

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 156: TARA SWART

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself Podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be.

I'm your host, Whitney Johnson and today our guest is Dr. Tara Swart, neuroscientist, PhD and former psychiatric doctor, MD, a senior lecturer at MIT and Kings College and she's also an executive advisor to business leaders throughout the world.

**WHITNEY** Tara and I first met several years ago when we were both speaking at a conference hosted by the Management Center in Turkey. I was immediately drawn to her work. To be an agent of disruption, first, we must become its subject and that starts with our brain, what we choose to think about. In fact, Tara was our very first podcast guest, but because I was on the launch point of the S-curve as an interviewer, I interviewed like an automaton, we didn't end up airing the episode. A year or so later I discovered the work of Bob Proctor, you may remember him from *The Secret* after he and I spoke on a panel together at Junior Achievement. He's a student of Napoleon Hill, Earl Nightingale, and he's been studying how to rewire our brains for over 50 years. I've recommended his book, *You Were Born Rich* on more than a few occasions. So, I've become even more intrigued by the power of the mind than I was five years ago or several years ago when Tara and I first connected.

What I love about Tara's work is that she explains the science behind *The Secret*, behind what you've heard described as the law of attraction in her book, *The Source: the Secrets of the Universe, the Science of the Brain*, a book which Deepak Chopra describes as marrying universal truths with scientific rigor. Tara Swart, welcome to the podcast.

**TARA** Whitney, it's so lovely to be in touch with you again, and I'd actually forgotten (laughing), about that previous podcast, so... but I'm pretty sure with where we both are now and the reason that we've reconnected, that we'll definitely be airing this one.

**WHITNEY** Absolutely. And I'm so excited for everyone to hear what you have to say. So one of the things that I love to find out and, and I know I've read a little bit about this in your book, but I would love for you to share with our listeners where you grew up and what you wanted to be when you grew up.

**TARA** Okay. I grew up in Northwest London and it's relevant to the story that I was the first child of first generation immigrant Indian parents to the UK, and, you know, it's a bit of a stereotype that Indian parents want their children to be doctors and lawyers. So as the first, I don't remember a time that I didn't think I was going to be a doctor and yes, my younger brother is a lawyer.

WHITNEY Well, you were very obedient children.

TARA Yeah, I mean it's just so fascinating to now come back and speak with you on the Disrupt Yourself Podcast because I went along a path that was laid out to me. I was lucky that I was good at math and science, I actually loved being at medical school and I really cared about my patients, but I woke up at one point in my life in my mid-thirties and thought, "This was never actually what I wanted to do and I, I've never actually really thought about what I want to do," and that's when I first disrupted myself.

WHITNEY So what did you do? How did you disrupt yourself?

TARA There's a good parallel here with neuro-plasticity, which is the ability of the adult brain to change itself. So I taught this thought process for two years, of this wasn't what I chose to do. You know, there is a huge privilege to be a doctor, there are a lot of good things about it, but what else could I do? And so, I made a list, mostly in my mind, a little bit on paper for two years, but I started having different conversations with people, people who were in different jobs or who changed jobs and started thinking about things that I could actually do. But I was really held back by this false belief that because I'd done a vocational degree, that there wasn't anything else that I could do. So I, I literally think it took two years for that pathway in my brain to build up to the point that I actually said, "I'm going to quit medicine and do something else."

And by that point I'd done lots of research and found that executive coaching had a lot of transferable skills from being a psychiatrist, which is what I'd specialized in, had some elements that I just like in life, partly of being quite Zen, but also being very focused, and was something that I could start to build up my own sort of freelance practice and then maybe build into something bigger. So for some strange reason I really can't explain, 'cause it's not in my family or our sort of social group at all, I wanted to run my own business.

So it really was, it was disrupting myself, but it was disrupting so many people's idea of what should be, that it definitely led to some kind of identity crisis as well, which is really interesting to look back on, sort of how those kinds of low points in your life can actually be, you know, real huge turnarounds where you become something much bigger than you ever thought you could.

WHITNEY So good, there's so much to unpack there, and one of the things as I'm listening to you talk about this, is this idea of when you make that decision to do something different, there can be this loss of identity and people who know you and have seen you in one, sort of one persona, they look at you like you have literally lost your mind. And it sounds like you had or experienced some of that.

