

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 280: BROOKE ROMNEY

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S Curve of Learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. This week, I'm speaking with author, blogger, and speaker Brooke Romney, who has had many S Curve jumps in her life, specifically around being a parent. Like many new moms, she got trapped in the cycle of comparing herself to others, then tying that up in her self-worth. After a lot of reflection and personal growth, she came out. On the other side is the author of the book *I Like Me Anyway*, which made for a fantastic conversation about modern parenthood and how to empower your children while also letting go of the things we can't really control. Every parent and prospective parent will certainly find a lot of insight in this conversation. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: Let's start with your very first book. You were at the launch point of the S Curve as a parent. Tell us what that looked and felt like.

Brooke Romney: Well, I love looking back at this time of life for me because I'd been in college, I worked on Capitol Hill. And when I decided to have a baby, we decided that I would stay home. And I was frightened and excited about it. But what I realized is that none of my talents and gifts translated well to parenting. I thought I wasn't a great homemaker. I didn't like children very much. And so, this was a big jump for me to be able to do this. And so, I had my baby, and I had all these idyllic visions of what it might be like. And mine came out screaming for 3 hours, and the nurses took them back, like trying to figure out what was wrong, and nothing was wrong. This was just who he was. I remember in the hospital even trying to do the swaddling like the nurses and kind of blaming it on my husband that it didn't look so good. And, and really realizing that very first moment that I was not natural at motherhood. And so, brought the baby home, we lived in Washington, D.C., and I was 3,000 miles away from family. My mom came to help for ten days, and I just bawled when she left because I thought there was no way that I would be able to do this on my own.

Brooke Romney: My husband was working for an accounting firm tons of hours. And anyway, it was just one of those times where I thought, I do not think that I am capable of doing this, but I was willing because you didn't have another option. I didn't have a lot of friends I'd been working. None of them had children. And so, I really kind of started doing it by myself. And back then, it's hard to remember a time when there wasn't the Internet or ways to

search things or find out how to do it right. So, this was 2003, and I remember needing to type in the exact right Internet address if I wanted to get to the Washington Post, but there was no way to search anything. And so, as I was trying to figure out this whole motherhood thing, I read a lot of books, and I started to feel a little bit more successful with my child. He still wasn't sleeping, was crying a lot, but he was hitting, hitting milestones. So, I was feeling good about that. And then I thought, if I'm going to be at home all day, I'd love to figure out how to be a homemaker.

Brooke Romney: You know, what am I going to do? I started watching the Food Network, and before, I had used the microwave as my main form of cooking. And I watched this show called *Semi-Homemade*, and I thought, okay, I can get a frozen chicken breast and pour spaghetti sauce on it and put mozzarella cheese on it and pretend like that is chicken parmesan. And, and I felt very successful as I learned these small new things. I watched *Trading Spaces* on HGTV, and I remember crackle painting almost everything in my house just because that's what they did on trading spaces. And as I looked around, I was really fulfilled by how much I'd grown and how much I had learned, and what a difference I'd made. And I really remember thinking, you know, maybe I could be on TV like, I am good at these things. I am. I'm good at food. I'm good at homemaking. I can decorate. I even would get the clothes out of the washer before they mildewed and put them in the dryer. And I just thought, yes, like my I read to my kid, you know, I'm sleep training, this is going really well. And so, I went from horrible to, to thinking that I was excellent at something.

Whitney Johnson: So many people want to be a parent, and we want to do it well. And I think that we overlook those early days of how desperately inept we feel.

Brooke Romney: And even how desperately inept we feel at every new stage, like how consistently we are new at what we're doing. And for some reason, with parenting, we feel like it should be innate, that we should know what we're doing, that it should be easy and natural. And parenting is the same as all the other things we do is there's an S Curve, there's a learning curve. We are beginners every time we're at a new stage.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, you're in Washington, D.C., you start to move up that S Curve, not only as a parent but also as a homemaker, feeling some degree of competence. And then you moved to a new city, and you found yourself at another launch point. Not so much as a parent, but within a community. Tell us about what happened.

Brooke Romney: I felt great about who I was, and as I moved to Arizona, it was a very different community that we were in. We lived in a master-planned community where all the houses were the same, many of the families were the same, and I was so excited to start making more connections. I had a couple great friends and mentors in Virginia.

Whitney Johnson: So, you did make friends in Virginia over time?

Brooke Romney: I did, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: So early on, you did not.

Brooke Romney: Right.

Whitney Johnson: But you made friends.

