



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 191 – Finding Purpose in Transition with Ellen Rothstein
April 2, 2023

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[00:00:05] Kathy Robinson: Welcome to [The Athena Wellness Podcast](#), the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that's dedicated to supporting you on your journey to live more wholeheartedly.

[00:00:30] Kathy: Today's episode is brought to you by The Athena Wellness Academy, your resource for wholehearted living.

The Academy's featured offering is an online course called, *From 'Type A' to 'Type Be,' How to Mindfully Descend the Corporate Ladder and Invite What's Next*. This course is perfect for you if you're contemplating or navigating a professional transition, and it's available as a self study or with a small cohort of students facilitated by me, Kathy Robinson.

To learn more, I invite you to go to AthenaWellnessAcademy.teachable.com or click on the link in the show notes.

[00:01:21] Kathy: Hello and welcome. Thanks so much for joining me.



One of the pleasures of hosting this podcast is speaking with those who use personal experience to teach others how to navigate the ups and downs of the life journey. It's even more powerful when this journey happens over a period of time, so we, as listeners, can learn from the twists and turns and unmarked paths that our guests have sometimes found themselves on.

I'm joined today by coach Ellen Rothstein, who guides her clients through life transitions by creating customized, actionable strategies. Ellen believes in tapping into her client's inner wisdom to create a positive vision for their next phase of life and then guiding them toward that vision.

Here's what we cover:

- An overview of the transition journey;
- The impact of identity loss when navigating transition;
- Common life transition struggles and strategies to address them;
- How to dream big in the second half of life; and
- The importance of self-care during times of change.

You can learn more about Ellen at ellenrothstein.com. I'll put a link to her website and email in the show notes.

And now onto the show. I hope this conversation helps you find purpose in your life transitions.

[00:02:49] Kathy: Ellen, welcome to *The Athena Wellness Podcast*. Thank you so much for being here today.



[00:02:56] Ellen Rothstein: Thank you, Kathy. I'm so delighted to be here.

[00:02:59] Kathy: Wonderful. Well, please, share a bit about who you are and what you do.

[00:03:03] Ellen: My name is Ellen Rothstein. I am a life transition coach. What that means is I help people work through transitions.

Transitions are all around us. We go through them at so many different points in our life. If we're losing a job, changing a job, if we're retiring, if we're moving, if we're changing our major relationship status, that could be divorce or whatever, if we're having a new baby, if we're losing babies to empty nest – any point at which you are facing some kind of major change is what I would call a transition.

What I help people do is face that transition with some clarity and insight so that they can approach that with some enthusiasm rather than just trepidation and fear.

People often get stuck, understandably so, not really knowing what they want this transition to look like. And so we work together to figure that out and figure out what obstacles they may be putting in their own way. Then, we can create an actionable and realistic plan. They can be accountable to me and to themselves to get through that. Then, they can look back on it and say, "Oh, thank God."
[chuckles]

[00:04:21] Kathy: Thank God [crosstalk] So glad I had some capable guidance there, yeah, because you mentioned so many keywords here that I'm looking



forward to getting into, including clarity, insight, and enthusiasm, and why that's so important.

Before we get to that, what brought you to the work that you do today? I'm going to guess you probably didn't graduate college and say, "You know what? I'm going to work in the area of transition." Please, tell us that story.

[00:04:47] Ellen: Actually, I graduated with a degree in art. I went to UC Berkeley and I was a practicing painter. I had galleries, exhibitions. I sold paintings, but you don't know if you're going to sell the next one in two weeks, two months, two years. I had to do some hard thinking about whether I really wanted to continue this lifestyle. I could not afford to continue this lifestyle.

Eventually, I ended up working in advertising, not in the creative aspect, but in the - more the account management side, which really meant working with the clients and the internal teams. I discovered I liked that part. I didn't love the field of advertising. And I lost a lot of jobs. There were layoffs. There was downsizing. It was rough. I was out of work a lot. It was a bumpy ride.

Then, eventually, I ended up working for a digital media company for a long time. I became a project manager as well as doing the people part. There were parts about that job that I loved. I discovered I loved being the liaison between the CEO and the leadership teams and the engineers. I learned how to ask the right questions without ever feeling like I had to be an engineer, between the sales, the legal, and all that.



What I hated was I felt like I had to prove myself every minute of every day. What I really noticed was a disconnect between feeling in charge at home. I was married with two children running a household and then I'd go to work and I felt like I had no voice. This was my background feeling. I started to work with a life coach on my own to try to understand what is going on here and how can I integrate what I was calling my home self with my work self.

We were working on that, making good progress, and then, I got laid off again. This was in February of 2019. I discovered at this point it's hard to be an older woman and get hired in a young tech town. I'm in San Francisco. Everybody is in their 20s and 30s and most of them are male, so ageism was really rampant. I was trying to get a job as a project manager.

I finally got one, a contract job, and it was a terrible fit. I hated them, but they hated me even more, I think. It was terrible. When that was done, then it became clear this is not working. This is a round peg in a square hole. I had to really figure out - what do I care about?

