

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 26: Alden Mills

Whitney: Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak and live all things disruption. On today's show....

Alden: And the saltwater came into my hands and it hurt so badly that all I could do is cry while I was pulling on that oar, because every time I pulled on the oar, the saltwater dug in deeper. And then I started thinking that no one can see that I'm crying because I'm covered in saltwater. And I just remember knowing this is it; this is the moment. I have to push through this—and I did.

W: Before we get started today I wanted to just make a quick note especially to our longtime listeners. You may have noticed that our sound quality over the last few episodes hasn't been quite as good. That's because more and more of my interviews are remote. I love talking to people in person, but sometimes that isn't possible. Like with today's guest, [Alden Mills](#), who was in Spain at the time of our conversation. Alden is a former Navy SEAL turned successful entrepreneur. According to Inc. Magazine, his company, [Perfect Fitness](#), who brought us the [Perfect Pushup](#), was the fastest growing consumer products company in 2009. He's now the author of [Be Unstoppable](#).

W: Alden Mills, thank you so much for being our guest on the Disrupt Yourself Podcast.

A: Whitney, thank you for having me; it's a pleasure to be here. The brief background on me: I grew up in a small town in central Massachusetts. Was told at the ripe old age of 12 that I needed to learn the game of chess because I was an asthmatic, and thankfully, had a really powerful mom in my life who said, "It's up to you. You go figure it out." And through years of getting involved with different athletic pursuits I finally found something that worked for me, because I was basically a very uncoordinated, two-left foot kid. Started rowing; rowing took me to the Naval Academy and that then took me to SEAL Team where I had seven glorious years of leading three different platoons. And then I went to business school; majored in entrepreneurship. Started a company that became the fastest growing consumer products company in the country, in 2009.

W: And you are still the CEO or what are you doing currently?

A: No, I started another company; I sold [Perfect Fitness](#) in 2011 and then worked for the larger company. Went from entrepreneurship to intreprenurship and then left that and started another company called [Fetch](#)

[Fuel](#), which is a pet food company with my partner. And also moved over to Spain for a couple of years to write my second book.

W: You mentioned that you were diagnosed with asthma. Can you talk about why that was such a turning point for you as a 12 year old boy?

A: Well, you know here's a person with known authority telling you something that you have no other reason to believe it's not your limit. And that's a doctor; put me through a battery of tests and said, "You know, you really need to lead a less active lifestyle. Can I suggest the game of chess to you?" And at 12, as I kind of looked at my parents when they say, "Don't do this or do that;" the doctor was right up there as one of these primal figures. So my mind had already gone down the path of thinking about "Oh, I hate the game of chess; I'm not even any good at checkers." And it was my mom that would just continually remind me that it would be up to me to decide if that was the limit I wanted to embrace or not.

W: What did your mom say to you exactly?

A: The very first thing she said was...she had me leave the doctor's office—I can remember this like it was yesterday. She came out, and she kept these long fingernails and I swear she used them for moments like this. She dug them into my forearm, and I was tearing up and she said, "Look at me. You have to decide whether you want to play chess or keep playing the things you want to play and we will support you. I'll get you the medication. But this is going to be up to you to decide." And of course, I didn't get it the first time but after about three years of her encouraging me—I mean, along with my father, but mom was always there and encouraging me to go try a different sport and do this and then the chessboard never came out.

W: The reason I asked you to share that story is I remember reading it in your book [Be Unstoppable](#) and I thought it was such a powerful interchange between you and your mother and how asthma was a turning point for you. It was a constraint but it, in fact, turned into this amazing tool of creation because it gave you something to bump up against. And then your mother was just like, "What are you going to do? You've got to choose." And that became really a watchword, I think, in many ways for you, throughout your life.

A: Without question. The big theme of the book—[Be Unstoppable](#) is about how you embrace those constraints and that stress makes you stronger.

W: Now in high school, kids made fun of you, and they made fun of you for something in particular...what did they make fun of you about?

