**EPISODE 203: Getting Unstuck - The Power of Changing How You See Yourself**

**With guest Dr. Maria Dominguez**

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MD: “I hired you so I could quit. And the beautiful arc of coaching is that not only did I not quit, really, I find so much joy in working in the emergency department, and I can see myself doing this for a long time now.”

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.

Hey there, and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host, Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 203. A while back, I did a podcast with Dr. Cindy Tsai on the most important aspect of career change. That was episode 91. And the important aspect was, in case you didn't hear that episode, was your relationship with yourself.

When we talk about making career changes, I like to break it down into two categories, internal changes and external changes. Both are important, but if our relationship with ourselves is compromised in certain ways, it can make it hard to move forward. In those cases, we may need to focus on internal shift to help us take meaningful action that truly serves us. You might be wondering, “What exactly do I mean by our relationship with ourself, and how can this become a barrier?”

I'm excited to have a very special guest today who will share her own journey around this topic. Emergency medicine physician, Dr. Maria Dominguez, will be joining us to talk about how she went from grappling with self-doubt and the imposter syndrome to a much more empowered relationship with herself, which led to her finding more fulfillment and joy as an emergency medicine physician and the gumption to start a side business.

As Maria shares her journey, we will dive into how she transformed her relationship with herself and the practical steps she took along the way. If you're facing similar challenges, I hope you'll find valuable takeaways that you can apply to your own situation. Without further ado, it is my distinct honor and pleasure to welcome Dr. Dominguez to the podcast. Hi, Maria. Welcome.

MD: Hi. Thank you for having me.

HF: Well, thank you for coming on. I'm so excited to have you share your story.

MD: Thank you. I'm here to share. Okay.

HF: Wonderful. Now, you've had a bit of a difficult childhood, and I've talked on the podcast about how certain things that happen in our childhood can influence even our career path and how things might be going in our current career and job. So, I think it would be helpful if you'd like to just share whatever you're comfortable with about your childhood and growing up.

MD: Yeah, it's interesting because I think of it more of like chaos, and then I think about how in emergency medicine, we control the chaos in a way. I moved to the United States when I was about six years old. I was born in Columbia, and shortly after that, my father died. So, my mom was a single mom. We were sleeping on my aunt's couch. God, I don't even remember how long we were sleeping on the couch before. Because her boyfriend at the time stole all the money that she had saved to move here. So, we were sleeping on my aunt's couch, and then my father died, and then my sister came to live with us as well.

My mom eventually remarried, and her second husband got sick and was dying. He had cancer in the middle of all of that, trying to get treatments and chemo and all of that stuff. We had to deal with Hurricane Andrew, which one of those events that happen in your life that just changes it an instant. We were living in this house that my mom had saved up for, worked her butt off, and it was gone. So, we never went back to that house. We collected whatever we had left that didn't get destroyed completely, and we were living in like this little apartment that a family member let us borrow with.

I think we had four dogs and 16 parrots in this little tiny apartment thing, and it was like right when we were teenagers. So, we're getting to know ourselves and trying to understand the world in a different way as young women, I speak for me and my sister, and then we were looking for houses. My mom always liked to look and drive around and look at houses, and there was this one house we kept coming back to, but we could not afford it. And my mom was like, “I don't know what to do because this is a house, we all love this house”, and then a week later, my mom won the lottery.

HF: Oh my gosh. It's crazy.

MD: And my mom and my aunts had this habit of playing the same numbers because they played each other's birthdays and their parents' birthdays. And one of my aunts called my mom and said, “Did you play the lottery?” And my mom's like, “Yeah.” She's exhausted. At the end of the day, she's like, “Go get your ticket and call me back.” And my mom's like, “I'm tired. - Go get your ticket and call me back.” And this was the one aunt that didn't play. I have my two aunts and my mom, and then my mom and my other aunt won the lottery.

HF: Oh my gosh.

MD: And we were able to buy this house. And it's the house my mom still lives in today. And then she remarried after my stepdad died. And that brought a whole level of chaos and more dogs and step-siblings into the household. And yeah, in a nugget, that was my childhood.

HF: Well, thank you for sharing that, Maria. I can't imagine losing your dad at such a young age and then losing your stepdad and then having these blended families and just trying to be a kid growing up. Do you remember at all how you were thinking about yourself and what was important to you as you were seeing these events happen and probably seeing a lot of things that were out of your control and out of other people's control? Do you remember at all how it made you think about your future?