I had to do some very deep thinking about what are my strengths, what do I enjoy doing, because often, those are one and the same. I thought back to the high moments of my various jobs and careers and I realized that it was when I was working with the people and when I was being creative.

Now, I had stopped being an official painter years before, but I was definitely continuing on my own just for my own pleasure. I got to the point where I wanted to integrate what I love doing and what I'm good at. Then, at this point, we're now



in the pandemic and everything is shut down, I had taken some classes in previous years in life coaching, dipping my toe in the water, thinking, "Is this something that makes sense for me?"

Well, at this point, when I thought previously that I couldn't afford to do that because I needed a full-time income and benefits, I thought, "Well, maybe someday." Well, someday arrived. I wasn't going to get full-time income and benefits, and so I might as well figure out what I really am passionate about doing.

And so I did. I enrolled in an ICF-accredited life coaching program and met some amazing people and also developed this expertise and started out focusing primarily on retirement because people around me were retiring. I was seeing those that did it well and those that didn't.

Plus, my father, who was a doctor, had, many years ago, pointed out to me that he noticed with his patients that those that had nothing planned after they retired deteriorated physically and emotionally very quickly. Those that did have plans thrived.

I thought, "There's something here." I started focusing on retirement, but then, I realized it's one of many transitions we go through. As I mentioned earlier, there are so many. I thought, "Okay. I have struggled with change my whole life. Let me work on this and let me try to impart some of my hard-earned wisdom to other people." That's how I ended up doing what I'm doing now.



[00:10:00] Kathy: Isn't it amazing how when you were in your 20s, there's no way you could have looked forward to see all of these, what felt like ups and downs as you go through life, were really preparation for you to do the work that really feeds you today. I can tell just by seeing your eyes light up, the difference between when you were talking about your corporate life and the difference between talking about what you're doing now, or any of your creative endeavors. There is really a difference in just your energy.

I wonder, at what point did you realize, "Oh, everything that I've been going through is actually experience that I can leverage into this new career"?

[00:10:43] Ellen: It clicked when I started doing my practice coaching. I had a chance to actually put something into use, draw upon my own wisdom. Although, to be clear, when you're a coach, you're not giving advice, you're helping that client figure out what his or her path is.

I also discovered I can write. I can do podcasts. I can do other ways to get my voice heard. But my primary focus in the one-on-one coaching is to help that person's voice get heard.

It all started to come together when I started to do that. I realized I get to have some control now because previously, I'd been working for other people. I've been working for large employers, medium-sized employers, and finally, I was working for myself with all of that scariness, pros and cons, and all of that. I've finally felt in charge in a way that I hadn't experienced before.



[00:11:47] Kathy: When you were talking about the expectation of proving yourself every day and the disconnect of who you are at home and who you are in your professional life, and this feeling of not having any voice, to me, it feels like those are really the seeds of burnout.

When we talk about burnout, we say, "Oh, that person is just so overworked and so overtaxed." It's been my experience that when you're unable to show up the way you want to show up at work, whether it's through your own means or through expectations that are being put on you, that is what causes the burnout. This is just my theory based on my own experience, so I'm just curious, your reaction to that.

[00:12:26] Ellen: I feel like there are two parts to that answer. One is self-care, which I'm very big on. The other is you get energy from doing something that you find soul-satisfying.

If you are getting burned out, it's probably, in my opinion, a combination of the fact that you are not putting your own oxygen mask on first. You are so busy taking care of everybody else. You are not listening to yourself and taking care of yourself. What you are spending all that time doing is not making you feel good. It's not work that you are really embracing and loving.

[00:13:07] Kathy: I'd love to just start with talking about the change management process because you very astutely pointed out it's not just at certain times of life, it's all throughout life that we're going through change. Can you talk a little bit about that general journey of transition and what the phases might be?



When I think about it, maybe this is very simplistic, I think about something ending. There's this liminal space where you're not who you were, but you're not who you're going to be yet. Then, there's the after, whatever that might be.

Is that the way you think about it? I'm sure there's another model. This is just something that I made up, [chuckles] so if there's a model you can draw on, that's fine, but do you see it that way?

[00:13:48] Ellen: Yes, but I also had studied and understood the wisdom of Prochaska's Stages of Change model. He identified five stages of change: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance.

I have experienced myself, and I've witnessed a lot of people spend an enormous amount of time in the pre-contemplation phase. And it addresses what you're talking about as well. You're thinking about changing. You have some sense that you ought to change, there are things you know aren't working, but you can't quite take the first step or you're not even a hundred percent convinced you are going to make any change.

Then, eventually, you come into the contemplation stage where you can also spend a lot of time thinking, "Okay. I guess I have to embrace this transition, like it or not." In some cases, a transition like a job loss might be foisted upon you. In other cases, it may be your own choice, if you are, for example, ending a relationship. Then, you're embracing the change.



