

Ep #104: The Courage to Make Changes and Choices



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Dr. Marie Murphy

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Hey everyone, I'm Dr. Marie Murphy. And I want to tell you, as respectfully as I can possibly say this, that a lot of the advice out there on how to deal with an infidelity situation is pretty darn useless. At best. At worst, it's a bunch of prescriptive, moralistic, judgmental, shame-y horseshit. If you're in the midst of an infidelity situation, you don't need anybody telling you what you shouldn't be doing. That's just not HELPFUL. You need to figure out what you actually want, and what you're going to do about it. This may be scary. This may seem hard. You may think you don't know what you want – or think you don't have permission to go after it, even if you did. But you CAN decide what you want, and feel great about not only making a decision, but acting on it – even if other people have things to say about your choices. And you don't have to do this all by yourself! I can help you do these things. When we find ourselves in uncharted territory in our lives, it really helps to have a guide who can help us figure things out and move forward. And that's exactly what I'm here for.

So if you're ready to sort out your infidelity situation in a way that's truly right for you, let's work together. I offer shame-free, blame-free, non-judgmental relationship coaching via Zoom, so we can work together no matter where you're located. To schedule an introductory coaching session with me, go to my website, mariemurphyphd.com. I can't wait to meet you.

Okay! I've talked about decision-making on this podcast many times before, but today I'm going to talk about the COURAGE it can take to make choices, and make change.

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But in saying that, I'm really only talking about the tip of the ice burg. In order to even get close to making choices and changes, and being able to summon or cultivate the courage to do so, we may have to believe that our lives can be better than they have been. And it can take courage to believe that, or even entertain that as a possibility.

In order to make changes and choices, we often need to believe that we the right to have desires in the first place, and the right to make choices in the service of what we want – especially if we think other people aren't going to like our choices. And it can take courage to believe that we might be allowed to have desires, and to pursue them in the first place!

It can take courage to believe that we can make the best of whatever decision we make. Many of us believe that there are "right" choices and "wrong" choices, and believe that if we make wrong choices, we're going to be screwed, one way or another. It can take courage to believe that we are in charge of our own experience of life, and that we can make the best of any situation – even ones we may not love. Believing that we have that kind of power means that we recognize both our power and our responsibility – and doing that can be scary. Allowing ourselves to believe that we have power may take a lot of courage.

It can take courage to do things differently from how we've done them in the past, or how everyone else we know has done things in the past. Allowing ourselves to be different from how we have been, and different from the person we know ourselves to be can be TERRIFYING.

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It can take a LOT of courage to believe that we can tolerate whatever blowback may come as a result of our choice.

It can take courage to believe that we know what we want, and that we're sure enough of what we want to do something out it.

It can take courage to tolerate uncertainty. This one's a little ironic, of course, because life is ALWAYS uncertain, even when we think it isn't.

And all of this can be true in many situations in life, of course. Since I deal primarily with infidelity, I see this come up for people who are dealing with infidelity situations all the time. But that certainly isn't the only kind of context in which we may need courage, and not know how to find it.

Some definitions of courage suggest that it means to face danger without fear, but other definitions – which are far better, in my opinion – tell us that courage is the willingness to tolerate fear. Having courage enables us to do things that scare us, even though we're scared! Having courage doesn't mean that we don't feel fear.

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Sometimes we think that courage is this elusive or scarce thing, or something you either have or don't have.

But it isn't. We all have the capacity to intentionally cultivate courage. Even if we've never consciously done that before.

So often, I see folks who are in the middle of an infidelity situation, and they're pretty concerned about what might happen if they were to make any changes. I know this is an example I use way too often, but it is a common experience: someone will be married, or in a very committed relationship, but they'll be involved with someone else, and they'll want to leave their marriage, but they are effectively paralyzed with fear. They're afraid they don't really know what they want, but they're also afraid that they do know what they want, and that acting on what they want would lead to all sorts of other scary stuff happening.

