

34. Living an Authentic Life with Dr. Jillian Rigert



FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

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Michael: Well, hey everyone, and welcome to another episode of Doctors Living Deliberately. It's so great to have you here with us today, and welcome to my co-host Arpita. How are you?

Arpita: I'm good, Michael. How are you doing today?

Michael: I'm doing great and as always excited to have a phenomenal friend and coach and somebody that I've gotten to know really well over the last couple of years, Dr. Jillian Rigert. So she is an oral medicine physician, a head and neck cancer researcher, a life and leadership coach, writer and YouTuber an all around an awesome person and welcome Jillian. How are you?

Jillian: I'm great. I'm really excited to be here, so thank you so much for having me.

Michael: Absolutely. Well, can you tell our audience a little bit more about you and kind of everything that is Jillian.

Jillian: Everything that is Jillian. Wow. That's like a lifelong question, right? I originally started my career directory as a fast track into dentistry with a vision that I was gonna become a military oral maxillofacial surgeon. And that's been a big part of where I'm, my mission today is to help people when they realize that their original career trajectory was out of alignment with who they really are. So I realized in hindsight a lot of my efforts were to hide that I'm extremely sensitive, and our society tells us that sensitivity is a weakness, and if you spend time in it, you realize it's a great strength. It just depends on what you're doing.

So when I was in oral maxillofacial surgery and in the military I was really struggling with being on call. And I developed very pervasive suicidal ideation. I was really afraid to quit because society again tells us that failures to be avoided at all cost, and at that time, I felt very alone. And so that was even more detrimental and I learned that deep pain of loneliness that many of us feel. But fortunately, one surgeon told me that she faced very similar challenges, and that one voice helped me to know I wasn't alone. And knowing that impact on me has helped me to share my story more vulnerably because through vulnerability, we really help ourselves, but also can save lives when people realize that their struggle is not unique to them and someone can help show them the way out and be the light and maybe hold them when they can't put their feet underneath themselves, which was true for me. I was very fortunate to have a program director in oral surgery that saw me as a human first, which is a big part of my mission, to make sure we bring the humans back into healing and supported me holistically. And I never wanted to disappoint him. And I thought disappointment meant leaving surgery, but disappointment to him would've meant doing something that was against what I really wanted to do and would be out of alignment with my best interests. And how often do we allow ourselves to accept that to be true?

So I did end up leaving surgery and I was medically discharged from the military and that led me into a new specialty of dentistry called oral medicine, which straddles dentistry and medicine. And through that experience, I really gravitated towards patients with cancer who are often felt that if they have challenging diagnoses, especially stage four cancer, they're left without a lot of support at times, cuz people don't what to say. And I've learned that feeling of loneliness from my own experience with anorexia when people don't know what to say, they don't know how to help you. So sometimes people abandon you and sometimes people come closer. And so I really wanted to learn how to be that person that came closer to people during difficult times. And you do coaching, we do coaching and I learned often you hear the terms hold space for people, and I was like, I need to develop the tools to hold space for people. So that led me into life and leadership coaching, and

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that really helped me to start to develop the tools I needed on my own healing journey. And like you both, if something's working so well from us and it can really bring us out of the depths of darkness and we don't, you know, do coaching without other healing modalities such as therapy when it's needed. But coaching helped me to take back ownership of my life. And I feel so often, especially working in a medical system where we develop learned helplessness, that we often feel like we don't have that power. So I hope to be an example of how to reclaim that power in order to lean into the life that you truly desire.

Arpita: So powerful, Jillian. It's really impactful just to see that you're able to share with vulnerability to let other people hear your story. Tell us a little bit about like how you actually stepped into living with integrity, living with what was true to you and authentic to you.

Jillian: So it took me some deep darkness in order to hit a rock bottom and realize that anything was better than where I was at. And so I'd like to help people when they're in that more messy middle and not at their rock bottom because that rock bottom for so many, including where I was at, could mean it's life threatening. So I had contemplated that rock bottom a few times, and my rock bottom was severe compromised from an eating disorder and through doing the wrong thing first. So when I left surgery, I was inpatient for anorexia and during that time I was plotting my next move. I wasn't resting and I skipped that step.

