**EPISODE 1195**

> *"**MW:** It also screams confidence, because if you can own this is who I am and not be ashamed of it and say, 'Actually, this is how it's a huge value add to you, to your company. I'm the one who saves us money because I spot problems and raise my hand about that before it happens. I'm the one that has deep integrity and will say when I don't feel something is right.' These are the people you want on your team; it just requires, we feel confident and take ownership of those strengths and speak to them."*

[INTRODUCTION]

[00:01:09]

**FT:** Our guest today is offering advice for the folks in the audience she describes as sensitive strivers, empathetic, driven individuals. You may have been called too sensitive at work and in everyday life. But she is here to be a champion for all of us who identify as sensitive strivers, how to break from stress, perfectionism and self-doubt to achieve confidence, overcome imposter syndrome, speak and act with assertiveness and find the confidence to work and lead effectively.

Welcome to So Money, everybody, I'm Farnoosh Torabi. I'm so excited for my friend, Melody. She has been working tirelessly to bring this book to life. Susan Cain, the author of *Quiet,* the New York Times best-selling book calls Melody's book groundbreaking and insightful. Melody Wilding has coached hundreds of private clients from CEOs and Fortune 500 executives to leaders from the Department of Education, the Federal Reserve, the UN. She teaches graduate level human behavior and psychology at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in New York. Her advice has been featured in the New York Times, Oprah Magazine, NBC News. Here's Melody Wilding.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Melody Wilding, welcome back to So Money. Congrats on your new book.

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**MW:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here and finally share it.

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**FT:** Yes, trust yourself is the title. Stop overthinking and channel your emotions at work. I am thrilled. I know that you have been deeply involved in researching and developing this book concept for years.

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**MW:** That's right.

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**FT:** Truly.

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**MW:** Well, the book itself was five years in the making, but I've been doing this work for 10 years now, so yeah, quite a while.

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**FT:** Do you feel like you really nailed it here? Do you think you needed all this time?

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**MW:** Absolutely. It's funny because an aspect of sensitivity is deeper processing, which now looking back on it makes complete and total sense. But this is a new concept, so it really took

 

me a while to see it come together and to really research it and see the patterns within my clients. I think we got it though, I think I nailed it.

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**FT:** Yes. I know all those years ago when you were first describing your thoughts for this thesis, I felt like we were talking around it, where you're talking about like people who are emotional. But you really nailed it to this piece about sensitivity. I really want you to tell us about who the protagonist really in this book is and it's a prescriptive book. But for thinking about like the hero in your book here, these sensitive strivers. Tell us who they are and what you want us to know about sensitive strivers. I think you identify with this group very much, right?

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**MW:** One hundred percent. This book is completely from my own personal experiences, but also my clinical training and my years of coaching now. A sensitive striver is a high achiever, who is highly sensitive. They are someone who is driven, enjoys pushing themselves to achieve goals, but they also think and feel everything more deeply than the average person. Biologically, this refers to about 15% or 20% of people, so about one in five people. You or someone you know is a sensitive striver. We have this trait difference that leads us to be more attuned and reactive to our environment and what happens within us. We are more aware of, observant and responsive to our own emotions as well as those of other people. We are deeply caring, we're committed, we give our 110% to everything we do. That's the striver side. But we very much have this inner world that's on overdrive.

While being a sensitive striver is a tremendous strength that comes with a lot of assets that are very important to your professional life, if not managed correctly or many sensitive strivers just lack the tools to manage their sensitivity correctly. Because we process and experience the world more deeply than other people, we're more susceptible to stress, overwhelm, overthinking, imposter syndrome, lack of boundaries, all of those sorts of things.

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**FT:** You say one in five, but that's still a minority of people at work. I know that we often dismiss the people that we call sensitive as overly sensitive, too sensitive, sensitive to a fall, all of that. You're living your truth as a sensitive striver in a world that isn't celebratory of that. That has to be the biggest barrier. That has to be the biggest challenge, right?

