

**[Transcript] The Diary Of A CEO with Steven Bartlett / Moment 109 - How to Overcome & Push Through Your Hardest Times: John Eckbert**

When was your hardest time?

My hardest time?

In your five guys journey.

Yeah.

Well, I was, I went through a very painful divorce and went through something called leave to remove, which I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy.

It's the, essentially it's the right to have your children taken out of the country.

So I had two young children who the court system approved leave to remove, which allowed my ex to take my kids back to America, which was incredibly painful.

And my whole view of myself, my definition of who I was changed.

I thought of myself as a great partner, good husband, good father, devoted father.

I was in politics back in America, was involved in my community and a church leader and, and businessman.

And I thought, you know, all these things are who I am.

And essentially all of that was, you know, a quite a large bonfire of vanities.

And that was a real dark, dark moment for me.

And there were, there were days when five guys was the one thing in my life that was stable and that I could hold on to.

And that really pulled me through a very difficult, dark time personally.

How long did that process last?

That's part of the UK challenge.

It took years, a better part of two years were in that process.

And then, you know, trying to rebuild those relationships and thankfully I'm in an amazing place with my kids now and have, you know, accepted that they, that we have had a more adult relationship prematurely.

But now that they're both at university, it feels more normal now.

And those are hard fought, hard, hard won, recast relationships, which, you know, were really important, are important to me.

But was, I was, the thought that they were at risk was caused just enormous anxiety and living with that kind of anxiety on the personal side, having a, having a place where, you know, things were more predictable was in being able to work in that way and provide for them was, you know, a real, yeah, really helped me through.

When your kids are essentially taken away to another country and you've got this huge responsibility of running this big business.

How does that impact your ability to show up every day professionally?

Yeah.

Well, I mean, it was, it was, it was really complex for me because I had a non-compete back in the U.S. for the business that I had sold.

So I couldn't just relocate back to America and do my job.

So it felt like a huge catch-22 because I had these court-ordered financial obligations and the only way that I could really fulfill them was to keep doing my job here.

So court-ordered financial obligations is in the separation costs and stuff that you have to pay your part.

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Yeah.

Exactly.

So it felt like a catch-22.

They were allowed to leave, but I had to provide for them.

So I had to stay.

And so it was, it felt like a kind of a indentured servant for a bit.

But, you know, being able to, to focus on, on a, on the important job that I had actually was enormously relieving because I knew that for, you know, 10 hours a day, you know, 12 hours a day, whatever it, whatever it ended up being that I could actually do something productive that I knew I was good at that made a difference for them.

And that was the, the anxiety of being separated.

I could set aside for a few, you know, for those hours in a day and that was really helpful.

It could have absorbed, just kind of overwhelmed me.

But work was able to, it was, it was a place where I could, where I could escape from that.

Did you see your motivation fluctuate often when we have these like pretty substantial life events, there's an initial period where getting out of bed in the morning is a little bit more difficult.

It's almost like someone is messed with your why, your reason to get out of bed and your sense of purpose.

Yeah.

So you always have to, I've learned from my own experiences that you have to spend a little bit of time, you're almost faking it to get, to get the drive back if that makes sense.

Yeah.

No, of course.

No, well, you know, I told you I got up at 5am when I was a kid and practice violin for an hour before, before school.

And what I mean, I was never a great musician, but what I did find was that if you did something every day, you actually could get better at it, maybe even more than competent.

And I think it was something like that that just in me, you know, said, you know, get out of bed, do the next, do the next thing.

And something, things will change.

You will, I called a friend of mine who'd been through a similar situation.

And he said, you know, just keep showing up, you know, texting my son every day, calling, you know, every day, being as present as I possibly could.

And, you know, obviously it's imperfect and it's deeply upsetting, I'm sure, to them as well as, as well as to me, but doing it as much as you possibly can to be available and in touch.

And, and then you just have to trust, trust something that it'll be okay.

Trust something?

Is it just trust life that it will?

No, I mean, you know, now we're getting very personal to you, but, you know, I believe in a higher power, I don't, I don't pretend to understand it, but I think there's something

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much more powerful than I am in the world.

And what I will say is that it helped me to see the world in two camps.

One are things that I can control and some things that I absolutely can't control.

And if you spend, if you allocate your mental health and your time on the things that you can't control, you can drive yourself to distraction and mad, eventually madness.

So being able to focus on the things that you can control and, and realizing that that's your job, you know, your job as a human is to do the things that you can control.

And if you, if you, you know, it's just, it's just arrogance and ignorance to, to focus on the things that you can't control.

And so identify those, identifying those two camps and being at peace with that, accepting that you can't, some things you can't control, that's really hard, but it's hugely important.