A: Oh yes. My thunder thighs. I was terrible at anything that involved a ball. It was freshman year in high school and these coaches lined up all the freshman

kids and this one coach—here’s another authority figure—came up to me and he looked at my legs and he’s like “Hey, you have rowers legs.” It was the first time somebody had flipped something that I had just considered a negative in my life. Because there were so many kids having gone through YMCA, playing YBA, and I accepted the fact that I had big legs and they were slow and they were not really helpful for all these sports. But then this guy comes along and tells me about another sport where these are perfect for, and that just flipped a paradigm shift in my head and I learned to sit down and go backwards and suffer for long periods of time. And I became good at it.

First year I just started off in a club program and then I did the most ridiculous goal-setting, that at the time everyone thought was crazy and that was I was going to try out for the varsity team as a sophomore, and there were only juniors and seniors on these teams. There were two open spots but one was going to be taken up by a new experienced rower. And so there was just one spot left and I have asthma and I was taking these medications but I wasn’t thinking about it anymore. I found somebody who was on the team that was willing to bring me under his wing and I gave it everything I had and when I didn’t think I had anymore I gave more and ended up earning that seat.

W: What does that look like—I know this comes back to a theme in your book—but this idea of giving everything you have when you think you don’t have anything more to give. Let me sort of preface why I’m so intrigued by this, is that I tend to think of myself as someone who has grit, and I don’t know if you’ve read [Angela Duckworth’s book](#), which is fantastic...

A: Mm hmmm.

W: ...you could be a poster boy for [grit](#); she should have written about you. I look at it and I realized a few years ago that I’m actually really good at never giving up but I’m not so good at always showing up and there’s really a difference between the two. And so, getting that spot on the rowing team wasn’t about your not giving up; it was about showing up, heart and soul. Did you distinguish between the two in your mind or was this sort of...or what did that look like for you?

A: Unknowingly, I had built up this reason...not only a reason to believe why I could be on that team, but I had created what I call an outcome living in my head. And an outcome living in my head was I could not just visualize what it was going to be like wearing a varsity shirt and going and doing a race and going back and telling people, “Hey look, I made it.” But I also visualized what it was going to feel like for my parents to say, “Hey, my son made this crew. First one in the family to ever do something like that.” And I started to apply the pressure on myself that it wasn’t just about me; it was about all the people that I really cared about and getting them included as part of this virtual team when I got to these points where I didn’t think I could give anymore. And so

every time I pulled that oar—and there was a very distinct moment where I thought about quitting. My hands weren't prepared for the amount of rowing we were doing on these two-a-days, when we were brought down to Florida to train. And so I had lost all the skin on my forefingers on each hand and they...they became so swollen that I got an infection and I ended up having a fever and they pulled me out of the crew for two workouts. And they said, "Look, you got to do a seat race." And they pull the boats together and you swap seats and race again. And basically if you keep winning then that means you're, you're faster than the other person. It's the kind of rudimentary way to decide who's better at rowing. And they had put me in the boat, and this wave broke over the boat and I'd taped my hands basically in two claws and the salt water came into my hands and it hurt so badly that all I could do was cry while I was pulling on that oar. Because every time I pulled on the oar the salt water dug in deeper. And then I started thinking, "You know, no one can see that I'm crying because I'm covered in saltwater." And I just remember going, "This is it. This is the moment. I have to push through this." And I did. And I did it because it wasn't just for Alden at that point; I had built up this outcome for everybody that was important to me. I knew how proud it would make them that I did this as well as it was for me.

W: Right. So this was the cinematic sort of climax, where you were going to make it or not, and since you had the film in your head you had to push through it.

A: Yeah, and I had a really good reason not for making it. I mean, my hands were blood red raw and I could have just said, "Hey, my...you know, I've got to back out medically. And I had a similar scenario in SEAL training that I did not talk about in the book, but it was another one of these moments where the body was giving me an option to get out and it was the will—what I call the kind of understanding why I really want to do it—that enabled me to persevere.

W: So what happened in SEAL training when your body gave out?