MD: Yeah, I kind of wanted control. I think that's kind of another reason or one of the many reasons I wanted to be a doctor from a really young age, because it just seemed that people are always going to need doctors. And then I had encountered so many doctor. My aunt had type 1 diabetes. A lot of medical complications that she had. And so in and out of the hospital. I was exposed to a lot of doctors and I thought, “Wow, how cool would it be to do that?” And there was this other element of it that at a young age, I realized that knowledge was really empowering and accumulating knowledge, accumulating all of that information was a form of control for a power, if you will.

HF: Absolutely. That makes sense. How did you then end up making your way to medical school and choosing emergency medicine?

MD: Yeah. Applying to college, I ended up going to University of Miami and I always knew I wanted to be a doctor. And then I met a couple of friends while I was at the University of Miami and we just studied our butts off because we all wanted to go to med school. And they helped me learn how to learn, because in a way it's not an easy thing. It doesn't come naturally. And I think I have ADHD. So that was really hard for me.

And then I finally got accepted to Albert Einstein. I applied to so many medical schools. And I don't know why Albert Einstein, I think it was at the top of the list. And I was like, “Yeah, I'm going to apply to school.” And mind you, I grew up in Miami and I ended up going to Albert Einstein in the Bronx. So it was a huge, colossal shift. And mind you, I lived at home through college because I couldn't afford to live in the dorms. So it was big, big shift from me being at home with my dogs and my mom and my stepdad and all my blended family to being in an apartment in the Bronx and not knowing how to even dress appropriately for the weather.

And then ultimately, when it came down to emergency medicine, it's kind of a funny story. I was doing an elective. I don't remember what it was. And I wanted to switch it. And I needed permission from the assistant dean or something. I walked into his office and he's like, “No, as a matter of fact, I'm going to switch you into emergency medicine. You're going to love it and you're never going to look back.” And I was like, “Whatever, I don't believe you.”

And he was right. Absolutely. I just fell in love with it. It was so much going on at the same time. And it was like this beautiful chaos in a way. You're dealing with all kinds of things happening at the same time and all kinds of characters and all kinds of personalities. The people, the other emergency medicine kind of staff, I don't know, there's something about them that just made me fall in love with that. I don't know, the charisma, they're just all super. I don't know, they just roll with the punches. And there was something about that, that really gravitated me to go to ER.

HF: I'd like to transition here, Maria, and talk a little bit about the imposter syndrome. Can you give an example about how it was showing up for you?

MD: Yeah, part of it is just kind of the newness. You become an attending, you're the attending. And then some of it's like, “Oh, I don't know, do I really know what I'm doing? Am I taking good care of my patients?” Like I said, nobody really pulls you aside to say you're doing a good job. In my case, also, it's not like they were pulling me aside to say you're doing a terrible job. But I did that for myself. I questioned myself a lot.

And I think it culminated, or I guess it snowballed after I got sued. I was involved in a lawsuit. And I remember the day that I got served, like it was yesterday. And I wanted to quit. I just wanted to give up. And if I didn't have my student loans, and I didn't have so much invested in this future that I had idealized in a way, I would have quit immediately, I would have quit that day, and never looked back.

And then it's these little micro things that happen, just in life and having conversations that are difficult. And sometimes people not speaking to you kindly. And instead of acknowledging that, whatever's going on with them, it's them, it's not about me. I really did internalize a lot of that. So, if I talked to a consult, and they were having a bad day, and they took it out on me, I would take it as an insult. And then there's that constant, comparing yourself to your colleagues who were brilliant people. And yet we all bring our own gifts to the space. I can't tell you how many times I was worried, just the worry that I'm doing something wrong, or that I'm going to get fired. It’s just constant and exhausting.

HF: I appreciate that you shared about the malpractice too, because this is something that happens to a lot of physicians. And unfortunately, it has caused physicians to commit suicide, to leave medicine or to practice and stay in a job where they've lost their joy, where they're practicing defensive medicine, and they just are miserable. How did you move beyond that point when you just wanted to quit and you would have been gone that day?

MD: It took years. And like I said I tried therapy, I read all the books. And ultimately, honestly, what I feel catapulted me in a positive direction was coaching. It just opened up a whole world of vocabulary for me that I didn't have before, and an understanding of who I am at my core. And these are things that I couldn't have possibly learned without coaching.

HF: It's interesting you bring that up, Maria. This is one of the reasons why I wanted to have you on the podcast, not because we specifically work together, but to help others see that change can happen. And change can actually happen fairly quickly. Because I remember when we started working together, how you were relating to yourself was a problem. And we all have this, I have it in myself too. We're a works in progress for sure. But you had an incredible self-doubt. You were very critical.

