

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 359: MICHAEL GERVAIS

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson, CEO of Disruption Advisors, where we help you grow your people, to grow your organization because organizations don't Disrupt people do. And the building block of that growth—it's you. After 49 days fasting under the Bodhi tree, some six hundred years before Christ, Siddhartha Gautama was struck by an idea. We suffer because we are attached to things, to people, to desires. When we can't have it, we feel an emptiness, an emptiness that leads us to sadness and anger and destruction. But what if we never wanted it in the first place? Gautama taught his philosophy for the next few decades and centuries after that, his followers would give him a new name, the Buddha. Total complete elimination of your yearnings was called Nirvana. In today's world of networking and social media, where everyone's opinion seems to have infinite importance, finding Nirvana can seem difficult, to say the least. Our guest today has made a study of how that yearning to belong, to be accepted, shapes our behavior and our view of ourselves. Doctor Michael Gervais is host of the podcast *Finding Mastery*, where he pulls on his experience as a high-performance psychologist to draw out what makes top athletes and boardroom professionals tick. He's out with a new book, *The First Rule of Mastery: Stop Worrying about What People Think of You*. As you'll hear, Michael is bringing eastern philosophy out from under the Bodhi tree into high octane places like the Seattle Seahawks training camp. I hope you enjoy.

Whitney Johnson: So, Mike, we will get to mastery and your book in just a minute. But I want to start with some humility. When is a time in your life when someone else's opinion absolutely crushed you? Paralyzed you? What did you think? How did you feel and what happened in your body?

Michael Gervais: Great way to start. I could probably point to all of my intimate relationships, people that I care about and they care about, they have demonstrated care for me when there's a reflexive response that is callous or

not considerate and like that, that happens, you know, semi-regularly in relationships where, well, you're really tuned to people and you care and you feel safe, and then all of a sudden there's something that happens. So that, that's one. But I'll make this really concrete—is that professionally, there was a mentor of mine, and he was somebody who I really respected and trusted and felt safe around. And I hung on his words and his guidance in my early professional career. And I called him after there was an event. And I do talk about this in the book, but I called him after I was doing an event and it was a championship, Ultimate Fighting, event. And so, the athlete that I was working with had won, and he performed really well, and I was sharing it and before I even got to the meat of it, he says to me, Mike, why don't you try to get yourself off of camera? I thought, what? What? He goes, yeah, you're all over the camera. And that's not where we belong. Basically, what he was saying, but it absolutely felt like there was a knife in my side, and I wasn't trying to be on camera. I wasn't that was not any part of what I was trying to do.

Michael Gervais: And it was that comment that actually changed maybe the next ten years of my professional trajectory. And so, it got in, I metabolized it, I organized that thought to not be anywhere near a camera for a long time, which is it might sound immaterial, but it was. I wanted to celebrate the internal work that the extraordinary do, and I wanted to tell those stories, and I wanted to point to the strong people in the arena and how they are investing in their psychological strength and well-being. And so, I pulled away from it. And what it felt like in the moment was, there's a flood of intensity, meaning that of just physiological intensity. My body temperature heated up, my breathing changed, my heart rate started pounding. I felt a cold sweat across my body. And emotionally, what it felt like is that I wasn't good enough. So, there was a small, deflated feeling where it felt like, I was, you know, like at Christmas or Easter or one of those kinds of things where there's these chocolate bunnies or Santa Clauses or something, and you poke it and there's nothing on the inside. It felt like I was that crumbling chocolate facade of a person. And so, I was, I did whatever I could to reflexively take care of myself, but to appease the discontent from the other person. And so, I became apologetic in my response. And so that that's kind of it—physiologically, emotionally, and psychologically. That was how I experienced that moment.

Whitney Johnson: How did you get out of it, or did you get out of it then? How long did it...

Michael Gervais: No, I didn't. I mean, I just internalized it, and I was like...right, I got the message from my mentor, right? And come to find out, he didn't actually, it was more in jest, and it was a more reflective thing where he probably wanted to be that person and didn't want to see me, you know, the young one take that position in sports psychology and performance psychology. So, looking back, it was much more complicated. But how I managed it is I just reflexively acknowledged it and said, right, okay. Gotcha. Thank you. And it, that's, this is why mentorship and relationships are, in one respect, wonderfully powerful and can be radically dangerous. Because when you give yourself and your trust to another person, not naively, but you're, you've made a decision at some level, like, I'm going to trust what this person has to say and their opinions and what they, um, that I backed myself in the trust I had for this person. And it wasn't egregious. That was the narrative of my discipline. So, this wasn't something out of left field. Sports psychology is supposed to happen in the background. And that's right. I just wanted to celebrate how the extraordinary are actually doing their work. So not only did I avoid cameras, which was, that's not really the big deal. What I avoided was celebrating how the extraordinary work from the inside out. So, I didn't really adjust. It took me about ten years.