Brooke Romney: Yeah. So, we were there for about 18 months, and I found some great friends and mentors. They were all quite a bit ahead of me, which was great. Still not a lot to compare to for my exact stage. And so, we moved to Arizona and all these people were just so similar to our circumstances and our families. And I could not wait. I'm a people person I couldn't wait to make these connections. As people were inviting us to their homes and getting to know us and being so neighborly and kind. What I realized; it was really interesting. Instead of feeling better and more myself, I started to retreat because what I found when I got there was these people were actually really great. They were much further along in their S Curve than I was when it came to parenting. They had multiple children who were well behaved, and I had one that was still really struggling to, to behave well. And when you're a new parent and you think an 18-month-old should be able to follow directions and obey and all those things. So, they

were doing things really well with, with multiple children. I would go to their homes, and it wasn't semi-homemade. They were making bread and, you know, cooking Mexican food from scratch. Their homes were decorated beautifully, not just crackle painted, they had style. And every other person I met had a photography business on the side. So, they were doing all these great things with staying home, but having businesses and, and doing children. And I remember someone showing me where they had food storage and I thought, Wait, aren't we in our twenties? Do we have to do food storage in our twenties? And it was just so overwhelming to me, all these things that these women could do. And I started to really sink and pull back because I didn't feel like I wanted to constantly be exposed to people who were so much better than I was at everything.

Whitney Johnson: You know, it's interesting hearing you say that because you had this experience of feeling like you were somewhat alone on this on this S Curve, on this journey. And you had some mentors who are willing to do S Curve loops and help bring you along. And then you get into a situation where you feel like you're more around your peers. And as opposed to that, instead of that being comforting, it became discomfoting.

Brooke Romney: It did, especially because I started to feel competitive, because I think through school, you know, you wanted to be the top in the class and even in your job, you wanted to continue progress and be promoted. And when I moved to Arizona, I saw all these people that were, you know, not literally being promoted, but they, they were moving up that ladder. And I saw myself really like one of the bottom rungs. I didn't know how to continue to progress. And so, instead I just pulled back.

Whitney Johnson: All right. So, you're this is a different S Curve. It's not really the parenting S Curve, but it's, it's moving into a community where you find people that are, in many respects like-minded and you admire and you want to be a part of, but you're trying to figure out what your place is in that community. So, what did you do?

Brooke Romney: Well, I pouted for a little while.

Whitney Johnson: As one should.

Brooke Romney: Yes. And thought, well, I'm just not good at anything. And, and then I had just that little prick that reminded me that maybe I wasn't good at those things, but that I really did have something to share. And what I could share was I was a gatherer, and I was friendly, and I was a good conversationalist. And so, instead of trying to be what everyone else was being, I thought about the talents that I had that I could bring to the table. And so, I started Park Days, I led an exercise group I wasn't qualified to lead. I invited people to my slightly messy, undecorated home, and served them Little Caesars Pizza. And I realized that what I was bringing to the table was also what was needed, not instead what was needed, but also what was needed by this community of women. And as I did that, I stopped feeling competitive and I started to feel a part of something. And then I started to learn from other people, and they were so willing to share their talents. I don't, they never felt competitive with me. I just felt competitive with them. And I learned to make bread. I learned to teach and love my children in different ways than I would have ever expected.

Brooke Romney: I learned to decorate, and I never was the best at any of those things. Nobody ever asked me to help them organize their drawers, but I was growing and learning and also bringing something to the table. And I think when you talk about, in *Smart Growth*, you talk about ecosystems. And as I thought about that experience, that was a learning lab for me. That was an ecosystem that was so incredibly enriching for me. And I think about the choice that I made to be a part of it. Because I think a lot of times in our lives, whether it's business or personal or parenting, we find ourselves in incredible ecosystems and we can choose to take advantage of that ecosystem and learn and grow, or we can pull back and try and go at it on our own. And I was there for six years and there was so much growth personally in those six years. And as I look back and think what I might have been, if I would have chosen to just be on my own or be frustrated or not participate in the ecosystem. I don't know where my life would be today without those experiences.

Whitney Johnson: On *Disrupt yourself*, we talk about seven accelerants of growth and playing to your distinctive strengths and that recognition that you had of I have strengths and in fact they might be distinctive, and I would argue, you know, 20 years ago we weren't thinking about this so much, but a lot of people have social anxiety, and we now know that, especially today. And what I hear you saying is you didn't really so much, maybe a little bit, but

not a lot. And so, you were able to help be this glue for perhaps a lot of women. Maybe she was great at breaking bread, but it was very difficult for her to break bread with other people. And you made that possible. I'm also thinking too Brooke, as I listen to you, my very first book that a lot of people don't know about was called *Dare. Dream. Do. Remarkable Things Happen When You Dare to Dream*. And that book came out of something a similar experience. Well, not similar, but, but there's an analog here, which is I remember when about ten years ago. So, my kids are starting to grow up and I had achieved some success from a career perspective and having conversations with women and saying, you know, what's your dream? What do you want to do? And having many women say to me, I don't have a dream.

Whitney Johnson: They didn't quite say it, but that was the unspoken word. And I just felt like you have to have a dream, like you have to have things that you want to be and do just for you, not for anybody else, just for you. And so, part of the reason I wrote that book, I didn't realize this at the time, but in retrospect, I wrote it because I had all these women similar to what you were describing about parenting does not come naturally to me. It is not. I am not gifted in this area. I had all these women who I was watching, people like Vanessa Quigley, who's a founder of Chatbooks, who does this so effortlessly, and learning from them and being inspired by them. And saying, okay, I'm learning from you how to be a better mother. I want to give this gift to you of how do you go after a dream, not a parenting dream, but a dream for you. And it was in some ways my homage to them.

