



## **EUDAEMONIA** **Challenge, with Belinda Kirk**

September 1, 2021

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Kim Forrester (00:00):

In recent decades, our overwhelming need to eliminate pain, reduce risk, and avoid discomfort has given rise to the term, 'the bubble wrap generation'. But what are we doing to our well-being when we choose comfort and safety over hardship and adventure? I'm Kim Forrester, you're listening to the Eudaemonia podcast, and today it's time for a truthful chat about challenge.

Intro (00:31):

Welcome to Eudaemonia the podcast that is all about flourishing. Plug in, relax and get ready for the goodness as we explore the traits and practices that can help you thrive in life ... with your host Kim Forrester.

Kim Forrester (00:50):

Belinda Kirk is a British explorer, author, and motivational speaker. Belinda is the founder of Explorers Connect, a social enterprise that connects people to opportunities for adventure and expedition, and she is the founding campaigner of the Adventure Revolution. Belinda has spent 24 years leading groups into the wilderness all over the world, including youth development expeditions, biological research missions, and remote filming trips for the BBC. Her new book, Adventure Revolution, is a wonderful explanation of why adventure is essential to our well-being. It's my absolute pleasure to be chatting with Belinda today, to explore the importance of adventure and to learn why we thrive more when we embrace our discomfort zone and seek out challenge. Belinda Kirk, it is just such a delight to have you here with me on the Eudaemonia podcast. How are things with you today?

Belinda Kirk (01:50):

Great, thank you. It's lovely to speak to you. I've been talking to lots of adventurey people, which is also good, but it's nice to talk to someone from well-being. The book is kind of ... my research is bringing together two worlds, so it's nice to talk to someone else on the other side.

Kim Forrester (02:07):

I totally understand. And I think that not a lot of people fully understand that there is a definitive link between adventure and seeking out challenge, and actually living our best life and boosting our well-being. So it's just so wonderful to have you here to discuss this particular topic today. In your book, Belinda, you explained that while our modern lives have become less challenging, right, less adventurous - which may come as a surprise to some of my listeners, but of course, statistics show that we are safer, we're more comfortable than ever before - and yet, as you write, we are also more stressed than we have ever been before in the past. Can you explain to my listeners what you mean by, you know, we're safer and more comfortable, but we're also more stressed?

Belinda Kirk (03:03):

Yes. It's a difficult concept to get your head around. It's one I've struggled with. When I say we're more comfortable than ever before, I don't think - and I don't mean - that we've got an easier life than ever before. I think ironically, by making ourselves comfortable, we've actually made life harder for us. We've kind of gone past some sort of breaking point. So we evolved to live adventurously. We obviously evolved to live. We have a flight or fight response that is, that is designed to go off, to protect us from danger. We used to live in much harsher conditions with much more prevalent danger around us. We've created - with many, many benefits, I'm not saying we should go back to where we were, you know - with many benefits we've created a much more comfortable world. But I think we've created such a comfortable world that we've actually lost something along the way. And that might be that we need a little bit of grit. We need a little bit of discomfort. We need a little bit of challenge and difficulty. And I don't mean trauma. That's different, but we need something that challenges us every day because that's really what brings us to makes us rise. You know, we talk about rising to the challenge. That's kind of how we push ourselves and find out what we're capable of. I think life today is for most of us, or for most of us for most of the time, we have our routines and we have our rules and we've created civilizations that are incredibly complex and we've done amazing things. You know, modern medicine is not something to be sniffed at. But because of these routines and rules and, you know, the repetitive way that we can live and the way that we've sort of, I think, we've become less comfortable with uncertainty as well as discomfort because we've taken away all of these unknowns, that we're kind of weakening ourselves. And I think it also weakens our mental health.

Kim Forrester (05:02):

Well, let's go there Belinda, because you're talking there about how we're uncomfortable with discomfort. And I certainly believe that we've become more risk averse, more adventure averse. Particularly in developed nations, I think. As you say in your book, we're sort of fencing off our wild areas. We're bubble wrapping our children's playgrounds. What do you think we're afraid of Belinda? What is it that we're hiding from?

