



EPISODE 91: The Most Important Aspect of Career Change - Believe It Or Not

With guest Dr. Cindy Tsai

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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 91. We're talking about something today that is one of the most important aspects of making a career change, but it's not something you'd necessarily think of right off the bat.

This critical aspect is your relationship to yourself. By this I am referring to how you see yourself, how you talk to yourself, whether or not you trust that you can figure things out as well as how you see yourself in relationship to your world. For example, do you

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see yourself as more a victim of circumstances or perhaps being trapped? Or do you believe you are empowered and of agency to make positive changes?

It may sound a bit odd to talk about our relationship to ourself, but even though we are one person, there is this duality. For simplicity purposes I like to think of these two selves as the trust-based self on one hand and the more fear-based self on the other.

When you are considering making changes, the fear-based self can get in the driver's seat and take over. The fear-based self can keep us stuck in different ways and make it harder to move forward and see possibilities rather than problems. When you have a healthy relationship with yourself, you are able to recognize this part of you and deal with it in a constructive way. And that doesn't mean beating it up.

Today on the podcast, my lovely guest, Dr. Cindy Tsai is going to join me in exploring how when our relationship to ourself is compromised it can show up in different ways, such as feeling like an imposter, being overly perfectionistic, people pleasing and feeling like the victim of one circumstance. We'll be looking at how these traits can get in the way and how to move beyond them to come from a more trusting and reality-based relationship with yourself and your circumstances.

Dr. Cindy Tsai is an internal medicine physician who has done extensive training in coaching and mindfulness, and is currently working on her certification in integrative medicine. She is the author of the book "So Much Better: Life-Changing Strategies to Develop Calm, Confidence & Curiosity to Become Your Own Inspiring Success Story." I am very honored to welcome Dr. Cindy Tsai to the podcast. Hey Cindy, how are you?

CT: Hi, Heather. I'm doing great. Thanks for having me.

HF: I'm really excited. And I know you'll be talking about this, but I have a copy of your book right here, and I think it's excellent.



CT: Thank you. Yeah, it was really fun to be able to write that book and share it with others.

HF: Yeah. I will be giving the listeners some more details later, but let's begin with this topic of your relationship to yourself and how it plays into your story of how you got to where you are right now.

CT: Sure. I like to say that ever since I was young, I was this introverted perfectionist with good girl syndrome. And what that means is really wanting to do everything right and make everyone else happy. And it really stemmed from when my parents actually shared that they didn't plan to have me. And so, I think growing up from a young age, I internalized that and held onto the story that I wasn't wanted and that I wasn't enough.

And what happened as a result was, I felt like I needed to constantly strive, achieve, chase success, and really almost as a way to prove my worth. And so, I think that really led to the development of these various traits of being a professional and doing everything right and working super hard, even though I was maybe exhausted and tying into as you mentioned in the introduction, this relationship to yourself. I think a lot of times I probably really wasn't connected to myself and I was going after accolades, achievements, awards, all of these things, but it was all external.

I think the most important thing is really to develop that connection, to really maintain that connection to yourself, having that trust and grounding so that you do know what lights you up and what fuels and nourishes you instead of what other people are saying instead.

HF: Yeah. That sounds like a very painful awareness of what your parents shared with you. And thank you for sharing that. I remember reading on your website before I even met you that this was something your parents had shared with you, that you weren't wanting it. And it was a gut punch for me. Like what do you even do with that as a child? Can you tell us a little bit about how that came about?

CT: Yeah. I'm the youngest of four daughters and there's a big age gap in between me and my sisters. And so, I think when my mom was pregnant, she wasn't really expecting it. And I'm trying to recall. I feel like just from a young age, it was kind of always talked about in our family in terms of, "Oh, Cindy was an accident." And I think I internalized that as thinking it was a mistake, whereas thankfully with therapy coaching, all the things that I've done, I've really been able to understand and shift my perspectives and to see it as a wonderful surprise for the family.

I know my parents didn't mean it in that way. And I think now really looking back, being able to offer so much compassion to myself, to my family, my parents especially, because they were very supportive throughout my whole development process, education, training, everything. And it's like if they really didn't want you, why would they be doing that?

It was a good experience to see how important it is to be mindful with your words and especially around kids. Because I think when you're in those early years of development, you really don't know. You kind of make those assumptions. And so, I think that was a really helpful lesson and awareness that really, we have to be very mindful of our words and to know that it can really make an impact on others.

HF: Yeah. Because that's exactly what we want to know as a child, that we're loved and wanted for who we are. And you described a lot of behaviors that are very common for physicians and for people in general of being perfectionistic, being the good girl, wanting to please, wanting to achieve. And so much of that is really about just wanting to be loved and cared about, but it can develop this relationship with ourselves where we're never quite enough.