TARA Absolutely. I mean, friends, family, colleagues, like the new people that I met who were advising me - it's quite actually a relief to hear you say that because it's still something I feel like I went through alone because I didn't really know anybody else that did something exactly the same. And so it was bad enough when I first said I was going to do it, but then when I ran out of money and I couldn't pay my bills, and I still wouldn't go and do a weekend locum as a doctor because I just felt if I went back at all that I would have failed, people already like thinking I was crazy. And you know, partly it was luck, but obviously it was a lot of hard work as well, and you know, that eventually turned around and then it really made me feel so much better about it that I'd never stepped backwards or let myself down in the way that I felt was letting myself down, even though it wouldn't necessarily have been the case.

And I don't actually think that's the right, necessary advice for everybody, but for me, I had a very strong focus on just continually moving forward with the thing that I wanted to do. Although interestingly, part of the story is that I decided to leave something and that was a big part of it and

I'll tell you a bit more about that later because I might be on another disruption path at the moment.

WHITNEY Okay. So, all right, I can't wait to hear that. And so now everybody is going to have to listen to the end of the podcast so they can hear the whole story. So, something else that you said was really interesting, which is this idea of you were a psychiatrist, you had this moment where you recognized this, "I'm not on the right S-curve. Like it's a good S-curve, but it's not... and my parents think it's the right S-curve, but it's not the right S-Curve for me. I need to jump to a new S-curve." But it took you two years to get to that point. And you talked about this idea of neuro-plasticity to get to the point where you were ready to actually make that jump. You had to start to rewire your brain. And so, what I'd love for us to do now is pivot a little bit in the conversation and talk about the science behind the law of attraction, and the science behind, you know, what you've documented in your book, *The Source*.

I mean, I, I think about this idea and it's just so interesting. I know for many, many, many years I was very skeptical. I'd hear law of attraction, I'd be like, "woo woo". And I think for some people they would be surprised by that because I am a person of faith, I do believe in God, but I also worked on Wall Street. And so I, I think what would be really good for us to kind of set the stage for the rest of the conversation and for you to really be able to share some of the, the insights and the knowledge, and the expertise that you have is for those who are listening and thinking, "This is rubbish," let's talk about the neuroscience or some basics of the neuroscience behind this idea of the law of attraction and being able to go after and get what you want in your life. First of all, figuring out what it is like you had to do, but then once you do making that happen.

TARA I actually really love the fact that you've said, "I'm a person of faith, I believe in God, but I also worked on, worked on Wall Street." Why do we in society feel like those things should be mutually exclusive? And, you know, so I resonate with that because, probably because of my Indian cultural heritage, I've always been interested in yoga and meditation like way before they became like more mainstream and you know, the spiritual type things like the laws of attraction. But I also felt for a long time that because I was a doctor, I'm a PhD, that I had to keep those two things really separate. And one of the, the things that I've, that's really sort of landed for me recently where I think... when I think about who am I, if I can't describe myself as a doctor or a neuroscientist or a coach, and one of the answers to that question is I'm a bunch of contradictions, like every other human on this planet.

And so when someone like you talks about themselves in that way, it really makes me think that this is a huge part of the human condition that isn't really talked about. And so, just to segue in from, from what we were discussing before, the reason that I decided to change my career was because I looked ahead at the field of psychiatry for the next 30 or 40 years and decided that it wasn't going to change, there weren't going to be really many new, new mental illnesses or that many new or different treatments. And, I had worked in different sub specialties because there's quite a lot of variety available, like the children, old age, drug abuse, criminal psychiatry, and I'd also traveled to work in lots of different countries. So I think I had to have that period of trying to change things within the paradigm that I was in, but then when I actually quit my job, the chief of psychiatry said to me, "This is a real loss to us cause you could do this job in your sleep." And if I needed one last reason to quit, that was, he gave it to me. (laughs).

WHITNEY (laughs).

TARA And, you know... exactly.

WHITNEY Absolutely. "I am at the top of my curve, and if I don't jump, I'm going to get pushed off cause I've fallen asleep on my sleep," right?

TARA Yeah, or I'm just going to stay asleep for the rest of my life, and I... that was unimaginable to me. So, so that was, you know, that was good. I think, you know, I definitely love learning. I didn't love change that much at the time, but I've, you know, that's, that's become the thing that I've learnt to do better than I was doing it before, and so it's been a very parallel journey of the personal change and really understanding neuroplasticity.

So, neuroplasticity is the most exciting thing that's happened in neuroscience in the last 20 years or so. And it's shown us that these previous conceptions we had for example, that by the age of 18 your personality is fixed, or, you know, in adulthood you, you can't really change your brain that much, like you can't teach an old dog new tricks. What we've been able to see with sophisticated scanning techniques is that that's absolutely not the case and that the brain actively molds and shapes itself in response to everything that we experience, everything that we learn, every person that we meet, every emotion that we have till we're about 25.

