

Deliberate Organizing with Julie Morgenstern

Episode 50



Power of Moms

A Gathering Place for Deliberate Mothers

April: Hello. This is April Perry with Power of Moms, and I am so excited. Today, I get to interview one of my heroes, Julie Morgenstern. I have been reading her books for years and just absolutely love everything that she's put together, and so I'm thrilled to get to be on the phone. Welcome, Julie.

Julie: It's great to be here, April.

April: We are excited to get to talk about organizing as deliberate mothers, and how getting organized is going to help us become better moms and more balanced women. For those of you who aren't yet familiar with Julie Morgenstern or maybe have heard her name, but want to know a little bit more about her, she runs a website. It's juliemorgenstern.com, and she's a professional organizer and time manager.

You've probably seen her books all over the bookstores. One of the one's that's specific to this call, that we're going to be talking more about, is *Time Management from the Inside Out*. She also has a book I love called *Never Check E-mail in the Morning*, and I think of that title every morning when I don't check my email, so thanks, Julie, for that! Julie has also produced a new balanced life planner. I've been seeing ads for it everywhere and have been looking into this beautiful planner. I'm sure we'll hear more about that as well.

She is the mother of her daughter, Jessi, who is now 27. Julie's going to let us know a little bit about how she became organized and how motherhood played a role in that, and show that she totally understands our community. So, maybe we should start there, Julie. Can you let us know how you got started organizing and how motherhood started out for you?

Julie: Yes. Well, I was truly, truly a notoriously disorganized person. Growing up, I was a very right brain, creative person. I was in the theatre. I was an actress. I was a dancer. My room, growing up, was just stacked, floor to ceiling, with cool things that had no home ... things that could've been a potential prop, or a potential inspiration for something.

April: Sure.

Julie: I was always late for everything, and I was always losing things, and I was the little creative genius type, right? I always pulled it off at the last minute, and it was at a cost, but only to myself, right? If I had to do something last minute, the night before, or do it again because I lost it, I was the only one who was going to be impacted.

But when my daughter was born, I knew within a few weeks. I was like, “Oh, my God, if I don’t get my act together, this child will never see the light of day. I’m never going to get her out for a walk.”

It literally was one day when she was about three weeks old, and she woke up from a nap. I thought it’d be a great time to take her for her first walk. It took me two-and-a-half hours to gather things to get ready for the walk. Then, by the time I was ready, she was back asleep, and I thought, “Oh, my God.” Organizing is all about being ready ... ready for anything. Before you have kids you’re juggling a few balls. You’re juggling your social life, your personal life, and your work life. Right? That’s not necessarily easy, but that’s all you’ve got to juggle, and it’s full. You’ve got a full life.

Then, you have a kid and you go from juggling three balls to something like 12. It’s like it explodes overnight. Nobody prepares you. No one really tells you the time management disaster that’s about to hit you when you become a parent. I think it’s because it protects a continuation of the species because if they told you, you’d be like, “I’m not doing that. That’s impossible! How do I do all that? How do I take care of a kid’s needs, their food, their shelter, their education, their medical ... all of that?”

That’s for one kid. Then, you have two kids. Then, you have three kids. “How do I take care of the basic needs, plus the emotional needs, plus the relationship between the kids, plus the relationship between your spouse and the kids, and you and your spouse?” I mean, nobody prepares you. Not to bury all the listeners in overwhelm, but that really is the overnight shift.

April: Yes. I’m glad you acknowledge that because I think that’s how a lot of women are feeling right now. I was telling Julie before the call, all of the mothers in our community are deliberate mothers. We all want to do a really good job, but we are struggling every day and we often compare ourselves to everyone else’s best and how organized we think we should be, and it’s just not the reality.

Julie: No, it’s not. Most people struggle. Even if you go to a friend’s house that looks organized, if you really look in some of the back closets and the spare room, it’s a disaster back there. I’m in those homes.

April: Because that’s what you do. You’re in the homes of these moms and you’re checking this out.

Julie: Everybody.

April: That's good to know. I just wanted to know how you feel that getting organized is really going to help us to be more deliberate mothers and be there for our families. How did you find this switch?

Julie: What being organized will do for you, is that it will automate certain functions so that you are freed up to really be present with your kids and yourself, and not feel guilty about taking time for yourself. Right? Or for your spouse or your friends. You need to automate as much and systematize as much of the mechanics of running your house, of taking care of things. The more you automate, the freer you are to be in the moment.

