

FULL EPISODE Leah Steele FRIED .mp3

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SPEAKERS

Caitlin Donovan, Leah Steele



Caitlin Donovan 00:01

Alright everybody Today I have for you a super fun guest whose name is Leah Steele and she is the founder of Searching for Serenity, a business focused on mentoring and training corporates and professionals who are struggling with imposter syndrome, burnout and feeling overwhelmed by their careers. Leah is also a blogger, speaker and jewelry designer, because: why have one career when you can have three. So please let me welcome you so much to the show. Leah, I'm very happy to have you. And, as in you warned me before we get on. So I will warn the listeners if you are someone who is offended by follow language, this might not be your favorite episode, because we're going to just let them fly. Because we both enjoy it. So that's the way it's going to go. So we have to get started. Could you guide us through what happened to you when you were burnt out? Because the audience doesn't know this yet. But Leah before this was a lawyer. So this is this is a big change. So could you tell us this story?



Leah Steele 01:04

Yeah, I love the way you said lawyer like it's, it's a euphemism for so many things. So, as you can tell, from my voice, I'm British, I live in England. So there's a really long version of the story that starts when I was about eight years old. But I'll give you the shortened version, because frankly, it's it's a long and winding but I was eight or nine years old and I decided to become a lawyer. I was in a very difficult situation. And when my mom went to a lawyer to try and get some things resolved divorce, selling houses, things like that. I'm

sitting in this lawyers office. And I was sitting in one of these high back wooden chairs at this conference table that I thought was so snazzy now, just seemed so quaint, sitting at this table, watching this lawyer just start to sort everything out. And I suddenly had this kind of realization, swept over me and like, I want to do that. I want to be that person. for other people. I'm going to help to help I want to be able to make things better. I want to be able to make sense of the dark. And it was a completely ridiculous crazy dream because I came from a single parent family. Although my mom worked. We were also relying on state handouts to keep us above water. My father was an electrician, my grandpa was a plumber and plasterer. I came from the most blue collar kind of family and nobody in my family that have been to university my mom and even that school without any qualifications. It was just crazy. absolutely crazy. But as you figure out with me, I don't really let things like sanity or the way the world works kind of stop me. So my entire life became about becoming this lawyer. So I did my degree I did my postgraduate degree I was called to the bar in Wales in 2007 and kept going, kept going, kept going. And everything had become this all encompassing. I need to be this person. And of course, an eight year old has no damn clue what a lawyer does, apart from sit in an office and have paper files, apparently nice suits



Caitlin Donovan 03:05

and snazzy desks.



Leah Steele 03:06

Oh, very snazzy desks. It was hilarious because that law firm actually shared this this weekend before we're recording this. I shared a letter from that law firm because after this, I'm so impressed. I wrote to them and asked to do work experience with them. And I applied a year in advance as a tiny little High Street law firm with three partners in an associate. And I still have that letter. It was sent to me 21 Yeah, 21 years ago, and 20 years ago, this month, I started my legal career with that work experience. So yeah, so it's it's got a lot of memories, for me. But everything had become this all encompassing, I have to be this person. I didn't really know who this person was. I just knew that wherever I was, at any given moment, I wasn't it yet. Whether it was I wasn't qualified, I wasn't working in an area of law that I thought I should have been it was earning enough money. And there were a lot of knocks along the way that are a lot of crazy stories that genuinely I share them with people like you sure, are you sure that happened to you and you didn't dream it? But yeah, I was working really, really hard to try and become qualified, is this really weird situation, I don't know if it's the same way you are. But over here, you can do all of your study, and still not end up doing the job that you set out to do because you have to

get kind of like an apprenticeship or like, you know, somebody has to give you the golden key. It wasn't happening wasn't happening for me. So I was working in law as an unqualified lawyer and working second and third jobs on top of it, just pay the bills, because the pay was really freaking shit and you know, it's constantly I don't have enough money, or I'm not close enough to where I need to be. And the overwork just kept rising, I eventually qualified to do it in 2012. So whatever it is, what 28 at that point, so it wasn't like I'd watch the decades into, but it felt like it.



Caitlin Donovan 05:02

You know, when you're 28, 5 years is 15.



05:04

Yeah, exactly. And, you know, it was just, it felt like, you know, it was always on the horizon. For years, it had been a carrot that's been put in front of me by employers like, Oh, yeah, we'll help you qualify, and then they didn't, or oh yeah, we'll help you qualify that two and a half years to get the details pinned down and me going, I will leave. But yeah, it took forever, or it felt like it. By the time I qualified. I sat down one day and worked out that I paid overtime and second jobs alone: So working in cinema, working at a closed shop, I taken on a second job with my main employers where I worked 40 hours a week, to kind of help them evenings and weekends. So my, my usual weekly schedule look like I did a nine to five, but I would also do five to eight, two or three evenings a week and attend to on a Saturday and then sleep on Sunday and do it all over again. And I worked out that I had done something like an extra three and a half years of full time employment on top of my day job in the seven or eight years it takes me to qualify. So I was consistently working a minimum of 60 hours a week for nearly a decade, I sat down and realized that I was like, Oh, no wonder I'm tired - didn't change anything. Didn't change a damn thing. But slowly, it was just becoming more and more and more. I took on another job where I was commuting. And I was commuting three hours a day. I'm not a good traveler at the best of times. There was a week it was getting ridiculous. I was doing this really intense job. When I qualified the lawyer I was working in mental capacity law. Essentially, I was ferreting around in the records of people who have passed away figuring out whether they had capacity to write the words that they did, and helping families sort it out. And I'd also taken on a new specialism but I taught myself essentially went to one course created a new specialism and started setting up a department around it and was pitching for work and doing marketing events and delivering training to other lawyers and add a regular magazine article in a monthly magazine for private client lawyers. And I did quotes for national press and I was spinning so many plates and looking back. I think that's crazy.

