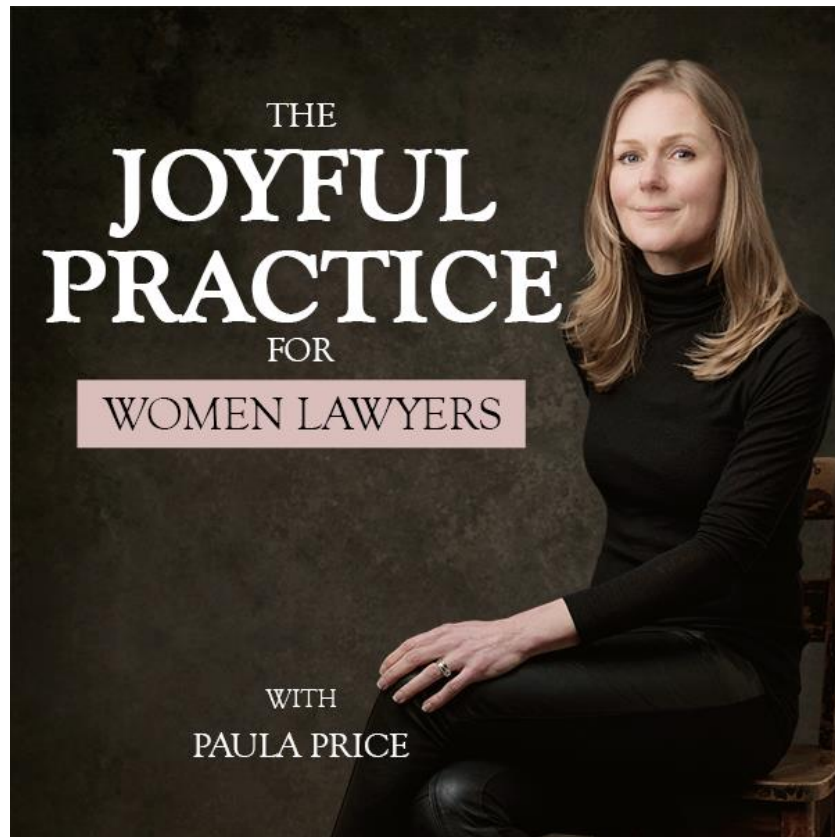


**Ep #38: The Working Parent Playbook
with Lori Mihalich-Levin**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Paula Price

Ep #38: The Working Parent Playbook with Lori Mihalich-Levin

You're listening to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast episode number 38.

Hello my friends. Welcome back to the podcast. It is such a treat to have you here this week. I'm so excited to introduce you to our very special guest Lori Mihalich-Levin. Before I do that, I just wanted to say this is an episode that is really dedicated to the working parent.

Whether you're at the very beginning and you're just getting used to dropping your kids off at daycare or you're somewhere a few years in, maybe you've got more than one child. You're learning how to navigate that transition from one little human to two, or if you're a few years into it. You've been doing this for a while. You've been navigating the challenges of the pandemic. The tension between balancing your professional work and your family, all those things.

This episode really speaks to those issues. I would invite you to listen to it and take from it what is most helpful to you. If you know anybody who is in the situation where they are navigating the challenges of working and doing the family thing and figuring out how to do it in a way that aligns most with their values, then I would encourage you to send this episode to them and invite them to have a listen. You never know. It may be that there's a message in here that's exactly what they need to hear right now.

So with that I'm going to turn it over to the recording of our interview and wish all of you a most amazing week. Bye for now.

Welcome to *The Joyful Practice for Women Lawyers* Podcast. I'm your host Paula Price, lawyer turned certified executive coach. This podcast was created to empower women lawyers just like you to create a life and practice you love. Join me every week for a break from the hustle so we can focus on you, what you truly want, and how you can create it.

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If you're over the overwhelm, done with putting out fires, and ready to create a life and practice that brings you more joy, you're in the right place. Ready for today's episode? Let's dive in.

Paula: Hi everybody. Welcome back to the podcast. I am so excited for all of you to join me here this week. I have a very special guest for all of you to meet. We are so excited. I am so excited to have her here today. Her name is Lori Mihalich-Levin. Lori is a lawyer and the founder of Mindful Return. You're going to learn all about Mindful Return and what it is. She's also the author of *Back to Work After Baby*. As you may have guessed, her area of expertise is really in helping new parents transition into the workplace. So Lori, welcome, thank you so much for coming on today.

Lori: It's so wonderful to be here with you Paula. Thanks for having me.

Paula: Oh it's so exciting. So Lori, can you please tell us more about yourself?

Lori: Sure. So I'm joining you this morning from chilly Washington, DC. I know chilly is a different definition in Canada, but it's 33 here. It was 20 something this morning, and that's cold for us. I like to say that I wear three main hats in life, although I know we all wear 72,000 hats every day.

Paula: Pretty much.

Lori: Yeah. My one hat is that I'm mom to two wonderful redheaded boys who are just about 9 and 11. So they are in third and fifth grade. They are blissfully in school today, which has not always been the case as I'm sure you know over the past couple of years. We had 15 straight months at home with them during the pandemic. So that was a very long haul.

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Professionally I have two other hats. One is that I am a healthcare regulatory lawyer. I've done stints as an associate at a law firm. I went in house for a while, and I've been a partner at a law firm where I was a partner on a 60% and then a 50% schedule.

