



Episode 42 - Overcoming fear-based thinking at the crossroads

With guest Dr. Jennifer Vick

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JV: “I think the most frequent thing I say to myself in the red circle thinking is I can't. And then I will come up with 8 trillion different excuses for why I can't do something.”

HF: Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hello, hello and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. You're listening to episode number 42. I want to thank you for being so supportive of the podcast. Your enthusiasm and great reviews help me keep going with the new content every week.

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I do want to let you know that I'm taking a break from the podcast for the last two weeks of August. So this will be the last episode for the month. Never fear though, I'll be back at the beginning of September. Promise.

Speaking of fear, I have a question for you. Is there something going on in your life right now that is creating some anxiety, maybe some self-doubt or fear? Okay, good. I mean, not good if you're feeling anxious, but good that we have something to work with. Because today I'm sharing an exercise I love for dealing with anxiety and fear.

Whether we realize it or not, when we're facing a challenging situation, we are coming from either fear-based or trust-based thinking. Now this is a continuum with fear-based thinking on the far left and trust-based thinking on the far right. At any given point in time, we are somewhere along this spectrum.

I see a lot of fear-based thinking coming up around career change. This is completely understandable and normal. However, it can keep us stuck and adversely affect our decision-making. The good news is that we can shift from fear-based to trust-based thinking, and it doesn't require years of deep therapy or a brain transplant.

I have a wonderful guest joining us who's going to help us explore this topic and give you a real-life example of how the shift in perspective can be made. Her name is Dr. Jennifer Vick, and she's a board-certified pediatric nephrologist, avid backpacker, and mother of two. She recently transitioned into a nonclinical career and successfully addressed her own fear-based thinking in the process. I am incredibly honored and delighted to welcome Dr. Jennifer Vick to the podcast.

JV: Hi Heather. I am so excited and honored to be here talking to you today on your podcast. I was remembering when you asked me to do this, talking through this fear-based to trust-based thinking when you were considering whether you were going to start doing this podcast. We've had plenty of conversations on our own about this. And really, I

think recognizing that you're in fear-based thinking is a critical first step in changing your thought process towards career transition.

HF: Yes. And I can't thank you enough for being willing to come on the podcast and do this with me because as you know, I tried to do a solo episode on this topic. I spent a whole day and I hated it. So, I need you because you're going to bring life to this. Thank you.

JV: Well, you certainly helped me with a lot of this thought work for myself. So, I owe a lot to you in this process.

HF: I am truly honored. Would you like to begin by telling us about where you were in your career when you first contacted me? What was going on?

JV: Oh, sure. I probably waited far too long to reach out to you. I had been thinking about career transition for literally nearly a decade or at least considering my level of content versus discontent with the job that I found myself in. And I'd spent a good bit of time reading books and listening to other people talk about job changes and trying to figure out what it was that I really wanted from my job.

And I had just become increasingly despondent honestly, with my situation to the point where I felt that I had lost empathy for my patients. I had very little patience with the learners who were around me, with myself, with my patients, and their parents. I was spending far too much time at home doing work and not enough time with my family. And so, there was just this growing resentment that was building about my job. And that's where I was.

HF: And you are such a compassionate, empathetic, intuitive person. So, this is not your normal way of being and feeling about yourself and other people. So you were really under a lot of stress.



JV: I was, yeah. My nature is to be an incredibly optimistic, “go-getter” kind of person. And I found myself being exactly the opposite of that. Just sort of feeling down and that there weren't really any other options and that this is just how things were going to go for the next 20 plus years. And it was kind of miserable.

HF: Yeah. You are helping to paint this picture of what happens that creates this fear-based thinking, because we get very narrow and it does feel dark and it does feel kind of hopeless.

To set the stage for this exercise, we're going to do, I want to just talk a little bit about how I came up with this technique that I use. And this is not a new technique. I didn't invent this. I just had a little twist to it. So, it had been a couple of years ago when something in my life was really bothering me. I was anxious about it. I was fretting and I just didn't want to feel this way anymore. I don't remember what the situation was, but I said, “Okay, enough is enough. I'm going to look at this from a fear-based perspective. And then I'm going to see how it looks if I look at it from a trust-based perspective where I'm trusting myself, I'm trusting life”.

