



Episode 61: How to Get Around Your Obstacles

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Here are the starting questions today: As you think about an important goal you have, what are your biggest obstacles? How do you move forward despite them?

We all have things we want and are working toward. We call these our goals. Some goals are more tactical, like launching a business or advancing a project at work. Other goals are more personal, like overcoming impostor syndrome or being a more concise communicator.

Our goals matter to us – they represent our growth and achievement. And, sometimes there are things that make it harder to achieve our goals. In coaching, we call these things barriers and obstacles. Obstacles get in our way.

Like, I have a goal to promote my business on social media – and one of my biggest obstacles is worrying about what other people will think of my posts.

Obstacles are the forces that hold us back from moving ahead easily, confidently, and efficiently. They can be things in our control – like our time, mindset, or worries. They can also be things out of our control – like requests from other people, what other people do or say, or a lack of resources.

Here's the thing: most people want to feel like they're moving forward and making progress in life. We want to be proud of the things that we're doing, trying, and learning.

Knowing that obstacles exist, and knowing how to deal with them can help you move forward more easily – with clarity and maybe even some courage. It's courageous to keep moving forward despite the headwinds, despite that inner critic voice or the criticism of others.

Having a way to deal more effectively with your obstacles can help you focus more on thinking productively about action steps you can take, people you can talk with, mindsets you can practice – all the things that are in your control.

Today's tool also helps you remember what's in your control regarding your obstacles, and how you can approach and manage them, so as to get back to the “good stuff” -- the moving forward -- more easily.

The tool today is a way to approach and think about your obstacles. I call this tool “naming the obstacles.” What this involves is recognizing and listing all of the worries, fears, thoughts, and mindsets that are crowding your brain and keeping you from moving forward.

We name our obstacles to contain them. When we identify and acknowledge something, our brain can put it in its place. When things are in their place in our brain, our thinking is more orderly.

Instead of our obstacles running us, we get to decide how we want to deal with them and where we choose to put our attention and focus.

I like to use visualization with this tool. I imagine obstacles to be like ferocious animals at a zoo. If you've ever been to the zoo, you've likely seen some animals that live in an area behind glass or plexiglass. They're usually animals like lions, tigers, or gorillas. You can see them in their habitat, they might even come up to the glass to look you in the eye, and you know that they can't physically touch you.

That's our goal with obstacles. We know they exist. We can see them, name them, and contain them. Then, we can imagine they are in their own "obstacle zoo" where they roam around behind the glass while we focus on thoughts and actions that are more productive and helpful.

I want to share an example of how a client and I used the tool of naming the obstacles. In our coaching session, my client shared that he was worried about an upcoming difficult conversation. He had to have a hard conversation with a direct report and he was feeling uneasy and unprepared.

In this case, his goal was clear. He wanted to be prepared and he wanted to have a plan. He wanted to show up confident, clear, and caring. What he was noticing, though, was that his thoughts were muddled. His thinking felt stuck.

Stuck thinking usually indicates the presence of obstacles. So I invited him to make a list of all the obstacles that were keeping him feeling stuck with this goal.

The first obstacle he listed had to do with his emotions. He realized he was very angry at the direct report for that person's behavior. His anger was an obstacle because it kept him ruminating and replaying situations over and over in his head.

We listed obstacle #1: anger.

Obstacles 2, 3, and 4 were different kinds of worries. One worry was that the person would take potential legal action; another worry was about saying the wrong thing in the meeting; and the third worry was that the person would react with a lot of questions. Worries are obstacles when they keep our thinking stuck and focused on the fears.

Obstacle #4 was a lack of time. He had many things to do and it was hard to find time in his schedule to prepare and meet with HR to talk through the meeting agenda.

Listing and naming the obstacles help our thinking because this process frees up space to think more effectively. Here's the way to do it. When you list an obstacle, say it matter-of-factly, without getting into the story or judgement. Just like you would name the animals at the zoo: there's a zebra, there's a giraffe, there's a penguin. Same with obstacles. There's my obstacle of anger. There's my obstacle of busy-ness. There's the obstacle of my inner critic perfectionist.

As my client and I created this list, he got into it and kept adding more. Because here's the thing about listing obstacles: it's fun! It's an opportunity to give ourselves permission to "tell" on ourselves, to name all the reasons it's hard to do something. It's freeing to list all of our excuses.

That's because obstacles want to be recognized and acknowledged. They exist, and they get to exist in their own space, on their own piece of paper, or in their own column on a spreadsheet.

What I find is that after listing and naming the obstacles, it frees up brain space to return to productive thinking. When you know that your obstacles are safely in their obstacle zoo, you can then think about your next action steps.

With my client, after we listed his obstacles, he was able to think much more productively about what was in his control to prepare for the conversation.

We listed out some action steps. One, he could meet with HR and ask them what outcome they were hoping for. Two, he could choose the perspective he wanted to be in for the meeting. An three, he could practice out loud how he'd start the conversation. All of these action items helped him feel confident and ready, and reminded him that he could be an intentional leader who handled tough conversations with both caring and directness.

At the end of our coaching call, I asked him what was helpful about the tool of naming the obstacles. He said that he felt calmer and more in control. His thinking was clearer. In his body, he felt more confidence and less anxiety. He was ready to move this goal forward, and he knew how to contain obstacles more easily in the future.

Naming things helps engage more effective thinking. We can name perspectives, emotions, beliefs, and – as we talked about today – obstacles that are impeding our progress.

In the next few weeks, I invite you to try this tool. When you feel like your progress toward a goal has slowed and your thinking is stuck, pause, and imagine your obstacle zoo. List out the worries, mindsets, and resource constraints getting in your way. Name the obstacles that are present for you.

You'll eventually notice that your thinking opens up. When it feels like you can think more productively, then ask yourself what your next step forward is. Remember that it's in your control to choose a mindset, choose a person to talk with, an email to write, or a question to ask.

Progress requires skill, strategy, resources – and a way to navigate around your obstacles. Because obstacles happen, and it's in your control to more quickly regain your footing and your way forward.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you would like help making an action plan and getting around your obstacles, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!