Before we launch into some examples that we're going to use, do you want to talk just a little bit about this whole thing of having a relationship to yourself and how you separated out so it can actually be something that you work with?

CT: Yeah. I think about my journey. I was always focused on becoming a physician ever since I was young. I was very passionate about health and wellness and wanted to help people. And I thought being a doctor was the best way to do that. So, I was very focused. I went straight through all my medical training and was really looking forward to starting work as a PCP. And then I realized when I started work that there were things that I really didn't enjoy in terms of I really wanted to look at the whole picture and to offer more than... I didn't want to just prescribe medications as a band-aid, but I really wanted to offer healing on a deeper level.

And throughout this process, there were definitely moments when I was in burnout and exhaustion, but I actually was diagnosed with an autoimmune condition that impacted my eyes. It was uveitis, and it really prompted me to slow down and to really think about what is important to me and what are my priorities.

And I think when you look at this relationship to yourself, a lot of times it takes these health crises or big events for you to finally slow down and to really pause and reflect and think about it. And so, that experience really taught me a lot. It really encouraged me to look into integrative medicine, to look into all these other different modalities and to really create my own team of practitioners and to really advocate for myself in terms of what did I want, what did I need, what was I doing? Am I really taking care of myself? And so, I think it's a really helpful reminder that things happen for a reason. And when we don't listen, I feel like things just keep coming up again and again.

HF: Yes. And you make a really fabulous point here, which is kind of at the pinnacle of all of this is we have to prioritize ourselves. They say, put your oxygen mask on first, yadda, yadda. We hear it all the time, but we're so used to prioritizing everyone else's needs and patient's needs as what we're trained to do that it's a very weak muscle to prioritize



ourself. And that's why I think seeing this relationship to yourself so there's this other person that's suffering like you with these physical symptoms and all these other things, like see that person outside of yourself to see that she needs help. Because if you had a friend who needed help, a loved one in your family, you would be prioritizing their needs. So, we have to shut this.

We're going to go in a minute into some examples to make this more concrete, because I know it can be a little slippery subject. But before that, we're going to pause for a short break so I can tell you about some resources for you. We'll be right back.

LinkedIn has been one of the most helpful resources for my clients in landing great jobs. Initially many of them were reluctant to put themselves out there and network on this platform. But once they created a profile and learned how to use LinkedIn strategically, they had a lot of success. My LinkedIn for physician's course shows you how to create your own standout profile, have success networking and land nonclinical jobs.

To learn more about this online course, go to doctorscrossing.com/linkedincourse or simply visit the Doctor's Crossing website and hit the products tab at the top of the page. Now back to our podcast.

All right, we are back here with our lovely guest, Dr. Cindy Tsai, and we are going to start with the example of the imposter syndrome and she's going to help us see how to shift that relationship to ourself. Take us away, Cindy.

CT: Sure. I think about imposter syndrome as really when you were doubting our own abilities and we're feeling like a fraud. I think we can see this a lot in terms of physicians, when you're a new attending, when you take on a new role, maybe it's in leadership and an administration and it's something completely new to you. And that sense of imposter syndrome can settle in. And I think it can really get in the way of making changes and our

own success because we have this constant self-doubt, this feeling that we're not good enough or that someone else will do it better.

And then all these things that really can be mentally draining because we're so worried and stressed about it. And so, I think it's helpful, as you're thinking about how to dismantle this imposter syndrome, it's really about learning to recognize this pattern, this thought pattern that you have. And I talk a lot about mindfulness and how it's important to be present and paying attention to the present moment without judgment.

And so, we can bring this into this tool, into this imposter syndrome example where you can practice being an observer of your thoughts and seeing that it's almost like extracting yourself as a different being, looking at yourself and just looking at this part of you without judgment.

I think that part about judgment is so key because we're so quick to judge ourselves when we're really critical perfectionists, high achievers, all these qualities that a lot of physicians have. And I think it's also a good practice to do a reality check of what have you actually done in terms of being objective. It's like you went through medical school, you went through training, you were board certified, all of these things. And really reminding yourself and looking for the evidence so that you can actually stay focused on that part. And usually, I find that when I help clients focus on what's working and all the positives, they're able to quiet down that negative part of that self-doubt. So, I wanted to share those examples.

HF: Yes. And I love that you brought up finding the evidence because we practice evidence-based medicine. So, we can really relate to that. We need to look for what's already been proven, so proof. We can look at our own history of our training and our accomplishments and our skills and the feedback that we get and how our patients do. And it's hard when that evidence really stacks up for the imposter syndrome to still have legs in standing.