Whitney Johnson: You know, it's interesting as I hear that story and I'm so glad that you told it, because when I read it in the book, I was like, wow, that is really powerful. And you've now written a book called *The First Rule to Mastery*, and it is subtitled *Stop Worrying What People Think About You*, which is a very big statement. This is the first rule to mastery. I'd like to hear more, and I also have a question and you probably don't have an answer, but I wonder if you hadn't had that experience with that mentor, would this book have ended up being written?

Michael Gervais: No. I'll tell you what happened was, so the first rule of health is to put down the poison that you're drinking. Okay. So that's assuming that you're drinking poison. And it's not get more sleep. It's put down the poison. Like, why, reflexively, you are drinking poison every day throughout the day. If you want to be healthy, put down the poison. So that's, I'm having fun with the idea that the first rule of mastery is: stop drinking the poison. And the poison is this obsession that we have about what people think of us. And we're, it's the water we're swimming in. It's the air we're breathing. It's the elixir that many of us are guiding our thoughts, words, and actions by. And so that's, I'm just having fun in that level saying, 'put down the poison'. So, if I didn't have that experience plus a couple other experiences, which was, the first one happened when I was 16 years old and I saved up for a couple summers to buy

my first truck, my first car, and it cost about \$2,000. It was a Mazda pickup truck. It was like it was exactly what you would imagine from a surf kid that was working, you know, odd jobs to get a car. And I remember I was driving and there was a car that was going to pass me. And this is maybe like three months into having my, my license. And there was a car that was going to pass me going in the same direction.

Michael Gervais: And I stood upright. I wanted to look cool to the person who, I had no idea who this person was, but I wanted to look cool. I grabbed the steering wheel. I kind of leaned in a specific way, and I thought that I'm going to look good when they look over in my, you know, \$2,000 car. I'm going to look great. And as they're passing, I try to catch their eye. They didn't, they didn't look. They never turned their head. They had no care or interest in what was happening in my world. And I thought to myself, like, what am I doing? What did I just do over the last 20 seconds readying myself for somebody else to like me, somebody I didn't even know. And I was so embarrassed by that. Like, I didn't, I never really talked about it because I was so embarrassed, because I knew I was playing a game to be liked, and I knew that that wasn't the way to go through life, but I didn't know how to change it. I didn't know how to adopt that. I didn't have anyone in my life that I could talk about it. So, I just kind of kept it quiet. I know I kept playing that game. Maybe not as much as I would have if I would have gotten early approval, you know? But I kept playing it.

Michael Gervais: And the upside is that I figured out socially how to fit in and shapeshift a little bit and be part of a community. But the cost was I lost my way. I fit in, but I didn't really know what I stood for. What I was going to stand on the table for, what I was going to, you know, die for if it was that extreme. But I, I was more interested in this reflexive need to be okay in the eyes of others rather than to stand true for something. And then when I started working with the world's best, they had it too. And so now we're in this little sanctuary, this athlete and myself, and we're talking, and you know, what's getting in the way of you getting free in life and really going for it on the court or the field or the stage or whatever it is. And they go, I don't want to look stupid. I don't want to let people down. Um, you know, I don't want to embarrass myself. I don't want to embarrass my family. It's not about money. It's not usually about physical injury. It's about emotionally looking a certain way in the eyes of others. And so, it was the combination of those three things. It was this trend line that I had lived. Yeah, it was this trend line that I'm noticing the world's best are managing. And then there's that kind of lightning bolt thing that happened for me where I was like, whoa, I have just shape shifted my life to fit into my mentor.

Michael Gervais: These world's best or their deepest fears, looking bad in front of others and letting their family or whatever down. And then I was playing the secondary game to fit in rather than to be me. And so, it was the combination of those three. And then I'll add one more Whitney, is that I had been thinking about this a lot, but I didn't have like a formal, a formal way of like organizing my thoughts. So, I wrote an article and then I had a friend that was at HBR, *Harvard Business Review* on their online distribution. So, I said, hey, what do you think of this? He said, yeah, let's run it. That seems like it's going to fit, like in our community. I was like, great. So, 12 months later he called and he said, oh, that thing about fear of people's opinions, "FOPO", it was the number one downloaded article 12 months in a row. Like it really touched a nerve.

Whitney Johnson: Wow!

Michael Gervais: So that, yeah, people talk about lightning bolt moments or something. I don't really have those. It's more for me, like there was 4 or 5 things that were moving towards like, you know, figure out the science behind this and make it super applied so that people can relieve themselves of this poison that they're, that they're drinking.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. That sounds like a lightning bolt moment to me. The most downloaded article every month for 12 months on HBR. So, you kind of slipped in the term. That is, the amazing term—it's, FOPO. Say it again.

Michael Gervais: FOPO. It's so good. Right? It is...

Michael Gervais: Fear of people's opinion.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. It's so good. Go, say it again.