And sometimes what people effectively do is sit back and wait, and hope that the fear goes away on its own. Other times, people try to tell themselves that aren't actually afraid of anything. It is not uncommon for a client to tell me in no uncertain terms that they're afraid of a whole list of things that might happen if they were to get divorced and pursue a relationship with their affair partner, and then five minutes later tell me that they aren't actually scared of anything.

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I want to suggest that we a LOT to gain by being willing to get clear on exactly what we're afraid of, and allowing ourselves to feel afraid! I want to suggest that acknowledging fear, and allowing ourselves to actually FEEL fear are critical components of cultivating courage. Fear doesn't have to be a problem, if we're willing to work with it consciously. It may not feel AWESOME to feel fear, but if we're willing to feel it, it doesn't have to give us too much trouble. It's usually when we fear fear, or try NOT to feel fear, or try to deny that we feel fear, that it gives us problems.

Fundamentally, emotions are just sensations that arise in our bodies when we think a thought.

When we can learn how to tolerate the sensations of fear, and get clear on the thoughts that generate the feeling of fear, two things become possible. One is that we're able to handle the experience of feeling fear differently. We can gain confidence that we can tolerate it, and then we don't have to avoid it. And this allows us to make very different decisions in our lives. And number two, when we're conscious of the thinking that generates our fear, we can reduce the total amount of fear we experience. And learning how to do these things, and putting these approaches into practice is LIFE-CHANGING, and this is part of the work I do with my clients.

But, even when we actively manage our minds and reduce our fear-generating thoughts, and even when we're willing to tolerate the sheer, immediate experience of the emotion of fear, this doesn't mean that we eliminate the experience of fear from our lives entirely. As long as we're human, we're probably going to have to experience some fear. And if we

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want to make big changes in our lives, we're pretty much guaranteed to have the opportunity to experience a good amount of it.

That is why it is so very wonderful to intentionally cultivate courage.

To talk about courage and what it is and why it's important, I'm going to talk about the Tarot, or Tarot cards, as I did back in episode 88, which is called, "When Bad Shit Happens." By the way, people, I have a new podcast production company, and although we are in the early stages of our relationship, it has been a pretty good one so far. And one of the wonderful things they have done is number my podcast episodes. Isn't that nice? Why didn't my old production company do that? Don't ask. What is important and awesome is that now my episodes are numbered in iTunes. Yay.

As I talked about in episode number 88, the Tarot is perhaps best understood as a set of illustrations of universal aspects of human experience. It's a set of cards that depict life experiences that have shown up over and over again within humankind, across cultures and times and places. The Tarot represents common features of the ways that humans grow, and evolve, and deepen – and the essential nature of the challenges and opportunities we are likely to encounter as we move through the human experience of life.

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And as I talked about in episode 88, one of the wonderful things about the Tarot is that it helps normalize the idea that life is full of twists and turns and challenges. Life is full of experiences in which we build things up, and it's also full of experience in which things are torn down. We kind of love to believe that we're creating our lives in this linear fashion, and that we're moving in a direction of ever-increasing progress and improvement, and once we have the right foundation in place, everything is just going to get better and better. But as many of us know from our own experiences, that's not necessarily how it works! And what the Tarot can help us see is that we don't need to consider this a problem. The Tarot suggests that the archetypal human experience is one of twists and turns and peaks and valleys, rather than linear, unidirectional progress.

At points in our lives we may head off in a particular direction, or build up careers or relationships or other structures in our lives with the best of intentions. But in order to truly evolve, to become the fullest expression of who we are, and to be able to most fully contribute to the collective, there are going to be times when readjustments are necessary. And as I talked about in episode 88, "When Bad Shit Happens," that sometimes means that major structures of our lives have to be completely dismantled, and this is often represented by the Tower card.

And if we think we may be on the precipice of something like that, we may be pretty terrified.

But what the Tarot emphasizes, in addition to the normalcy of the upheaval and disruption we may need to be willing to experience in order to grow, is

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the depth of the resources we have for navigating disruption and upheaval. The Tarot assumes that challenges are normal, AND that ordinary humans have infinite capacity to meet those challenges.

And some of those capacities or resources are represented by the Tarot card called The Fool.