But, if every day you're trying to figure out, "What do I cook for dinner today? Oh, God, do we have any canned tomatoes?" and you're running around getting the kids dressed; where things belong in your house; just the physical organization of your home, it can steal so many hours looking for things. Then it creates stress and tension, and hurt feelings.

So, being organized creates the environment. It calms the environment down within which you and your family get to connect, evolve, and you get to raise your kids. Think of it as creating the house in which you are raising your children. You want it to be a really calm and organized and supportive environment, not an environment that you are wrestling with and that's working against you.

April: It's so interesting because I think a lot of mothers think, "Well, if I really make things very structured and very systematized, then I have to live this rigid, mechanical life, and I want to be more 'go with the flow.' I want to be flying by the seat of my pants. I want to be one of those fun, spontaneous moms." I think a lot of people will stop themselves from getting things really organized and systematized because they think they're going to lose that spontaneity. But, what you're saying is you make things automated so you can have more spontaneity.

Julie: That's exactly right, and it is. You're absolutely right to point out that it's kind of the opposite effect and that fear is real. I had that fear. I was this creative person. I was terrified of getting organized. I thought it was going to squelch my creativity. But if you do it right, it frees up so much time. It allows you to spin on a dime. If you try to be spontaneous, go with the flow, and you don't have that much structure, things can go wherever. A kid needs something. They either need time, or they need a Band-Aid, or they need a snack, and you can't find it. How spontaneous is that?

April: It's not at all.

Julie: At all, right?

April: No, and then you're yelling at everyone.

Julie: "Who moved the cheese sticks?"

April: Yes! Now, you have resources for moms, and that's what I love about you is that you're not just trying to tell people, "Yeah, go get organized," but you actually help people do it. I know there are a lot of different levels at which you help mothers. You have a whole team of people who can go into people's homes and help them, and we'll link to your website in the show notes here so that people can find you.

But, how would you recommend a mother get started? Would you recommend she start reading one or two of your books? Start with a planner or a time map? What do you recommend typically? Let's say a mom's listening right now and she's thinking, "Okay, my life's totally out of control. I want to get in control. Where do I start?"

Julie: If you feel that both your physical space is disorganized and chaotic and your schedule is also disorganized, I actually usually recommend that you start with your space. Maybe not your whole house because it can be daunting and take a lot of time, but start with one space in your home or in your life that you're in every single day that's small, that you can get organized.

Most common targets would be your bathroom, your handbag or the diaper bag if you have babies, your refrigerator, your front hall, your entry. Those are small areas that you can conquer in maybe two or three hours. My first, sort of flagship book, is called *Organizing from the Inside Out*.

April: Love that.

Julie: In that book, you can read the first five chapters, which are short, and they basically describe how to organize anything; to design it the way you think and your natural habits, so it's really easy for you to maintain.

April: That's why I have a hamper behind my bathroom door because my daughter kept throwing her clothes there even though there wasn't a hamper there, so I read your book and I thought, "I'm going to put a hamper where she throws her clothes." That's worked great!

Julie: Look to where the piles are and create storage right there, and that's perfect.

April: In your book, *SHED Your Stuff, Change Your Life*, I love how you explained why people hoard and why people surround themselves with stuff. I thought the psychology behind that was brilliant. So, I'd recommend that book for someone starting too. It's helped me realize, "Okay, people are trying to surround themselves with this comfort," or, "We have deeper issues as far as why we keep so much stuff."

Julie: Yes, if you have too much stuff, you just have a volume issue, right? Nothing is junk. I really don't believe any of our stuff is junk. I think if you're hanging onto things that you don't use, it's because it represents an attachment to something that you're struggling to release. In the book, *SHED*, I walk the reader through the process of discovering, "What does that stuff mean to you?" Once you understand what it

represents, it is much easier to either release it because you're like, "That's an old need. I don't need that anymore," or, "There's a better way to get that goal met than by saving all this stuff."

So, you can really get underneath the clutter and on to what your connection is to it, and that will help you release it. De-cluttering or getting rid of stuff that is not relevant anymore in your life is probably the hardest thing to do for people. But in *SHED*, I walk people through a process that makes it actually nourishing. It makes it empowering. It makes it exciting. People love it.

April: Yes, I loved it. I think that's true. When your physical space is clean, I think then it's easier for your mental space to start getting organized.

Julie: Absolutely. Get your space organized, and you also free up time, right? Because you're not wasting so much time looking for things.

April: Yes, or cleaning things.

Julie: Exactly. It's true. An hour or two a day minimum, is what you're going to regain in an organized space.