But then I also look at my clients and they do exactly the same stuff.



Caitlin Donovan 07:23

Yeah, people are doing this all the time. This is a very relatable story.



Leah Steele 07:27

It's, it's what you have to do, isn't it? I think we have this idea that I'm going to pitch up I'm gonna do my qualification, and then I get qualified. And it'll just work. And instead, when we start working, it feels like we're constantly shifting sands, you know, you have to do these extra things in order to get a pay rise of 2% a year or a bonus of less than your monthly mortgage payment for one month, right. So there's a lot that goes with it. And the thing that I realized looking back was it wasn't people doing this to me, every time there was an opportunity. I was like, Oh, me, me, me I'll do it, I'll do it, I'll do it. Like me, like me, please please like me. And so it just became more and more and more. And we got to a point in December 2014. So I'd only been qualified for two years, but I've been working for a decade. My mom had been in out of the hospital. And we began to realize what was wrong with her. There was no treatment. And there was this week, two weeks before Christmas. I had a client client conference lined up for mediation. I had another couple of meetings. So I ended up in four days working Monday to Thursday, I did 50 hours of work. It's more like 60. If you include the commuting, there were days where I was on the train at 5am and didn't get home till midnight. Right. And I just kept going and going took Friday off work so I could relax, avoid the company Christmas party because I was being crappy to everybody at this point. Shocking, right? Yeah. And just start my Christmas shopping. You know, call my mom. at six o'clock that night, I had a text message from one of my colleagues said, we've been let go early. We're getting into the Christmas party. I'm sorry, you won't be here. But we'll have a drink for you. And I'll tell you all the gossip tomorrow and 20 minutes later, there's a knock at the front door. And was the police because my mom had been found dead that morning.



Caitlin Donovan 09:11

Oh, my god



Leah Steele 09:12

yeah, two weeks for Christmas. And three weeks later, I was back at my desk dealing with the recently bereaved who were in disputes with their family. Whilst taking one day off a

week to clear out my childhood home but there was a period of you would think right, you think the knock at the door would be the Oh my god, and then her life fell apart. And then she rebuilt. That's what it would be in any Hollywood Story. Right? Yeah. My prince would have slept in that moment. My prince had already swept in and it was fine. But



Caitlin Donovan 09:38

prince, check.



Leah Steele 09:40

Yes, Prince Charming tick. But it didn't it took me another six months to properly fall apart. And I really



Caitlin Donovan 09:47

That's really important



Leah Steele 09:49

it's it's crazy, but it's what we do. Because not one of us gets up in the morning. It's like, how do I feel my butt little bit muscle tension. I'll go back to bed for the day. It's like gritted teeth into it. Sheryl Sandberg tells us and crack on.



Caitlin Donovan 10:04

Yeah. And I think that what you said is something that I've seen in patients over the years, many, many, many times that they'll say, you know, but I'm not particularly stressed right now. like nothing's really happening. And I'm like, what about the past 18 months, they're like, Well, you know, my mother died. I've been overworking My father was hospitalized. You know, I took a trip and then it got canceled. And I ended up being stranded in India for you know, two weeks with no water, and you listen to these things. And then I have to stop and sort of like, play the reel back for them and say okay, so this is what you just told me the last year and a half of your life looks like you might not be feeling those things today. But they were bound to roll up into a giant tumbleweed and knock ya over at some point.



Leah Steele 10:50

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. And that's exactly what was happening. I got almost to the end of the financial year was signed off sick two weeks. This is the absolute kicker I got signed. I was signed off sick by my doctor for two weeks on the basis come back we'll see if she should be going back to work because I wasn't sleeping. I had chronic IBS was feeling nauseous all the time. I'd had a viral infection bacterial infection, I had sinusitis. You know, my body was just going: "sit the fuck down." Yeah, and I wouldn't do it. I got signed off sick on a Monday morning and I went into work and I told them I've been signed off sick and I was going to take the next few weeks off work but I wanted to clear my desk last and it got to the point and my boss was just looking at me like you are crazy woman I am going to have you removed from the building if you don't leave by 4pm so that's fine. I will get it done. So I will clear up my desk on the first day basically went home for two weeks to try and get my shit together because we can all get our lives together in two weeks



Caitlin Donovan 11:50

of course that's a very reasonable timeline. Yeah,



Leah Steele 11:52

If not less, I mean really 40 hours should have done it should it Yeah, yeah, I'm and two thirds of the way through my sick leave I checked my bank account because I've had a text message says my mortgage payment has bounced. My employees were not paying me my time offset because quote, I'd had too much time off that year with you know, my mother dying and being the only person to sort out her estate and having had a whooping three weeks off work for that. And I just sat there on the floor in the lounge crying my eyes out thinking what the hell have I done one because I thought I'd go back down to embarrassed and I'm too ashamed and too angry with them. I'm going to cut someone ya know. All the reasonable things that go through our head



Caitlin Donovan 12:33

hahaha, I'm gonna cut someone



Leah Steele 12:37

and then on the other hand, I was like, What the fuck I done with my life that this is what happens



Caitlin Donovan 12:42

That this is the result, yeah



Leah Steele 12:43

now I've I've worked 60, 70, 80 hour weeks. I've done days where you know I got up at 5am and drove to a network it wasn't a networking event it was like okay I don't know if you guys have like a country show okay Town and Country show.



