

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Olivia Vizachero

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You're listening to *The Less Stressed Lawyer* podcast, Episode 79. Today, we're talking all about “can't” thinking, avoidant behavior, and reward cycles. You ready? Let's go.

Welcome to *The Less Stressed Lawyer*, the only podcast that teaches you how to manage your mind so you can live a life with less stress and far more fulfillment. If you're a lawyer who's over the overwhelm and tired of trying to hustle your way to happiness, you're in the right place. Now, here's your host, lawyer turned life coach Olivia Vizachero.

Hi there. How are you? I hope all is going well in your neck of the woods. I am doing well over here, getting settled down in Charleston. I'm finally getting back into the rhythm of coaching my clients.

My first week here, there was construction right outside of my office on the porch in the place that I'm staying, and it was pretty disruptive to my coaching schedule. So, I'm getting back into the swing of things now. I am into my second full week of coaching my clients following my regular schedule, and something came up on a recent client call and it inspired today's episode topic.

This is actually something that comes up pretty frequently with the clients I coach, especially the people that I work with who struggle with procrastination and avoidant behavior. So, I've talked on the podcast before about thinking that things are hard.

I recently did an episode about thinking that something's big, that it's a big project, that it's a big deal, that it's a big decision, and how we create resistance for ourselves when we're thinking those types of thoughts. We drive up our avoidant behavior by thinking that way.

Another way that I see people drive up their avoidant behavior is by telling themselves that they can't do something. This might seem really obvious, but I promise you, it is a really important thing to be on the lookout for, especially if you're a procrastinator.

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

So, if you procrastinate, you probably do what a lot of my clients do, which is they tell themselves that they literally can't force themselves to do something. When I coach people week in and week out on avoiding what they've planned to do, my clients come back to me and they're like, "Olivia, you don't understand. I just can't force myself to do it."

This is actually one of my favorite thoughts to coach on, because it couldn't be further from the truth. The truth is, you literally, you quite literally can force yourself to do something. All right? Now it has to be something that's within the realm of possible things that you can do.

If I asked you to jump off of a 50-story building and fly without any machinery attached to you, you can't do that. Humans can't fly without being assisted by some sort of technology. But if it is something within your capabilities, your natural capabilities to do, then you literally can force yourself to do it.

So, the standard, and this is going to seem kind of drastic and maybe a little dramatic, but I do use the standard and I think it's very, very helpful. It just provides so much clarity. My standard for whether you can or cannot force yourself to do something is, "If I put a gun to your head, and your life was on the line, would you be able to do it?"

If there's an email that you're avoiding sending right now, you know that there's an email in your inbox that's been there for a week and a half, and you just keep telling yourself, "I can't force myself to respond. I don't understand what's wrong with me. I just can't force myself to respond to it." You keep dwelling on it and it's starting to haunt you.

It's sort of like "The Tell-Tale Heart" Edgar Allan Poe poem, right? It's relentless, it won't leave you be, it's just lingering there hanging over your head, creating all of that extra stress and strife, and you've got so much dread that's just building up inside of you.

We make matters worse by lying to ourselves and telling ourselves that we literally can't do it. But if I put a gun to your head, and your life was on the

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

line, and it was between you sending that email and you dying, you would find the willpower to send the email. You would write it probably quite quickly. You would be able to find within you that motivation, that drive, that determination, would come to the surface.

I'm not suggesting that we put ourselves in such dire situations as having a gun to our head. But what I want to highlight here is that if you are capable of doing it under such circumstances, then you're always capable of doing it.

So, the opposite is actually true, you literally can force yourself to do it. Learning how to force yourself to do things is a skill set that we build, right? This is what I mean when I talk about developing discipline. It's when you force yourself to do something simply because you committed to doing it, regardless of whether or not you feel like it.

But the only way that you can develop discipline is by no longer believing the lie that you can't force yourself to do it. Because like I said earlier, the opposite is true, you literally can.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about what happens when we tell ourselves that we can't force ourselves to do something. When you're thinking about a task and you're telling yourself, "I can't force myself to do that," you end up feeling really out of control and helpless, very powerless.

Then think about what you do when you're feeling that way. You procrastinate, you avoid, you don't force yourself to do it. So, if you're thinking that you can't force yourself to do it, I promise you, you won't.

Now, when you change your thoughts to the opposite, to choosing to believe, "I literally can force myself to do this," what changes? You're going to feel completely different. You're going to feel capable and in control. And when you're feeling capable and in control, guess what you do instead of procrastinating and avoiding the task at hand? You do it.

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

I'm going to give you even more of a specific framework to follow. I want you to, when you're telling yourself, "I literally can force myself to do this," and you're feeling capable and in control, I want you to start by identifying: What are the thoughts, the negative thoughts, I'm thinking? And the negative feelings that those thoughts cause me to feel, that are coming up for me when it comes to this task?

I want you to identify the specific T's and F's; the specific thoughts and feelings, okay? You're going to identify those thoughts, and you're going to make a little list. I call it an "allowance list" of the negative emotions that instead of avoiding, you're going to force yourself to feel. You're going to feel them on purpose, okay?

So, you're going to find the negative thoughts and identify the negative feelings. And then, I want you to pick one thought that you're going to think instead of all of the negative thoughts that you just identified. What's the thought you're going to choose to think instead? I love to think, "I literally can force myself to do this."

