



The Athena Wellness Podcast  
Episode 029 – Turning Wellness Challenges into Wins  
April 18, 2021

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Welcome to the Athena Wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

Hello, and welcome to Episode 29. Thanks so much for joining me. Think back to the last time you arrived at a new place in body, mind or spirit. Perhaps you started a new job or project, achieved a wellness milestone or made it through a life transition of some sort. Think about how good that felt. Were you proud? Relieved? Happy?

Now think back further. What prompted you to make that change? Most likely, it was some sort of challenge, either an internal realization like dissatisfaction, stagnation or a new desire, or there was an external event that prompted the action.

Today I'll be sharing three wellness turning points where I felt like I was at a crossroads, scared and uncertain, but knowing I had to make some changes. And each time, it felt like I was facing an insurmountable challenge, like I was trapped in the way things were with no way out. Looking back, I can see I had numerous options, but I was too mired in the situation to objectively identify and assess my alternatives.



Along with these stories, I'll share some lessons learned and some recent advice I heard that just blew me away. We'll wrap up with a way for you to define a current challenge, how to reframe it as an opportunity and then create a path forward. So I invite you to sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

My book, *The Athena Principles*, opens with a scene of me crossing the finish line of an ultra marathon at age 54. But 20 years prior, I couldn't run one lap around a track. In that 20 year span. I had a series of three wellness turning points that transformed first my body, then my mind, and finally my spirit. Each challenge turned into a win, taking me deeper and moving me closer to what I call wholehearted living, which is living in alignment with your true nature. I'll give you a flavor of each turning point so I can better illustrate how you might be able to turn your wellness challenges into wins.

03:12

The first occurred when I was five years out of my 20s. Walking to Port Authority Bus Terminal after work one evening, the toe of my shoe caught the hem of my trench coat and I went down on the steps of Rockefeller Center. I scrambled up and resumed the walk, briefcase in hand, with barely a scrape. But the fact that I couldn't regain my balance hit harder than the pavement.

For the first time in my life, I felt like a middle aged woman and I knew it was due to stress and poor lifestyle choices. I was a year into a corporate job I did not like and that was accompanied by a long daily commute. I was eating the wrong foods, not moving my body and giving little attention to sleep. In response to those stressors, I drank liberally and kept a relentless schedule of parties, concerts, and never ending activities with my partner, family and friends. As a result, I gained 25 pounds in the 13 years since I



graduated college. And in rare quiet moments, I would acknowledge I needed to make some lifestyle shifts, but I was never sure how to go about it.

One day at work, I noticed a colleague in the coffee room shaking a plastic tumbler and I asked him what he was doing. He said he was following a new workout and eating routine that included protein shakes, which was a new concept at the time. So at lunchtime, I walked over to the bookstore and bought *Body for Life* by Bill Phillips, which outlined the program that my colleague was following.

I started preparing that evening. To make sure that I could follow the nutrition part of the program, I emptied the fridge and the cupboards and filled them only with foods listed in the book: vegetables, clean proteins and healthy fats.

The workouts consisted of cardio and weightlifting components. I bought a basic treadmill and put it right next to my bed and borrowed a weight bench and some weights and put those next to the treadmill. My clothes were laid out the night before and I exercised first thing in the morning. I made working out unavoidable.

Each week there were three simple weightlifting routines that rotated between upper and lower body workouts. Three cardio days were interspersed with the strength workouts and they consisted of 20 minute laddered intervals. Sunday was a rest day.

Since I was unable to run for any length of time, my cardio intervals consisted of mostly walking with a one minute jog every five minutes before catching my breath for the next set. I came face to face with the fact that I was overweight and out of shape in my mid 30s. I felt the extra weight I carried with each step. I was shocked I had allowed myself to get so out of touch with my body.



Thankfully, consistency brought progress. I completed the workouts as best I could each day. And the program mechanics of strength and cardio routines, coupled with the simple eating, really changed my body. But something else happened when I started working out and focusing on my diet. I began showing up for myself.

But here's the thing, there was an emotional component and it can't be underestimated. At the time, my social life was rooted in poor health habits and it had to change if I wanted to stay healthy. I found that the emotional and social changes I needed to make were harder than the physical ones. But if I didn't make them, I would have been caught in an endless loop of progression and regression.

The second turning point is related to mental and emotional burnout. By the time I turned 40, it looked like I had it all together. I had lost the 25 pounds and kept it off. I was hitting the gym on a regular basis, had a loving partner and family, and worked for a top tier Wall Street firm. But on the inside, I was barely hanging on.

07:57

Due to an organizational change. I was working for a new boss who was not a fan of mine. And the feeling was mutual. Watching my peers get let go one at a time, I did not want to be the next one. So I set out to over deliver on every single work project.

The stress compounded as the months passed. I would wake in the morning with a start, nauseous from the adrenaline already pumping through my body. Due to the late nights at the office, it wasn't unusual for me to get only four or five hours of sleep. Well aware of the full day that awaited, I would pull myself out of bed to begin the morning routine that would get me on the road by 6:30am.



Along with the workload, the other non negotiables in my life were family, diet and exercise. I knew I was teetering on the edge of dis-ease given the pressure that I was under. So eating well and working out were my release valves.