Belinda Kirk (05:33):

Well, this is the really interesting thing. A piece of research I've actually read since writing the book, because I was looking for this, was that ... like, my gut instinct is that because we've evolved to live in such a harsh world where there are real dangers prevalent all around us. And because we've taken those out of the equation, we're still on high alert. We're still looking for problems but there are none, as it were. And so we find problems where there aren't any. We find stress where there isn't any. And there's this amazing new study I found about, there were some researchers from Harvard, I think, were looking at people going through airport check-ins. You know, like the security were looking for threats coming through airport security through, you know, the traveling passengers. And there were certain sorts of facial expressions or behaviors or whatever that they were looking out for. And when those are there, they saw them. But when they were taken away, they actually saw them when they weren't there. So there's some really interesting research out there that we're kind of designed to have a bit of adversity, a bit of adventure, a bit of difficulty. And there's also wonderful research that says that the people who've had a bit of adversity in their lives are actually happier and have better well-being in the long term than people who've had too much adversity, but also interestingly, they are happier and have better well-being than people who've had no adversity. So it's a really interesting set of information out there. And I think, I think it's because we need a little bit of grit. And a little bit of darkness shows us where the light is, you know.

Kim Forrester (07:17):

Speaking there, you remind me of children. And children are naturally drawn to challenge, right? They're naturally drawn to pushing the boundaries of their physicality and their intellect and their creativity. In your book, you mentioned a school in the UK that is adding challenge and adventure to their educational approach. And in Auckland, New Zealand, there is a school called Swanson Primary that has eliminated all playground rules. So for the past several years, these kids have been free in their playtime to climb tall trees, and to build contraptions, and to ride bikes, and to roll down hills. Perhaps unsurprising to you, Belinda, these children are thriving at school. So studies have shown that there has been a decrease in bullying. There's been a decrease in ADHD symptoms and injuries, which is really interesting, but there's also been an increase in compassion and cooperation amongst these children. What do you see happening there, Belinda? What can we learn as adults about the way we approach our own playgrounds?

Belinda Kirk (08:36):

I think we need to remove the rules. Isn't it, it's pretty clear. We obviously, as very complex communities and societies, we need to have rules and we need to be respectful of others. So there's certain amount of rule following that we need to do. But we also need to use our own judgment. And we need to, I think at least if there's one space that we should leave without rules, it's the wild, it's the outdoors. You know, we should ... hands-off basically. Let's not put rules on the outdoors. Very disturbingly, the first rules - a couple of years ago - the first rules were actually placed upon Montblanc; the first mountain to have rules in order to climb it. And I think that's a big mistake. And it's not about not protecting people. It's about actually giving people responsibility for themselves. The more rules we have, the less we take responsibility for our behaviors. And also I think that then knocks on to the less responsibility we have to live our own lives and to be responsible for our success or failure or happiness. I think we actually strip people of their ability to have fulfilled lives, to fulfill their potential, to have happy full lives, because we kind of take away, we give so many rules or we take away people's choice and the freedom to think for themselves. So I think the fact, I mean, I love that, that the survey about that school, and there's several others that point in the same direction. I think we've taken the risk out of play and we put too many rules into play, both for children and for adults. And I think we just have to go back a bit. We just have to undo some of that and we'll all thrive a lot more.

Kim Forrester (10:26):

You talk a lot about natural challenge. I mean, that is your message, right? Let's all get out in nature and explore and find out what we're capable of out in nature. I want to bring it inward for a moment because we are natural beings as well. So there is nature within us; there is nature residing in every cell of our body. So do you feel that, as important as natural challenge and adventure is, is it equally as important for us to pursue intellectual or emotional challenge in your view? Does it boost our well-being when we step into our discomfort zone in our social interactions, or in the way we are open and vulnerable with others, or in our learning and growth?

Belinda Kirk (11:20):

Oh, absolutely. I talk about natural challenge because it's the most perfect way for us to find out about challenge because we're designed to do that. But where adventure is really important is not that we go and do the adventures. It's almost when you come back and how it's changed you and how it's informed you and given you the gift of knowledge or self-awareness. And what I've learned

from adventure is to be braver; is to not be scared of uncertainty, to not be scared of failing. And therefore, when I approach other ways, other areas of my life, whether it be career or relationship, this idea of getting out of my comfort zone, and I've seen this in other people, getting out of your comfort zone - if you've done it to climb a mountain, you can do it in your career or in your relationships. I absolutely agree with what you say, because leaving your comfort zone is not just about doing it on a hillside or in the middle of the sea, wherever you're adventuring. It's about learning how to do that, empowering yourself, so you can do it in every part of your life. And there's the wonderful, wonderful vision of a comfort zone that I always liked. It's that if you imagine you live inside a circle and there's a circle around you, and that is your comfort zone. When you step out of your comfort zone - and whether it be on an adventure, or whether it be writing a book or starting a business, or asking someone out on a date that you've always wanted to - you step out of your comfort zone. And then, you don't shrink back down to your comfort zone. Afterwards, your comfort zone comes up to meet you, as it were. So your comfort zone and your life basically grows and therefore your experience and everything, your confidence and your experience of life, grows because your comfort zone gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And the things that you're comfortable with expand, and therefore you're able to do more and more and more. And that is why I believe people always say that doing adventures or anything that stretches your comfort zone, is all about showing you that you can do more than you thought you could.