Michael Gervais: Yeah. And it was meant to be playful as well. Like, FOMO is a thing. We all know YOLO. We all know what it means. And I thought, okay, let's just extend the fun and FOPO, and it, fear of people's opinions. I think it's one of the greatest constrictors of my potential. Other people's, maybe human potential. It's one of the greatest proponents of being safe and small and to just fit in in the eyes of others. Now we're safe. And I outlined the biology, the neurochemistry, the psychology, and the behaviors that that lead us to FOPO and how to get away, how to get off of, you know, that model as well. But in essence, FOPO is this unproductive obsession with what other people think about us. And it's this exhaustive attempt to interpret, you know, what they might be thinking about us, their opinions, what they might be forming. And it's really about avoiding rejection or trying to get their approval. And I don't know, I think when we get honest, I think most of us go, oh, I know what that is. You know, vulnerably so Whitney, maybe I'm the freak here, but do you do you have any relationship with FOPO where you say, yeah, that that's a little bigger than I wish it were?

Whitney Johnson: Oh, yeah. I took the quiz, and we'll talk about the quiz in just a minute.

Michael Gervais: Okay, good.

Whitney Johnson: But before we go to the quiz, so that we have everybody who's listening with bated, you know, sort of bated breath waiting to hear about that quiz. I did love though that...

Michael Gervais: No. Waiting to hear about your results.

Whitney Johnson: About my results.

Michael Gervais: They don't care about, they want to know what their hero Whitney, like how did that go? They want to know.

Whitney Johnson: But we're going to ask you what yours were too.

Whitney Johnson: But I love what you said. I'm going to quote directly you said, "understanding and valuing other people's opinions is a component of social intelligence". So, you're not saying we don't need to know what other people think, and we don't need to not listen to other people's opinions. But then here's the clincher where you said, "it's problematic when the perceived opinions of others become the prime driver of our thoughts and actions".

Michael Gervais: Yes. And so, all right, so let's just kind of open this up a little bit. The premise is to stop worrying. The premise is not to stop caring. So, people who don't care are sociopaths, the enlightened narcissists.

Whitney Johnson: Right.

Michael Gervais: So, we do need to care when we are reflexively, in an unexamined way, just like me and my mentor responding to their sense of approval of what's okay and what's not okay, then we start living life on their terms, not ours. And that is part of, I think, an abusive cycle in relationships. It is, it's this sense where they, whoever they are, knows better, is mightier in thoughtfulness or whatever. Like they know better than I know what is right for me. And I mean, if you think about the narrative of how we come into this world, we have these big eyes looking up at adults, and we are one of the species. There's a handful of species that really need for a while, the rearing and caring from adults. So, we're looking up at, a pretty uninformed set of parents for the most part. Most parents do not have an advanced degree in how to parent. Well, they are taking in a very unexamined way the heritage that their grandparents, great grandparents, grandparents, and parents have passed on to what good parenting looks like.

Michael Gervais: And you know, the old joke, like, if there was a book on parenting, well, there actually, there are a set of books on how to be your best and how to do it in a way to help you be aligned with the principles that you want to live by. And there is this beautiful science called psychological services. And when you go and sit with, you know, a therapist and really do the work, you become better at anything that you want. If it's parenting, that's where that's the gym for parenting for, for whatever. Okay, so it's usually pretty unexamined where these young kids with big eyes looking up to our parents, and every time they frown, we go, ooh, oh, I don't get the thing or there's consequences. So, we're learning early that to be part in a relationship with the elder, that we need to play a certain

way to be okay in that relationship. And at one level, that fundamentally is very important because we are relational humans. We are in relationships with ourselves and others. Mother nature, experience in itself, machines now is another thing that we're in relationships with.

Michael Gervais: And so, the relationships really matter. But we're conditioned in an unexamined way for most of our early life, when we are setting the foundation of our psychological framework, that what they think is directly related to survival and survival of belonging and survival of food and shelter and basic needs at an early age, and that is tribal. If 250,000 years ago Whitney you and I were, we were responsible for something in the tribe, and we were just kind of knuckleheads, and we weren't getting it right. And we were disruptive to the flow of what the elders wanted, the vibe of the tribe to be about. And we're underperforming. Maybe we, you and I were responsible for hunting or gathering or doing something, making the arrows, whatever our craft was, and we kept breaking the arrows, we kept having dull arrows. And we were disruptants to the vibe of the tribe, the elders, what do you think they'd say to us? Like, what would the elders do? They'd say, Whitney, Mike, we need to talk to you. And what would they say?

Whitney Johnson: My immediate thought is they would probably kick you out of the tribe.

Michael Gervais: Yeah, they probably would give us a warning once or twice. And if we keep screwing up, they'd be like, you got to go.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Gervais: And then we all know what happens. It's too wild for the two of us. Or even if, like, a couple of our family members got kicked out with us. Like it's too wild...

Whitney Johnson: On your own...

