

Ep #184: Why You Can't Sleep



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Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 184.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal 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.

Well hello my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. Happy July. Welcome to July. So I am recording this on June 29th, and it's due on June 29th. I had a podcast interview scheduled for y'all to launch off July's theme, which I'm kind of shifting it up a little bit to be honest with you. Because I have seen so many people talking about their stress levels continuing to be high even though you are on vacation, even though school's not in session. So I'm going to address that today very specifically with a problem solution format to this podcast.

But originally, I had scheduled a podcast interview for today to launch off July with one of my clients. The fun part about this upcoming interview is that this client was so courageous, and he came on the podcast at the very beginning of his first year in school leadership. On that podcast episode, we said, "Let's check back at the end of the year and see the progress you've made and talk about the journey of the first year."

He is so excited to share with you all of his experiences, his entire first year journey as a middle school lead principal. His name is Dustin. He's going to be on the show next week. We are recording later today, but we had a little hiccup where we couldn't record last week. So we are postponing that until next week, but I digress. Let's get on with it.

So in July, I really want to spend time talking with you about leadership. I want you thinking about leadership in a larger context, in a context that

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expands what I call the portal of possibility. I will do a podcast on the portal of possibility later on, but I want to expand your thoughts and your belief systems about who you are as a leader, who you can become as a leader, what leadership looks like, what leadership doesn't need to look like, like the old school way of thinking. And wrap your head around the idea that you can be an effective leader and have an amazing life outside of your workday.

There is much more to life than work. I know. I've been sold the dream too. Hard work pays off. The best employees are the hardest workers. They're the first ones in and the last ones out. I know. I know the rhetoric, and I know that it feels very true. To this day I have to continually coach myself on how working less serves my clients better. When I'm rested and ready to go, I'm a better coach. When you are rested and ready to go, you are a better leader. When your teachers are rested and ready to go, they are better teachers. Same with students.

We all know this intellectually, but we've really been sold on the idea that we need to work and get ahead, especially in the summer. Get ahead and be prepared and get as much done as possible before the school year starts. We think that if we get ahead of the game, we're going to feel better later on. When in truth, we're pounding ourselves now with so much work or thinking about work over the summer, like worrying about it, but not really being productive and actually getting things done.

So there's massive worrying, but not a lot of massive action. That misalignment is what causes so much stress, so much burnout, so much sleepless nights. That is what I'm here to talk about today. The title of this podcast is *Why You Can't Sleep*, school leader. This podcast could be for anybody who can't sleep when they're thinking about work, but obviously this is *The Empowered Principal* podcast, and we're here to talk about you fearless leaders out there.

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So I saw a post on social media from a principal, and it was the sweetest little post. It had a Peanuts character on it, and it said, "I need my brain to stop thinking at night. I just need some sleep." This poor principal said, "Is there anybody else out there who can relate?"

My heart went out to her because I too was that principal. Many of you listeners are too that principal who you don't even want to be thinking about work, and it's firing up in your brain. It especially shows up in the middle of the night at 2:30 in the morning, and you cannot go back to sleep. Then 5:30 comes and you're exhausted. Then you feel like you can't get up early and do your morning routine because you've been up thinking about work all night.

So let's tackle this problem. I've been thinking about it, and I have been observing myself because my brain does this too. I get very excited when I have an idea about a concept or a client problem that they're facing that my brain is working on solving. So I too do this in the night. I've been studying myself, and here's what I've come to notice. There are different reasons why we can't sleep.

There are some very tangible ways and strategies of handling our not being able to sleep. I'm going to share those with you, but I'm also going to talk about the mental emotional capacity of all this, and why this is happening at a deeper level. So that you can start to observe yourself and notice what you're thinking and how you're feeling and how the brain is looping, and are there patterns of thought? Are you thinking about the same situation or the same person or the same problem over and over again? Are you thinking about the past versus the future?

There are so many things that keep our brains awake at night. There are definitely tips and strategies out in the world for morning routines and evening routines. I'll save those for you to search yourself. Definitely there

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are calming routines at night. You can journal. You can put on positive podcasts. You can put on calming music, sipping chamomile tea, taking melatonin. There are all kinds of things. I'm not a doctor. I'm not here to prescribe a sleeping regimen for you or a sleeping protocol for you.