Then I run a program called Mindful Return. That's my third hat, which I founded eight years ago to help new parents transition back to work after parental leave. I left my big law job last summer to focus on Mindful Return, and now I practice law as my side gig. So I've flipped the weight of those things a bit. I have very much appreciated and enjoyed having what I've called a portfolio approach to my career where I'm just doing one thing. It keeps me more engaged and more happy.

Paula: Fabulous. Thank you so much Lori. I love that. I heard the term multihyphenated the other day, which I think is another way of describing it or multi-passionate. I really love how you have these different hats, right. There's the hat of mother of your two boys, 9 and 11. Which we were just talking about before we started recording. I love that you're two years ahead of me. So I get to look to you and say, "Okay, this is what the future can look like." Bravo 15 months of having your children at home. I'm sure that you've learned.

Lori: It's not pretty.

Paula: I can't even imagine. I imagine that you have so many pearls of wisdom that you can share with us after having gone through that experience. It's a real one for a number of parents in Canada as well depending on where you are and what your schools are doing. I think for all of us too who are lawyers who have...

So you described it as sort of this portfolio, but interests and professional interests in addition to lawyering. I think it's fascinating, and I know a

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number of our listeners are going to be really interested to hear about how you balance those and how the interest that you've had have shaped the trajectory of your career. So thank you so much Lori. So excited to have you.

One of the things that I imagine you hear a lot of is the challenges that parents face in relation to balancing their responsibilities as parents and balancing their responsibilities as professionals. So you work with parents, as I gather, the Mindful Return. So in those initial stages when they first go back to work after baby number one.

Lori: Or two or three or four.

Paula: Or two or three, beautiful. And how the challenges evolve over time. I mean imagine the experience that you had when you first went back versus the challenge of last year, more than last year. 15 months of pandemic schooling. They change. So I would love to hear from you what some of the common challenges are that you hear from parents at the various stages of balancing their professional and their family lives.

Lori: Yeah, that's a great question. I could go in so many different directions. I'll put a pin in the word balance, and we can talk about that later.

Paula: Yes definitely.

Lori: Because it's not my favorite word. In terms of the stages, I guess the first thing I'll say is when I first founded Mindful Return, I thought that the program would be most useful to first time around parents, just as you were implying. It turns out eight years down the road that about half of each of our cohorts is full of existing parents, as I call them, who have second, third, fourth children.

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I ask why is that? It's because people who didn't necessarily have a very positive transition after parental leave the first time want to have a do over. They want to have a community of support behind them. They want to have strategies. And, as you're suggesting, baby number two is different. It presents different challenges than the first one. So I think every parent transition back to work after any child probably needs a little bit of support and guidance.

That said, when someone's going back to work after baby number one, I think some of the biggest challenges I see gosh are around navigating that transition into childcare, trusting the care provider, feeling really weird about leaving that being that you've just created with some other human. I recall that not being an issue at all because I've already formed really trusted relationships with the care provider.

I think in the baby stages, the sleepiness and sleep deprivation is always challenging. And as you're suggesting, some of those feelings of guilt at the beginning. I don't know if I can do this. I don't know if I'm being a "good mom" to my baby if I'm going to work. I don't know if I'm being a "good employee". I think those can be really severe at the beginning, those thoughts.

And the identity shift and transition is really hard at the beginning for the new parent, right. I mean you've been so and so the professional, so and so the lawyer who had mastery and control over her world and her career and travel and all of that good stuff. Then suddenly you're confronted with this task of caring for this being. You have no idea how to do it. You don't know if you're going it right or wrong. There's a whole bookshelf of books that give you conflicting opinions on what you should be doing. So I really think that the identity shift into working parenthood is big, right, initially.

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Overtime we get through the challenges of the petri dishes that are daycare and the different illnesses that come with that and the unexpected that comes with that. I think that the adage the problems get fewer but larger might be true. When a baby is born, they have like 25 things in an hour that you don't know what's happening.

Now my sons are 9 and 11. They don't have hourly problems, but the issues that they have are more significant, right. They're around mental health and forming friendships. How to deal with a math problem that they're not understanding and all the sorts of things that you don't deal with when the kids are really little.

We've gone from fights over daycare spots and waitlists for pre-K to now being completely assured that our children are going to public school. So we don't have that as a navigating challenge anymore. But now we have to fill our summers with summer camps that are very expensive. School doesn't last all year. It ends at 3:00 p.m. I could go on and on, but those are sort of a smattering of the different stages that we're going through. Now I have an 11 year old. We're in puberty. So that's a whole 'nother can of works.

Paula: Oh wow. I can't even imagine, although it's getting close. Lori, I love how you described that because I can see how you would have more, or not more. You would have parents that are coming to you after their first children. I'd like to ask you as well about your experience with your second child. I know when I went back the first time, it was so much of that identity shift that you were describing, right. Where you've gone from being the lawyer who is able to put work at the top of the priority list no problem.

Then when the new person comes along, the baby's there, then your responsibilities really change. Your priorities they necessarily shift. Somebody has to be there to pick up the child from daycare or they're

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going to call the authorities. This is not really an option to stay late and finish whatever it is that you would like to finish. So there's a lot of the identity shift in the beginning.