Michael Gervais: To survive with a small tribe. So, getting, being rejected was a near death sentence. So biologically, our brain is scan, designed to scan the world and find all the dangers. Check. Yeah, it's really important. So, we need to program ourselves to be able to find the opportunities, to program ourselves, to counter-rotate, to find the good, as opposed to the danger. Your brain's supposed to be a bit critical and pessimistic. It's supposed to, for survival, but the surviving life is not the good life. It just means you're living longer, but you're playing it safe and small. So, I, I think most people think that there's a way to have both.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michael Gervais: To have a good long life. And so, fitting in is important at one level to the tribe that you want to be part of, but not at the cost of your sense of self.

Whitney Johnson: It's table stakes, isn't it?

Michael Gervais: Yeah. And Whitney, you and I are both saying this from a very privileged position, and we're saying it in context of the Western philosophy. So, the eastern approach is like, wait, I don't get this individualism, this doesn't that's not this is not right. So, I'm saying this in context to a Western position where I'm not, I'm no longer struggling at this current phase of my life for food, shelter...da da da da. So, this is like an above, the line conversation uniquely situated in a Western framework.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. So, one more thing on this and then we'll jump to the next question. But I thought it was interesting, this idea of FOPO and where your very opening quote, your opening epigraph was 'everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves with Carl Jung'. And I want to pair that with a quote. One of my favorites is, the greatest, and I'm going to paraphrase, 'the greatest influence on a child is the un-lived life of a parent', which is also Jung. And it's just interesting. One of the aha's that I had when I was listening to you and also reading you, which is—when we feel FOPO, that's actually an opportunity for us to unpack and to learn some really important things about ourselves.

Michael Gervais: Yeah. I love those two quotes that you just shared. And I'm glad you had an aha! That's fun. So, there's two ways we think about training. So traditional psychology would say, okay, you want to work on kindness? Okay. Got it. Okay. So, next time you're in, in a moment, orientate yourself to be kind. Next time you're in a moment where, in a moment with another person like, you know, be aware and orientate yourself to kindness and then when you're in an emotionally charged conversation with somebody, make sure that you're practicing kindness there, too. That's too hard. Your point is well taken, and I triple down in the book is like, you know, when you're in it and you're noticing that you're reflexively being, like, looking for approval or stressed on the potential rejection, just clock, 'this is FOPO'. This is me trying to fit in rather than be me. Like, just clock it. But instead of like waiting for the moments, the thing that we do in elite sport that is different than most other environments is that we frontload our training. So, there's only three things we can train. We can train our craft; we can train our body and we can train our mind. And the best of the best of the best aren't leaving one of those up to chance. But they're not waiting till game day to train those three.

Michael Gervais: So, in, let's say let's say I was in the NFL for nine seasons with the Seattle Seahawks. Sunday is game day. So, Monday we are training physically, technically, and mentally throughout the day. Same. Tuesdays a day off, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Everything that we're doing, we are specifically and concretely, creating an agenda and a practice schedule around what are we going to get after technical training today, might be ball placement, it might be ball security. It might whatever. What are we doing for physical? That's the gym basically. You know, and the cardio conditioning that happens on the field during practice. And third, how are we going to train our mind. And each day we go after one specific mental skill that we're going to work on. And that skill could be confidence. It could be being calm, it could be mental imagery, it could be controllable goals. Fill in the blank. And there's about 16 of them that we work from. So, we front load them. We practice them in a calm environment first. So that might be in your office or, you know, on a meditation pillow or, you know, in, at your home writing something down. So, we're practicing it in a calm environment, and then we're practicing it in messier environments, and then we're testing it in rugged environments. So, you want to anchor yourself up in the way that you train or practice anything.

Michael Gervais: So again, like if you want to train confidence, confidence comes from one place, one place only. It's very simple to understand, hard to practice. It comes from what you say to yourself. If you want to be confident, you have to first become aware of what you're saying to yourself that's either building or taking away. And then you practice awareness, meditation, journaling, or conversations with people of wisdom. Those are three ways to increase awareness. And then you practice in a parallel path what you're actually saying to yourself, and then you pick thresholds. I'm going to practice speaking to myself as I walk into the training room, or as I walk into my home, or as I walk into the office. What do I say to myself in a in that calm environment? So, we use thresholds, we use awareness training, and we use choosing how we speak to ourselves so that we're working from a place of autonomy as opposed to being whipped around by the world's demands. The greatest of the greatest work from the inside out. They do not let the world dictate their internal experience. They have conditioned and trained themselves to know how they want to feel, and how they want to think well ahead of the situation that is unfolding or the situation that is going to test them. So that's a front-loading model of investing in yourself.

Whitney Johnson: Yep. So, you said you've got the words, you've got the threshold. And then in that moment when you're in in the arena, I saw that you had just interviewed Brene Brown, like you're in the arena, what would he be saying to himself then?

Michael Gervais: So, the threshold is the way you speak to yourself as you're crossing a threshold.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, as you're crossing.

Michael Gervais: Right.

Whitney Johnson: Ok.

