

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 46: Benjamin Hardy

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast. I'm Whitney Johnson. I think, write, speak, and live all things disruption. Today's guest is Benjamin P. Hardy, the #1 writer on Medium, and author of the book *Willpower Doesn't Work*, released today, March 6.

Whitney: Ben, welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. It is so nice to meet you, and um, today your book is out called [Willpower Doesn't Work](#), and it's a provocative title. Will you tell us all what it's about and of all the topics you could've chosen, why did you choose this particular topic?

Benjamin: I wrote about [Willpower Doesn't Work](#) because I've been studying psychology for, you know, going on a decade now, I'm almost done with my PhD. I've also spent a very, very gross amount of time studying self improvement. I read probably about 100 books a year, and um, one of the big things that I kind of noticed in my life experience and also in my psychology research was there was a huge conflict in what I was experiencing and learning academically, and what I was seeing in a lot of the self improvement research ... I mean in the self improvement books, which I love. I love a lot of them, I love you know, my life's been changed by self improvement, but in psychology, we, we're very focused on how the environment influences behavior, identity, even thoughts and emotions, but in most self improvement books, they're not talking about that, they're just talking about you know, how to improve your mindset, like how to improve your grit, like how to have more willpower, like it's all about you, and so I wanted to write a book that, in my opinion, really would allow people to change their life, and that's looking more at the bigger picture, which is how you and your environment are two parts of the same whole, and how you really can't change your life unless you also change your environment.

Whitney: I have gotten a chance to read the book in advance, and it is a fantastic book. So everybody who is listening to this podcast, go out and buy it right now, it is fantastic. So, I want to dig in a little bit to this idea something that you said in your book was, addiction comes from having ineffective defaults in place. Whoa. And then you said, the best way to alter addiction or any form of undesirable behavior is to disrupt your environment. So can you give us some tips for defining, or, excuse me, designing defaults that will allow us to break addiction, or move away from that addiction, or any kind of addiction?

Benjamin: What we just don't really realize that the situation is shaping our behavior. Um, but when it comes to defaults was there something, I mean, I'm happy to go into it, but was there something very specific that like really stuck out to you and why that was, why that one kind of stuck out to you? I'd be interested in hearing that before I even go into this.

Whitney: Yes, are we going to have a psychology session on the spot? Because I think that that....

Benjamin: No, no, no, I have something here like, like why that one stuck out, you know what I mean?

Whitney: Yeah, so that was really interesting to me because as many of my listeners know, I have a long running um, struggle with sugar and actually, my, my younger brother died as a consequence of addiction, or sort of the long term consequences of addiction, and so I think this is a really timely and important question for me. And I, I think also, like you said, nearly everybody is struggling with some type of addiction. I, I mean, I have, I underlined so many things, I can't even find them. So but, I think that probably gives you enough background, so that you can launch into giving people advice, because, everybody listening to this, I am virtually certain, is struggling with some kind of addiction, so I think this is gonna be really helpful for you to walk through what you can do to put more effective defaults in place.

Benjamin: Yeah, thank you for sharing that, that just gives, so there's a, you know, a Stephen Covey principle, you know, seek first to understand and then to be understood, and so, I wanted to make sure I was kind of approaching this the right way, thank you for sharing that by the way, it's not easy to talk about.

You know, I myself, I, I, I would say I have an addiction, to some extent to caffeine, not it's something I talk about in the book, it's something I think about, because I think that's one of the cultural addictions, that's becoming more pervasive. But I grew up in a house where you know, there was heavy drug use, you know, there was meth and cocaine and a lot of drug use in my family, and uh, luckily, you know, in the last couple of years, a lot of that's shifted, but, even still, addiction's a huge part of my family, and it's something that I've had to think about and deal with a lot.

So I mean, basically, your defaults are based on your environment, and so, if you just tweak the environment, it often becomes really easy to act how you want to act. In the book I call those forcing functions, you know, it's just forcing yourself to function how you want to. If you have an addiction to technology for example, changing the default would just be, just where do you put your phone, you know most people the default is to keep it on their body, and uh, that is like the worst place to have it when it comes to willpower, because it's constantly on your mind. You know, we have short term and long term memory.

And so you don't want to constantly be dealing with your short term memory thinking about your phone, so I would say one default is, leave your phone somewhere away from your person, if you're like away from your body, if you're trying to actually be with people. I leave my phone in my car, when I come home, my default is, my phone is in my car. Like other defaults are really easy, just like, don't have some of the stuff in your house. You know like, the default for most people is that they have junk food in their house, even when they don't want to eat sugar and so their default behavior is to rely on willpower and lose because the environment always wins. And so, I think just making, making your life easier by uh, what I would call putting forcing functions in place, which just make the behavior you actually want, your natural response.