And to do that, I went and I got a green piece of paper and a red piece of paper that I had. I put that red piece of paper on the floor and that was representing the fear. And I stood on top of it. And I said, “I'm just going to talk out loud of what the fear is saying”.

And so, I described that situation and what I thought would happen from fear. And I could feel my heart starting to palpitate a bit and I was getting a little short of breath. And I said all these things.

And then I said, “All right, I'm going to stand on this green piece of paper and take a couple deep breaths, ground myself, get calm and say, when I looked at this from trust, what's possible?”

I looked at it and all these things came out of my mouth that made sense. And they calmed me and I was like, “Oh, okay. This could actually be alright”. And so, I ended up calling it red circle thinking versus green circle thinking. Imagining that you're standing on a red circle, maybe the size of a bicycle tire, sort of create that environment and then stepping off of it onto a green circle, because we may not have a piece of paper around us.

For this exercise, Jennifer, what I want you to do is imagine that first, there is a red circle underneath you. This is when you're in the fear-based perspective and take yourself back to that time when you just described where you felt kind of hopeless. Recreate for us, what were the thoughts that were going through your head when you thought about your situation and potentially making a change?

JV: Yeah, I definitely don't have a red circle on my floor, but I can put myself in the red circle. I think the most frequent thing I say to myself in the red circle thinking is “I can't”. And then I will come up with 8 trillion different excuses for why I can't do something. To “I'm crazy to even be considering this. Where would I even start? You have no idea what you're doing. I don't know what else I would do or could do. And what would happen if I can't find another job? And what would it look like If you quit your job, could you get it back? My colleagues are going to think that I'm a complete loser and they're not going to want me back. What if I had to take a pay cut? Could I afford to take a pay cut? How much of a pay cut could I take?”

Then I started thinking about all these things that could be cut out well. I could stop watching Netflix. I could probably sell some of my grandma's crystal. So, I was thinking of all these things that just sort of reinforced this “I can't” thinking in my head. Like, what if I totally screwed this up and I can't afford my house? And then I can't afford my kids? And oh my God, what if I can't afford my kids and ask them to potentially downsize or move to a different school. And then it was, “You can't do this. You really just can't do this. You're being selfish, even contemplating making a career change”.



HF: And you are more than the primary breadwinner. You're a single mom. And you have these two kids. So, this is not just a flight of fancy thinking.

JV: No, no. It is definitely down to the brass tacks, right? Like I have to be able to bring in enough to support myself and my kids. There isn't anybody else who's going to do that. It's entirely up to me.

HF: Yeah. So, these thoughts that you had, had some basis in reality. You needed to be a provider, but it sounded like you were getting buried under them in a way.

JV: It didn't take long. You start that process. It's like, they all just sort of waterfall over your face.

HF: And before you know, you're homeless, you're out on the street and you're begging for things.

JV: Exactly, exactly.

HF: I just wanted to say some of these characteristics of fear-based thinking are what Jennifer is describing is what can go wrong. We tend to look more at the problems versus what's possible. Because she wasn't really imagining there. Well, what could be different? It's circular. You tend to go through this litany of ideas, but then they keep coming back again. So, no new ideas tend to come in. It's not very creative thinking. It's a huge energy sink. It's taking up a lot of your mental and emotional energy, which again, makes it hard for you to do something different.

Well, now let's shift gears and get into the green circle. To do that, I like to first begin with a couple of deep breaths to ground us. Because we're usually stuck in our head and our body has a lot of wisdom to it. When we can really tap into the wisdom of the body,



we are bringing in a whole other dimension. So, if you want to just take a breath or two, Jennifer, please take your time. And if you're listening out there, it never hurts to take a breath - two or three.

JV: Or three.

HF: Or four. And just imagine that green circle. Green is a very positive color and it's full of life too. And it tells us to go when we're at a traffic light. If you can, from this perspective, if you take yourself back to when you were changing your thinking about what's possible, what were the thoughts that were coming up from this trust-based perspective of trusting yourself and trusting life?

