



When Your Job is Killing You

Our show is back with a new format! Stevon welcomes Juleyka Lantigua, the show's creator, as a discussion partner as he delves into the complexities high achievers face. In this episode Deepa tells us that after 20 years of moving up in corporate America she felt like the epitome of success. But when physical symptoms of burn out began to intensify, she knew she'd reached a breaking point. Stevon and Juleyka talk about how to address somatized stress and his advice on stepping down from a demanding leadership role.

Clip: So, what we high achievers get is really good at ignoring symptoms and signs. She somatized the stress of running to maintain the life she was in was showing up physically for her.

What's up everybody? Welcome to *How to Talk to High Achievers about Anything*. I'm Stevon Lewis, a licensed psychotherapist. We're going to get into somatizing in a sec, but first in this new season of *How to Talk to High Achieves about Anything*, we're going to change things up a little bit today and moving forward, we're going to have Juleyka Lantigua:, the amazing individual who invited me to host this show hanging out with me from now on. Hi, Juleyka.

Jueyka Lantigua:

Hey, Stevon. What's happening?

Lewis: Nothing much, chilling, making stuff happen, talking to high achievers, changing lives.

Lantigua: It's just a regular Tuesday for you.

Lewis: Run of the mill.

Lantigua: So I have to confess, I am so excited to be here. Let me give people a little bit of an insight into, first of all, why I think you're such a superstar and why I literally created the show so that you could host it because I think that you are a bomb. You are also the bomb, but you are a bomb to those of us who are really striving and trying to do things in ways that there's no precedent for, and talking to you for the original show in the series *How to Talk to Mami and Papi* was so enlightening and was so strengthening that I thought, we need to work with this man. And so, I'm just so thrilled that I get to play a small role of your agitator on the show this

season as your guest. I'm just so excited to learn from you and I know we're going to have so much fun.

Lewis: I definitely think that will happen. I think you bring out the really good parts of me that people will enjoy. All right, let's get started.

Today we welcome Deepa. Deepa is an author, speaker, and business owner dedicated to supporting professional women of color. In her previous life, she was a senior executive in corporate America. She was really successful, but when her dream career began taking a huge physical and emotional toll on her, she had to decide if and how to walk away. Let's get into it.

Deepa: I'm Deepa Purushothaman. I live in California. I'm a former corporate refugee. I left corporate America two years ago to write a book called *The First The Few, The Only*, and to start a company called nFormation, which provides safe, brave, and new space for professional women of color. Growing up was definitely something that shaped a lot of the work that I do now. My parents immigrated to this country in the late '60s. I was born here, but I was maybe one of five students of color at school, and so there was a lot of, I think, questioning, a lot of identity, a lot of, I think, just first generation questions that happened when my parents really wanted us to assimilate and to fit in a lot of ways, and so a lot of confusion around culture because when we spent every summer in India, I didn't fit in there either, so this real sense of not feeling like I fit in.

When I started my career, I started as a senior consultant in Deloitte out of grad school. I thought I was going to corporate America for a year or two. My background was actually politics and policy, and so I was really into advocacy, criminal justice. My stint in corporate America was supposed to be for a year or two just to get private sector experience, to go back and to work on policy and politics issues, and 21 years flew by and I didn't go back, and I think that's part of the challenge that I started to feel towards the last couple of years of my career. I was feeling very called to go back to policy and politics because of what I was seeing in the world, and I really didn't know what to do because I was at that point a senior partner. Partnership is very much like a tenured professorship.

You spent all this energy to get there and people don't leave, especially when you still have 20 years in front of you, but this growing question of purpose, this really growing question of like, "Is this what I was put on this planet to do?" And it started to be really loud, then I started to get really sick. It started as skin rashes and adrenal fatigue, and then over the course of two years, it grew to infections. It just ended up with shingles and then numbness, so a complete neuropathy in my arms and my legs. I ended up spending eight months in bed. I think at the time I really

attribute it to the stress, I really attribute it to the travel. I used to get on and off planes six times a week, that was very normal for me. It was a very intense lifestyle.