Whitney: So what forcing functions do you put in place to limit your intake of caffeine?

Benjamin: Well one is I just don't have any caffeine at my house right now. For me it's all related to pre workout. My dad, my brother were way into fitness, and like my roommates in my undergrad were way into fitness, and so like I think there's two sources of addiction, one is like the addiction that you like, you turn to to avoid dealing with your pain, and the other one is just, you know you get exposed to something that feels really good, and you just kind of like start using it a lot.

Benjamin: And you know, that's kind of how I was, it's not like I started using pre workout with a lot of caffeine in it because I was trying to avoid my trauma, it's because it was just introduced to me, I, I used it, and I loved it, and then I just kept using it. The default for me now is, you know, first off, having open conversations, talking to my wife, telling her about it, and then just not having it. I have just stimulant free pre workout at my house now. But a lot of your environment is uh, not keeping things secret, you know, I think most addictions again, you're as sick as your secrets. Is telling people about it so that you have accountability systems around you. Like one of the big things I talk about in the book is, your environment is way more powerful than your internal resolve, if you really want to accomplish something, you have to create external defense systems, you know, that's where accountability comes in, that's where like consequences come in, that's where, you know, creating an environment that makes your goal happen.

Whitney: So what do you mean when you say, if you're required to exert willpower to do something, there is an obvious internal conflict?

Benjamin: Willpower, you know, how I talk about it is I think it comes from like mostly two sources. One is you don't know what you want. Let's just say for example we're talking about you and sugar. You know, there's something you get out of the sugar that you're not getting somewhere else. So what I always say is willpower is for people who don't know what they really want.

You know, if you know what you want, if you're really clear on your why, then the internal debate is over. Obviously there's still the external environment that you have to deal with, but a lot of why willpower exists is because internally a person's not clear on what they want. So like Michael Jordan said, you know, the moment I made a decision, I never thought about it again. Ralph Waldo Emerson said the moment you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen. You know, if you're required to use willpower, you're internally conflicted because you're not 100% committed to what you want to do.

Now, that's kind of where most people stop. Most people say, okay, so I've got to get committed, or I have to like deepen my why, but no one ever actually told them how to do it. A lot of people think that change happens from the inside out, which it sometimes does, but mostly it happens from the outside in.

Whitney: You have a really powerful, compelling personal story, which I think is really interesting, you don't quite share it until the end of the book. I mean, you've alluded to it briefly, but share a little bit more about that personal story, and why that, you know, sort of your origin story is so important in your being able to say, yes, it is your environment that shapes who you are?

Benjamin: Yeah absolutely, so, you know, when I was 11 years old, my parents got divorced, and that divorce crushed, you know, my dad, and sent him off into a tail spin of going deep, deep, deep into the drug world. I mean my parents are amazing, I love them, you know, and I don't judge them, I mean one of the other components of addiction is you can't punish the pain out of people.

In order for addiction to be overcome, there has to be compassion, and uh, and so, I don't judge them, I know that they went through a lot of pain. It obviously in the time, it was really rough, because me and my younger brothers had zero stability. Which led to just barely graduating high school, and then, kind of being stuck outside of high school, a year out of high school and being nowhere. You know, I barely graduated and I found, and then I was spending 12 to 15 hours a day playing World of Warcraft, living at my cousins house, no job.

I saw some of my friends you know leaving for military or like doing missionary service, and other friends going to college, and it was kind of that point in time where I was like, okay, I need to like decide who I want to be, and I was realizing that I couldn't do what I wanted to do with where I was living. Um-

Whitney: Hmm-

Benjamin: And so, I just couldn't make the change, I mean, everyone tells themselves every day that they want to do something, and 90% of the time, they never do it and so I decided to leave, go on my mission and kind of that's where a lot of the big switches flipped in my head. Like I realized that I could decide who I wanted to be. So like, all of your friends know you a certain way, and I'm not saying that you should totally change your peer group, but it's really hard for people to see you a different way, and so you get locked into being a certain way, unless you can change the context.

I just changed my life, like literally, instantly, when I was in a new situation, spent two years, you know, serving a mission, reading a ton of books, learned how to journal, and just, came home from that experience a totally different person, and when I came home, I just realized that, I would very quickly revert to the person I was if I stayed in that same situation, because most of the people there were still stuck with the same paradigms, the same views, the same behaviors, and they all saw me the same way.

And so, I was a different person and I needed a different environment, so I decided to go to school away from all my high school friends, and uh, you know, then ended up going into graduate school and kind of a very pivotal component of all of this was becoming a foster parent of three kids. So like my wife and I, we've been foster parents of three kids for three years, and it was really the whole becoming a foster parent, like, putting all that external pressure upon myself that allowed me to finally start my writing career.

