

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 162: KELLY GOLDSMITH

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 Kelly Goldsmith. Kelly received her PhD from Yale, is now a professor at Vanderbilt, where she's received numerous teaching awards including being one of the youngest professors ever to be nominated for Professor of the Year at Kellogg where she taught previously.

Kelly studies how people respond to uncertainty and scarcity, uncovering the seemingly paradoxical effects, which is why I wanted you to hear from her. Pursuing a disruptive course involves embracing constraints, the lack of something, which in addition to her academic research, Kelly knows about first hand, not only because she went on the job market in 2008, but because she was a contestant on Survivor: Africa, the third season of Survivor.

WHITNEY Welcome to the podcast, Kelly.

KELLY Thank you so much for having me, Whitney. It's a real honor.

WHITNEY So, where did you grow up and what did you want to be when you grew up?

KELLY It's funny, no one ever asks me that. I'm from San Diego, California, that part I talk about a lot. I'm a proud Californian and southern Californian no less. What I wanted to be when I grew up, honestly, just like a lot of kids, it fluctuated a little bit, but I remember early on, I was a big TV watcher, big fan of television. And there was this show called *Who's The Boss*, which featured this woman. Judith Light was the actress and she played Angela and she was an advertising executive. And I thought her life looked so glamorous and I really wanted to be a busy advertising executive with great, huge Eighties hair and the suits and the shoulder pads and, and that was the dream for a while.

WHITNEY Oh, well you kind of did become an advertising person.

**KELLY** I kind of did, a very roundabout way. Like, most of 99 percent of what I do is being a marketing professor here at Vanderbilt, as you mentioned. But every now and again, I get brought in on consulting projects and sometimes I get brought in to consult on ads. And every time I get brought in to consult on an ad, I'm like, "I'm living the dream. Today, I am Angela From *Who's The Boss*," and it's great.

**WHITNEY** How did you become interested in the topic of scarcity?

**KELLY** When I was a grad student at Yale, I got to Yale in 2004, having been on a reality show and then like worked in LA in various types of jobs. And, most notably, I worked in reality TV casting, towards the end, which was super fun, but is not the traditional track to academic, you know, achievement. So, I got to Yale and I felt like I was completely fighting out of my weight class.

Like, I didn't ... I'd never taken an economics course and now I'm taking PhD level economics at Yale. My training was very different than anything I was doing in graduate school and that was evident. Right? Like, I was just not naturally as good at everything. I wasn't as fast to learn the literature, I didn't know how to design experiments. I didn't know anything really, when I started grad school, which is terrible, right?

And I was very afraid of getting kicked out and partly to kind of ... I'm like, "Okay, well what am I going to bring to the table? How can I force these guys to keep me around?"

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Instead of letting herself get discouraged, or focusing on the gaps in her training and background, Kelly went to work. She took a look at skills and strengths she already possessed, and doubled down. She made herself indispensable as a hard worker. Whenever a professor had research they needed help with, Kelly was there. By trying to keep herself in the good graces of her professors, she not only published research in several different fields of research, she found her area of interest.

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**KELLY** What I was really interested in was goal setting. To me, goal setting was fascinating. Right? How do you get people to work harder? How do you inspire people to work harder? How can you inspire yourself to work harder? I thought the effects in the literature were so cool and there was so much neat stuff coming out at the time that it felt like a really exciting space to be in with respect to understanding goals and motivation, really at the individual level, so not from an organization behavior standpoint, but just as a human being who's always looking to engage in better time management, and lose weight, and be a better person, and be happy, but also have fun. Like all these conflicting goals we have as people, I was really interested in understanding how those conflicting goals kind of play out across our decision making process.

I think the longer I exist as an adult and the more life experiences I have, the more I've come to realize that goal conflict, as we progress through our life course, only gets worse, not better. Once you have kids, you have a constant state of, "Oh, I have kids now," where you have a constant state of goal conflict where it's like, "Should I be spending more quality time with my family, or should I really be building up my career?" Right? So there's always that tension and I think for a lot of us, you almost feel like there's never enough hours in the day. You can never really feel like you're doing a great job at everything all at once.

WHITNEY I want to kind of keep light touching on this idea of scarcity. When I read your research and listened to your TED Talk, what it sounds like to me is this continuum. So let me tell you what I understand and then you can tell us, does this make sense and, and kind of riff on it. So there's the, you have nothing, so what do people do. Then there's the moving along the continuum, you have nothing, but there is a promise of something-

KELLY Right.