Michael Gervais: So, it could be anything. But we practice them, and we don't practice them to be rote or structured. We practice them to have moments and opportunities to bring the part of us forward that we want to, you know, to do. And so, if you want to be loving and kind, well, when I go into my sanctuary, my home, I never bring my phone.

My phone is never to my ear. I'm not on a speaker like I need to do all of that work in my car before I...and sometimes I'm in my driveway for 30 minutes, you know, wrapping up, you know, all of that because when I walk into my threshold or into my sanctuary. I crossed the threshold and I want to bring a loving, kind father/husband into that threshold. And so, it's just a moment to bring a part of you forward that matters to you. And so, whether it's performative or it's something else and sometimes at work, you know, there's a performative part of us that we want, and there's a more authentic part of us that we want. So that, your point was, how do you speak to yourself? It's just, it's having awareness of the feeling that you want to have and it's not so much the words that you're using. The words create a sense of felt sense. And so how do you want to feel and how does it feel when you're at your best as a parent? How does it feel when you're at your best as a board director or as an individual contributor or whatever? So, knowing the feeling is really important. And then what is the language that supports that feeling coming to the surface?

Whitney Johnson: Got it. Okay.

Michael Gervais: Right. And so, it's more, that's more of the structure than the actual content of what you say, that the content is unique to each person.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. The contents, the gateway to get to the feeling. The feeling...

Michael Gervais: That's right.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Okay.

Michael Gervais: That's right. And it's not like you just say something once.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michael Gervais: I am, you know, I'm a tough MFer, like. It's like a series of ways of speaking to yourself throughout the day that give you that felt sense, and we're just using as many moments as we can to almost, uh, this sounds too structured to, to program it. It's a more of an eastern thought in this way. It's more about like watering that seed that you want to have grow.

Whitney Johnson: I think it goes to the identity piece that you talked about, where you say identity is one of the most fertile breeding grounds for FOPO. And by what you say to yourself, you are gradually, you know, sort of word by word by word, constructing an identity and self-concept. So...

Michael Gervais: 100%, and we are certainly in the West. We are obsessed with performance, and it would make perfect sense in a culture that is obsessed with performance, that we would build an identity around being a performer, around performance. And there's a name for it. It's called a performance-based identity, and a performance-based identity is declaring that your sense of self is directly connected to how well you do your thing. And so now how well you do your thing is oftentimes in relationship to how poorly or how well somebody else does that same thing. So, a performance-based identity again is like, okay, I am, my sense of self is based on how well I do. That will move you into the anxious, unsettled, scratchy, um, high work ethic that could get you really good at something because your sense of self is so connected to how well you do something, and the approval you're getting from being good at something. That is most of us. Most of us have an unexamined performance-based identity. And what happens is when we have a performance-based identity, we have foreclosed all of the other parts of who we are, and that takes the majority of the space up.

Whitney Johnson: Okay, I have to say, can you say that again? That was so beautiful. When we have a performance-based identity, we foreclose the other parts of our self. Is that what you just said?

Michael Gervais: That's right. Yeah. To be able to feed the culture obsession with performance. And so, it's no longer I am who I am. It's I am what I do relative to you. And there's so many of us have that, again, that is the water that many of us are swimming in that we don't even quite realize we're swimming in it. And I didn't, I didn't know for a long time, um, I did know, go back to my teenager self. I grew up surfing, and I did know when, like, aunts and

uncles or teachers would say things like, oh my, so you're a surfer. I knew that, I never answered that question that way because it felt like, no, well, that's something I do, but it's not who I am. And I felt that constriction early on. I don't know it, obviously my parents, they were counterculture. They dropped out. And so, there was always that push against the grain mentality. And this is the, my parents were like hippies in the sixties. Right. And so, they like, I learned that kind of, um...don't swallow the pill of society thing at an early age. And so all that being said is, I think that, I'm not sure my friends got that message, and I hear a lot of my peers, when you say when they introduce themselves, they reflexively say what they do.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah,

Michael Gervais: Because they think that that's what people, you know, want to know about them. And that's what the part that they want to bring forward. And we're so much more than role. We're so much more than achievement.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Okay. So, let's go back to the beginning of your career. I would argue when I read this story about how you started, I would argue that it's very disruptive because here's what I understood, and you tell me if this is accurate, that you were, you had studied psychology. Psychology was not yet in vogue. You wanted to do sports. And, but you didn't quite know how to do it. So, you went to the edges of the edge of sports, which was extreme sports, which is all very disruptive. But can you tell a little bit more of the story?