Then having another child. So I've got two children. I found with the second child that it added an extra layer to that where there's increased exhaustion I found because there's the sleepless nights with the baby but then also managing the first child. I remember feeling that way during pregnancy. The first pregnancy was a walk in the park. I mean it wasn't, but by comparison it was.

Lori: Comparison yeah.

Paula: Because if you needed to rest you could rest. When you've got a toddler and you're pregnant, all of a sudden you're not able to get that extra sleep. It's like that when you go back to the office. At least that's what I found is that it was, I think you described it—I was listening to a podcast you'd done. It's like going from two children to 85 children or something like that.

Lori: Yes. One plus one is 85 is what we say in our household.

Paula: Yes exactly. That's how it feels, and you're still balancing that with your responsibilities at the office. So the transitions, they play out differently. Then as you talked about as the children get older then the problems or the challenges you have are so different. In our house, for example, it's screen time. Are we eating a healthy enough diet? What about all this sugar that keeps creeping in? Are we getting enough time outside? Of course with the pandemic, it's that's put pressure on the ability to have playdates and extracurricular activities.

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So there's these constant questions that come up as parents is are we doing enough. Then, of course on the flipside, are we doing enough at work as well. So I imagine you see all of it.

Lori: Yeah. That word enough is a fraught one. I mean I feel like in a legal billable hour world, there is no such thing as enough. Every month it's a new month. It's a fresh slate of hours needing to be accrued. I have a sort of personal sort of daily practice around enoughness because I think it's something we have to create for ourselves. Because to the outside world nothing will ever be enough. We can never meet everyone's expectations, period.

Paula: Totally. Do you have any recommendations for that? I mean I have clients who I've worked with who are lawyers, they are high performing. They're in firms where billable hours are part of their output. That's part of what's being measured. Do you have any recommendations in terms of how you approach that question from the perspective of balancing— Because they are. That's the thing with billable hours, right. It's a unit of time.

Lori: Yeah. So I'll tell you what I have done in the past Paula. Then people can take or leave this strategy because I recognize that it has pitfalls. There's two prongs. The first one I think is non-controversial. The second one might be controversial. The first one is to really ground and center in my own values. And to use the Teddy Roosevelt quote “comparison is the thief of joy” to really just focus on me and what I need for my family and know what is most important in my life so that the value that I am placing on the billable hour as it relates to my identity goes down.

The second strategy that I used for a long time when I was a partner at Denton's was to not look at my hours. That, as I said, can have good and bad consequences because then you might not know where you're

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stacking up or whatever. When the monthly hours reports came around, I didn't open them. I did that for my own sanity and mental relief because I didn't want to know how I was stacking up against my peers because that wasn't how I was valuing or rating myself. I worked hard. I put in the hours I needed to work to get the work done. Then I just decided to let it go.

Paula: It's amazing. It's really an interesting way to approach the billable hour. One of the things that is different for me as an entrepreneur versus when I was practicing is I no longer record billable hours. So what I measure for myself is value. Where am I contributing value? That really is looking at the output and the deliverables and are the people that I'm working with satisfied? Have they gotten the result that I want them to achieve?

So what I love about your approach, controversial as it may be to some, I don't know, is that it allows you to focus more on am I delivering the results? Am I creating the value? Less so on am I docketing the .1s and the .2s. Which in itself, I think the billable hours, it is what it is. It's a placeholder. It's a way of measuring time and value. I mean it's not a perfect measure. We all know that. It really does take the shift.

It's so different, right? I mean I used to litigate. The hour you're sitting in chambers waiting, you're not delivering as much value as the .25 that you're actually on your feet speaking to your applications.

Lori: Yeah.

Paula: So I know that time isn't always a measure of value. What's neat about your approach from my perspective is you really are capturing the value, right? You're focusing on the provision of the services that get the results that you need and without looking so much at the numbers. So I love that. It's very refreshing.

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Lori: Thank you. I have two notes that I would like to add to that, just reflecting a little bit. One of the reasons I was able to “get away with that” and no one kicked me out for the duration that I was a partner. I think I was a partner for about six years. Was that a lot of my work was not hours based, right. So I would land agreements with clients where it was a global agreement. It was a flat fee over a certain period of time, which I found to be much more comfortable. So I had the revenue coming in, but I didn’t have to worry about exactly how many hours were being racked up against it.

The other thing I want to put, just point out and we can just commiserate about is that I think working parents are some of the most efficient people on the face of the earth. When you become more efficient in a billable hour world, you bill fewer hours.

So I sort of think that the system is rigged against those of us who become very oriented towards getting something done as opposed to people who sort of drag out projects. Not necessarily because they intended to but because they have all the time to drag them out. So I think it’s a challenging position to be in. To be becoming more and more efficient and able to prioritize and even better at your job and have it appear as though you are now worse at your job because you're billing fewer hours. It’s a conundrum.

Paula: I love that you said that Lori. I love that you mentioned an alternative fee structure. I agree. I don’t think I was ever as efficient or I never had to be as efficient as I have become since having children. Because your time is now there are real bookends to the day. There's the mornings with the kids. There's the evenings with the children, and wanting to be efficient with the time that you have. For a lot of listeners, they may have flexibility in terms of how they show their value.

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Lori: Right.

Paula: I mean it will be different. For some listeners, they have their own firm and they're setting their own fee structures. So they're able to capitalize on their efficiencies. For others who are in a large firm, like the one that you're in for example, maybe that means figuring out how to structure the fees differently with their clients so that they're not being penalized for being efficient.