WHITNEY ... if you help other people, so what do people do. Then there's the, I've got something, not a lot, but I've got something and I'm starting-

KELLY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... to worry that, that might go away. And then on the other end of the continuum, I've got a lot of something, and I worry it will go away.

KELLY Right.

WHITNEY So is that correct and then, can you just talk us through it and give us some, some color and detail around that continuum?

KELLY Well, one thing I will say, and, this could just be ... Like, I want to be transparent about the people I study in my experiments, so I can't speak to ... Like, there's lots of different types of scarcity in this world. You know, there's people in, like people that I work with, that study rural farmers in India, pre-harvest who can't feed themselves or their family. Like there's, that type of scarcity, which is qualitatively different than most of what I study.

So what I study is we bring undergraduates into the lab, and these are people who oftentimes don't feel like they have enough. They're taking studies for money, right? So they don't feel like they have enough. On the other hand, they're not chronically poor. They can keep the lights on, they have a roof over their head, etcetera.

WHITNEY Okay.

KELLY So that's just to kind of contextualize.

WHITNEY Yeah, perfect.

KELLY And some people have given me grief when I present, and they say, "Well, you know, you should be studying the bigger problems of poverty." And I, I totally agree. That's like really significant, important research that needs to get done. But I also think in terms of what my interest has always been, which is basically helping people understand how to make it through their day in this very complicated world that we live in, where we have a lot of pressure coming at us from different angles. I like understanding, you know, the middle of the bell curve, and here in the United States and what, the kind of struggles most of us, face most of the time.

The continuum question I think is, is interesting, at least given the people that I study, I find a lot of responses to scarcity that I consider to be very adaptive. Like, originally, when I got interested in this literature, the bulk of what was out there, at the time, was this kind of almost like pejorative perspective that scarcity made people, you know, cognitively impaired, which is to say scarcity made you stupid. There was kind of a negative perspective on what scarcity did to people and, and, and that's a bummer, and because a lot of us experience scarcity.

And like I said, in all my experience, in the lab and running these experiments, it's very easy to make people feel like they don't have enough. And if it's true, that it leads to all these negative maladaptive consequences, like we're all kind of in for it. Right? So I started really pursuing this and a lot of responses to scarcity, at least among the people I study, are actually pretty adaptive for achieving your goals and, and navigating your circumstances.

That doesn't activate the same mechanisms, as when you feel like there's hope. It's when you feel like there's hope, that it really kicks off the series of behaviors that I've spent most of the past 10 years studying. If there is no hope and you believe there is no hope, people are very adaptive and don't just stand there and bash their head into the wall forever. Like, they'll focus on something else.

WHITNEY Oh, interesting.

KELLY Like they'll shift their attention, which is good. Right? Like, I think we've all been there, like when you get dumped. Right? And the dude is not, or girl, or guy is not coming back. Right? We don't just sit there and cry forever. Like, eventually you get over it. And the same is true with scarcity. I think if it's never coming back, that people are very adaptive, at rolling with those punches. We allow disruption to take place and that's an adaptive response to I guess what you could call, in a way, scarcity, but really it's just a lack of access is what we'd call it.

WHITNEY Yep.

KELLY Which I think is qualitatively different than scarcity because a lack of access, you may be sad for a second, then you experience loss but you move on. Scarcity, which what I've studied with the population I described, is really about when you have that hope. Right? So you feel like you don't have enough but there's still the hope that you can get some more.

And that kicks off a lot of interesting psychological consequences. So as you mentioned, you can get this scarcity reaction that people will pursue, which is very adaptive. Right? So if you feel like you don't have enough money and then you do some budgeting or you think about how you can get that little side hustle going on, or you contact friends. Like, you think about restructuring your life a little bit, so as to have more, kind of net positive at the end of the day. Like, that's a very adaptive response to scarcity. But that's not always what we observe in populations.

So when we wrote this review paper that I talk about in the [TED Talk](#), you can get this very adaptive response to scarcity where people try to engage in scarcity reduction.

So they're already working two jobs, they don't have enough time to add more. They've got so many, you know, kind of hands out to them, with respect to needing money, that they just don't feel like they can increase their bottom line, but they still acknowledge that they don't have enough. Those people might engage in more of a compensatory route, where they're trying to deal with their feelings of scarcity in an indirect way, like they're trying to repair how they feel, but they can't prepare it directly by getting more of this resource they don't have enough of.