JV: The first question I asked myself was "Who says you can't?" Spending some time thinking about why I felt like I couldn't. Was there anyone else out there telling me that I can't do these things? No, there is not a soul out there saying "Jennifer, you can't". It was entirely coming from my own thoughts.

Once I recognized that I was the one creating these roadblocks for myself, it was really just sort of a life-changing pattern in my thinking to I had to ask myself, why do I think I can't do this? And the answer to that was, "Well, of course you can. You just have to decide that you can. You've done lots and lots of other very hard things".

For instance, I have just recently gone through a divorce and I faired that fairly well and landed on my own two feet. And that was entirely me. That's a hard thing. I did that. I am a doctor for crying out loud, and that is not an easy path for anyone who has to go through it. You do lots of hard things when you're going through medical training. I was a pediatrician. So, in my residency and early in my career, I was doing lumbar punctures on babies and intubating premises in the delivery room. I mean everybody has their own really challenging things that they do, and we do those things. So, I've done plenty of other hard things. I've been solo backpacking in rough weather. And I'm like, "Wait, you

can do all of those things. And there's no reason why I can't do this if I really want to do it". I have done many hard things. I just have to set my mind to it.

HF: That is a great question you asked yourself, which was "Who's telling me I can't?" Because I'm sure if somebody was really telling you that to your face, you would punch them.

JV: Right. Exactly.

HF: Yes. Exactly. You stick them up. But we tell that to ourselves all the time. And so, when you started shifting this perspective, what were some of the thoughts about what was possible?

JV: Well, at first, I had lots of grand ideas. Like I could do anything I wanted to do. I could start a kid's camp. I could open a coffee shop. All these grand ideas. Like there's nothing I can't do.

HF: Go big or go home.

JV: Exactly. But then some reality starts to sink back in and then you think, "Okay, what would I really like to do?" And that's where you came in. And I think depending on what your situation is, you may be able to do this thought work on your own. Or you may have a friend or colleague who could help you with it.

But I spent a lot of time doing the exercises that you gave me, learning about my personality type and what my likes and my dislikes were. And what did I like about work? And what did I not like about work? And just going through all these really great questions to figure out what kind of job I wanted for myself going forward. So, those were really incredibly useful, actionable things to do.

HF: And you bring up a good point about that. It would be easy to think that we're shifting from fear-based to trust-based thinking that we might just become Pollyanna and be "Oh yeah, I can do anything, it's all possible" and then we might go do something really stupid. But when we're really grounded in trust-based thinking, like you mentioned, we are realistic. We don't shut down our minds prematurely. It's okay to dream. It's okay to dream of having a kid's camp or doing something else. But that spaciousness of thinking, that creativity of thought, that permission to dream allows us to then settle into what's possible.

JV: Yes, absolutely. I had a completely different outlook on what my skills were. You would ask the questions that people have going through career transition. And I asked myself "What other skills do I have, besides being a doctor?"

And when I was in fear-based thinking, I really couldn't think of a single thing that I could do with myself besides you can be a doctor. That's what you know how to do. You're really good at being a doctor. But beyond that, I really couldn't think of anything.

But once I sort of put myself in that position of trust-based thinking, I was like, "Well, I'm really good at X" or there's a whole bunch of different things that you start to realize that you can do, or that you are really quite good at. And you become open to your gifts. Like recognizing there are things that I do well that I do better than other people.

And those are gifts that have been given to me. And it's not a shameful thing. A lot of us feel like it's really not something that you want to spend any time considering, but that is where your strength lies is in your gifts. And so, being able to recognize that those are there for you was really only possible once I was in trust-based thinking.

HF: Now, you're bringing up some additional great characteristics of trust-based thinking. We mentioned that you're realistic about yourself, you look at the possibilities and don't get bogged down in all the problems. It's a creative space. There's also a sense of calm

that comes when you're in that perspective. And you're trusting. And this is I think a real key point. You're trusting that you have what it takes to figure things out.

And you really brought that up when you're talking about all the hard things that you have done. You went through a divorce, you're a physician, you did all the things we have to do to learn those skills. And they're not insignificant at all.