If you're not particularly familiar with the Tarot, the name "the fool" might throw you off. But worry not. The Fool card is not about foolishness in the way we usually think of it. The fool card represents the principle of courage, and the capacity to act from a state of wonder and anticipation, rather than fear. In one representation of the Fool card, fear, in the form of a tiger, gnaws at the fool's leg. But the fool doesn't give any power to fear. The fool just looks straight ahead, and the tiger may be very much there and biting the fool's leg, but that doesn't stop the fool. And that's how I encourage you to think about fear: it may never go away, and sometimes it may bite your leg, but you don't have to let it stop you.

The Fool card represents the ecstatic adventure of growing and unfolding in our own hero's journey. That's an almost-direct quote from Angeles Arrian, by the way, who is a cultural anthropologist who studied humans' use of symbols. She also tells us that the Fool represents our capacity to give birth to new forms of relationships, and to new ways of setting limits to culture-like people and situations. Not only that, the Fool represents our capacity to allow ourselves to be compassionate with our sensitivities and vulnerabilities in new ways.

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And what a deep form of courage that can be. Sensitive to our fears, and sensitive to how very real and very threatening they may seem. Yet also willing to treat those fears with compassion, without taking them as indications of truth, or letting them derail us. The Fool represents your capacity to be who you are, and to allow yourself to express the spirit of who you are, or the unique essence of your individual self. Angeles Arrian goes on to say that “The Fool is the state of ecstasy and wonder experienced by all humankind. It is an inherent resource we all have that is waiting to be remembered and utilized.”

Amen to that! So many of us have gotten sucked into believing that life's a struggle and we always need to be on the ready for the next bad thing that's going to happen, or prepared to fight our next battle or anticipate our next disappointment.

But what if we didn't have to live that way?

What if we could focus on believing that although human life may have plenty of challenges, it also presents us with abundant opportunities for joy and connection and harmony and delight? Sure it's true that we aren't always going to get what we want. Sure it's true that things are going to happen that we aren't going to like. But what if it's also true that there is so much good that's available to us, as long as we're open to it?

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Yeah, getting to what we want may require us to deal with some stuff we don't really like. Making any big change may require us to deal with the discomfort that so often comes from simply doing things differently. If we're going to do anything that scares us, we have to cultivate the courage that will enable us to do the things we're afraid to do despite the fear. And none of this is necessarily comfortable. But what if we had faith that it was WORTH IT to do the uncomfortable things?

And this, dear listeners, is where the rubber hits the road for a lot of my clients who are engaging in something they think counts as infidelity, and they're considering making a change, but they think change is going to be hard, and THEY AREN'T SURE IT'S GOING TO BE WORTH IT to do the hard things. They aren't sure that there will be any payoff to bothering to do the things that seem scary.

And this is why I think that having faith in ourselves and in the future is either a part of courage that isn't usually included in the definition, or a prerequisite of courage. That's a quote from the late Ted Kennedy, by the way. Have faith in yourself and in the future. Having faith in ourselves and in the future can definitely be a result of having courage, but if we don't have faith in ourselves and in the future, it can be hard to have courage, and if we don't have courage, it can be hard to have faith in ourselves and in the future.

If we've experienced life to be tough, it can be hard to believe that it could be otherwise. And if we don't believe it can be otherwise, it can be mighty hard to take action that will prove us wrong.

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And this is why it's so, so, so immensely important to work on our mindset. Whether or not life is hard is a matter of our thinking. Whether or not something is scary is determined by what we think. Whether or not it's worth it to make change is – you guessed it – determined by what we believe to be true. Chicken-and-egg problems like this one are always solvable if we're just willing to start SOMEWHERE.

So when I'm working with folks who are considering making changes in their love lives, and are contemplating making changes that may seem big or scary, our work together often revolves around examining their beliefs about what's possible, and what's available to them. Is it possible for you to experience more of what you want to in your life? My answer to that question is yes, but you have to believe that for yourself in order to act as if it so – and in order to make it so, you have to act. For a lot of us, expanding our capacity to be courageous requires us to shift our beliefs about what it's possible and acceptable for us to experience. If we're going to be willing to experience fear and be willing to do things that we are currently very afraid to do EVEN THOUGH we feel fear, it helps to have a clear sense of why it's worth it.