Then I want you to find one additional thought about the task. One thought makes you feel a little bit more determined, a little bit more committed, a little bit more in control, a little bit more capable. What's that thought?

And then I want you to make a deal with yourself. Remind yourself that you literally can force yourself to do this task. You're going to say, "All right, I'm going to be willing to feel all the negative feelings that doing this task will require me to feel," and then you're going to gag-and-go through that discomfort.

So, when you're believing that you literally can force yourself to do it, guess what? You end up doing the task. You end up forcing yourself to do it. And you get all of the relief and sense of accomplishment that comes on the other side of telling yourself that you literally can force yourself to do it, that it's within your control, that you're in control of yourself, rather than being out of control and not having any power over what you do and do not do.

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

Now, I want to also offer a few different suggestions for what you can do to really overcome your initial resistance. I've talked about this on the podcast before, but when you are feeling really resistant and you're in an avoidant pattern, and you feel like you can't bring yourself to do the task at hand, I want you to make a deal with yourself that you're just going to do it for 30 seconds. If you can get 30 seconds into a task, you will work on it longer than 30 seconds. But you just have to get over that initial hump.

Another incredible trick, and I love this one. I actually learned this from Kara Loewentheil. She's a coach, also a former attorney. She teaches people... Because one of the reasons that we end up resisting the negative emotion is we're shoulding on ourselves. We're telling ourselves we have to do something, and then we create this rebellion cycle.

You start to rebel because deep down you know you don't have to do anything. You become sort of like a petulant child; really fighting yourself, going to war with yourself. You're telling yourself you need to do something, you have to do something, and the toddler inside of you, the primitive part of your brain is like, "No, I don't. You can't tell me what to do." Then you create this resistance.

When there's resistance, then we want to rebel against the resistance. You end up rebelling by procrastinating, by avoiding the task that you keep telling yourself you have to do. While simultaneously telling yourself that you literally can't force yourself to do it, even though you can.

So, the suggestion that Kara makes, which I think is absolutely brilliant, is she suggests if you're going to rebel, because you just have to prove to yourself that you have free will, then rebel, but don't reward yourself. Meaning, don't do the thing that you said you were going to do, and also don't do anything else.

Don't scroll on Instagram, don't go watch an episode of Seinfeld, don't go grab a snack, don't go work on something else that you weren't planning to work on but seems more fun or easier to do in the moment. Literally do

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

nothing else. When you confront this decision, this choice between doing the thing you plan to do or doing nothing at all, 99 times out of 100 you'll choose to do the task at hand rather than squander that time.

The problem that we face when we're in an avoidant pattern is that we reward ourselves by doing something more entertaining, more fun in the moment, easier in the moment, and then we reinforce this resist/avoid rebel cycle because we get a benefit by avoiding the task that we planned to do. We have to eliminate that reward cycle.

If you stop rewarding yourself by doing something else that's more entertaining or easier or more fun, and it just comes down to wasting time or doing the thing you planned to do, doing the thing you planned to do will be less uncomfortable than just wasting the time. So, you end up choosing that because it's preferable to the alternative. That will only happen when you take the reward, the more entertaining option, off the table.

You really are only comparing, "Do the thing that I planned to do, or do nothing at all?" But all of this starts with you believing that you literally can force yourself to do something.

So, I want this to become one of the most practiced thoughts you think, all right? Every time you tell yourself, "I can't force myself to do this. I don't understand why I can't force myself to do this," I want you to remind yourself, that it isn't true.

"That's just a lie my brain is offering to me right now to get me to avoid completing this task, to get me to seek instant gratification and comfort, temporary comfort in the moment. It's just a lie. What is true, is that I literally can force myself to do this. I just have to be willing to feel some uncomfortable feelings, and that's within my capabilities, that's within my power and my control. I can feel those feelings and force myself to complete this task. I am strong in that way. I am capable in that way. That's within my abilities to do."

Ep #79: Can't Thinking, Avoidant Behavior & Reward Systems

Every time you tell yourself you can't you have to redirect your brain and remind yourself that that isn't true, and that you can. You absolutely can force yourself to do something. I know it might not sound like a super exciting way to go through life, forcing yourself to do things that you don't want to do, but I promise you, it really is rewarding.

You will feel so much more proud of yourself when you force yourself to do things you don't feel like doing, simply because you promised yourself you would do them. All right? Give this a try.

Practice thinking this new thought, "I literally can force myself to do this," and see what happens over time. It may not work the first time, or the fifth time, or the 10th time, or the 50th time, but if you keep practicing this thought, I promise you, over time you will build belief in your ability to force yourself to do things.

And, you get to start small, if you want to start small. Don't start with the hardest thing on your to-do list. Start with the easiest things, the things you just have a little bit of resistance to, not a ton of resistance to. Okay? Remind yourself, "I can literally force myself to do this. If a gun was to my head, I'd be able to do it, which means I can do it anytime I choose. I just have to force myself to follow through."

You can force yourself to follow through, you just need to practice. All right, get out there and go practice.

That's what I've got for you this week, my friends. Short and sweet and to the point, but it's a big game-changing shift in your thinking. From "I can't," to, "I can." Go out there and go get things done.

I will talk to you next week. In the meantime, have a beautiful week. I'll see you in the next episode.

Thanks for listening to *The Less Stressed Lawyer* podcast. If you want more info about Olivia Vizachero or the show's notes and resources from today's episode, visit www.TheLessStressedLawyer.com.