Yeah.

I, I was at this festival this weekend and there was a, I did one-on-one meetings with lots of people that were in the audience for three hours and I found myself being asked over and over again how to deal with exactly that, which is when chaos arrives in our lives, what to do on that day.

And people had me recording these voice notes for them for that day.

So when that day comes, they just want it to be able to play it.

And what you said there is exactly what I said, which is there are a small list of things you can control.

And on that tough day, make a promise to me that you'll spend a hundred percent of your mental energy focusing only on those things.

Cause you can't, cause obviously yesterday, focusing too much on that tends to lead to depression as I think the loose sour, the philosopher says, focusing too much on tomorrow and the things that are yet to be in your control will also cause a lot of anxiety.

So really focusing on today, I think is just phenomenal advice in terms of A, it's the thing that's most conducive with a successful outcome, but B, it's also the thing that's most conducive with having a healthy mental state in total chaos.

No, I think that's absolutely right.

I mean, I think the other thing is that realizing that our, I believe our purpose in life is human connection.

I think that's why we're here.

I think we're made to connect and sometimes it's, you know, we're colliding, you know, more than connecting, but figuring out how to connect with other human beings.

And I will say, you know, that was the making of me as being able to, you know, when someone comes into my office and says, you know, I've lost my, I've lost my partner, you know, they passed away, you know, way before their time, you know, being able to connect with that person in that moment of loss is hugely valuable as a company, but hugely meaningful to me as a human being.

And I wouldn't have been able to do that if I hadn't been through the loss that I had experienced.

So, you know, it's one of those things where you end up being grateful for the most upsetting things that happen in your life because I think they're the making of you in many ways.

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Because of what you said at the start, this conversation about that importance of feeling like you belonged, and that's so, it's so evident that that is much of the reason you've also been successful is you're, you mean, even from this short conversation we've had, you strike me as a very empathetic person who is able to connect with others. That moment must have been presumably even more difficult because your sense of belonging in that moment was taken from you to some degree, the family unit, right?

No, for sure.

That was, yeah, that was a defining moment.

But now, you know, the thing about five guys is that, you know, we have these 8,600 people who get up every morning and have this shared vision mission to make great burgers and fries for hungry customers.

And I get to be a part of that.

And you know, I get to be a part of this larger community that has this, and that, you know, winning in business feels fantastic, right?

I mean, it's a real high.

I'd say it's a drug and it's an addiction and being a part of a community that's accomplishing this thing.

You know, we were the eighth fastest growing business in 2016, I think, in the U.K. and the fastest growing food and beverage business.

And even with that, we never met a budget that I had made.

So, you know, we were fastest, but, you know, still behind by my mind and being a part of this community that shares our values and that are all working towards this is enormously satisfying and, yeah, feel something that, you know, has always been empty.

Some days as CEOs, we maybe we're tired or, you know, we're in a bad mood or something's off.

We can sometimes not show up as our best selves.

Sometimes when that happens with me, I regret it.

So I'll go home and think, I just wish I'd, I wish I'd handled that situation differently.

Do you, does that happen to you a lot where you think, fuck, I wish I'd been in a better mood or I'd slept more today or something?

Yeah, Julie tells me.

Who's Julie?

Julie, my head of ops.

She comes in and says, yeah, you really fucked up that meeting.

That was, but actually having somebody who, you know, to me, one of the worst things that can happen are these, you know, emperor has no clothes where, you know, where the most important powerful person in business has blind spots that, you know, everybody knows about and somehow you, you know, you work around.

And that's just hugely dangerous as a business.

And having people who can come into your office and go, John, that was, you know, that comment was just way out of line or really unhelpful, you know, you now have people thinking you're like this.

Is that what you wanted?

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So people who can confront power with truth and, you know, to me, that kind of culture is hugely important to a company because you can go so wrong with the emperor has no clothes and people think, God, we know this, we just can't tell him to that person.

How do you cultivate that?

Because I imagine a lot of CEOs and a lot of team members that work for a CEO think, oh, there's no way I could give him my CEO and tell him that was wrong or he shouldn't have said that or she shouldn't have said that.

I think publicly owning your shit is really, is really helpful in that way.

You know, so showing up at the next meeting and go, hey, you know what, I said this the last meeting and that was just really wrong.

It was off and, you know, I was off my game or, you know, I didn't think it through.

And, you know, it should be the opposite of that and, you know, showing that you can respond to that kind of challenge, I think is important as a leader.

And then you give everybody else permission to do the same thing.

You know, I mean, you can change your mind.

You're allowed to change your mind.

You're allowed to be wrong as a fallible human being, too.

And confessing that it's powerful.