

Choose Your Hard



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Welcome to the *Perfectionist Professional Woman* podcast. This is episode nine, "Choose Your Hard."

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.

Hello, hello, hello! Welcome to this week's episode.

Today I want to talk to you about a strategy I call "choosing your hard." This strategy can help you handle hard things in a couple of ways, and everyone seems to be going through hard things right now, so I think this is a really timely topic for the podcast. The strategy can help you first by reframing how you think about hard things (which can make them easier to handle), and second by keeping you in the game, so to speak. And I'm going to explain a little more about what I mean by that.

In the book *The Psychology of Money*, author Morgan Housel talks about the importance of investing money in a way that allows you to stay in the game

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long enough for you to benefit from the power of compounding interest. He says, “good investing isn’t necessarily about earning the highest returns, because the highest returns tend to be one-off hits that can’t be repeated. It’s about earning pretty good returns that you can stick with and which can be repeated for the longest period of time.”

You can’t win a game you’re not playing, and you can’t accomplish a goal you’re not working on. So when challenges come up and your motivation goes down, this strategy of “choosing your hard” can help you stay in the game long enough to eventually win, to eventually accomplish your goal or overcome your challenge.

OK. Let’s talk now about what I actually mean by “choosing your hard.” I’d like you to think of it a couple of different ways. First is choosing the *level* of hard and second is choosing the *kind* of hard. For both, the main point I want to emphasize is the *choosing* part, or your agency over your options – *choosing* the level of hard and *choosing* the kind of hard.

In any self-improvement or growth practice, personal agency is *the most* important aspect, and interestingly enough, it’s something we tend to downplay, dismiss, or misapply. Personal agency is critical, though, because it is the source of our power. When we don’t understand that or we don’t understand how to use it, we *disempower* ourselves. We give our power away.

So what might that look like?

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Well, in any given situation, there are things we can control and things we can't, right? In stoic philosophy this is known as the "dichotomy of control." Human beings spend a lot of time and energy worrying about and/or trying to control things we can't control – things like the weather; the stock market; what other people think, feel, and do; and things that happened in the past. We focus on things we *can't* control while simultaneously ignoring what we *can*, which is what we think, feel, and do. Stoic philosophy says, and I also recommend, that you focus on what you *can* control and just ignore the rest. Now sometimes that's easier said than done, I know, but when we focus on and try to control things outside of our control, all we do is waste mental, emotional, and even physical calories. We end up feeling frustrated, stuck, and disempowered. Acknowledging and acting on what we can control, however, has the opposite effect. It leaves us feeling energized, hopeful, and empowered.

It may not seem like it, but when something in your life feels really challenging or overwhelming, you *do* have options about how you can respond or proceed through the situation. Let's say you're dealing with a health challenge. Maybe you or someone else in your family is suffering with a chronic illness or chronic pain. Maybe you've tried a lot of different things to alleviate or cure the suffering. You've gone to different doctors, tried different medications, tried other therapies, maybe you've fasted and prayed for relief, and the chronic illness or pain hasn't improved, or at least it's still there. Maybe you've been told it *won't* improve, and there's nothing more the medical community can do to help, and at that point maybe you feel like you're out of options. Maybe you feel like you don't have choices or personal agency here.

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I think most people would agree that's a really challenging thing to go through, but when you tell yourself there's nothing more you can do, you give up all your personal power. Your brain shuts down any problem solving and shifts into self-pity and wallowing. And look, I'm not saying any of this to minimize anybody's suffering. I'm not saying you *shouldn't* feel self-pity or sadness or anger or anything like that if you're in a situation like this. I know chronic illnesses and chronic pain are incredibly challenging. I know they are hard to handle – whether it's your own diagnosis or someone else's. But here's the thing. Wallowing in self-pity and anger and frustration won't fix the problem. It won't make the chronic illness or chronic pain better. If it did, I'd be all in on you doing it. But, it only layers additional suffering on top of the existing suffering, and then you're just suffering even more!

