

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 293: ANNIE DUKE

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. How do you decide whether to quit or continue on with something? How do you control cutting your losses? Are you keeping it something just for the sake of keeping at it? Annie Duke, a professional poker champion turned decision strategist, has devoted her life to the study of decision-making under pressure. Her laboratory was playing poker, where in the course of a single hand, you make up to 20 decisions. She's written the best-selling book, *Thinking in Bets*, and has a new book out titled *Quit*. After winning over \$4 million during her poker career, Annie says she should have quit about four years sooner than she did. It turns out we usually want too much certainty before we quit something, and we don't want to live with the thought of what if I continued? Or what are people going to think about me if I quit? We tend to try everything to keep going and stay until we realize it's intolerable. In total, what that creates is we generally quit too late. Annie and I had a great conversation. This episode is definitely worth not quitting. Definitely holding on to the end. Enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, where I'd like to start is have you share with us a formative experience, something ideally from your childhood, that allows us to understand something that shaped you. And as we look back and connect the dots, we say, Oh, that's why she decided to really focus on decision-making in her career, why she's now focused on writing a book about the importance of quitting. What comes to mind?

Annie Duke: You know, let me just say, I think it's so hard because I think that when we look back on things in our childhood, we want them to make sense with where we are today. And so, we create these causal stories that aren't necessarily causal. So, with that caveat in mind, when I was eight years old, my mother, who was musical and played the piano, decided that I should take piano lessons. And I did. And I was very bad. I wasn't good at it. And pretty quickly into the process, I said to her that I didn't think that I should be playing piano, that I was, I was very bad at it. She made me stick with it. It was, you know, you got to build grit here. And I remember being very upset about it because, from an eight-year-old's mind, I had had a very logical conversation with her about this was not the best use

of my time. And there were, and there were other enrichment. It wasn't like I was just like sitting on my bed. There were other enrichment activities that I could have done, but she was very insistent that I stick it out. I still think about that to this day. Like, why didn't she just let me quit? I wasn't any good at it. I could have done other things at that time. So, perhaps there's something in there that relates that made me think about quitting. But I do think it's a just-so story.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. I really appreciate how you gave that caveat at the beginning about how we like to go back and make sense of things. And maybe it does, and maybe it doesn't. But it is, it is intriguing how you very much wanted to quit, and you've got this book about quitting at the same time. It did give you grit so that you don't quit when you shouldn't.

Annie Duke: I don't think it gave me grit because I think I was already pretty gritty. There was, there were lots of things that I was already sticking to, and I think it just honestly made me miserable. You know, here's the thing. Like, as far as parenting is concerned, I think that our job is when we determine that something is worthwhile. We need to let our kids know that just because it's hard doesn't mean that you should quit because that's what grit gives you. It gives you the ability to stick to hard things that are worthwhile. But it was very obvious that piano wasn't worthwhile for me. I mean, for one thing, I was tone-deaf, which my mother knew. I couldn't, you know, you wouldn't want to hear me sing *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*. So, what was I doing playing piano? Like it wasn't. It would have been better for me to spend to be spending that time on other things. And there were lots of things that I did that, that got hard. And I had to experience disappointment. I did gymnastics for a very long time and there's lots of disappointments. You fall off the beam, you know, and you got to get back up and keep going. And so, if you're really trying to teach somebody grit, you have to make that distinction. And I think it's a thing I think it's a mistake that we all make, not, not just parents. In this idea that grit on its own is good, that grit is character building, that it's something that we need to develop. We need to develop that muscle. But it's not true. Grit is good when the thing we're doing is worth it.

Annie Duke: And every minute that I spent playing piano was a minute that I couldn't do something else that, honestly, like I would have been more talented. It probably would have fulfilled me more. I might have been able to carry into my adulthood. For me, a lot of that would have been sports, which I really love, you know? But whatever, you know, I mean, maybe my mom wanted me to learn how to draw or something. I don't know, whatever, but something besides piano, which I was really terrible at. And I think that we need to realize that when we're thinking about what are the things that we're trying to accomplish, whether it's for ourselves or for our children, and we choose something to start, like the piano. That piano doesn't become the object. It doesn't become the object of our grit. Because if we get information after we've started that it isn't the thing for us, sticking to it isn't a good choice because we've determined it's not worthwhile. And I think that one thing that's really important for people to understand is that for people who have read the book *Grit*, and if you haven't, you should, because it's a great book by Angela Duckworth.

Whitney Johnson: It is.

Annie Duke: She would never disagree with me because what she says is go explore a bunch of stuff, do a lot of sampling, find the thing that you're passionate about, and then persevere, even in the face of it being hard. And I was not passionate about the piano because I was really bad, and the teacher was telling my mother that I was really bad.

Whitney Johnson: You know what's fun about this is, well, two things. I actually was very good at the piano, and I was terrible at gymnastics. I could not even do a cartwheel.

Annie Duke: Oh, there you go. See, I was quite a good gymnast, but I fell. But I fell off the beam a lot, you know? I mean, you fall off, you fall off the parallel bars. You, you know, you mess up your tumbling, run, whatever, and you know, you have a bad day, you have a terrible meet, you get terrible scores. You have to learn to come back the next day.

Whitney Johnson: Interesting. Because in my I work my work, I think a lot about S Curves and finding the right S Curve fit. And the way you're describing it, the thing that's coming to mind is once you find the S Curve that you want to be on, that you're passionate about being on and presumably probably good at it as well, then.