Brooke Romney: I just love that because you brought something that you were great at to the table and enriched their lives in a similar way that they were enriching yours. And I don't know that we even realize that in the moment. It takes some hindsight to be able to say, wow, like, look what that woman gave to me, whether it was business, parenting, you know, home dreams, those types of things. The more I've realized and appreciated people for their strengths, instead of either wanting my strengths to be theirs or wanting their strengths to be mine, I find that my connections and my relationships are so much more fulfilling. And I think that goes for women, men, workplace, home, neighborhoods.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, you know, you're doing well emotionally when you're not competing with people, don't you?

Brooke Romney: Absolutely.

Whitney Johnson: You have a chapter in your book titled *Hey, Give Me Back My Worth*. Tell us about that.

Brooke Romney: Oh, man. Well, if I could undo some things about my personality, it would be so many years wanting my worth to come from external accomplishments. And the interesting thing about being a parent is you are not in control of those external accomplishments. There's a lot of things we can be in control of which is which is a wonderful thing. But my husband and I and you know, Mike, but we have gone through some really interesting ups and downs in our personal and professional lives. When I realized that I was placing a lot of my worth in who I was and how well I was doing life on the external things like promotions, jobs, well behaved children, being the ideal neighbor, those types of things. I was really struggling because my first kiddo is awesome and creative and interesting but doesn't follow rules like he is definitely someone who wants to do it his own way.

Whitney Johnson: Hence the reason he cried for 3 hours at a time when he was a baby.

Brooke Romney: Exactly.

Whitney Johnson: Just to be clear.

Brooke Romney: Right.

Brooke Romney: And he likes to go at a different way and different path. We've taken some risks in our life and careers. And while some of them haven't gone well in the moment, you see the future need for those. And so, for a while I was basing my worth upon all these external things. And once I realized that I could not do that, or I would consistently feel like I was underperforming, undervalued, underachieving, that really changed the way I thought about myself, about parenting, about work, about everything I did. And I remember going up to a woman once and

saying, wow, your teenager is just amazing. You know, you don't always see really great boy teenagers. They don't peak at 15, but her's was fantastic. And I just said, wow, he's, he's so fantastic. And I'll never forget what she said to me because she said, if I take credit for all the good, then I have to take credit for all the bad. So, I just teach and love in the best way I know how. And then I just have to be satisfied with what comes next. And her one line changed my perspective. And after that I thought, you know what? I am only in control of whether I teach and love and the best way I know how.

Brooke Romney: And after that, it really is up to my kids to do with their life what they want to do with it and what they can do with it. And sometimes you don't see success in every child at five or 15 or 25 because we're all on a different S Curve. Where our life is going to go differently, depending on who we are and what our strengths are, and whether the world values those strengths at certain ages. But it gave me a lot of peace to be able to just be content. And I speak to teenagers a lot and they ask, you know, what's, what's one piece of advice you would give to teenagers? But I would also give this to adults. And, and it is stop defining yourself by things that can be easily taken away. So popularity can be taken away. Good looks can be taken away. Being smart can be taken away. And so instead of defining them, defining their selves, or even us defining our children by those things, instead you are someone who appreciates beauty. You're not athletic, but you are a relentless worker. You're not smart. You love to learn. Those things can never be taken away.

Brooke Romney: And as I think about myself, I can't define myself by my child's achievements. I don't have any control over those. But I can define myself by my effort to create relationships with my children, and I can be really satisfied with those regardless of where my children end up on a world success scale. When it comes to being a great neighbor, I don't know that I can always be everyone's ideal friend, but every day I can do something that says like I put some effort into my neighborhood today. I put an effort into my friendships today. Am I going to be everyone's cup of tea? Am I going to be there for everyone all the time? Probably not. But when it matters, I want to know that I was there when it mattered. And so, working really, really hard and it's a daily choice to not be defined by achievements and success. One of the things that I thought about, too, was, you know, you can, you know, quantify your work on what you did, or you can quantify it on the relationships that you built or, you know, the careers you helped raise, which I think you do so well.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you, Brooke. So, as you were talking, I just felt myself feel emotional because I think, I think one of the big challenges for me as a parent; and I think for most parents is to get to that point where we stop projecting our hopes and dreams onto our children and just let them be people.

Brooke Romney: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And it is so hard.

Brooke Romney: It is because we think we know the best path and we have all these experiences, and we would love for them to not have to go through the hard things and not to make the wrong choice. And Mike and I talk about this a lot, but as we look back, like those hard things and those wrong choices got us to where we are today. And I don't want to steal those from them. And the hard thing is, is when we get our worth from our child's achievements, then we really, really want to bubble wrap them.

