

# Master of Change with Brad Stulberg

[00:00:00] **Brad Stulberg:** part of the human experience is going through periods of disorder and is feeling disoriented. And you don't even always grow from those, but that is just a natural part of life that we're always going through these cycles of order, disorder, reorder. Even the most average human existence will include periods of disorder. Research conducted by Bruce Feiler, shows that the average human undergoes at least 35 significant life changes in their adulthood.

So, try as we might, we cannot escape these cycles and I think acknowledging that and accepting it actually makes going through them easier.

[00:00:40] **Emily Edlynn:** That was Brad Stolberg 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.

[00:01:01] **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.

[00:01:11] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:19] **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.

[00:01:28] **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.

[00:01:34] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:38] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

[00:01:47] **Emily Edlynn:** Hi everyone, this is Emily, and I'm here today with Debbie to talk about my discussion with Brad Stolberg, author of his new book, *Master of Change*, how to excel when everything is changing including you. And we covered a lot in this interview, but it's still left so much that the book got into that I found really fascinating.

And I think this book just applies to every human really because we're all managing change all the time and at all different levels, and I think this was a really good mental reset for how to start thinking about change in new ways and really contemplating how we can respond in more thoughtful and healthy ways to managing change.

What did you think, Debbie?

[00:02:41] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, so there's this song lyric that is from a song by Corinne Bailey Ray called *Put Your Records On*. Do you know that song, Emily?

[00:02:50] **Emily Edlynn:** I don't think so.

[00:02:52] **Debbie Sorensen:** Okay, so the lyric says, *The more things seem to change, the more they stay the same.*

And it kept popping into my mind as I was listening to you talk to Brad because it is such a universal, like that's the one thing that is a guarantee is that things are going to change over the course of anyone's life. And what I really appreciated about this conversation that you had with Brad is how he talks about change in such a deep philosophical way.

He just zooms way out on it and looks at change in all these different ways. But I think sometimes having that sense, you know, we're so in the middle of our immediate problem like, oh, you know, this relationship just changed or ended or, oh, I have to move or change jobs or whatever the kind of change may be.

We're so fixated on that that sometimes we don't zoom way out and look at the picture about how this is playing out in our life and what change means to us. And so I loved listening to how he's conceptualizing change in his work.

[00:03:55] **Emily Edlynn:** We talk at the beginning about kind of the human impulse to resist change, that change feels scary and threatening. And there's a lot of resistance to change that actually can have profound impacts on the individual and on society. And so it's really interesting to start looking at some

of his strategies and techniques for how to reconceptualize what's happening when we're managing change, and if we can do a little mental shift around how we're thinking about it, how we really can flourish and thrive from change. And I think it's a great shift of, Just our automatic response of, Oh, change is bad and scary and really looking at opportunity rather than threat.

[00:04:43] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah. And I think change is sometimes good for us and better. And sometimes it's just inevitable, right? We can't stop it. We can't avoid it. Sometimes we might not want to avoid it if it's a change that we're excited about. But sometimes, whether we want to or not, it's going to happen as time passes by.

Actually, one of my daughters just moved from elementary school to middle school. And I, part of me just wishes she could stay in elementary school together, but I mean, that would be pretty weird after a while. And so it's, I can't avoid it. It's inevitable. It's going to happen and it's not easy. One of my favorite things that he talked about was actually toward the end when he talked about how sometimes we want there to be like meaning and growth and post traumatic growth out of change and that that can happen and I, I really believe that that can write that sometimes people can find new purpose or think about themselves in a new way. After they face change and adversity in their lives, but sometimes it just sucks and there's not this deep sense of, oh, that happened for some sort of reason or something like that.

And that is the reality. There are times when we have to deal with change that we don't want, and we don't like, and that's okay too, right? It's okay to not feel like, oh, that was such a great experience, or even, there was so much meaning in that, that I grew as a human being. Sometimes you don't, and if you could make that change not happen you would and I think that that's a way and allowing yourself that is also really important,

[00:06:19] **Emily Edlynn:** Well, and pushing too much for finding meaning and growth when it's not the right timing ends up kind of keeping you stuck rather than moving forward. And I talk a little bit with him about my work with seriously ill children and how to get a terrible diagnosis for your child. That's not, something you embrace. it's you have to integrate a new reality that no one would choose and it's really painful. There are ways to live with that new reality that help with coping, but it doesn't have to be that you're finding this incredible meaning in a terrible circumstance. So I did really appreciate his nuance with that.

So I hope everyone enjoys this conversation. And this affects how everyone thinks about their own changes, whatever change is going on in your lives right now, kind of how you could apply some of these ideas.

[00:07:26] **Emily Edlynn:** Brad Stolberg researches writes and coaches on health, wellbeing, and sustainable excellence. He is the bestselling author of the Practice of Groundedness and co-author of Peak Performance. Stolberg regularly contributes to the New York Times, and his work has been featured in the Wall Street Journal and The Atlantic among many other publications.

He's on faculty at the University of Michigan's Graduate School of Public Health. In his coaching practice, he works with executives, entrepreneurs, physicians, and athletes. He lives in Asheville, North Carolina. Brad's newest book that we're discussing today is Master of Change, how to excel when everything is changing, including you.

And it's out now, welcome Brad,

[00:08:10] **Brad Stulberg:** Thanks so much for having me. It's great to be here.