Annie Duke: Probably, but maybe not. Like, maybe not. Maybe you're terrible, but you love it. But that's okay.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. And then that's where the determination comes in. You know, the quote that's coming to my mind is the Seth Godin quote, which is "Winners quit all the time. They just quit the right stuff at the right time."

Annie Duke: Yeah. So, I love Seth's blurb on my book.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, well, there you go.

Annie Duke: Seth and I had a conversation very early on about quitting. He wrote a wonderful book called *The Dip*, which I think everybody should also read. And, you know, that's exactly the right thing, is that we say winners never quit and quitters never win. It's just not true. Winners quit a lot. In fact, it's why they win. And the reason is that I think that the thing that we lose sight of when we're, you know, the piano becomes the object or whatever, is that life's really short. We have a limited time on this planet to devote to things, limited attention, to devote to things. Whenever you're devoting your time and attention to one thing. That means that there's a whole bunch of other things that you can't devote your time and attention to. And if those other things would be better for you, if they would help you achieve your goals more, if they would make you happier, wealthier, whatever, whatever the things are that you're trying to achieve, then it's really sad, right? Given the limited time we have that you're preventing yourself from being able to go and do those things. By sticking to something because simply because you think that perseverance is good, full stop period, right? That perseverance builds character, full stop. Because that's not true, right? Sticking to things that are worthwhile.

Annie Duke: That is what you need to be doing. And if you determine that it's not worthwhile either on its own or in comparison to other things that you should be doing, switching faster than other people would is actually going to allow you to be successful. Because I think here's the problem that we have. I think that we think that quitting slows us down or stops us or our progress. And sure, if you quit something that's worthwhile, that would be true. But if you're quitting something where you determined that other opportunities are going to be better for you. Well, what that means is, let's say that you're doing something that isn't getting you to your goal, that's causing you, in fact, to lose ground. Right. That's what's actually slowing your progress. Persevering at that is what's slowing your progress. But if you quit and switch to something better, that's going to get you to where you want to go faster. That's what's going to speed up your progress. If you're losing ground at the thing you're doing, switch to something that's going to cause you to gain ground. And that's the thing that we need to realize, is that quit doesn't, quitting doesn't stop your progress. It speeds you up.

Whitney Johnson: So, that's why you make the statement that quitting is integral to your success.

Annie Duke: I think that it's in fact incredibly hard to be successful without quitting, both in the broad sense of quitting the whole enterprise, right, when it's failing. But also in the smaller sense, like just as an example, like with the book that I wrote, *Quit*.

Whitney Johnson: That's a great title, by the way.

Annie Duke: Oh, thank you. That was the first thing I thought of, actually. Oh, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: The first thing you thought of.

Annie Duke: So, So, here's the thing. I'm terrible at titles,

Whitney Johnson: Clearly not.

Annie Duke: So, *Thinking in Bets*, the title. The title, Nicky Papadopoulos over at Portfolio, my editor, was the one who came up with that title. Thank God because the title I came up with was really bad. It was called *A Little Bit Better* originally, which is a terrible title. It's horrible. She also titled my second book, *How to Decide*. But this one, I came in guns blazing because it was the first thing I thought of. I called my agent up. I said I want to write a book

called *Quit*. And he was like, What? And he was like, What do you mean, like quitting drugs or something? And I was like, No. Like a counterpoint to *Grit*. And he was like, Oh, okay. And the title stuck. I'm so excited. I actually titled my own book. It's so thrilling.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that is something to celebrate because, as you know, coming up with the title of a book is.

Annie Duke: It's so hard. But this one just fell out of me. It was so exciting. But anyway, so, if you, if I were to send the proposal to you. You would see some fully developed because the proposals, you know, about 60 pages, there are narratives that are actually fully written in there, a couple that actually appear in the book. So, Everest is in the book. I think Muhammad Ali is, which was also in the proposal is in the book. But there, there are at least two narratives that I can think about that I fully wrote. For the proposal that are not in the book.

Whitney Johnson: What's one of them?

Annie Duke: One of them is about a program at West Point called the Branch Matching Program. And it's actually a really great narrative. It just doesn't appear in the book, which is, it used to be that cadets got to choose the branch of the military that they were going to go into based on their GPA. And it was a horrible system because employment markets are two-sided. And it also meant that the cadets were avoiding they were avoiding, like really hard classes like engineering, and then maybe they were choosing the engineering, right? So, you didn't want it to be tied to, to GPA. So, Admiral Riley Post actually changed it to be called a branch matching program. So, cadets would give their top five choices for the branches. And the branches would provide like a checklist of, of qualities and characteristics of someone that they thought would be a good fit for that branch. So, the cadets would sort of get to examine that material, sort of figure out what is that branch about, what type of person are they looking for? They would then give their top five. They would interview with the branch. There'd be like a scoring system, and this would start pretty early, and then the cadets could change their minds. And reorder, and it ended up creating a lot more happiness in that cadets were more likely once they did, once they were in a branch, to stay beyond the point that they were sort of contractually obligated to. And so and so forth. It was, it was a fully formed narrative about that, giving everybody the option to quit. Right. Like the branches could say no to a cadet. The cadet could say, Oh, I talked to them, and I looked at it and said, That's actually not for me. And it created a lot more happiness. So, I thought it was a kind of fun narrative.