Whitney Johnson: Yes.

Brooke Romney: Because we just want to make it so easy, and we want to make it look so good from the outside. And when we're concentrating on making things look good on the outside, we don't always let them have the experiences that help them grow on the inside.

Whitney Johnson: Right. Well, and it's no longer about them.

Brooke Romney: Yes.

Whitney Johnson: It's about us.

Brooke Romney: Yes. And, and it's really hard. And I have strong willed boys who are independent and have plans and their own hopes and dreams and ways of getting there. And I've really had to relax that and also create relationships where they're interested still in coming to me.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Brooke Romney: And asking the advice and asking the questions because they know I'm not going to squash their dreams. I have a I have a parenting mantra that says Dreams dash themselves. So, I am not here to be the dream dasher. I am here to help, support, cheer, give information, help educate. But I won't dash someone's dreams. If, if my ten-year-old wants to play in the NBA, at some point, the dream will dash itself. Or it won't if he gets his way. But he will be able to find things. I have I have faith in who they are that they will be able to pivot and find a successful path, even if it's not the one that I prescribe for them.

Whitney Johnson: What's the difference between being productive and making progress?

Brooke Romney: I love this question. And I think you, you illustrate this so well in your *Smart Growth* book because you give so many different examples of people who make progress in so many different ways, which is something that I appreciated so much. But for me, productivity is something that I feel like is shouted from the rooftops. If you want to be productive, there is a book for you, there is a podcast for you, there is an app for you. And I think what I realized is that productivity doesn't bring satisfaction, it can bring success, but not always satisfaction. And I have sometimes, so I, I'm a creative mind and I had a few years ago there was a YouTube video about making your bed. If you make your bed every day, it's something that makes you feel successful from the beginning. And I believe that for so many people, I love I love it. I was bought in. I'm not a bed maker. So, after I watched that and I think it might be in *Atomic Habits*, too, I was like, okay, I'm going to be one of those successful people. I am going to be a productive person. I'm going to start the day with making my bed.

Brooke Romney: And I did it for like two weeks and I felt absolutely nothing. That was just not important to me. It's important to my husband. He does it almost every day, but it wasn't important to me. And so, I started to think about the types of things that are important to me and what makes me feel like I'm making progress. And, and I truly wish, like, I even remember praying one time to have OCD, so I would be a cleaner person, but it's just not something that makes me feel like I'm making progress. And so, I stopped making my bed and instead I started taking a few minutes to meditate in the morning just to breathe and to read scripture. And that was a better use of 3 minutes of my day than making the bed every morning. And I think Scott O'Neil talks about using more of our time to do the things that are the most important to us. And I really appreciated that thought because I think being productive can often lend you to doing things that are less important but give you a checkmark as opposed to the things that help you make progress.

Whitney Johnson: So, you're seeing productivity in your brain as a tool. It's a means to an end, but it's not the end.

Brooke Romney: Right. Yes. And, and I think I love being productive in the ways that feel important to me. So, even looking at, I think making progress feels like success. And when I think about a book that I've written, sometimes I could look at a number and feel like, wow, that's productive. That's awesome. Look at that metric. But actually, what makes me like feel like I'm making progress is when someone tells me a story of how what I wrote impacted their family and that makes me feel successful. That's the difference for me between productive and progress or checking a box and being successful is that I'm doing what I was created to do in a way that's meaningful to other people.

Whitney Johnson: And as I'm listening to you, I'm thinking about the idea of progress. So, for example, I may have a goal to do a better job of connecting with my children and with my husband. And on my list of things to do in a day, connecting with my children and my husband is not on the list of things to do. Yes. So, I'm productive, productive, productive. And I remember hearing someone say, I think it might be Emma McAdam, who talked about instead of making a list of things to do, make a list of things that you did. Because then that allows for you to, if you do have a goal, to connect with a child or to build your relationship with a child, when they come in and they interrupt you on something that you were doing and you spend time talking to them. You're then building that relationship. You can put it on your list, you can check that off. And now you're focusing on you're not only aware of

your productivity, but more importantly, like you say, you're making progress on the dimensions that actually matter to you.

Brooke Romney: I love that. That's something that I think about a lot because I think one of the things that I talk about is leaving space. What I realized is that something that makes me feel satisfied is and like I'm making progress is when I leave space for connection in my day. So, I could write for 10 hours, and I could get to the end of the day and feel very productive. And then I missed connecting. And so, one of the things that I try to do is make sure my days involve connection, because when I look back on the days that I actually feel successful, they usually have a balance of both. And for a while when I was very busy, I just needed to work. And my work, because I'm a writer, is solo work. I work by myself, usually in a room with a computer, and while I was getting a lot done, I was feeling very empty. I write about people and connections and relationships, and I wasn't having any of those. And I realized that in order to do my work well, I needed to live my life, not just write about life. And so, I started making space, like there were some hours that were unaccounted for because then I didn't feel so worried about what came next. And, and did I have to rush off? And there's a story that I tell in the book about a woman who made time for me when I really needed it. And I look back and wonder, what if she would have said she had to go? Or just looked at her watch or walked away. Or knew that I needed somebody but knew she didn't have time for me. She literally changed my life by being willing to stop. And after I had that experience, I just wanted to make sure that my day was padded enough with open spaces so that I could be that person for someone else.