Back then my goal was to work out four times a week. I had flexibility on Saturdays and Sundays, but twice a week I would do all I could to leave the office by 8pm, changing into my workout clothes before I got into the car to drive straight to the gym in New Jersey. If I made it there by nine o'clock, I would have an hour to exercise before the facility closed at 10.

I can remember some nights sitting in my car in the parking lot of that gym feeling foggy and buzzy from the exhaustion and the copious amounts of caffeine consumed during the day. I couldn't bear to think about getting on the treadmill or lifting the weight. I would bargain with myself: "Just go inside and begin. You don't have to do the full workout." Of course, once I got moving and the blood started flowing, I would feel the connection with my body, with something other than the all consuming pressure cooker that I worked in. That connection was an important reminder that there was more. It was like a faint whisper that something needed to change.

After 18 months, I knew I was in desperate need of some time off and a change of scenery. I made a career limiting move and took my unused vacation time so my partner and I could drive our camper van to Alaska, via the Alaska Highway, a trip that was on both of our bucket lists.

At the time, it was the first leap of faith I ever took in my corporate career. I had no plan beyond the road trip, and I instinctively knew this break from the norm would not sit well



with my boss. Nevertheless, we were Alaska bound. That trip would prove to be the catalyst for the second phase of my wellness journey.

Although it took almost two weeks on the road before I could unwind, the combination of driving 10,000 miles and spending time in unfettered wilderness began to work its magic, alchemizing the raw experience of the last year and a half at work into some semblance of meaning.

The mental processing was helped by the fact that I was getting to do all the things I had forgotten I loved. I took pictures, shot video, wrote, drove, listened to music, spent time in nature, spent time with my partner, and enjoyed what I called “road movies,” watching the passing landscape of towns and fields and countryside through the windshield of the moving van while listening to my favorite playlists (at that time, they were mixed CDs).

At the beginning of week three of the trip, while zigzagging on unpaved roads in the Alaska Boundary Range, I had a profound moment of clarity. I felt something shift and I knew I needed to make some changes when I got back.

I realized my past habits had created an unbalanced state of wellness. All the things I loved, from my partner to writing to spiritual discovery, were cordoned off from my professional life. To create a healthier future, I needed to change my habits, focus on spending more time doing what I loved, and find ways to bring more of my emotional, creative and spiritual sides into my daily life.

Within weeks of returning to work, I got a call from a former boss who I loved working with a number of years back. He had moved to a company in New Jersey and asked if



I'd be interested in joining his team. I resigned from that Wall Street firm within three months of my return from Alaska.

Looking back, the act of defining what gave my life meaning became a tipping point for that lifestyle change. And my wellness choices began to better align with my desires and values. As a result, it became easier to identify what the right choices were for me and then follow through. I finally stopped working against myself.

My new job gave me time in the morning to work out and to be home most nights by seven. This opened time for my partner, writing, reading and preparing for the next day before getting to bed at a reasonable hour.

These changes didn't happen overnight. At the time, each step didn't feel like it was part of a longer journey, or that it was leading to a more energetic, purpose driven life. I could see none of those things as the years unfolded. In fact, it felt unremarkable day after day. But the results were cumulative. And the small steps I took to pursue the things I loved had a big and lasting impact over time.

14:20

The third wellness turning point was the most intense, yet least visible. It's a bit elusive and hard to describe, but it began when I felt an enticing pull to attend my first writing retreat when I was 46 years old. Until that point, I had written privately for more than 20 years, but had never shared my writing with anyone nor my dream of becoming a writer.

Attending the week-long retreat on Whidbey Island in Washington State was the spark that completely transformed my life and began the deepest phase of my wellness



journey. It was a perfect storm of circumstances that took me way out of my comfort zone. Nothing from my professional life was of use there. I was in an unfamiliar shared space with writers from different life experiences. And when we gathered around the dinner table the first night, we learned that we'd be entering into silence for 36 hours toward the end of the week.

Each day was uncomfortable, like looking in a mirror and seeing insecurity, doubt and fear staring back. There was also the sickening realization that I would have to write and read something to the group to get feedback by the end of the retreat, what felt like a true testament to whether my dream of becoming a writer was going to be possible. But in the strangest way, each day also felt like a homecoming.

During the silent portion of the retreat, I finally quieted enough to listen to my inner knowing, which proved to be so powerful, not only did I write an impactful piece, but I learned how to access that quiet wisdom for clarity ever since. In the 36 hour hush, I also caught intensely vibrant glimpses of the heart based future life I desired. And it was far from the left brain place I was living at the time, and almost exactly how I live today.

16:37

So I'd like to share some lessons learned from these stories, starting with an overarching theme, and then adding five additional points. And then before we transition to the last section where I'll share a method to help you turn your challenges into wins, I'll share something I recently heard that just amazed me and I think it'll give you some deep food for thought.

So here's what I've learned over the last 20 plus years. Challenges are not immovable objects. Everything shifts and changes over time: people, places, experiences, personal





and professional situations. If you're feeling stuck and it seems like you have no options as I did in my early years, just keep that in mind. The old adage is true, the only constant is change. Although when we're ready, change can feel like it's happening way too slowly.