Caitlin Donovan 13:01

No, tell us about that. We you know Americans love this British shit.



Leah Steele 13:04

Oh, no. Well, this is British as hell, in the middle of ass f**k nowhere? No, it's not ass f**k nowhere. But it is the middle of nowhere. You don't get any phone signal in the middle of Wales for a farmers show. So this is because agriculture is big in Wales. I was working with a farm where we did a lot with agricultural clients would show up to these events. So we were in a big marquee thing at this huge, I mean huge farmers show thousands and thousands of people and pens of sheep being shown and you could buy your shotguns which is the only place in the UK I've ever seen a shotgun in real life or any kind of gun that wasn't attached to a fairground, you know, merry go round thing



Caitlin Donovan 13:47

that shoots water at a target.



Leah Steele 13:50

Yeah, you know to win a dark or something. And this massive event going on that we went to so it was ridiculous heat, I'm ginger and pale I don't cope with heat well. In a marquee with no air conditioning, massive humidity and I got up at 5am to drive three and a half hours there.



Caitlin Donovan 14:06

You're hating life right now.



Leah Steele 14:07

Yeah, got home at 8pm. And it's like 6am get up Do it again. So you know this, I had broken down completely. I'm sat there on the floor thinking, what the hell is my life come to that it doesn't matter how much I over work, it doesn't matter how much I perform and beg people to love me at the end of the month, I can't get my mortgage page because you know, I had a breakdown even though I work with clients with mental capacity issues all day long. It felt so wrong to me. So that was my first Fuck this shit moment. It should have been six months before my mom died. But you know,



Caitlin Donovan 14:42

no, well, or, you know, I mean, you can learn what you can learn when you can learn it that doesn't. Unfortunately, one of the things I've learned about burnout is it never fucking works on my schedule.



Leah Steele 14:55

No, and survival mechanisms are strong within all of us. That's how we get to burnout. I say to my clients again and again, people who give a shit don't. You know, it's only people who give a shit that burn out the people who don't give a shit don't ever burn out because the stakes were never high enough to begin with.



Caitlin Donovan 15:10

Well, you said a couple of times already in this conversation is something that is really crucial to the work that I do and you know, doing all these things so that all these people love me.



Leah Steele 15:20

Yes, yeah. imposter syndrome and people pleasing.



Caitlin Donovan 15:24

And pleasing people pleasing is the core of everything that I teach. Yeah. Because God, we just we give and we give and we give for all the wrong reasons. We convince ourselves that we're doing it for the right reasons we're quote unquote, just trying to help and why doesn't everybody appreciate it, then we get resentful, because they're not responding to

our help the way that we want them to which the help that they never asked for and probably don't need.



Leah Steele 15:55

Yeah, there's nothing like making a relationship transactional to bring it down to its knees.



Caitlin Donovan 16:00

transactional and/or codependent. ya know,



Leah Steele 16:04

there's a lot of that, definitely



Caitlin Donovan 16:06

of it, there's a ton of it. But it being in that place where you feel like your value, and your inherent worth as a person is only visible when you are paying out energetically in massive, massive amounts more than you have in your energetic bank is going to get you burnt out every time.



Leah Steele 16:27

Every single time. Yeah.yeah. So back to the crying on Florida lounge.



Caitlin Donovan 16:34

Yeah, yeah, lets go there.



Leah Steele 16:36

Let's go there. That was four years ago now. And that could have been energetically, it feels like three decades ago. Yeah. Because everything has changed since then. That was May. Yeah, may 2015. So four years ago, just gone. And I started making changes, and I did the thing. We could only ever work within our understanding. And you know, what we've experienced before. So my response was, F this shit, I'm gonna get a new job. And so I did, that day pretty much - got a new job, right? I'm working for a nice little local law

firm, it's five minutes down the road. I won't have to do the travel, I can go home for lunch, I can walk my own dog. And that's, that's try that.



Caitlin Donovan 17:19

It's going to be jolly.



Leah Steele 17:22

It was terrible. You know, when you walk into a room and just know you don't fit? Yeah, day one. Absolutely. Day one. But it was that situation of I don't feel like I can cope here. I don't have the language to discuss with people what's going on. I just need to get out. Give me any escape route. So I have my escape route I got on the on the boat, and realized the boat had a great big hole in it. So I started thinking outside of the box, which is actually far more difficult to do than it sounds. And I've been seeing people. I think we all have somebody on Facebook who pops up with a sponsored post saying something like you hate your job was like, No, I don't. I never hated my job.



Caitlin Donovan 18:07

My iPhone is listening to my conversations again.



Leah Steele 18:12

Yeah, always. This was before we fully realized that this was happening as well. Yeah. And so I saw somebody that was saying, right, you know, leaving your job to have a freedom business. And working online was like, Hey, I can do that with some of the skills I've got as a lawyer. Let's do that. So I start working with her, and a couple of sessions in we're in a group call. And she's like, you don't care about this thing that you're trying to do this legal career spin out that you're trying to create? What is it that you do care about? And I was like...I genuinely don't know.



Caitlin Donovan 18:43

No one's ever asked me that before, and I never stopped to think about it.