April: Yes.

Julie: So then, you should move into your time. For time, I really think the very first thing everybody should do is get themselves on a single, consistent planner of some sort. There are many products on the market. We just came out with Levenger, a paper-based planning system called the balanced life planner. It's based on everything I've taught my clients -- that balancing your life is actually how you have the energy and the brainpower to do everything you want to do, and more, if you have a balanced life.

April: I'm so glad you said that, and I'm looking into your planner. I love how you're not trying to help everyone do it all, but really trying to pick what things they really want to do, and then do all of that. You take people to that level, turn out everything that's on your list and focus on what you have. I love how you suggest putting the timeframe next to each action ... really deciding, "How much time is this going to take?"

Julie: That's right.

April: Sometimes, as mothers, we're like, "Oh, I could do that in five minutes," but it's really going to take us an hour, and then we're frustrated. We can't do all that.

Julie: That's right. Time estimating is a big, overlooked step in planning our days. "Well, how long will that take?"

April: Yes.

Julie: Then you end up with an over ambitious to-do list for the day, and then no matter what you got done, you feel disappointed in yourself or frustrated-- even though you got so many things done. But that's because your list was unrealistic to begin with. We all feel great when we get all of our to-dos finished for the day. It's like, "Wow, I got it all done." Well, make sure that your list is doable, and then you'll have that feeling every day.

April: One more question on the planner. I love when you were talking about the planner. Obviously, so many moms are going digital right now. Do you have any kind of advice on how to control the phone use? You can get on your phone and have access to instant email and messages, and you're organizing, and I feel like the phone is taking us away from our children. Do you have a piece of advice for this?

Julie: Yes. You have got to, first of all, recognize scientifically that whole constant email, IM, digital stuff is actually scientifically proven to be addictive. So, recognize that you are addicted. I could give you the science behind it. It has to do with the dopamine in your brain and the cortisol, and it gets you into this rush, rush, rush. You feel like you're doing something all the time. You feel productive, right? But, you're totally disengaging from life. You're totally disengaging from your kids.

This is true for all of us, but kids are the most raw and vulnerable about it. Paying attention to them is what makes them feel they're important, and that's true for adults too, right? If you're talking to somebody and they're on their digital device, you feel like you've just been dissed. You feel like you're not important.

But, if someone is looking in your eyes and listening to you and not distracted, you feel like you're very important. So, you have to recognize the value of paying attention. Studies say even babies, (they measured this) can tell if the adults in the room are engaged on their Blackberries or whatever, or if they're actually really being paid attention to.

April: Wow.

Julie: They can feel it.

April: That's amazing.

Julie: Actually, in the last week, believe it or not, I've had two discussions with people in this area who have studied this, and we think of babies like, "What do they know?" That's where it happens, and it affects their health for the rest of their lives, their mental states, their self-confidence. You've got seven years. Pay attention, you've got to break that addiction. Break it. There's two ways to do it, to break your addiction. One is ban all digital devices, including Facebook and the computer and everything for the first and last hour of your day. Just start with that.

April: That's good, okay.

Julie: It'll be hard. You're going to be nauseous for three days. You're going to be like, "Oh, my God. I don't know what to do with myself. In the morning, when I wake up, I have to check who wrote to me overnight."

April: Yes, it takes discipline. It totally takes discipline. I've been doing this, and it takes discipline, but it feels good when you can do it, don't you think?

Julie: You reclaim and you reconnect to the world. You reengage. You get to the deeper parts of your brain. It's literally a different geography in your brain, so you can't relate when you are on a device in the way you can when you are away from it. You engage a whole different part of your brain when you're actually communicating with somebody off of the device. So, first and last hour of the day, start with that, and then you can start breaking away at other times in the day. That's one way.

The other way I would recommend people try, is just give themselves one whole afternoon. Start with once a week on Friday, from the time the kids get home until they go to sleep at night. Say, "No, I'm not looking at all." Just give yourself a digital vacation one day a week. So, you can either do it two hours a day, beginning and end, or just do it one afternoon a week. That's just to break the habit. Once you break the habit, then we want you off it for several hours at a time every day.

April: Yes, excellent! I love that. I think it's amazing how you can go from feeling overwhelmed, like you have too much to do, to feeling completely free and energetic and creative when you can set aside those hours. I've totally noticed that in my life ... it's interesting. I'm sure you deal with this with all the mothers and parents you work with.