So Martha Beck has a change cycle. It has four phases. The first phase is that death and rebirth. So many people we meet wanna skip it, especially we're overachievers. We wanna skip that processing and go into the next action item. So anyone who's contemplating a life or career transition, I'd recommend doing what I didn't at that time, is resting to reset and check in with yourself. Because if we don't do that, we are in survival mode where we can't see all of our options and we're looking to escape. And so what that looked like for me is when I was inpatient, I got my next job, next residency in case the military discharged me, which they did. I waited to resign from oral surgery until, I think it was a day or two before I started my next residency. I struggled my way through the next residency because I had unprocessed grief and I was extraordinarily burnout still. And I then, when I, I was in my first faculty position, all the same cycles come up. I was medically compromised from anorexia and I just couldn't do it anymore. I was exhausted from the cycles. And I said, I have to do something different and what haven't I tried yet? And so I, I paused and I started to lean into what I was feeling and I was in Sunny Smith's Facebook group and everyone was talking about coaching. And I was like, I was so desperate for something new. And I was looking for a coaching program that really resonated with me. I didn't know who Martha Beck was at the time but she wrote the book *The Way of Integrity* and reading that book really resonated with me. It's all about how our experiences, if we're living out of integrity or out of alignment with our core values, can impact us and it can show up as chronic illness. You know, for me, the eating disorder was a coping skill of living out of alignment and what life could be like if you're living in alignment and going through that coaching program helped me to identify, well, how the heck do we know after we've been living for so long in alignment with other people's values, how can we get back connected with ourselves? And through going through that program and having a supportive community, that's ultimately how I started to identify where I was living out of alignment and where my core values truly lie.

Michael: I think you bring up so many incredible points here. So first and foremost, you know, we're speaking to an audience of high achievers, people who are incredibly motivated and worked really hard to get where they are in life. They push themselves to succeed and excel at all the different stages of education. And there can come a time where you're not feeling aligned with kind of the path that you've set out in front of you, and that could be really daunting, right? As you were saying, right? There's the fear of kind of abandoning the path,

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of failing, of kind of having started out on something, this sunk cost fallacy of I've already invested so much time, effort, and energy into this thing, and if I give up now, again, it's what a huge failure. What a waste of time.

And so as you were saying, you know, we come up with all of these compensatory mechanisms of just like, okay, well if I can't do this, then I just need to throw myself into the next thing without really figuring out, what do I really want? What does authenticity look like for me? And rather than just kind of buffering and, and dumping ourselves into work and more overachieving, which for a lot of us, I mean for me, that was kind of my mo and let's be honest still is of just moving onto the next thing without fully processing it. So, you know, this is a really hard thing to do. How do you recommend people even start on this process? Because I would say starting is probably, I mean, the whole journey is difficult, but starting is probably the hardest.

Jillian: Yeah, I think it's doing less, I think it's starting to subtract things. So in coaching the role of the coach from a Martha Beck's standpoint is to help the client remove things from their life. So whether it's thoughts or leaning into what they're actually doing. It's all about starting to take away the things that are clouding them from seeing what their next best step is. So when so many of us, we wanna make these drastic life changes when we're like, I just can't do this anymore. But we know sustainable changes in our life come from turtle stepping and making small changes. So the first thing is to pause and identify like in your day, what feels to be out of alignment, where you're feeling like friction, frustration, resentment, and where do you truly find meaning and how can you let go of some of the things that are no longer serving you to start to lean into the things that are giving you meaning.

Arpita: I think one of the things that I oftentimes will say to myself and say to my clients is, what can you let go of, right? What is not necessary right now? And it doesn't mean that you're not gonna come back to it down the road. But at this moment in time, in this phase of our life, this is something that is not urgent. It is not high priority. So how can we let go of this and maybe revisit it later? I think that's super important. And you touched upon the quadrants with Martha Beck. I was lucky enough to have two sessions actually with her in one of the coaching programs. And, you know, she talks about really allowing yourself to essentially dissolve. And that's kind of, it's funny, that's how I came up with my logo, because you think about she referred to it as like a caterpillar completely dissolving in the chrysalis and that rest phase. So like you have to be able to purge those emotions and let yourself fall apart, let yourself completely deconstruct, and then you have the rest period because you're giving yourself that opportunity to do that. And then after that, you can slowly start to rebuild. And that's the beautiful butterfly coming out of the chrysalis as it's forming, the cells are reforming. And so I don't know if that's part of how she relayed to you, but that that was, it resonated with me significantly. So I don't know if there are more quadrants that you, if I interrupted.

