



The Myth of Extraordinary Success

Elizabeth: [00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to *Everyday Unicorn*, the podcast that helps you harness your magic for greater success in work and life. I'm your host, Elizabeth Hope Derby. I'm a mom, a recovering perfectionist, and a longtime leadership and business coach. In this podcast, I'll teach you the secrets of everyday leadership and how to leverage your brand of magic to supercharge your clarity, confidence, and joy.

No more trying to fake it till you make it or twisting yourself into knots so you can fit inside other people's expectations. Whether you're running a business, evolving your career, or just trying to find balance between being a parent and an actual person, it's time for you to start living your version of success in the office, on the playground, and beyond.

Starting now, you get to make every day a bit more magical just by being you. So [00:01:00] let's get to it.

Hello and welcome back to another episode of *Everyday Unicorn*. I am so happy you're here. Today I want to talk to you about the myth of extraordinary success. And this is a topic that is on my heart a lot because I have a real bone to pick with our cultural obsession with extraordinary achievements, with extraordinary results, and with extraordinary success.

And what underlies all of that is the myth, the false expectation that if we can achieve extraordinary things, we will unlock extraordinary happiness. And this to me is, it's a toxic lie [00:02:00] that underpins most of the messages we receive about pretty much anything related to consumerism.

You know, I've been seeing a lot of ads. I've been watching Hulu recently and for some reason, I'm getting a lot of ads for different prescription medications. Probably says something about their assumption of my demographic, but anyway. You know, I think there's what I see a lot in these ads is a focus on curing whatever's wrong with you.

You know, the visuals they give you are like peak moments, right? It's like you've climbed to the top of a mountain, or you're laughing with your best friend at a pastry shop, or you're on a sunset cruise and a romantic date with your life partner, or you're laughing and playing with your children. And, you know, peak experiences, things that we associate with happiness and fulfillment and living the good life.

And these are advertisements, so obviously that's what [00:03:00] they're going to show you. They want to talk about how it's possible to achieve more of these things. Joyful, happy, fulfilling moments, if you just buy their stuff, if you just cure your pain, if you just try another pill. And, I mean, of course, like, all advertising is about this, right?

It's either, and I've studied, just sidebar to say, I've studied marketing and advertising for over a decade. And generally, it falls into one of two camps, right? We're teaching people, not teaching, but you're implying that people will either overcome pain or achieve pleasure. It's one of the two.

And studies have shown that on average, people avoid pain. 80 percent of the time, that's what will motivate people to take action to buy. 20 percent of the time it's to achieve pleasure. And, so obviously, right, we're pain avoidant, of course, who wouldn't be? I am much more likely to do things because I'm unhappy about it.

And I want to create a change because I want to relieve my unhappiness, or I want to relieve my physical [00:04:00] pain, or I want to relieve my mental or emotional pain, whatever. So that's sort of how the advertising market is framed. And once you start seeing it that way, it's obvious. But I'm talking about this because it's persistent in all the messaging we receive, not just literal advertisements that we're watching on TV.

You know, I opened up my email today and I had a notification, just a marketing message from LinkedIn about how to stand out in a competitive market. Like how can you possibly stand out in a competitive market? And, that was the email subject line. And so obviously, email subject lines are meant to capture your attention.

They are meant to get you to click through to open the email. So they want to hit on something that feels like a hot-button issue to you. Just like news headlines, right? Like, there are word choices made in ways that are meant to spike the parts of your brain that will react to bad news or really good news. Like, it's all over the [00:05:00] top.

There's this level of extremism baked into the messaging that we're surrounded by. And, that's just true across the board because we live in an attention economy and people are constantly competing for attention. The only way to get your attention is to use words like extraordinary.

Or to show pictures of extraordinary achievements, or to talk about case studies of professionals who've achieved extraordinary things in their careers, or to talk about how extraordinarily competitive the job market is. And so how, you know, that sort of extremism is the water we swim in. It's because we are surrounded by people who want to get our attention, and want to keep our attention.

And what's underpinning all of that is just how we're wired. It's just how our brains are wired. We pay attention to extraordinary things. You know, watch any nature documentary, people aren't paying attention to the birds who have, like, dull feathers, right? Like, we want peacocks, we want huge, flashy bloomage, [00:06:00] and it's what our eyes are drawn to.

That's the way the world works. For better and worse. And in this particular case, I want to draw your attention to the fact that you are likely day in and day out buying into a myth about being extraordinary in your career, in your life, achieving extraordinary things in your business or your work, achieving some level of extraordinary happiness.