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**MW:** I think I face that challenge in trying to write the book. As you said, I danced around it for so long because I was afraid to touch the concept. There was something I had disowned about myself. I really had spent my entire life figuring out how to push down, squelch, hide my sensitivity and not feel like it was something I was burdened with. I was really an expert at only presenting to the world what I wanted people to see, and not having many needs and being overly helpful. I think many other people who are sensitive strivers have had that same story, where you grow up with these narratives that, "Stop taking things too personally. You should have a thicker skin. Why are you so high maintenance? Can't you just get over things by now?"

We internalize these messages that having this depth of processing and way of experiencing the world is a bad thing and you should get rid of it or you should hide it. I think that's exactly why so many sensitive people struggle with self-doubt is because they have been invalidated for so long that we start invalidating ourselves.

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**FT:** Right, and you get to this point where you're really stuck and you can't make important decisions.

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**MW:** Yes.

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**FT:** That's really what's at stake here, is your inability to move on with your life. Tell us about, what was your process for self-acceptance, Melody?

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**MW:** I was in a fortuitous position, because my training is in psychology and neuroscience. I have a background as a therapist. I was someone who went to school to follow the right steps, A+ Gold star student. Then was quickly dropped into the work world and met with all of my unsustainable habits, my overworking, my insecurity, all of that crippled me very early on in my career. It was an extension of not knowing how to manage myself and my career as a sensitive striver. I was in a good position because luckily from my training, had the tools and the knowledge to start changing my thoughts, and build better boundaries, and disconnect my self-worth from my success and had actually been building a coaching business on the side of my full-time job, and was working with the similar clients, and saw the same patterns for them. That's really the genesis of the book.

Now, flash forward 10 years and have built this coaching practice, and really the book is a distillation of the methodology that has come out of that. I think one of the first places to start is that being a sensitive striver can really just feel overwhelming at times. It can feel like everything affects you so deeply and you have so many weaknesses. Like you were saying, you overthink things, you can't make decisions. Where do you start it? It can be paralyzing at times.

In the book, what I wanted to do was really to create a framework for understanding yourself as a sensitive person, so you could tease apart the aspects of your sensitivity and prioritize where to start, to start seeing changes.

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**FT:** Before we get to that though, how do you identify that you are somebody that is sensitive? Because maybe you are in denial. It's really hard to have a sense of yourself sometimes. How do you get there?

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**MW:** There is a self-assessment in the book that is drawn from what we know about the research on both high-sensitivity and high achievement. People who would be defined as a sensitive striver are people who experience their emotions to a great level of intensity, and depth and complexity. They have a strong desire to exceed expectations in everything that they do. They consider themselves to be driven, they enjoy pushing themselves to achieve goals. They think before they act. Because a hallmark of sensitivity —

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**FT:** This is definitely not me. Oh my God! The think before you act part.

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**MW:** It's so funny because --

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**FT:** They're not impulsive.

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**MW:** Right. They're not impulsive. We tend to be very cautious.

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**FT:** They're good with money, you think? Do you think they're good with money?

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**MW:** Most of the sensitive strivers I meet are excellent with money, because they are such deep — they pause before they spend on something, right? They really anticipate eventualities of these are the people that have every type of insurance and you better believe I have life

insurance, and disability insurance, and pet insurance and I have anticipated everything that could happen to me. So yes, these are those people who also see opportunities that others miss. Sensitive strivers tend to make great entrepreneurs, because they are people who think of inventive solutions. They tend to be five steps ahead of other people, because they have made connections before other people have even gotten there then, because they're nuanced thinkers, since we take in more information, we make more connections with that and see it before other people do.

But some of the downsides, some of the flipside of this trade is having an inner critic that never takes a day off, struggling with burnout because you say yes or you overwork, being easily impacted by stress. So sensitivity fundamentally is about having a highly attuned nervous system so we are always taking in everything from our surroundings, which can lead to overload. Spending eight hours in front of a Zoom screen and you're just constantly overstimulated. We have a lower threshold for stress.

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**FT:** Do you sometimes wish there was a different word to describe this person, because I still keep going back to society, and how we — the context in which we use the word sensitive is not always praiseworthy. It's like, "Oh! She's really sensitive." That's so unfair, because how you're describing this person, she's a superhero.

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**MW:** Yeah, 100%. I'm so glad you said that. I don't wish there was a different word. I wish we could update the meaning of the word, because it does carry a lot of baggage with it. But I will say that so often, for my community, I get the question, "Well, should I tell people I'm a sensitive striver?