Lori: Right exactly.

Paula: So I love that you suggested that and that you mentioned that just because these are options for women who want to show I'm still contributing. It might not be because I'm recording X number of hours, but here's the value that I'm bringing. So I love knowing that there's options out there. I have another question for your Lori, which is what impact having children typically has on working parents in terms of their priorities?

Lori: Well I think having children automatically puts in the front of your mind what your priorities are and forces you to articulate them out loud in a way that you might not have otherwise been called to do. I think your priorities, for me anyways, my priorities had to get calendared in a way that they previously didn't. If something did not appear on the calendar then it just simply didn't happen.

The ambition and work and career development are still for me just as high on the list as they were before I had children. Being an available and compassionate and mother to my children is also high on the list. So, for me, it's about integrating those two into a week rather than causing them to be in conflict with one another.

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My husband and I maybe seven years ago or so started a practice of having a Saturday evening meeting. Hot date on the couch where we sort of go through a whole number of things. It started with this thing that we call the Saturday basket where we toss all of the things that need to be addressed into the basket. Then Saturday night we deal with it and map out our week.

We found that overtime, we learned that our own mental health suffered dramatically when we didn't one have time with our own grownup friends, when we didn't have time for ourselves, etc. So now at that Saturday meeting we block on the calendar the priorities that we have like going on a date night for the two of us, like scheduling time alone. I get a three hour chunk on Saturdays and he gets a three hour chunk on Sundays. That's something that we intentionally put on the calendar.

So I think having children forced us to articulate the priorities and then find a home for them on the calendar. It's not necessarily any of our priorities went out the window, but they just got modulated in terms of how much time we can spend on them and how they fit into a work week.

Paula: I think it's so fascinating. I love your idea of a hot Saturday date night. I heard you mention this before. I was like oh that was such a good idea, and the idea of a basket. We may start implementing the same thing in our house because what a wonderful way to manage your week and to give that focus to what it is that you want to have happen. Because absolutely I am with you. If it doesn't get calendared it doesn't happen. I would like to know that the things that are important are going to happen in our lives.

One of the thing that I found for myself when I had children was that my focus in terms of my professional work shifted. You mentioned that your professional work is really important to you. That your career ambitions are

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really important. That you're balancing those with your family. What I find interesting is that your commitment to Mindful Return seems to be increasingly taking up more space in your professional work. So I'd love to know how that shift has happened for you overtime, and how that is a reflection of the priorities that you have.

Lori: Yeah. That's a great question. I started Mindful Return as a passionate program. It was 20 minutes here and there. Oh my gosh somebody has to create this thing because people aren't providing this type of support. There are so many baby focused resources but not grownup focused resources. It was that evening and weekend, wherever I could squeeze in the time thing.

I made a very intentional shift after about a year and a half of running Mindful Return and seeing just how much benefit this community and this program were having on people that I wanted to have some daylight hours to actually work on it and not just shove it into my post bedtime routine. So that's when I ended up leaving the trade association where I was working when I had my two kids and going, ironically, back into a firm and which I sort of at one point swore I would never do. It was definitely a lesson in never say never.

I interviewed at firms with a premise that I would only be on a 60% schedule. Basically said whoever wants me at 60%, you can have me. If you want more of me, I'm sorry that's not what's available right now. There were any number of firms that did want to hire someone on a 60% schedule. My interest in one supporting working parents at the firm and also two serving as an alternative model for people at the firm was really important to me. That it's okay to be on an alternative schedule, and this is normalized. Here's why I'm doing it.

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Then over time a couple of reasons why my emphasis on Mindful Return has shifted. One, my passion for it has absolutely grown. I think during the pandemic especially I saw that working parents were just completely underwater and struggling mightily. So my attention was really drawn to trying to help that effort even more.

Two Mindful Return is a parental leave benefit, a learning and development option. There are now 85 different companies, about half of them are law firms, that are offering Mindful Return as a parental leave benefit. So I'm more in a position of having a viable business model. There are companies that are paying to send employees to the program.

I guess the last thing that I'll say is we took a survey of about 1,000 of the people who had been through the Mindful Return program and looked at a five year period of time. We discovered that in contrast to the 64% return rate that is the average return rate in the U.S. anyways of women who go back to work after having a baby, the people who had taken Mindful Return, 85% of them were still at their same employer. 93% were still in the workforce.

It's data like that that says that say to me oh my gosh, this program actually helps with retention. It's doing what I hoped it would do. I want to devote more time to it because I'm so passionate about it. Yes I care about my Medicare legal practice and believe that supporting physicians and residency programs is important. That's my legal gig. It doesn't get me fired up as much as trying to support fellow working moms and working parents in the workplace.

Paula: Which is so amazing. Like I can see, I mean for the benefit of our listeners I can see Lori. We're having a face to face Zoom conversation, and I can see how excited you are and how passionate you are about the project and about the work. Those are amazing numbers, right. To have

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that kind of impact on a community of parents who clearly feel supported. There's clearly something going on there for them. To have that connection to them, to have that connection.

From what I understand, this comes out of your own experience, right. It's like what would I have benefited from in this period of transition? Now you're able to create that for others so that they're feeling whatever it was that you would have wanted in those transitions. So what do you think it is about the program? Is it the structuring? Is it the community? What do you think is so effective at helping people through those transitions?