The potential of a person is based on the demands of their situation. And most people's situation isn't demanding very much of them. Like when I became a foster parent, and in a graduate program, all of a sudden, like this situation demanded me to become way

more than I was. It's like necessity became the mother of invention. And that's what led me to start writing and becoming very successful in my writing very fast wasn't because I had this, these innate gifts, it's because my situation literally required me to succeed. And then I've just been writing ever since.

Whitney: Let's talk about the foster parenting, and then we'll circle back to, so that's a really interesting departure, I mean most people don't wake up and say, I'm going to be a foster parent. How did you decide on that course, and what does society misunderstand about foster parenting?

Benjamin: So my wife grew up with foster kids in her house, you know, I think they had like 15 foster daughters go through their house over the course of you know, a few years. And so my wife always kind of wanted to be a foster parent, I never had that on my radar, even though my dad was adopted. But ever since we've been married, we've tried to get pregnant, never been able to. We're in process of doing in vitro, which, I mean, we still are pretty sure we'll one day have our own kids, but we just knew that we wanted to do foster care when we moved out here to South Carolina, as I talk about in the book, we knew that we were going to create an environment that would, that would force us to change as people. I mean, we've never had kids before, let alone three kids with troubled background. So when you put yourself in that situation, I mean we did it intentionally, you know, that's one of the things I talk about in the book, there's a concept called precognition where you create an environment that you know will change you.

And that's kind of what we did with foster parenting, it's like we knew that we wanted to like live certain standards, we wanted to become better, more compassionate, more caring people, and we wanted to help other people, so we thought you know, let's be foster parents. We know that that situation's going to force us to develop the characteristics that we want.

Whitney: Hmm, so forcing function for you, a forcing funct, function for the kids, and going back to your comment that you said, most people are living small not because they lack the inherent talent, but because their situation isn't demanding more of them.

Benjamin: Yeah, I mean, one of the big things just, just to kind of wrap this idea around, and it's something I think is really important, like in western culture, we really have a fixed mindset about who people are. We think like who you are, when you were born is who you're going to be when you die, and we don't really, we take for granted the situations we're in. We take for granted that our environment is constantly nurturing us, it's changing us. And so kind of like the big pivot idea of this is like, people believe that it's your personality that shapes your behavior, but really it's your behavior that shapes your personality. When you put yourself in these situations, you can change as a person.

Whitney: It's really powerful, and, I'd love for you to share you, you talked about a professor, um. Dr. Nate Lambert, am I getting his name correct?

Benjamin: Yeah you got that, yeah, Nate Lambert, yeah.

Whitney: Yeah, tell, tell us about this story of your, you know, you're doing research and, or, sort of, your undergrad and then graduate experience. I, I think it was that, just, tell us that story, because I think it's really powerful, illustration of, of what you're talking about.

Benjamin: Yeah, absolutely, so I mean, one of the, so, the, the kind of, heading of that section is, is that every person's potential is relative, it's not absolute. What that means is that your, your potential is based on what surrounds you. You know, in my undergrad research, I was really wanting to go to graduate school, and so, what I was taught is that I needed to do a lot of research with professors, and get research experience, because that's like what graduate schools are looking for, that's what I was told. And so I'd spent hundreds of hours doing research with five different professors in the psychology department, and I was going above and beyond, you know, if you're thinking about it in terms of effort, I was being very effortful.

Whitney: Hmm.

Benjamin: Um, I was spinning my wheels, I was getting what I thought I needed, and I ended up being rejected from graduate school two years in a row. Uh, and I was doing more research than anyone I knew. I mean, I was working with so many professors, and all my professors kind of assured me that I was a shoo in. Um, because of everything I was doing. It was just not true, and I think that that's, that's kind of where most people are at when it comes to like them trying to change their life.

Whitney: Hmm.

Benjamin: They're doing, they're exerting a lot of effort, they're pushing their wheels in a direction, but ultimately they're not getting any traction, they're not moving, they're not getting where they need to go. I, I really wanted to get into graduate school and I wasn't getting the result. One, you know one thing that happened and I didn't even talk about it in the book was, we decided to take a break, my wife and I. Right when we graduated, we decided to do a Woofing trip. Woofing is uh-

Whitney: Yeah, what's that?

Benjamin: It's an acronym, it, it stands for the [Worldwide Opportunities for Organic Farming](#). So like, WOOF is a program, worldwide, where you can go and you can live on a farm somewhere out, anywhere in the world and basically you just have to pay for the ticket to get there, and then you work on a farm a few hours a day and you get room and board. And so, you know, for a summer we lived in Ireland, and we just like we farmed like on a goat farm for a while, and then we farmed like on this gorgeous garden and spent like two or three months in Ireland, and it was you know, one of the things I talk about in the book is that you often need to get outside of your routine environment to get clarity.

