

Ep #2: Pain vs. Suffering



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With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Welcome to *The Empowered Principle Podcast*, a not so typical, educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy, by refining your most powerful tool: your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Hello empowered principles, how are you doing this week? How's it going? I am terrific. I am so happy to be recording these podcasts. I am so happy that you are here and I am thrilled to be working with you here today. I have to tell you how much I love this podcast thing. I was so nervous my first podcast. I was avoiding like the plague. And then once I sat down and I got the professional vibe going on, I got the headset and the really cool mic, it feels so empowering you guys, really, I love this.

It's been so much fun to create this content. There just doesn't seem to be enough hours in the day for writing, and that's how I felt when I was a principle actually. Not enough hours in the day to get that job done. But that is going to be another topic for a podcast. People's stories around time fascinate me. I must do a podcast on time. I will be sure to address that in a future podcast.

But now let's get back to our topic of the day. So last week we discussed the difference between addressing the source of our pain versus addressing its symptoms. Do you remember that? If you didn't, catch last week's podcast episode number one on cause versus symptoms. So when we experience negative emotions or feelings - I use these words interchangeably, we tend to concentrate on getting the pain to stop as quickly as possible versus stopping to ask ourselves what is the source of this pain, where is this coming from, by the way? Like, what is going on here?

So for most of us, our tolerance for experiencing negative emotion is incredibly low. This is why we avoid and delay uncomfortable situations

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when we're at work and why we medicate with our choice of medication. Could be food, it could be alcohol, sleep, sex, social media, shopping, or prescription drugs when we get home. Our brains are wired to avoid pain and seek pleasure, guys, it's normal. So don't feel badly.

It's the brain's job to protect you. When we were cavemen and cavewomen, our brains learned how to protect us from situations that might have ended in death. This is called the reptilian part of our brain, and it was designed for fight or flight. It's referred to as the sympathetic nervous system. It is a very important function of our brain and serves us well, and really served us well back in the cave days for many, many years.

But however, today in this world of cushiness and comfort, we no longer need to hunt for survival, and rarely are we being chased by lions. At least I hope this is not your case, because if it is, don't be listening to this podcast right now. Run. Listen to your reptilian brain that says, "Fly, get out of the way."

Now, situations arise in our current lifestyle that the brain interprets as life threatening. When we think stressful thoughts or we believe we are being attacked emotionally, mentally, or socially, our brain kicks in to fight or flight mode. It immediately shoots off adrenaline and norepinephrine - I think that's how you say it - into our bodies, and causes the familiar sensations of sweaty palms, the pounding chest, the tingling that goes down your legs, your muscles tense up, your cheeks flush, your breathing starts to increase and get rapid, and you have intense alertness. If you've ever heard a noise outside at night, outside of your window, you know what I'm talking about. All of those things trigger in a second.

The problem with this response however is that the body cannot differentiate between true physical danger and perceived physical or emotional danger, right? You think somebody is outside that window, you're just thinking. It's a thought that pops into your head. I hear a noise, I

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make it mean there's a killer outside my window and your body reacts immediately into fight or flight even though nobody's there. It was just a squirrel. But your body and your brain respond exactly the same way regardless of the actual situation that's occurring.

So let's see how this might play out at any given day at work. I'm going to paint a little picture for you here. Your day is going off to a great start. You're in the office, you're welcoming students and families, you're sipping on your favorite Starbucks beverages - hopefully just one. Let's say a parent brings you a Starbucks and you are thrilled, you are having a great morning. But boom, in walks an angry parent. They start yelling that their child was hit by another child during recess yesterday, and they are demanding to meet with you immediately or they are going to march over to that superintendent's office right now.

I've had this happen. They proceed to tell you how unsafe your campus is and that you have no control over your students because there are no rules or consequences at this school. They ask you, "What are you going to do about it?" and what kind of trouble the other student will be in for their behavior. They want answers and they want them now. Put yourself in that situation in your mind. Or think of a real scenario that actually happened to you and what immediately happens in your body. Adrenaline rush? You bet. Do you want to get away? You bet. Do you also feel the need to defend yourself? Absolutely.

Your brain perceives this approaching parent as life threatening. Before you have time to deem the situation physically safe, the brain has already triggered its fight or flight response. Because our body cannot tell the difference between true danger, physical danger, or even true emotional danger, it responds in the same way for both. It cannot tell the difference between, "I'm going to be eaten by a lion" or, "This person's going to say something that hurts my feelings." It thinks it's the same level of danger. It reacts as if you're in physical danger and that that pain is imminent.

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So when we talk about pain versus suffering, I define pain as the initial physical response to an actual moment of being in distress. Pain is the sensation we feel when our body is in physical or emotional distress. On the other hand, suffering is a mental replay of a painful experience. It is our interpretation of the experience, and the story we create around the experience. This is when we get to add a splash of juicy details and a little dash of drama. Our brains are really good at that too.