And from 25 to 65, you really need to do things to push yourself through that S-curve, or I would suggest several S-curves between the age of 25 and 65 and that, you know, there are some activities that people say, you know, "What about if I do Sudoku or crosswords?" I think if you're a numbers person and you start doing crosswords or vice versa, it's a little bit trickier at first, but they're not really very difficult tasks. When we talk about things like learning to tango or learning a new language or learning a musical instrument, people say, "I don't have time. Like I've got the day job, I've got my family, I, you know, I want to keep fit and healthy," but it has to be something that's sufficiently difficult that it makes you sweat mentally, as it were, to actually change your brain.

And that's what I think an S-curve is because just learning, maybe like what's relevant to a job or something that isn't that attention intense, like you can do it quite easily alongside everything else that you need to do, that's not really going to force you through those bends of the S-curve. To, to get to a point where you turn a corner that you didn't expect and you find these cumulative benefits in your brain, you've got to take on some learning that's really quite challenging. And so what I believe about... what I love about the disrupting yourself idea is that you could wait until you lose your job or your partner walks out on you, wouldn't it be so much better to put yourself through that much change willingly in the first place, So that if the change is thrust upon you, you're so resilient and adaptable to that?

That's what true neuroplasticity is. That, I can flex and change the way that I think, the way that I learn, the things that I do, and then if there's a crisis and I really need to be able to flex and change those things, I know that I can do it.

WHITNEY So powerful, Tara. As I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, "Okay, I love this idea, sufficiently difficult to make your brain sweat." And I'm thinking, "What do I need to do that will make my brain sweat?" And it doesn't necessarily need to be something fancy, right? I mean it could be that I'm going to decide how to plant a really great garden and I don't know how to do that, right? So it just needs to be hard for you or hard for me, and it... but may not be hard for someone else.

TARA Absolutely. I mean, gardening is actually a great one and it's, it's one of the things that I'm actually going to work on this year. Another one that isn't a difficult one for me because I always do it, but so many people don't is cooking. Like whether it's following a recipe or being an Iron chef, which is just, you know, making something out of a random set of ingredients, so many of us eat out, get takeaway, or just stick to the same old things that we, you know really know in our lives. And so experimenting in the kitchen as well as the garden can be really great ways of inducing neuroplasticity.

WHITNEY I want to circle back to this idea of law of attraction, but I want to ask you a few more questions and I think we'll end up getting there. So, you talk in your book about the whole brain approach,

and by the way, everyone, buy this book. We are going to give away two copies to our listeners and newsletter subscribers, but you should buy this book and give it to everybody, you know. In the meantime, Tara, tell us about the... give us a quick rundown of the six neural pathways that you, you talk about in terms of sort of, you know, you talked about this plasticity, but there are different ways your brain can flex.

TARA Okay. So the source, the title of the book obviously has a spiritual connotation, and there was a reason that I chose that word because it kind of goes counter to the very scientific backing behind it. I've described the source as your brain firing on all cylinders. And I specified-

WHITNEY Hmm.

TARA ... six brain pathways that correlate to six ways of thinking that we use a lot in our day to day life and work. And they are mastering your emotions, knowing yourself, which is the brain body connection, so listening to that, trusting your gut, which is accessing your intuition or inner wisdom, making good decisions, which is using your logical brain pathway, staying motivated and resilient to achieve your goals.

And then finally the creativity, which is using all of those other brain pathways to manifest the real world outcomes that you desire. And that's the connection to the laws of attraction.

So, those six pathways are what I call brain agility. You know, we all have emotions, logic, intuition, and we use them to different extents. So we'll have pathways in our brain that are more developed because we like doing it or we do it a lot, pathways that we under-use and therefore it's a bit harder to think in that way, and then, you know, perhaps some pathways that we've actually blocked off from for many reasons, often they come from childhood, but to whatever degree you're using these different pathways and it's not about being good at everything or equally good at everything, it's just about considering that if you're managing your life pretty well by being very logical and quite motivated, how much more additive could it be if you also listened to your intuition, if you also think outside the box?

And if you're using as much of your brain power as you possibly can, then you actually take more agency in life. So you move from that feeling of being a bit passive and like life throws things at you and maybe you cope with them quite well to being much more proactive and stepping back and thinking about what you really want and then doing things to make that more likely to happen.

WHITNEY One of the things I've noticed recently is that we all want to, you know, move along our S-curve faster. We all believe in this idea of neuroplasticity and, or we hope that we do, and I've noticed that with myself and also people that I'm coaching that when they get emotionally triggered, everything breaks down and sometimes they don't even know what being triggered means but what I would love for you to do is just stop for a moment and not, not-

TARA (laughs).