And I want to talk about this idea of extraordinary happiness. Like, what does that even mean? I think if I talk about extraordinary success in your business or your career, or, you know, in your artistic practice, if you have an artistic practice, I mean, I think we all know what that is, right? It's like, making a certain amount of money every year, whatever your income threshold is, it's the big, it's the millions plus for most people, or it's having a New York Times [00:07:00] bestseller, or it's winning all kinds of awards, or being featured in different fancy places, right? Like, these are sort of the markers of extraordinary success and achievement that we associate with above-and-beyond sort of wins, right?

I think in life, in certain areas of life, like parenting comes to mind, I think most people are not aiming for extraordinary. I think they're just aiming for satisfaction and survival to a certain degree. And I say that because I really don't know anyone who would reasonably push their children or themselves to be extraordinary, to become an honors student, to get into Ivy League schools.

Now, of course, those people exist, right? I'm not saying that doesn't exist. And maybe you are like that. Maybe you're like, listen, I came from an Ivy League background. I was high honors all the way. That, to me, matters a lot for [00:08:00] whatever reason. Maybe that's your bag, probably not if you're listening to this, although I will say, I was a high achiever. I mean I'm sure you're a high achiever if you're listening to this, but you probably don't attach that level of importance to certain external markers for your children or yourself as a parent, but you probably want to experience more happiness, and joy and fulfillment on a day to day basis.

And this is what I want you to notice. That, in some cases, we have a false idea of what happiness looks like and what's possible to achieve realistically. So that we assume what our life should look like, and what are actually our ideas are really ideals.

Our idea of happiness is really an ideal of happiness. We think that day to day, as [00:09:00] parents, as workers, as supervisors, as business owners, as bosses, we should be extraordinary because we hold ourselves to very high standards. Or even if your standards aren't that high, because that's the other thing.

It's like, listen, you may have high standards for your own performance. But you may have unrealistic expectations for what kind of happiness is possible in your day-to-day life because you have been so conditioned and inundated by the messages that we receive on a regular basis. I'm not saying any of this to discourage anybody.

I don't feel discouraged by this information. I personally feel relieved by this information. To me, it's a relief to think, you know what, if I have a day where I feel mostly relaxed and I have several highlights of warm, wonderful moments and I can, you know, maybe do, do a handful of things that I feel were meaningful and I [00:10:00] accomplished something that mattered to me.

I had a good conversation with my husband and I was able to play for a while with my son and give him a kiss and feel good in my body and breathe some fresh air. That I am, frankly, like I have food in my belly. I have, right, a roof over my head. That's winning at life. As far as I'm concerned, that is extraordinary success.

And I think that is not the standard that most of us hold ourselves to. I think we have a problem with ordinary. And then we think like, well, that's ordinary. That's, I mean, maybe what I just described is actually extraordinary for some folks. But in general, the ordinary in our lives is the only place we're going to experience what we think of when we say extraordinary success or extraordinary happiness. You know, there's nothing wrong with being average, although if you're a high achiever, that probably makes your skin crawl. And I know for a long time that made my skin crawl because I was always [00:11:00] someone who could achieve extraordinary above and beyond, like, you know, one percent of the one percent type stuff in my work life, and in my personal life.

I felt, like, destined for great things, and therefore, should always be winning and achieving at this sort of superhuman level. And the more I have let go of that, the happier I am. Because when you let go of the desire to be extraordinary, you could start embracing the delight of being ordinary.

And detaching from that myth that extraordinary results create extraordinary happiness really frees you up to enjoy what's already here, to enjoy what you've already created. And that is the easiest way to love your life and to do more really cool stuff, to experience more of the good stuff in your life, to help other people experience more of the good stuff is to enjoy what you already [00:12:00] have, and to really appreciate it. And not to appreciate it from a place of like, ugh, I know I should appreciate this. I'm going to be grateful. I'm going to grit my teeth and force myself to be grateful. But from a place of, no, I'm genuinely glad that this is my reality in this moment.

So I want to give you a little exercise that you could practice at some point today, maybe right now, if you're listening, right, to help you tap into some of this ordinary success, to tap into some of this feeling of ordinary happiness and maybe experience how that can feel better than it's felt so far today.

Now I mentioned at the top of this episode that most advertisers are either telling you that you can escape pain or achieve pleasure. And so I want you to just notice right now, how are you feeling? And what is it that you think would change if you achieve something extraordinary today?