100-hour weeks were not unusual and I enjoyed it, but it had caught up to me, and so that combination of purpose and I think my body speaking really started to make me ask different questions. My crisis point came when I was at my 14th doctor. I was really struggling. She looked at me side eyed because I went to my doctor's appointment with my suitcase because I traveled. I saw her in San Diego when I traveled, and this is now the third time I've seen her and she said, "Deepa, I see you as your suitcase every single time, that's not normal." She said, "I can run more tests or I can tell you what I think you probably already know. I think your job is killing you," and then she asked me three life-changing questions. She said, "What would you do if you didn't do a big job like this? Do you feel like you have to do a big job like this to be worthy?"

And then her third question was, "Don't you see you're worthy just being you?" I felt like she had seen through me. My work was my identity and although I loved it, I was caught up in it in some ways. I don't know that I knew at that time what even made me happy, what I really wanted to do, how to get out even if I wanted to get out because it was a lifestyle, it was a way of being, and so it was a big process. It took me almost two and a half, three years even after that conversation to leave. I felt very responsible. I was our first Indian female partner in a firm of 100,000 people. People knew me by my first name. I felt like there were a lot of eyes on me.

A lot of us feel responsible. A lot of us are carrying responsibilities, weights, obligations, expectations that are not ours. There's a way to give it back, but you need to know you're carrying it first to be able to give it back. It's still an ongoing process. Even as an author and someone who's launched a publishing company now, it's really easy for me to get into the habits of overworking, of overperforming, of working that corporate sort of lifestyle. And I have to remind myself, I get to pick the life that I want. I get to set up the hours that I want. I get to say yes and no to things in a very different way. And so, I think there's a lot to it that is still a process and still something that I'm learning.

Lewis: Deepa, thanks for sharing your experience with us and being a part of our show.

What stood out to me when I was listening to Deepa's story was the intense amount of pressure she puts on herself to be successful, even though it is causing her pain or difficulty in her personal life.

Lantigua: Listening to Deepa, I felt like somebody was holding a mirror up to me because those three questions that that doctor asked her, what would you do if you didn't do a big job? Do you feel like you have to have a big job to feel worthy? Those are questions that I have wrestled with my entire life, and I think that it's double the case for women of color. Why do we not think that just us getting there is enough?

Lewis: So it's a tough one, so the environments we're in at times really does send us messages that suggest that we don't belong or that you're not doing it the correct way. And so when we take that in and we question ourselves, it becomes problematic because it'll change our perception of ourselves. And so, we have to continue to work to prove that we do belong and that we are supposed to be where we've gotten to. If you're in this space or you're in this room, there's a reason why. Let go of some of the pressure to perform and just show up and be you.

Lantigua: She literally says, "My work was my identity," that was so difficult to hear.

Lewis: It is because high achievers can easily attach to the created identity. So being a senior exec in corporate America, titles that we've achieved or obtained, it's hard to let go of this representation if there's some positive feedback when we lead with those identities that only capture a small piece of who we are.

Lantigua: She also says, "I didn't know how to get out," that reminded me of the movie, Get Out.

Lewis: Absolutely.

Lantigua: You're in the "sunken place". She also calls herself a corporate refugee. So saying that for some people, getting that deep in corporate America can feel like the sunken place is probably a little bit of a stretch, but not that far off.

Lewis: We'll get into this after this short break.

Lantigua: How do we recognize when we've gotten to the sunken place professionally?

Lewis: It is about the self-awareness that we have and recognizing that there is some safety in the title. When we're asking ourselves to become more or to accept and adhere and be obedient to our calling, there's also a cost to that. Deepa, she was really successful for 20 plus years in corporate America and moved up the ladder, earned some status, and the cost of that is that maybe you are not doing something that you want to be doing or that you're doing something that is being praised by others, but you'd much rather have an interest in another area. And to think about recreating that success in a place that isn't proven or linear, that's

scary to do. She's got to grieve the loss of that, or at least risk losing that to try to create and build something new in a different space.

Lantigua: She actually puts that very question really succinctly, and she says, "This growing question of purpose started to get really loud." And I thought, "Oh, I get that on such a deep level as a founder, as an entrepreneur, as someone who had to grieve the loss of an 18-year career where I too was climbing, climbing, climbing, climbing until I got to the proverbial mountain and then realized, "Oh, I don't want to be here at all." Tell me about grieving. How do we prepare for this grieving that has to happen?