Whitney Johnson: That kind of cuts to the quick.

Brooke Romney: It's hard.

Whitney Johnson: Because I'm so scheduled and, and just that and yet, and yet I think about. You know right now when we're administering our S Curve tool and asking people to rate themselves. That one of the dimensions that they struggle the most on is to step back, to slingshot forward. And where that's showing up is people are not taking time to rest and to reflect. And I think that that falls into that bucket of what you're describing is do we have any slack in our day for the unexpected, for the spontaneous, to find those joyful moments or the moments to serve? I would say, as I listen to you say, that I am not ready to do anything on that right now. And I think that's important for us to be aware when we're thinking about change, about the S Curve, is that sometimes we're still in one place and we're at the top of our current S Curve, which is maybe not how we want to be. We're not ready to make a change yet, but it creeps into our awareness. What would my life look like if I had a little bit more slack in it?

Brooke Romney: I love that you said that because there are so many times where my husband is, is very change forward and I'm a little reticent about it. And a lot of times I have that, well, no, I don't want to do one more thing or I don't want to change. I like the way it's going; it's working for me and just recognizing that. But even just that little idea that can start working on us, whatever that is, I think it's really powerful to say I'm okay not being ready, but I find value in it.

Whitney Johnson: I want to talk about your most recent book titled *52 Modern Manners for Teens*. That is a tongue twister. And you've got 52. And what I thought I would do is I would pick out two that really resonated with me that I think are applicable to adults as well, which is part of the reason why I chose them and then give you an opportunity to do a bonus of one that you think is relevant or that you especially love. So, the first one is advocate for yourself at school. Talk about that.

Brooke Romney: We have entered a new age of parenting with a lot of parents who want to just make things work for their children. And one of the things that I find is really important in our children's growth is for them to have a voice, and especially for them to have a voice at school. And so, teaching our children young that if you have a question, you ask it to your teacher. If something isn't right with your grade, you approach your teacher and discuss it. Advocating for yourself also entails doing things kindly and with respect, and so prepping our children on how you do have that conversation. If they're nervous, empowering them that this is something they can do. I have a child who doesn't love confrontation. He's happy to just make sure everything runs smoothly. He will be inconvenienced so that others aren't. But we taught him this idea from a very early age, and while he wasn't ready to talk to plenty of like a coach or, you know, somebody like that. He was happy to go and discuss his grades or his questions or what he didn't understand with his teachers. And I think it's so empowering for our kids to know that

they are in charge of their learning and their education and that when something isn't working for them or when they see something that isn't right, they can say something. And I think, like you said, this works for adults too. But if we teach it young, it's something that's natural that doesn't feel wrong or uncomfortable. I can't tell you how many of my friends who are teachers say that they just get calls from parents asking them to change a grade or why something isn't updated. And, and they're fine to have those conversations once a child has approached it, if it hasn't if it doesn't have a resolution. But I think it's really empowering for kids to be able to understand that they own their education.

Whitney Johnson: The second one that really stood out for me, and I think because it partly hit home, was the know yourself. Talk about that and then I'll share some reflections.

Brooke Romney: Sure. I love this one because know yourself. The rest of the tip basically says: When someone asks you what you like to do, have an answer. There isn't a right answer to this question, but there is a wrong one. And that's I don't know. And one of the things that I think is so important for our kids is that when someone asks them a question that they feel confident in saying something in return. And why I think that's important is because it's a really great positive feedback loop for them. If you know yourself and you can say, oh, I love basketball and Legos, and somebody says, oh, you do, that sounds great. My son loves Legos, or I love basketball. Tell me more about it. And it starts a connection for them. And then that adult walks away and says, wow, that kid, you know, he's really on top of things. And then you're the kid who's on top of things and people use you as an example. And people call you when they have work, or they need a helper. And it just is something that creates this really great opportunity for kids to feel successful. And I have a really cute story. A mom texted me or she messaged me on Instagram about she was doing that tip with her older kids. But her younger son was I think he was only like five. He was listening and they were at the grocery checkout and the grocery store clerk asked him, oh, what do you like to do? And they had practiced it as a family. And he had an answer. And as they walked away, he said, Mom, that was so cool. I know myself.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that's the cutest ever.