CT: Yeah.

HF: It's like it wouldn't hold up in court, with all that evidence. So, thank you for that. I'm going to talk briefly about perfectionism, which is something that I think most of us can really relate to. And there's so many great things about striving to do your best and be your best. So, I don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's this tipping point where the relationship of having high ideals and standards becomes dysfunctional, starts causing problems. And here's an example where it can show up if we've had a medical mistake or we might have had a malpractice suit, something like that.

And what can happen is you start relating to yourself as this person who's done something bad or wrong, or isn't good enough. Again, impostor syndrome can come in, but there's this feeling of "I'm doubting myself. I don't really trust myself anymore." So, I'm doing a lot of second guessing, I might be going to ask other people what they would do in this circumstance. You're slower with your patients. It's more exhausting and it can even start questioning whether you belong in medicine. A physician might come to me and they want to know about nonclinical careers. But first I think it's important to see can this relationship be healed? And if it's healed, could that mean that you really are meant to stay in medicine?

An example of how I might work with this is I actually have the client separate out that part and have it sat in a chair next to them. It's so not be that part. It's when we are that part, we can't really see ourselves and work with ourself. It's a misnomer of self-help.

When I have them do this exercise where they're having that part, sit in a chair, they can be the one who can be more like a friend or a coach or a mentor, someone who's being like we would be for someone else. And then they can acknowledge how that part is feeling, how hard this was, the guilt that they may have, the shame that may be experiencing and help to reframe how they're seeing themselves.

I would often have them speak to that part. And what that may sound like is I understand that you went through this difficult experience. I know it was really hard. I know you may even feel ashamed, but you've done your best and you can't be perfect in medicine. Nobody is. Almost every physician has had experiences like this. And to start seeing what's really true. You trained hard. You're really good at what you do. I know you really care about your patients. They love you. You work very hard. You're invested in this. And if this is something that you really want to do, I trust, and I believe that you can do this.

And sort of starting reframing how you're seeing them, how you're talking to this part of you. And also let them know too that if they decide that they don't want the risk and the liability going forward, that that's okay, you'll help them figure out something else to do. But it's really important to sort of heal that relationship of how you're seeing yourself before you try to leave medicine or do something else.

CT: Yeah. I think that makes a lot of sense. And a lot of times I see people come where they're unhappy about something. It's in their circumstances and they want to change their circumstances. It's like I hate my job, the administration, whatever. And then they immediately jump to looking for another job, thinking that if the administration changed or whatever, that their life would be so much better. And I think it's so important to remember that it really starts from that relationship with yourself. Because that brings so much more control because you can't control what other people are going to say or do.

HF: Exactly. And that's a little foreshadowing because we'll be talking about that in a minute. But would you like to talk about the people pleasing?

CT: Yeah. I see a lot of people pleasing. I definitely was doing a lot of it for a lot, most of my life. And it's the idea that I want someone else to like me, think well of me and that if I

don't do what they want me to do, that I'm going to disappoint them. And so, this can look like saying “yes” when you really want to say “no”, whether it's maybe a colleague's night call shift or whatever, and maybe you just joined the team and you're like, “Okay, well, I don't want people to think I'm not a team player” even though you've done all your obligations and all of things.

And so, when you're in that people pleasing state, you are usually putting other people's needs, wants, and feelings above your own. And you end up making decisions that may not necessarily feel good to you, but it's what you're doing to help to please other people and make sure they're happy.

And I think this really comes back to this idea of not believing in your self-worth and your self-value. And it's an important reminder that it really starts from the inside out. We talk about this relationship to yourself. I think a lot of times when I was in that people pleasing state, over time, inevitably resentment develops and that's a really challenging emotion to hold onto. And so, I think it really comes down to reframing how you see yourself and a big part about people pleasing is learning to create and maintain boundaries. Having that healthy sense of who you are, what's important to you is taking care of yourself and learning to say “no” so that you're able to stand your ground and also do it in a way that you can speak your truth.

And I think a lot of times for people, it can be challenging, especially in the beginning to say “no”, because it's like, “Well, what are they going to say or think?” But just a reminder that we really have no control over what everyone else says, thinks, feels. It just comes down to us. I think it's really important to remember that we have to be clear about what we want and we don't have to be this caretaker of other people's feelings, experiences, because that's not in our control and can only cause us more stress and angst.