Jillian: Yeah, no, that's fantastic. That's the phase one that many people skip. And if they start to let go of things, what they, I like to do the root cause analysis. We also talk about the five whys really getting to the core of where our beliefs originated or potentially originated. Because when people are letting things go, say I went from being an employee to an entrepreneur. Well, okay, great, I have all this autonomy and I filled all my time again, and now I'm not working the nine to five, I'm working the 24/7. So what happens is that we have a culture of busyness where we equate busyness with status. So if we don't challenge that, then we think I need to appear busy because society often says the people that are busy have higher status. And how does that impact you? So how can you be intentional about challenging that belief and scheduling that time to rest, or do what you need to create that boundaries? Because without challenging that original mindset, I fear that people

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are just gonna keep getting back into the behaviors that they had learned before that are no longer serving them today.

Arpita: Yeah, and I think another piece of it is also like recognizing that rest is part of work, right? It's not in addition to, or when I get to it, rest is part of it because if you don't rest and refill the reservoir, you're not able to really show up with your full potential.

Jillian: That's another great comment because when I grew up I used to watch a lot of TV and I was told that I was being lazy and so I would do anything to avoid being called lazy. And so I overworked and I don't have a TV today and I have a hard time sitting because I equate that feeling of being called lazy with resting and when I realized, like going from survival mode where when I was having really bad suicidal thoughts, I thought I either had to finish residency or take my own life. Like there were no thoughts between there. And what I realized is when we're in survival mode, we lose our creative mind. So we're not able to see all the options. So we're really doing ourselves a disservice when we're trying to dream and scheme in survival mode because our brains can't go there. And so if we reframe rest as being one of the most productive things that we do, then how can that give us better permission to do that?

Michael: That does, that requires a tremendous mindset shift, right? Because as you were saying, we have this like societal norm of busyness and I think our roles in medicine also very much deemphasize the need for rest, right? So a lot of people talk about the need for a morning routine. Some people will wake up and they'll journal, or they'll meditate, they'll exercise, they'll do all of these things to kind of prepare themselves for the day. And there's so much evidence to support that if you start your day the right way, the rest of the day will be so much better. You will be so much more effective throughout your day. But if you look at what my day looks like, I, you know, roll out of bed and I'm like, go, and I, you know, want to get on the road before rush hour gets too bad and I get to the office and I could sit and, you know, write down some thoughts or meditate, but I should probably open the electronic medical record and get right to work cause there's probably so much stuff in there that I should tackle before the onslaught of the rest of the day. And so if you are not very intentional about the rest then it won't happen. And I think that's an important thing to remind our audience of is that it's not just about talking about the rest and it's not easy. Right? Rest as you were just implying, you know, some people may say, oh, that looks lazy. But if you can be intentional about it, if you can set yourself up the right way, if you can demonstrate for yourself how much more efficient and productive you can be if you allow yourself to rest, everything follows.

Arpita: Yeah, and I think another piece of it is just also recognizing the difference between rest and laziness and kind of being onto yourself, right? Because when we rest, we know that we have accomplished and that we're maybe tired, or that we feel depleted and we need to refill versus when we're lazy, kind of a piece of you knows that you're like not showing up as your best self. You're kind of being a slack ass there, right? And so having that inner knowing with yourself to know, Hey, this is rest and this is lazy, and I'm kind of being a lazy ass. Let me kick my butt into gear and do it. Let me stop procrastinating, versus, okay, I am spent, I'm tired, I have done a lot of productive stuff and I now need to do the other part of the productivity is, which is allowing myself to rest so I can refill my cup.

Jillian: And even changing the way we view laziness, right? Because laziness being a negative thing makes productivity seem like it's championed. And so when I was inpatient, I wasn't allowed, like, there wasn't allowed to move. And it further equated my relationship with exercise in a very negative way. And so I find it

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to be if I have a lazy day and I watch something on Netflix, well that's, you know, we're speaking to overachievers here. It's different if people are not living up to their potential and you know, they could have a better quality of life. So knowing the context of who comes to listen here we're speaking to people that are constantly have this default of working really hard. So if we start to judge ourself because we're being lazy, well that just plays into this very self-critical mindset that we have. So if I have self-compassion, because you know what? I'm gonna have a lazy day, or I'm gonna consume what I feel like today, well then that has a role. Maybe, you know, and sometimes depression comes across as laziness. So to really check in and say, what do I really need here? Maybe I need a lazy day. And that's okay.