[00:08:13] **Emily Edlynn:** I'm excited to talk about your book today that covers so much territory and we'll do our best to hit all the highlights, but there's just so much depth and richness to the ideas that you're presenting in this book. What I took away is the mission of your book was to transform our relationship with change. Would you say that's on the right track?

[00:08:36] **Brad Stulberg:** That is, it makes me very happy to hear that. I think that my primary goal when I first set out to write the book was to better understand change for myself. And that goal transcended me and became to help my readers better understand change. And by the end of the research and reporting process, when it was time to actually write the book, the goal shifted yet again to trying to provide people with a language, a vocabulary, some concepts for things that perhaps we experience, we intuit maybe a part of us already even knows, but we don't yet have the words for.

And in this particular case, it's around this amorphous topic that none of us can avoid, which is change.

[00:09:23] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. And you do this really expert job of blending ancient philosophies and traditions with current psychological sciences and

neuroscience. So it's a really interesting blend of all this wisdom that we can all draw on. I'm curious, you kind of start laying the foundation with why this is important to have a positive relationship with change and where we're going wrong.

How would you describe our current relationship with change as a modern society?

[00:09:59] **Brad Stulberg:** I'd say that it is one of opposition and resistance. We tend to try to avoid change or engage in magical thinking when there's change. , we tend to try to over control change, or at least think that we can over control. And we often try to get back to where we started before there was a significant change, and so often that proves to be futile.

And I think more than anything, we just try to resist it. I think the biggest, most extreme example , is perhaps aging. And the gazillion dollar anti aging... industry that maybe a sliver of it is really related to aging well and having good function and vitality as one ages, which I think is a really honorable goal, but that's just a sliver.

I think the vast majority of the anti aging pie is really about looking at aging as this terrible thing to avoid and, avoid at all costs. That's a very intimate example. And then more broadly, I think that when technological changes occur. When social changes occur, we, we often go through periods of struggle.

[00:11:07] **Emily Edlynn:** Right, so in your opinion, after working on this book, Do you think we're functioning with change differently now than in the past or has it always sort of been like this, this resistance and desire to control what we can't control?

[00:11:21] **Brad Stulberg:** I think that this book is very timely, but I also think that it is timeless. All of the ancient wisdom traditions, be it East, west, stoicism, buddhism, the ancient greeks, christianity, judeo christianity, islam they all speak to the topic of impermanence in their own ways and to trying to control what you can and let go of what you can't.

So I think it's been a perennial struggle. for the human species to live in a world of impermanence, when we have this prefrontal cortex that tells us that everything we love is going to change and eventually pass on, and that's very hard to reckon with. I think that what I took up in this book is really starting around 400 years ago, at the very beginning of what you could call empirical science this concept of homeostasis started to have its emergence. The concept

wasn't coined until 1865, so that's about 170 years ago, but in terms of a changed process it was the predominant model of thinking really since the 15 1600s. And homeostasis, in short, says that we crave stability, anything that is a threat to our stability is therefore bad, and when we get shook out of stability We should try to get back to where we started as swiftly as possible.

So, you could use shorthand to say that homeostasis describes the change cycle as order or stability followed by disorder or change or chaos, and then back to order or stability where you started. And this has been the prevailing scientific model for change, as I mentioned, really, since the beginning of science and it started off in biology and the life sciences but it has spread into psychology, sociology and beyond.

And it wasn't until just a few decades ago that set of researchers stepped back and said, actually, this might be the wrong model for change. And when you look at any living system, whether it's an individual like me or you, or an organization or a community, or even an entire species over millennia.

And you see what those that flourish and thrive do in the midst of change. They don't go through order, disorder, order there's a subtle difference but it's an important one, and they go through order, disorder, reorder. So it's true that we like stability, but that stability is always creating itself somewhere new.

And I think the etymology of homeostasis versus this new pattern, which researchers called allostasis really tells the whole story. So homeostasis comes from the Latin root homo, or homos, which means same, and then stasis, which means standing. So it argues that you achieve stability by staying the same.

Whereas allostasis comes from the root allo, which means change or variable. In stasis, which means standing. So it says that you achieve stability through change. And I just love this elegant double meaning that the way to be stable through change is through change, is by changing at least to some extent.

[00:14:42] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. I think that doesn't feel intuitive to the way our brains are wired. I think the homeostasis model probably persisted so long because it's how we're Naturally built, I think, to crave that stability through returning to what felt stable before the disruption.

[00:15:03] **Brad Stulberg:** I think that's right. However, I think that even though allostasis is brand new in science terms, you see this pattern throughout the myths and folkloric traditions dating back centuries. The hero's journey, which is prevalent across mythology, tends to have a pretty common pattern.



The individual that is at home and stable and their life is going well gets called to adventure and enters into a period of disorder and chaos where they see the world as it really is and often part of that is they reckon with impermanence and they go through trials and tribulations and they feel like they're falling apart and then they come back home.

The same but different. And to me that is the cycle of order disorder reorder So I think there's always been a part of us to that realizes that there's something very intuitive and natural about that cycle as well.

[00:16:02] **Emily Edlynn:** Yeah, you know, you see that in all the, if you think about movies and books and TV shows, that's what's happening,

[00:16:08] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, it's it's Simba and the Lion King. It's Elsa and frozen It's Moses and the Israelites. I mean it is a very very common theme in ancient myth and modern myth

[00:16:21] **Emily Edlynn:** So, why do you think it's so hard? Why do you think it's so hard for us right now? There's this sort of... you know, white knuckling our homeostasis and not wanting change and that resistance.