WHITNEY ... not for you to stop, for you to talk and tell people what's happening when we get triggered, and what do you recommend people do in that moment, because that can really throw a grenade. You may be doing great work and moving forward, making lots of progress, you get emotionally triggered and you throw grenade in your progress. And so we'd love for you to talk about that for a moment.

TARA There is a few ways I could speak to that. One is that any time you recognize that something like that happened in the past, it doesn't... you know, not expecting you to notice it in the moment,

necessarily, journal about it so that you raise it in your awareness. So the more we can raise from non-conscious to conscious when this happens and why it happens, we can start to see some patterns about it sort of in the present day. The other way I would approach it is that when that... when it happens like that, like you're just triggered, like almost from nowhere, it's because of a neural pathway that's been laid down there for so long that you're not aware of it, but it's really, you know, it's a very easy pathway for your brain to go down and that's usually some kind of childhood, I'm not going to say trauma, but you know, a pattern that's been built up from your childhood experience.

And, so you may remember that in the book there's a section on the ghosts from your past. So I would say that when you get triggered like that, it's cause it goes from your past gets invoked really suddenly because it's something that's very entrenched. So if you go back and do the ghosts exercise, you're more likely to just be generally more aware of the things that might trigger you. If you journal in the here and now, then you can just get a much clearer view of when this is happening because what I find happens is if you, if you feel triggered and you acknowledge it, even in the moment, you soon forget about it a week or two later whereas if you've recorded it every time it happens, then it's very valuable data for you to read back over. I'm actually a much bigger fan of... well, I think you learn more from reading back over your journal than just writing in it. So the writing is like downloading, but if you look back through it, you see patterns in that, that state of your brain.

And just to go into the science because I think it's really helpful for people, to not just thinking of, "I am an emo- an emotional person," or "I felt angry and that makes me a bad person," to think that when you get triggered, for whatever reason, you might uncover, your amygdala which is deep in your limbic system, so it's a little element shape structure in your brain, it's not your tonsils, which is in, in Spanish and means tonsils. That parts of your brain is the seat of all of your emotions. And basically it gets triggered by our deepest emotion, which is fear.

Now when we experience fear, the brain and the body communicate with each other and we release higher levels of cortisol and adrenaline. And that has a cascade effect on all the other brain pathways, and there are hundreds of brain pathways and it makes us, you know, go into survival mode. So we're not... we, we won't be trusting and open to another person's perspective. We will completely think only about how we can protect ourselves. And, so, normally the frontal cortex of the brain and the limbic system speak to each other, and the frontal cortex keeps the limbic system within a sort of normal range.

If you get triggered, then the emotional response goes beyond that normal range and it takes much longer and it's much harder for the frontal cortex to dump that down again. So there's a short period of time where you're basically not in mastery of your emotion. So, you know, I, I called the top brain agility pathway, master your emotions. And I like the word mastery rather than control because we can't really always control everything that might trigger us. Even if you've had years of therapy and, or done years of meditation, I think control is about outward basically, so I prefer mastery. And the reason-

WHITNEY

Hmm.

TARA

... that I've even put the brain pathways in that order is that anyone who's listening to your podcast is more than logical enough, and that's why I put the logical pathway quite low down. It's the emotional interaction with the logical pathway that we all have so much potential to improve.

And you know, it's okay if you get triggered, but what I ask people to do is start off by looking back at the time that you were triggered in just trying to learn more about it. Next time, know that you're being triggered in the moment but don't necessarily do anything different. But the third time, know that you're about to get triggered and either take a deep breath, walk away, go to bed,

whatever you have to do to not say or do the bad thing that's going to have even more consequences for you. And then, you know, in the future going forward, see if you can actually find new and better ways of behaving and being to that old trigger.

WHITNEY Tara, that's so beautiful. There's something that you said in there and I don't know why, but when you talked about this idea of using your logic to help you master your emotions, it actually brought tears to my eyes. It made me feel very emotional, and I don't know why. I think it may be because I think for all of us, in that moment when we get triggered, it's so frustrating for us cause we don't want to be in that place. And I, I have this mantra for myself is in that moment when there's this thing I feel like I really must, must, must, must do. I must not do it because that's when I know I'm being triggered, but there was something about the way you said that, the way you articulated it, that made me feel like, we can still do this. Like it's frustrating, but our logic can help us in that moment and we can take, take... we can take action that it's not, the emotion isn't controlling us, that we can master it. And it was just lovely and I wanted to call that out so that anybody who's listening, because all of us get triggered, have a little bit of a tool after having listened to what Tara just said, to help you master your emotions and not do the thing that you think could make things worse.