Michael: When you work with people when you talk about how healthcare kind of impacts all of this, can you share with us some of your thoughts about how our roles in medicine and healthcare affects kind of the authenticity and how we're showing up? I know that that's important work for you.

Jillian: Yeah, I think it's hypocritical for our healthcare system to demand of the people who work in it to be unhealthy, right? It's like who, if we're offering patients recommendations for lifestyle, unless you're in that lifestyle sector and have really committed and set boundaries, you know, person who's working a 1.0 FTE, not sleeping, not eating well, and, you know, neglecting their relationships, well you're reducing the human basic needs and what that person probably values in order to fit the system mold. And unfortunately, so many people feel like cogs in the wheel and a lot of moral injury comes up not only from the way that we're being treated, but not being able to offer patients the services that we think are in their best interest because of their pocket size. So when I think about each issue that comes up in the system and how that takes away from our ability to be well, how are we gonna show up for the patients with the strongest compassion and the best mindset if we're starting ourselves off in that deficit?

Arpita: So Jillian, can you give the listeners maybe a couple of tips on what you do to be more intentional about creating a more positive outlook or having an environment that fosters the growth and what we're looking for with regards to our day-to-day interactions with them?

Jillian: Yeah, so first it's knowing what's within your control. You know, it's easy to feel that learned helplessness because the system's really big and we can't control everything. But in each interaction, if we can make the small changes and modifications to our own mindset and what is within our control in our lives and improve that, then it starts from that inside out. Right? And then if you really live in a, an environment that's preventing you from being well, considering yourself to move if that's necessary. But if you're not able to move, then how can you better each day and find meaning in your everyday? So that will look different for a lot of people depending on what their obstacles are, but something that. Often comes up is the people pleasing and stretching ourselves thin and having these expectations that everything is a sense of urgency. And we need to check in on like what's the reality here. And you know, a lot of people are getting help with the charting and just the things that are really taking away from their ability to show up with their families. So I know that's a little bit all over the place, but it kind of depends on what areas the person is really getting stuck and identifying what's in their control and what might not be.

Arpita: Hmm. What are some things that you've done to like kind of really infuse joy in your life?

Jillian: So my dog has taught me the most life lessons because he is a cockapoo, he's very compassionate. And I feel he is been a huge part of my healing journey because he taught me the power of play and like, just being

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ridiculous, you know, and not taking ourselves so seriously. So I was off Instagram until we went to this ACE conference and I started doing their promos because I thought it was, you know, gonna be a hard place for me to be on because of my history of anorexia. But what I realized, it can be an outlet for you if it's enjoyable and just being who you are and allowing yourself to be silly. It really helped to take a break from all that negative mindset. And I love to run and I realized, you know, diet culture is very pervasive in our society and how I used to run very compulsively. And then when I realized self-compassion has really grounded me to help heal myself from my eating disorder behaviors, it helped me to realize like, wow, society's got a lot wrong. If it got that wrong, what else could be wrong? And I think surrounding yourself with people who also have that growth mindset and like what's possible. Because we can get really negative when we think about all the things that are, broken in our system and where we feel trapped.

Michael: Yeah and just to highlight some of the things that you've kind of said throughout, you know, starting, right, cause you've done a lot of uncomfortable things, right? Like even you were just saying, being off Instagram and then, and then making a decision to go back to it. And then fully embracing it and allowing yourself to be silly, right? When there is something that you are confronted with that feels uncomfortable, that you're not sure if you want to do, you talked a little bit you know we, spoke about Martha Beck and taking small steps. And then kind of working your way into it, not judging yourself, allowing yourself to explore these things with curiosity and moving slowly into it and, and then just figuring out like, is this right for me? Rather than just, you know, diving head first and saying like, okay, I have to do this right now because I just need to.