[00:16:36] **Brad Stulberg:** I think a couple of things make it really hard. The first is just, it's the construct that we all grew up in for change for the longest time. If you just Google homeostasis and change, you'll see tons of articles about why it's so hard to go to the gym or stop eating highly processed foods or name that habit.

And they're all written in this theory of homeostasis governs everything. So I think some of it is when you're a fish in water, all you know is water. And for the longest time that was really the only model that we had for change and a big part of what I'm trying to do with this book is, is shift that.

I think something else is that there is an entire industry built up on giving people the illusion of control when we don't have it in promising stability that is backed by billions of dollars of very powerful marketing. And I think it doesn't necessarily acknowledge that part of the human experience is going through periods of disorder and is feeling disoriented. And you don't even always grow from those, but that is just a natural part of life that we're always going through these cycles of order, disorder, reorder. But I don't think that there's an expectation for that. I think the expectation is that I should be happy all the time, I should be healthy all the time, and I live in this jolly western world where optimism is great and any kind of disorder is to be avoided and bad

versus an acceptance that there's no escaping it. Even the most average human existence will include periods of disorder. Research not conducted by me, conducted by Bruce Feiler, shows that the average human undergoes at least 35 significant life changes in their adulthood.

So, try as we might, we cannot escape these cycles and I think acknowledging that and accepting it actually makes going through them easier.

[00:18:32] **Emily Edlynn:** I found that so reassuring when I read that in your book and I think You're right. If you look at the wellness industry itself, you know, it's selling Promises that are made to be broken and you know, I write a lot in the parenting space and Parenting content is full of this You know, unrealistic expectation that things should feel harmonious and calm.

And if they're not, then you need help. Then you need to get this bundle to help you never yell at your child again, or whatever it may be. But I think there's not this leaning into even our family life and people we're in close relationships with we're all changing and that's affecting our relationships and each other.

[00:19:22] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, that's right, and I think that we tend to, we being in the West, we tend to over index on the stability, not the stability through change, and I think it is so liberating that we don't have to give up stability altogether, like stability is important and we can be stable through change. We have to be stable through change and by accepting changing and by changing to at least some extent.

There's some fascinating research I cover in the book on the difference between cultures that raise the people that live there to have what anthropologists call an interdependent worldview versus an independent worldview. In an interdependent worldview, you see yourself as part of a broader environment.

You're very relational you see yourself being impacted and influenced by what's around you more than the opposite, whereas in independent cultures, which is the predominant mode in America and most of the West is diametrically opposed. You see yourself as separate from your environment, as influencing and exerting your will over your environment, and unsurprisingly, interdependent cultures have a lot easier time wrapping their head around allostasis and stability through change because they view themselves as just in harmony with an environment that's always changing. Whereas in the West, we tend to view ourselves as at odds with that environment that is always changing.



[00:20:47] **Emily Edlynn:** and you illustrate that beautifully with this metaphor comparing the road. And the path.

[00:20:55] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, it's one of those days, you know, this is a writer, like when things just work. And there aren't that many days like that. But on this day, I was glad to have it. So I was looking at the start of the book for a way to kind of get at this East versus West view of, change and really how it permeates all areas of our life.

And I was playing around with the metaphor for a wave in a river, which comes up later in the book, but it didn't feel like the governing metaphor. And for whatever reason, a road versus a path popped into my mind, and I've long been a fan of the essayist Wendell Berry. And years ago, I read Wendell Berry had an essay about roads versus paths, and he wrote about them in the very literal sense.

He was an environmentalist, a farmer, a nature writer. So he wrote about like taking care of the land and the difference between paths and roads. But in this book, I use that metaphor in a figurative sense to say that a road is very linear. It aims to get you from here to there as fast as possible.

It plows over everything in its way. If you get thrown off the road, it's unambiguously a bad thing. Your job is to get back on as fast as possible. And you often spend more time looking at the map than the road itself, or in today's day and age, listening to podcasts, zoning out than actually driving. And the goal of a drive on the road is just to get where you're going and to have it feel like it didn't take that long.

Whereas a path works in concert with its environment, it is unveiling itself as you walk it. You can't really stumble off of a path. And there are so many interesting opportunities that arise on the side that you often take note of, because you're really in your environment, you're not separate from it when you're walking a path.

And I think that the more that we can envision our lives as paths the better off we'll be. Because the ultimate fear of living that road life is you crush it and you do that trip perfectly and then you get to the end of the road and it happened really fast and you don't even know how you got there, which is kind of the goal of like a eight hour, you know, one day drive, but that's not many people's goal for how they want to live life.

[00:23:01] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. So let's get into rugged flexibility. This is a model you developed that is the theme throughout the book. So can you just introduce the listeners to this concept?

[00:23:14] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah. So to be rugged is to be strong and durable and really robust. And to be flexible is to be soft, to be supple to go with the flow, to bend easily without breaking. And oftentimes people hear these two words, rugged and flexible, and they think of them as being inherently opposed to one another.