Brooke Romney: And I just thought how fun to be able to give him the gift of confidence and understanding who he is. And then I'm really careful in that tip to make sure that people know what you do and what you love can change. And it doesn't have to be what everyone else likes to do. This is you, and you need to be comfortable with who you are.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, I want to unpack that. I think that we talk as adults about the elevator pitch and the elevator pitch is that ability to say, what do you do in 30 seconds? And for so many of us, it freezes us with terror, very, very difficult, but with practice, we get better at it. And yet, I find that even now, at my age, I struggle with that question. It's like, well, what do I do? What do I like? What do I care about? And I think and it can lead to an existential crisis very quickly. What I love about the way you're describing it is you didn't say, what do you do? You said, what do you like to do? What do you love to do? I love that because, like you said, everybody has something that they love to do. I actually want to start thinking about that. And I mean, actually, going to ask you the question in just a minute is we can practice real time is what do you love to do? Because then it allows people to be themselves. They're not performing.

Brooke Romney: Right.

Whitney Johnson: They're just in this place of learning. This is what I this is what I like. So, Brooke, what do you love to do?

Brooke Romney: I love getting to know people and I love hearing their stories and what makes them excited and where they come from. And then I love connecting over commonalities and learning from differences. That's what I love to do.

Whitney Johnson: How long did it take you to get to the point where you could frame that really quickly?

Brooke Romney: It's taken me a long time to be able to have the words for it, but I think inside it's something that I always knew I loved. And even my husband will say, you just love people. And I do. I just love people. And the

funny thing is, I don't just love like a few people. I just love getting to know people. I actually love the small talk. I love just getting to know someone and who they are. And then if they'll let me, you know, go a little deeper. So, I love it.

Whitney Johnson: So, are you both an extrovert and not shy?

Brooke Romney: I am definitely an extrovert, and I was shy-er in the beginning. But I think because we moved around a lot and I have such a high need for people, I taught myself how to not be shy anymore. I wasn't always the person that was comfortable introducing myself or saying asking somebody a question, but I've gotten better at it because it's important to me.

Whitney Johnson: So, what's your bonus?

Brooke Romney: So, my bonus, I think, works for children and adults, but my bonus is find new friends. This manner has been something that has changed families and changed perspectives. I have gotten countless messages about this manner and the thing that I love most about it is, is the manners pretty simple. It basically says if you're with a group of people that continually exclude you or make you feel bad about yourself, find new friends. This isn't easy. This isn't fun. But and it's going to take some time. You're going to have some lonely weekends. You're going to have some lonely days. But in the end, there are people out there who will like you for you. What I like best about this manner is I have had so many messages from parents who have said, when I shared this manner with my family, I had a child come up to me and say, my friends are really mean to me, and I think I can make new friends. And it's helped parents understand how to support their kids through that process, how to help love them through that process, help them be okay with the fact that they're home alone because they're actually searching for new friends. And it's created some really, really beautiful conversations in the family. There's one that goes along with it that says, don't leave just one person out. It's really helped a lot of kids recognize when they're doing that and that it's not okay. The find new friends has also been really important for adults who say, you know what, I've been trying to be part of this group who doesn't want to include me now for ten years. I'm going to go ahead and look around and see who else might need me in their life. I think it's important for us to all realize that there's people out there who need us, who need our experience, who need our stories. And when we sit in a place where we're undervalued, it's time to move on that S Curve in friendship and relationships and look for the people who need us that also bring something to our life and people that we can also serve.

Whitney Johnson: All right. Let's talk about book publishing. So, your first book, *I Like Me Anyway*, you self-published and that has now sold 15,000 copies roughly.

Brooke Romney: Yeah.

Whitney Johnson: And your second book, *52 Modern Manners for Today's Teens*, published six months ago and has sold 45,000 copies just for everybody who knows. And this statistic is a little bit old. But a few years ago, only 5% of all books sell more than 5,000 copies. So, this book is doing phenomenally well. So, for people who are listening and are wondering about, do I want to publish a book? Do I want to self-publish a book? What are your thoughts?

Brooke Romney: A few thoughts. It's a lot of work. And I know a lot of people who want to self-publish, and they want to publish a book and they have this burning desire to share something. But that's only part of the story. And you have to be willing to put yourself out there if you want to your book to sell. Otherwise, you're going to have some family and friends that buy your book, and it's going to be nice, but it's going to be a lot of work for something that feels very nice. When I wrote my first book, I did write it for that purpose. I, I just felt like there were some things I wanted to share and I self-published it. I actually had a publisher that I thought wanted to print it and then it ended up not working out for them, which was very devastating. And I was stuck in this place of do I self-publish? What do I do with this? And then I was tasked with a lot of my own work with *I Like Me Anyway*. One of the things that was really important is if you're going to publish a book, you need to make it worth the reader's time. You need to put the time and the money into editors. It can't, if you throw it out there, you will get the same response of people will know it was just thrown out there. And so, I don't like the detail process. And I was forced into the detailed process of hiring editors, figuring out a design and a cover and a title, things that I thought I would be able to push on to someone else that knew better than I did.