Because there's just too many, too much stuff going on in your, in your day to day environment, but when I was outside my environment, when I was living in Ireland, and I was reading tons of books and just really thinking about my life, it kind of allowed me to like rethink my, my course. I mean I just finally like admitted to myself, what I'm doing isn't working. You know like, I've got to stop the madness, you know, and so, when I came home, I started looking for different professors in different departments. Often it's being in a really counter intuitive environment that allows you to get the insights that are just not available where everyone else is. You know, if you're trying to master a certain topic, sometimes it's better to be away from everyone else who's in that topic, so that you can have different angles on it. But so I started, um, researching with a young professor who was on a fast track to tenure, and I, I decided that's what I would look for is someone who was super motivated and who was publishing a lot, and who was in a different department.

Benjamin: Because I'd already tried my department, and it wasn't working.

Whitney: What department were you in?

Benjamin: I was in psychology, and he was in the family science department.

Whitney: Got it.

Benjamin: Which is pretty close you know, I just needed something different, and so, uh, I found this young professor in a different department and I looked him up and noticed he was publishing a ton. I asked him if I could be his research assistant. Like literally our first meeting together, he gave me a manuscript of his, which was almost, you know, fully written, and he said, this paper has already been rejected for publication, but if you work on it, and get it really cleaned up, we can resubmit it to a different journal, and like I had never ever worked on a paper before, like we had done like little research projects and stuff in my other labs, but I'd never been given a paper that I could submit to publication.

It was just a totally different situation, a totally different opportunity that was unavailable to me with the other professors, and it was immediate. So, with that new situation, I worked like so hard, I spent like 40 hours working on that paper, sent it back to him, he was like, all right, let's submit it. And so like within a week of being with this specific mentor, I was way further, I was 100 times further than I'd ever been working for hours and hours and hours with the other professors.

Whitney: Do you think you would've had that big insight of you need to reset if you hadn't gone and taken that break?

Benjamin: Uh, you know, I probably wouldn't have. I mean my wife, she was, she's often more wise than me. She was the impetus to leave, I didn't want to. I didn't want to go to Ireland and like live on a goat farm with no technology. But it was, it, it, it was what I needed you know, and obviously not everyone can go and leave for uh, three months.

I mean in the book I talk about just taking disconnected days, you know, if you can once a week just to get outside your routine and just give yourself a break for a day and I think being outside your routine environment is very important for making big decisions, and so yeah, I wouldn't have gotten it if I hadn't left probably.

Whitney: All right, so, you're in the middle of your PhD, um, you haven't finished it right?

Benjamin: No, I'm almost done, I should, I'll, I'll, I'll be done in 2018, um, I just have to finish my dissertation.

Whitney: So that's, you, you find yourself in an interesting situation, because often times, people want to finish the PhD, get an academic posting, then write a book. You've written a book, um, and you haven't finished your PhD next, yet. So, what, what are your plans after you graduate?

Benjamin: I mean it's just to keep doing what I'm doing at this point, like one of the big topics I discuss in the book is the power of investing in yourself. Like when you, when you spend money on something, you become really committed to it. Like that's one of the ways that you can quickly change your identity is by spending money, you know, on your own goals, on yourself, and on relationships. When you're in a PhD program, you often have what's called an assistantship, like where you teach classes or you help a professor with their research. When you're in an assistantship, they give you a very small stipend, like less than \$1,000 a month to live on, but they pay for your tuition. So most, most PhD students in America are living on less than \$1,000 a month. And that's what I was living on, but then I decided you know, and I talk about it in the book, quit my job because we became foster parents, and really tried to pursue the dream of writing. What I try to, convey in the book is when you invest money in yourself and in relationships, you can get basically a 10 x return.

Had I not paid [Ryan Holiday](#), who is a very cool writer, he's someone I like, he wrote the book [The Obstacle is the Way](#), he's written [Ego is the Enemy](#), he's someone who I became friends with as my blog started to grow. But I have wanted to write a book for a long time. But, you know, there's so much friction to doing certain things. By friction, I'm talking about emotional like resistance, um, like I didn't know how to write a book proposal, that just seems daunting to me, I didn't have any agent like, I didn't know how to navigate that world, and I'd look online and I'd google how to write a book proposal, and I'd see a million different things.

So it was just scary, it was hard. And so I, instead of just dealing with that, I paid Ryan Holiday a few thousand dollars, and had him consult me on how to write a book proposal. You know, and so like that was an investment of I think two or \$3,000 which was huge at the time, um, but, by doing that, first off, when you pay someone it just, it creates a different type of relationship, and uh, obviously, he helped me because he's written several book proposals, so within the span of a few months, I was able to write a really great book proposal with the help of him, because he pointed me exactly in the directions I needed to write it, and then he introduced me to an agent.