TARA Yeah, thank you so much for saying that. And I think, you know, even when you say something like, "That almost brought me to tears," there are some people that just aren't in touch enough with their body to even recognize what that means. I mean, you know, I would say that that's landed for you for a reason. It's something that you're working on and clearly, you know, you then said, "I have this mantra," so it's obviously something that you've been thinking about. And I had a similar experience at a party in December where somebody who I'd just met and we got into a conversation, second conversation because of something I was working on and, and she said...you know, so like in the theme of what we had started discussing, "Cause who are you when you're not doing?" And I literally looked down and said, "I could burst into tears right now."

WHITNEY Hmm.

TARA And so I wrote it down and like, you know, I went and thought about it and it's been so profound for me. So, you know, things like that, just like things trigger us, things land like that for us because it's got some deep meaning for us.

WHITNEY Yeah. And, and what you just said too, I think is important is this idea of we talked about trigger and that sort of the negative piece, but I love the word that you used, landed, is for us to also be aware of those moments when someone says something to us or we have an experience and, and, and it feels like deep inside of us that it's somehow true or real, and that we be aware of those as well. And so I, I like that you did the point and counter point for us to be aware of both of those situations, because of those important datapoints.

TARA Absolutely. It's very yin and yang, you know the logic and emotion, and the trigger and the landing.

WHITNEY Yeah. Oh, so good. Okay. Let's now go to law of attraction, vision boards, what are they, the science behind those. If you can talk about those for a moment and then I'm hoping we can do a little live coaching around something that I'm trying to get done. So let's start with the vision boards.

TARA So, vision boards actually relates to one of the pillars of the laws of attraction, which is manifestation. And manifestation is creating or bringing into reality the things that you really desire. And so I actually called them action boards, so because although visualization is a large part of them and they are... you know, you, you only create imagery, you also have to do

something on a regular basis to try to make these things come true. It's not about creating a vision board and then sitting at home and waiting for, you know, your life to magically change.

WHITNEY Oh that's good. Okay.

TARA Yeah.

WHITNEY I like the shift, I like that, action boards.

TARA So, manifestation is basically about the fact that because our brains are bombarded by so much information all day, every day, there's a natural filtering system that fades into the periphery, the things that are crucial to our survival, and focuses to the front of our mind, the things that are crucial to our survival. So that's called selective filtering and selective attention, and then there's a third process in the brain called value tagging, which is that it tags in order of importance the things that it's brought to our attention. There's two elements, there's a real theme here to the value tagging, which are the cold or logical elements, and the warm or emotional elements.

And so the logical elements are, you know, things you need to get done at work that day, the grocery shopping that you need to do, and the emotional elements are about our sense of belonging. "Do I feel that I really belong in this family, in this team, in this community, in this society, and you know, what are the pros and cons of what my sense of belonging is in, in those different sort of areas?"

And so our brain will focus on absolutely the things on our to do list that we need to do, but also the thing that's most crucial to our survival, which is that sense of belonging. And if you, and if you think about evolution, we had to be part of a tribe to survive and that has still a very, very strong gear in our brains.

So, if you don't create a vision board or you don't step back and think about what you really want in life, then there's enough stuff going on that you'll just focus on what you need to do, and you know, what's essential to your survival.

If you're able to take time to step back, and... you know, I think a really good question is, is your life panning out exactly how you always dreamed it would? And for a small number of people, the answer to that might truly be yes, for some people it might be that it's good enough, and to some people, they might be, "Actually, there were some things I always really wanted to do that I haven't managed to do yet, but I'd love to have time for, you know, space to bring into my life."

So, if you create a collage and it's literally like a mood board, you know, on a piece of card, go through magazines, cut and... you know, cut things out and stick them down, I love the idea of doing it in this tactile manner, but in this day and age it can certainly be done on, you know, digitally. If you find images that represent, either literally or metaphorically, the things that you really want to know and you place them in positions that mean something to you on this board and you decide whether this board is full or whether there's space in it, whether things are connected or whether they're separate and you do this, I mean, you know there's a whole chapter in the book on how to do this, but you do it till it feels right.

So if there are things that you know that you want, but when you find the imagery, it doesn't feel right, don't put it on your board. If there's an image that you find in a magazine and you have no idea why you want to put it on your board, but it just really attracts you, put it on your vision board. And then there's a psychological effect called the Tetris effect, which has... and people of a certain age group will remember that if they played Tetris late at night, then when they close their eyes to go to sleep, they could see the little bricks falling in front of like their closed eyes, and so

we know that what you look at last thing at night before you fall asleep has a very strong psychological priming effect on your subconscious.