But in my research and reporting on individuals and organizations that weather life's changes really well, I constantly found that they were equal parts, rugged and flexible, so they didn't fall to either of those extremes. They married these two qualities. So rugged flexibility is this key construct that I introduce as what I believe is the essential core skill to navigate cycles of order, disorder, reorder. And I've been told by all the dialectical behavioral therapists in my life that I've made their day by making non dual thinking and the dialectic such a big part of this book.

[00:24:15] **Emily Edlynn:** Yes. As a psychologist myself, I was celebrating

[00:24:20] **Brad Stulberg:** But I think, I think that's so important because in all seriousness, like, we do tend to think of things as either or but so much of life is both and. And this comes up over and over and over again in my subject area for this book, which is Navigating Change.

[00:24:35] **Emily Edlynn:** Yeah, so let's get into that because that non dual thinking is part of your mindset section. So you have a section on mindset, a section on identity, and a section on actions. So I want to touch on each of those. So for mindset, what does a rugged and flexible mindset look like?

[00:24:54] **Brad Stulberg:** It has a couple of core components the first is acceptance, which I know you've had many guests speak eloquently about, so we don't have to spend too much time there, but just accepting that life is full of change and that there really is no avoiding it. Another key component is this notion of being orientation versus having which was developed by the mid 1900s psychoanalyst Eric Fromm.

And we can spend some more time on there in a second. I'm just going to list them all and then you can direct where we get to dive in. Another really interesting part is the importance of updating your expectations to match reality when things change. And then finally the notion of tragic optimism, which is

very non dual, and that is a term coined by the psychoanalyst Viktor Frankl, who many people know for his work on Man's Search for Meaning. But he wrote this little essay a few years after Man's Search for Meaning called The Case for Tragic Optimism, and I actually find that his most transformative work, so I pull from that quite a bit.

[00:25:55] **Emily Edlynn:** Yeah, you get into it really nicely in the book. This whole area made me think. I, I do a lot of work with people with chronic pain and we know from the research that the way people who have chronic pain think about their pain directly impacts the quality and intensity of the pain. So I know you get into the idea of the relationship between pain and suffering and it's something that is a huge piece of chronic pain treatment is pain is not the same as suffering.

[00:26:32] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, that's right. Ooh, I bet you'd like that part of the book. So I was as you mentioned earlier, I really try to pride myself on being very evidence based in all of my writing because I think so many books in the genre are not. I want to be a signal where there's a lot of noise. So I was looking for places to go to try to explore the power of acceptance versus resistance in the face of change.

And a lot has been written about this in the wisdom traditions but that's not really empirical science. And a lot has been written about it in acceptance and commitment therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. But even there, acceptance is just a part of a greater process. But then I stumbled upon this research from pain science.

That shows exactly what you're saying, that a major thing that is often helpful for people experiencing chronic pain is paradoxically to stop making the pain go away or to stop trying to make the pain go away. So there's this offhand equation in the book, which is suffering equals pain times resistance. So life is full of pain. You're always going to have pain, whether it's physical or emotional. And I think that change, for a lot of people, especially negative changes, can be painful. But the more that we resist it, the more that we suffer.

And here I did reporting with the Mayo Clinic Center for Rehabilitation and Chronic Pain Program, and they're at the cutting edge of chronic pain treatment. And a big part of what they do, it's the first step that they do, is they get patients that come in, again, it's the ultimate paradox, to try to stop making their pain go away.

And they get them to accept that this pain is here. And then once that true acceptance happens, you can begin to work with it and you stop pushing it away. And oftentimes the pain improves. It's not to minimize chronic pain. It's not to say that chronic pain lives in people's heads. Chronic pain is very complex.

It's a socio biological environmental phenomenon. You know this better than me. You get 10 leading pain researchers in a room and they can't even agree on a common definition for what pain is. And yet it does seem that the way to approach pain is to live in the in between between wanting it to go away and trying to make it better, but not trying too hard because then it gets sticky.

And that is so hard to do.

[00:28:56] **Emily Edlynn:** Right, and the best treatment for chronic pain actually fits another issue or theme that you touch on, which is finding meaning in life. And so a big part of treatment for chronic pain is to work with people on getting in touch again with a meaningful life where the pain isn't dominating every aspect.

And that is the treatment that seems the most effective in eventually reducing the pain, even though that's not the stated goal, the stated goal is to improve quality of life.

[00:29:29] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I love that. And it mirrors a lot of acceptance and commitment therapy. So I have like intellectual knowledge of this from my writing and research, I don't have lived experience of chronic pain but I have lived experience of really bad obsessive compulsive disorder which you could argue has some parallels with chronic pain.

It's these intrusive thoughts that absolutely debilitate you and you want nothing more for them to go away. But ironically, the more that you try to make them go away, the worse that they become. And such a big part of my therapy was learning to just let them be there. And even when they were telling me I couldn't or something terrible was going to happen, just continue to show up and act in alignment with my values and where I sought meaning.

And the intrusive thoughts to date have never gone away. They just don't hold as much power over my life anymore. And I think psychological and physical pain we're learning are not too dissimilar.

[00:30:21] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. And chronic pain we're talking about as one example, illustrating these concepts, but you're right any sort of physical health diagnosis, mental health diagnosis is a change. It's a period of disorder. So

[00:30:36] **Brad Stulberg:** And, and, and,

[00:30:37] **Emily Edlynn:** through that before you wrote this book?