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**FT:** Well, like in an interview for a job, like what is something about you that we should —

 

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**MW:** I wouldn't suggest like, "I'm sensitive striver" in a job interview. But you need to have a basis of trust with someone. But every time, hands down, I've had clients say that they have this conversation where they share this idea with their manager, they share this framework with them. It's overwhelmingly positive, because it helps people understand you. It helps people put together pieces of how to get the best out of you and work effectively with you. It also screams confidence, because if you can own this is who I am and not be ashamed of it and say, "Actually, this is how it's a huge value add to you, to your company. I'm the one who saves us money because I spot problems and raise my hand about that before it happens. I'm the one that has deep integrity and will say when I don't feel something is right." These are the people you want on your team; it just requires, we feel confident and take ownership of those strengths and speak to them.

You don't necessarily have to say, "I'm sensitive" but you can speak to the upsides of the trait and how they bring a benefit.

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**FT:** I apologize. I interrupted you every time you wanted to give us the advice, the strategies. I'm going to through some of this with you because I think it's so important. The first thing is, you want to teach people in your book how to avoid burnout, set boundaries and break your work addiction. Can you talk around that and how do you say no if you are the person who always is conditioned or wants to say yes?

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**MW:** Yeah. I think this is really relevant right now where there is no separation between work and life. The number one thing I have been hearing from people and working with clients on is burnout. Some of the recent research I've seen says up to 85% or 90% of people are feeling that. When I work with clients, typically how I see burnout manifest in a way I don't think is talked about enough is this idea of over functioning, which is kind of self-explanatory.

 

But over functioning is a way of taking on more responsibility than is actually yours. As an over functioner, not only do you do more, so you tend to have the most projects, you have the most responsibilities at home. But you also take on responsibilities for other people's feelings, so you may try to kind of control a situation or contort the way you present something so that people will like you and be happy about it. Or you're the one who swoops in to fix every situation for someone. When you over function, you can create a dynamic where other people under function. I see this all the time where people want to be the team player, they want to be the superhero on their team or in their life in general. They will just keep taking more on their plate, it's kind of like this never-ending capacity that they have, which women especially do this.

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**FT:** Yeah. It's also been called things like emotional labor, this idea of like taking on the emotional tolls or the responsibilities, the silent work.

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**MW:** One hundred percent. It's often masked as a positive. You're a team player, you work so hard, but that is exactly what leads to burnout and disempowers all the people around you. Your partner, your kids, your coworkers, your collaborators, then don't step up. Of course, that's not good and nobody wants to be the person disempowering the people around them.

Where to start with changing this? I always like to say, use your emotions as data and use them as a guide. If you can look for places where you feel resentment, resentment is the number one emotional queue that you the boundary that needs to be set. You have some sort of limit that you have — you have let something go on too long and somebody has crossed that limit. And you have probably just kind of been stuffing it down and taking it and not said anything. It is calcified into this resentment, which is kind of like anger toward someone.

Look for areas in your life where you feel that sense of resentment. If you are the one who — every month, you are the one at the end of the month doing the financials, and there is just resentment towards that process, well, that's probably a good sign that you are over functioning and you can take back control by asking your partner to pitch in or finding someone to help you

 

with that. For example, like if you own a business and you have accounting reps, you hire someone to help you with that accounting at the end of the month. There are different solutions for this, but often times, it's even just identifying where the opportunities are, and then it's pretty easy to figure out what a solution should be.

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**FT:** I think part of the concern too is when you ask for help, or you realize you're over functioning and you say to your colleague, I can no longer do this. We worry may be and I'm using the unit universal we. Like it can come across as a weakness or like it's not you're over functioning, you're feeling it. The colleague has no idea that this is stressing you out. They may just see this as like, you putting one less thing on your plate. How do you present it in such a way where it really does make itself clear to everybody that this is not sustainable?