Whitney Johnson: I love, as you're talking about this and the aha that I'm having and listening to you, is this, this notion of when you're quitting something, you're making a decision.

Annie Duke: Yes. But also, when you're not quitting something, you're also making a decision.

Whitney Johnson: Which goes to the next question I wanted to ask you. Which is, why are we so bad at quitting? What's happening from a psychological perspective?

Annie Duke: How, how much time do you have, Whitney?

Whitney Johnson: I have at least a half an hour. How much time do you have?

Annie Duke: This is part of the problem. This is the thing that when I first started thinking about writing this book, *Quit*, You know, I was thinking about when you're making decisions, you're making decisions under uncertainty. And what that means is, like, after the decision, there's going to be luck involved. You hardly know anything at the time that you make a decision. And there's all sorts of information discovery that occurs after the fact that that's that feeling of like, I wish I knew then. What I know now is, oh, I didn't have all the facts when I made the first decision, and now I know a whole bunch of other stuff. You know, it's like when you take a job, you actually know very little about the job, and then you go in, and you see what the culture is like. You see if you like the work, and sometimes you find out you do like it, and sometimes you find out you don't. And that's where quitting becomes like this super valuable thing. Like the option to quit is what allows you to react to the new information in the world. So, that's kind of where I started.

Whitney Johnson: I want to say that again because that just hit me right between the eyes. The option to quit is what allows you, finish the sentence.

Annie Duke: To, to deal with the uncertainty of the original decision to start. It is, it's what allows you, it's what allows you to react to new information. So, imagine if once you started something, you could never stop. It wouldn't matter if it turned out your boss was toxic, you couldn't leave. Right. But. But we can. So, what that means is that we can. We can take a job even not knowing a whole lot about the culture there. Like, we're making some guesses because it's okay. Because if it turns out, we don't like it, we can, we can quit. So, so it's like super valuable. It's a super valuable skill that we really need to get good at. So, that was where my thinking on it started. And then, as I started going through the cognitive biases that people, I think are pretty familiar with from the work of like Daniel Kahneman and *Thinking Fast and Slow* and those kinds of books. For many of the biases that we have, you can pull this, quitting, this failure to quit thread all the way through it. So, let me just start with kind of this broad problem with quitting, which is this: If you want to find out how something turns out, you've got to stick with it. And we want to do that because then we're not left with the what ifs. Right. Maybe I could have turned it around. Maybe it could have been different. And I think that those what-ifs are really hard for us because it's the moment that you quit that you can't succeed. Right. So, if I've started something that I want to succeed at, it's only that moment that I quit where I bring the probability of success down to zero.

Annie Duke: Right. Like now, I can't do it anymore. And there's a couple of problems for us with that. The first is that we don't like failing, right? It's Richard Thaler, the Nobel laureate, would say we don't like closing accounts in the losses. In other words, short of the finish line, we don't like that. That doesn't feel good to us. And the other thing is that we don't like the imaginings of what other people are going to say about us. And those imaginings are mostly wrong, but only a little because, you know, if you call someone a quitter, it's an insult. So, you know, my mom didn't want me to quit piano because she thought that would show a lack of character on my part. So, we get those messages, like throughout our lives. We know that people think about quitting really negatively. And one of the things I'm trying to do is just rehabilitate that concept. And so, we're afraid of what people are going to say, you know, what is that going to mean in terms of the way that people view me? And what ends up happening because of that is that at the point that we're actually willing to quit, it's usually because it's not a choice anymore, because things have gotten so bad that there is where we're basically at certainty that we can't continue with what we're doing and then we're finally willing to walk away from it because that gives us the comfort of knowing, well, I tried everything, and I do actually know how it turned out. It's like a siren song, right? Like I got a head toward the rocky shoals, even if my ship's going to break apart, at least I know what happened, you know, And.

Whitney Johnson: I know that I crashed.

Annie Duke: I know that I crashed. Exactly, like I started a company, and then I ran out of money. What could I do? Right. I was running a marathon. I broke my leg. What could I do? You know, I was. I was in a job and my boss was toxic, and I stayed there for a year trying to make it better. I talked to my boss. I was in therapy. I talked to my coworkers. I, you know, so and so forth. But why? Why are you doing that for a year? Because you want to know that you tried everything until it was totally intolerable for you, and then you're finally willing to walk away. And then other people don't question your decision, which is something that we don't want to have happen. In sum total, what that creates is that when we quit, we're generally quitting too late. And if you're in a terrible situation where your boss is toxic, and you're miserable in your job, and you spend a year trying to right the, the situation, that's a year that you could have been in a different job, which was really happy.

Whitney Johnson: You could have been doing gymnastics and not piano.

Annie Duke: I could have been doing gymnastics and not piano. By the way, because I didn't, I didn't get to start gymnastics until I was done with the piano because it was an after-school activity.

Whitney Johnson: One of the questions that's coming up for me as I'm listening to you is this, this imaginings and concern about what other people might think and that perception and you're a quitter and quitters or losers kind of thing. But as you describe this, I also had this wondering is, is there an element of when you close the door on something that you thought was going to be, is there an element of grief that we don't want to deal with?