Leah Steele 18:46

No one's ever cared because everybody has that bit on their CV where we say what we do outside of work. And I can bet you all of the money in my bank account, you probably want something better than that. Bet you ready thing that everybody listening to this has on their CV that they like watching films or going to the theater, and like reading, traveling, and some kind of sport. And I can honestly say that at least four or five of those are bollocks, absolute rubbish. You know, I have theater and film on my CV. And at that point, I couldn't have told you the last time that and I think it was about eight years beforehand.

L

Leah Steele 19:26

Nobody cares. Because it's about what you can do for your job, rather than whether you're a well rounded human being who isn't going to murder at the end of the day.

L

Leah Steele 19:33

So I started wondering, what is it that I care about? And then paying attention to what what are the things, there are a few of them, as you can imagine, one of the things that I can't stop ranting about somebody brings up, right and one of them was the just the absolute state, that so many women in or at work, how many women I'd seen leave their careers or have to make the choice between having a happy home life and having a career, or who just couldn't keep sacrificing. And early on in my career, I thought they were weak, or that I could do it better. I was smarter than them or I just wouldn't make some of the choices they've made. And then I was sitting on the floor of my lounge crying. So that's where I started. And I started paying attention to why is it that we struggle? Why is it that we don't have a work life balance? Why is it that for example, law in the UK, flexible working is almost seems like you're less than if you want to work less than five days a week. If you want to work from home occasionally, it's like well, why? why you should want to be here all the time. And so I started talking about that. And that's where searching strategy really developed from I just spent a couple of months blogging and thinking about what I was sharing and what my experiences were. And the key themes that came out of it were burn out. Yep. Very familiar with that on. Imposter syndrome. Ding, ding, winner. Yeah. And just this constant state feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, never on top of the workload. But for people in particular, who did love their careers, or do still love their careers and want to love them again, those people who have those epic ninja days where they get everything done, and everything goes well, and they feel proud of themselves but they can't remember the last time it happened. And that's where I started for the last four years I've been researching, developing, adding to and working with women from UK, Europe, US just getting deeper into it, and asking them, what are your boundaries? What do you say no to? What are the points at which you'd say no, I'm sorry, this is this is a no,

I'm leaving in any work situation. And those questions are very difficult to answer for a lot of women.



Caitlin Donovan 21:48

We all know Simon Sinek loves to say like you need to know your why. I know I tell my patients, you need to know your NO



Leah Steele 21:57

Yes, absolutely. exactly



Caitlin Donovan 22:01

you need to your NO, you know, because if you don't know where you end, where your energy ends, you'll again burnout every time. I found a blog post on your website that I absolutely loved, which is called How to avoid burnout, or why most burnout advice is bullshit.



Leah Steele 22:23

Yes. hahahah



Caitlin Donovan 22:25

It's amazing. And I think that exactly what you wrote. Before we get on this call, Leah was saying it's interesting because I think we come at burnout from different perspectives. I think we might use different words, but I don't think we come from different perspectives at all. And this is why: I cannot stand and I write about this regularly on my blog, I cannot stand the positive thinking culture that allows us to spiritually bypass all the bullshit that's happening in our lives pretending that it doesn't bother us because we are above that.



Leah Steele 22:56

Yeah, I've been looking for what the psychological term to spiritual bypass might be, you know, a psychological comparitor. Because spiritual bypass, it's something I think people understand in the spiritual communities online, anybody who is more heavily into the woo, but you try and explain that to somebody who isn't heavily into the woo or is so far into

get shit done on the day, they just keep going that they think I don't have time for



Caitlin Donovan 23:23

Well, it's false, it's false positive thinking.



Leah Steele 23:25

Yeah. And it's, but it's exactly the same situation that actually blog, the blog about why burnout advice is bullshit was because an influencer on LinkedIn commented that they were going to write a blog about burnout, because burnout was real, because I haven't taken a day off in six weeks, and I look to them like "Aw, Snookem's seriously".



Caitlin Donovan 23:44

Yeah, that's not it



Leah Steele 23:46

It's not fucking bullshit. No, just drives me nuts. burnout has become a cold word. Yes, Burnout has become like, "Oh, I'm so burned out". No, you're tired? Or you're bored. Or you're frustrated, or the new the outcome?



Caitlin Donovan 24:02

Or because you need a vacation... I have a blog post called: Are you burnt out? Or do you need vacation? It's not the same thing.



Leah Steele 24:08

No Burnout is when you take that vacation and log into your emails 12 times a day, to the point that your boss threatens to remove your email access, because you're emailing from the rooftop pool of your Gran Canaria hotel, saying, but have you done this? But have you done this? But have you done this?



Caitlin Donovan 24:22

Or you allow yourself the vacation, You take the time off, and you come back in and you

feel like you never fucking left



Leah Steele 24:29

Yes, exactly.



Caitlin Donovan 24:31

The component that I think is really important is something that you mentioned in your story is this idea that, you know, you were having IBS, you were having viral infections, you were having bacterial infections, you were having sinus infections, your body was literally breaking down. So in the research that I've done, there's a huge amount of research that supports the fact that your body breaks down, your immune system breaks down, your brain changes structure, your stress management centers don't work as they're supposed to, we are not talking about something that you're just thinking or feeling. This is that people say that that there's a word you know, psychosomatic that there's an issue in your body that is mostly, quote unquote, in your head. And psychosomatic is actually a real thing, when you have an issue in your body that is, comes from a mental place, there is a physiological change in your body, which actually means that that thing is, is really happening. So whether or not it's from your head or from like an injury outside, it doesn't really matter. It's real either way. But more importantly, for me, I have flipped that word around and the word that I use in my blog posts and on my Instagram, is Somatopsychic. Things can happen in the body that then have an effect on our ability to function mentally, as well. Yeah. You know, it can work both ways.