There are protocols out in the world available to you for morning routines and evening routines. I am going to share a very tangible routine that you can use, but I want you to know this is going into the why it's happening and what we're thinking and how we're feeling. And what's creating the habitual pattern of not being able to sleep because we're thinking about work or school or campus or education or students or teachers or whatever it is that you are spinning out on.

So problem number one that I have noticed. This really comes back to like when I first started coaching, it was one of the first things that I learned from my coach Stacey. It was one of the most powerful quick turns that I had in terms of transformation with my brain. That is the concept of open and closed cycles.

So if you think about your brain, it's basically your body's computer. The brain is in operation all of the time, even in the night, even when you are at rest. The brain is functioning making sure everything in the body is working, making sure you're breathing, making sure that your thoughts are still in action, you're dreaming. You're doing all of these things. Your brain is phenomenal. Let's give it some kudos, first of all, but I want you to think about the thoughts you're having about the situations that you're thinking about as an either open or closed cycle.

So open cycles are what keep you awake. They are things in your mind, usually they're in your future, and you're thinking about them coming up. The prospect of them happening, the anticipation. So your brain is processing the future. The reason it's doing that is it's trying to ensure your

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safety, to protect you, to make sure that you've got all your bases covered. But it's holding on to all of this information in your mind. It's thinking about the to do lists, and then all of those mini tasks underneath those to do items that require that project or that task to be fully completed.

So when you have a task, it's kind of like a file on your computer that's open. Your brain is actively engaged in that, even if it's in the background running. It's like having a bunch of tabs on your computer open, and they're still actively using up energy from your computer even though you aren't actively working on them.

So having that tab open in your mind. The more tabs you have open when you're thinking about hiring and you're thinking about the master schedule and you're thinking COVID procedures, and you're thinking about your own dentist appointment that you forgot to schedule. You're thinking about your kid's eye exam, and you're thinking about you've got to send money to your college kiddo for rent. That's what's on my mind this week.

So when you have all those little to-dos, your brain is holding on to all of that. One of the worst things you can do is keep your to-do list in your head. So the solution to an open and close cycle is diligently and intentionally planning out everything you need to do. Not just on a big piece of paper where you're writing it all down. The solution is to number one, write it all down so it gets out of your brain and onto paper. The paper is a placeholder.

Then you want to take it one step closer and actually schedule those things. Put 'call the dentist' in your calendar for Monday at 10:00 a.m. that way your brain can relax knowing, "Oh, we've got that on the calendar. At 10:00 a.m., I'm going to call the dentist. It's going to take me five minutes. I'm going to call, and it's done." Don't even think about it.

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The little, tiny things can take up so much energy. Remembering to get that birthday card or remembering to send that anniversary gift or sending off the wedding gifts. Like all those little tasks that we do, like picking up the dry cleaning, all of it, it takes up so much time and energy. When you don't have a placeholder, a place to catch it, and a place to put it on the calendar so that you can tell your brain, "Hey brain, it's taken care of. We're good."

All those little things, that's so easy to do, yet we don't often do it. Because here's the problem behind the problem. We don't think we have the time to sit down and spend 30 minutes writing down everything we need to do, thinking about the to-dos behind the to-dos, all the mini tasks. Then putting them on the calendar, even the little easy stuff. We don't do that. We put it off.

The simple solution is to spend 30 minutes at the beginning of the week and put it all on the calendar. Then you will see, "This is how much time I have. This is how much time I need." Then you start to prioritize. If you don't take the action of putting it on the calendar because you don't think you have the time to do it, guess what? You waste time spinning out and being tired at night because you're holding all that information in your brain.

So the role is to look at all the open cycles, put them down onto paper. Yes, it's a lot, and you can do it. Schedule it. The priorities will rise to the surface very quickly when you see the time that you have and the time that's required for other things. It will prioritize, and the stuff that isn't as important either gets delegated or falls off, and you're like, "I'm just not going to do that. Or I am going to do this. It's a priority, and here's why."

So getting more intentional about our calendaring and about our to-do lists can help your brain relax at night. You want to create open files and closed files inside your mind. You want to put those tasks down on paper so that

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your brain is like, "That is as good as done. I can check it off the list."
Okay?