Annie Duke: I think there's two things that I would put sort of under the category of grief. The first is that we failed. So, when we start things, the minute you start thinking there's some there's some sort of finish line that's implied, sometimes there's an actual finish line. If we set a goal, there was a finish line. If we're running a marathon, there's a finish line. If we're climbing Everest, there's a finish line, the summit, but there's always a finish line implied. And if you quit something short of the finish line, I think that's really hard for us because we failed to reach it, you know, And I think that that's going to involve grief. But the other thing, and that I think is, and let me just say something about that. Where that, that goes wrong is that we forget to measure the progress along the way. Think about it this way. Like if I'm running a marathon, and I start it, and I run 16 miles of it. And I have to quit for whatever reason. Maybe I'm dehydrated. I am going to grieve that marathon because I failed. But I ran 16 miles more than I would have. But it's not the way we process it. We process it as being 10.2 miles short. And so, we only see that as a failure when actually compared to somebody who never got off the couch. It seems to me that I did really well, and the shame of it all is that it's arbitrary, right? If I ran 16 miles in the context of a half marathon, I would have run an extra 2.8 mile, 2.9 miles.

Annie Duke: Right. Like I would have gone beyond what I needed to do. So, I think that there's that element of grief that gets put in there. And and I think that, again, we need to think about the progress along the way or. Well, I learned something, and I reacted to it well. So that was good. And we don't think about it that way. The other thing that I think goes under this category of grief is this feeling of mourning, the time, and the effort. Or the money that we spent on something feeling like we had wasted it. Right. You sort of have to let it go. You know, I mean, I'll hear people say this like when they're thinking about quitting their job, and they're really miserable. And, like, why aren't you quitting? And they'll say, well, you know, I've spent all this time onboarding and learning the ropes and getting to know the players and figuring out the culture and processes. And if I quit now, I'll have wasted all of that. I've wasted all of that time. So, that's that feeling of like, sort of like mourning the time that you have spent on something. The problem with that is that waste is not a backward-looking problem. It's a forward-looking one. Right. Like not quitting something because you're afraid of the grief that you might feel at having wasted your time in it means that you're going to waste more time. In other words, the time that you've already spent is gone.

Whitney Johnson: Sunk cost?

Annie Duke: Yep. The effort that you've already spent is gone. But what you should, you know, what isn't gone is the next minute that you're going to spend or the next dollar or whatever. And what ends up happening is because of these sunk cost issues, it's just called the sunk cost effect. We take into account what we've already spent into deciding whether to continue. And what that means is that we continue down paths that are no longer worthwhile. So, if you already know that you hate your job, the fact that you spend a lot of time in the job already learning the ropes and onboarding and, you know, figuring out the players and all of that stuff. Doesn't mean if you already know you're unhappy that, you should waste the next week or the next month. Of your time in that position when you could switch to something that's better for you. So, I think the irony of it is this fear of having wasted something makes us waste more. That's what, that's what actually creates the waste. And I think that that partly comes from sort of under that category of grief, you know, of mourning what you, what you put into something. And that that's never going to sort of come back to you.

Whitney Johnson: You know, and as you're saying this, I'm thinking about something that I read in *Thinking in Bets*, and you focus a lot on separating decisions from outcomes. And I'm thinking about especially right now as I talk to business leaders, and you do too. They're saying we may not get very good outcomes from a business perspective over the next couple of years. We've got tremendous headwinds and helping them sort through that. Does that mean you're making poor decisions, or does it just mean that the outcomes aren't what you were hoping for? And I think this builds into what you're also saying is this idea of if you, up until this point where you've invested this time in this energy, you've learned enough to know that actually it probably is time to quit. And up until this point, you've learned something. But now, if you don't make that decision, if you don't quit now, it becomes a waste.

Annie Duke: Now it becomes a waste because, you know, I think one of the most heartbreaking examples of this that I came across in my research for the book was talking to General Tony Thomas, who's director of SOCOM. So, he was in Afghanistan. You know, he would have to talk to Gold Star parents, and the Gold Star parents would, would say to him, you know, like he would sort of describe it as like they grab him and say. You have to go out and win this war because I don't want my child to have died in vain. You know, and I think we can all. That's a gut punch

for all of us. I can really feel that. And he said he had to. It's so hard not to sort of get caught up in, in that because, you know, these parents are mourning. And he's, he's mourning these soldiers. But what he said is that you have to remember that what matters is should you send the next child into battle. That's, that's the question. Right. So, the fact that you have casualties of war is incredibly heartbreaking. But we have to avoid the trap of saying that, well, the only way to make, make that a worthwhile sacrifice is to continue with the war. And do everything you can until the moment that there's no choice to be able to win it.

Annie Duke: Because if you've determined that the war is not worth continuing with, then that moment is when you're sending someone into battle. When you already know that it's not worth it to do that. And this is part of the problem is that that feeling of wanting to make sure that the people who have already perished have not died in vain can make us make somebody new, not die in vain. Yeah, right. And I think that that's the issue. And when we look back at a lot of the at least recent conflict that we've been in, I mean, we can all see that we should have stopped Vietnam a lot earlier. And George Ball, who was secretary of state, part of the *Pentagon Papers*, actually said it's going to be really bad. We're going to go in. And once we start losing, we're not going to be able to stop. He actually expressed the sunk cost fallacy in the *Pentagon Papers* and said, we're going to lose them. We're just going to escalate our commitment to it. And we can all look back and say, how, how many, how many kids died well, after the point, it was very clear that that was not a war that we should have been continuing.

