

# When Progress Is Slow



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**Keri Martinez**

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# When Progress Is Slow

Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is episode seven, “When Progress Is Slow.”

I’m Keri Martinez. I’m a wife and mother of three children and three bonus children. I’m also a certified life coach and a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For a good portion of my life, I equated perfection with happiness and success. I thought that striving to *be* perfect and *do* things perfectly was the key to feeling happy and to being successful. I’ve since come to realize that perfection *isn’t* necessary to achieve either one of those--quite the opposite, in fact--and that has made such a difference in how I think, feel, and experience life. So if you’re a professional woman and you’d like to know how to release perfectionism so you can trade self-doubt for self-confidence, stop beating yourself up, and start enjoying your life more, then come with me. Let’s do this together.

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Hello, and welcome back.

How’s your week going? Mine is going pretty well. We are getting some more rain where I live, which I really like. I live in Southern California and we don’t usually get a lot of rain, but this spring has been different and we’ve gotten a lot more rain and even some snow that we don’t usually get, and it has been a refreshing, fun change.

So, today I’d like to talk to you about how to handle slow progress, or what to do if you’re feeling frustrated because you think you’re progressing too slowly. Maybe you’ve been working on a goal, or you’ve been trying to change or build a habit, or you’re going through a challenging situation and it just feels

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

like things aren't progressing as quickly as you'd like. Maybe you even feel like things are *regressing* instead of *progressing*. Can you relate to this? I have experienced this so many times, and still experience it on the regular, but I have some strategies and some tips that have been immensely helpful for me in these situations. I'm going to share these with you so you can feel more empowered and motivated to keep going when progress seems slow...or non-existent. And I also hope to convince you in this episode that slow progress isn't a bad thing, or at least it doesn't have to be. It can actually be useful and good.

## 1. Slow progress is still progress, and sometimes even no progress can be progress.

Okay. This first tip has two parts. Part one is to remember that slow progress is still progress, and part two is to remember that even no progress can be progress. What? Yes, you heard that right – no progress can actually be progress. Both of these parts are true, but let's look at them one at a time.

Part one - slow progress is still progress. Let's start with a story. About three years ago my wonderful husband gave me a guitar for my birthday. This was something I had asked him to get for me, and at the time, I had every intention of watching some YouTube videos, practicing, and learning how to play. Well, three years went by, and during that time, I did watch a couple of YouTube videos and I practiced a few times, but most of the time the guitar just sat in its stand, silently mocking me every time I walked past.

Last summer, I decided it was finally time to learn to play. I also decided that I needed to put some skin in the game to motivate me to practice, and I

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

thought it would be better to learn from a live person instead of a YouTube video. A live person could guide me in real time and would also serve as an accountability partner to further motivate me to practice. So, seven months ago I started taking guitar lessons from an incredibly talented young woman named Abbey. Shout out to Abbey because seriously, she blows my mind everytime I hear her play. She's amazing!

Now, before I continue, let me give you a little background. I am decently musical. I can play the piano and sing reasonably well, and as a child I learned to play several other instruments, including the guitar. When I learned guitar back then, it was only strumming chords, never picking individual notes, but this time, I wanted to learn to play classical guitar where you *do* pick individual strings, so that's what I asked Abbey to teach me.

When I started with Abbey, I thought that since I'd learned to play as a child, and because I had a decent musical background, that it would be fairly easy for me to learn classical guitar. I figured that because I could read music, play the piano, and had played guitar before (albeit 40 years ago), I would pick up classical guitar fairly quickly.

It is so hilarious to me at this point that I thought that!

So, I went into this with the expectation that it would be *easy*. I figured it would be a little challenging *sometimes*, but I wasn't too worried because I figured my enthusiasm to learn and my prior experience would carry me through. I imagined myself flying through the lesson book, and I just knew I was going to be Abbey's star guitar student, her amazing classical guitar protege.

## When Progress Is Slow

OK, that's a little exaggerated, but you get the idea. I thought it was going to be pretty smooth sailing.

