints, the reality of the structural barriers that you have to overcome the reality of your own internal psychology, all of that stuff. If you're looking at that and are aware of it, the plans and the solutions that you put into place are going to become more effective, just because you're working with real stuff, you're not just kind of like dealing with the surface level things.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah, well, you have more of that internal compass. So if you just, if you sort of are able to identify, like it's important for me to engage in some self care and I also need to retain my income, then you can get more creative in how you find time and space for both of those. And, if, but if you don't even have that awareness of like what your values are, then, then you just sort of are re you know, responding to the external demands instead of following what's important for you individually. And one other area that I think is so cool that you're writing really maps on to acceptance and commitment therapy is that you discuss the mismatch in values and action. And there's this very cool exercise that I have patients do. It's a really [00:31:00] popular exercise called the bullseye exercise, where we actually have people identify what their values are and on this, picture that looks like a bullseye target, they map how close their actions are to what their value is and if I look and see that most of my actions are far away from the target. And that's really telling, or if there are some life domains where my actions are far away from the target, then those are areas that I can work on in terms of asking myself, what are the behaviors that I can start to engage in that would help to bring me closer to the target.

And you gave this example that I see all the time you wrote, I knew my family was at what I valued most, but my actions weren't reflecting my new values and worst of all, the harder I tried to power through all my work so that I could focus on what I actually valued most. The faster, I drove myself into burnout. And so I'm kind of curious, how do you help folks get their actions more aligned with their values? Especially again, as we're talking about, there's such significant pressures that so many working [00:32:00] parents are legitimately facing.

**Sarah Argenal:** The way that I've been able to do it. Number one, I think again, we kind of have to even step back further. I, whenever I talk to people, they can't. Tell me what their values are. They can say something along the lines of, I want to support my family, or I want to be healthy. You know, like you were saying, I kind of need to break it down even further into it. And so that's where I start with people is, well, let's back up even more. What are your values? And a lot of people also will like, recite values from when they were kids. You

know, they were taught as children or what they maybe saw in their home, but they haven't kind of re-up, you know, re-updated that stuff. They haven't updated how they feel about certain things. And that was, that was kind of that crux of it for me was I had a very clear sense of my values. And then I had kids and even kind of going into parenthood. I had, I kind of write it in my book too. Like I had a two dimensional view of what parenthood would be. I understood like, oh, my time is going to change. I'm probably not going to sleep a lot throughout the night, those kinds of [00:33:00] things, but I became a different person like on a molecular level and I didn't lose myself. I still was who I was before, but I just kind of like added on this technicolor to my life and I needed to figure out what that would then look like. And my values did shift. And so, I mean, for me, it was flexibility and freedom and being able to spend time with my family and my loved ones, whoever that happened to be with myself, even when I wanted to. Yeah. And, and those kinds of things, like, I mean, I still spent four years working at that same law firm, but we made other changes around the edges of our lives to start and kind of worked our way lowly, but deliberately into our new lifestyle that we now have seven years later, you know, it's not like any of this stuff ever happened overnight. I was able to do small, tiny little changes, but I was very clear about what those changes were and why I was making those changes again. That's where that. Self-awareness piece comes in because I spent a lot of time.

And a lot of [00:34:00] energy to it, which I think this is a trap. A lot of people fall into, I really was concerned about what other people would think of me or am I making the right choice here? There are so many experts that say that this is the right thing to do, but maybe I want to do this thing over here, but they're telling me this is the way I need to do it to be. Quote, good mom. So let me do that. And I just was, I was getting so wrapped up in so many things that was, it was taking my time and energy and attention away from what really mattered. And when I started to get clear about that stuff, a lot of the stress, even though a lot of the stuff, stances of my life, didn't change a lot, the chaos or stress or guilt, a lot of that stuff that really does still, you know, the decision fatigue, all of that stuff does deplete you in certain ways. I was able to start letting go of that stuff. First, and then I'd start making little changes around the days, my day, you know, it's like, hey, you know what? I am not answering emails after five as PM. And you know that you've got to work with me here. I'm going to have to leave kind of where we're at. And so that my company decided to work with me.