Kim Forrester (13:26):

Belinda, are all challenges created equal in your view? And what I mean by that is, if we challenge ourselves to build a successful business or earn enough to buy a Ferrari or appear on the reality TV show, will accomplishing that kind of materialistic goal or challenge have the same well-being benefits as, say, climbing Kilimanjaro or raising funds for a worthy community cause? You know, something that is more about humanity and connection.

Belinda Kirk (14:01):

I think my gut instinct and also some research that I've read along the way, right, in the book, there's two types of reasons for doing things, I suppose. There's the intrinsic and there's, the extrinsic. And if you're seeking extrinsic approval, i.e. to get richer, to get beautiful to, you know, whatever, you know, if you're relying on other people's expectations of you to validate your challenge, then it's, I don't think it's got the same validity. Because you basically, I mean, that's the trap that we fall into in our modern world. We constantly compare ourselves to others. We're constantly looking outwards to say, "Oh, look, you know, everyone out there, validate me, validate me." The beautiful thing about adventure is that it's non-competitive. Yes, I've fallen in the same trap. I did a Guinness World Record adventure and, by doing it, I realized that it was not what being adventurous is about. The Guinness World Record was not my pinnacle of my career at all. And the great thing about most adventurous challenges - or at least I think the purest adventurous challenge - is that you're not battling nature and you're not conquering mountains. You're actually conquering yourself. You're battling against yourself. Or not, actually that's not the right word. It's not battling against yourself, but you're finding out what you can do. You're pushing your own boundaries and you're finding out what's possible and that is incredibly powerful and meaningful. Whereas looking for external tick boxes is, I think, not.

Kim Forrester (15:37):

Throughout this conversation, Belinda, the word uncertainty has been popping up a lot and you do write that uncertainty and adversity are the ingredients that kind of combine with challenge to make

it worthwhile. But the problem with living in our comfort zone is that we can become so entrenched that we can't even see the possibilities for uncertainty. We can't see the possibilities for adventure in our lives. We can't see, Belinda, where we can expand ourselves and challenge ourselves to become a greater version of ourselves. So how do we know where uncertainty lies in our lives? How can we recognize that, "Yeah, you know, that's the adventure or that's the endeavor or that's the change that is going to challenge me and propel me into that, sort of, powerful state of uncertainty and adversity and growth"?

Belinda Kirk (16:40):

I think your gut instinct. I think if something scares you, but you want to do something but you feel that you shouldn't, or you can't, or you'll do it next week - that's a classic - you could have off or next year, or whatever, I think that is probably the thing you should be doing. Or the thing that you keep talking about doing. I've got this great ... there's this thing on my fridge that my partner found and we both agree with, and it says, "You're soon dead. That stuff you keep talking about doing you better go and do it." And I think that it just reminds us, it's a kick up the bum to remind us that we ... you know, life is not about avoiding mistakes or avoiding discomfort. Life is about finding life, living life, filling our days with life. That is why we're here. It's not to avoid discomfort or avoid fear. And so, because we've created societies where we are very risk averse and we're very bad at generally now, as societies, we're very bad at dealing with uncertainty because we've taken all the uncertainty of most of our every day. That is very, very hard. But I think there's a couple of things you've got to remember. You've got to take the first step and you've got to remember that the first day is going to be the hardest, because if you're not used to risking or following your dreams, despite the fact that you might look foolish or fail, then the very first step is the hardest one. It's the most uncomfortable one. But once you take that first step, there will be this wonderful feedback because you will get this empowered - even if it goes a bit wrong - you will feel empowered because you've had a go; because you've had a try, because you've changed your mindset a little bit. And you can take little steps. You don't have to go jumping straight, headfirst. It's up to you how you do it. But I think take those steps.