As you might have guessed, that isn't how things have played out. Learning to play classical guitar has been *much* harder than I thought it would be. The first six to eight weeks, the fingers on my left hand really hurt from pressing on the strings. It took weeks to build up sufficient calluses on those fingers so that it didn't feel like the strings were cutting through my skin when I pressed on the strings. I had to learn a new way to sit, position my body, and hold the guitar; and my left arm and shoulder ached a lot while I was building up muscle to hold my left arm and hand appropriately.

The biggest challenge so far, though, has been getting my hands to work together. When I play the piano, my left and right hands play completely different notes. Each finger that presses a key on the piano plays a different note from any other fingers that are simultaneously pressing keys. Over the 40 plus years I've been playing piano, my brain has gotten very good at coordinating that kind of movement. I can look at a piece of music and my brain knows how to make my right hand play one set of notes and the left hand play another set. That piano playing neural pathway is solid and strong.

With guitar, though, instead of the right and left hands playing separate sets of notes, the right and left hands work together to play one set of notes. For any given note, my left hand has to press the correct string in the correct position on the fretboard, and my right hand has to simultaneously pluck the same string. Going from note to note, I have to move fingers on both hands to the correct strings all while trying to keep my eyes on the music, not looking at my fingers; and on top of that, I'm trying to use proper technique

## When Progress Is Slow

so my strings don't buzz and I have good tone, and I'm trying to use proper fingering so I'm able to change notes quickly.

It's a LOT for my brain to manage, and a lot of the time, my brain has been pretty terrible at it. In the early weeks, I would sit down to practice and just couldn't get my hands to work together. It would take a long time to get through one line of music because my brain took what felt like forever to figure out the positioning on both hands to go from one note to the next. A lot of times I'd position my left hand correctly but pluck the wrong string with my right, or I'd pluck the correct string with my right but mess up my left hand position. Some days it would feel like I was regressing because I'd completely botch songs that I played just fine the day or the week before. I was pretty frustrated much of the time the first three, four, probably five months. I broke down in tears a number of times thinking, "I'm never going to figure this out. This should be easier than it is. I should be picking this up faster."

So progress has definitely been slower than I expected, and slower than I wanted, but when I remind myself that slow progress is still progress, it's much easier for me to keep going. I feel lighter, more empowered, and more motivated when I think that.

Something interesting that I've noticed through all of this is that there have been many times where I've practiced a piece and really struggled to get the fingering down. It'll sound pretty bad and choppy for a few days, and I'll get frustrated...again...because I'll start thinking things like, "I'm not getting this. I should have mastered this by now." Then, I'll sit down to practice the next day and be able to play it correctly. My fingers will just know where to go and the song will suddenly be much easier to play. I know why this happens, but it

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

feels almost magical each time it does. My brain is building new neural pathways each time I'm practicing. Of course I can't see that happening, but I know it is. It takes more than just practice, though, to build and strengthen a neural pathway. My brain also needs sleep and rest, so after a sufficient amount of practice and sleep, the neural pathway will be strong and stable enough for me to play the music. It is so miraculous and fascinating to me how that works! So in addition to reminding myself that slow progress is still progress, I also remind myself that progress is still happening in my brain even though I can't see it.

Another example of where I've found it helpful to remember that slow progress is still progress has been with strength training. A few years ago I started following a training routine from a book I purchased, and this book touted the benefits of lifting heavier weights with fewer reps over lifting lighter weights with more reps. As I progressed through weeks and then months of this program, I added too much weight too quickly – because I was impatient and thought my progress wasn't fast enough – and I ended up injuring myself. I had to completely stop lifting for a while to allow my body to heal. When I started up again, I had to be very intentional about telling myself slow progress is not a problem because it's still progress, and sometimes slow progress is necessary to protect yourself.

OK. Part two - sometimes no progress can be progress. This realization came to me a couple of weeks ago when I saw an Instagram post by a man named Roger Frampton. Roger is a mobility coach, and he posts a lot of content about improving your flexibility and strength, and in this particular reel, he posed the question, "What if making no progress was still progress?" He said if you maintain your current mobility 10 years from now, that's a huge

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

achievement, because you haven't gotten worse, your body isn't worse off, and you're not in more pain. I'll put a link to the reel in the show notes so you can see the whole thing because it's very good. I'd never thought about progress like that before, but I saw that and thought, yes, that makes sense! Where else in my life, besides mobility and strength, might that be true? The first thing that came to mind was my house and yard. We have quite a large slope in our backyard that grows way more weeds than I'd like, and I thought, if we keep the amount of weeds to the level they are now instead of having them grow out of control like they love to do, that would be great! I still want to do things to decrease them further, but I can see that no progress would still be progress here.