But they could do it indirectly and that's where you pick up on some consequences that may superficially appear maladaptive. So you've got somebody who feels poor and they go out and buy expensive shoes to make themselves feel richer because they feel like they can't directly repair the problem. Well, now they've got less money, right? So that looks maladaptive but if you take a big step back, what they're looking to do is they can't make themselves feel richer by getting more money so they're looking to make themselves feel richer through an indirect route, through this compensatory consumption.

Scarcity also activates a goal, like getting more of the resource you don't have enough of. So there's mechanisms associated with that. One awesome paper that we have, looks at how scarcity affects just your like, cognitive processing, which is a very hardcore psych 101 thing to study. And one thing that we found was when you remind people that they don't have enough of something, people actually process information at a higher, more abstract level. So they kind of view the world from 30,000 feet and it's because when you think about things more abstractly, you're more likely to identify creative routes to overcoming obstacles.

WHITNEY Let's double click on that because that's

KELLY Okay.

WHITNEY ... that goes absolutely to the work that we do around how you embrace your constraints. You said something really interesting. You just said that when people don't have enough of something, there's lots of different ways that we can respond to that.

We can go into the compensatory behavior, but we can also start to go into problem solving mode. Talk to us about that.

KELLY I studied this thing called construal level theory earlier in my career and basically construal level theory is the notion that we could either, as we go through the world, kind of look at the nitty-gritty details or we can look at the bigger picture and there's chronic individual differences, there's cultural differences. Some people love to look at the nitty-gritty details, some people are trained culturally to look at the nitty-gritty details, some people look at it more, naturally look at it more abstractly, and kind of take in the bigger picture.

And that as we go through life we can see things kind of in terms of the big picture, or in terms of the nitty-gritty. And both, neither one, I should say is, is the better way to do it. Right? There's times when looking at the big picture is really advantageous. There's times when looking at the nitty-gritty is really advantageous, and looking at the big picture just gets in the way.

So the first study that we ran, I was like, "Okay, well if you get people thinking about scarcity, they're going to want to solve the problem, so they're going to view it in this nitty-gritty way." And there's lots of different ways you can measure people's level of construal. So we were thinking, "Okay, well, if you, if you come at the world, you're thinking about scarcity, you're going to want to solve the problem, but you're going to have a nitty-gritty focus." And that's what we tested and in the paper it gets into all the ways we tested it, using these classic validated measures of construal level, or whether or not you're thinking more abstractly or concretely.

And the opposite of what I predicted showed up and was statistically significant, which you know, is always informative when that happens. So it wasn't that when you activate thoughts about scarcity people were thinking in the more nitty-gritty way, in fact, they were thinking more abstractly. And it took us a long time. Like I said, it took like 10 years for that paper to get published because it took us a long time for us to wrap our brains around why that kept happening across all these different measurements of construal level, that people who were thinking about scarcity would actually think more abstractly. And it wasn't until I turned to the literature on constraints and there, what we saw, is that thinking abstractly is what you have to do, if you want to navigate constraints. Right? You have to take that higher level perspective in order to find the unique way around the problem. And then, we're like, "Oh my gosh, this is what's been going on all along in our scarcity studies," because what is scarcity? It's a constraint goal pursuit. You don't have the resources you need to get where you want to get. And in fact, activating those thoughts, subsequently, made people think from this higher level, more abstract perspective because they want to be able to navigate those problems.

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One of the interesting things about Kelly's research is her finding that the feeling of scarcity doesn't come from what you actually have or possess, it comes from how much you think you have. And since that feeling of scarcity comes from your thoughts, you can manipulate it. You can change what you think about or feel about what you have.

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**KELLY** Your own personal level of resources. This is something we've measured a million times in our studies and you would think that it would influence our results because we usually manipulate scarcity in the sense that, one way or another we get people thinking about not having enough, or not

I have never found that your own personal level of resources moderates the influence of the scarcity manipulation, which is kind of scary in a way. Because what that tells us is, it doesn't really matter how much you have, it matters how much you feel like you have. And we can knock around how much people feel like they have very easily. And this is not my research, so much, but research by Eesha Sharma and her colleagues, which is really interesting stuff that looks at financial deprivation. So these are people that like have enough money for a computer. They're keeping the lights on, they have electricity. So what you find there is you can make people feel poor very easily. You can make rich people feel poor very easily.