You know, I almost got a \$300,000 deal out of it. I paid \$3,000, and was able to get a \$300,000 book pay. I mean that's one example, and I, and had I never paid Ryan to write that, I, I might have never still written my proposal. So because I was invested, I was more committed in doing it, but also, I created proximity to someone who could actually teach me how to do it, and we got it done.

Whitney: That's, that's a high ROI, that's for sure. So, [you're the number one writer on Medium](#) for the last several years, how did that happen? Was that intentional?

Benjamin: Yeah, it, I mean I didn't plan on being the number one writer at Medium, um, you know, when I first started publishing on Medium, I didn't even really know what it was, uh, I had heard about it from like a friend. I started writing on Medium a few months after I became a foster parent, once my situation demanded me to really think about my life differently, uh, I started studying how to build an online platform.

Because for the previous five years, I'd wanted to be a writer, but never did it. All of my research in my entre ... I mean in my PhD program has looked at the difference between dreamers and doers, whether that's people who want to start a business, or whether that's people who want to become, you know, an artist or a writer, what's the difference between people who dream and who do? And it, it really comes down to people who invest money in their goals.

It was as simple as buying a few books and buying an online course, and the online course was \$197, it was [John Morrow's Guest Blogging course](#). And I was starting to like really study the craft of like how to actually grow an online audience, and then once, you know, then I just started blogging after I had gone through that course. I um, I started pitching myself to platforms, I actually like bought a domain name, which for us was huge, you know, we paid like \$800 for benjaminhardy.com and that was like, that freaked me and my wife out.

You know, we started like actually putting money into it, actually saying like, I'm going to go for this. Ben's not dreaming anymore, he's actually like putting up a website, he's studying this stuff.

Whitney: Ben was that your point of no return?

Benjamin: 100%, yeah, absolutely. And the point of no return, you know, was, yeah, when I started paying money to do it, and I find that that's what most people's point of no return is. I mean, it's often created by an external situation you know, like we became foster parents, but that in and of itself wasn't enough. Like then I really had to start investing in it. So yeah, that, that is when it changed for me. One of the things [Joe Polish](#), he's one of my mentors, says, is like, the reason he's successful is because he actually believes in his methods. Like he is, he is a convert to his own method.

And I am too, I am, I, uh, I believe in this stuff whole heartedly, you know, the whole quote, like when you make a decision, the universe conspires to make it happen, I live that every day.

Whitney: So Medium became a mean, uh, a medium (laughs) for you to achieve your goals. But you had, you invested up front, paying that \$800 to buy that domain name was a huge, huge nut, I mean it was basically a months like, 80%, your whole month's salary. Um, did you, did you make it public in some form or fashion, um, in terms of what you were setting out to do, or was it just the fact that you were starting to write in a public forum and looking to build, uh, build an audience?

Benjamin: Yeah, so I mean, I didn't, uh, I mean I didn't necessarily make it public that I had bought a domain name except for the fact that I now had a website. And I, I think one of the beauties of blogging is that it is public, you know, it's different than writing in your journal, which I had been doing for the last five years, I'd been writing a lot, but I'd been writing privately, and I think you know, one of the things I try to talk about in the book is the importance of practicing or competing in public.

So when I started blogging, and it was like in April or May of 2015, and putting my blogs on, on Facebook, you know, just sharing links to my articles, like it was all of a sudden like oh, whoa, Ben's blogging, you know what I mean? Like, that's different. A lot of people didn't even know I wanted to be a writer. But I was studying, really intensely, like, yeah I was in a PhD program, but I was spending way more time studying how to build a blog.

Um, I'm not a good student in my PhD program, to be fully blunt. And I was, spending a lot of time studying, and I was spending a lot of time practicing in public, failing, you know, I wrote a, I probably wrote 30 or 40 blog posts in a two month span, and uh, after writing that much, so there's two quotes, you know, one is that quantity leads to quality, and the other one is it's better to be prolific than perfect.

And so, I just started just throwing stuff out there, and trying to pitch it on different platforms, and then eventually, and then, and I had learned about Medium.com, I didn't really know much about it. Um and I, and I started copy/pasting some of them into Medium.com. Like literally a month or two after I started blogging one of my articles just went totally viral.

Whitney: What was the article?

Benjamin: Yeah, it was [Eight Things Every Person Should do Before 8:00 AM](#), it was just a blog post about my morning routine, and there's some surprising elements you know, like I talk about the, like, why it's awesome to take a cold shower in the morning and you know, after that point, I just, I just kept writing, and I mean, so one of the things that I talk about in the book is that it's not confidence that leads people to success, it's success that creates confidence.

You know, it's just like it's not inspiration that leads you to action, it's action that creates inspiration, you know, it's this whole idea that it's what's outside of you that transforms what's inside of you. And so, you, I publish a ton of things, fail a ton of times, and then I get this big win all of a sudden, now I have this confidence that I can do it.