Whitney Johnson: Yeah. Thank you. And, I have such reverence for people that are disruptors. So, for you to kind of point to that, like, oh that's cool. So, I grew up in the counterculture off access, action sports. And so, I needed to understand psychology because I could not surf under the pressure of people watching. I could surf in...there's two types of surfing. One is called core surfing, and the other is competitive surfing. Core surfing is when no one's watching. But you know, it's all about being core, putting yourself in a consequential situation and just knowing what that feels like and never talking about it. And the competitive surfing was people judging and critiquing you. And what I couldn't translate, it, like I was so obsessed with what they were thinking of me, based on what I shared earlier in the conversation that I just couldn't. I couldn't do it. So, I needed psychology. So, I was like, wow, what is this thing called the mind? Like how do people that are exceptional do it? And the only avenue I could find was traditional psychology. And that was the study of disorder and dysfunction and disease and kind of the taboo that many of us are familiar with, that those people go to psychologists. And I studied it because I wanted to understand this invisible world that is so powerful that I was a bit of a mess when it came to being able to guide my, my inner life. So, I studied it. Undergraduate degree psychology. Cool. And I went, what do you do with that? You go back to school; you get a master's degree or something.

Michael Gervais: So I went, and get a master's degree. Second semester, I dropped out, first. Sorry. First semester I dropped out because, like, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't do traditional psychology. It felt like I was investing in a future where I was going to listen to people complaining and listen. This is a 24-year-old kid. That was my framing at the time, and I was I don't have the patience for it, nor was I that interested in that part of it. I wanted to study the 10% that really were flourishing in life, whether it was in sport or anywhere else. Like I want to know what that 10%, how they organize their inner life. So, I don't really care about athletics, I don't really care about elite athletics. But it was the working laboratory to understand how people use their minds to get the most out of their craft and their body and maybe, life. Come to find out, there are some best practices and principles that the best of the best use. But also come to find out that most of them, when they leave sport are a disaster. So, they've only like lined them up. 87% within two years of leaving the NFL are broke. And so, so they use these extraordinary set of psychological principles to be great on the field, but didn't know how to translate them to the next phase of their life. So, I wanted to understand not only what did they do during that time, but what translates to other parts to life.

Michael Gervais: So that's the counterculture. Me, like the industry was pointing to the dysfunction, and I wanted to know more about the flourishing, the aspects of flourishing. And so that was it. And it's only because I needed it myself.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michael Gervais: Like I, I wasn't I wasn't struggling in that way, but I was struggling in the sense that I know that there was more in me, there was more room to grow, and I just didn't know how to do it. It was never going to be about working more, because that, I was already working as hard as I could, and I was like 25 years old, like it was... And I think most of us have ground that methodology to the bone.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michael Gervais: So, I only wanted to work with people that were as unhealthy. This was unhealthy. I recognize it now. I only wanted to work with people that were as obsessed about getting better than I was, but that was coming from an unhealthy framework of myself. I was totally performance based. I needed it for myself, and I wanted to work with people that were going to do the work for themselves. It was just an unhealthy 27-year-old model. And then so I got into pro sport not because the lights were bigger, but because those were people that were going to work as hard as humans can work, like on the optimization side of being their very best. And then I was in there and I was like, this is crazy.

Michael Gervais: This is like a breeding ground for narcissism. And I was so early in the trajectory of sports psychology and pro sport that I didn't feel valued, like it was like. I don't know, it was weird. I didn't like how I felt in it, and these 24-year-olds were using the microphone. Not for global good, but for, you know, self-aggrandizing.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah.

Michael Gervais: And so, I was like, I got to get out of here. This is all make believe. And so I left and I went back to my roots to work with people that were committed to operating in consequential environments where if they made a mistake, they could die or a loved one could die. So, it's back to super high stakes, consequential environments from action sports like big wave surfing or, Felix Baumgartner, who jumped from 20, uh, 130,000ft, where no one's jumped from that height before. And the brightest minds in aerospace weren't sure if his arms and legs were going to rip off as he passed through the sonic boom. You know, those types of environments that were radically, radically dangerous because the purity was so honest and so real that people on the team had to bring their very best because the stakes were so high. So that was my laboratory for about ten years, understanding what it feels like and what it means to be completely responsible to bring your best foot forward, your best self forward, because people's lives depend on it.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm, mhm, mhm. You have a quiz that people can take. You also have a course which looks very enticing. But it's a, the quiz has different archetypes. What are some...where can people find the quiz and what are some of the archetypes?

Michael Gervais: Okay, fun. So, the quiz is, it's at findingmastery.com and you can find it easily there. And so that's our website. And so, you take the FOPO assessment and there's three basic archetypes that we had. And we did a full description that sits underneath each one of them. So based on how you respond, you're either a dolphin, a polar bear or gazelle. So, a dolphin is somebody who really has low FOPO. They're really curious. They're engaged, they're open, you know, so they're, they don't have a whole lot of burden from trying to be accepted or the fear of being rejected by other people. They're playful. Right? They're just, you know, they're just kind of going through. Moderate FOPO, that archetype for fun is a polar bear. And so, they have the ability to adapt to, you know, environmental conditions. And they can also blend in. You know, they're strong. That's good. They've got a moderate amount of FOPO that they're working from. And again, what we're talking about is FOPO, fear of people's opinions, that it's a model for shaping your thoughts and your words and your actions.