Leah Steele 25:53

Yeah, absolutely. It's something that - I so I made a choice very early on when I realized that actually, burnout is something I can't stop talking about. Imposter syndrome is something I can't stop talking about. I want to help people to enjoy and thrive in their careers instead of feeling like they have to choose between a poor life or a wealthy unhappiness. And as I started really getting into it, I made a very clear decision. I was going to carry on working in law, and from the time I launched Searchin for Serenity, I worked full year across two different law firms. Before I then decided right, that's it, I'm taking a step back more, and I'm putting more of the energy in Searchin for Serenity, I already had clients by that point, because I wanted to prove to myself that it can be done, that you can manage reverse burnout, change your lifestyle, without overhauling it without drinking. I'm sorry, I keep joking about green juices and pond scum. But I used to take green smoothies to work and put them on the desk, and people'd be like, "the fuck is

that in that bottle?" It looks like pond scum tastes like pond scum. It's supposed to do something good for me soldering kit. I was not good at recipes. But I made this really clear decision. I was going to do it because I wanted to prove that you can do it. And I wanted to walk the talk. But what then ended up happening because of course these things always happen. I moved to a role where I was in the UK is called a quarter protection deputy. So the way to explain it to anybody in America is Britney Spears conservatorship. Imagine that happened, but it was more private. So a court that anonymized her right. And instead of her dad being appointed, it was professional. That's what I did. So I managed that financial affairs of about two dozen people who had severe traumatic brain injury either as a result of brain injury, right traffic accident, accident at work, criminal injury. And as a result of those injuries and the claims arising, they each were worth between one and 15 million. And so I would do everything from buying the nappies and hiring their carers, firing their family members when they stole their money, checking whether they had capacity to consent to sex or marriage, arranging everything, you know, I was there for life. And and I was doing that job whilst I was creating Searching For Serenity and the amount of parallels I had sitting there in multidisciplinary meetings with neuro rehabilitation experts. And you know, psychologists and neuro psychiatrists and lawyers have been doing this for 30 years and growing. These people with traumatic brain injuries are exhibiting exactly the same symptoms my clients with burnout, exactly the coping mechanisms that they used. I lifted quite a few of them and employed them with clients because when you're burning out your attention to detail wanes, your ability to retain information, your focus, it's exactly the same as a frontal lobe injury.



Caitlin Donovan 28:40

Yeah, well, physically, the brain, the frontal cortex in the brain, as a result of long term chronic stress becomes physically smaller. Yeah, like if it actually shrinks, so there is brain damage.



Leah Steele 28:55

Yeah. And my background in particular, one of the crazy stories I happened was, while I was doing my postgraduate degree, my father died. My father and I had been estranged for a very long time by the time he died, but he had suffered from early onset dementia. So for me sitting there, on the one hand, working with people who are chronically stressed on the other, having realized that when I was writing letters for action, bringing all of the case together, it's I think people underestimate how creative a lawyers job is or any professional job is because you're usually creating something from nothing it's pure alchemy. But bringing together everything in a case right let's call action at 10am I couldn't do it. I kept sitting there looking at the computer I couldn't do it. I'd have four

copies nothing was working. I ate a bag of sweets my brain started working right that's how chronically exhausted I was I needed to mainline sugar for my brain which is fueled by carbohydrates, to start working



Caitlin Donovan 29:47

did the same exact thing



Leah Steele 29:49

Brilliant one is it was Percy Pigs which anyone in the UK know they are adored. A universally adored sweet but sitting there ripping the ears off a cartoon pig in sugar form at 10am. It's a horrifying state for anyone to be in just to be able to do your job.



Caitlin Donovan 30:05

Yeah, absolutely. And and you you do need it. And so this is it's so important. And I want to say read something that you wrote on this blog that I think people need to hear. I think it's important. And you say "most people think the opposite of burnout is energized, happy a stock photo image of a woman with beautiful white teeth, boobs that jiggle and a stomach that doesn't running down the beach insunshine. It's not the opposite of burnout is resilient. The opposite of burnout is about being you completely you minus a bit of the self damaging behaviors and plus the word no in a slightly more frequent basis. I'm sorry, that's not sexy at all, is it?"



Leah Steele 30:53

It's not!



Caitlin Donovan 30:55

But, it's true.



Leah Steele 30:56

So many people, because I did this, I absolutely did this. I realized a year before my mom died, that I was burning out. I didn't know what that was. I didn't have the language for that. And thank God The World Health Organization has actually developed a definition

for burnout now because all sudden people like burnout syndrome, burnout is a occupational disease. And I kept reading these magazine articles going you got it wrong.