[00:30:39] **Brad Stulberg:** yeah, so, yeah, oh, of course yeah, I was really sick with OCD almost like eight years ago now, and I was very fortunate to find myself a wonderful therapist and psychiatrist that made the very sick period really just 12 months. So those 12 months felt like forever but I'm very fortunate because a lot of people don't get that level of great care right away and they live with it being debilitating for a longer period of time.

But that was absolutely a cycle of order, disorder, reorder in my own life, I think that in that 35 average adult life changes, the most common ones have to deal with family. So getting married, getting divorced, having kids, having your kids move out of the house, the loss of loved ones meeting a new best friend, distancing from an older friend.

And then the other really common category is around health. So an injury, recovering from an injury, a health diagnosis working through that health diagnosis, and that can be physical or mental.

[00:31:35] **Emily Edlynn:** Yes, absolutely. So we could talk about this for the whole time, but I want to make sure cause you cover all just amazing territory that people should get the book. Right. So they can get to the depths of it. All right. So moving on to identity, this section really struck a chord with me, especially when you talk about, and we'll get into what this means, but the risks of too much fusion between identity and a pursuit. So personally, just released my first book. And so I have this new identity as book author and this pursuit of writing a book. And I know you have much more experience with this, but it can be easy, right?

To get sucked into sales numbers and Amazon rankings and all these quote unquote metrics of success. And then I feel amazing or terrible about myself on this roller coaster in my identity as author, but when I can connect with my other identities that also give me purpose and meaning, it helps me weather the storms of the one pursuit and identity.

[00:32:43] **Brad Stulberg:** Preach! Say it louder for the people in the back. I'm right there with you. Yes, I'll start by telling the story of the double gold medalist in the 2022 Winter Olympics, Niels van der Poel. So he won the 10k and 5k long course speed skating, and he shattered the world record. So he is the best long course speed skater to ever step foot on the planet, and likely will be for quite some time.

But prior to the 2022 games, Vanderpool felt that he was underperforming and he's Curious. He said, Why am I underperforming? And he identified fear. He was holding on to a lot of fear. Then he said, Well, why am I feeling all this fear? And what he realized is that there was no Niels Van Der Poel outside of Niels Van Der Poel, the speed skater.

He was completely fused with speed skating. And he writes eloquently about how how As a result of that, any change to his career in speed skating would completely rock his entire identity. So an injury, an illness, a misstep, a competitor over performing, anything. He was just so fragile because he was so fused with this single identity.

So in the lead up to the 2022 games, Vanderpool did something that at the time and still is completely unconventionable for a world class athlete. And that is he took weekends off. So starting Friday evening to Monday morning, his life had nothing to do with speed skating. He just lived like a normal person.

He went bowling, he went out for beer and pizza, he went on hikes, he started reading books, he got involved in his community. And suddenly, he had other sources of identity and meaning in his life. So it wasn't just speed skating. And he talks about how as a result of that, he lifted this huge burden of speed skating being the sole source of his identity.

And it allowed him to enjoy the sport more and to compete from a place of openness and love versus compulsion and fear. And if the best ever in a sport that requires nothing but training and recovery can do this in benefit, then I argue in the book that we all can. So the metaphor that I like to use for this is thinking of identity as a house.

And if you've got just one room in your house, and that one room catches fire or floods, you're in very big trouble. It's going to be extremely disorienting. Whereas if you have multiple rooms in your house, you can go seek refuge in those other rooms while you work out the flood or the fire in the other one.



And it doesn't mean that the rooms have to be the same size. It doesn't mean that you have to spend the same amount of time in each room. Doesn't mean that the rooms are permanent. You can have renovations, you can have additions, you can take a room away from your house. I just argue that it's really important to have more than one room at all time.

And in the research literature, this is called self complexity, and it essentially says that if we can have different parts of our identity integrate into a cohesive whole, we're more resilient throughout periods of change.

[00:35:47] **Emily Edlynn:** Yeah, you talk about that a lot, which was really fascinating. This idea of holding our distinct selves as a cohesive whole. So can you say more about how you, I mean, you're a coach, right? How do you work with people on this? And maybe, I don't know if it's the same or different, whether it's an athlete versus an executive.

[00:36:08] **Brad Stulberg:** I think it's the same and it's a very acceptance and commitment therapy driven approach for me anyways, which is really getting down to someone's values. And that's the scoreboard. Like if you need a metric, I want your metric to be, are you living in alignment with your values? And like, that's your cohesive whole.

And however disparate the activities under each value is, as long as those are your core values that make you who you are at any given point of time, if you show up day to day and you try to practice those values, then you're doing well. And that makes your whole. So like for me, you know, my big rooms in my identity is spouse and father.

As author, as athlete, as community member slash neighbor slash friend, and then coach. And on the one hand, you could say like, those are kind of disparate. But on the other hand, I would argue that those track really well to my core values. And when I'm firing well enough across those four or five rooms, I feel like a very cohesive hole.

And if anything, when I neglect one of those rooms. Or I spend way too much time in one of those rooms, I actually start to feel more disintegrated. And I think launching a book is a prime example, because it's so easy to just spend all your time in the author room, and you're just swimming in a sea of external validation, and status, and comparison, and all the bad things.