Whitney: You know what I think is really interesting, is that you said in your book that, before I guess right around high school, you were a big gamer, you played a lot of World of Warcraft, and what's interest, and then you just said, right now that you're not a great student, and I think it's fascinating, and I'm going to just analyze you for a second, I think because you are a gamer, you know how to do things as efficiently as possible, and so, part of building an online platform and presence, it's a game, and so, that's interesting and engaging to you, and so you figure out what the rules are, how do you do this. Does that, does that resonate with you? Um, what I just described?

Benjamin: It totally does. I think gamification you know, as a practice, is so powerful, yeah I mean, what you just said is perfect. You know you just, you have to discover the rules, what works, what doesn't, and then you, you manipulate, you know, you manipulate the situation to succeed you know. That's actually what I talk about in the book is that every environment or every context has rules. And uh, you know, the smartest people, well so you know, even Charles Darwin, he said it's not the most intelligent, it's not the most, uh, strong of a species that wins, it's the most adaptable to change. And so-

Whitney: Right.

Benjamin: I mean that's in my opinion the definition of mindfulness, you know, you jump into an environment or a context, or a situation, and you say, what are the rules of this situation, how does it work? Uh, do these rules resonate with my own personal rules? Is this even a situation I even want to be in? But when it comes to like yeah, achieving a goal, it's like, okay, let's see what the rules are in this industry, or how does this work. And then, figuring out how to maximize those rules, to me that's the definition of being an adaptable learner.

Whitney: Uh, a lot of people, I just the other day, I had someone come to me and, you know, ask me, had, had written a book proposal, really good idea, I forwarded it on to an agent, um, contact that I have, and the very first question out of their mouth was, what is this person's online presence look like? So, the book idea might be interesting, but they need to have an online presence. Um, for you, in getting a book deal that was, uh, you know, a \$300,000 book deal, what role, and I know I'm kind of leading the witness, but what role did your online presence play in your being able to get this deal?

Benjamin: I mean, pretty, I would say, got to be 80%, you know, or more, I mean really when it comes to the book proposal, there's three sections, there's what is the book, who are you to write it, and then how are you going to sell it? Who, who am I to write it, is two parts, it's what is my relation to the idea of the book, and how do you actually know if I can write it, you know? And a big part of that second one is related to how do you sell it? Which is, you know, you have to have an online platform. I had written an e-book, [*Slipstream Time Hacking*](#), at the beginning of 2015, around the same time I started blogging, before I even started blogging, and uh, I tried to get a book deal for it, I reached out to a ton of agents, and they were like, you don't even have a website, like-

Whitney: (laughs)-

Benjamin: You need to build an online platform, there's no way you can get a book deal unless you have at least 5,000 subscribers. That's kind of when I was like okay I really need to figure this stuff out, and so the great part is, is when you build an online platform, you know, especially an email list, then it just opens up all the doors, you can sell products, you can sell books.

I mean just as an example, I, I sent an email out today to my email list, you know, my book was sitting at 300, like 300,000 in Amazon, and I sent one email to my list today, just saying hey, just so you know, my book comes out, and I've got some free bonuses, and like immediately it shot up into like the top 1,000.

Whitney: Any courses that you recommend and do you have a course on how to build an email list or an online audience? I know you have some courses, um, or if you don't, are there any courses that you recommend for people that are listening?

Benjamin: So, you know, the mutual friend that you and I have, [Richie Norton](#), he and I created a course called [Author, Audience, Affluence](#), and uh, that course is a deep dive into, you know, viral headlines and stuff like that. Related to my book launch, you know, this book launch, and you know, everything related, I actually made a separate course recently. You know, in the summer of 2017, I joined [Genius Network](#), which is a \$25,000 um, master mind group. I talk about that-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Benjamin: And I started paying for really big mentorships, like once I started making money on my blog, I almost invested all of it back into my own self improvement, or back into you know, relationships and networks. And so, uh, I have a course that's, you know, a deep dive into how to build a platform, but also how to build the network and how to, how to apply a lot of the science that I talk about in *Willpower Doesn't Work* to kind of transform yourself from a dreamer to a doer. It's [willpowerdoesntwork.com](#). And you can get those courses for free if you pre order the book, so, I'll give, I'll give you a link for sure, but [willpowerdoesntwork.com](#), if you pre order the book-

Whitney: Although by the time this airs, it will have, you, you can't pre order it anymore, so we'll just include the, right, because this is going to air actually the day that your book comes out-

Benjamin: I mean, yeah, I'll uh, you know, even if, because this, this goes live, literally the day that the book comes out, which is freaking awesome, I'll leave that page up for the week of the book.

Whitney: Okay.

Benjamin: You know, so if you hear this, and it's still the same week, then you know, those things are totally available, if it's beyond that, then you can just go snag the book, you know.