But I think a signature part of this trust-based thinking is you're respecting yourself. Because it's very disrespectful to say all these things we say to ourselves in fear-based thinking. Like we said, if someone else were saying all these things "You can't, you shouldn't, what's the matter with you? You're crazy. You're a fruit loop. Put your head down, suck it up. Who are you?" We would not tolerate it, that kind of abuse, not for a second. But there's something different about when we do it to ourselves. We allow that, but it's damaging.

So, let's look at a few more things about how people can shift this perspective. Because it sounds hard in one way, but actually every time I do it with a client on the phone and I have them shift into trust-based thinking, I am not telling them what to say, I give them no prompt at all. And they all find that place, that perspective within themselves. They don't have to buy a vowel from me or a clue or a hint. I've seen this done over and over. But it is helpful to have somebody guide you. If you are doing this on your own, can you think of some other ways Jennifer that you helped change your thinking?

JV: I can't take credit for doing this all on my own. I sort of joined this group of people who were talking about this in different avenues. I was doing meditation with Headspace and I was reading and listening to a lot of Brene Brown and other life coaching podcasts.

And the three things that I took away from those lessons were that suffering comes from wanting things to be different than they are. I realized I was generating my own internal suffering. Just constantly wanting to be something different, or for life to be somehow

different. And that the only thing I really have control over are my thoughts. And really that's the key to changing anything. It's learning that you have to change your thoughts. And if you want to do it, then you should do it. You should just do it now.

Those three takeaways really helped me sort of step into that trust-based thinking. I realized I could sit here and be miserable, but I have to make a choice. I have to either commit to staying in clinical medicine and finding contentment or agreeing that I'm just going to be suffering. Or I needed to commit to another way of working, whatever that was. I couldn't live the rest of my life in this sort of in-between wanting something different. It was just not sustainable. It was really having such a negative impact on me. Once I decided, "You have to make this choice", it became easy. Like you have to commit to figuring out something else. This is not working.

HF: That's a really powerful statement. And it reminds me of a takeaway that you told me you had in this process. Do you remember what it was?

JV: I do. I do. Yep. Once I realized that I had control over my own thinking that that's not something anybody else can do, **I realized that the power to change is in my hands.** If I want something to be different, I am the only one who can make that happen. So it was an incredibly empowering thought. It was the booster for me, to be like, "Okay, if I want to change, that is entirely in my control. And I alone hold the power to do that. So, do it".

HF: Where did this personal empowerment take you?

JV: I spent a lot of time with you going through all this thought work and came to the conclusion that at the end of the day, I really wanted a job that contributed to patient health. So, patient wellbeing and health is still at the core of what I want to do. I just didn't want to do it in clinical medicine anymore.

I decided to take a job in pharma and have really, really enjoyed that aspect of patient care. I still feel very much like I am contributing to patient care every day in what I do. I'm just doing it on a global scale as opposed to a one-on-one scale.

HF: And that is something that a lot of physicians talk about. It's wanting to still have that impact and do it in a different way. We can reframe what being a doctor means. That we're here to heal, to help, to make the world a better place. There are many, many ways to do that. So, a huge congratulations to you, Jennifer. It's been such an honor to watch you in this process and see you evolve and transform your life.

JV: Well, thank you so much, Heather. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to you, Heather, for helping me work through some of just the nuts and bolts of this career transition. And I couldn't be happier actually. I'm doing something I enjoy. I have so much more flexibility in my day. I'm able to travel with my job. And so, I'm able to go visit my parents and still be able to work. And I don't have a lot of the constraints on my time that I did with clinical medicine. So, it has been a fantastic transition for me.

HF: Well, thank you. And you don't owe me anything, just your happiness and seeing you smile on the other side there is such a great reward. And thank you so much for coming on the podcast. I know this will be helpful to others. And I owe you. Okay? So, there we go.

I do want to let you guys know that I'm going to link in the show notes to a blog that I wrote on fear-based and trust-based thinking for leaving medicine. And there is also a homework you can do that goes through the steps of the exercise, as well as some audio examples.

So, make sure to check that out. And remember that fear traps us, but trust in yourself, transforms your life. And don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in two weeks in September. All right, bye for now guys.



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Podcast details

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