



Episode 72: How to Refocus During a Challenge

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: when challenges happen, how do you recenter yourself? How do you calm the anxiety in your body and begin to shift your thoughts from worry to clarity?

Before we talk about challenges, let's exhale. Thinking and talking about challenges can make our body feel tense and constricted. Exhaling and letting the air out of our lungs helps our bodies loosen, which can then help our thoughts start to lighten and shift.

So, challenges. We all have them. We all have times in our lives personally and professionally that are tough. Whether big or small, challenges affect how we feel in our body and where our thoughts go.

Especially when something unexpected happens. Those times can be particularly hard because they can feel like a shock. We didn't anticipate it and we didn't have a plan.

During these times, we get thrown off balance and lose our center. We feel lost and unsure about what to do and where to focus. And if we work with and lead others, it's especially important to find our footing and refocus quickly, because others are counting on and looking to us.

Whatever the challenge is, our goal is to move through it. We want to get to the other side, where things feel more settled, and where we feel physically calmer and recentered. We want to get to the place where we have a clear road map that we can share with others so that we can guide them through the obstacles and uncertainty confidently.

Today's coaching tool is one that can help both you and the people you're leading to navigate your challenges. It's a question that you can keep asking yourself and others, to quickly come back to center, reorient, and get your bearings when things feel chaotic and murky.

Because here's the thing about being human. Life is full of unexpected events. Our opportunity as a soul in this body in this lifetime is to find and use tools and strategies to navigate the highs and lows, to help our nervous system re-find its calm, and help our brain remember that we are resilient, capable, and a problem solver.

Sometimes our brain needs some help shifting from stress to problem solving and from feeling lost to finding a way forward. That's what today's powerful question can do: help you and your thinking shift from seeing only the unknown to finding the known pieces that you can grab on to, work with, and take action from.

The question is this: What do you know?

What do you know?

Focusing on what we do know, what is clear, and what is known helps us locate ourselves in the here and now of our life. It reminds us of the people, strengths, values, and processes we already have to move through a challenge.

And we often need that reminder, because when we're in the challenge, and our brain and body are having a stress response, we lose access to our higher-level thinking. We often forget how capable we are and that we do have support around us. We feel stuck and alone.

So we need to remind our brain that's not the truth, and that's what this question does. It says to your brain, stop looking at the chaos, and let's refocus. Look over here instead, where there's a lot that's already known. We often know more than we think we do, and answering the question, "What do you know?" is the way to name and identify the pieces that are solid when the ground seems shaky and the landscape unfamiliar.

Let's make this real and talk through an example. I hear from clients about challenges that come up all the time. There are personal challenges: people get sick, or their family members get sick or, tragically, pass away.

People have professional challenges: their boss is unexpectedly fired, or their organization has a company-wide layoff, or political forces affect the work they've invested their career in.

All of these challenges have one thing in common. When they first happen, they often cause feelings of panic, worry, or frustration. They can feel like a shock and make your thoughts feel jumbled. We lose clarity and might not know what to do next.

That's what happened with one of my clients whose boss was suddenly let go. After the news, her brain focused on worries. She was worried about how to help her team through the change. She was worried about the new person she'd be reporting to. She was worried that people would want to gossip. Lots of worries.

So I asked her this coaching question: "What is one thing you do know?"

She thought, and answered, "I do know that I have a talented team."

I asked, "What else do you know?" She said, "I do know that my peers and I have a strong professional support system."

I asked again, "What else do you know?" She said, "I do know that I have some ideas about the next steps I see for the company."

You get the idea. We did this a few more times, and each time I posed the question, "What do you know?", it was an opportunity for her prefrontal cortex to be activated, as it chose pieces of information it did know.

After she answered the question about 10 times, my client had a list of things she did know. Her worry had lessened. She was thinking much more effectively. She was reminded about her strengths and abilities to navigate a challenge. She was looking forward more easily.

And the great thing about answering the question, "What do you know?" is that it's a step toward taking action.

When we have something we do know, we can then ask this question: “What’s one thing you can do?”

Clarity makes action more accessible. Knowing what we know gives us clarity to move forward more productively and confidently.

Like with my client – after reminding herself that she did know she had a strong support system, she made a list of colleagues she wanted to check in with.

After reminding herself that she did know that she had strategic ideas for the company, she was excited to create a strategic plan.

In a challenge, it’s easy to get lost in what we don’t know. It’s easy to let the overwhelm overtake us and keep us feeling adrift.

Deliberately inviting in what you do know is a way through the fog to familiarity. Even if we might still be unclear about details, there are always things we do know.

For example, my client didn’t know how much gossip there would be. And she did know that she wanted to have a response ready in case it happened.

Whatever it is that we do know, when we anchor on to that, it helps us reorient ourselves and reorient others. It helps us chart a road map forward more confidently so that we can take steps forward more easily and calmly.

The question, “What do you know?” is one you can ask yourself, and it’s also one you can ask those around you when you want to offer them help and guidance in navigating a challenge. Reminding others that there are things they do already know is a gift.

Our thoughts create our reality, and any time we can direct our thoughts in a more positive direction, we’re moving toward the reality that we do want and that does align with our thoughts and purpose. We know a lot, and building on what we do know helps us feel more empowered and in control, and show up intentionally for those around us.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help navigating a challenge, 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!