Or if you were [00:13:00] experiencing extraordinary happiness, how would your mindset be different? How would your feeling about where you are right now be different? And I'm willing to bet it's one of three things. I'm willing to bet you either want to experience relief from some kind of pain, like I've got a cold, so it would be nice if I didn't feel so stuffy, right?

That's a pretty minor example, but relief from pain is one thing you probably would like. A feeling of peace, inner peace, peace of mind. That's the second thing that you may be wanting. And the third thing is pleasure. Some feeling of reverence, inspiration, satisfaction, entertainment, accomplishment, something that lights up the pleasure zone in your brain.

You probably want one of those three things. And so if you can just notice right now, what is the thing that you're wanting the most? Is it relief from pain? Is it peace of mind? Or is it pleasure?

Notice what that is for you. Now, you may [00:14:00] be, I don't know, very frustrated or very anxious or very stressed about something which by the way, I would argue comes from this obsession with extraordinary success and extraordinary achievement. You know, it's going to trigger your anxiety. It's going to trigger your perfectionism about like, I have to become extraordinary.

I have to do extraordinary things. My life should look extraordinary. It should feel extraordinary. There's so much pressure baked into that. If you do feel, maybe, if you happen to feel something like white-hot anger right now, which you're probably not if you're listening to a podcast. But maybe, who knows, you can get behind that and see what, let's say all you really want to do is like, write a really angry email to someone or curse someone out right now.

The question is, what's under that? Are you wanting relief from pain or are you wanting peace of mind? And you just ask yourself, why do I want to do this thing? Why do I want to do this thing? The more times you ask why, the deeper you're going to get into what you genuinely want to experience right now.

And like I said, it's going to be one of those three things: relief from pain, [00:15:00] pleasure, or peace of mind. So you figure out what it is you want right now. And then the little exercise is this. Ask yourself where you can source that in your day. How can you experience pleasure today? How can you experience peace of mind right now?

How can you experience a little bit of relief from pain? These are actually pretty simple. It doesn't have to be permanent. In fact, it won't be permanent. And that's an important point. No feeling of happiness, no feeling of joy, no feeling of fulfillment is permanent. Everything passes, it will come back, but everything passes.

So what is it that you want, and where can you achieve it? And I'll give you some examples. So if I thought, okay, relief from pain because I have this, you know, like I feel like my nose is getting stuffier and stuffier the longer I talk, how can I give myself some relief? Well, I literally could take medication just like the advertisers suggest.

I could take a hot [00:16:00] shower. Go drink some tea. I could blow my nose. I'm probably going to blow my nose. That's the easiest thing. And then after I have that experience of relief from the pain, just take a beat, take a pause. Enjoy that feeling of momentary clarity in my sinuses. That's one.

Let's say what you want is peace of mind. Well, how can you feel peace of mind if you don't feel peace of mind right now? The easiest way to do this always is presence. To get present in your body, to do some kind of grounding, close your eyes. Take a few deep breaths, touch your skin, feel your feet on the floor, just be where you are, appreciate your heart beating in your chest, appreciate your lungs filling with air, appreciate the fact that you have this time on earth, meaning literally this period of 15 seconds, here you are.

Give yourself something that feels peaceful. Give yourself that gift. Or if what you're [00:17:00] really craving is pleasure, then go do something pleasurable for yourself. It doesn't have to be massive. You know, you could just look at beautiful things on Pinterest if you want. You could go stand in the sunshine if the sun is shining.

You could stretch. God, that feels good when I stretch, doesn't it? You could tell someone something that you really appreciate about them and know how good that feels. Feel how good that feels. Because really the extraordinary sensations that we seek are the things that that moment immediately after you get the thing you want before it shifts and changes, and we all move on.

Right? So the more you practice savoring that sensation that comes after the thing that you most want, the more you will build the muscle memory of experiencing something above and beyond average. The more you will detour from your typical way of moving through life and feel [00:18:00] something outside the ordinary, something extraordinary.

Simply because you slowed down. You paid attention to what you wanted. You gave yourself a little bit of that and allowed yourself to enjoy it. Right here in your ordinary life. No extraordinary achievements required. I hope this was helpful. As always, I am wishing you a day of magic and extraordinary moments.

Extraordinary baked right into the ordinary because that's what we're talking about here on Everyday Unicorn. All right, I'll talk to you next time.

Thank you for tuning in. I hope today's show helps you remember that every day can be extraordinary and that you, my friend, already are. If today's episode was inspiring or useful to you, hit subscribe so you don't miss an episode. If you want to go deeper, you can hire me as your private coach or as a workshop leader for your organization.

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