Caitlin Donovan 31:19

Yeah, I know. I know. It's based on Christina Maslach's research. And they took the three top factors that she uses the physical and emotional exhaustion number one, the second one being the cynical cynicism and detachment. And then the last one, the lack of feeling a lack of impact. And those are the the definitions that there for those of you who don't know, I'm not teaching this to Leah, I know, she knows. I am teaching, I'm saying this for the benefit of the group. Yeah, World Health Organization has adopted the definition of burnout that was created by burnout researcher who holds a PhD, her name is Christina Maslach, she's very impressive, I have read a lot of her work. And she's done a crazy amount of work on it. But because the first one, for instance, is physical and emotional exhaustion, that basically covers anything from IBS to bipolar disorder, like we're we have not really quite figured out we have a definition - But we really have not quite figured out how to really talk about it because of the fact that for each person, depending on what their previous circumstances were, what their previous lifestyle was, what their previous structure was, how their parents ate and spoke to them and all of these other factors, burnout was going to present to them differently. So I think one of the reasons that burnout is coming out now as such a big thing is because we are finally getting to the place where we're doing more individualized medicine, and we're not as attached to, you know, a list of three things that define a disease.



Leah Steele 32:50

I've seen this in action because as a mental capacity lawyer, one of the things that we used to use quite a lot with something called a mini mental state examination.



Caitlin Donovan 32:57

Yeah,



Leah Steele 32:58

now, I, omg, I laughed until I cried, I'm gonna get political now. I'm sorry. The readership I was gonna say readership of people listening now switched off. Because many mental state examination is literally a checklist. Yes. Are you oriented in time in place? Do you know who the President/Prime Minister is? And a couple of years ago, when Donald

Trump's medical evaluation came out, and a big song and dance was made about a he was completely mentally healthy - it was the mini mental state examination. And, of course, as somebody who's worked with it, I'm sitting there going, No, that's Oh, my God. No, this is it's a minimum standard. And you know, I've seen I've genuinely worked with cases where people have scored 12 out of 20, on minimum state examination, who couldn't remember what to do with toilet paper after they used it, so hung it around the bathroom. But But you know, so the idea that one equates to the other, but I think we all look for black and white, a year for my mom died. I'm sitting in the toilets again and again, again, Google, what is that out? How do I cure burnout? And I kept finding the same articles that talked about priests burning out and the lack of empathy. Okay, that's one thing. But all the advice was, change your diet, try to relax, telling a type A lawyer who spent her entire life in survival mode, how just try to relax is a little bit ineffectual should I say?



Caitlin Donovan 34:28

it's a little bit rude, I think because you're not talking to the person that's sitting in front of you like it's, yeah, it's totally ignoring who you are as a person.



Leah Steele 34:36

Yeah. And it's so - that we think I'll just, you know, I'll just do hopscotch I'll just jump into these three boxes turn around, jump back, and everything will be fine in my life, I want the Is it the red pill, the blue pill, I can never remember which one it is. Yeah, we'll call it purple, but yeah you know, we want a pill, we want a quick fix solution, we want to press a button and it'll be okay again. And I remember just crying in the toilets for work and I used to do this thing, where I just fold a tissue, and I will put it directly on the waterline of my eye above my lashes. Because if the tears were soaked up directly from my eyes, and I hadn't cried down my face, then you know, obviously, I haven't cried. So it doesn't count, you know. But I remember just sitting there thinking, How do I how do I resolve this? How do I change this. And that's the biggest thing that I've been trying to focus on. And I sometimes get lost in it, but come back to it. Just want to tell people that it doesn't mean the end of your career, it doesn't mean the end of your life, it doesn't mean that you have to go and quit your job sell your house and go and live in a mud hut and barley, unless you really want to



Caitlin Donovan 35:43

Yeah, unless that's what you need, which is fine.



Leah Steele 35:45

Yeah, if that's what you choose, that's different. Yeah. Particularly with burnout. It's like being perpetually backed into a corner with a, you know, a big beastie, some kind of Tiger or a lion in front of you. And you could run away, you could get out of it, you could respond, but you feel like anything that you do is going to make it worse. And, and so it's just easy to stay in this corner here. Yeah, and keep going. And I have so many people who say to me, because I have had a rather weird and wonderful life. In the first 35 years of it, God knows what I'm going to do for the next night 35 God. But so many people say to me, oh, I understand when you burnt out, you've had this happened or that happened, or you know, your mom died. So it made sense that you found out how can I burn out when I'm doing you know, a job and I'm married with kids? I'm going, Okay, when's the last time you slept eight hours a night? What was the last time that somebody said thank you to you at work? When was the last time that you did a job that you didn't go home and think, I could have done that better and I've got 15 more things to do tomorrow. And I'll just log into my emails after dinner, we need to stop making it about catastrophe and make it about every day. That the choice to live? Yeah, every day, you've got the choice to live a little better or worse, and most people are choosing to live a little worse, option by default.



Caitlin Donovan 37:04

Right. And then you said in this book was also "So instead, I help you figure out why you're checking your email so much. What don't you trust? What do you think you have? To turn? Why do you think you have to turn the world by yourself?" Yeah, right. This, this falls into very much the type A personality. So and this is one of the things that I have a little bit of a bone to pick with. I love this question. And I think it's important and also: Burnout, in my research, one of the things that I found is there is a certain amount of it that is internal and controllable by us, and a certain amount of it that is external and not controllable by us.



Leah Steele 37:45

Yeah.



Caitlin Donovan 37:46

Right. So this is when you can make changes, and one of those changes might need to be that you have to quit your job and go work somewhere else. Because the environment that you work in lends itself to that for you. Yeah, right. Having a lack of autonomy in an office is one of the signs having honestly having like really bad lighting, in an office, yes, is

one of the things that leads to burn out. So if you have a place that's not focused on creating a burnout resilient culture, within the corporation within the job within the company, then sometimes part of the part of it is you do have to change that, because you cannot combat the energy of the entire world.