Annie Duke: And I think that what's interesting with the Vietnam War is that when you look at the generation of scientists who really started thinking about this problem of failure to quit in the form of escalation of commitment. Which, just for people to understand, we have the intuition that when we get signals that things aren't going well, that obviously we're going to quit, and we don't, we do the opposite. We actually escalate our commitment to the cause that that generation of scientists was very much influenced by the Vietnam War. These were scientists who came of age in the seventies. They saw what was happening with that conflict. And in particular, Barry Storr, who was one of the first people to really start to do work in this sort of area of why do we escalate our commitment to losing causes, was directly influenced by what was going on in Vietnam. And that was what really started his thinking about it. And so, I think that that's one of the sort of highest stakes, most, most heartbreaking kind of gut-punching places where we can really see this problem in a very big way.

Whitney Johnson: So, Annie, you just mentioned that many scientists were influenced by the failure to quit in Vietnam. What influenced you? Why you just spent several years of your life writing this book? Why? What was animating this, this decision?

Annie Duke: So, you know, I mean, I think it's a variety of things. I mean, first of all, I quit a lot of stuff in my life. But but I also think that I'm pretty gritty, right? So, I mean, I finished a bunch of books. I must be pretty gritty. You know, I could feel myself being a little bit irked at the way that people thought about grit and quit as a binary, you know, grit is a virtue, and quit is a vice. Because I thought that that was doing a lot of damage, you know? And in my life, I've seen people stick to, to many, many things, including myself, way too long. I just kind of didn't like the messaging, which again, I just want to say that's not Angela Duckworth's message. It's just like it's kind of a misinterpretation of her work because what she says is much deeper than that. But I think that people just sort of thought like, you know, winners never quit, and quitters never win. And I just wasn't happy with that message, number one. Number two, just in decision-making work, you really realize what the value of the option to quit, right? As I've spent my life thinking about decision-making under uncertainty and just really understanding, it's something that I wrote about very briefly in *How to Decide* it was about a page and a half in *How to Decide* that sort of bloomed into this book, how incredibly valuable the option to quit is. And I think that a lot of the genesis of, of thinking about that really just comes from my life as a poker player. Because poker is all about what we call optionality, right? You, at any time, you have an option to raise, you have an option to call, you have an option to fold.

Annie Duke: And it turns out that probably the most valuable option, not probably definitely the most valuable option you have is folding. Because you, you know, in my life as a poker player, that was the most difficult thing to do. Is fold when you already have money in the pot. Fold when you've played a hand really aggressively, and it turns out the bluff isn't working, and you sort of have that feeling of when you fold everybody at the table kind of being like you're an idiot. Like, I mean, it's not a pleasant feeling to have. And you could sort of feel these forces working against you. Right? But but if I fold now, I'm going to lose all those chips, you know? It's a hard skill to develop. But

when you look at elite players versus amateurs, quitting is actually the distinction. It's the main distinction. There's things that have to do with aggression and also but it's that ability to fold in situations where other people wouldn't. That actually really separates you from the pack. And when you look at amateur players, they're playing. If you look at like in a game like Texas Hold'em where you get dealt two cards to start, they're playing, on average, over 50% of those two card combinations that they're dealt. Whereas a professional is playing somewhere between 15 and 25% of those.

Annie Duke: So, they're just professionals are actually folding. And I think that's probably surprising to people. Professionals are folding a lot more than amateurs are. They're a lot better at sort of thinking about the long run and understanding this consequence of continuing in a hand that you should not be in, that you're going to lose those chips and not be able to use those for a better situation later. And you're always sort of trying to think in the long term about that and get yourself into the best situations at all times because your chips are a limited resource, right? You know, I had always thought pretty deeply about how do you develop the skill of being good at cutting your losses, which is a hard skill to develop. I think that that was a lot of it for me. And then I would see that repeated in my consulting. I would see that repeated when I was looking at the decision-making work and the cognitive bias work. I would see that repeated just in terms of the way that people talked about grit. And sometimes, by the way, preferred, preferred somebody who kept at it for the sake of keeping at it, even though it turned out really poorly, over someone who just walked away at the right time.

Whitney Johnson: I foresee a discussion coming on of Grit or Quit with Angela Duckworth and Annie Duke.

Annie Duke: Well, the thing is that I think that it actually wouldn't be that interesting a discussion because we would agree with each other.

Whitney Johnson: You would agree.

Annie Duke: I mean, that's the thing is, I think people don't think we agree, but we do agree.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, yeah.

Annie Duke: Completely. Right. And I know I know from that. I know from some things that I've been told that I think that she can be frustrated at the misinterpretation, you know, because what happens is that people come along and they say to her, well, you're just saying grit is good, no matter the context. And she's like, That's not what I'm saying.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, I guess it's a grit and quit. It is you make the statement of when you quit on time, it feels like you're quitting early. Can you talk about the psychology of that?