This is hard for our brains to process sometimes, and I totally get that, but when we argue with reality – when we spin in thoughts of how it isn't fair or we shouldn't be experiencing it or things should be different than they are – we just create more suffering and pain. Our brains think this kind of spinning will help, but it never does. Byron Katie says, “When you argue with reality, you lose - but only 100 percent of the time.”

If you're thinking you have a right to be upset and angry and frustrated about what you're going through, you're right! I'm not saying you *shouldn't* feel that way and you *should* just be happy instead. What I am saying is that in “choosing your hard,” you can minimize or eliminate the *unnecessary* suffering, the additional suffering, if you want. And if you don't want to, that's completely fine, too.

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Okay. Let me share some ideas to illustrate how you can apply this strategy and “choose your hard.”

First, you can acknowledge what you’re going through is hard, and just let it be hard. Stop resisting the hard or telling yourself it shouldn’t be this way and instead, acknowledge and allow it. This is how it is right now. It won’t always be this way, but right now it is what it is.

Second, remind yourself that hard work brings growth. Think back to examples from your life or someone else’s where hard work led to something positive. Maybe it’s building muscle, learning a new skill, earning a degree, developing a certain characteristic, creating a product, or winning a competition. Remind your brain that hard work is beneficial and then tell yourself you *can* do hard things. Cliche or not, that statement is true.

Third, tell your brain hard work can be fun. That’s probably more true of hard work that comes from pursuing goals than it is from situations like chronic illness that we don’t choose, but it can be a helpful thought nonetheless.

When I worked as a technology coach and trainer, I would occasionally have to learn new programs or platforms so that I could then train others on how to use them. Each time I’d have to do that, I would go through a formal training with the software company to get started, and afterward, I’d spend a lot of time poking around and playing and trying different things so I could really understand how the program worked. I would intentionally try to break things so I knew what would happen. Later, as I was training others, if someone asked me how to do something I didn’t know how to do or that I wasn’t sure was possible within the program, I’d play and explore and try

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more things until I figured it out. Sometimes, if the program didn't have the explicit feature or function to do what the person wanted it to do, I'd find workarounds or hacks to meet their needs. That was a lot of work for me, but it was fun! I know that kind of thing isn't fun for everyone, but my point is that a fun, play-filled approach served me very well. It allowed me to hyper-focus and stay in the game long enough to develop real expertise so I was then a very effective trainer and troubleshooter.

So consider, how can you make something about your situation fun, or at least maybe a little fun? How might you incorporate play and exploration in your struggle and process? If you were just playing, if you weren't looking at the situation with a serious, "I have to figure this out right now" perspective, what might you try or do differently?

Fourth, ask yourself, "How could this be easier?" If you're feeling overwhelmed, what are you telling yourself you *have to do* that you don't actually have to do? What can you give yourself permission to let go of, simplify, or delegate, at least temporarily, that would make things easier?

At work, are there processes or meetings you can streamline or eliminate? Early in my education career, I had a co-worker who one day shared that he regularly examined his teaching practices and procedures to see where he could make them more efficient. Before that conversation, I confess it had never occurred to me to do that, but that conversation completely changed how I looked at what I was doing. If you're doing certain things just because you've always done those certain things, give yourself permission to consider other options. Can you streamline, delegate, or eliminate anything you're doing? For example, are there tasks or roles you've taken on that no one

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actually asked you to do that you can stop doing? Can you establish design standards to streamline the creation of new presentations, documentation, and projects? Are there bells and whistles you're trying to incorporate in projects that don't add much value and could actually be scrapped? Can co-workers help with projects or tasks you've been given? Can your boss redistribute duties within your department to take things off your plate?

At home, can you eat out more, buy frozen dinners, or eat sandwiches and cereal so you don't have to cook as much? Can you delegate cooking or cleaning or carpooling to someone else? Would it really be the end of the world if you didn't dust for a month or two or three? Can you cut back on after-school activities for your kids?