This is also where we get to choose how badly we want to feel or not. As Dr. Martha Beck describes it, clean pain is the pain we feel from the actual experience. Dirty pain is how we feel when we think about the painful moment. Dirty pain resided in the mind as a past or a future event. It is not a present moment feeling. It is the distress that emerges when you remember a painful experience or when you anticipate experiencing one in the future. That is also labeled as worry or anxiety.

So take the example of the angry parent. In the moment, your brain kicked into high gear to protect you from harm. Your body responded as it should, as it's wired to respond, and you experienced intense vibrations in your body because feelings or emotions, it's a vibration in the body. You interacted with that parent and eventually the parent left. That is the end of the painful experience. Your brain immediately starts to create a story about that experience, which again, is the brain trying to protect you. So I'm not bagging on the brain, the brain's awesome. But it can be a bully.

So your brain creates a story around what happened, and it creates this story so that you can feel better. It's trying to protect you, it's trying to make you feel better about what happened, even - this is the downside of our brains - even if the story isn't true. So we create a story around the event that occurred to help us feel better. And I know y'all have done this if you've had a break up with a person, because they were the love of your life until they weren't, and then you had other things to say about them. There was a different story created around that experience.

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So when we aren't aware that the brain is creating a story, it is very easy to believe those thoughts, that story around the circumstance, as truth. So a story might look something like this. You walk out of your office, the parent leaves, your secretary's looking at you like, "What the heck happened?" And you say to her or him, "Can you believe the nerve of that parent? Coming in here and screaming at me like a lunatic? How dare she accuse me of not having a safe campus? Does she even know how much anti-bullying work we've done with these kids? I mean, even when I complained that we've hired additional yard duty staff, she continued to complain that it wasn't enough. Of course, her child would never do anything wrong, it's always someone else's fault. And you know what? I do not appreciate her threatening me with going to the superintendent. She had no intentions of trying to solve this situation peacefully. She didn't even give me a chance to investigate what happened. I am so over it already."

And guess what? There's your day. And it's eight thirty in the morning. So by the time you get home that night, your brain has replayed and edited and revised and add some juicy details and a little dash of drama to the scenario, and it's repeated this story and it's penetrated into your brain over and over again. You've told the story to several people and now it's evolved, right? And ironically, your brain is just trying to protect you. And in its protection mode, it's made the situation mean something terrible. It's creating this story to make that person the bad guy and you're just simply the victim, because it wants you to believe that you are well, you are safe, you are kind, you're loving, you're all the things. So it's added these details and layered meaning onto the details. It's actually created something different than what was done and said in the real conversation.

And because our bodies cannot tell the difference between those painful moments and the thoughts about painful moments, we get to feel the emotions and physical responses that come with the pain every time we think about that painful moment. Now, how fun is that? We have to go through it over and over again. We don't have to, we choose to. Our brains

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just put it on rewind, repeat. And often times, it makes it mean that something is wrong with the other person, right? We tend to compound our pain with the story of what the situation meant.

So it tends to blame, right? It tends to externalize the situation and put the onus on the circumstance, the situation, the event, or the person involved so that your brain can tell you there's something wrong with them so that we don't have to make it mean there's something wrong with us, or that we did something wrong. So I know, you're probably wondering, "I get this Angela, I get this at a cognitive level, but how do I stop my brain from doing this? Like, when I'm in the moment it just happens", and I hear you.

It is a challenge to catch it. And here's the honest truth guys, you cannot stop your brain from thinking. Thoughts just appear. That's its job. But you can be aware that the brain's going to create a story around this event that occurred and then you get to decide whether you want to believe that story that it's creating. So if you can think of the story as separate from yourself, and that you just can thank your brain for trying to protect you, you can slow down the process of reaction and you can say, "Wait a minute, what's really going on here? What really happened? How do I want to feel about this situation? What do I want to make it mean? What do I not want to make this mean? Do I want this to ruin the rest of my day, or can I come to peace with this and move forward?"

So let's review the ways that people typically respond to pain and then we'll talk about how to be more aware of the story. So when a painful situation occurs, we choose to act in one of three ways. We avoid, or we resist and react, or we process. So avoiding is when we overindulge in something else to avert the discomfort of pain. We overeat, overdrink, overwatch TV, over-surf social media, we over shop, we oversleep, or we just go down and take some anti-depressants and call it a day. And there might be other things that you personally do to numb or avoid pain at all.

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So sometimes we engage in these avoidant behaviors that we think are healthy. Now, this was me. I used to work out incredibly hard on myself. The harder the day, the harder the workout, seven days a week. So I thought this was a healthy response to my stress. Now, even though you think it's healthy, such as going to the gym daily, or working really late hours, that's another thing, when you continue to work, you overwork yourself. I am sorry to tell you this, those are still forms of avoidance.