Lori: Yeah so I think there are two questions baked in there. One is what's helpful in retaining and employee, and then what's helpful in having people actually feel supported? They're interrelated but not exactly the same. I've had people who have not even spent all that much time in the course material say, "I feel really grateful for my employer for giving me this tool to help me come back. It says that they care about me, and that they actually want me to return after I have a baby and that matters." So I think just like the statement of offering support from an employer really matters.

I think the secret sauce inside of the Mindful Return course, which is a four week online asynchronous course, but it's run as a cohort. So you're in there with other people who are all at the same life stage as you and you're interacting with them. The secret sauce really is that community. It's that sense of hearing someone else articulate so beautifully the exact fears and concerns that you have, and having you say, "Oh my gosh I'm not crazy. That's what went through my head. Oh that we're all feeling these things and we're all hearing them and echoing them."

I mean I like to think that the course material itself is high quality and very supportive. I know that 50% if not more of the value of taking this program is being in a cohort with people who are all driven professionals who want

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to figure out how to do this balance, if we're going to use that word. Hearing the idea that they're just not alone and that other people have gone through it and have figured it out and so can they.

Paula: Absolutely. I love that Lori. I think what you're doing is such an amazing service because it's true. I think you are creating the framework. You're creating the content and the materials. Here's what's helpful, and here's an opportunity to meet with other individuals who are just like you who are having the same challenges. I know that I'm part of membership communities where there is that energy and there is something that is so validating about hearing other people articulate the same challenges that you're going through.

I think as parents what is particularly interesting in that dynamic is that we all live our separate lives with our separate families, and we see other people's outsides, right? We see their Facebook reels. We see whatever things show up on social media. We start comparing our insides to their outsides, right.

Like our days where everything is a mess and the kids are fighting and we give them Eggo waffles and takeout, whatever it happens to be. We can fall into these spirals where we feel like we're bad moms, bad parents. That we're not doing enough, going back to the word enough.

The reality is that we're all kind of living out our existences within our separate homes, and we're all facing similar challenges. Maybe we're not facing them all at the same—Luckily, we're not all facing all challenges at the same time. Spread themselves out so we have a chance to catch our breath and everything.

To be able to see that we don't need to impose these unrealistic standards ourselves. That we can embrace the fact that we're all human, that we're all

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going to have challenges. We're all going to have successes. There are other people out there that are just like us. I think that can be such an empowering community to have, and to feel like you're supported and you're validated and that there are people out there that understand what you're going through.

Lori: Yeah absolutely. I guess two other thoughts that came to mind as to what I think makes the program effective. One is in the jumble of emotions and tasks and sort of chaos that is new parenthood, people appreciate having something structured to work through. Like okay. You just told me that there are four categories that I need to get my head around. Okay, I can do that.

The other thing that I hear from people is, "You've given me something to check off every day. I can read this short thing. I can interact with my peers, and they get super vulnerable. Then I can check it off. Guess what? It gives me a little dopamine hit to check it off. I don't get to really check off much of anything when I'm just trying to nurse for the 13th time today and keep my baby alive." So there's some element of the type A craving order that I think benefits from this type of program too.

Paula: Absolutely. You've predigested it. That dopamine hit counts for something. I remember when my kids were super young, and I was in the grocery store lineup and a woman complimented me on something that I had done. I think I told my children they weren't allowed to have I don't know a toy or a candy or this or whatever. Most of the time you do these acts as a parent that you think are in the best interest of your children. Your kids yell at you. Nobody really says good job.

Anytime somebody gives you that pat on the back like good job mom. Good for you. It gives you that extra, maybe it's the dopamine, but it's that lift you need to just take that next step forward and keep going. So I love

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that you've created a community where parents can find that. Lori you mentioned, oh my gosh I cannot believe 15 months of I gather this was homeschooling. Is that what it was or homeschool, whatever that's called.

Lori: Remote school.

Paula: Remote school. It's not technically homeschooling. I know for so many parents. I feel so blessed in where I live, we've had school most of the time. There were a couple of months where the schools in our neighborhood were closed down, but apart from that we've had our children physically go to school. There are parts of Canada where it has not been like that. Where the schools have been shut down and the parents have been doing remote learning.

I know for myself when the children have been at home and I've been working, it creates this real conflict. Because for whatever reason, as soon as I go to open my laptop and start working, that's when the children will want my attention for whatever reason. They will go to great lengths sometimes to get it.

What it does for me is it puts me in this position of conflict, right? Where I really care about my family and I really care about my professional work. Now all of a sudden I'm sitting in front of my computer and I have to really face that conflict head on. It is very challenging. I know for parents who are doing what you've done—Or I guess I don't know but I'm guessing that that conflict shows up more often because your children aren't off site. They're actually in the home.

So what recommendations would you provide? What guidance, what advice would you offer to parents who—Because I don't think that we're done with this quite yet, right? What recommendations would you give to

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parents? What lessons did you draw from going through that experience with your children?

Lori: Yeah great question. Pivot, pivot, pivot, pivot. That was my word of everyday. Know that every single day you're going to have absolutely no idea what is about to happen. I think I just uttered that word throughout the day almost as my mantra.

My husband and I had a very jigsaw puzzle like schedule between the two of us. I think communication between a partner or with someone else who you are able to share some tasks with was absolutely critical in mapping out who was on point when. Then really acting as though that other parent weren't available. Yes they might have wanted mommy, but guess what? Mommy is blocked off for these hours.