Annie Duke: Yeah. So, this goes back to what, what I was saying before that. So, here's the problem is, we usually want to get to way too much certainty before we're ready to quit. Because we want to know. We don't want to live with that. Like the counterfactual like that. What if I had continued? What are people going to think about me? So, that's kind of problem number one. But the bigger, so, and this all comes down to this problem of the decision to start something is made under uncertainty. We don't, we know very little for most things in comparison to all there is to be known. And after we start something, we're going to find out new stuff. And then sometimes that stuff is going to be bad, and we're going to be thinking about quitting. But that decision to quit is also made under uncertainty. And what that means is that just as when you start something, you have to be looking ahead to the future to try to make some sort of forecast about how you think things are going to turn out at the moment that it's correct to quit. You're also going to have to be looking at the future and both thinking about, how do I think this is going to turn out? And also, how do I think other things that I have not even started would compare to the thing that I'm thinking about quitting? And so, that is also sort of like rife with uncertainty. So, what ends up happening is that it means that quitting is. You know, sort of a forecasting problem. It's getting yourself into the future to see that the thing you're doing no longer is kind of worthwhile doing. But what that means is that the situation you're in at the moment is not going to be so dire that it's 100% sure that you should quit. In fact, it's going to be really far from it.

Whitney Johnson: Which goes back to, to Kahneman and Tversky's loss aversion theory because we're more motivated by what we lose and by what we gain. And so, where we are right now has to be so bad that we're willing to give it up.

Annie Duke: That we don't have a choice. Because here's the thing about loss aversion. Loss of version is the problem with starting. What do I mean by that? That as we're thinking about, like, should I do this, this or this, we think about what are the possible losses that might be associated with any of those things. Now, it could be that there's something that you could do that has a large loss associated with it, but on average, it's going to be better for you than something that you do that has only a small loss associated with it. So, let's imagine a situation where there's some choice that you have that has only small losses associated with it but also only small wins associated with it. In other words, it's going to be an incremental change versus something that could really fail but also could win big. So, that would be an innovation. We're going to prefer to choose the thing that is incremental over the thing that's innovative because it's less likely we're going to experience a loss, even though it would be better in this case to do the innovative thing. So, that's a problem with starting, right? So, this kind of gets to where loss aversion comes into the quitting problem is that once we've already started something, any time that we continue it, we don't actually think of it as starting fresh, right? We don't think, Oh, I'm going to start it again today, and then I'm going to start it again the next day.

Annie Duke: And it's just the thing that we're doing. So, when we're facing down the quitting decision, it's also facing down a new starting decision, which is I'm going to quit this to start something else, and then that starting something else becomes a problem, because then we experience loss aversion associated with starting a new path. So, if I could just give you a really clear example of this. I had a reader of *Thinking in Bets* or somebody who had heard me on a podcast I think, write to me named Dr. Sarah Olson Martinez. And I do try to respond to everybody who writes to me. I'm not perfect at it, but I try. But she wrote to me at a very good time because she was wondering whether she should quit her job. And I was writing a book at the time called *Quit*. So, that was, that was excellent timing.

Whitney Johnson: Thank you, Dr. Sarah.

Annie Duke: There you go. So, I wrote back to her and said, Hey, I'm just wondering if, if you might not mind getting on a zoom with me. So, I talked to her, and basically, she, she had been an emergency room physician, emergency medicine physician, and she loved it.

Annie Duke: But then things sort of started to change. For one thing, she got a promotion to be an administrator. And by the time that I had talked to her, she was only actually doing about six shifts in the emergency room each month. And the rest of her time was spent as an administrator, and she was completely miserable. And she was miserable mainly because things about emergent medicine had changed, that she wasn't as happy with the actual work of being an emergency medicine doctor. But, but the administrative work wasn't like the shift work. So, the shift work was like you did it. It was hard. You finished it, you went home. It didn't come home with you, but the administrative work was like 24 seven, like emails, text, like having to respond to things. And she had two young children at the time. And what she found was that her kids were unhappy, and she was unhappy because it was affecting her ability to attend and have attention for her children. As she described it to me, she had been miserable for a long time, like a couple of years at least. So, when I'm listening to this, I'm like, Well, why did she write in to me? Like, why? Why hasn't she quit? And so, I asked her, so she had another job in the offing.

Annie Duke: That was evaluating cases for an insurance company. And I said, okay, so what's stopping you from going and doing this new job? And she said, Well, what if I hate that, too? Okay, so, here we can see this problem, right? Like she's in something that is miserable, but that's not, no longer a should I start it problem. It's a status quo. So, that idea that maybe she would be miserable in a year, she's thinking about it, but she's not feeling that pain that comes with that. And when I asked her, Why don't you switch? Then you can see loss aversion all of a sudden, peek its head up, and go, But what if I hate that too? What if I have a bad outcome from that? So, what I said to her was, okay, I get it. Like you might get a bad outcome from that. Let me ask you this question. Imagine it's a year from now, and you've stayed in your current situation. What's the probability you're going to be happy? And she said 0%. I mean, she was certain because she was already so miserable for so long. Okay, imagine it's a year from now, and you're in this new position. What's the probability you're going to be happy? She said, Well, I don't know because I'm not in the position yet.

Annie Duke: I said, Well, take a guess. She said, Well, I mean, I guess probably like maybe 50, 50, like 50% at the time will be happy. I said, Oh, is that greater than zero? And you could see just this. Oh, my gosh. Right. Like I get it. And she quit her job and she went and took the new one. And last I checked in with her, she was quite happy. So, now we can see this thing of, if you quit on time, it will feel like you quit too early, even at that moment. When the decision is super obvious. She still hasn't quit. And when she's writing to me, she's asking for my advice. So, she feels like it's too early and she wants my help. But it probably should have been done a year before that. Or I mean, because she had been miserable for a very long time. So, so what happens is that because you have to sort of look into the future and sort of think about what's the probability, clearly, the time to quit is not when you have a 0% chance at happiness. It should be way before that, like when you have an 80%. No, not when you let me say it again.