Lewis: So, I'm really glad you said that because I would like to shift people to think more about it as an evolution, an evolving of who you are. Just like Deepa, you were doing really well working for someone else and are also doing well working for yourself now. I use a ton of analogies when I think about things, and the analogy I think for this, Michael Jordan. When he came into the league, he was Michael Air Jordan-

Lantigua: His Airness.

Lewis: His Airness, fine from the free throw line. I think we can all agree that by the end of his career, there wasn't much air left in MJ's game, still very talented basketball player, still the best in the league, won several championships after The Air wasn't what it used to be. I think we want to adhere to or maintain this version of ourselves or the first season that we were in of our lives, then we don't allow ourselves to grow and evolve. And so, I don't want to look at it so much as a loss of, but an evolution of. You can do things in a different way and still maintain the level of success you've gotten accustomed to.

Lantigua: I like that. The other thing that stood out to me was how we've learned now that trauma lives in the body, but it seems like Deepa couldn't identify how much of the trauma related to her career sacrifices was living in her body. How do we listen to our bodies more when we are just driven, driven, driven?

Lewis: So, what we high achievers get is really good at ignoring symptoms and signs. She somatized the stress of running to maintain the life she was in was showing up physically for her.

Lantigua: And that's called somatizing?

Lewis: Somatizing.

Lantigua: Oh, I didn't know that. How do we keep that from happening?

Lewis: Continually do an audit, what we want, and how we want to achieve that. For most of us, and I think Deepa said this as well, she knew the voice for what she wanted to do was getting louder. You hear it, you know it, it's in you, you can feel it. Listen to it. We have to be inquisitive. So when something isn't sitting right with us, don't run from it and don't say, "Well, that's just me. I'm just scared to do this other thing," it's, what's going on internally? What thoughts do I have about moving from one space to the next? Why am I hesitant? And what fears in our past history, and you talk about traumas, have convinced me that it is safer for me to stay where I am than to move and do something different?

Lantigua: I love all of those questions that you just enumerated because she says, "My body speaking really started to make me ask different questions," and I imagine that some of those questions were related to the ones that you just stated. Deepa also spent eight months sick in bed.

Lewis: Bananas, that's half of a year out of commission and still had a difficult time saying, "Well, maybe I should stop doing this and do something different."

Lantigua: Right.

Lewis: It's really not an easy thing to do, even though the signs were there that some evolution needed to happen. Juleyka, thank you for bringing out the best in me, you're a phenomenal sounding board, and I can't wait for us to continue this conversation.

Lantigua: Oh, that was so much fun. Thank you for having me.

Lewis: On our show, my goal is to help all of us figure out how to achieve on our own terms, and I see Deepa and many other high achievers out there doing exactly that, finding ways to succeed in spaces without many examples of people like them at their level, making the decision to be successful in another capacity that is more aligned with who they are and having the courage and trust in themselves to go for it.

And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything. We're thrilled to be back on your feet and we want you to be a part of our show. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices and celebrations, and what's ahead on the journey for you. Send our producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show. She's at virginia@lwcstudios.com. How to Talk to High Achievers About Anything is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Trent Lightbourne mixed this episode. Juleyka Lantigua: is the creator and executive

producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram, we're at Talk to Achievers. Bye, everybody.

Lewis: And that's a wrap. Thank you so much for listening to How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything. We have really big plans for our show and we want you to be a part of it. We want to hear about your successes and challenges, your sacrifices, the ways you've celebrated, and what's ahead as you grow. Send our producer Virginia an email and we'll get your story on the show.

She's at Virginia@lwcstudios.com. *How to Talk to [High Achievers] about Anything* is an original production of LWC Studios. Our show is produced by Virginia Lora. Editing and production support from Jordan Cali. This episode was mixed by Trent Lightburn. Juleyka Lantigua: is the creator and executive producer. I'm Stevon Lewis. On Twitter and Instagram, we're at Talk To Achievers. Bye, everybody.

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