Brooke Romney: One of the beautiful things about self-publishing that I would suggest to everyone is to crowdsource, get people involved in what you're doing, get them excited about what you're doing and what you're bringing to the table. I did already have an Instagram following when I published my first book, but it wasn't huge. But the people that were there, I had created content that they felt like was valuable and they were bought into it. And I thought, you know, even if just maybe a 10th of these people would buy this book, I would feel like it would be successful, and I could cover my costs of, of the publishing process. I went through the Amazon direct publishing, and they print on demand. There are some good things and bad things about that, so I'm happy to share that. If anybody's interested, I'd be happy to message you about that. The nice thing is they didn't require upfront money in order to publish that book, and so it did suddenly feel very doable that my costs were only that of editors and designers and things like that. But I really did push hard, and I felt like I created something that would be valuable to people. I think that's the most important part is when you're creating a product that it's not something you're going to have to beg people to read, but when they read it, they'll want to share it.

Whitney Johnson: So, you talked about the crowdsourcing. Are you saying crowdsourcing in terms of you went to Instagram, you asked people to buy the book or what else when you mean crowdsourcing what else are you saying?

Brooke Romney: Oh, it was it was actually so fun. I was trying to decide on a title, and I involved them. I had them vote on titles. And actually, my final title with I had decided on my title. I asked for help with my subtitle, and I asked them for I had four subtitles. I had people vote and then I had people comment. And actually, the subtitle came from a comment on my Instagram. She put a couple of things together and I love the way people would share. Well, I like this, but it actually has a little bit of a negative connotation. You're a positive person. I think you should have a positive subtitle, and it was something I never thought about. So, since I didn't have an editorial board to help me, I turned to my Instagram followers, and they were incredible. We, they helped me pick a color. They helped me decide on how the title was displayed on the front cover, and they were as excited about it as I was. Which when you don't have a publishing company backing you, it's nice to be able to say, how does this work? Is this going to work? And they were my audience. They were who I was writing for. And so, it's pretty amazing what social media can do.

Whitney Johnson: And then your most recent book that sold 45,000 copies, who's buying it?

Brooke Romney: It's parents of kids who are eight and up, and they are hungry for ways to help their children be more successful and ways to deliver it in a way that doesn't feel like parenting. What I realized is that parents don't love correcting their children, and children don't love when parents correct them. It feels very personal, and they don't want to take that. And they want their parents to be their fans. They want their parents to be excited about them. And parents have to correct often enough. And so, especially when they talk about these manners, like, do you know how to act when you go to someone's home? The kid gets defensive immediately. What, you think I'm just rude? You think I'm a slob? You think I'm just going to walk into someone's house and, you know, those are that's how the conversation goes. And it's not a productive conversation. Right? The thing that we're missing is our kids actually really want to be successful. And they have all this wild west of the Internet, and they have friendship drama, and they don't quite know how to do it. And so, what I found is parents are buying this book and the kids are taking it into their rooms and reading the whole thing unasked. No bribes. Some parents are doing it like I had a mom who said I thought my 14-year-old would roll his eyes and I found him in his book, in his room reading the whole thing, because guess what? He's a 14-year-old boy and he's not quite sure how to navigate this world. And he's doing a lot of things that are awkward and he'd like to know how to get past that stage.

Whitney Johnson: So, this is useful for teenagers at the launch point of being a teenager S Curve.

Brooke Romney: Yes. And it's so and it's so useful for parents who want to have discussion because guess what? This manner isn't coming from them. It's coming from this expert out there. And there's 45,000 other families because they're teenagers are all struggling with all these things, too. It makes these teens feel less alone. It's not just me that doesn't know that I should put deodorant on every day and my mom keeps telling me to shower. This is a teen thing. All teens smell bad. All teens should probably shower and put deodorant on every day. It doesn't feel personal. And it's. It's delivered in a way that allows them to take action in a really, really easy, simple, simple way.

Whitney Johnson: I love it. All right. So, Brooke, where's the best place for people to find you?

Brooke Romney: I'm really active on Instagram and I have a website for BrookeRomney.com and then my books are all on Amazon. And Modern Manners is still in Costco in Utah, Arizona, and Idaho.

Whitney Johnson: When we're at the launch point of the S Curve in relationships, growth is not always apparent. And but when you reach the top of the curve, the growth can be stunning. Maybe not the top, but the sweet spot. Do you have an example of that, a story that you can share around that?

Brooke Romney: I do. I have something that's one of my favorite moments. I, when I started working more full time, I was doing so many things wrong. I was inexperienced. I was moving from fully staying at home to kind of dabbling and writing to mostly working full time. And then and I had committed to a bunch of things and one of them was like a video. Another one was a podcast interview. And then I was trying to also be the parent that I wanted to be at the same time, because I, I've never wanted to let go of that part of my life. And so, I'd commit to all these things, and they all went really poorly that day, and it was just such an incredible failure for me. And my husband asked me how everything went. He knew there were some big moments that I had that day, and then I was also trying to be at a basketball tournament for my son. And, and I just said, I just, I failed. And, and looking back, there were so many easy ways to fix things. If I had just done this, if I had just done that, if I had just done this, why didn't I do that? And I just kept saying, I'm just so stupid.