Whitney Johnson: A 20% chance of happiness or 30% chance of chance of happiness.

Annie Duke: That's probably when you should be quitting. So, one of the totally fun things that I researched for the book was this website that Steven Levitt of *Freakonomics*. Absolutely. Stephen Levitt puts up a website. This was in the early 2000 or the later to the aughts at some point. Anyway, he puts up a website. Here's the idea. So, like Whitney, you're you have some big life decision, like, should I stay with this podcast or quit it? I mean, I don't think you're thinking about quitting the podcast, but as a hypothetical, you know, should I stay in my job or quit it? Should I, should I stay in this relationship or should I, should I break up with the person? And he invited people to come to this website, input what the decision was that they were thinking about, and then they could flip a virtual coin. Heads you persevere. Tails, you quit. So, first of all, I'm sure people listening are like, who would do that? 20,000 people would do that. So, 20,000 people went and did this. And here's the thing. So, so I just want to sort of get some ground rules here. I just want to make sure that you intuit this as I do, that if someone is willing to go flip a coin to make a decision about whether they should stay or go, that they think that the decision is 50/50 since the coin is 50/50. So, this must feel can we agree that it has to feel like a very close call to them?

Whitney Johnson: Yes, we can agree.

Annie Duke: Right. Because like, if you knew that you should stay, you wouldn't go flip a coin. And if you were sure that you should quit, you also wouldn't go flip a coin. So, it must feel like a very close call. And what the implications of that close call are is that if we assume that our goal, in general, is happiness, that you can't figure out whether staying or going is going to bring you the most happiness. That it feels like it could be either or, you're really not sure. Now that we sort of agreed on that. So, people go and flip the coin. And now what Levitt does is he checks in with them two and six months later for these big life decisions, and he just measures their happiness as compared to the day that they came to the website. And what he wants to know is, I measured your happiness on the day you came to the website. Are you happier or not? Are you less happy or more happy? And if it were the case that it really was a close call, then what you would expect is there would be no difference. The people who were told to stick, who stuck. They would be equally happy as the people who were told to quit, who quit. And that is not what he finds.

Whitney Johnson: What did he find?

Annie Duke: That the quitters were happier. So, what that means is that so this gets to if you quit on time, it will usually feel like you quit too early at the point that you as a human being experience as a close call. It's actually far past the close call. Quitting is already the winner.

Whitney Johnson: Because you've already the fact, the very fact that you're asking the question would suggest.

Annie Duke: That it's already the winner. But we get to it long after we even ask the question, Right? So, if we're experiencing something as a close call, which isn't close at all, what that means is that we should be quitting before we think it's a close call. Because that's going to be when it's objectively right. And so that's one of the things there's a management heuristic. I think Jeff Smart has said that "the time to fire someone is the first time you think about it."

Whitney Johnson: What's something besides piano that you quit in your adult life that you think, Oh, I quit that on time, but it felt too early.

Annie Duke: I don't know that I have quit anything on time. You know, and I think this is the problem. I think there's lots of things that I've quit sooner than I otherwise would have. And I think that's one of the things that we need to realize for ourselves, Right? You know, Astro Teller, who's the CEO of X over at Google, his thing is always like, if I can quit after \$2 million instead of \$9 million sunk into a project, I consider that a win. Now, would I have preferred not to have spent the \$2 million? Yes, but. But I just saved seven. And I think that that's that, that's been true with me. Quitting poker was really hard for me. And I do think that I quit at a reasonable moment. But looking back, I think I should have probably quit about four years earlier than I actually did. I started doing a lot of stuff in parallel, which was helpful to me. But the stuff that I was doing in parallel, I really loved, and I, looking back, I should have freed all the extra time up to be able to focus on that. You know, I quit traveling for work, but I. I did it in a way that was too slow. So, I started reducing how much I was traveling for work. And it took me a long time to get to the decision to actually just quit traveling for work.

Annie Duke: And there were a variety of reasons that had to do with some cost, the feeling of disappointing other people, and how nice it is to be asked and wanting to say yes to things and a variety of things. But in the end, every time I got on a plane, I was miserable. I wasn't miserable giving the speech. I was miserable with everything that was I had to do in order to be able to. Yeah. Yeah. I don't like being away from home and whatnot. And so, you know, I was sort of on this reducing path, but it took me too long to get to the know. If it's not on the Acela corridor, I'm not going to do it right. I'm just not going to travel for it, you know. So, I, but again, I think that I was able to get to that earlier because I do think about these things a little bit, a little bit more. But, you know, I'm not sure I've ever quit something on time to tell you. I tried to quit the piano on time. I tried really hard but, but it wasn't my choice. My mom made me keep going. So, that was something, that was something that I tried to quit on time.

Whitney Johnson: At the end of every interview. I am curious about what have you found useful in this conversation? So, I've been asking you questions, and I found much of this basically all of it, useful. Did you make any connections? Did you have any aha's, some ideas, some observations in the course of the conversation that you can share?