We tried to keep up certain traditions and rituals that we would have done even if they had left the house. So for example we have a separation ritual with our kids. It's called hug, kiss, push. It came into being when they were in elementary, no in daycare. When they were toddlers and they wouldn't celebrate themselves from our legs and they were attached.

Paula: Remember those days.

Lori: Yeah. So at some point when they were around three or four, we came up with this hug, kiss, push thing where they're allowed one last squeeze huge, one last squeezy kiss, and then a push out the door. Which was hilarious to them because normally they're not allowed to push mommy and daddy. It detached them from our legs. They still do hug, kiss, push. They're like 9 and 11. So we made sure to adopt that in our house to make sure that they knew that okay hug, kiss, push means goodbye. We separated from them even within the home.

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Another strategy really was just like looking only one day ahead. If we looked further, we would cry in agony in all that we weren't doing. I think it was really a 15 month survival goal as opposed to people were like, "Oh thrive during quarantine." I was like no, no, no. Survive during quarantine.

Use whatever help and resources you can get. Our therapy bills were very high for many members of our family, and that was an essential. I started doing a one-on-one yoga session with a teacher who used to live in DC and moved to Colorado. Now I can work with her remotely via Zoom. Really prioritizing that thing that filled me up. Yeah I think survival mode probably. Recognizing that it won't always be like that.

The last thing that I say generally speaking I do truly believe in the concept of work life enrichment instead of work life conflict. This is a concept from the psychology literature. There's a wonderful researcher at Brown University named Yael Schonbrun who has done a lot of research on work life enrichment.

I try to center and focus on the idea that in general even if not on this one particular COVID filled day, my work does enrich my life and how I feel about my family and children. I'm a better mom because I work and I have these other interests. Conversely I am better at my career, I'm better at running my company, even at practicing law because I am a parent and because parenthood forces me to stop and take time out of everyday to be more present with my children. So in the darker moments, I try to remember that they are actually supporting one another even if at the moment they can feel like they're dragging the other one down.

Paula: Totally. I love how you've articulated that. I've definitely felt that as well. That notion that the professional work that I do complements and enhances how I show up as a parent to my children and conversely that the enrichment that they bring into my life and the choices I've made

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professionally because of them, right. Because of creating time for them, because I'm now interested in something because of them. That the two really do complement each other even though sometimes they are at odds with each other.

The thing that I've found is probably maybe the biggest challenge for me and one that I am intentionally mindful of is just time, right. That when the children are at home it means I will not be necessarily moving as quickly as I would if they were not here but that that's okay, right. So I find just wrapping my head around that sometimes really helps. I really love how you've highlighted that that the two really do serve each other.

I love what you talk about with this yoga class. One of the things that I think is important is self-care. Kind of related to that is notion of setting boundaries, right. Boundaries for ourselves. I would love to know what your thoughts are on boundaries, why they are important, and how you would recommend communicating boundaries.

Lori: Gosh boundaries are such an important topic in working parenthood. It elevates it to the top of the priority list right away. I'm a big fan of the image that I believe it's Greg McKeown draws about boundaries. He says picture a playground where the kids are just running all over the place. The grownups are responsible for making sure they don't run across the street or go out and hurt themselves.

Then imagine that you put a fence around it. Now the kids can play wherever they want. The grownups don't have to pay as much attention and worry about them. Everyone's freedom has effectively doubled by the fact that you have this boundary.

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So I'd like to remind parents that boundaries are not this evil stick that we're wielding. They are necessary to everyone's freedom. To think of it more as a freedom tool than as a bludgeon, I guess.

In terms of setting and communicating boundaries, there are a couple of steps that I think you need to go through in thinking about boundaries. One is where do I need to put a boundary? How can I then implement the boundary? Then just as importantly how can I then reinforce the boundary because it's really only on me to be able to reset it.

I was coaching a woman who is a lawyer at a big firm, and she was growing very frustrated because she had thought that she had established and appropriately articulated a boundary around bath and bedtime. She had a partner who was consistently calling her at 6:30 every night. She said that she kept feeling bad for she would either pick up or she would feel bad that she had to remind the partner.

I think in that instance my advice is twofold. Either one you can drop the narrative about the idea that they forgot because they don't care about you. It's just that this partner it's a habit, right. So if you drop the narrative that you did something wrong. That oh my gosh, you have to remind them again. Nope just can't talk now, but I'll talk at 8:30. Remembering that part of the boundary setting process is that the boundary just needs to be reminded over and over, and that's part of the normal process.

A thing that can help the other prong of this is if that's not okay, there are other people you can work for who will respect the boundaries more. We all have choices in terms of where we work and for whom we work. So it's a matter of getting comfortable.

I keep coming on boundary setting and meeting other people's expectations, I often come back to Laura Vanderkam's work around time

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management. She has this wonderful parable called *Juliet's School of Possibilities* in this book she talks about the fact that even if you had all the time in the world, you just could not possibly meet everyone's expectations. Meeting the ones that you—Hang on a sec. I'm just going to grab it because she just says it so much more beautiful than I do.

Paula: Sure.