[00:35:00] Luckily, you know, so there are just like, there were probably a hundred of those little conversations and decisions between my husband and I, and we continued to this day doing those sorts of things. So that's kind of how. It worked for me. That's how I work with other people. That's really, the basis of my framework is kind of like start big, start broad, like start, like look at, you know, zoom all the way on that, on that airport and see where everything is. What do we have to work with here? What's the totality of what we're dealing with? How does it all impact each other? And then how do we zoom back in and start making changes in a positive way?

**Diana Hill:** Psychologist off the clock is happy to be partnering with Dr. Rick Hanson and his six week positive neuroplasticity training. You can check out more about the offering on our website, offtheclockpsych.com and there we're going to be offering you a \$50 off coupon code that you can use to sign up. These powerful methods will be useful to you. [00:36:00] And if you're a mental health professional, there is also opportunity to bundle it with his professional course, which is ideal for therapists, coaches, educators, managers, trainers, and health care providers. So register now , through our website offtheclockpsych.com

**Jill Stoddard:** We want to let our listeners know about a free online conference coming October 14th to the 25th. It's called The Embodiment Conference and it gives you free access to incredible teachers, practical tools for these difficult times, and a supportive global community. They'll have a couple of our Psychologists Off TheClock former guests like Stephen Porges and Dan Siegel, and other incredible speakers like Tara Brach, Kristin Neff, and Sharon Salzburg.

So to check it out and to get your free ticket, you can go to [www.theembodimentconference.org](http://www.theembodimentconference.org).

**Debbie Sorensen:** and we'd also like to invite you to a virtual book club with our cohost, Jill Stoddard about her book, Be Mighty that's happening in October. And if you go to our website and link to it through our sponsors page, you can get a [00:37:00] 15% discount at checkout. If you enjoy the podcast, please consider making a values based donation on Patron. Even a small contribution helps us with some of our expenses. You could think of it as taking a co-host out for a cup of coffee and you can link to Patron on our website or just search for us on patron.com.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love how you talk about working Parenthood as an ecosystem where each part kind of impacts the other and that you can sort of do this toggling back and forth of zooming out and zooming in sort of zooming out to see the global picture and then zooming in to sort of focus on one, either make a change or just focusing on getting something done in one particular domain, just sort of come back and just, um, before we start going through the four steps of your system, just talk about this important point that sometimes we focus on the problems that exist outside of us and keep us stuck. It's sort of like that Bible phrase of, the stick in your brother's eye is much larger than the log in your own. It's so much to focus on the stuff that's outside of us. And I'll just [00:38:00] read another quote from your book that I thought was terrific. "You're right. It's tempting to escape the discomfort of our problems as quickly as possible. So our tendency is to get a quick understanding of the problem, then move right into problem solving mode. But until we understand the real issue, we're only addressing the surface level symptoms." And so what your step system really does is it really encourages people to. Ask the deeper questions, and sometimes it is something that's happening outside of you. But as you said, you know, often it's really interacting with stuff that's happening internally at a deeper level. You have this terrific four step system that starts with the system inventory. It really starts with you having people ask a whole lot of questions, but I wonder if you can give us a couple of examples of the kinds of questions that are in that system inventory.

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah, it really, I know probably a lot of people might've heard of a life wheel where they kind of look at all the different areas of one's life and, and the way I kind of break it down [00:39:00] is we have, again, all of these different aspects of our lives. For many of us, we are parents. Um, so we have a parenting relationship with our kids. We also have a marriage relationship or maybe with an ex spouse or with a life partner, some sort of co-parenting relationship that might also be with a parent or a babysitter or a neighbor or somebody who, whoever is kind of in your, in your crew of people who are helping you

**Yael Schonbrun: (interjection)** in your village.

**Sarah Argenal:** You're yeah, exactly. Like who's supporting you in, in that parenting process. Um, we have a work or purpose area of our life. We have our mental health, we have physical health, we have self care, you know, just kind of as a kind of filling ourselves. We have, um, friendships, we have community and, you know, just other neighboring relationships. We have recreation, just all of those kinds of things. So I broke out this the whole first step of this framework that I help people go through this system inventory. As you mentioned before, um, you really go through [00:40:00] every single area of your life. There's money, there's household management, you know, just go through every area and just.