And What I attribute to my mental health during this period are just some non negotiables in terms of those other rooms. So ensuring that I'm at the gym four

days a week for an hour and a half, and when I'm at the gym, I don't have my phone on me. Like I'm just there. That's my athlete identity. Family dinners and bedtimes, at least four nights a week.

Sitting out on my front porch. We live in Western North Carolina with some Jason Isbell music on, so neighbors can come by and chat and bring a beer or whatever they do, at least one night a week. Like, my book is not important enough to give that up. And then you get through the period of launching the book, and that stuff ratchets up to three nights a week, or whatever the more equilibrium is.

So I think it's, like, good to have these rooms, and then have some minimum effective doses for how long you want to spend. And in each room. And what's so nice about this is, you know, if the book isn't doing well and the sales rank is never going to be as high as you want it to be, so it'll, the sales rank will never be good enough.

So when the sales rank is not good enough. When you go to the gym and like you hit your deadlift or you go out to the garden and you realize that, you know, you're, you're harvesting seeds for next year, you're at your family dinner or whatever it really puts things in perspective that like the book is not the only thing that you need to quote unquote win at.

[00:38:47] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. And I think this dovetails nicely into your discussion about rugged and flexible boundaries, So ruggedness without flexibility is rigidity, so it's not, flexing. As you said, you May 1st period of time need to only three nights a week do what's meaningful to you as a spouse and father, but then you can come back to the four nights a week.

And then you said flexibility without ruggedness is instability. And it actually kind of reminds me not to bring up parenting again, but of like controlling parenting where it's all about rigidity and not much flexibility versus permissive parenting, which is all flexible and not much rigidity.

[00:39:28] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, and I think you could argue that so much of just being a mature adult is parenting yourself in a way, you know and whether you call it your inner child or whether you call it like just, Winnicott's like being good enough for yourself. But I think like as adults, we're just doing the best we can to take care of ourselves too.

And I think that your approach in parenting is, spot on where it's not either or it's both and and it's like, how can you hold these two competing ideas at the

same time? I think another way to think about it is like, Intellect is knowing something, and wisdom is knowing when to apply it. So I think in these cases, it's as I said, it's around having some minimum effective doses, like that is the ruggedness.

Cause it's very easy to just let them go away, and then they never come back. Or they come back, and you find yourself in a spell of anxiety or depression because you let them go for too long. But then, having the flexibility to titrate them up or down, depending on what else is going on in your life.

I mean, it's like back to a house, you never spend the same amount of time in each room of your house. Maybe if you're a sports fan during football or basketball season, you spend a lot more time in the living room where the TV is. When you have a child, you're going to spend a lot more time in the new baby's room than when the kid is three or four.

If it's a season of the holidays and you have family over, you probably spend a ton of time in your kitchen for, family meals. When you're a teenager, you spend a lot of time in your basement trying to stay away from everyone. So, it's not about, like, having to be equal, but part of taking care of that house is making sure that you never neglect those rooms.

You don't want mold to grow anywhere. And I think the same exact thing is true for the different parts of our identity.

[00:41:05] **Emily Edlynn:** So do you think there's signs that we are not attaining a cohesive self, you know, are there warning signs where we should kind of pay attention and take stock of our identities and how we're living?

[00:41:19] **Brad Stulberg:** I do. I think that if you're in a partnership with someone whether it's romantic, intimate, or just very close friendship. Leaning on the others in your life, especially when you're going through something that you know is going to be a disorder event and kind of throw your identity for a ride, and just telling them like, I need you to look out for me.

I told my wife, like, I'm about to launch this book, and I'm about to go kind of crazy. But I really would like you to help me make sure I don't go too crazy. And I don't have to like what you tell me, but like, I really would like you to tell me when you see me going too far in the, book house. So leaning on trusted others and then making these decisions before you're in the heat of the moment.

So, you know, when that book is coming out and you're just looking at the sales rank and whatever it is, it's very hard to say like, oh, I better go to the gym because that's also important to me. But if beforehand you just define with some ruggedness, this is, this is the non negotiable. I am just going to show up and do this because my more observer, wiser self knows this is good for me and then commit to doing it.

I think that goes a long way. And then I think that this is also just part of aging and realizing that when you do go completely all in on something to the exclusion of everything else in your life, you always get burned. Like, I mean, it never ends up well and, I'm glad that I'm on Psychologist Off the Clock because I probably have a friendly audience.

I do some business podcasts and no one buys my book. But like you even look at these stories of super successful people like that went all in and were obsessed and they're sociopaths, they're assholes. Like they're not happy, they don't have thriving senses of belonging and community. So my goal isn't to win eight championships or make two billion dollars, my goal is to live a good meaningful life.

[00:43:02] **Emily Edlynn:** yes, and it gets kind of culturally rewarded that intensity and obsessiveness and self centeredness too. There's such an egotism to that pursuit at all costs, Of being number one or whatever the aspiration is.

[00:43:19] **Brad Stulberg:** And there's such a selection bias, and I don't know why, that would be a very fascinating thing to research. Those are the stories that get told. But for every Michael Jordan, there's a Tim Duncan who was quiet, who was humble, who didn't get completely obsessed with basketball, who won NBA players ever.

But there's no Tim Duncan documentary, probably because it's not as like, it's not as compelling. It's not as sexy. It's not as much of a train wreck. Like we like to watch near train wrecks.