For example, open up your Instagram feed, if, around spring break time, if you're me, and you see all my girlfriends that are taking these glamorous ski trips. Everybody went to Greece last year doing these exotic vacations. And I mean, it makes me feel poor. Right? And even though I have plenty of resources to make it through the day, the lights are on, everybody's fed, everything's good. But, and again, it's very easily, via social comparisons, to make even people with perfectly adequate, if not abundant, resources feel like they don't have enough.

I talk about this in the [TED Talk](#), I do think this a negative downstream consequence of social media is that it can activate this almost like chronic low level feelings of scarcity among anybody, because I mean, you can't keep up with the Joneses because if you move up a social class, for example, your Joneses change. Right? The Joneses just keep getting fancier. There is nobody who feels like they have enough money.

**WHITNEY** So you're saying that you, when you start trying, manipulating and, and putting people in a position where they feel like they don't have enough you get the same results when you just talk about money.

**KELLY** About money.

**WHITNEY** But it doesn't even have to be enough money or not enough-

**KELLY** Correct, yes.

**WHITNEY** ... just money itself is a trigger.

KELLY Correct. And I mean, their manipulations were subtle, like the screensaver where it was flying dollar bills versus flying birds or whatever. So just exposing people to images of money, leads to the same consequences as if you would prompt them with thoughts about scarcity. And I've never done studies on this directly but it's always been something that's burning in the back of my brain as something I want to do.

WHITNEY Yeah.

KELLY Because I think, what happens when you prime people with money, when you just get them thinking about money, it automatically makes you think you don't have enough. Again, we don't have Bill Gates as a participant in our studies. It's possible there's people out there that are perfectly content, but I don't think those people show up on my campus to take my studies for five dollars and 15 minutes kind of thing. But, I mean, I think for most of us, most of the time, just mentioning money automatically makes us think we don't have enough.

WHITNEY That's fascinating.

KELLY Yeah.

WHITNEY So you raised an interesting point and, and you know, before the interview I was having a conversation with my 19-year-old about to start college daughter, and asked her, "Well, what would you ask Kelly?"

And her question was, I thought a great one, so I want to ask it, is so what happens when you do get triggered, when you do get in that place of like, "I don't have enough?" and objectively, it's not true. Like, anybody else looking would say objectively, "This is not true."

KELLY Right.

WHITNEY But subjectively you are.

KELLY Right.

WHITNEY And I know this isn't what you study per se, but I have to think you've thought about it.

KELLY Yeah.

WHITNEY What do you do when a person gets triggered into this place of subjective scarcity?

KELLY My early research was often, dealt a lot with this notion of priming and like, how can you turn off any prime? Right? Like the John Bargh and colleagues they looked at this kind of non-conscious priming across lots of domains. So like weird stuff people in that camp found is if you have a picture of your mom on your desk and your mom believes you should be an academic achiever, you'll actually do better on math tests, than if you have a picture of your mom on your desk and your mom believes you should be a homemaker. Right? Like, the things we expose our self, to in our environment, fundamentally change our performance and the way we behave.

But what anything in the priming literature would tell you is for pretty much any prime, like, sunlight is the best disinfectant. So if you understand that you can be triggered by things in your environment, and you understand ... And this requires us to be very present, which is hard. I mean, I am totally guilty of not being present most of the time. Right? So it requires us, as we flip through our social media feed to be conscious of the fact that like, you know, my girlfriend Jenny's most recent trip on a yacht in the Mediterranean, like, I am feeling feelings of jealousy. I am

feeling like I don't have enough. I am feeling like my family vacations are pretty lack luster, now that I look at hers.

And, oftentimes, we're going through life so fast we don't even realize we're not present enough to be aware of our thoughts. If we are aware of our thoughts, it gets a lot easier to say, "I, know what I'm feeling, I know why I'm feeling it, and I know that realistically, I don't have to feel that way." And honestly, this is just one picture from her one vacation. If you saw the 30 other ones she didn't post, probably her kids screaming, and the yacht broke, or you know, maybe the yacht didn't break, I don't know. Maybe it was a perfect vacation, but you get the idea. Right?

WHITNEY Yeah.

KELLY When you take a step back, we all know that nothing is ever what it looks like on social media. So I don't think the problem is that ... I never believe that consumers are dumb. I think we're well aware that social media isn't what it looks like. On the other hand, we just go through life fast. Right? And, Danny Kahneman has this great book, *Thinking Fast and Slow*, and when we go through life fast, a lot of what we're doing, just to make sense of our universe and keep moving, is we're processing at a very superficial level. Right?