Observe it, don't evaluate it. Don't get down on yourself for whether it's good or bad or anything, or, Hey, this is really what I'd much rather it look like in this first step, it's really just gathering data. It's gathering a snapshot of your life today. And again, like people who have gone through this process six months ago or a year ago, it looks very, very different. Every time you answer these questions, some things might say the same and then other things might change a whole lot. And so it's really just like, hey, let me just get a quick update. Let me look and see what's going on in my life and all of these different areas. And it's probably the only time people will sit and look at their lives as a whole. And what that does is allow people to just, just get an observation just without judgment without flogging yourself for what you're doing wrong or getting too into, oh, this is what's really, really working. I want to keep doing that. Like, you don't have to let go of [00:41:00] anything. You don't have to change anything.

You just get a view, a big picture view. That's kind of far, far, far zoomed out view. And what I've found is people will answer like the simplest questions and it'll bring something up for them. I don't know what it is. I always, it's different for different people, but even just answering those questions and be like, gosh, I just, I didn't even realize that. Like I have been so driven by making money and that is really to the exclusion of my relationships or my parenting or whatever, you know, it's like, just as they're answering these questions, a lot of things will just come up and I don't even know. I kind of encourage people in that first step. Don't even go there yet. We'll get there. That's step two. But in step one, just gather data, just get information and start with that.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And so in the next step, that's sort of the evaluate. You have people move from just taking the snapshot and noticing and becoming aware to actually evaluating. So how do you help people to do that? How do you help people to evaluate the different areas of their life?

**Sarah Argenal:** So in the book, it's kind of a [00:42:00] progress that there's progress. People can go through on their own in the book. That's, that's why I wrote the book is so people could just take this and have it on their shelf and do it whenever they want. But there's just a lot of different questions. And a lot of that surrounds energy levels and Hey, what, what fills me up? I don't, and it's even less about time. I have found it's about like, Hey, when I get to the end of the day, do I feel good about what I've done throughout the day? Or do I feel like I was just kind of in like, go, go, go mode all day. And I didn't really accomplish anything. Was I like running around, like I was in fire drill mode. Yeah. So there's a lot of questions around like how, how are you feeling about each area of your life? And I do encourage people to start with one area you don't like if you had to kind of rank all the different areas, which ones either giving you the most trouble or which one do you feel like you want to improve the most? Which one do you think? Like if you improve this one area, like maybe your mental health or maybe your physical health, maybe that would help you improve some of the other areas? Um, There's prayer, meditation, whatever area of your life you feel like you might want to improve. You start kind of narrowing it down because [00:43:00] we do have limited time. We don't have, you know, we can't just sit here and navel gaze all day long. So it's like, where are you going to focus first? Let's commit to something. And so that whole second process, the whole second step the E for evaluate. It's all about like taking that data and just doing some analysis, looking at it and not just looking at one area, a lot of people will be like, Oh, I just need to, I need the house cleaner. I just need somebody to come in and clean my house. I'm like, do you, or like, do you need to have a conversation with your spouse? Who's maybe not putting in as much energy at the house or maybe do need a babysitter, so you can have a little extra time to like tidy up around the house. I mean, like. There are probably a lot of different options or opportunities to improve your life. But if you aren't looking at it as a whole, it's easy to kind of be like, this is the sore thumb. Let me go focus on that. so this whole second separately let's really look at all of these different areas and let's narrow it down to the one I want to focus on first. Let's, let's make some decisions around that.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. And I know too, that you've been [00:44:00] really influenced by, Greg McKeown's book is centralism. I've heard you talk about it. We've actually had him on the podcast before. and what he talks about is narrowing your focus, right? Because if you're going to be an essential list, you're going to be a lot more effective. If you focus in on whatever's the most important, because, and he said this to me, actually in the interview that like, if you, if you say everything's important, then you're just not going to be effective. And so it's really a question of effectiveness this narrowing. And it's not to say that, you know, something, that's not the thing that you're focusing on, doesn't matter at all to you, but you're sort of deciding that. Whatever you're going to focus on is the most important and, and that you care the most about being effective there. Um, and so the next step is to list solutions, identify actions in acceptance and commitment therapy. You know, this would be the step of, identifying committed actions. And, I think that that one is like a little bit more intuitive and I don't know if there's any tricks or tips of the trade that you'd like to live, leave listeners with.