Jillian: It's spot on and it brings up the power of knowing your why and anything you do. And there's a lot of ulterior motives for why people do things. And then if you show up inauthentically, people know it, you know it, and it causes further distress. So if I wanna be on Instagram, because I think it's funny, but then people say, well, you being that weird isn't gonna help your coaching. Well, great, it's not supposed to, right? That's not like, this is not my goal. Maybe it actually kind of does, cuz people realize like, you're gonna show up authentically. That's who you are on and off the screen. But you know, we hear all these, or what are people gonna think of you if you're not professional or, you know? I'm like, well if you're authentic and you express yourself openly what I have learned through allowing that is you find that true sense of belonging. And if I'm working so hard to fit in and I'm constantly told I'm not enough, which happens quite often when people have an agenda for you that you're not fulfilling. And my inner people pleasing wants, then again, mold myself. But I've learned through experience of doing that over and over again, that it leads to negative consequences. So if we ground ourselves and we reflect on the lessons learned and just say, well, I've already gone that route, I'm gonna try something new and like you said, with curiosity and see how it works out.

Arpita: Well, wonderful. I think one of the things that you talked about was like your why and living authentically and true to yourself. And I think that honestly comes a little bit with age. I mean, I hate to say, I think some people naturally have it, but I know for me, probably in my forties, I became a little bit more comfortable saying, I don't really give a shit what people think. And now definitely more towards the end of my forties, early fifties, you know, if you had told me five years ago, you're gonna be talking to people and telling 'em about your story and blah, blah, blah. I'd be like, you're crazy. You know? So part of it is just becoming comfortable with our skin, and I do believe it's a little bit of a factor of our age and our, our maturity and, you know, recognizing that we have another half to live now, so how do we wanna live it? Do we wanna continue to live it in a way where we're putting on a facade for other people and spending our energies doing

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that? Or do we wanna live it true to ourselves and having fun and kicking ass and not giving a crap about what other people think about us, right?

Jillian: Yep. Because we've had the life experience to know how it feels. I think had I always lived in alignment, I wouldn't know the deep pain of living out of alignment. So my nickname used to be silly Jilly. I was like super goofy and I always thought, oh my gosh, I could never imagine what it's like to have depression. Well, now I know, you know, and, and what, what matters most in those dark times. So yeah. I know Adam Grant always talks about we learn through the reflection on our life experience. So not everyone learns if they're not reflecting and being intentional about learning those lessons. But you've been doing the work and I think that it really shows in how you're showing up.

Michael: That is so important. I, I love that. Thank you for sharing that. So for our listeners that want to hear more from you and know more about you, can you tell them where they can find you?

Jillian: Yeah. Thank you so much for asking. So my YouTube channel, as I mentioned, it kind of shifts with the phases of the recovery that I've been in, sorted as permission to pivot. And now is a life true to you. And it starts with a quote from a nurse who used to spend time with people who are dying. And, and she talks about one of the top five most common regrets is living your life for others and not living a life true to you. So the channel is meant to be a community where you can really lean in, know you're not alone, and you can really explore what would it mean to live a life true to me.

Arpita: So cool. I love it. And maybe this YouTube channel of yours is exactly that. It's evolving as the phases of you evolve and that's amazing, right? It doesn't have to follow the mold of what everybody else is doing.

Jillian: Yeah. And for anyone that hears this, right, just thinking about all the pressures that we take from our other behaviors and put it into the new endeavors we have. So if we can create something and not put the same pressures that we did of our, you know, our past jobs that we've had, where we burn ourselves out again. So as I was mentioning, the life true to you, I'd like to show up in the conversations that are organic. And so taking away that pressure to have to film something every week and let it flow and leaning into that because YouTube will say, well, you need to be consistent and all this. You're like, but do I? Like, what's my goal here? And what's gonna be sustainable for me? So anyone that's considering a podcast, writing on a blog, doing a YouTube channel, if you're gonna start judging yourself for not being consistent, release yourself from that judgment. Just show up when you want to and, and share yourself with the world.

Arpita: I love that Jillian. So good. Well, thank you. It's been an amazing little episode today. I think you've shared so many little nuggets of wisdom that will really help people see your vulnerability and how we have options, and we get to choose who we wanna be and how we wanna show up. So I appreciate you coming on Jillian, today, sharing your story.

Jillian: Yeah. Thank you again for having me. I really appreciate you both.

Michael: Absolutely, truly living a life true to you. An inspiration for all of us. Thank you so, so much Jillian Rigert. We'll see everybody next time on the next episode of Doctors Living Deliberately. Bye

Arpita: Bye.