[00:43:46] **Emily Edlynn:** Yeah. My hero was Tony Gwynn. He's a baseball

[00:43:49] **Brad Stulberg:** Oh, of course. I know Tony Gwynn. Yeah.

[00:43:51] **Emily Edlynn:** I mean, he was like the model of consistency, right? I think it was 19 years for the one team. And he won the batting title record number of times. I don't remember all the stats, but I was obsessed at one point,

but he's not the glamorous Hero everyone talks about, there are no documentaries about him.

[00:44:10] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah. I mean, there hasn't been a documentary about Niels Vanderpool, the speed

[00:44:13] **Emily Edlynn:** Right

[00:44:14] **Brad Stulberg:** and he's, he's the best in the world. So I think there's selection bias. I think some of it is just the same reason that we like horror movies. Like we're just attracted to stories of absurdity and people who live on the edge.

But I think the data would tell a different story, which is that self complexity not only do you feel better and it helps you sustain mental health, but you can perform equally as well if not better when you have some self complexity in your life.

[00:44:39] **Emily Edlynn:** right. And we're here, I mean, one of the missions of this podcast is to help people live a more meaningful life, And this is what your book really touches on. So, I want to get into action.

[00:44:50] **Brad Stulberg:** Mm hmm.

[00:44:51] **Emily Edlynn:** part three. So rugged and flexible action. What does that mean?

[00:44:56] **Brad Stulberg:** So this is about being in conversation with change instead of viewing change as something that happens to you. And this is really about like What do you do with your agency? Whether your agency is 100 percent in a situation or half a percent, often, and generally it's somewhere in between, often we have some modicum of agency during periods of chaos, change, and disorder in our own lives.

And yeah, this section of the book is really just about, well, what are the skillful actions that we can take to not only have change shape us, but to try to shape the change.

[00:45:34] **Emily Edlynn:** I was really interested in this concept of, and I don't know if I'm going to say it right. Zanshin?

[00:45:39] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, Zanshen. So Zanshen is a term out of the martial art Aikido, and it's a continuing awareness that recognizes you don't just want to be focused on the target, you want to have a soft view that includes the target. And remember, this is like an actual martial arts, so the target would be like the person you're trying to strike, but also everything that's happening around the target.

And I just found this to be like such a beautiful metaphor for going after goals in our life, even if the goal isn't to like hit someone in the chest in martial arts, but whatever your target is, I think Zanshin can help. And then I came across this research from a completely different field, not a keto, but of vehicular safety, where there's something called target fixation, which is when people get so focused on the target that they're trying to hit or avoid, they end up barreling into it. So they started off with fighter pilots in world war two. And when they had a target, if they like got fixated on it, they would fly their plane right into the target by accident instead of like firing a missile at it. And then nowadays, thank goodness, although there's still way too much war, but we're not fighting wars in those ways.

You could argue that maybe it's worse now with drones and whatnot. But anyways, another conversation target fixation manifests often with crashes on the shoulder of the road. Um, And I found this fascinating. Like you often hear, like there's a pile up on the shoulder and that's because you see a car off to the side of the road and you look at it and you say like, all right, I can't hit it.

And then you can zone in on it and by accident, you pummel right into it. Whereas Zanshen is this softer awareness. And they end up teaching, they don't call it this, but they teach Zanshen in driver's ed. And then I of course use this metaphor in the book to talk about is you're going towards any goal, towards any target in your life there's going to be all of these changes that happen because it is inevitable and we don't want to have target fixation. We want to have more of a soft awareness as Anshan that allows us to take skillful actions along the way instead of just being so locked in.

[00:47:43] **Emily Edlynn:** It's such a great description. And I think, I think we can all relate to those times in life where we get super fixated on one what is the goal or what way of reaching that goal and how limiting that ends up being and having this ability cause it's not just zooming out. It's being able to zoom in, zoom out, you know, Kind of the flexibility piece and even say the rotating.

It's not just in and out. It's like. The whole thing shifting. So I think that's really helpful. I want to make sure we at least touch on the brain science. You talk



about rage versus seeking pathways. Could you just say a little more about why these are important for us to understand?

[00:48:27] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, I found this to be fascinating. So this comes from the research of Jaak Panskeep, who is a neuroscientist that studied what's called affective neuroscience. So this is trying to match brain activity and brain states with emotions. And he defined these core pathways, or circuits, in the brain that have fairly predictable neuronal activity when people are in certain emotional states.

And two of these pathways that he identified are the rage pathway and the seeking pathway. And the rage pathway is what it looks like when we are doing just that. When we're angry, when we're snapping, when we're very reactive. And the seeking pathway is what our brain looks like when we are curious, when we're problem solving when we're planning, when we're working toward a goal.

And what Pondscape found is that these pathways are zero sum, so they both cannot be activated at the same time. And what I love about neuroscience like this is it's like such common sense, like, well, of course, you cannot be extremely pissed off and raging about something at the same time as you're thoughtfully working toward making it better.

So in many ways it's just like fancy fMRIs to tell us what we already know, but there's something about that that's really validating and helpful. So I take this neuroscience research and I apply it to, well, how do we respond instead of react in the face of change in our own life? And how can we do everything possible to activate our seeking pathway as quickly as possible in lieu of our rage pathway.