HF: Yes. I'm so glad you said that about control because it was something I wanted to mention about the perfectionism because there's a degree of feeling like you have to control everything, that sort of underneath perfectionism. And when it comes into the career change process, what it can look like sometimes is feeling like you have to have this perfect picture and a guarantee that it's going to work. So, you have to be in control of that you're going to get a good job, that your family's going to be happy with you and the income and whatever changes come about that you're going to have to be successful. It's going to have to be the right fit.

So, I've seen physicians get frozen in making any changes because they feel like they have to control and pull all these strings and make it all happen. And the shift really is just the sense that I can be a learner and I don't have to be perfect. And I also don't have to be in control of everyone else. I guess I'll do my best for my family, but I'm not in control of their feelings and what this looks like or what it looks like for anybody because that's a huge burden.

CT: Yeah, absolutely. I think it's really learning that to offer an extent compassion to yourself and throughout all of this.

HF: Right. We're only human. That's what keeps coming to my mind. We are only human, seriously. The last one is something you're starting to touch upon, which is not being a victim. And I think with all the changes in healthcare and medicine, it's very, very natural to feel like a victim of the healthcare system. We've lost power, we've lost autonomy, a voice. Naturally what can happen is we start complaining. We come home, we complain to our partners, probably heard this many, many times before. We get together with our colleagues or we're kind of venting and it's a very disempowered place to be. And I'm guilty of it myself. I think I've played the victim in my past, like "Why did this happen to me? Why did this person do that?" And yadda yadda yadda.

But when you reframe things to say, “If I'm coming from a place of my own agency and my own empowerment, how does it change how I look at this situation?” And what I find it starts doing is that energy that you're putting out on blaming and what's wrong and all this negativity, you take that energy back. So, it starts belonging to you and it's available for something different.

And with my clients who come to me and feel very despondent about how things are, they often feel really stuck. And some things they just start doing is looking at what can they change in their current situation. And it could be going down in time, changing their schedule, refusing to go to so many hospitals. Starting to have a voice or also starting to see that they're not trapped, that there are all these options. And that shift to being empowered is a great way to start gaining hope. And that will give you more energy to be able to begin this process.

CT: Yeah. I think that is such an important point, knowing that we always have options. And I like to say this a lot that you always get to choose. I think a lot of times we think we're stuck and there's this saying that you can't solve the problem from the same level that you created it.

HF: Right, right.

CT: It takes that other perspective, that other mindset, that reframe for you to actually see, “Oh wow. I've been focusing on one tree when there's a whole forest.” I think it's really important to your point of really reframing and knowing that you do have options that you don't have to be stuck in a victim and helpless, but you can be empowered for sure.

HF: Yes. And you reminded me of this quote, “You don't have control over what happens to you, but you do have control over how you respond.” And this speaks to, you're bringing in the mindset because a great first place to start is if your mind is already going to dreading work and anticipating what's going to happen, your schedule's going to blow up. Well, the first place of changing and having control is controlling your thoughts. We don't have to have these disempowering thoughts.

CT: Yeah. I think learning to manage your mind is one of the best skills I've learned through coaching. And I'm so grateful that I can offer this to clients because I don't think we recognize how powerful our thoughts are and how big of an impact it has on our day-to-day wellbeing.

HF: Yeah. Yeah. And so, you have a lot of tools and resources for clients and I like a lot of the techniques you have in your book. Would you like to share with us how listeners can find you and a little bit more about the book?

CT: Sure. I'm happy to. My book is called "So Much Better: Life-Changing Strategies to Develop Calm, Confidence & Curiosity to Become Your Own Inspiring Success Story". It's a self-help book that's based in mindfulness. And I wrote the book because through working with many clients, I realized I was sharing a lot of the similar tools/techniques that help people regardless of where they were. And so, I wanted to distill it into a very practical resource and guide for people to use.

I break it down into these pillars of calm, which is about regulating your nervous system. Confidence, which is really maintaining, reprogramming your mind so you have that strong sense of self-belief. And then curiosity, which is about connecting to your inner wisdom and bringing in the fun and play and joy into your everyday so that you can stay connected with who you are. And I really think it takes this holistic approach to really be well.

And so, I'm happy to share this book. It's available on Amazon, Barnes & Noble. And you're welcome to connect with me on my website. It's cindytsaimd.com or I'm on social media at Cindy Tsai MD on all the social platforms, LinkedIn, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube. And yeah, thank you so much for having me. It was wonderful to be here.

HF: Oh, it's been a real treat. I'll make sure all of your information is in the show notes so people can find you. And thank you again. This has been really wonderful. I wanted to



talk about this because it is so fundamental. So, here's my last kind of pitch to give you permission to prioritize yourself. It's not selfish, it's being self-full and everyone will be better for it. So don't forget guys to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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