So the solution is when you're spinning out and you're thinking about tasks, things you have to do. You feel overwhelmed. You feel really busy. Write it all down. You can write this all down at night. I tell my clients put a notepad by your nightstand. When the thought list, the to-do list, comes up, you brain drain it that night. Just write everything down. Then it's captured. Then you can be like, "Oh good. That feels good. I remembered that. I'm going to write it down. In the morning, it goes directly to the calendar."

So you spend 10/15 minutes every single morning when you're starting your day prioritizing your day, putting things actually on the calendar, and then getting to work and honoring that calendar. So when you're spinning out on a to-do list, write it down, put it on the calendar.

Okay. Problem number two, my brain does this so often. It gets really excited when I think about it. So I have to calm myself down. So I'm with you on this problem, number two, which is future thinking and past thinking.

So my mind tends to default to the future. I'm always thinking about what's coming up and what podcast I want to write about and the clients that I'm serving. Serving people ahead of time, how can I overdeliver? How can I give you the most value ahead of time so that when you do decide you want a coach and you're ready for coaching, you're a yes when you get on this call? We're already going to be a yes.

I like to think about how I can serve you like a five star hotel. What does five star coaching service look like? How can I overdeliver? So my brain's always on thinking about what are the little things that hold principals back? What are their fears? What are their objections? What are their worries? What are their doubts? Why are they staying up at night? Why are they

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exhausted? You're doing this with your teachers and your students and your families and your district and your community. You're thinking about all of that, right?

So the mind tends to default to future thinking, or sometimes, and we've done this too, where it goes back to the past. That's when you've been through a situation. Maybe it was a little traumatic or maybe it didn't go the way you planned. You perseverate and think about it in hindsight what you should have said or what you could have done or how you should have handled it or what you didn't know and now you know. You're kind of feeling that burn of not feeling like you handled it like you wanted to handle it, or the way you felt you should handle it. So there's two kinds of thinking there, right?

When you're thinking about the future and you're really excited, what's happening is number one, you can go back to problem one. Where if it just becomes a to-do list, write it all down and calendar it. But if it's this kind of like nebulous anxiety worry, what could happen, all of the what ifs. When you're thinking about that, that means there are some unprocessed thoughts and emotions happening inside of your brain. In that case, you need to brain drain all of those thoughts that are happening and the worries and process those emotions.

If you're thinking about a conversation you have to have and you're worried, you want to process through that. Why am I worried? What's the worst case that could happen? What's the best case that could happen? Our brains are wired to look at the worst case. Why not ask it what could possibly go well, right? Give it the 50/50 so your brain can relax a little bit when you're anticipating a future fear or a future worry.

If you're looking back at the past and you're perseverating on a problem that didn't go as planned or a situation, you need to process that and look

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at the reality of what happened. What worked? What actually worked in that moment? What didn't go so well? What are you not happy about? What didn't you like? What did you learn? Where are you moving forward with this?

Every single experience that you have in your principalship is a learning opportunity. It's all learning, even the good ones. Learning what to do, learning what not to do, learning what works, learning what didn't. Learning, learning, learning, it's all learning. So if you're perseverating on the past, process it. What went well, what didn't go so well, and what did I learn? Simple as that. Then you can come to reconcile and be at peace with the reality of your past and use it to propel you forward for your future. Okay?

Okay problem number three. This is where I'm going to get on my high horse. I'm going to try to make this short and sweet. The problem when you're thinking about work all day long. You're thinking about work at night, in the morning, on the weekends, on your vacation, on your breaks, while you're celebrating your anniversary. Which my husband and I just celebrated our fourth anniversary on the 27th of June. I was not thinking about work. I was down in Santa Cruz frolicking. It was beautiful.

The reason I'm able to do that is I've worked really, really hard to not make work the most important part of my life, and the most important part of my day, and the top priority all the time. Yes, I love all of you. It serves you for me not to prioritize work 24/7/. I'm more creative. My content gets deeper and richer.

When I go out and play and I study my brain, what it's thinking about when I'm out having fun and what it's thinking about when I'm working and when I'm thinking I have to work when I'm playing or that I should be working or that I should be getting to that, or I should be solving this problem. The solutions I come up with are not as rich. They're not as juicy.