So when people say to me - I have clients who say to me, "Well, you know, I'm getting my stress out. I'm going to the gym, I'm working out every day" or, "I'm staying really late at the office. I should be doing this, I should be getting this work done." If you are doing those things to avoid feeling pain about situations, that's different than when you are doing it out of the need for your body to move, or the need for you to complete a task. So any time you feel pain and you choose to do something else that numbs the feeling, you are avoiding, even if you want to label it as healthy avoidance, which you can do. But it's still avoidance.

So resisting and reacting involve actions of anger and blame. We aren't avoiding the pain but we are responding to it with resistance and with negative reactions. We lash out at others, we rant about how unjust the situation is, we lie to ourselves and to others about what really happened, which is a harsher way of saying that we just buy into and tell that story our brain's created around the pain. Even though we enhance to get our point across, we are resisting and reacting. This type of response may temporarily reduce the vibration of pain in our body, but it eventually couples with anxiety and exhaustion, which then increases the intensity of the pain to the point you have to surrender.

Processing the pain on the other hand means acknowledging the pain and allowing it to exist even though you are not yet able to rationalize it. This is the uncomfortable space. It is very uncomfortable in your mind and in your body, but my friends, it is possible to do. You become the observer of the

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painful vibrations and allow them to take place for as long as they need. You're not numbing the pain or resisting it. You're just letting it wash through you.

So back to episode one, the example of the doctor's office. Getting the medicine to numb the pain right away before the doctor's taken time to look at where the source of the pain is, is numbing. That's why it's called novacane, right? Novacane numbs you. And for those of you who know me, I'm a massive, massive, massive Green Day fan, and they have a song called Novacane, and you should check out the lyrics to that because it is exactly what we do. We want numbing, we want the pain to go away.

Okay, but I'm digressing. Okay, so if you can become an observer of your painful vibrations and allow them to wash through you, you can allow the pain to go away for good. It sounds like it's a simple thing, but it is not. You will be amazed at how much you want to not feel the pain, the vibrations of pain in your body. And I'm talking emotional or mental pain, what we're creating. There are going to be times when you're so tempted to numb, but if you can allow it, the pain will go away for good, I promise.

When you are consciously processing a painful experience, and the emotions become intense, it can help you to say, "Hello pain, I feel you. Brain, I'm going to tell you something. I'm not in any real danger, but I understand, we're just processing pain. We can do hard things, this will pass and we're going to be okay." Acknowledging the pain out loud can release some tension and helps you see it as separate from yourself. I also find it helpful to talk to my brain as a separate being and tell her that I'm okay, I understand her good intentions and that she does not need to protect me by creating a story. We are strong enough to accept the truth of what happened.

Now, the unsettling part about pain is that you must feel it in order for it to go away. And I know that stinks, my friends. It does, but it's true. This is my

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truth. When you process the pain, it subsides. However, when you avoid or resist pain, you are suffering. You suffer because you are either dancing around the pain in avoidance, or you are believing the story about it and you're spending your energy reacting and resisting. You end up having to feel discomfort one way or the other, and when you resist and avoid, the pain actually sticks around much, much longer.

Considering this, I feel it a wise question to ask myself, "How long do I really want to be in pain over this? Is this worth avoiding the pain that I'm feeling?" Because I have to feel pain anyway. So here I am avoiding the pain, but it's still there. I can only avoid it for so long. It will come back when I'm not able to do what I do when I avoid. Or I resist and I'm angry and then it's in my energy all the time and my energy that could be going to something amazing and positive is going to something negative and painful.

So how long we choose to suffer is entirely up to us. When I first became a principal, I wanted everyone to like me. I wanted people to think I was doing a good job, I wanted them to feel I cared about them and I cared about the kids. Just saying this out loud makes me laugh now because I see, I can see how I was setting myself up for some epic failure, at least in my mind. So first of all, the minute we need others to act a certain way in order for us to feel good about ourselves, we are in trouble. You and I both know that we cannot ever, ever make someone feel or act a certain way.

We certainly try. We want people to behave in the way that we want them too, right? And when we believe this, when we believe the need for people to like us and speak highly of us and treat us well, and when they don't, we suffer. Any time we have an expectation that does not match the reality of our life, we suffer. So I also study Tony Robbins, and he talks about our life blueprint. And when our blueprint, which is our set of expectations around how our life should be, when our reality of our life matched our blueprint,

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that equals happiness because everything's going as we expect it should be going.