Lori: "Here's the thing. There could be infinite expectations. Even if you never slept, you could not meet all the expectations of your employer, your colleagues, your clients, your friends, your family, yourself. You cannot do everything. The choice to meet one expectation is always a choice not to meet another." Then she goes on to say, "Expectations are infinite, time is finite. You are always choosing. Choose well."

So for me putting a boundary in place is declaring my choice. It's saying this is the thing out of the millions that I have chosen to focus on. I'm not going to allow the other things in right now. Yes I can be flexible when I need to be under emergency circumstances, but otherwise I've made the choice. I know that my time is finite. This is what I'm choosing to focus on, and I will live with whatever the consequence is of having the boundary. I'm going to pause there. I've gone in a lot of directions.

Paula: No I love that. I love that quote too because it's so true. There are infinite possibilities out there. Infinite opportunities and recognizing that it's a choice, right. That you're choosing this particular activity in the moment. You're making a decision to the exclusion of others. I think that's a really beautiful way of describing it.

Quick question there on this notion of enforcing boundaries. This came up in a coaching conversation that I had the other day with a lawyer who was talking about whether or not the environment they were in was one they

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wanted to stay in in the long run. Boundaries was an issue, right. Having communicated a boundary and then feeling like that boundary wasn't necessarily respected, right. It was a workload question.

Lori: Yes.

Paula: So what would you recommend there in terms of I mean if you work in an organization, for example, maybe it's a lawyer. Maybe it's something else where you've made a request that you want. Maybe it's fewer billable hours or you don't want to be working weekends, whatever it looks like. You feel like your employer hasn't really respected that.

My guess is that this isn't happening out of malice or the employer trying to impose something on the employee that they don't want. My guess is that it's busy and they're in survival mode and they need somebody to do the work. So they're asking somebody to do the work.

What recommendations or what ideas might you have for the person who maybe needs to or would benefit from—I realize I'm kind of putting my own spin on it. Maybe they wouldn't benefit from it. To reinforce or to reiterate the boundary because it's almost like you have that conversation once and then you expect that the boundary will be expected. Maybe sometimes it doesn't catch that first time. What do you think about that? Have you had that experience where you're wanting to go back to that conversation and reassert the boundary?

Lori: Yeah. I think it's important to remember that it's okay to reassert a boundary. It's also okay to say yes I said I could do that before and now I can't now because my circumstances have changed.

I want to just put a plugin for this wonderful Instagram account. I don't know this woman personally but Nedra Tawab. She does beautiful work on the

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exact language that you can use when talking about how to set boundaries in your personal life with your relationships, with your employers. So just go follow her Instagram page for actual language you can use on a regular basis.

I think taking away any idea that boundary setting is probably a once and done conversation is probably helpful. Like no, it's an ongoing negotiation on a periodic basis. Maybe it's even putting a calendar item on with a person that you are touching base with on a regular, every three weeks or something to say let's touch base and reevaluate how this schedule is working out or whether or not what we've agreed to is actually sticking. Even if it's a calendar note to yourself to check in on how it's working and to raise it.

I think recognizing whether this is in fact a season and a season you're willing to work through. Say, "Okay, I get it. I'm going to have to work weekends for the next of couple of months business there's this huge project and it's going to end in September. We've all agreed after that it will be fine. Not it will be fine, but I can deal with it until then."

Or to say this is chronic. I'm working for an organization where everyone is having these problems. Guess what, it is not just me. This is how the organization is built. Then deciding for yourself whether you want to work within that structure or not.

I think some of us focus on the things, and I'm guilty of this all the time. Focusing on my contribution and my responsibility to the problem when in reality it might be a bigger structural issue. It might be that the entire economic base of this organization is built on the billable hour, I don't know. Built on systemic sexism or racism or whatever. It might not be you is what I'm getting at. If you can sort of evaluate what you have control over versus

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what you don't have control over, I think that can be helpful in figuring out whether to make a move or not.

Paula: I love that. Thank you so much Lori. I think you're absolutely right. There's the conversation. I'm going to check out that Instagram account. I'm more interested in elegant ways of articulating a boundary because it's not always easy. I love that.

I also love looking at the organization as a whole, right. Having made some genuine efforts, having had some difficult conversations to carve out the boundaries that you want. If it's not working, sometimes that is beyond what one individual can do. In that case, you're now making another decision about are you going to choose that environment or choose one that is different? So great. A couple more questions for you Lori.

Lori: Sure.

Paula: I know you are highly efficient and productive. I would love to know if you have any productivity hacks that you would be willing to share. I get all excited. I love this kind of thing.

Lori: I know. I love it too. Yet I don't know how much I have that is all that effective. I do a brain dump list making exercise every week where I take everything that is in my head and put it out onto paper. I've just recently as in like a week and a half so it's still totally new started trying out an app called Todoist, which is basically trying to convert my—I'm going to hold up my paper to-do list onto an electronic app version. So far I'm enjoying it, but the verdict's still out because it's only been a week and a half.

I'm a big fan of Daniel Pink's MIT principle, which is most important task. He has a really short like Pinkcast. It's a minute and a half about this. The idea is to do the most important task first in a day. That sounds sort of

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simple and not rocket science and maybe a little silly. Don't we do that anyways?

The answer is no, we actually don't. We often go through our to-do list and pick the easy things that give us the quick dopamine hits and don't necessarily address the most important things. I found that as a working parent knowing that I could wake up tomorrow and get my children to school and then in 30 minutes have to go pick them up, it's more important that I do the most important thing first because I might not have the rest of the day to work on it.