And also, if you look at this board that you've created once or twice a day, and you visualize everything on it coming true, then when you're walking about around at work or on the street, you are more likely to notice things because your brain is primed to notice things related to those images, and you're more likely to grasp opportunities that might otherwise have passed you by because if you'd left it to the natural filtering system of your brain, it's not thinking about your deepest desire, it's just thinking about what you need to get done today.

WHITNEY     Hmm, okay, that's super helpful. So the action board and then you talk through the science, there's the tagging piece and your brain just starts filtering for things that will help you make that vision, what's in your head become physical reality

TARA         Yeah, and you know, I can tell you, from personal experience, but now that the books come out like I mean I must literally have thousands of messages on Instagram from people saying, "I made a vision board. Look, look at what came true," and it's either stories of, "I got engaged, I got married, I got pregnant, I started up my own business," or I, I've actually received photographs from people saying, "This is where I am on vacation. Look at what's on my vision board." And it's literally the same picture. I mean it's, it's kind of inexplicable by science, but the back explanation is what I've just told you about how it primes your brain to look for things.

WHITNEY     Let's do a little practical exercise here. I have a book that I'm working on and the manuscript is going to be due...well, in, in the not too distant future, but I find myself not quite working on it even though this is presumably one of the biggest priorities that I have for 2020. Will you coach me, just for a moment, beginning with the question, if I were to create an action board, I'm a little bit lost on like what should the picture be? Like, I don't know what the picture is for writing a book? So, I would love a little bit of coaching and I know there are a lot of people who are listening who are working on their next book or want to write a book, and I think this could be really helpful for everyone, including me.

TARA         Yeah. So I would say that my assumption about you, so I'm very happy if you'd say that it's wrong, is that you make it look really effortless to write books, and I think in some dark point of writing my book, I actually said to myself, "I'm not like Whitney," so coaching you on this, we're going to keep it general like you know, as if you're somebody that just doesn't find it that easy.

WHITNEY     Oh, you're so kind, thank you.

TARA         So this relates back a little bit to, we covered manifestation as one of the laws of attraction, but actually the one that I've put as number one is abundance, which is, it's, it's kind of like positive thinking, but it's feeling like, you know, there are lots of opportunities in the world, there are many resources, we're not in competition for, you know, the things that we want.

The reason it's important is that the natural gearing of the brain is to avoid loss and it's two to 2.5 times as strong a psychological effect on the brain as our desire to get a reward. So, although I'm sure you'd love to be holding this final product and seeing it on the shelves and you know, getting people telling you about the effect it's had on them by reading it, the first step is usually that there's something you're afraid of that's preventing you from actually starting writing or you know, to going to the next level, whichever stage that you're at. So I think a really useful exercise for you will be the, what I call the revolution exercise. And this will help to find imagery for your boards, but you know, often to find the imagery, you have to step back and set an intention or do some journaling or do an unblocking exercise. So I'm going to go with this and then, then I'm going to leave it to you and I'd love to help you, you know, if you now find an image.

So, this is an exercise where you set an intention at the top, so it can be quite general, you know, like why do you really want this book to be out there in the world or, you know, what do you want this book to look like or do for you or achieve? So have you got a sort of a succinct phrase that you could give me to answer that?

WHITNEY Yeah, I want people to understand how we grow.

TARA Okay. Great. Perfect! And so, then, I'm going to talk you through it. I don't know if you have pen and paper, but you could maybe complete this after it. Oh, great.

WHITNEY I do.

TARA So, you need to write that phrase at the top, and then divide the rest of the paper into three columns.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative).

TARA And the first column is called the barriers. So write down all the reasons that you are not writing a book that's going to help people to learn how to grow.

WHITNEY Okay? All right. I will do, I'm going to do this exercise later. Just go through it quickly now. But this is awesome. Okay, barriers I have to write down, what's the second one?

TARA So, just very quickly, you might say that I don't have time or it's not a priority or you know, it'll get it. I'd like you to fill at least the first page with barriers because this exercise depends upon you really raising all the potential barriers cause if you miss something then it doesn't work as well. So once you...

WHITNEY Okay, you know what? I'll do at least one in each category. I think don't have time is definitely one. Another one is like how do I take all this information and put it together? Like the scope of it, just, it feels complicated, and the third one is it just feels scary.

TARA Okay. They're great examples. So the second column is now the opposite statement to your barrier, even if it couldn't possibly be true. So I'm going to give you the first one, which is I have unlimited time. It can't just be, I have enough time, it's got to be a ground statement.

WHITNEY All right.

TARA So, you tell me what the next two are.