A: I got busted for taking asthmatic drugs. There was a pill called Theodore, and I was through hell week and I'm about 17, 18 weeks into training and I'm doing a three mile ocean swim and my lungs started filling with blood. And I was drowning. And I had to raise my hand and I got pulled out of the swim. And by the way, if you raise your hand on a swim usually that means you're quitting; in this case, I said, "Look I got a medical...something's going on," and they saw all this blood coming out. They took me to the hospital and they discovered I had this antigen in my blood which....Then they realized I had been masking my asthma and they said, "Ok, you've got to quit. You know, we can't have asthmatics in SEAL team." And I had been taking this asthma medication since the ripe old age of 12 and it had been my crutch. And I believed that I had to keep taking it so I never stopped. And then they forced me into a position where if I didn't stop I was going to be dropped. So I said,

“I’m not an asthmatic.” And they made me go through a series of tests and I stopped taking the drugs and I passed them.

W: I hope that other people are as inspired, um, everyone that you’re...is listening, is as inspired by this as I am. I could just feel myself filling with resolve to get done what I want to get done today and in life, so thank you for sharing that and kind of giving us a bit more of the detail around the experiences. What does a Navy SEAL do, exactly?

A: Navy SEAL stands for sea, air and land. And we get trained in those three mediums, right? So, scuba diving, jumping out of airplanes, doing all kinds of things on land. Um, when I went off for missions, we had to be qualified in 167 different kinds of missions. So there is a wide variety of different things we do, but across the board, we’re very small teams focused on disrupting the battlefield. That’s the real mission.

W: Let’s talk about one of your missions because I want people to be able to hear about what you did. So can you talk about a mission where you got to the target and then it was time to extract and you had to ask that question of how you get home?

A: The best kind of example I can give you is there...we had a mission in Bosnia and the mission was we had to identify a person indicted for a war crime; they’re called piffwicks. And this particular guy was nicknamed Dr. Death; he was number three on the list of 77, and he was responsible for a massive number of genocide, like 60 or 70 thousand. He had a breed out program where they were bringing Muslim women up and his troops were raping them, keeping them there for a trimester and then releasing them back in. I mean this guy was demented. And so there was no question on why we needed to go get this guy, but it was a massive challenge because we were there to be a peacekeeping force. Now SEALs aren’t peacekeepers, let me be clear about that. But we had to find this person and we had to positively ID this person before we could do our own version of a roadblock. At the time, the technology was very nascent; it was this digitalized SLR camera and it was the first of its kind. It was a \$35,000 camera. And we had to take a picture of him, send bad-guy picture to higher headquarters; they had to verify this person before other assets would be put in place to take down the piffwick and bring the piffwick to The Hague for a war crimes tribunal. So we also had to take him alive. And very soon...very early on in the mission we realized that the cars were moving too quickly for the new digital SLR autofocus. All the pictures came in blurry and our commanding officer called us up and said, “Hey, this is an abort. The equipment doesn’t work.” And I gave the whole context to my small team; there’s four of us sitting on this hilltop, on this cliff, trying to get these pictures. And one of them came up to me and said, “Sir, you know I think I’ve got a way we could do this.” And I’m like, “Ok, what is it?” “Well we’re going to dig some potholes on the turn, and that should slow the car down.” Of course, I

wasn't thinking about it; I was thinking about, alright, how do I work on the technology of this camera...

A: We called our headquarters, asked for permission to stay in the woods longer; he goes, "I'll give you 24 hours." Twenty-four hours led to 48, and it ended up leading to 96; we ended up staying eight days longer than we thought and we got the picture. And we made some great potholes. That was the kind of...the big change on how to make that mission successful. And then from there the extraction became almost a foregone conclusion at that point, where it had worked to our advantage, where we're working with another military group to get us out in some Land Rovers late at night...

W: It seems like sometimes it's easy—and I'm just going to use that word very, very judiciously—easy to get to, you know, the action on the objective, but once it's time to extract yourself...sometimes it's harder to extract than you think it's going to be. So you think you're done but you're actually not done.