However, when our blueprint, the way we think things should be does not match the reality of the way that they are, that equals suffering. So no matter how hard I try to be liked, how hard I worked, how much I cared about the staff and the kids, there were people, including some parents, some staff members, some community members, some district office staff, whoever, had something critical to say about me, when I was criticized for my work, it really stung. However, the suffering came when I would perseverate about all the things I believed people were saying. The worst suffering came from my own mind.

I spent hours thinking about what people said, which always turned into speculation of what was being said. Does your brain do that too? Do you wake up in the night and your damn brain thinks of that one incident? It's like, why are you thinking about this? I don't want to think about this, but it does. Then you're up for the next two or three hours replaying this incident and speculating what others said and how much - you know, how you'd respond differently and much more cleverly, of course, much more savvy than you actually did in the moment.

We give so much energy to our pretend thoughts about what might be happening. We think them over and over, to the point that they feel real. Remember, our body cannot determine the difference between what is really happening and what is a thought about what might be happening, and its response is the same. We feel the same yucky vibrations that we would feel if we were actually being told to our face how awful we are at our job.

Here is the important thing to note. When you are experiencing a moment at work that your brain has deemed as painful, your body is not in actual physical danger even though it experiences physical responses to

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situations, it perceives as dangerous. Now, this might seem obvious, but in the moment, in that painful moment, it is extremely challenging to realize that we are going to be okay. It does not feel okay.

Emotional pain is just that, an emotion. Emotions cannot hurt you. They cannot physically hurt you. It feels like they can. I understand that it feels like they can. You experience physical discomfort with emotional pain, but that pain will not kill you. So you will be okay, you will be safe, you will live. Unless you physically respond in such a way that you actually harm yourself. And if you're at that level of emotions and you feel like you might physically harm yourself, then I highly recommend that you immediately call for help, call 911 to help yourself get support, get therapy. Coaching is a little bit different than therapy. We can go into that more later, but please get the help you need if you feel like you are at that level.

This podcast is designed to help people who have some discomfort and some uncomfortable thoughts, and help us wrap our head around how to improve those thoughts. So this notion is challenging for our brains to embrace. The idea that emotions as intense as they feel, are simply vibrations in the body, it seems to minimize their impact on us, or at least reduce the impact on us. They feel so big when we are experiencing them that it doesn't seem possible that they are only vibrations. Yet if you try to explain what pain is to someone who's never experienced pain, like, pretend an alien came down from Mars and has no concept of pain. If you try to describe it to somebody or something that's never experienced it, you realize that you end up describing physical sensations in the body.

Like, emotional pain is - you can explain it as like, the tightening of the throat, the pain in your chest, like actually heartache, right? There's heart pain. You feel that. Painful chest, the sick to the stomach, a lot of times I just feel sick to my stomach when I think about something. You'll get a headache from your heart rate being increased and your muscles being so tense you actually can create a headache out of that. But in the end,

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processing emotional pain is not life threatening. So understanding this changes everything, and once you really know this, once you really, really know that negative emotions cannot harm you, you will be able to cut out so much suffering in your life and spend your energy moving forward and creating beautiful things in this world.

In the next podcast, we're going to break down our through process so we can learn the process of how to manage our thinking in order to manage our emotions. Understanding this changed my entire way of being. I am telling you, this is the heart of change. You need to understand how your brain functions and impacts your emotions and actions in order to manifest change in your physical world. Change comes from within. Without knowing how to change yourself internally, you will not be able to create change in the world around you. So get ready to dive deep in next week. We're going to go there.

I'm going to help you, I'm going to show you the way, and I know you're ready for it because you're here. Alright, my empowered principals, may you have an outstanding week. Please take some time during your week to notice when you find yourself thinking painful thoughts. Write those thoughts down, make a list, bring them to the next week's podcast, send me a note on Facebook or email me at angelakellycoaching@gmail.com so I can find out what's going on in those pretty little heads of yours.

Being aware of the thoughts your brain is creating is such a huge first step in the direction of stopping your suffering. I look forward to being with you guys next week. We're going to talk about how to steer your brain's thinking. It's one of my most powerful tools that I've learned in coaching. Can't wait to share it with you.

So if you enjoyed this podcast, I gratefully ask that you take a few moments and write an awesome review on iTunes. I love hearing your feedback and questions and comments so that I can refine the podcast to meet your

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needs. This podcast is designed for you. I am so honored that I can serve fellow principals in this capacity, and look forward to teaching you how to empower yourself as a principal.

Alright my friends, empowered principals, go forth, have an amazing week. Please drop me a line if you have questions. I am here for you. This podcast is entirely for you, I am giving you all my best stuff so I would love it if you could take a moment to write up a five-star review on iTunes. If you have any questions on how to do that, send me a message. I love you all, you are beautiful, amazing, and you are doing incredible work in the world. Have a wonderful, wonderful week. Bye.

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