## 2. Give yourself grace about what you don't know.

On to tip number two. This tip is to give yourself grace about what you don't know. With learning guitar, I had a realization during one frustrating practice session that when I started this, I had no idea it was going to be so hard. I had no idea I was going to have to learn a different way to sit and hold the guitar. I didn't know I was going to have to build up calluses and arm and shoulder strength, and I was going to have to create a completely new neural pathway to work around the one that allowed my hands to play separately on the piano. I had no idea that knowing how to play the piano was going to make it harder, not easier, to learn to play the guitar. I didn't know what I didn't know.

Now could I have researched, talked to other people, watched videos about learning classical guitar, and so on and figured out some of that stuff before I started? Possibly. I certainly could have done all of those things. But – and



## When Progress Is Slow

this is important to note – there’s a good chance, even if I had done all of those things, that I still would have missed stuff. For example, even if someone had told me it was going to be hard or harder than I was expecting, I don’t know that I would have believed them. Before I started, I was so confident my musical background would help me, I probably would have dismissed or ignored any comments to the contrary. That was something I had to experience to understand.

No matter what you’re trying to accomplish or learn or achieve or get through, there will always be things you don’t know you don’t know. There is so much power and freedom in accepting that, because when you do, you realize you don’t need to shame or bully yourself for not knowing (which, side note, is typically what humans and perfectionists in particular often do). But what good ever comes of that? What good would it have done for me to shame myself for not realizing it was going to be harder than I thought? What useful purpose would that have served? None. Absolutely none. I was already struggling and suffering. Bullying and shaming myself on top of that would only have added more suffering for me – which would not have been helpful.

This is not to say I didn’t have bullying and shaming thoughts around this – I absolutely did – but when they started forming, I recognized what was happening, and I made a conscious choice to tell myself, “Look, Keri. You didn’t know what you didn’t know. That’s normal, and it’s fine. You thought this was going to be easier and faster, but you were wrong about that. It’s okay. What do you want to do now?” Talking back to my brain like that whenever the bullying thoughts come up – and they still do – that has helped me keep going and keep practicing. It has helped me keep going to lessons

# When Progress Is Slow

when I feel like quitting or telling Abbey I can't make it, it's helped me keep asking Abbey to demonstrate proper technique and give feedback on my technique, to keep working on the suggestions she gives me, to keep working through the pain and the tears, AND to notice I have progressed.

## 3. Give yourself permission to be a beginner.

Next tip. Tip number three. This tip is to give yourself permission to be a beginner. What does that mean? If you've downloaded my "Lies of Perfectionism" cheat sheet, you may remember that one of the lies I listed is that you should be farther ahead than you are. (Side note, you can head to the show notes for a link to download that cheat sheet if you haven't already.) "You should be farther ahead than you are" is a lie because there is no pre-set schedule for growth. You are where you are. When you believe the lie that you *should* be farther ahead than you are, when you believe it's NOT okay to be a beginner at something, when you believe there's something wrong with you because you're not farther ahead than you are, you end up feeling inadequate, insecure, frustrated, ashamed, and disempowered, which often leads to quitting. And quitting is definitely not going to help you progress any faster, right?

When I was going through coach certification, my teacher, Brooke Castillo, taught this concept. In the very first class she said, "In the beginning, you're not going to be good at this. You're going to suck, and that's okay. Be okay with being a beginner. Let it suck." And that was hard for me to swallow. It still is sometimes. As a perfectionist, I didn't want people to see me suck. I didn't want them to think less of me because I couldn't do something well. The real truth, though, was that *I* would think less of me if I didn't do something well and that caused me more pain than other people not

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

thinking well of me. Once I gave myself permission to be a beginner, to be where I was and not berate myself for it, training and practicing, trying and failing, got much easier.