And as soon as we talked about doing something for yourself, advocating for yourself, doing something that would get you out of your comfort zone, what happened, and this is what happens to so many of us is the fear-based ego comes in, and you would shut everything down really fast. Reasons why you can't do this, why you can't ask to go down in your number of shifts and change your schedule and maybe do something entrepreneurial.

But the amazing thing was, Maria, within a number of sessions, you transformed yourself. And it just amazes me. And so, can you think of some of the things that you're able to do or mindset shifts or whatever it was that really helped you go from beating yourself up and putting yourself down and feeling like you're less than other people to totally changing that self-dialogue?

MD: Yeah. I remember our first session, I was like a shell of a human being. I was so in such a negative space. And I don't even think self-loathing really describes it to the depth of what I had. I agree a lot of that. And I think for me was just one of the first things is sort of evaluating that voice in your head. I had a really, really loud voice in my head that would tell me all the negative things about me. And then I believed those things. I would think, “Oh, I'm lazy. I'm stupid. I don't work hard enough. I could do better.” And the truth is I'm not lazy. I'm not stupid. And I work really hard. I work as hard as I possibly can at everything that I do, being a mom and managing the household as best as I can. And it was just kind of hearing that voice and learning that that voice wasn't my truth.

And then there's this concept as well about the forgiveness. I really adopted this thought process of when I mess up because messing up is inevitable and there's going to be gaps in my knowledge that's just inevitable. Just adopting this thought process of “I'm welcoming my humanity here. I'm human.” And so, now what? And the next step was growth. This growth mindset as opposed to limiting mindset because what I do know and what I know for a fact about every physician I've ever met is we can learn. We have this incredible capacity to learn and we love it. We wouldn't be where we're at if we didn't love to learn. Knowing that also was empowering for me. Okay, I don't know this, but I know I can learn it.

HF: Those are gems that you shared. And it reminds me of when we were working together back then and you had these ideas about yourself. “I'm lazy, I'm stupid”, comparing yourself to other physicians. And when I started asking you, “Well, tell me some stories about how you've helped patients” and you started telling them and they were phenomenal stories and they really spoke to this incredible heart that you have for people and people who are in difficult circumstances and other people might have really judged. I'm curious how that was helpful for you to retell those stories.

MD: Yeah, it's like the concept of being seen and then you start to see yourself as who you truly are. I do love people and I love what I do and I love the connection that I get to to establish in a very usually quick way in the emergency department. You have to be able to get people to trust you quickly. I love that I get to do that.

HF: All right, Maria, I want to ask for some more examples of before and after how you've changed, how you relate to yourself. But before that, I'm going to take a quick break to share some resources.

All right, my dear listeners, if you don't know already, I have a freebie tab on the Doctors Crossing website and we keep adding more resources to this. So, if you're interested in seeing if there's something that would be up your alley, you can go to doctorscrossing.com and at the top of the home page, hit the freebie tab. And there is a position starter kit for those of you at the cross roads who want some help thinking through this process. There's also resource guides on pharma, medical writing, time management, interview prep, LinkedIn, resumes and more. Again, that's the freebie tab at the top of the home page at Doctors Crossing and I will put a link in the show notes.

All right, we're back here with my wonderful guest, Dr. Maria Dominguez, and we're talking about how changing your relationship to yourself can be a game changer in your career. All right, Maria, I'd love it if you have some more examples of how this was showing up for you in terms of changes that you were able to make and do things differently to have a different outcome.

MD: Yeah, I immediately think about that comparison, and concept of wanting to be perfect when there's no such thing. And on top of that, there is this element of being surrounded by very brilliant people. I have such deep admiration for my colleagues. They're all so smart and I'm really grateful now. I'm really grateful that anytime I need help or have a question, and again, it's in the culture of emergency medicine to ask each other for help, or we call it consulting each other. But it was like a little bit of a source of shame that I wasn't, in my opinion, as brilliant as they were. I would look at my colleagues and see just how amazing they are at bringing up literature, dissecting every aspect of the EKG, and just spewing all this knowledge at any given moment. And before I would just use that as an opportunity to beat myself up and “Okay, I'm going to go read about this when I get home”, as opposed to now where I just really revel in their brilliance.

HF: Well, this is such a great point because I read this quote of something like “Comparison is the thief of joy.” And it really is. It's such an important topic that I'm going to be doing a whole podcast on compare-itis with a guest. And so, I love that you're able to see them and acknowledge what's great about them, but not have it have a negative effect on you, actually have a positive effect. So kudos to you. Do you have another example you'd like to share?