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Going away from the work, giving your brain a respite from the thought has to come from the belief system that your personal life is equally important to your work life. Scheduling in fun and pleasure and rest. Whatever that looks like for you. It's different for everybody, but you have to know yourself well enough, have a relationship with yourself well enough to know what feels like fun for you. What feels like rest?

For some people, it's staying in and reading a book. For other people, it's getting out on a hike. For some people, it's going out social to restaurants or dinner or parties or celebrations or barbecues. Some people need the people. Some people need the nature. Some people need alone time. Whatever that looks like for you, you have to know yourself in order to understand what feels like fun? Why it feels like fun? What does your body need? What does your heart, mind, and soul need in addition to work?

I just want to say that taking a break from work doesn't have to be super time consuming or super expensive. You don't have to use all of your resources of time and money to indulge in rest from work. But the more you have a focus outside of work, you have hobbies, family, travel, friends. Whatever you want to do with your life, making it equally important is what allows your brain to think about other things besides work.

Think about this. What would you do with your life if you weren't allowed to work? If you couldn't work. If it were not an option. If you had to spend your time, your energy, your money on things that had nothing to do with work, what would you do? If you can't answer that question, that is part of the reason why you can't sleep. Your body and your brain and your heart, mind, and soul, they need balance. You have to intentionally offer that balance and provide it for yourself.

Now, the last thing I want to say about why you can't sleep is that when we wake up and we're spinning out, then we get frustrated with ourselves. So

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the problem becomes we're actually in resistance to how our brain is wired to work. Being upset with your mind for spinning out adds layers of frustration to already feeling worried and stressed.

So your brain is wired to keep you safe and protect you and solve problems, right? It goes into that problem solving mode if it deems a situation at work that you're facing or thinking about. In any way, shape, or form it feels like a threat either a physical threat, an emotional threat, a mental threat. When it feels like something isn't quite safe for you or comfortable for you, it will go into problem solving mode. Especially while you're sleeping.

When you wake up and then you start thinking about how to solve this problem, "I'm in danger. I'm in danger." When you have that fight or flight and you get into anxiety and worry, then you get upset at yourself on top of it for not sleeping and for worrying. That is adding layers of thoughts onto what's already happening.

So instead of resisting it, the solution is to allow your brain to do what it does. Of course it's spinning out. Of course, it's trying to problem solve for you. It's having some thoughts. You don't have to be upset that your brain is spinning out. You can process the thoughts, even if it means getting up and getting out of bed and getting it all out onto paper at 2:30 in the morning, then so be it. It's better to process what you're thinking and get it out of the body and onto paper, and look at the emotions and notice, "How am I feeling and why am I feeling this way?" You can put yourself into a state of more calm and relaxed after you've let that energy out.

That does allow the brain to then say, "Okay, I've said what I need to say. I've processed. I see what's going on here." Maybe you do have a sleepless night or two. I'm going to say that sleep is 50/50 in the sense that

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some nights are awesome, and some nights aren't. They just aren't all perfect.

If we can just allow that and accept it like, "Oh, tonight my brain is having a moment. It's thinking a lot of thoughts. I'm going to write them down." Instead of tossing and turning and being frustrated with ourselves. There's a difference between allowing it to do what it's doing and to be upset and resisting that the brain is overthinking, overworking, right?

So, I hope some of these tips have been helpful for you. They have been really helpful for me. Please reach out and let me know. Tell me what is going on in your mind, what aspect. Is there another type of problem that you're facing, that you can't seem to shut down? Let's talk about it. Join the Empowered Principal Facebook group. Let's talk about it there. When you're ready, let's get to coaching. Aren't you ready for your coach yet? Come on now.

Yes, the Empowered Principal program is open for the upcoming school year. If you are ready to have a one on one coach who's in your corner for the next 12 months of your life to help you get started or to help you wind down. Whether you're a veteran principal and you're winding down or you're a new principal and want the support of a veteran principal who has life coaching skills to help you create the balance you need, to help you get the sleep you need. Come on over. Let's do this. Have an amazing week. I'll talk to you next week. Take care. Bye.

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