Whitney: Fantastic. So, last question for you. So, what environment could you put yourself in, in the next year that would be the most disruptive to you, and therefore have the most leverage in terms of your becoming the person you want to be?

Benjamin: I mean, I kind of already did it. So, one of the things I talk about in the book, and I'll, and then I'll answer your question is, you know, the type of work you do should match the environment you're in, and so, you know, when I started making any money on my blog, we, my wife and I live very conservatively, and so luckily she supports me and kind of like investing almost everything back in right now.

But so when I joined Genius Network, which is a \$25,000 investment, you know, and I spent almost my entire book advance back into like developing relationships, at my very first meeting, I was so blown away, um, well, I don't actually don't know if I want to go that direction, because it's just not accessible, but, um, for me, one of the big things I've learned is it's not enough to just be in an environment, but it's your orientation towards that environment.

Whitney: Wait you know what, I want you to go back. What's not accessible? Because I'm not sure that I would agree with that, because, your point of okay, if you invest, I mean you took \$25,000, which you didn't really have, and invested in yourself. So the point is, is that you invest in yourself to the point where it almost hurts, um, and then-

Benjamin: Yeah yeah.

Whitney: That's a consequence of your willingness to do that, you were able to get into a room it sounds like, with some people that could have a significant impact on who you are, what you do, and your business, and, and likewise, you were able to have a significant impact on them. So, I know you just said it's not accessible, but I would argue that in fact it is.

Benjamin: No, no, I'll finish the story.

Whitney: Yeah.

Benjamin: Perfect I love it. So, you know, you know, you don't get paid the whole book advance at once. I got paid like you know, like \$60,000 in chunks, uh, and you know, and as soon as I did that, I invested in you know, a mentorship with Ryan Holiday, and I invested in, in the 25K group, Genius Network. Then after my first meeting, I was so blown away by what happened, you know, and one of the things that you need to do, and this is one of the things that I have found most people fail at.

Is when they make a big investment in themselves or in a relationship, they immediately want a payback. And I don't know if you've ever heard of [Dan Sullivan, he's the founder of Strategic Coach](#). Dan Sullivan is so smart, and he talks all about 10 x thinking all the time, and about really what it means to go 10 x, and in Genius Network as an example, one of the quote unquote rules of that environment are that if you don't 10 x your investment. So if you paid \$25,000 to be a part of that group for a year, if you don't get at least \$250,000 worth of value back, meaning that like you upgrade in like turn the

ideas and the relationships and the collaborations that you get into at least \$250,000 of business that you would not have gotten, you can't rejoin.

Like that's just kind of the rules of that level of environment. Well when I was, when I went to my first meeting, I, I signed up to give a 10 minute talk. And I gave a talk about how I've been able to gain over 20,000 email subscribers a month for free with you know, on Medium, a lot of things happened. But basically, one of the core philosophies of Genius Network, and really in my opinion, it, it kind of goes back to Adam Grant's book [Give and Take](#), is, life gives to the giver and takes from the taker.

So if you join, if you invest in yourself, or in a relationship, or in a mentorship, and you immediately want the return back, you're kind of being a taker, you're not going to get out of that what you could have. But if you invest in a relationship, and then all of a sudden you become of service to that relationship, like you pay someone \$25,000 to be in their network, and then you just be an insane giver to that person, it's like you're paying someone to work for them. It's like, that's the opposite of how most people function.

Um, but it's really rooted in abundance thinking, you know it's like you just given an immense value, and that's kind of what I tried to do. And my paradigm just in one meeting totally shifted, and so Joe Polish actually has a group called the 100K group. Dan Sullivan's in there, Russell Brunson's in there, I mean, a lot of some of the big marketers in the world, it's a very high level master mind group, like after my first meeting, I just had the intention, I need to get into the 100K group. My wife, when I told my wife about it, she's like, we don't have \$100,000, like for you to spend on a master mind group, Ben this is ridiculous. You know what I mean like-

Whitney: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Benjamin: You just spent \$25,000, you're crazy. It's just a very different level of thinking. You know, it's kind of like the whole idea, you're the convert of your own method, plus I'm a huge believer that you know, personality is fluid, it's not fixed, and so I know that if I put myself in the right environments that I can adapt to those environments, and so, I just figured out a way to make \$25,000 payments towards the 100K group, and was able to get into it. Being in that group, it's just so interesting when you can get into that level of environment, the type of collaborations and insights that are available. Which you know, have totally paid back already. It's, it's, it's really weird, I mean, it sounds like totally, I, I don't know, uh, maybe you just share your insights on what I'm sharing.

Whitney: Yeah, yeah.

Benjamin: You know what I mean?