And this can be true for the minor changes that often disrupt our day. So a kid is sick home from school and it messes everything up. Dog has diarrhea. You're already late for a doctor's appointment and you get stuck in traffic. Um, Just in those moments do we immediately kind of snap and go into rage, which doesn't feel good, or can we bring about more of a seeking approach?

And then for bigger changes, even if it doesn't play out in the minute, but health diagnosis, change in job status change in romantic relationships generally speaking, the, the less time we spend in that rage mode and the more time we spend in seeking mode, the better we feel and the more skillful we're able to navigate the change. So I think it's important.

[00:50:44] **Emily Edlynn:** Very important. And I like, actually, In putting a visual in my head, I'm going to keep where I'm going to have the rage pathway is a bright red and a seeking pathway is a calm greenish blue. And I'm going to check in with myself. Which pathway am I on right now?

[00:50:58] **Brad Stulberg:** And I think the best way to do that, and you would know this maybe better than me is affect labeling. It's like the psychological term for it. Which simply says that you want to name your emotions and by naming your emotions, you separate yourself from them. So when you're in an emotion and you're completely fused with it, you just are it, and it's very hard to get out of that state.

Whereas, if you can say, I'm feeling overwhelmed or despair or excitement or anger, and I'm actually feeling anger in the left side of my chest, or I'm feeling some tingling and heat in my neck, well, now you are no longer completely fused with that hot emotion. You are separate from it. You're turning on the part of your brain that can analyze instead of just be.

And I think that's often a ticket out of the rage pathway is just to label what you're feeling and then say, all right, do I want to act on these feelings or do I want to just acknowledge them?

[00:51:48] **Emily Edlynn:** right. And we're going to, be on the rage pathway. We will spend time there. It's more, how long will we spend there?

[00:51:54] **Brad Stulberg:** How long and do we let it completely take control?

[00:51:57] **Emily Edlynn:** Right. Exactly. So before we wrap up, I want to make sure we get to a part of your book that I absolutely loved, which was around making meaning. And I worked for years in children's hospitals with pretty seriously ill children and their siblings and parents.

And, you know, this was a very complex way to make meaning of a really difficult situation. And so you present something that I think is so... profound and helpful, which is making meaning can be a very healing part of the grief process. But, sometimes terrible things happen, and we don't have to make meaning. And sometimes it makes it worse to attempt to make meaning. And so, cliches like, what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, or God doesn't give you more than you can handle, not helpful.

[00:52:49] **Brad Stulberg:** Yeah, utter bullshit. I think that there are times when life is random and cruel and You can't necessarily make meaning, certainly not

in that moment. The worst thing to tell to a grieving parent is like, what are three things you're grateful for? Because the research says practicing gratitude is helpful.

Like, are you insane? No, it's not. Not in that circumstance. So I think that there's a tendency with a lot of books to have all these tools and then present them as a panacea instead of acknowledging that for the capital T traumas in our life, Often, the only appropriate thing to do is to be kind to yourself, to seek support, and just to focus on surviving and getting through.

And what the research shows that I find somewhat consoling and fascinating is that we do tend to grow and make meaning, even from capital T trauma. But it has to happen on its own time. We cannot force it. And by trying to force it, we actually slow that process down or get in its way.

Um, and it's not to say that it always happens either.

There's adverse childhood events. There is rape in other forms of sexual abuse. There's war. I mean, some things just do not lead to meaning and growth. But many things do. Even very hard things, but it has to come on its own time. And the worst thing that you can do is to judge yourself or put an extra weight on yourself, of feeling like, well, I need to grow, or I need to find the golden nugget, or I need to be able to learn something from this.

No you don't. All you need to do is get through. And if any of that stuff's going to happen, it'll happen on its own time.

[00:54:30] **Emily Edlynn:** That is a great place for us to end, I think. But before we're totally done, are there any other strategies? We went through a lot today. Any other strategies we didn't touch on that you would recommend for people right now who are in the thick of a period of disorder?

[00:54:46] **Brad Stulberg:** I think just that is just naming it and recognizing that we are constantly going through cycles of order, disorder, and reorder. And even to be able to have a dialogue about that with the other people in your life it's affecting and say, Hey, I feel like I'm in this disorder period and expect that it's going to be hard.

It's going to come with challenges. It won't be forever. And then yes, there are some tools that can help get to reorder in a, in as good of a way as possible. But there's no getting to reorder without going through the disorder. And then calling upon this term rugged flexibility just as a construct to make sure that you

don't fall prey to the extremes of I either need to be so flexible that I just go with the flow always or I need to be so rigid and rugged that I try to control things.

that's a false dichotomy and managing change involves a little bit of both.

[00:55:34] **Emily Edlynn:** Perfect. Brad, it has been an absolute pleasure to have you on the podcast again, this is your second time on the podcast. If you want to hear more from Brad, he was on episode two 232. So I really hope listeners grab this book. We could barely skim the surface today of all of Brad's wisdom. His newest book is Master of Change, How to Excel When Everything is Changing, Including You.

thank you for writing this book. Where can people find you?

[00:56:01] **Brad Stulberg:** The book is available wherever books are sold in whatever format you prefer. Hardcover, ebook, audio. And then the place that I am most on the internet is probably Instagram, which I am at Brad Stulberg, just like my name.

[00:56:18] **Emily Edlynn:** Great. Thank you so much, Brad.

[00:56:20] **Brad Stulberg:** Thank you.

[00:56:30] **Jill Stoddard:** 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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