Now, I know some of you are thinking, “That’s all well and good, but I should have started something – whatever it is you’re working on – sooner because then I’d be farther along now than I am.” Maybe it’s going to school to get a degree or changing your diet to lose weight or setting aside money for retirement. If you’re thinking, “I messed up by not starting something sooner, and that’s hurting me now,” let’s just play with that for a minute. Let’s say that’s true. We could have a whole separate discussion on whether or not it’s “true” that you messed up by not starting something sooner, but for our purposes right now, let’s just say it’s true. You should have started something sooner so you could be farther along now. OK. Now what? Can you go back in time and make it so you *did* start sooner? No. So what’s the upside of telling yourself that you *should* have started sooner? I get it – this is hard to wrap your mind around and challenging to believe, but there is no upside to believing it. You’ve probably heard the proverb that the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago, and the second best time is now. Don’t give your mental and emotional energy to trying to change something you can’t change. You can’t go back in time. You are where you are right now. Accept that and then decide what you want to do going forward.

## 4. Look for and acknowledge progress you’ve already made.

Moving on. Tip number four is to look for and acknowledge the progress you’ve already made. There’s a book written by Dan Sullivan and Dr.

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

Benjamin Hardy called *The Gap and the Gain*. In this book, Dan Sullivan says, “The way to measure your progress is backward against where you started, not against your ideal.” As humans, our tendency is to look ahead to where we’re trying to go or to what we’re trying to achieve. This is what Dan Sullivan refers to as “the gap,” and it’s useful to pay attention to that. We need to keep our eye on where we’re trying to go so we know when we’ve veered off track. But our brains aren’t good at using “the gap” to determine how much progress we’ve made. We need to regularly look back to see how far we’ve come, and that’s what Dan calls “the gain.”

I’ve been doing this a lot with learning to play the guitar. When I’m practicing a particular song and feel like I’m not making progress, all I have to do is flip the pages of the book back to see how much growth I’ve already made. And that’s so fun and motivating!

There’s an account I follow on Instagram called @lizandmollie. Liz Fosslien is the Liz in @lizandmollie, and she posts a lot of images she creates about various mental health and work topics. She posted a powerful image a while ago about this idea of looking back at how far you’ve come. I love looking at pictures like hers because sometimes they convey ideas better and are more memorable than just words. So I’ll put a link to this image in the show notes, and I hope you’ll check it out for yourself.

## 5. Remember growth takes time and is not linear.

Tip number five is to remember that growth takes time and is not linear. We think growth should look like a hockey stick – it should be a steep upward

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

## When Progress Is Slow

trajectory – but it rarely is. How often do we see growth like that in real life? I don't have a number or a percentage, but I know it's rare. Usually growth looks like a stock market graph – lots of ups and downs but an overall upward trajectory – or some crazy line that loops all over the place but keeps moving forward. There are a few @lizandmollie images I think illustrate this idea beautifully and I'll link to those in the show notes, as well. I'll describe a couple of them here, but you really need to see them to get the full effect. In one image, Liz has drawn a seed being planted and then growing and wrote the words, "Good things take time. Just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean that it never will." In the second image, which I think is my most favorite of all she's done, she has what looks like a spirograph drawing. If you don't know what a spirograph is, imagine someone drawing in a circular motion, around and around and around to create an overlapping spiral. With that drawing she wrote words about how growth can feel like going in circles. Below that spirograph drawing is another drawing that looks like the side view of a spring with an arrow pointing up and then words about how making progress is more like this. Again, I'm not doing this justice, so please go look at the actual image.

I listened to an episode of *The Virtual Couch* podcast back in December of last year, and in that episode, host Tony Overbay talked with his friend and colleague, Nate Christensen. At one point in the episode, Nate talked about making a New Year's resolution 10 years ago to work on having a more positive mindset and how he was going to keep working on that until he achieved it. He then said it's now 10 years later, and he just now feels like he's got it. He didn't think it would take that long, but it did. Growth takes time.