Whitney: So I think, I think this is really powerful, and I think it's important, because there often times, and I, I, I had this experience when I was interviewing Peter Simms not too long ago on a podcast where um, he had done a lot of collaboration or collaborating with Ed Catmull, who, you know, Pixar, right, this demigod. And, you realize after you talk to

Peter that this didn't just get handed to him, he had to work very, very, very hard to cultivate a relationship with Ed Catmull.

And I think you're saying something similar here, which is, you've had tremendous opportunities, and will continue to have tremendous opportunities, but you've not only put in the work, you've been smart, and you've been willing to invest in yourself. I, I love this quote by um, Charles Dickens, and it doesn't quite apply, but I think it does apply. Which is, if our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, we are not giving enough, and I think what you're saying here is if my investing myself does not at all pinch or hamper me, I'm not investing enough.

And I think that's really powerful, regardless of the, the field that you're playing on, um, we all have our own field, we all have our own sphere, and I think your, your example, your illustration, is something that every single person uh listening to can, can learn from.

Benjamin: I mean, I mean just to, just to say from where it all started, you know, I was making less than \$12,000 a year, and this was literally in 2015, and I, and those investments in the beginning were books, and they were online courses. They're, you know, and then the biggest first investment I ever made was paying, I bought 20 books from [Jeff Goins](#), because he was in the middle of a book launch, so that I could have a 30 minute conversation with him. That was \$220, I paid \$220 to get some form of access, just to get the information directly from the source.

And just doing those little things, actually, they change your identity, they change your psychology, you go from dreamer to doer. And it's just like, it doesn't have to be big in the beginning, but, but, but what we're talking about here is, that it quickly becomes 10 x.

Whitney: Fantastic, Ben, um, I'm so taken by your book, I thought it was powerful, compelling, extremely well written, I'm delighted that uh, Richie Norton has introduced us as, as you know, as he may have shared with you, you get a lot of shout outs, in our collaboration, [Richie and I are collaborating](#), and I think we're certainly an example of these unusual suspects that you were talking about, and just wish you the absolute best with your book launch. I think I'm going to predict, I don't really need to, because it's not a very great prediction, but it's going to do very, very, very well, and I'm super excited for you. Thank you again for being on this show.

Benjamin: Whitney you're amazing, if there's any way that you and I could collaborate sometime, that'd be amazing. (laughs).

Whitney: Okay, we'll have to-

Benjamin: We'll see-

Whitney: Do it. We'll have to do it, okay Ben, good luck.

Benjamin: Thank you so much.

There's so much here. I'm not sure where to start. So I'll start with this quote. "Your potential is shaped by what surrounds you." As I read [Willpower Doesn't Work](#) and talked to Ben, I thought, yes. Of course. This is why I needed to write [Build an A Team](#). Because people, maybe you, have read [Disrupt Yourself](#), and said, ok, I get it. I'm ready to change. Now I know how. But how do I get my boss to let me change? The people around me to let me change? [Build an A Team](#) is my answer. Because your potential is shaped by the people that surround you.

Then there's this quote: "Most people are living small, not because they lack the inherent talent, but because their situation isn't demanding more of them." When Ben became a foster parent and had three children relying on him, \$12,000 a year wasn't going to cut it. He had to figure out how to make money. So he started writing. A lot. This is such a great example of how when resources are at a minimum, we get scrappy. And in that scrappiness, we tap into our distinctive strengths.

Also, for those of you who want to write, take another listen to Ben's personal story. It answers the question every book agent will ask - Who are you and why are you - why can you, why do you have the expertise - to write about this.

His decision to write on Medium answers the 3rd question an agent will ask, which is -- who's going to buy what you're selling? Ben will tell you - he will be the first to tell you, I would say - that there is some luck here. There are a lot of platforms that start and go nowhere. But Medium has succeeded. Not only is Ben a great example of showing up to your dreams -- he writes and writes and writes -- but he's also taking on market risk like I talk about in [Disrupt Yourself](#). Had Ben tried to become the #1 writer for The Atlantic, The Wall Street Journal - not going to happen. Probably not going to happen. But Medium. A brand new platform. That could happen and did.

Practical tip: Think about, right now, top of mind. Something you want to get done in the next six months. How can you change what surrounds you? What the situation demands of you? So that you are more likely to achieve your goal? It may be extreme, like Ben had to get up and remove himself from an environment when he was a teenager. But it may be that you need to clean your house so that you can think. And/ or commit to surround your brain with ideas that inspire you, invite you, demand you to be better.

If you are listening to this episode during the week of March 6th, 2018, go out and buy Ben's book right now. If you're like me, you won't need willpower to do it. You've got the default setting. A point, click and buy option right in front of you, right now.

Thank you to Ben Hardy for being our guest, sound engineer Kelsea Pieters, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributors Heather Hunt and Emilie Davis, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.