So MIT is important. I love the Pomodoro method, the 25 minute block of time where you're working undistracted then you've got five minutes of break. Where undistracted I mean all of your technology is off and whatnot.

Then I think productivity hack for me is scheduling downtime. It's the scheduling alone time. It's the ability to plug myself in and recharge by reading a novel and making sure I get seven hours of sleep a night. Addiction is a strong word, but I love Insight Timer. I use it everyday and do a 15 minute yoga session every morning before breakfast. For me, those are the things that make me more efficient, productive, and clear headed.

Paula: I love it. Yeah. I share a number of your strategies. The brain dump weekly is one that I practice as well. I need to. I need to know what's coming up in my week. I like to be cognizant of what projects I have going on. I find it super helpful, especially when your days do get disrupted to know already what you want to accomplish that week. Then you can shift the existing items as opposed to having to come up with them from scratch. I really like that most important task first concept, especially if you don't know if you ever will have time.

Lori: To do the second task.

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Paula: The less important task. It sounds like you have practices and routines. To me, that's always a big part of it is are we making it a practice that we adhere to? So I love hearing your productivity tips. I remember I read one of your I think it was a blog article or something where you talked about the Pomodoro method it in. It reignited my interest in it.

I did a few Pomodoros that day or that week. I was like yeah, this is really awesome. It really does give you that focus for that period of time to get whatever it is that you're working on to get it done. I think we have time for one last question Lori.

Lori: Cool.

Paula: Which is we've alluded to it a couple of times already. The notion of work-life balance and what your take on that is.

Lori: So when I sit down and think about words, and lawyers love to think about the meaning of words.

Paula: Definitely.

Lori: And concentric circles and what fits into what and Venn diagram. I'm like why is the word work not part of the word life? Like why are they two separate things that we're contrasting, right? So when forced to discuss this, and I use the words work-life balance just because people know what the reference is.

Paula: Totally.

Lori: I much prefer either work life integration or quite frankly just the word life. Like work is an important part of life. Like I live. Therefore I work and I parent and I all these things. Putting them at odds to each other doesn't

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work for me. So I brought this up before, but where I really like to recenter myself is in the work life enrichment argument that they're enriching each other. I just sort of let go of the story that they're in conflict. Then I don't think about it.

I also don't use the word busy. I find that language really matters. So when I don't think of myself as busy, I don't act with the panic that comes with busy. When I don't use the word work-life balance, I don't think of myself as having them in conflict because I'm not sitting there trying to measure them against each other.

Paula: I love that. I think it's so true. I think to me work-life balance just brings up this concept of having to have—it's like pressure that you have to have a certain amount of time at work. I'm using air quotes. A certain of time not at work.

The reality is the two kind of eb and flow, right. There's going to be times where you're spending more time with your family. There's going to be times where there's more time spent with your professional work. It's that flow. It's not necessarily balance, right. Sometimes it's going to be completely off balance, and that's a good thing. You like it like that, right. It's fun. It's exciting. So I totally agree.

Interestingly I love that you talk about definitions. Earlier today I was looking at the definition of life. Just because you know it's life, right. What is the definition of life? There was the game of life. So I wanted to know like how do people define life? I won't bore you with the details, but one of the key pieces of it was growth. I thought that was really interesting.

So anyhow bit of an aside, but yes. I think looking at definitions and the meaning that we give to words is pretty fun. Watching the words that we

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use, right. The word busy I also try not to use that one. It's really hard to find a synonym though when you're like oh I'm really busy.

Lori: Full. My life is full.

Paula: Full. I'm at capacity.

Lori: Full in a good way.

Paula: Yes. All sorts of different options. So Lori with this podcast episode there will be notes, show notes. You've given us a number of resources already that we'll include. I would love to include how people can find you, how they can work with you. Where can they find you? The Mindful Return, please tell us.

Lori: Sure Paula. They can go to www.mindfulreturn.com and find out about all of our programs. We have a new cohort for moms and a new cohort for dads starting every other month. I'm on all the usual social media channels. You can follow us on Instagram @mindfulreturn and Facebook and Twitter and all the good places. LinkedIn. If you heard this podcast and you link in with me and say you heard this episode, I will accept your connection. I don't always accept every LinkedIn connection that comes my way, but if you mention the podcast I will.

I cohost a podcast myself called *Parents at Work* that you can feel free to checkout. Oh when I say I cohost it, I cohost it with my wonderful husband who's a career coach. We just have a blast doing it together. Then the last thing is you can find my book *Back to Work After Baby* on Amazon.

Paula: Amazing. Beautiful. We will link to all those things. Lori it has been such a pleasure having you here and having a chance to chat. Is there anything else you'd like to share before we wrap up today?

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Lori: No you are a wonderful interviewer. Thank you Paula. I really, really enjoyed our conversation.

Paula: Thank you.

Lori: I mean like working parents are in a tough spot after two years of a pandemic. I just want to say like you've got this. You'll figure out how to make it through. We are putting on foot in front of the other. We are all just necessarily letting balls drop, and that's okay. We'll pick them up later.

Paula: Thank you so much Lori because that is exactly the message that somebody needs to hear right now. Thank you so much for joining us.

Lori: Thank you Paula.

Paula: Thank you everyone who's listening. Thank you for joining us. We'll look forward to catching up again soon.

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