MD: Oh, I'm thinking about this one particular physician that all of us refer to as the greatest of all time, the GOAT. And I think about the qualities that he has that I personally find the most endearing about him is just the way that he relates to people, all people, every single person. He's just, I don't know, he's just amazing. I like to think that I also have that quality. And I appreciate that I can see that in myself now, or before, I really couldn't see anything positive about myself a little bit.

HF: And they often say, when we see something we admire in someone else, that it is in us. And so, that person can be a mirror. One thing I wanted to bring into, I know we're getting close to time here, but how changing your relation to yourself can also cause external things in your job to improve. We change ourselves, but then it can even be the concrete things that follow. What did you do externally to make things different of anything?

MD: I don't know if this answers your question or not, but through the arc of coaching, I learned to trust myself. I really had a difficult time, even trusting what I could possibly need. And I had a lot of difficulty asking for what I needed because I was so afraid of being judged or being labeled or being seen in a negative way to the point where I had a really difficult time even asking to drop hours. And there's a few other things that I've asked for that when I went to leadership, they were like, “Yeah, of course, go ahead.” And I think when you learn to trust yourself, you recognize that anything that comes your way, you can handle and that's power.

HF: That is key. I think that's one of the most important takeaways here is often when I hear physicians make this shift, the powerful shift from that, “What if” thinking like, “What if it can go wrong? I'm not going to be able to do that.” The self-doubt when they embrace this different perspective, invariably they'll say, I've done hard things. I can figure it out. And that is that trust element. And when I know they come to that perspective, they're golden.

MD: Yeah. And it's that concept of coming back to your essence. You really have to get to know who you are to trust yourself. And when you get to know who you are and you realize all the beautiful gifts that you have, even though you're completely and utterly imperfect as a human being, you can trust that you're going to figure it out. The point where the other day I was like, “Maybe I could create an airline. I'll do my own airline so that we can travel without feeling like we're on a Greyhound bus.”

HF: Right. No, I love that. We start to see possibility instead of what's impossible for us. Now, in the last minute or so, would you like to share this entrepreneurial idea that opened up for you and where you're at with it right now?

MD: Yeah. Like I said, I had tried so many things that I thought would be helpful to me. And I listened to all these TED talks and all these podcasts and every book. I even had a therapist. Not to say those things didn't help. But for me, what really blew my mind was coaching. And when that world opened up to me, it really lit me up. I was like, “Wow, this is incredible work.” I wonder what it would look like to go that way. And when I started following that path, so much just fulfillment and joy came from it. And I decided I wanted to create my own coaching practice. And it just brings me, I don't know, it fills me up.

HF: I can totally relate to that. I can't imagine doing anything else. And I love your journey, because we can't really help people that well, if we haven't struggled with some of the things they're struggling with. I remember this woman who was a confidence coach, and she advertised herself as always being confident, like she came out of the womb, confident. She said, “Yeah, I just always been a confident person. I help women become more confident.” I'm like, “How can you help people do something that you've never really had to do?”

MD: Yeah, there's this beautiful quote by Thornton Wilder that goes, “Without our wounds, where would our power be?” And the way I take that is I've been there. I know, me too. I get it. I get it. And I know what it's like to be on the other side of it.

HF: Right, that it's so powerful. That's what often wakes us up to making changes when we suffer. And if we don't have that suffering, we may not really wake up to see what we need to do differently.

Maria, I just want to honor you and coming on the podcast and sharing your story, the great work that you're doing. And I'm so happy that you are empowered in your work as an emergency medicine physician. And you're also on this path of helping others through coaching. Is there any type of website or link that you want us to put in the show notes or you want to tell folks about?

MD: Yeah, you can go to my website at abovethehorizon.com. And there's a little bit about me and where to schedule a session.

HF: All right. Wonderful. Any last words you want to share for the listeners?

MD: Just coaching changed my life. And I'm so grateful. I have this vision of people having everyone, everyone having a coach, everyone having someone to just lift them up. It's just been an incredibly powerful, beautiful journey. I just remember, I hired you so I could quit medicine. And the beautiful arc of coaching is that not only did I not quit, I find so much joy in working in the emergency department. And I can see myself doing this for a long time now. I'm grateful that I get to do that. It's a very beautiful job to hold people at their darkest moments.

HF: Well, thank you again for sharing so openly and for being a beacon for others who may be struggling. We'll check back with you and see how that coaching business is doing. And thank you again for coming on the podcast.

MD: Thank you so much. It's my pleasure and honor, really.

HF: Thank you, Maria. All right, my dear listeners, thank you for joining in here. Please feel free to share the podcast with anybody who's struggling or you think this might be helpful for. I would be really grateful and we want to keep spreading the word till there are no doctors who feel alone and are struggling. And as always, don't forget 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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