Leah Steele 38:34

Exactly. My point is that I see people quit because they don't think they have any other option.



Caitlin Donovan 38:41

And they may or may not depending on



Leah Steele 38:43

or it's just pushed to such an extent that they see no other option. And that was one of the reasons why for me, I worked. I mean, I did I changed my employer, as I was setting up Searching for Serenity. And I did have a little bit more autonomy, that came with some side effects, definitely. But, you know, I did not move to some kind of free range, you know, pasture fed version of law, it was the same strip lighting, you know, internal desks, sitting a monitor 12 hours a day, being attached to a mobile phone and traveling around the country. What I the biggest thing that I want to help people understand is you have to, or you get to make informed choices, and quitting your job because it's accumulated and accumulated and accumulated until like I was sitting on the floor crying going, how could I ever go back that six months too late, six years too late, sometimes getting to the point where you can do as much as you can within yourself, know that you are getting healthy at know that you have control over certain aspect, and then being able to very clearly identify what is outside of your control. And whether that is something that you can tolerate for the long term. That's a very different proposition from what I see a lot of



Caitlin Donovan 40:02

Yes. yes yes



Leah Steele 40:02

You know, I get a message a week on LinkedIn for somebody going, Oh, my God, I love your work. I've been reading your blogs, I quit my job today. I have no idea what I'm going

to do I go, Oh,



Caitlin Donovan 40:12

yeah, I absolutely am 150% right there with you. And the word that you're talking about the thing that you're that you're floating around, is resiliency, increasing, increasing your stress management skills, increasing your the amount of resilience you have which which in my practice, I call bounce back ability, increasing your bounce back ability so that you're at this place where you can actually know where the energy leaks are happening, where you're over giving, and where you can pull that which things are actually affecting you. And just like you said, What are you able to accept and allow to be a part of your life? And what are you not, but you can't make that decision from a burnt out brain with a diminished frontal cortex. Because your even your stress management system, your limbic system is not working properly. And also, in addition to that, that your frontal cortex is responsible for logical thinking. Right? So you're, you're not as able to think logically as you were before, so it's not a great time to make that decision. You know?



Leah Steele 41:19

No, I used to sit that, you know, we had people when I was working some as a mental capacity lawyer, managing affairs for people, you know, everything that they did was not scrutinized in the bad way, but reviewed. They were some of the most supervised assisted people I've ever met with carers left, right, and center medical reports about Can they do this? Or can they reason this? Can they understand this and make an informed decision? And I kept sitting there in awe thinking, you take this to any given person on the street. And I don't know, if they can pass this test Yeah, you know, I don't know if the mom who is working five days a week and desperately trying to the school run to the after school clubs, know your kids are already exhausted, shoving a piece of white toast in her garb, and then checking into her emails after her kids have gone to sleep and working till midnight, which a lot of my clients do. Yeah. I don't know if they can make some of these more detailed



Caitlin Donovan 42:19

nuance choices. Yes, yeah.



Leah Steele 42:21

It's so important. But that goes by the by somebody that I follow on LinkedIn. A while back

referred to law in particular has having become factory work for brains, this expectation that will go in, sit down, do eight to 12 hours go home, that there's never any peaks or troughs in our performance that we shouldn't be impaired or impacted by anything. And it rang so true for me, because it's this constant presenteeism, it's constant showing up physically, your brain is elsewhere. Your brain is still in bed, sitting at your desk and just scrolling and scrolling and responding to the most inane, stupid or simple emails, because you have to do something you have to show you're doing something, but everything else is just



Caitlin Donovan 43:11

productivity.



Leah Steele 43:13

Yeah, exactly. So it's one of the things that I'm really focused on.



Caitlin Donovan 43:18

I love it so much. What is can you tell us what happens in your mastermind?



Leah Steele 43:24

So I, my masterminds a little bit different. So I call it the Resilience Academy. It was called the Serenity Spirit Mastermind until recently, and I realized that we as a group, because they've been with me, most of the people, almost all of the people in there been there with me for two years, because it's about long term maintenance and improvement. It's about tiny tweaks as opposed to the radical life overhaul that everybody seems to want. Again, it's deeply unsexy. But the Resilience Academy in particular, it's about being able to have a safe space to go to share, to be able to talk to people without feeling like you know, Sheila from accounts is going to stab you in the back if she catches you crying in the toilets, or any of those kinds of things. I do weekly live trainings, and it's on random and disparate topics, from actual resilience management, self esteem, to how to deal with appraisals, to we have a book club and Brene Brown features very heavily. There's a lot of upcoming texts around radical candor, you know, the idea of being very honest, and very deeply and how it changes the way we communicate work, the way that we deal with stress. But it's really about all of the skills that we were never taught. Because as kids we learn language, we learn how to write, we learn how to tie our own shoe laces, nobody says to you, one day, you're going to go to work. And there's going to be somebody who

does something that you're uncomfortable with, and you have to carry on work with them, or make the decision about what you're going to do about that or find the right person to go and speak to these are all incredibly nuanced topics, that we are just expected to know, we're just expected to have resilience, we're just expected to know how to deal with that client who keeps making advances to you or that client who got you know, so many of them



Caitlin Donovan 45:12

People just already filled that in you said that client who and we went dot, dot dot and everybody just said in their minds who that client was,



Leah Steele 45:20

that's all there's always some of them, right. And I've I've certainly worked with, I've got some brilliant people actually have, some of my legal clients are still connected to me now, even after I've left law and love what I'm doing now, because we connected on such a human level, but they're also so many people who were very difficult to deal with. And we're not taught how to deal with difficult people. We're not taught how to manage your energy, when you've got massive competing demands, we're not taught how to switch off



Caitlin Donovan 45:49

it, we never need to know how to switch off before because we didn't have cell phones until 2007. Like a smartphone, you know?