A: That is actually a very accurate statement and I have made some real planning mistakes in the past where I made the extraction the hardest part of the whole mission; I'll never do that again. And that involved...we did this action on an objective where we had to, um, prime these missiles and then at the end of it, I called for a four hour swim across this bay and I didn't factor into the equation that we were severely dehydrated and had been out sitting on this beach for two or three days and we weren't physically up to par to what we mentally thought we were. And it took us six hours to get across that bay and we spent everything to do it. And we were lucky that we didn't have to call for help after that. And by the way, there's a similar thing: I like to climb mountains and a lot of people think that once you get to the summit that the climbs over, but actually the hardest part is then coming back down. And that is a very metaphorical relationship to the extraction. It's equally as difficult.

W: So what do you do differently now that you have had a few of those instances where you haven't planned for the extraction piece?

A: I look at the entire mission and really try and simplify as much as possible and reduce risk wherever I can. I added way too much risk into the equation when we were, when we were doing these extractions. Because you kind of get in love with "oh yeah, we can swim a long period of time." It became this kind of ego-related manly, man thing, when it was just stupid.

W: So you're learning not to be stupid. That's a funny thing that happens when we get older, right?

A: Yeah, and removing the ego. I mean, that's the hardest enemy.

W: Alden, how does your ego show up as a CEO and Founder of a company?

A: Ego in the beginning, when you're founding a company can be a really helpful thing. For example, I'm facing bankruptcy; I have five investors pulling me aside after I said, "Hey everybody, I know I raised a million and a half dollars and I know I spent a million four hundred and seventy five thousand dollars on ways not to launch a product, but I've got this next product; I'm sure it's going to work. And could we just put in another couple hundred grand?" And they turn around and say....

W: Sorry. This is with [Perfect Fitness](#), right?

A: Right, this is with Perfect Fitness.

W: Okay.

A: And they said...and by the way, this is 37 of my closest friends and family and a smaller group of them who are hedge fund managers and such said, "Alden, it's over. You don't even have enough to pay the manufacturer, the accountants and the lawyers. Go get a job; you're starting to embarrass yourself." And I was kind of like, "Okay, that hurt." And then my father-in-law brought me out while my wife and mother-in-law are in the kitchen and he's like, um, "Alden, can you hear me?" I'm like, "Yeah." Put his arm around me and, you know, we knew they were looking at us, so we were looking out, away from the house. And he's like, "I didn't raise my daughter to live in poverty. You've got six months to figure this out. Do you understand me?" Ah man, that hurt even more. And then finally, my wife—she's got a baby in each arm and one in her belly—and she starts tearing up and she goes, "I don't know how much more of this I can take." And it was this cross between the ego and the will. "You know what? I don't care what these experts say; I know this product's going to work. I'm going to give this everything I got." And part of that involved my ego because I had been reluctant to use the whole Navy SEALs story. And we created this little product called [The Perfect Pushup](#), developed by a Navy SEAL. And two years later we had done almost \$100,000,000 in sales.

W: So you were building this business, you'd developed this product, but you had been unwilling to tell your story in making this happen. You had been hiding your gold. What was that about?

A: I had.

W: What was that about?

A: The whole Navy SEAL element is about being a quiet professional. It's not about walking in to a room full of people and saying, "Hey, look at me. I'm a Navy SEAL." And it's really engrained in you, from the time you show up.

They'll ask you a question in training, "Hey, who's a Rambo in here?" And if you remember the old Sylvester Stallone movies called Rambo, uh, who, you know, this was this special operations guy who went and did missions all by himself. They'd always get somebody raising their hand and they're like, "Okay, you're the first to leave." Because they don't want Rambos; they want people that are these quiet professionals that put the ego aside and link arms and go do things together as a team. And the idea of going out and doing self-promotion was a very difficult task for me and I had a really hard time with it and still, with some elements, do. I don't like telling everybody within 10 seconds, "Hey, I'm a Navy SEAL." I prefer that to never come out on the table. But that was one of the things that was holding me back and, ironically, the other thing that was holding me back was the ego of wanting to do this world's greatest fat-burning device. I wanted to make this super-complicated totally new category of thing, because I'd learned this in business school; it was all about creating a new category and I'm going to define a category and, of course, I had no idea I was creating an invention and I didn't appreciate what I had been doing and I needed all this time to educate people and I lost an amazing amount of money over a period of time and my ego had not allowed me to just say, "Hey, fruit loop, you've got to shift courses; this is not selling. It's not working." And I had been reluctant to really look at the data. I was on this egotistical mission of, "No, I'm going to create this product, this new category."