WHITNEY Okay, the next one would be is I am very capable of organizing complex...putting complex pieces together, fitting complex pieces together. And the third one is, is that, I am so excited about writing this book.

TARA Great, and so the third column is, and the language here is really important, "What I do differently because column two is true." So it's not what I would do if column two was true it's what I do differently from today because column two is totally true. So then, and it could have several answers for each point. So your answers are, I have unlimited time, basically, I'm the goddess of making complex things simple, and I'm super excited to write this book. So now that those things are all true, what would you actually do? What would I see you doing differently from tomorrow?

WHITNEY So on excited you would see me talking about it, telling everyone I'm writing it, it would be one of the first things I do in the morning, I can't stop, you know, just kind of processing the ideas related

to it. On the pieces, I would...that one's harder. I got to figure that out. The goddess of putting complex things together. I would probably, instead of having things stay in my head, I'd be more willing to talk through the ideas out loud with people and have lots of Post-It notes up on the wall, I have this big wall that I could use, which is an idea just came into my head, so thank you. And then the unlimited time, I would be in the present, like when I start fleeing to future or fleeing to the past, I would say, "No, I'm going to be in this moment right now," because then my time will feel like I have a lot more time.

TARA So, to be honest, you haven't really said anything that you couldn't be doing already, even without making a massive commitment saying, "I'm now writing this book."

WHITNEY (laughs).

TARA For time's sake, you mostly said, "I'd be talking to people about it. I'd be putting Post-It notes up on my wall." You know, it sounds like you might create a bit of a mantra for presence. Those three things you can do from today.

WHITNEY Uh-huh (affirmative)

TARA (laughs).

WHITNEY I love it. Okay. Any other coaching piece on that?

TARA So, you know, obviously you try to do a longer version, you'd have to really complete the exercise. And then once you've done that, and you've got your third column either scribble out or tear off and throw away the first two, keep the third column only and, you know, have the statement on your wall with your Post-It notes, the original statement, and then go back and look on Pinterest or in magazines, and look for an image.

So, I don't want to influence your brain too much, but when I was looking for my imagery to write my book a few years ago, I kept looking at pictures of books or sort of shelves with books, and I even thought, you know, sort of a nice old fashioned pen or something, and nothing just really felt right, landed with me as the word is, and then I found a picture in a magazine of a really old fashioned typewriter, and it was just so quirky and cute and, it had... I can't remember what now, but funny little things coming out of that, and I just thought, "That's it. That's the image." And I put that on the center of my, of my action board for that year.

WHITNEY That's fantastic. Okay. All right. This is so good. And I'll tell you the thought that came to me as I, you know, talking about how we grow, I thought, Oh, I could get lots and lots of images of things growing, and maybe even put a plant on my desk so that I'm motivated by what I want to accomplish in addition to the actual writing of the book.

TARA And was it...sorry, just picking up something.

WHITNEY Okay.

TARA Is this is a complete coincidence that you actually suggested gardening as the neuroplasticity activity or is that something that's on your mind during your life?

WHITNEY It was a complete coincidence. (laughs).

TARA But I think that could be an image for your board.

WHITNEY Yeah. Okay, now I'm crying again. This is awesome, Tara!

Now that everybody's heard your brilliance, where can people find you? They... like, they'll buy your book, but how else can they find you on- online if they want to learn a little bit more?

TARA Thank you, so, I have a website, [taraswart.com](http://taraswart.com), and I'm on [Twitter](#) and [LinkedIn](#), but I'm super active on Instagram [@drtaraswart](#), D-R and Tara Swart, and actually for me, you know, using imagery rather than words was, was quite a change. But I, I find that, that's where I feel like I impart my best sort of tips, and I can put links to, you know, things, other things that I've written or things I'm doing. So, that's probably the single best place to go.

WHITNEY Okay. I'm gonna go follow you right now.

All right. So, last question for you is, what's on your action board right now? What are you going to do to disrupt yourself or to jump to a new S-curve of learning?

TARA So, I mean, a lot of things on my action board for 2020 are still relating to the book and actually one of my potential disruptions is to change genres so you probably get this a lot, but you know, a lot of people are saying to me, "Are you writing another book? When you're going to write another book?" And writing is, is... I find it hard work. So, I have Netflix on my vision board, so I'd like to take some of the content from the book and have it more in a, you know, film or TV kind of streaming type genre, but that's not actually the main thing. And I promise you, this was not even on my mind when we actually arranged this podcast because, you know, we did that few months ago.