We're only engaging in that deep, cognitive thought, when we're saving it for when we absolutely need to, when we need to go to the ER and make a decision about should our kid have a cast, or when we have a really important presentation at work. We're reserving our cognitive resources, our kind of mental horse power, for these really important things. We are not, and probably judiciously, not using a lot of our deep cognitive processes on flipping through our Instagram feed.

WHITNEY Yeah.

KELLY But that said, if we actually force ourselves to have the presence to think about the messaging we're exposing our self to, and how it affects us, we can pretty much instantly turn it off because we're better than that. Right? We know that we have enough. And if we know we don't have enough ... This is another good thing. Let's say we figure out we don't have enough. What we can do is engage in that direct, kind of adaptive response, where we then say, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to click out of my Instagram feed. I'm going to go to my mint.com, I'm going to look through my spending for this month. I'm going to stack rank it by what's the highest spend. I'm going to think about where I can cut, and I'm going to start to make some smarter choices." Because I think once you really shine a light on what the real problem is, it becomes a lot harder to just go through life scrolling through your feed and kind of pretending it doesn't matter.

WHITNEY Feeling bad for yourself. Okay, so-

KELLY Yeah, exactly.

WHITNEY All right, so one of the things that I'm wondering is, as a person, and I'm thinking about scarcity versus individuals, and I know I'm asking you to talk a little bit out of your field. Although, I have to say, I love this whole meta thing of number one, you were on Survivor. Number two, when you started your PhD, you felt a sense of scarcity.

As a consequence, you're scrambling to prove that you should be there.



You work on lots of different projects and that gave you this breadth of understanding of the literature that I'm now, as we're talking, you're able to draw on, which I suspect has made your research and your teaching that much more robust.

KELLY Oh, you are so sweet.

WHITNEY So what's interesting to me though, is that, in that moment when you felt a sense of scarcity - you used it as a zoom out, "What do I need to do?" You got very strategic. You said, "I'm going to use this as an opportunity to disrupt myself to do something different, to do something better."

The question I have for you, Kelly, is when you've got a person who's on the launch point of an S curve are there things that you can do because scarcity does different things for different people.

Have you done any research on how you can prime people to use scarcity in a productive way? And have you done any research on being able to determine who are the people that respond to scarcity well, and who are the people that don't respond to scarcity quite as well?

KELLY Right. This is a great question. So one thing I would say, and I deeply believe this, is one problem ... like, the kind of blessing that occurs with scarcity is it gives you a goal but it also gives you a threat. For most of us, most of the time, the difference between a goal and a threat it's very, very, very subtle. Right?

So if you think, if you think about getting on the scale, for some people, "I get on the scale, I weigh more than I want." That creates a goal. "Okay, I need to lose weight, I'm going to set a plan, I'm going to get a good app, I'm going to track things better." For other people, you get on the scale and you see a threat. It's like, "Oh gosh, I'm never going to get there. I am so weak, I'm a bad person." I make all these negative self-attributions, and then what do you do to feel better about yourself? What's easiest? You eat. Right?

WHITNEY Mm-hmm

KELLY So the same thing, getting on the scale, can be either a goal or a threat. Some literature ... And some research, I did with my dad, I should say, looked at happiness and how to increase happiness and increase employee engagement. And interestingly there's just the act of introspecting on if you're happy. Almost everybody realizes they're not as happy as they want to be. I guess that's the downside. For some people, it creates a goal. "You know what, I'm not this happy? I think I could be happier." It creates a goal. They start thinking about things they can do differently in their lives. They think about people they should reach out to very positive.

For other people, it's a threat. "I'm never going to be happy, I've never been happy, how can I put myself in this situation? Look at all the things I've done, I'm terrible," demotivating. They do things that make them feel worse about themselves, they reinforce the stereotype they place on themselves, down the spiral they go. Right? And so goals in general, happiness, and then also scarcity. Just like anything else, you realize you don't have enough money, you realize you don't have enough of some resource, time. It can be a motivating goal or it can be a debilitating threat. This is why I try really hard not to judge anybody based on how they respond to a goal or to scarcity because I think the kind of needle of that, toggles between goal and threat. It's easily pushed around by a whole lot of things.

WHITNEY Fascinating.

KELLY Any given topic can tip between being a goal or a threat, when you recognize you're not quite where you want to be.

And that, to me, is the biggest predictor of if it's going to have a positive outcome or a negative outcome. And so the first thing I say when I'm advising people about how to respond to scarcity is, "Number one, you need to just accept ... stop that, take a step back, be present. Accept the fact that you're facing scarcity. Don't keep scrolling through the feed." Right?