Kim Forrester (18:38):

I want to get into the nitty gritty of challenge and adventure. Now we've been talking a lot about, you know, uncertainty and adversity. And I do think in particular that pain, physical pain, emotional pain adversity, it's something that we tend to resist to a huge degree in our modern lives. But I would say that any challenge that's worthwhile invites in emotional, physical pain and adversity. What practices do you use to, not just overcome adversity when you face it, but to actually thrive through and grow through the experience?

Belinda Kirk (19:25):

That's what I think that's what you get by just practice. When I go on adventures, I know it might be uncomfortable at times. And to be at good adventures, you've got to be cold or wet or tired or hungry at some point.

Kim Forrester (19:38):

Yeah, you've got to be saying at some point, "Why did I choose to do this?"

Belinda Kirk (19:44):

I've thought that to myself, several, like a lot of times. It's probably several times each adventure. But I always know the answer. And I've talked to other adventurers about this and it's very much that, I think, once you've done it a few times, you start to notice that the feelings of achievement and pride and so on that you get later on are worth a bit of discomfort at the time. And I think when you recognize that you can have that kind of experience, that is tough at the time, and you might be thinking why on earth am I here, but you do know that it will be worth it because of the way you'll feel later. And this isn't delayed ... well, it's like the difference between instant gratification and delayed gratification. But not doing it to the ... not overdoing it, I suppose, because you can also go too far the way that way as well. But this idea that you can suffer a bit ... and I'm not talking about trauma or things that are thrust upon you, but I'm talking about challenges that you choose. Adventurers choose to go on these challenges again and again, because they know there will be discomfort or difficulty or pain or upset. But they also know that there will be much, much more joy and achievement, and positive feelings, and feelings that they won't ... there's sort of a magic that you don't get in your comfort zone. You don't get. If you think of some of the most amazing memorable moments of your life, whether it be giving birth, or just general parenting. I mean, that's tough as anything isn't it. Or writing a book or whatever is put yourself out of your comfort zone. There has been difficulty in adversity and pain, but actually the overwhelming memories you have all golden.

Kim Forrester (21:30):

Yeah. Yeah. We learn so much about ourselves, right? We learn so much about our capabilities. But you mentioned there about going too far. And I wonder if in your experience, if it's possible for us to seek out too much challenge. So do you ever recommend that people sort of take a break from their discomfort zone and just sort of, you know, chill out for a while? Or I also think of the people who become increasingly daring where the challenges that they seek out become more reckless or more dangerous, and this could be in climbing mountains, or it could be in the way you build your business, or it could be in the relationships that you choose to engage in. Do you think that there's ever a point where we ought to sort of, you know, sit back and stop chasing the adventure and stop chasing the challenge? Or at least change course, you know? Rather than pursue the same kind of challenge in riskier and more daring ways, could it be wise for us to say, "Well, maybe I'll challenge myself in a completely new sphere of my life?"

Belinda Kirk (22:47):

Gosh, there's a lot to say about that. Start with the fact that the model that I talk about a lot for the comfort zone is the Karl Rohnke model, which essentially, if you imagine three circles around each other, you've got the comfort zone in the middle, the stretch zone around that. And then the outer part of the model is the panic zone. And so definitely, when we're talking about stretching ourselves and getting out of our comfort zone into the stretch zone, we do not want to be going into the panic zone. In the stretch zone we learn and we assimilate information and we get those magic moments. If we go into the panic zone, it might put us off completely. We shrink back to the comfort zone. You never want to leave our comfort zone again. So it is a balance. And that's why I suggest always small, you know, take steps and trust your instinct. Your instinct is always right. For me, I had a very idyllic childhood in some ways. And then my later childhood was very difficult because I had dealt with episodes of violence and it made me feel very vulnerable and really worthless actually. And I went ... I think I was drawn to adventure because I needed to feel alive and I just needed a distraction. There's a story in the book with Kelvin as well, who very sadly lost his mother who was murdered. And his reaction was to go back to climbing that he'd done as a child, as a teenager. And

he went back to climbing, but he was doing it really - and he admits this - quite dangerously and sort of solo climbing, pushing his limits maybe a bit too far. Because he just needed to numb himself or to, not numb himself, but he needed to just distract and be immersed in something to stop the feelings. You know, he was just, he had to escape from it. But, so yes, you can misuse adventure, I think. But I think it's much harder to do, to do that. We numb ourselves in our modern world constantly with, you know, TV, social media, drugs, alcohol, whatever. There's lots of ways to numb ourselves a lot easier than climbing some epic, epic cliffs or whatever. So there is worse ways to numb yourself than doing adventures. But I think it's quite extreme and quite unusual to go that far. But the wonderful thing that when you have that happens to me and happened for Kelvin, is it because you're doing something that's actually quite a healthy thing at its heart that you will start to draw back. And both myself and Kelvin went on a similar journey that we just pulled the throttle back a bit and we found the perfect balance. And we both actually love taking people on adventures more than anything. It's about being out there, in nature, in adventure. And it's not about going to those crazy limits.