Annie Duke: Well, there's two. The main one is I hadn't really ever thought about the way that grief might, might play into the decision to quit. I think about the fear of waste, but really that translates to grieving over what you have lost. Right. And I think that that's a really beautiful frame. Particularly as it ties into these issues of war where there's real grief that's involved in those decisions. And, and it's a way that I'm connecting with, with the ideas. And so, thank you for that, because that's, that's a new way for me to think about it. But that was a big aha for me. And I think actually the last question I don't think anybody's ever asked me like, what did you quit on time? And really seriously, like besides the piano, which I really tried to quit, I just, I don't think I've quit anything on time. But the thing is that I don't think that is a bad thing because I think that's the whole point that I'm trying to get across in the book is that these things are really hard, and your goal is to try to get to things earlier than you otherwise would have because freeing those resources is going to be really helpful for you. Because you're able to use them for something better. And so, the fact that you're not getting it exactly right is okay. And because as, as you ask me about that and I said that I had this moment of sort of feeling mortified and embarrassed, and then I had to climb out of it and say, no, that's the point.

Whitney Johnson: Right. Well, and what came to mind when you said that Annie is in *Thinking in Bets*. So, you talked about if you can just get a little bit better at making decisions and the compounding impact of that, the compounding interest is the same with you can get just a little bit better at quitting on time. There's a compounding effect, which is over, over time is.

Annie Duke: Going to make a really big difference. And you know, when I think about there's one person who I think is literally the best quitter I've ever come across, and it's Stewart Butterfield who, who founded Slack. Before Slack, well, two days before Slack, he quit another startup that he was, he was working on it was a startup called, Glitch, which was developing a game called *Game Never Ending*. And he quit at a time when his founders couldn't see it. He quit at a time when his, his funders could not see it. They were all quite surprised that he quit at this time. But when you really listen to him explain it, he really did, He really, he was it was correct to quit. But he did it way before anybody else could see it. And here's the amazing thing. When I asked him about it, he said that looking back, he sort of realized he should have done it six weeks earlier, that even he was late to quitting.

Whitney Johnson: Wow.

Annie Duke: That he knew. But he was so worried that people would think he was just, like, capricious, you know, or that he had somehow lost interest in the company or something like that, that he kept going for six more weeks to accumulate more data to support his case, at least in his mind, that he should quit. And he's the best quitter I've ever come across. And even he feels like he got to that decision late. So, I'm going to give myself some grace here.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, absolutely. And I think there should be an award for Best Quitter of the Year. Any final thoughts?

Annie Duke: What we all need to realize is this, that whether to grit or whether to quit is the same decision. They're not opposing forces where one is a virtue, and one is a vice. If you choose to stick to something, you're by definition not choosing to quit it. And if you choose to quit something, you're by definition, choosing not to stick to it. And I think that that's the thing that we need to realize. And it's the thing that actually people misinterpret about Angela Duckworth's work is that it's a calibration issue. Because in the end, what we're trying to do is stick to things that are worthwhile and ditch all the rest, right? Like ditch all the other things that aren't worthwhile. And so, it's a matter of, can we get that decision, right? Which is really not, oh, just stick to things because that builds character. Like, don't quit things because that means you're a loser. It's that question of, is this thing I'm doing worthwhile in comparison to other things that I might be doing? And that's the thing that we have to remember is we need to stop thinking about them as like somehow completely different decisions that aren't related to each other or that one is good, and one is bad. They're the exact same decision and it's context dependent. And the context is, is it worthwhile for you to keep spending the limited time that you have on this planet? On this thing that you're doing.

Whitney Johnson: So good. Annie, thank you very much.

Annie Duke: Well, thank you for having me.

What a fascinating conversation. Here are three takeaways. First, I'm reflecting on the false paradigm of grit versus quit. For me, the order is first, you decide if you're going to quit or not, because winners do quit all the time. But if you do decide to not quit, then you need grit. Then you need perseverance. Meaning, at the launch point, you explore, you collect data, you decide, is this the curve for you? And if it is, then you keep going. Then you need the grit, which goes to point number two.

When you get better at quitting, this is a signal that you're getting better at making decisions, which can be liberating. I think there are simple ways to practice this, making the decision to quit reading a book or quit watching a show on Netflix that you don't really like. It's a low-stakes way to practice making decisions.

Third, when you quit on time, you feel like you quit too early. I loved too how Annie said that she doesn't know if she's ever quit anything early enough. It reminds me of something that Marshall Goldsmith said to me, and I quoted him in our book, *Build an A Team*. He said, "it's better to stay one year too short than one day too long. Don't overstay your welcome. As a CEO, set a certain time, make your contribution and leave. Don't hang on and be developing your successor. Leave with style and dignity and leave on your own terms. You're a CEO. Ten years. You're throwing the dice." It's hard to quit when you don't know the outcome. We don't like uncertainty. We don't like open loops. But again, winners quit all the time.

For further listening about cognitive biases. Listen to Buster Benson, [episode 174](#). For someone who quit at the top of their game, listen to Anne Chow, [episode 272](#). And for more on risk taking generally, which is growth accelerant number one in our personal disruption framework, take the right risks. Listen to [episode 228](#). Thank you again to Annie Duke for being our guest. Thank you to my friends at the Behavioral Grooves Podcast for making this introduction. Thank you to our producer Justin LeVrier, Audio editor Whitney Jobe, production assistant Stephanie Brummel and Production Coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this is Disrupt Yourself.