**Sarah Argenal:** Well, I think the main key to that one and like you were mentioning before, I think it, I think it's [00:45:00] so easy these days. There's so much information out there and

there's a lot of, you know, quote mindset work or positive psychology, or I think a lot of people can get a little bit distracted with all the ideas and the abstract thoughts and the goals and things like that. And like so many people know who really change habits and things like that. You've got to break it down into an action. And so that's what that step is really all about. And it's not just like, Oh, pick an action and do it, or go read that book and do what they're telling you in that book. But instead of this one, it's really about like, this is where we can leverage the information that exists out there.

Because I have found that so many people, they only exist in this step almost like they're not doing any of that. Pre-work, they're not really. I'm narrowing down the things that they want to change. There's like, my life is a insane, I need to fix it. So what's the, okay. Self care sounds like the thing or time management sounds like the thing, this book here is that the top of the charts on Amazon, that might, that must be the one. That's gotta be the thing that's going to work for me. And so they'll try to put it into practice, that one program and it won't work for them and they'll be like, Oh, [00:46:00] I must be doing it wrong. I should try it again. And so I find that people have been just. It's so easy to get pulled off course. So with this step, what I'm really trying to help people do is like stay focused on the things that you identified in those first two steps.

Like you have targeted an area. So now go out and utilize that information that is out there for you. There is all sorts of information, all sorts of ideas and support and advice, tools, and tricks and tips and all that stuff. That's all out there. So just get you, don't have to change everything about your life right now. Just change this one thing and go out and target your search too. The improving that one thing. But while doing that, you can brainstorm 10, 20, 50, a hundred, 200 things that can improve your life. And I think, yeah, when you do this process of brainstorming a ton of different ideas, it allows you to. Try one, which is kind of the last step. You try one and see how it goes, actually implement it and see what happens. And if it's not working, you know, from this third step that [00:47:00] there are other things I can try. If this one's not working, I can let this other thing go. And if it's not inspiring me, if it's not, you know, if it's not actually being effective, I can let it go. I've got other ideas. And so I can go now pull a second thing and try that, but it just kind of, it breaks it down. So it's not such an overwhelming process of like, I need to just improve myself as a whole. It's like, where do you begin? You gotta choose somewhere to begin.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Right. there's this trend of tiny habits or habit formation. That is really, I think, a strong movement, because it really is about focusing on one thing and creating small habits and building from the ground up as opposed to sort of, you know, trying to upend your life. It rarely sticks when we try to sort of. Poke here and poke there. We rarely move as opposed to if we start small and build over time. So I just want to affirm that the other and that last step of familiarizing, which you define as implementing experimenting, and then really asking yourself, is that helping me to create the life that I want or, [00:48:00] or is it not? And if it's not, then you kind of return to the list of solutions or to evaluating and create a new experiment. Those steps actually really remind me of what I do with couples. I teach couples communication skills in two different kinds of conversations. The first is discussion, but the second is problem solving.

When I teach couples problem solving, I actually have them walk through those steps where they generate solutions and as they're generating them, the trick is not to evaluate, but to be as creative as possible and to write them down and then they'll evaluate them, pick one and implement it for usually like a period of two weeks and yeah, take data , and It's great news if it works and it's great news, if it doesn't, because if it doesn't just gotten some data that is really informative. And then, you know, once you know what doesn't

**Sarah Argenal:** (interjection) is helpful.

**Yael Schonbrun:** exactly. So it's okay if it doesn't work, and it's great to also just, you know, set small expectations so that you're not disappointed, and this whole self lifestyle four step protocol really [00:49:00] fits in with that idea of really building from the ground up and being willing to try different things and be creative.

**Sarah Argenal:** Well, I think the other thing that I wanted to do when I kind of included that step is that I think. Again, most of the people that I work with, the people who are in, or now what they're kind of getting caught up in the kind of the trap that they are in is this infotainment thing where they are taking in tons of people, psychology or self help books, or talking to every friend they have, or crowdsourcing on Facebook, what they should do about a problem in their life. Like they're just taking in information and what that is doing is number one, causing them to feel like complete failures. Cause everyone else appears to have the answer. Everyone else is like, this is what you need to do because that's what worked for them in that period of their life, with their child, with their marriage or their family or their career or whatever. And so they're just kind of taking in all this information, right. But then no one ever implements it either. So it's like, I clearly have the answers here. I should be able to do this and I'm not. And so clearly [00:50:00] I'm the problem. I'm the failure. And so that's what I wanted to help people do is like, okay, step three is getting some ideas, but we kind of. Can we can get rid of a lot of the ideas cause you don't need to fix everything right this second. And we need to kind of break it down into things that can be done over a period of time and you can check it out and see if it works for you. And so it's not as big a deal. It's not as overwhelming to implement that one tiny little thing you can try it. And like you were saying that experimentation phase, I feel like we've kind of forgotten that that exists. You know, we can try it. And a lot of people will commit to something because they've read a book that everybody's reading and everyone swears by it and they'll try it.