I listened to a podcast this past week where an ecologist was talking about bristlecone pine trees, and she said these trees are often called "extremophiles" by scientists because they survive where little else does in extremely cold temperatures, extremely dry soil, high winds, high elevations, and short growing seasons. Despite all of that, they are extremely long lived. Some of these trees are between 1,000 and 5,000 years old. These trees survive extreme conditions because they devote their energy to just the simple basics they need to survive. Is this a time where you need to focus on just the simple basics to survive?

If a goal or habit you're working on feels hard, what would make things easier? In fact, what would be the easiest, simplest, smallest thing you could do to make progress? James Clear, the author of *Atomic Habits*, recommends doing things that are so easy you can do them without motivation. He says, "Rather than starting with 50 pushups per day, start with

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5 pushups per day. Rather than trying to meditate for 10 minutes per day, start by meditating for one minute per day. Make it easy enough that you can get it done without motivation.”

He also recommends picking a sticking to a pace you can sustain. This goes back to the idea of staying in the game long enough to win. Even if your progress is slower than you'd like, if your pace is sustainable, you're much more likely to achieve your goal.

Fifth, stop telling yourself you *should* be handling things better. This especially applies to challenges but is also relevant for goals and habits. Give yourself grace and acknowledge you are doing the best you can. Now sometimes your best isn't very good, but it's the best you're capable of *in that moment*. This isn't to say you might be capable of better at other times, but no one performs at their “Best” all the time. You are doing the best you can, with the energy and mental bandwidth you have, within the context of your current situation.

There's a quote attributed to Greek philosopher Heraclitus that says, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man.” The world around you is constantly changing, as you are. The fact that you responded “better” before isn't relevant now because the river is different and you are different. So choose not to push yourself so hard or expect so much of yourself. Choose to give yourself grace.

My sixth and final idea is, when you're facing challenges, be they of your own choosing or not, remember that things will be hard in your life no matter what. You cannot escape all difficulty and pain in life. Life is meant to be a

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mix of good and bad. You are supposed to have challenges and pain along with the good stuff. That's how life is. If you are working toward something or through something, things are going to be hard. You can stick with it or you can give up, but if you give up on something you really want or something you really care about, you won't eliminate the pain. You'll just swap one kind of pain for another. You'll swap the pain of working through the challenge for the pain of disappointment and regret at giving up on yourself. So if things are going to be hard either way, if you're going to experience pain either way, what do you want to do? What kind of hard do you want to choose?

I should add one qualifier here. I'm not saying you should never quit anything. Sometimes quitting will be the right choice in your life. I recently quit something I'd been working on for about 18 months. It was a difficult, painful decision, and I've definitely felt some sadness and regret about it, but it was the right decision for me and my family. I swapped one kind of hard for another, and it was still the right decision. I had a similar experience when I decided to leave the school district I'd worked for for more than 20 years a couple of years back. I swapped one kind of hard for another, and it was still the right decision. Things will be hard either way, AND you get to choose the hard that's best for you.

The real beauty of this strategy is that you can try different things to discover what works for you at any given time. Sometimes you'll find it more helpful to let things be hard, and other times you'll find it more helpful to consider how to make things easier. If the idea of letting things be hard makes you feel determined, calm, or empowered, then go with that. If, on the other hand, the idea of letting things be hard makes you feel overwhelmed and want to shut down, then look for ways to make things easier. Sometimes maybe you'll

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do a combination of both. Just give yourself permission to try different things and adjust as needed. However you choose to apply this strategy, you'll be tapping into your personal power and building your capacity to make decisions, get things done, accomplish goals, and handle challenges.

All right, my friends. That's what I've got for you this week. Go out and "choose your hard." I'd love to hear how this strategy helps you, so feel free to reach out to me on Instagram or Facebook and let me know.

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. 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 "Feel More Confident in Front of Others" cheat sheet. If you'd like to feel more confident speaking up in meetings or delivering presentations and trainings at work, this cheat sheet will help you do that.

Lastly, if this episode has helped you, please take a screenshot and share it on social media so others can also benefit. Be sure to tag me @kerimartinezcoaching so I can give you a shout out.

Have a beautiful week – ciao for now!