Leah Steele 45:56

Yeah. I mean, my it just shows how quickly change and this is one of the things I do to remind people, my mother left school at 15, no qualifications, worked in office jobs her whole life. She worked from home for very long period of time, she would work from 6am till 10pm. Every day, that's, you know, the method I grew up with. It's amazing I burned out really. But, you know, she worked in an office environment. It was not. God she's gonna come back and haunt me for saying this, but it wasn't complex work. She wasn't having to weigh up the the relative cost benefit of do I employed this family member? Or do I get a professional, that's going to charge more but have a better rapport or do this. It wasn't this constant grind that it is that so many of our jobs, right? Her mother left school, I have no idea if my grandmother has any certificates. My grandmother has never worked. She was a housewife. She had three children.



Caitlin Donovan 46:51

Oh, she worked.



Leah Steele 46:53

She didn't know she didn't know. Yeah. She didn't have paid employment.



Caitlin Donovan 46:57

Yeah, she didn't have paid employment, but she worked



Leah Steele 46:58

Yeah. And so she's says to me, you know, oh, I struggle so much. You know, when your granddad, I came home and he do this. And I, I kind of look at her. And I'm like, we could be from different planets. I know that, for example, my grandparents, when I was in law never understood. Why did you say contentious probate to most people, they don't get it. But I was sat at a family dinner, and my aunt turns t me and she's like, I hear you've qualified as a solicitor? Yes. Like, what is it? You do? Because they don't explain it very well. And of course they didn't. We lived in completely different worlds. And it's just so different. two generations. Yeah. 60 years between us. And the world has changed completely on its head, man. How are we supposed to deal with that? How we supposed to catch up? And how supposed to know what we're doing



Caitlin Donovan 47:48

knows. Yeah. And how we're supposed to learn these skills wouldn't have skills that we need now. didn't even exist, and we're totally unnecessary. Yeah. My gosh, the things we learned in school are not the things that we need in life.



Leah Steele 48:02

No. And, God, we need to change it because I look at my friends got a little girl who's four years old, and I am indoctrinating her into feminism, like you wouldn't believe. You know, I buy her t shirts. The last one was strong, smart and capable of anything. And you know, I get her these t shirts, she can't even read them yet, but like she will have it in front of her. Because when she grows up, you know, it's gonna be another 15 years, and she's gonna be working. And I cannot. Right now, I can't imagine what it's going to be like 15 years from

now. And the last 10 years. last five years, I've seen massive changes in my former industry. You know, next week, I'm going to speak to a law firm who actively engaged with how do we prevent them in our best talent? And how do we teach them resilience skills? Yeah. And I'm thinking, God, well, this is five years ago, I would have loved it. But it's changing so rapidly that they just miss it. Yeah. Finally, finally,



Caitlin Donovan 48:57

My very small goal with this podcast, my very small goal is to completely change burnout culture.



Leah Steele 49:04

Oh, you know, it's timing. I mean, you should achieve up by the end of next week, hopefully.



Caitlin Donovan 49:08

I mean, 48 hours is good, right? Yeah.



Leah Steele 49:10

Yeah. I mean, that's, that's the time frame we're going to do for everything, 48 hours to change the world. Exactly.



Caitlin Donovan 49:15

Leah, I am so grateful for this conversation. And the reasons that I think that this conversation in particular was important, because there was no bullshit.



Leah Steele 49:25

Now, I don't know how to do bullshit



Caitlin Donovan 49:26

I'm not very good at bullshit myself. And so I think that this is a conversation that people need to hear, because of a couple of things. One of the things that you mentioned, I'm

going to share that blog post that you wrote in the show notes, because I think it's a good one. And I think that it's necessary for people to read through the whole thing, because in this self help culture that we have created, we have forgotten to actually check in with those selves, and find out what that self actually needs. Yeah. And what you're saying is, you know, unless we start asking these questions, and figuring out who you are, and how you function and how to best design your life to create resilience, none of it matters. This the advice around burnout, a lot of it is very specific to the individual and requires a lot of introspection and thought and conversation and help.



Leah Steele 50:22

All of which take time, effort. And,



Caitlin Donovan 50:25

yeah,



Leah Steele 50:26

God we don't like looking at ourselves and realize who might have done something wrong, do we?



Caitlin Donovan 50:30

We don't, we don't. But I think it's very important for all those reasons. So I would like to just really, thank you so much for coming on, and sharing your knowledge and your experience with everyone. And your mastermind, which I will also share with people, which is exciting. And Leah also has a freebie on her website. That's called burnout first aid that I think everyone should go download. And I will quickly to that as well, because it's a fantastic resource for everyone. So Leah, thank you again, so much. That was such a joyful conversation for me.



Leah Steele 51:04

Thank you to really appreciate it.



Caitlin Donovan 51:08

All right, everybody. That was my conversation with Leah Steele our friend joining us from the UK. And she again is the founder of Searching for Serenity. And so I will share all those all that information with you in the show notes. And I really would like to encourage you to share this with anyone who you think might need to hear this message today. And we all have at least two friends that need it. I mean, at least so share it with those people. Let us know what you think. Give us some reviews and we'll talk to you soon.