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**MW:** Yeah. Well, I think you have to let people know what's in it for them. If there is some sort of change happening, what's in it for them. Sometimes I'll use the example of, you want to change the way you're doing some reporting at work let's say. Well, what's in it for the other person if they accept this change? For example, does it make it faster, or more efficient? Does it eliminate customer service calls that they're going to get? What is the benefit for them if they go with this change? Or a lot of times, like to say, "Frame it in the positive." The phrase is like, "To ensure I met my best or able to serve you, I'm going to sign off at 5:00 PM every day to ensure that I can show up with my best the next day." Or the positive no, which is, "I'm not able to do A, but what I can do is B." It's kind of a tradeoff about what you — you're saying no to one thing but yes to another thing.

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**FT:** I'm listening to course you're talking in the context of work, but I can't help but think about how this can apply to all aspects of our lives, these boundaries, these conversations, these scripts. We're not just sensitive at work, we're sensitive in our relationships with our friendships, everywhere. This is extremely transferable would you say? I mean, your book is called, "Trust

yourself. Stop overthinking and channel your emotions at work, but you could just stop at emotions. Stop overthinking and channel your emotions everywhere, all the places. Do you find that your work is omnirelevant?

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**MW:** One hundred percent, yes. Well, I do talk about it in the work context, you take yourself everywhere, right? The personal effects, the professional and vice versa, and these patterns tend to show up across your life. Yes, the book deals with it somewhat, definitely in the work context. But everything I think I talk about in there, especially now because work and life is so integrated, there is not a lot of separation that it really is applicable to all of the above.

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**FT:** How do you trust your gut? This is something that you explore in your book, and for our sensitive strivers who do tend to overthink and question perhaps their own thinking, how do you trust your gut? How do you define gut in the book?

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**MW:** Gut, intuition, whatever you want to call it. I think it's all pretty much the same thing, it's semantics. But your gut sense, I would define as the pool, the body of information, experiences, preferences that you have. That when you have to make a decision, your mind in fractions of a millisecond is doing calculations to pull from all of those that bank that you have to say, "What's the situation that was similar to this? How can I applied what happened there to what I'm facing now?" This happens all outside, completely outside of our conscious awareness, which is what makes it so powerful and why intuition can feel so woo-woo, because it doesn't feel like a concrete process, but —

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**FT:** It's data.

 

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**MW:** It's data.

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**FT:** It's your historical data. I had a guest on the show who talked about trusting your gut and it was Laura Day. I don't know if you ever heard of her, she's incredible and blew my mind. I always thought intuition was like this spiritual lighting candles woo-woo, look for the signs. She's like, "No, the signs have already been created in your own personal experiences, you have to sort of go back in time" and that intuition is really identifying those patterns in your data. Amazing.

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**MW:** One hundred percent. Yeah. It works on implicit memory, which is that ability to just effortlessly remember something.

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**FT:** It's not the secret.

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**MW:** No, it's not the secret, but not knocking it. You do you. It's like an internal traffic light, I say, where your intuition gives you that nudge, that sense that slow down, yellow, stop if something is really not a right fit for you or green, go ahead. It's kind of this internal knowing you get. It's a bodily sense, but it's also thoughts you have that really can and need to factor into your decision-making more. Because the research shows that people who factor in their gut feeling and balance that with more, what would you call it? Concrete or hard data.

For example, when people are making buying decisions about a car, people who pair that very analytical thinking with their intuition made better, faster, more accurate decisions. It is

combining those two, kind of the emotional and the analytical is more powerful than relying just on the logic alone.

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**FT:** We live in a world too where we often hear about the millennials being "overly sensitive." This has been documented in so many reports, whether it's like MacKenzie or PricewaterhouseCoopers or like 2020. Millennials are sensitive, how to deal if you're an employer. Again, why your book is important, because it's taking this connotation that we have with sensitivity and making it really positive and encouraging. But how do you from the receiving end of criticism, or constructive feedback, or just feedback from your boss and you are a sensitive striver. What's your advice to someone who's on the receiving end of that? Sort of criticism and they could really over internalize it?

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**MW:** Yeah. This is hard because sensitive strivers take their work, so they're so close to it and they care so much about it. They tend to take it personally, and just taking all of that feedback as more importantly as a reflection of our worth. I think that's where the problem comes in, is that, we equate saying, "Well, here's what could have been improved in this deliverable to, "You're a bad person. You're horrible at this job. You're a failure. Why did we even hire you?" We make these very big logical jobs.