WHITNEY Uh-huh

KELLY Maybe accept the fact that you're facing scarcity and then ask yourself, "Is this scarcity real?" "What's the evidence that I'm really experiencing scarcity? Is it just that my friend Jenny took an amazing vacation and it kind of activated more like jealousy or envy, but not really scarcity? Or in fact, am I looking at my bank balance and holy cow, I can't pay my nanny this month?" Right? That's more like scarcity, right?

So I think, number one, accept the fact that this feeling I'm experiencing, at, in this moment, in my day, is actually driven by the fact that I feel like I don't have enough. So kind of be present in the moment, and recognize how you feel. Then, question yourself and say, "Is the scarcity real?" And if it's not real, it's very easy to get over it. If you recognize, "You know what, that's just subjective scarcity. I was triggered by this thing in my environment and I'm actually doing just fine." You can actually keep going just fine. But if it is real, then I would say this number two step is so if you feel lonely, for example, that is a form of scarcity, what we call social scarcity. You don't have enough people interacting with you. But it's hard to quantify, like how many friends do you need, not to feel lonely? Or, you know, how many conversations should I have with my spouse per day, to not feel lonely? I don't know. I mean, I think that's very hard to quantify. Right now, my research doesn't offer solutions to those problems but we can get good solutions if you go through your day, you're present, you recognize you're experiencing scarcity, you question yourself, "Is this scarcity real?"

If the answer is yes, you want to try to quantify like, "How much do I have? How much do I need?" Right? Put number on it because that goal is much better if you can quantify it, if you can measure it, if you can track it, kind of hold yourself accountable. Any problem, like I tell my students, "You're just one good spreadsheet away from changing your life," which I think is true. Where do I want to be? Where am I now? Then, recognize that disparity and honestly, people get ... This is like getting on a scale. For some people, it makes them very nervous about knowing, recognizing the difference between where they are and where they want to be. But, 99 times out of a hundred, recognizing that disparity is sort of liberating, right-

WHITNEY Yeah.

KELLY ... because you knew, you knew it was there. Right? You knew you weren't where you wanted to be and now you've got number on it. And almost automatically by envisioning that gap, understanding the size of that gap, you can start to come up with solutions. Right? Because the solution you need, if you need to lose 200 pounds, is different from the solution you need, if you need to lose 20 pounds, or five pounds, etcetera. So acknowledging that gap is huge, and then the solutions, honestly, come naturally.

People think that coming up with the solutions is going to be the hardest part. And I always tell them that, "That is the easy part, that's the fun part." Right? It's easy. You can ask your friends, go online. In this day and age where it's easier and faster to access information from smart people all over the world, all the time, coming up with solutions is not the problem. Right? Just take an assessment of all the solutions that are out there, pick your top five. Then the critical next step is you've got to hold yourself accountable and you've got to track your progress. And that's where a lot of people fall short.

If you can pull it off, you can solve almost any scarcity related problem, you can achieve almost any goal. We're all intrinsically capable of it. But the downside is, I promise, once you solve that problem you're going to find a new one.

WHITNEY Yeah.

KELLY Which is kind of exciting that we have this constant motivation to get better and better and be better and better people. And there is no good enough. I try to, again, view it through a positive lens, that we're all so intrinsically motivated, we get the negative lens on it as we are a little bit like a hamster in a wheel, as we move through life. But but we're a, beautiful hamster wheel going through life.

WHITNEY One of the things that I was thinking about when you were talking about this, is this, you know, if you're a boss or a leader, you know, any suggestions you have for, how do you create scarcity for the people that work for you because as you said earlier, if there's some scarcity, that actually motivates people to improve themselves.

WHITNEY But how do you do that without, and of course I'm going to say this, getting someone or having people feel like they're going to get voted off the island? So-

KELLY Oh, girl, yes.

WHITNEY ... any thoughts on how do you strike that balance or what have you seen has worked for you, specifically?

KELLY Well, I mean, you could certainly talk to anybody in sales. Right? There's a lot of people in jobs out there where they have to make numbers. What is that doing? That's creating a sense of scarcity. You're giving them a number, they're not at that number, their bonus is contingent on their ability to make that number. And that it, that is motivation by activating the sense of scarcity. Right? Or if you're at an organization where the top 10 percent of performers are going to get a bigger bonus, or whatever the incentive is, what you're doing there is you're activating a sense of scarcity. Right? It's a zero sum game. Only the highest achievers are going to get this bonus and that can be very motivating.