Michael Gervais: So, the dolphins, it's not shaping their thoughts, words and actions all that much. For the polar bear—it shapes it just a little bit. You know, they're the type of person that's fun to be around. They're easy. Sometimes they're all about them, you know, um, I'm sorry. Sometimes they're about making sure that they're just fitting in and other times they're just really themselves. But they can go between environments. Now high FOPO okay, the archetype there for fun is the gazelle. So really alert. Quick to respond. They might get easily spooked. You know, they're really fast and agile, you know, and they're very tuned to the perception of threat or the perceived threats in their environment. So, it's like, you know, those are the three and we're totally having fun with those three.

But the descriptions underneath are actually super thoughtful from a research perspective. Now I say all this “asterisk, asterisk” Whitney is that the assessment is not, has not gone through clinical trials.

Whitney Johnson: You haven't validated it yet.

Michael Gervais: It's still in the fun stage.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. So, are you going to share which one are you or can you.

Michael Gervais: Yeah. Oh, yeah, I was the gazelle early on.

Whitney Johnson: But you've, you've moved...

Michael Gervais: Yeah, early on I was a, yeah early on I was a dolphin, young. And then I hit like teenage years, and I was the gazelle. And then I get a little bit older. I was the polar bear. And now I'm, I'm back to my roots of being a dolphin. It doesn't mean that FOPO has gone away.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, yeah.

Michael Gervais: I've just been working at it for a long time, specifically addressing the on ramps to FOPO and the off ramps, like how to get off of the FOPO freeway. And that's really what I try to do in the book.

Whitney Johnson: Right, I mean, yeah, professionally it, I would hope that you're a dolphin. You've moved up the S curve to the dolphin. Right? Leaped to the dolphin.

Michael Gervais: To the dolphin, yeah, yeah. And so where are you? How did your assessment come back?

Whitney Johnson: I was a polar bear.

Michael Gervais: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Okay. So sometimes...

Whitney Johnson: Sometimes I'm like totally good and sometimes I contort, right. So...

Michael Gervais: That's it. Yeah, yeah.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah...

Michael Gervais: And it's not until. Oh sorry. Go ahead, please.

Whitney Johnson: Well, I was just thinking about one of the things that you said. Let's see. So, one of the things you talked about moving through FOPO is to focus on learning and purpose. And so, I was thinking about that actually in advance of this conversation. So, if we were doing, if we're in this major FOPO place before, once we got on the conversation, you know, I'd be asking, does he like me? You'd be asking me, does she, does she like me? But instead, if we move out of that, we're going to that place of am I being true to my purpose in this conversation and being true to our purpose? If I'm understanding what you said, is to say you and I are both having this conversation because we want to learn from interesting people, but also because we really believe in helping people get better. And so, if we can stay in that place of purpose and of learning from each other, then we're good.

Michael Gervais: Yeah, it's no longer when you're in service of purpose. It's not about serving your needs, you know. It is about being a part of a coral reef, and it's about being part of something bigger. It's about being part of something that needs your support and help. But it's not just about you being seen or, you know, whatever. So that it's a completely different way of presenting and being yourself. So, one of the great fears is public speaking. Why is that? Because when people walk up those five steps, walk across the stage, the eyeballs are very dangerous because it's about the person being on stage. Right? And so, their eyeballs represent like, what are they thinking of me? As opposed to if Mother Teresa or Nelson Mandela or Gandhi or Jesus or Buddha or Confucius or Doctor King

Junior or Malcolm X, or fill in the blanks like, you know who's ever inspiring to you walks on stage that that person is like Mother Teresa would be about the narrative. Like, we've got to take care of the sick. We must invest time and resources. And I want to tell you some stories, and I want to tell you how it's changed my life. And I want to tell you, you know, where I need your help, where we all need to step forward for these people. So. So it's about, you become a vehicle for the purpose as opposed to the stage being a vehicle for acceptance. Yeah. And when that happens, the whole, your whole existence changes. And it's a pretty cool thing when you can spend the disciplined time to think about what is my life purpose. But that doesn't happen overnight. That takes time. It takes real investment of discernment and calibration and investigation of oneself to know what purpose will be.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah - and I would, I think Mike—I for me, I would take it even further because I—I personally feel like I know what my purpose is, but that doesn't mean I can always operate from that place.

Michael Gervais: You're 100%.

Whitney Johnson: And so, I think that's where the practice comes in. I, probably those three stages that you talked about, you can know what it is, but there's that challenge of practicing so that when you're out in the wild, you can still be in your purpose. And I would say being up on stage in front of thousands of people, you're out in the wild.

Michael Gervais: That's 100%. Yeah. And remember, what your brain is supposed to do is scan to find the danger. And the near-death sentence was being rejected by the elders. Rejected by others. So, we scan the world. This is what your brain is supposed to do. Scan the audience to see who's the one not accepting. Who's the one rejecting? Do they have power? Oh my God, I don't know. So. But their rejection, their squinting of their eyes, their crossing of their arms, their disengagement, you know, flipping through their phone. We interpret those as near-death sentences. Right?