And, you know, for a percent of people it's going to work great and they're going to love it and they're going to stick to it and they're going to go out and, you know, proselytize about it. And for people who it doesn't work for, that's who I'm trying to help. I was like, okay, that's. Is working for those people. And if it's not working for you, you're not wrong. That's not, you're not the problem. That's just not a fit for who you are right now with the situation in your, in [00:51:00] the circumstances you are facing the constraints, you have your goals, your, you know, it's like we have a million different things to consider right here and for whatever reason this isn't working for you and that's okay. So now let's try something new and that feedback in that kind of process of trying something and learning for yourself, it can be scary. And I think a lot of people get stuck in that third step of just taking in and

consuming information right now, because it seems like we're doing something, but we're not, we're not really actually trying to solve a problem. We're just learning. We're just putting stuff in our head. And after a while, that just gets to be too much. I think.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Yeah. I was just listening to a recent episode that one of my cohorts did with Lori Gotlib and who's the author of, maybe you should talk to somebody and she has this great line where she says, you know, insight is the booby prize of psychotherapy. And I think I like information, information is, is great and it's interesting, but from a lifestyle perspective and from a happiness perspective, it really only makes a difference if we take it out into the [00:52:00] world and act with our hands, our feet and our mouth. And that's really what acceptance and commitment therapy is about too. It's really about sort of getting to the point of engaging in committed action that's in line with your values. And you know, of course, that has to start with that self-awareness which you. I think did a great job in sort of emphasizing like that is the starting point. Um, and then I love too that you described that, you know, it's not. just implementing a simple solution, it's really about changing your lifestyle and that, that requires you to sort of continue with that self awareness of doing those check-ins. And you talked about the restorative check-in and the preventative check-in, but it's really about continuing to monitor, like how's your airport flying? Like are our, our airplanes coming in too fast or too slow? You know, which airplane do you need to focus on landing and which one do you need to help take off? Uh, and, and so it really is about just continuing that zooming in and zooming out.

**Sarah Argenal:** that quick fix culture we're in right now, too. That was [00:53:00] another trap. I'm like, we've got to address this because right now it's so tempting to believe like, Oh, you read this book, you do this one thing and we're good. Okay. Like, does it spark joy? Okay. All of our organizational problems are solved or whatever. And I it's so tempting. It is incredibly tempting to believe that that's all it takes and that then you do it once and you're off to the races and you never have to do it again. But that, I mean, if nothing else throughout my experience, as a working mom, it's just that, gosh, my kids are changing all the time. I'm changing all the time. My work is changing all the time. Our lives are changing all the time and it's important to keep up. Pulse, you know, on how are, how are things going and what do I need to fix now? It's always kind of just refining and that's, but I also think that that allows people to experiment and to change and to kind of just question for themselves, like, am I, am I good? And a lot of times you might be, you know, and then there'll be times where you're like, whew, I like that project really took it out of me at work. And I didn't realize it would take so much of my time. So. Now that that's kind of over, how do I want to [00:54:00] reset here or whatever, you know, it's like, it just allows you that opportunity to evaluate over time.

**Yael Schonbrun:** Right. It's this PR processing. I think that you're advocating, which really helps people be flexible and move with the times and wherever you're at in that moment, and to be able to look forward and prepare yourself for what's coming. And I'm just curious to finish this off are in your busy little airport over there. What, what are the things that you've been working on trying to either, evaluate, implement, come up with new solutions for what are sort of that that particular challenges are, or, I don't know if they're challenging, but what are the areas that you've been working on recently?

**Sarah Argenal:** Well, I mean, like everyone else, we're kind of reevaluating with COBIT and it, you know, the first couple of months, it really, I mean, it was. The rollercoaster of emotions. It's like, I'm angry today. I'm sad today. I think the last two weeks or so I've been in just kind of this, like the book was launched and I finished kind of doing a big push of promotion right after it was launched. And then my brain just shut down. And I, so I [00:55:00] was in this trap of like, I need to be doing stuff. I need to be productive and I have all these things I want to be doing. And I just took the last two weeks and just kind of evaluated for myself. I'm like, no, you know what? I've been pushing for a year to get this out.