Julie: Yes. I'm sure what you're experiencing is when you're not distracted with your digital stuff, you actually solve problems and you have real conversations, or you really finish your thank you notes, or you actually cook the meal and don't burn it. You do everything ...in a more deliberate way, back to your deliberate motherhood. Be present.

April: I think that could be another book.

Julie: There you go.

April: It's wonderful, and I love that. I love what you're encouraging a mother to do is really balancing her life and her family. Clearly, you were organizing while your daughter was still young, right? You've been working on this business for a long time.

Julie: Yes.

April: How many years have you been doing professional organizing?

Julie: Twenty-three years. I sound so young, don't I?

April: Yes, you are so young. But, you had to learn how to balance this. Maybe, as a closing thought, what do you recommend to mothers who want to pursue dreams? Most of the moms in our community love their families. They're very deliberate mothers, but they also want to pursue a part of themselves that they're excited about.

Whether it's work that they want to do or need to do; or whether it's another activity, a project, a book they want to write, or something they want to do, there's just this balance that we need to master. If you're going to get your physical space in order, you're going to get a central planner. We're going to learn not to be addicted to our phones. What else do you recommend as far as guiding us towards having that balance?

Julie: I think you want to identify, as you said, April, what is this thing that speaks most to your soul that's for you? What nourishes you the most? Is it this dream to write a book, or to have a small business or a big business? Is it some creative pursuit? Or, is it that you just love to go to the gym, and you just love that workout time? What is the activity that you don't have time for that you know would nourish you on the deepest level?

You want to identify one or two things. You cannot have a list of 14. It's just too much. Pick one or two. Start with the one or two things that would nourish you the most that you don't get to do, and then identify a regular time of day or the week that is carved out as sacred time to do just that. If you have to get a babysitter, get a babysitter or childcare. You have to make sure that once you've claimed that time, that you build protection around it and backups-- because you are a parent and stuff happens, so you need backups.

Then, you do that every single day or every single week, and you get better and better at showing up for that time and utilizing it. It can't be 30 minutes. You need an hour, or two, or three ... some chunk of time that you can count on. If you invest time doing that and you protect it and you do it, there is nothing else I can think of ... nothing that will fuel your energy and your power to be an incredible mother the rest of your week, and every day, than identifying the thing that fuels you and making sure you build it into your routine. Do it. You feel like, "Oh, no. My kids need me. My husband needs me. My job needs me." No, you have to find the fuel that's going to really sustain you and fulfill you, and that's balance. Right? That is balance.

April: Yes! I love how you mentioned that we can adapt it to our situation. If you're busy and you've got young children and you aren't able to get away very often, even just a few hours a week ... that that could be something totally fueling.

You are wonderful. Thank you for all your inspiration, Julie. I can't even recommend your books enough to everyone, and I'm excited to be able to link to this podcast and show our community. Any parting words or any final things you want to say?

Julie: Yes. Just recognize that organization is a lifelong skill. As moms, you need all the help you can get. Don't be ashamed of that. Everybody struggles. Everybody. Take one piece at a time. It's not an all or nothing proposition at all. Pick the area that's going to help you the most, start there, and just build and build and build. Don't ever call yourself "disorganized." It's just a tough job. Reach out and be patient with yourself. But don't try to do it all at once. Just pick one little area at a time and master it, and you'll feel a little bit of relief, and then you do another and another. It's not an overnight process, but it's worth every minute you spend on it.

April: Thank you so much. This was such a wonderful interview. I have been taking notes like crazy. I know I can go back and listen to it again, but I just had to write it all down as you were saying it.

Julie: Good.

April: Thank you very much. For those of you who have been listening, thank you so much for being with us. We have a comments section at the end of this podcast. Please leave your comments. Add any other ideas, suggestions, or thoughts that came to you during this podcast that you'd like to share that can help strengthen the rest of our community.

I'll link to Julie Morgenstern's website, so if you would like to have a little more help, you can read her books and you can go to her site. She has a whole team of people around the nation who can come and help you in your own home. We'll also link to her balanced life planner, so you can check that out and see if that's something that would work great for you. But, thank you so much, Julie.

Julie: Thank you. Come visit me on my website and see what we can do for you.

April: Juliemorgenstern.com, and this podcast was hosted by The Power of Moms, www.powerofmoms.com.

Questions: How could being better organized make your home a more peaceful, happy place for you and your family?

In your life, does your space or your schedule need to be better organized? Maybe both?

Challenge: Identify one space in your home that you can start organizing today.

Thanks to Rev.com for the transcription.