A few things, one place I always start with clients is getting ahead of this problem in the first place. You should be thinking about having very proactive conversations with your boss or anyone you work with cross functionally, different stakeholders about how you give critical feedback. How do you like to receive it, when, in what format can you give someone an example of? Let's say they need to deliver some news about something that needs to be improved, what is that look like? You should be having those conversations upfront so that there's more of a baseline when you do need to have that conversation.

Also, going on the offense, because feedback is the easier for us to manage when it doesn't take us by surprise. We sensitive strivers, again, like I said before, we like to plan, we like to

know what's happening. That's a core aspect of our trait, is kind of being vigilant of the environment and staying safe. The more you can feel in control of the process of getting feedback and not be sideswiped by it, the better. But often times, what happens is that because we fear feedback, we avoid it. We don't want to ask our boss, it's better not knowing, and that gets you into a trap. Because then, when you do get feedback, you're not used to getting it, and it hurts even more. Better to go on the offense, expose yourself, do a little bit of exposure therapy and get more comfortable receiving it.

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**FT:** Now we're getting vaccinated, it's easier to practice that.

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**MW:** That's right. That's exactly right.

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**FT:** Exposure.

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**MW:** Yes. When you do actually get the feedback, in the moment, my kind of two-step formula or actually, it's three steps is, start with a thank you. "Thank you so much for sharing that with me, then validate. I understand why you would be concerned that the quality of that deliverable wasn't up to par." Then ask a question. "What is your impression of what I could do better next time to improve this?" Again, start with a thank you, validate their concerns, ask a question. Very helpful to give you a handle, something to grasp onto, to have words that come out of your mouth. Because often —

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**FT:** Kind of the tears coming out of your eye.

 

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**MW:** Exactly. Exactly. Then afterwards, once you've had the chance to step away and you need to process that feedback, I like to have my clients take a sheet of paper, break it up into columns. In the first column, you're going to write down exactly what was said, the actual words that came out of that person's mouth, not your interpretation of it. Like I said before, often times they'll say, "Well, this needs to be changed, but we hear you're a failure and horrible at your job." Two very different things. You need to write down exactly what was said in the first column. Second column is your place to vent. That is, what is everything that is wrong with this feedback? What did this person misunderstand? What are they missing? That is your place to just get it out, get out the emotions. Because if you keep them down, they're going to come out in another way.

Third column is what could be right with the feedback. What is valid? What is worthwhile? Thinking about and considering. That goes in that third column. Then the last column is, what action will you take? Is there something you can do to improve your process? Do you need to just let it go? For example. That's an action too. No action is a choice. That's a very helpful kind of structured way to work through that feedback so it's just not bouncing around in your head.

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**FT:** Brilliant. It's so empowering and to use the words of Susan Cain, author of *Quiet,* best-selling book, groundbreaking on the strengths and superpowers of introverts. She writes about your groundbreaking and insightful, "*Trust Yourself* is essential reading for every sensitive introverted professional. Melody Wilding does a brilliant job of giving you tools to regain your confidence and become your most empowered self." You have praise from just the heaviest hitters, Fran Hauser who wrote *The Myth of the Nice Girl,* a friend who's been on the show. Also, Claude Silver, chief heart officer at VaynerMedia, who's just incredible. So many.

How does it feel now to be on the other side of this, Melody? What is next for you?

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**MW:** It feels incredible. I mean, it changes your life to hold the book in your hand for the first time. What is next is really getting the book out there, spreading the message, doing more speaking and really trying to change that perception of sensitivity as a weakness and to actually having it valued as a strength that it is.

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**FT:** Yes, you've given us framework, you've given us scripts, you've given us validation, empowerment. This is going to change people's lives. I mean, I can only imagine there is s many people out there and you know, then they're your client. You dedicated this book to them that have not felt like there has been any order to the disorder that they feel, that there is like any merit to this. This is great. I love it. Congratulations.

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**MW:** Thank you so much.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Thanks so much to Melody for joining us. The book again is called *Trust Yourself.* Available everywhere and you can learn more about Melody on her website at melodywilding.com.

Thanks for tuning in, everybody. See you back here on Friday for Ask Farnoosh. I hope your day is so money.

[END]

 