So if you're in an organization where only the top 10 percent of performers are going to get the incentive, or the bonus, and you realize early on that like, you can't get there from here you're never going to make it-

WHITNEY Yeah,

KELLY ... into the top 10 percent. You had a bad Q1 and there's just no way to recover. How do you keep that person motivated? I think this is the open question because really, like I said before, this goes back to what you mentioned about the continuum, if I'm in the bottom 30 percent of performers, and the distance, I just can't get to the top 10 percent by Q4. I just can't do it, there's no way. Even my best performance, I'm not going to get there, why wouldn't I disengage? Right? Why wouldn't I just give up? Because that's the adaptive thing to do.

So in order to make those people motivated, what you really need to do is you need to give them this continual sense of hope. Right? If there's no hope, why would anybody work hard? They may not know they're doing that, but they inherently do a good job of that.

WHITNEY So basically what you're saying is that, if you're a manager if you've got a person who's not necessarily going to get that top 10 percent bonus, you still have to find a way-

KELLY           Something.

WHITNEY       ... for them to be motivated because like you said, if you know you're going to be voted off the island, then you know you are, so you just stop trying, period.

KELLY           Why would you try? Yeah.

WHITNEY       Yeah.

KELLY           You need to keep them engaged. And I think there's a lot of good ways of doing that even just like, positive affirmations, letting them know you're still watching. Let them know their performance still matters, even if they're not going to be able to hit that critical cutoff.

WHITNEY       Right. If you think about this idea of introverts versus extroverts and I wondered ... So an introvert will have less energy to give to the outside world, which is in its own way, a form of scarcity in terms of their attention that they have to give to others is more scarce than the attention that an extrovert would have.

KELLY           Right.

WHITNEY       I'm just wondering if sometimes introverts are more popular or more sought after-

KELLY           Oh, sure.

WHITNEY       ...of that, of that scarcity factor?

KELLY           Right.

WHITNEY       And any thoughts on that?

KELLY           Yeah, well, scarcity creates value. There's Cialdini who's probably written the most, the successful and influential popular books on marketing. So he has a book called *Pre-Suasion* and he has a book called *Influence*. And in his original book *Influence*, one of the six principles of persuasion is the scarcity principal, which is that scarcity creates value. Right? And it's one of the things that underpins the whole luxury industry is we value things to the extent that they're unavailable. So if we see social engagement like as a social resource, and we see introverts as people that are inherently more unavailable to us, like, holding all else constant, yes, they should be more desirable because they're harder to get access to. So that is true. But, again, that is holding all else constant. And I will say like, introverts ... there's a lot packed into that. So they have other things to overcome.

                  But anyway, so I read this book and a lot of what he talks about inherently is making yourself less available, through tools in your outlook or through tools on your social. Like, how do you make yourself less available to people, so that you can use your time however you want to use it? And I do think, again, we can take a page out of the introvert playbook and all do a bit better, of, of managing that, better job of managing that because we, our time is valuable.

                  And I think it's so interesting to me, as somebody who studies scarcity, that we understand. Like we look at our bank account and we understand what it means when ...like, we don't loan our friends money because we understand what it means when we see dollars flying out of our bank account. However, we are more than happy to just give our time willy-nilly to people because that feels like the right thing to do, that feels charitable and giving and kind. At the end of the day, the only way you make money is with your time. Right? So we should be applying the same kind of

strategic, judicious decision making to how we give away our time, as we do to how we give away our money.

By making ourselves less available, oftentimes we will ironically become more desirable. So I think we can all benefit from that and really, take a step back and be a little bit more judicious and strategic about the things we say yes to, and the speed with which we respond to things. And in doing so, we can kind of maximize our own value for time and be more in control of how we allocate our time as a resource. And also, like you said, you know, we might become more desirable as a resource to other people because there's just less of us to go around.

WHITNEY There you go. All right, so I've alluded to this a few times and I feel I've opened a loop that I probably need to close for our, our listeners. What is a lesson that you learned as a young 20-year-old-being on Survivor that now informs how you teach and how you're parenting. What's a lesson that you learned, that informs who you are today having had that experience?

KELLY That is an interesting question. I want to pick a different one than the one I talk about in the *TED Talk*. In the *TED Talk*, I and what I say a lot is, you know, it was really surprising to me that in the game of Survivor, people are so helpful and nice to each other, which often doesn't make it to the air waves. But in reality, if you're in a context where you benefit, sort of giving to get, like impure altruism that can powerfully drive your decision making. Right? You can see these cultures of people where everybody is being super nice to each other and you assume that it's all driven by this like openness of heart and this kindness, and just kind of altruistic generosity. But oftentimes, we benefit from leveraging our relationships with other people.