The first time I faced bankruptcy was with an invention, and I was pumping along at about a half millions sales and I couldn't get to—I use [Geoffrey Moore's example of crossing the chasm](#), right? I'd get these early innovative slash early adopters coming to try it out but I couldn't get across that chasm and it was clear I had to pivot and I had to figure out a new product. Now, ironically, I'd had this product for ages called the Perfect Pushup, but I just thought it was too simple; it was not nearly as sexy of an idea. And it was that innovation on the Perfect Pushup that we launched that helped save the company the first time.

W: How will you disrupt yourself in the next 12 months?

A: The way I'm going to disrupt myself first, is we are going to move from Spain, where I disrupted myself for the last two years. Leaving my job and saying I'm going to give myself two years to start a new business, which was the speaking career. And we return to San Francisco in August and then over the next 12 months I'm going to start another business.

W: Wow! That's not the thought leadership? Something else entirely?

A: Uh, it's another invention that I've worked on for some time; it's an innovation actually. It's called Pentagon Security. We have these products; we haven't brought them to market yet and we're putting a team in place to bring Pentagon to the low-income, single mom world. It is a motion sensor that when

you place it on a door or a window, and if that door or window moves by just a fraction of an inch it sounds off an audible alarm. And it's based off of the SEAL concept of a mobile security perimeter. So these can travel with you and wherever you want to go you can set up a very simple security perimeter wherever you are.

W: And why are you focusing on single moms?

A: There are lots of high-end security systems that you can buy—and high-end, I'll put it at three, four, five, six hundred dollars and above. But at the end of the day people that can afford that kind of a security system and those are all networked and everything, that's a different classification of a person. But if you think of the person that really needs protection, the ones that are really out there the most, that's going to be the mother of a child that is not just a breadwinner, but she is CEO, chief operating officer and chief protection officer of that family. And she's going to need something simple that can work in her budget that's going to be effective and give her a good night's sleep.

W: Interesting. I love that. So...yeah, that's fantastic. Well, I wish you the absolute best with that. And Alden, thank you very much for making time from Barcelona, Spain, to have this conversation. I think our listeners are going to really, really enjoy having had the opportunity to get inside your mind for a few minutes.

A: Whitney, I've loved it and I'm a big fan of what you're doing so this was a real honor for me so...

W: Thank you.

A: ...thank you.

W: Thank you.

Several things have stayed with me since speaking to Alden. The first is thunder thighs and the power of authority to turn what is perceived as a liability into a huge strength. The second is grit. Alden Mills is a guy who gives it everything he has. Listening to him talk about raw knuckles? It helps me want to up my game. I'm also thinking about extraction. We do so much planning of how we're going to start; how we're going to climb to the top of a learning curve. How we're going to get people who work for us to climb to the top of their learning curve. But the extraction—planning for how they'll jump to the next curve is just as important to the successful completion of a mission, and to being considered a really great boss. People remember what it was like at the beginning, but they really remember what it's like at the end.

For a list of people, places, publications mentioned in this podcast, there are links in the show notes at whitneyjohnson.com. If you'd like a transcript of this interview, it's available to our newsletter subscribers. Thank you to all of you who have been writing in; first, to Alan Bolesy, a new listener—glad you're here. And to Redika Pelai, so happy to hear you find the stories of guests like Wendy Sachs inspiring. Thank you to Alden Mills for being today's guest, to sound engineer, Whitney Jobe, editor Heather Hunt, editor and show notes contributor, Macy Robison, and art director, Brandon Jameson. I'm Whitney Johnson and this is Disrupt Yourself.