Kim Forrester (25:28):

I love what you're saying there, that if we step into challenge and adventure as a way to boost our well-being, now that we're enjoying enhanced well-being, we choose to do the things that are actually good for us, right? Because you and Kelvin stepped into challenge and adventure as a way to help you process and move beyond the trauma of your past. And eventually that self care and the self understanding kind of kicked in, and you naturally started gravitating to challenges that were exciting and expanding, but there were also resonating fully with what is really best for you as individuals. Belinda, I have a million questions to ask you, but sadly, we've come to the final question of the Eudaemonia podcast and this is a question I ask every guest. Can you offer a morning reminder to my listeners? So this may be a practice, a mantra, perhaps a favorite affirmation, something that can help us all become a little more adventurous and step more willingly into challenge each day.

Belinda Kirk (26:42):

There's two questions I like to ask myself. And one is, "What's the worst that can happen?" And the other one is, "What's the best thing that could come out of this?" And so when I'm scared of something, but I know I've been called to do something and change something in my life, or engage in something new but it is intimidating and scary, I think, well, what's the worst that could happen? And often when you think about it, the worst that could happen is usually something that you can take. You can bear, you can put up with. So essentially, if I'm intimidated by something and I think, what's the worst or what's the best that could happen and I kind of weigh it up, it gives me a really good way of reframing challenge or uncertainty as well. I can reframe challenge or uncertainty, not as a threat, but instead as an opportunity. And I think it's a great lesson I've learned from adventuring is that I can - I suppose it's a bit about being brave - but it's about looking and reframing opportunities in front of you that, you know, they're not a threat. This is not about uncertainty, but this is about opportunity and excitement and possibility instead.

Kim Forrester (27:51):

I love, throughout this entire conversation, there's been this undercurrent of curiosity. Challenge and adventure is not just about what's the best that can happen or what's the worst that can happen or, you know, can I overcome that particular challenge? It's about "Who am I, and what am I capable of?" Such incredibly powerful questions for us to ask of ourselves, Belinda, and to go out there and

start answering. Belinda Kirk, your brand new book, congratulations, is called Adventure Revolution. And you are the global voice of the #adventurerevolution. If people want to find out more about your work, your book, your expeditions, where can they find out more?

Belinda Kirk (28:48):

Yes. So, I'm at [www.belindakirk.com](http://www.belindakirk.com). You can contact me through my website. I'm also on ... I do a bit of social media at the moment around the book. So you can contact me through @explorerbelinda on Twitter and also Instagram. And yes, of course, do I, I would love you to read the book and you can get it as an audio or a Kindle or a hard copy book. And the book is the first book to join up all this research that I've been trying to dig up for years. And the first book to explain why adventure is essential for our well-being. And the reason I wrote the book is because after 26 years of seeing adventure change people's lives, and as well as my own, I really believe that there are lots of really simple ways as well as more complex ways to add it into our lives, into our schools, into our every day, into our societies. And I think it's a hugely positive thing that we are we're missing out on, but it's actually right there for all of us to grab.

Kim Forrester (29:54):

This is a conversation we needed to have, and that I love to amplify around the world. Well-being is not just about chasing what feels pleasant or what feels easy. It is also importantly about pursuing things that create challenge and pain and abrasiveness and adversity. Belinda Kirk, it has just been such an honor to have you here on the Eudaemonia podcast. Thank you for your time, your support and your wisdom today.

Belinda Kirk (30:30):

Thank you so much. I love being challenged by some of your questions. I haven't thought of those things, some of those things. So it's lovely to, yeah, bend my mind around them.

Kim Forrester (30:40):

As the American actress, Cicely Tyson once said, challenges make you discover things about yourself that you never really knew. You've been listening to the Eudaemonia podcast. If you'd like to learn more about how to live a truly flourishing life, please subscribe, check out [www.eudaemoniapod.com](http://www.eudaemoniapod.com) for more inspiring episodes or come join me on Instagram @iamkimforrester. I'm Kim Forrester. Until next time be well, be kind to yourself and choose challenge.