I have actually decided to stop doing some of my consulting work, so I'm on sabbatical, but I've actually started to take a history of art course. And you might have read in the book that I was one of these kids that wasn't good at art and so I was told that I wasn't creative a very, very long time ago, and I believed it for a very long time. I'm kind of over that now, but studying something like history of art from having been a neuroscientist is to me, like not just that the subject matter is so different, but also because people's responses to this are so interesting, and I'm really grappling with how do I tell people that I'm doing this in a way that they don't act as if I've said something like I've give- you know, I'm giving up alcohol or something. You know, like when you say I'm giving alcohol to some people, a few people are supportive, but a lot of people are like, "What's wrong? Why are you doing that?" And "Oh, come on, have a glass of wine."

It feels a bit like that to say, you know, "I built up my business, I'm writing this book, but now I'm just gonna do something totally different. Not for any particular reason other than to disrupt myself."

WHITNEY Okay. So first of all, I'm a teetotaler so I'd be like, "Yeah, good job. You give up the glass of wine," but seriously, so the history of art, so the... it sounds like there's a dot that I'm not quite connecting cause it seems like a perfectly reasonable thing to want to study the history of art, but are you also saying that you're looking at becoming an artist? Are you looking at writing a book about art? Like, I, I, I... play this out for me a little bit because that in and of itself doesn't seem so odd to me. Is there some a story that we're not hearing?

TARA I think that says a lot about you, it's just really interesting because I have had people just looking at me like I'm crazy, you know, how you said the first time round. I definitely, you know, I don't like to limit myself in terms of neuro-plasticity, but honestly I could not be an artist, (laughing), that's just not possible. So, no, I wouldn't write a book about history of art. I, I'd like to know more about art and it's possible that I, I might find a way to connect art and neuroscience, but I think it's more about the fact that it'd be so easy to just stay on that hamster wheel of building up the business, continue with the consulting work. And, I sort of felt like rather than just do the obvious or the

default thing, I want to stop doing that because you know, like quit whilst I'm ahead and just do something totally different, and for me, having believed that I wasn't creative for such a large part of my life, I want to do something that's about art and beauty, and culture and creativity. And, I honestly don't know what I'm going to do with it. There is... it's actually quite a big thing for me to do something that doesn't have an end point or a purpose, so I'm just doing it for enjoyment and learning.

WHITNEY     Hmm. You know, and when I hear you saying that though, one of the things that's interesting for me is thinking about your comment, you said earlier about how your, your social media platform that you use the most is Instagram and you find that that's really been able to express your ideas and your thoughts, and people are able to connect with you through those visual metaphors that they have for themselves and their action boards, and so I'm really excited for you to just see how in putting these different pieces of your brain and your mind and your heart, what that's going to look like. It's very, very interesting and exciting. Any final thoughts or words that you'd like to share with us as we wrap up?

TARA         Thank you so much, you've like almost made me cry. So I think it's quite an interesting podcast cause I made you cry twice and you've made me cry now (laughing), yeah, I think there's definitely been lots of like emotional [crosstalk 00:53:34], intuition going on.

WHITNEY     Oh, that's good. (laughs).

TARA         ... I was having a few thoughts as you were saying that and I think it did actually trigger something for me, which is I wrote the book, I've been so touched by the response to it. I think that... I thought it's all very well for me to write about the career change that did that turned out really well, but I'm not really walking the talk if I don't disrupt myself again now, because that's what I'm asking other people to do.

WHITNEY     Tara Swart.

WHITNEY     Dr. Tara Swart, thank you so much for being with us.

TARA         Thank you so much for having me. It's been an amazing conversation, really.

---

Now more than ever, we need principles and truths to anchor us. The wonderful news is, that no matter what is happening around us, we have a brain that can forge neural pathways that serve us if we can be deliberate about what we are thinking and doing. Tara Swart's work will not only help you accomplish your goals and dreams, her work is critical in managing through times of stress.

We don't currently have to look very far to find situations that will cause us to mentally sweat. We have the opportunity now - right in front of us - to forge neural pathways that will help us make lasting change. Help us be more resilient. More adaptable.

Even in times of crisis, especially in times of crisis, we can, we need to make space to dream. Which is why I loved the exercise Tara walked me through. I resisted it at first, as you probably noticed. But even that shortened version helped change my brain about what I wanted to do and what was holding me back. And even though many of the situations around me have changed since going through this with Tara, it's still true that I can be talking out loud about my ideas, I can get up first thing in the morning and start working on the book. Which I now have more time to do.

What was your biggest takeaway from listening to Tara? She's talking about actual scientific principles - knowing that, what does her work make true for you? What does it make possible for you right now?

Thank you again to Tara Swart for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, manager / editor Macy Robison, content contributor Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.