# When Progress Is Slow

About a year and a half ago I was called to be a leader in my church's young women's organization, and when I was first called, I felt so inadequate, so unqualified, and so confused. I generally prefer to work with adults over teenagers. I'm more comfortable working with adults than with kids, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do or how I was going to relate to these young girls. I'm roughly four decades older than they are, and I kept thinking, "They're going to think I'm a dork and I'm not cool. They're not going to like me or want to hear anything I have to say. I don't know if I'll be able to help them in any way." Yada yada yada. The struggle was definitely real. It's been over 18 months now, and I feel better and more confident – I no longer feel completely lost, for example – but I still feel shaky and uncertain sometimes. I still wonder sometimes if I'm helping, if I'm doing what God wants or giving these young women what they need. But, I just keep reminding myself growth takes time—often much more time than we think it should—and that's okay. That's how life is. This is the way, if you're a *Mandalorian* fan.

## 6. Look for and collect evidence for what you want, not for what you don't.

Sixth and final tip, and I've saved my favorite one for last. This is my favorite one because I think this is such a powerful self-coaching and self-improvement tool. I have used this to improve so many things in my life, not just to handle slow progress. The tip is to look for and collect evidence for what you want, not for what you don't.

I posted a reel on Instagram and Facebook last week about how there will always be opposing forces and ideas in the world and how we need those to grow. Similarly, there will always be opposing evidence to support different

[Perfectionist Professional Woman Podcast](#) with Keri Martinez

# When Progress Is Slow

beliefs. For example, I could give you evidence that capitalism helps people, and I could give you evidence that it harms. I could give you evidence that chocolate is bad for you, and evidence that it's good. I could give you evidence that screens are fine for kids, and evidence that they're harmful. I could give you evidence that the world is getting better and that it's getting worse. I could go on, but you get the idea. There will always be opposing evidence to support different beliefs. It's supposed to be that way because choosing between two options and then acting on our choice is a big part of how we learn in life.

So, if there will always be opposing evidence, what do you want to believe? Do you want to believe slow progress is a good thing or a problem? Do you want to believe it's okay to give yourself grace for what you don't know or not? Do you want to believe it's okay to be a beginner or not? Do you want to believe it's helpful to acknowledge how far you've come or do you want to believe you should look only at how far you still have to go? Do you want to believe it's normal for growth to take time or do you want to believe it should be quick?

I shared stories with each of the previous tips to give you evidence to support what I believe about those tips, but someone else could come up with evidence to support the opposite of what I've shared, right? I choose to believe that slow progress isn't a problem because believing that helps me achieve the results I want. Believing that helps me accomplish goals and overcome challenges. So, because I choose to believe that, I choose to collect evidence to support it. I look for examples and stories and ideas from my life and other people's that support the belief that slow progress is okay.

# When Progress Is Slow

This is not to say that there isn't evidence to support that slow progress is bad – there is, and I used to be very good at collecting it! But, once I realized that I was stalling out and quitting some of my goals *because I believed slow progress was a problem*, I decided I didn't want to believe that anymore. I decided I wanted to believe it *wasn't* a problem and I made a conscious choice to start looking for evidence to support that.

Was it hard at first to find that kind of evidence when I was so used to looking for evidence to the contrary? Yes. Did it feel awkward and clunky initially to look for that kind of evidence? Yes. Did I have to stretch my imagination at times to find the kind of evidence I was looking for? Yes! But, eventually it got easier, and the more I continue to do it, the easier it continues to get. Whatever you task your brain to look for, it will find. So what evidence do you want it to look for?

## Summary

All right. That's all of the tips. Let's do a quick recap before I wrap up.

1. Remember slow progress is still progress, and sometimes even no progress can be progress.
2. Give yourself grace about what you don't know.
3. Give yourself permission to be a beginner.
4. Look for and acknowledge progress you've already made.
5. Remember growth takes time and is not linear.
6. Look for and collect evidence for what you want, not for what you don't.



## When Progress Is Slow

Thanks for listening to this episode of the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. To see show notes and a transcript, head over to [kerimartinez.com/podcast](https://kerimartinez.com/podcast). That's k-e-r-i-m-a-r-t-i-n-e-z dot com forward slash podcast. And while you're there, click the link to download my "7 Lies of Perfectionism" cheat sheet so you can see which lies you're believing that are holding you back. If you have any questions or comments about the episode, feel free to reach out to me on Instagram or Facebook. I'm @kerimartinezcoaching on both.

Have a beautiful week – ciao for now!