And the reason isn't that it's good to experience fear for its own sake. Some people might like that kind of thing, but that's not what I'm talking about here. I'm saying that for those of us who don't like feeling fear, but understand that courage is an option, having a clear sense of what we stand to gain by cultivating courage can help us do so.

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And for a lot of us, what we stand to gain is not just getting to live more of the life we want to live, although that's pretty important and great in and of itself.

It's about feeling like a powerful creator in our own lives. It's about actively being our own steward, and gaining the satisfaction that comes from assuming that role. When we believe that we don't choices, we don't have power, we don't have control over our own lives, we limit our options in life considerably, AND we tend to feel pretty terrible in general, AND our contributions to other people and to the world take on a particular quality. And then we produce results that look like evidence that we don't have any power, but really, we're showing ourselves how much power we really do have.

We can either use our power to cultivate courage or despondency. At any moment, we're thinking SOMETHING. We may not be conscious of what we're thinking, but we can BECOME conscious of what we're creating with our minds, and we can decide if we like what we're creating or not.

So what I want to underscore is that when you're thinking about making a change, or set of changes in your life that seem scary, fear does not have to be your stopping point. Now, let me also make it clear that there may be times in life when it may well make sense to hang back and hold off and not take big leaps. But there are also times when we may want to ask ourselves what the hell we think we're waiting for.

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By allowing fear to hold us back, by not actively choosing to cultivate courage, we are making use of the time that we're alive in a particular way. And sometimes, I point this out to people who have been stuck in indecision for a long time, and they tell me that they know, they totally know, and they don't WANT to keep living this way any longer. But yet, they sometimes tell me, they just can't make a choice because they don't know how something is going to turn out.

And there's so much I could say in response to that, some of which I talk about in episode #59, which is called, "Is the Grass Always Greener?" but for now I will simply say this. Yes, there are times in life when we really don't know how things are going to turn out after we make a choice. Sometimes there is a LOT we can't be sure of. But don't have to use this as a reason not to take action. We can allow ourselves to have our fears and concerns about what might happen, and we can focus on cultivating the courage to make choices and changes and make the best out of any choice we make, rather than allowing the concerns to keep us stuck.

So many of us are deep in the habit of thinking that the whole point of our existence is to make sure everything is OKAY. And I get it. Many of us have never learned that there's an alternative way of approaching life. And yes, I understand that there are always bills to pay and responsibilities to attend to and other people to care for and all of that. But what if within all of that, we could still regard our lives as a grand adventure in our own evolution? What if we could take our responsibilities seriously, and ALSO channel the ecstatic energy of the Fool tarot card, and allow courage and wonder to outweigh fear and control?

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Here's a quote from Anais Nin which you may have heard before:

“And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” That part of the quote shows up all over the place. But she goes on to say, “Life is a process of becoming, a combination of states we have to go through. Where people fail is that they wish to elect a state and remain in it. This is a kind of death. Living never wore one out so much as the effort not to live. Life is truly known only to those who suffer, lose, endure adversity and stumble from defeat to defeat.”

Now that last part about stumbling from defeat to defeat might sound kind of bleak, so I'll rephrase it a little. When we're WILLING to suffer, lose, endure adversity and defeats, we gain the opportunity to also experience triumphs, joys, ecstasy, and the singular pleasure of fostering our own evolution.

All right everyone, that's it for today. If you've been listening to me talk and thinking, all of this is great, but how do I apply these ideas to the specifics of my own life, then let's work together. As your coach, I help you apply the kinds of teachings and concepts I talk about on the podcast to the specifics of your own life, and I help you become accountable to yourself in terms of using the tools I teach consistently. And if you're looking to make changes in your infidelity situation that you feel great about, what could be better than that? Not much, if you ask me. So if you're ready to cultivate courage and expand your beliefs about what is possible in your life, schedule an introductory coaching session with me through my website, mariemurphyphd.com.

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Thanks for listening! Have a great week. Bye for now.