Whitney Johnson: They just got up, walk out to go to the bathroom

Michael Gervais: Exactly. As opposed to training and conditioning our mind to have the psychological skills to gate out that noise so that you can be connected to the signal, which is finding just the right contour of the words and ways that you want to express the ideas that you're given the opportunity to do. And when you can find that right contour of words that's lined up on purpose and is backed by your first principles or your virtues of life, you've totally got it.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah

Michael Gervais: You totally have it.

Whitney Johnson: Beautiful.

Michael Gervais: And it's radical being around those people. I'm so inspired by it because they've done the inner work to be about it. And they're using their life efforts to, to move or advance a purpose.

Whitney Johnson: One thing. People are listening right now, they're going to go buy your book. They're going to listen to your podcast. They might even take the quiz to find out if they're a dolphin, polar bear, or gazelle.

Michael Gervais: Thank you.

Whitney Johnson: But is there one thing that they could do right now, one little hack that you would encourage people to think about as they finish up this podcast?

Michael Gervais: Yeah, I would, I'd say. Where do you start? You know if you will. Is, anything that you've been thinking is important for, you know you. Okay. This is now me catching. You're catching me overthinking where to start? Because reflexively I say, get a meditation practice. Or I say, invest in the way that you speak to yourself.

Whitney Johnson: Okay. That's good.

Michael Gervais: Or I might say invest in a breathing practice, so you know how to downregulate and toggle down stress. But I'm actually thinking right now that probably the place to start is if there's anything in this conversation that's been a bit of a ping, that you've felt something, follow that.

Whitney Johnson: Mhm.

Michael Gervais: I come from a fundamental belief that you and I and others, everything they need is already inside them. And so, the role of a, a psychologist or a partner in life or a coach is to listen, is to hold up mirrors because they already have the answers. It's just kind of got, maybe some calcium on it, or they just can't access it. But like if you felt a ping, you know exactly, your audience knows exactly what the next step is. And so, I'd say keep listening and take action.

Whitney Johnson: So, Mike, in that spirit, what in this conversation was useful for you? What pinged you? What thoughts or ideas bubbled up for you?

Michael Gervais: Well, when you brought your, the part of you forward, when you recognized the trauma that was happening for that client. It reminds, it reminded me that of a first principle that I hold, that we all have trauma. And sometimes just the story that I'm sharing can be triggering and traumatic for other people. So, it just, that moment reminded me like, yeah, keep holding the surface that people have trauma. And that is where most of our psychology is formed. And just to keep holding that with kindness and compassion. So that, you brought that forward, it elicited in me. And so that was really cool for me. You're the, and I've had, I don't know, lots of interviews for the book on this to celebrate it. And you're the first person that has elicited that. So, I'm super grateful for it.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Michael Gervais: Oh, I want to say thank you. I want to say thanks for creating a forum to talk about stuff I love talking about. And you, you know, you just brought your whole self into it and that is felt. So, I would say thank you,

Whitney Johnson: Thank you.

Whitney Johnson: The first step is to put down the poison. Some poisons are obvious. Yes, a pack of cigarettes, an abusive workplace, but others are much more subtle in how they affect us. A need to belong is perfectly natural. It's wired into our brains, even. But let it shape your identity-and it's a poison, like anything else. And to be fair, our world is set up to feed us that poison with expectations put on us by social media, by politics, even by television and movies. We're still wired to think of ourselves as that aero craftsman, like Michael said, worried about getting kicked out of the tribe. But now we're under a much larger microscope than ever before. The Buddha taught that awareness extends to the inner world, the self, and we have to be aware of what we're telling ourselves, especially what we whisper under the surface. Remember how embarrassed Michael felt after trying to outmacho the other driver? When we aren't aware of those whispers, we can act in ways that surprise even ourselves. I want to end with the idea of core surfing. Michael described it as going out on the water, performing an incredible feat, and never telling a single soul. What a beautiful exercise and cultivating our own little corner of nirvana. An exercise in appreciating beauty for what it is, not for what others might think of it. What do you have that truly only exists for you? For more on exploring what lurks underneath the surface, there's my episode with cognitive scientist Scott Barry Kaufman. [episode 254](#). On learning how to reach out for help when the microscope of this world becomes a little too much, I point you to [episode 259](#) with Alexi Robichaux. And for a dose of confidence building, there's

Shade Zahrai, [episode 330](#). Thank you again to Doctor Michael Gervais and thank you for listening. If you enjoyed today's show, hit subscribe so you don't miss a single episode. Thank you to our producer, Alexander Tuerk, production assistant Etta King and production coordinator Nicole Pellegrino.

I'm Whitney Johnson.

And this has been Disrupt Yourself.