So to fill in those lulls, here are five other observations about the growth process that can help along the way:

- One, what allowed me to navigate the journey with benevolence was **self-compassion**, and that's the ability to care for your own well-being in the form of self-acceptance and nurturing support.
- The second is what fueled my journey - **intention**, and that's the emotion and the motivation behind why I wanted, and in some cases needed, to change.
- The third is what built momentum along the way was **consistency**. I set my gaze a few feet ahead a little at a time and took small steps, listening to myself, gauging how I was feeling and then just continued to show up in new ways.
- Number four is what impacted the pace of change and the pleasure of the journey was my **mindset**. Keeping a positive and optimistic frame of mind acts like a supercharger. And it's the best way that I know to hasten the pace.
- The last point is what ensured not only my progress, but the outcome that I wanted. And that's **accountability**. I had a check-in process that worked for me, celebrating my small wins along the way, adjusting my plan as I needed to, and even finding community with others who were on a similar journey.

And if those five items sound familiar, it's because they later became *The Athena Principles*, a process that has worked for me repeatedly, whether trying to improve my physical health, my emotional and mental well-being, or how to incorporate more of my spiritual practices into my daily life. To this day, when I want to make a change, I set



intention, show up consistently, stay positive, remain accountable, and above all, be kind to myself along the way.

But here's what I really wanted to tell you about what I learned over these last 20 years relating to implementing change. The three stories I just shared recently coalesced when I was listening to a talk given by author Rob Bell. He shared a story of some advice that was given to him. It's just one sentence. Here it is: "Every time you gain something, you lose something."

To me, the journey toward wholeheartedness is one of becoming, of letting go of the people, places and things that no longer align with the person you're growing into. Once you get a glimpse of who you're meant to be, there's no more hiding in the shadows.

And this means you need to acknowledge where you are in your life, get in touch with what matters most to you and take positive steps toward that vision. As your inner world changes, so will your outer world. To make room for the new physical, mental, emotional, spiritual you that's emerging, you will need to let go of some things. And for many, myself included, everything has to be released. This includes cultural and societal norms. When you live wholeheartedly, it's in alignment with your wisdom and your rhythms, not someone else's rules or expectations.

21:36

Are you still with me? Should we take a deep collective breath together and just let that all take root?

Let's shift gears a bit and talk about how you can utilize these stories and ideas to shape a strategy that can turn your wellness challenges into wins.



Here are some things to keep in mind:

- The first is to use your crisis or challenge as fuel for moving forward. There's a saying in the corporate world, "Never let a good crisis go to waste." Crisis opens our thinking to actions we wouldn't have taken prior. It's a way of reordering what felt like a fixed set point by re-examining the situation, questioning the way it's always been done, and finding new ways. When I took that tumble up the steps 20 years ago, it landed me on a wellness path that would someday become my passion and livelihood.
- Next is to rethink your question. It's healthy to use fresh perspectives and new solutions to old problems. When I decided to leave Wall Street, it wasn't about stopping the burnout I was experiencing. It was about integrating the things I loved into my life. Six years after that, it was not about how to become a writer. But more about Who am I as a writer? And how does that person live her life in a way that feels true?
- Next is break it down. Challenges are complex and their sheer size can be overwhelming. My mid 30s exercise plan was a 12 week program that I could plan weekly, execute daily, and repeat the cycle over again once it was done. incremental improvements add up and they create momentum and unearth new possibilities.
- Next is don't underestimate the emotional component of change. There will be grief. You're heading to a new place and you're leaving old dreams and ways of being behind. You're diving deeper. The people, places and experiences you've come to rely on will change as you do.
- And last, keep your eye on the big picture. Have visual reminders of why you're putting in the effort. In my last year of my corporate career, I wore a necklace that only I knew the meaning of. It was a symbol that reminded me of my new life



that I was creating and what I wanted to achieve as an entrepreneur in the second half of my life. It put all my effort in context and it kept me moving forward.

As we wind down and I look back, I can see that I was lucky. My wellness challenges were not born out of crisis. That allowed me to make deliberate changes that built over time. The first one was focused on exercise and nutrition. And that prepared me to go deeper with subsequent realizations. For many the need to focus on health may be more immediate through a diagnosis or a test result. Conversely, the call toward wellness for some may feel vague, more like an elusive pull to incorporate healthier and more meaningful life choices.

The ability to run my first endurance race at age 54 was the byproduct of more than 20 years of learning and experimenting, but it wasn't the original goal. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I was longing for more than just a change from the sleepless nights, stressful days, and alcohol filled weekends that were taking a toll on my body. I was longing for a connection to myself.

And if you're feeling the call to transform some aspect of your life, you, too, can do it by taking small steps and reprioritizing your wellness. You don't need a big goal like an ultra marathon or a job change to experience greater vitality. Having the energy to flow through the day, or the functional strength to work around the house without feeling depleted, is a great place to start. You may even begin to hear curious whispers that bring you down new paths heading in an unfamiliar direction, that feels a lot like home.



Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

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Until next time, be well!