Brooke Romney: I am just so stupid. Like, who am I to think that I can do all of these things? And my husband just said, You're not stupid, you're new at this. And it was so powerful for me because I realized I wasn't stupid. I'm just new and it's okay to be new at things. It's okay to be at the bottom of an S Curve, and it's okay to mess up and make mistakes and then look back and say, oh, there was actually an easy solution for that. I didn't see it in the moment. And that's okay because I'm new at this and I love that. He helped me understand that. He's so willing to take risks and be new and learn from them and not let it affect who he sees himself as. He sees that as brave and powerful and interesting. And I just saw it as, as a failure. And he just helped me understand that, like being new at something is brave and powerful and interesting. And now I look back and I do multiple podcast interviews and I don't have a difficult time with them. And I've, I'm always working on the balance of, of mom and work, but I feel like I've gotten to at times I've been more successful at doing that. And then like we talked about before, there's always a new S Curve, you know, there's always a wrench in something. You try something new at work or your kid enters a new stage at home. And it's gotten me really comfortable at being new and seeing that as like a very powerful place to be.

Whitney Johnson: What are some connections you've made or ideas that you've had? As we've been talking and processing that you're like, oh, I hadn't thought of that before.

Brooke Romney: I really, really loved the idea of listing what you did instead of having it to do list. Because I think it's really telling about our priorities when we look at what we do, that actually is what we value. And if it's not, then it's time to make some changes. And I think it's really powerful for me because I'm in a spot where I often get to the end of the day and haven't done what my priorities really are. And so, as I think about that, I think it would really help me list what I've done to see if it's aligning with the priorities, I say I have. And if it's not maybe reevaluating the priorities that I say I have so that I can be more in alignment. I know you talk about that in your book, aligning myself with who I really want to be with the actions that I'm taking each day. And so, I just I really love that.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Brooke Romney: I read your book that you just put out, *Smart Growth*, and I know it's a business book. But I found so many incredible applicable ideas for me in business, but also personally. I love the idea of we are programed to progress. That continues to hit me because I think there's so many people who have this idea that being at status quo or like stasis is just that would be so nice, right? Doesn't that feel I mean, when you're someone who's continually on an S Curve sometimes like that would be so nice to just be done with that. But continuing to forward, forward progression is something worth continuing and not only in ourselves, in our business lives, but personally. And then helping our kids understand that our kids are living in a world that is preaching to them like the lazier, the better. Just chill like you don't have to work that hard. There's ways to make money by, you know, being big on YouTube. And what I want to say is there are and those actually also take a lot of work too and helping

our children understand that there really is not an easy. Because we're programed to progress and when we choose easy, what we choose is our spirit falters. And that's when we see depression and that's when we see anxiety, because it's not who we're supposed to be because we're programed to progress.

Whitney Johnson: Brooke, thank you.

Brooke Romney: Thank you so much.

I loved speaking with Brooke. Here are my major takeaways. Number one, if you're comparing yourself to others, it's time to step back. A huge breakthrough for Brooke was when she began feeling happy for others greatness rather than feeling diminished by it. She stopped wishing other strengths were her own and focused on exploring her own strengths. For Brooke, this was about connecting with people. A big part of unlocking this is becoming part of a community, something larger than herself. It opens us up to learning in a way that isolation can't.

Number two, focus on what you can control. This advice comes in many forms and applies to nearly every situation. A fellow parent told Brooke that if she can take credit for all the good in her well-behaved kids, then she also has to take credit for the bad. This changed her perspective on parenting. She realized she can only control how she teaches and loves her kids. The rest will happen. Stressing about things that are beyond her. Takes energy away from what she can do successfully. That small shift of focus made a big difference in her life. This advice is great for parenting, but also especially great for running a business, being in a relationship or reaching a career goal.

Number three know yourself. This takes more work than we think when someone asks you, what do you love to do? Brooke says, there's no right answer, but there is a wrong one - I don't know. Notice the question isn't what do you do for a living? A much better way to form a connection with someone is asking what they actually love to do in their lives. I really appreciated Brooke's insight on why this is such a powerful feedback loop for kids. A child who has a passion and is not shy about sharing it signals confidence. It puts them top of mind as examples, helpers, and even for work in the future. It's an opportunity for kids to feel successful. And what a gift. Don't forget Brooke's advice. Dreams dash themselves. If your child wants to play for the NBA, let them dream it. Our instinct is to protect them from disappointment. But in fact, we know that failure is what makes us successful in the long run. In this way, letting kids dream big is more than just a feel-good poster with a rainbow on it. It sets them up for real life better than if you try to protect them at their launch point.

For more on thinking about what do you love to do, listen to Marcus Buckingham, [Episode 279](#). And for more on being a mindful parent, listen to Stu Friedman, [Episode 152](#). Thank you again to Brooke Romney for being our guest. Thank you to you for listening. Thank you to our producer Matt Silverman, audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel, and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.