I think it's okay to just. Be brain dead for a week or whatever, and just spend time with my kids and Bisbee present and, you know, learn about the Minecraft things that they're building or whatever, um, or spend time with my husband. Like I had to kind of go through. That whole process of reevaluation. And it's kind of launched me this week into, okay, so I'm refreshed. I feel better. I feel more clear-headed. Where am I? I'm gonna focus my time. And I'm, I'm really into simplifying everything right now. So in terms of my business now, where are we going? What does it look like? Right now we're homeschooling and we're about to start kind of the whole second grade and proofs preschool year, but it's really, for me, like, I, I, from I'm having this pull to simplify, like get rid of anything that causes extra stress or is [00:56:00] taking my attention away, which is so easy. I'm, it's, my undergrad degree is in political science. So it's easy for me to get pulled into the politics of a lot of different things. And so kind of like, okay, I'm taking like a social media detox and I'm spending time with my husband and we're, even though we can't really leave our house, we're making our backyard really nice so that we can sit outside and have a glass of wine or something at night. So. It really is just like calming myself, simplifying my schedule, being with the people I love staying healthy, all of those things. That's what my airport looks like today and we'll see kind of how it evolves.

**Yael Schonbrun:** I love it. I love the value of simplifying and that's one that I really get behind too, as a busy working parent. figure out what you want to say yes to, and then practicing no to the other things I think really just opens you up to be more engaged, more present, feel more effective, enjoy more, the things that really matter to you. So I love that. , I also just wanted to say before, before I turn off the recording, before we end, [00:57:00] um, that I was so impressed that in your book you managed, and I don't know how you did this, but you got a lot of COVID relevant stuff in here. Must've been like a final push. Cause the thing they ended up like a month or two ago, and we were not that far into the pandemic. How did you manage to do that?

**Sarah Argenal:** Yeah, I was done with the book. I had done all the rounds of editing and all I had my last proofread very last, like make sure every period is in the right spot proofread. I was about to send it to that proofreader and all of this COVID stuff was happening. And. My mom did one of the developmental edits for my book. She used to be a ghostwriter, all that. And I'm like, do I need to update this? Do I have just to go back because I'm like, I want it. And at the time this was March of 2020, so it was just starting. And I'm like, by the time this is out, will this all be over? Do I want to say something? Will it be evergreen? Or, you know, I'm like, I don't know what to do. She's like, yeah, you gotta mention it. I think it's a big part of what people are dealing with now as working burns for sure. But [00:58:00]

everyone, of course. Um, so I went in and I went through the whole book again. I changed the intro and I, and I assume in the future, I'll change that again.

Kind of do a second edition where I can update it. Cause at the time I really was like, I have no idea where this is going to go, but it kind of. Prove the premise of the book, which is go ahead, ha you know, create a life and then see what happens. Cause it's all going to shift. It's all going to change. Circumstances are going to adjust. And that is kind of the point of the book is there's no expert out there. You're always going to have to be the one and you can utilize information from experts and you can really use that for good. But it all has to start with you. And it all has to start with like this moment, you know, we can't rely on what we were doing a year ago or five years ago, or what was real. Then we are dynamic changing humans and, and relationships and families and work and all of that stuff changes so often. So yeah. Yeah, I kind of went back through and adjusted. I mean, some of the science, I mean, some of the research like, Oh, [00:59:00] we have a super strong economy. I'm like, well, I guess not now, you know, just things like that. I really had to go back and sort of a destined, I assume I'll have to do it again in the future, but yeah, I wanted to make sure it was relevant for

**Yael Schonbrun:** That's a timely read. Well, thank you, Sarah so much for coming on. The show is such a treat after following your work for so long to have you, you on and sharing your work. And we'll definitely link to your website and a link to your book. And, um, you got so many awesome materials, uh, through the website and your coaching practice. And I just really recommend any working parents who are struggling to reach out to Sarah. She is a voice of wisdom and common reassurance and also guidance. So thank you so much.

**Sarah Argenal:** Thank you so much. And thanks for all the work you're doing. It's all so necessary these days.

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