And, I don't know, I would say my takeaway from Survivor and also the research and just my perspective is there's nothing wrong with that. Like, I'm sort of on a crusade to rebrand and reclaim the win-win opportunity because at least what I see in my research on decision making is like, for example, when you tell people that an eco-friendly product also saves them money, they are less likely to buy it. And to me, that is crazy because you're just highlighting the fact. It should be an additive effect that this eco-friendly product, you're highlighting another, you know, self-relevant benefit that it happens to offer. And the fact that when I tell you it actually benefits you, all of a sudden it turns you off, that's crazy to me.

And the reason that I've found in my research that underlies this like aversion to win-win opportunities is, at least in the consumer space, oftentimes we don't feel good about helping other people unless we can tell ourselves that we're, quote unquote, "doing it for the right reason." Like, we're doing it because we're just purely, altruistically, in it for the good of helping others. And I think that's holding us back.

I think if we live in a society where helping ourselves, by helping others is dirty or shameful, we're less likely to help others. Right? And we're also less likely to help ourselves. This is terrible. So I'm on a crusade to say, "I, I think it's perfectly okay to be in social relationships or in professional relationships, where, you know, you get something out of it too." We don't just have to give away our time to help others when it's inconvenient for us. Like, we need to consciously think about our own needs and our own goals because we only get so many years on this planet and there's nothing wrong with making the most of them.

WHITNEY That is really interesting, Kelly. Really interesting, that we somehow, we take it away from ourselves. So where can people find you?

KELLY So you can find me on the internet at [profgoldsmith.com](http://profgoldsmith.com) and all the socials is @profgoldsmith, so P-R-O-F, Goldsmith.

WHITNEY Okay.

KELLY           And watch my TED Talk, please if you haven't. It would be really nice.

WHITNEY        We will include it in the show notes.

KELLY           Thank you so much.

KELLY           I appreciate that.

WHITNEY        Okay, so any, any final thoughts? Any concluding words?

KELLY           I think, as you go through life, we've got a lot of distractions, we've got a lot of phone pings happening constantly. And it's really, really easy to lose sight or marginalize or table your own personal goals, be they scarcity related or not. So for that reason, hold yourself accountable and continually remind yourself of what's important to you and what you want to achieve because at the end of the day, you know, your score card is going to be whether or not you achieved those things that are more important to you. And I think it's ... they're really easy to lose sight of, so I just want to help people kind of keep those top of mind.

WHITNEY        Thank you for being with us.

KELLY           My pleasure.

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So much to unpack here, especially as we've been dealing with the constraint of physical distancing and the feelings that have come as a result of this constraint.

First, in a time when things feel scarce - resources, social interaction, etc. - I found it helpful to hear the results of Kelly's research. That the scarcity itself isn't the issue, but the absence of hope. If we know that something is truly gone - the boyfriend isn't coming back, the money is lost, things will be different in the future - we can mourn and process that loss and then lean in to the constraint that has been created and grow in a different direction. Ironically, it's when we're clinging to hope that we feel the scarcity and those feelings, they become problematic.

So many implications of her research, but as a business leader working with people, it's important not to give hope when there isn't any. Think about how often people say - "I wish they would just tell me what's going on. I wish they would just tell me what's happening." If you know, then you move on. If you don't know, you start to compensate to protect that hope and fear of scarcity in ways that might not be productive. The kind thing to do from a research perspective is that if there is hope, let people feel hope. If there isn't, don't inadvertently create the scarcity. It's not kind.

I was also struck by some of our conversation near the end - that we feel if we help someone else, it can't also be helpful to us. That we avoid situations where we are doing something good that also benefits us. This is the opposite problem of only wanting to help ourselves and not others. We do this binary thing as humans where it is either / or versus both / and. But with our higher thinking skills, if we take a step back, we can see that both / and is possible and often the best option. Which reminds me of something Stew Friedman said in his podcast episode about how he interacts with his kids. He asks his kids and wife to tell him where they think he should be spending my time AND how that will be helpful to them. Both / and. It's the love your neighbor *and* yourself.

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Thank you again to Kelly Goldsmith for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Whitney Jobe, managers Melissa Rutty and Sarah Duran, editor Macy Robison, content contributor Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson  
And this is Disrupt Yourself.