Then, finally, you're getting ready to think about how you're going to enact this change. You're getting a little clearer. You can easily get bogged down. You can have your own limiting beliefs get in the way, thinking that, "Oh, I can't really do that," or, "This won't really happen and I'm not a person who can do that." You can bog yourself down at that point.

Then, assuming you can work your way through that to some degree, then you're in the action phase, and then, you're doing it. Then, when you're done, you're not done. There is maintenance and it's a self-improvement loop. There has to be a self-monitoring loop so that you go back and check in and make sure that things are working as you expect it.

The point being, you're never static. It's a constant motion. It's dynamic. It's real-time. You're never done. You may get through a transition but then you're probably facing some other type of transition.

[00:16:03] Kathy: I appreciate the clarity and as you're going through those stages, like, yes, that's the model we use when I got certified [chuckles] as well. It's been a while since I've been in the classroom.

But it was very helpful because the spot that I'm talking about is actually between action and maintenance. The action has been taken but you don't just make that change overnight. In the example of leaving a longtime corporate career, so you walk out the door, that's the action. There's been all of these steps that have led you to the point when you're finally handing in your ID badge, but you're not



whoever it is that you're becoming just yet. There is time between walking out the door and whatever this next thing might be.

The reason why I bring this up is because, at least with my clients and students, it feels it's that loss of identity that really seems to-- it trips people up, in that they're not expecting it or they're not expecting it to that degree or they've entertained and said, "That won't be a problem for me." Once you're actually in it and you can identify yourself as this thing you were whatever that was. Can you speak a bit about that process?

[00:17:20] Ellen: Yes. That was the key point in working with people who are retiring because when you're retiring, you've been a nurse, you've been a lawyer, a doctor, or whatever it is - that is who you were defined as.

When you went to a party, people asked, "What do you do?" "I'm a nurse." "I'm a doctor." I'm whatever. Then, when you're no longer that, what are you? Are you simply a mother? Are you a gardener? Are you a part-time painter? What are you?

So, it's the same thing that you're talking about. When you were a corporate worker, say, you were director of marketing and you leave. What are you? The key, I believe, lies in identifying what you really value and what you plan to do because if you've got something to be excited about and look forward to, sure, that bridges that gap between the loss of what you were to who you will become.

You have to have something you are excited about that you're looking forward to that you've done some hard work to figure out because if you are excited about



volunteering at a charity that's near and dear to your heart, you're going to want to talk about it. You're going to say, "I'm no longer director of marketing. I'm now going to be working with this foundation that provides guidance to families going through cancer," or whatever it may be.

If you feel good about doing that type of work and you've lined up something that's real in the world, rather than saying, "I'm going to look into." But if you've actually gotten to the point where you're taking action and you've got some clarity about what you're going to do, that can bridge that gap between who you were and who you are going to become.

[00:19:16] Kathy: This idea of identity loss is one of the challenges. Are there others that are common as you work with clients through transitional phases?

[00:19:27] Ellen: Yes. There are commonalities for sure: use of one's time, schedule. This can affect a lot of transitions, retirement being the most obvious one, but if you're out of work and you are looking for work, how you approach time is completely different. If you have a new baby, all the days run and blur together. If you are an empty nester, suddenly, you've got a different perspective on time, the good and the bad, the good being, "Okay, great, I don't have to deal with my kids. Now, what do I get to do?" The bad being, "I don't get to take care of my kids. Now, what do I do?"

Approach to time and schedule. I know for me that makes a big difference. I like to be the perfect amount of busy. Everybody's perfect amount is different. I think,



speaking for myself again, I like to feel productive, but I don't like to feel overworked.

Finding that sweet spot is common for everybody facing any kind of big change. If you are going through a divorce, your time is now different. If it's your doing, I'm sure that's got more positive aspects than if it's not your choice. How you approach time and schedule, I think, is a pretty-- it's one that people probably don't think about as often, but it's with us every day

[00:20:56] Kathy: And how often we default to our default. I kept my alarm set at the same time when I "retired." I was running a business but you do things because it's just what you do. This goes back to identity. This is the person I am. I get up really early in the morning and I'm so productive. It's like, "Well, do you have to be?" You get to ask yourself those questions.

[00:21:18] Ellen: Well, yes. When you're going through a change, I think it is important to keep some routines in place. You don't want to throw everything up in the air and say, "Everything is different."

What you can keep to make you feel as normal as you can as you're going through a big change is a wise idea. If it means getting up the same time every day to start your day, that's pretty important. If it means going to the gym every day at the same time, or whatever it may be that makes you feel normal, it's important to stick with those routines.



[00:21:50] Kathy: Yeah, that's good advice. You mentioned the word *enthusiasm* before. I'm wondering, especially for those who are a little resistant to change, what is the difference in the experience when somebody's working against it or somebody is embracing it?

[00:22:11] Ellen: I think the difference between embracing a change and working against it is how you feel about that change. If this change is being forced upon you, if it's not your choice, you're definitely going to be more resistant. You can still be resistant if it's your choice.

For example, you want to quit smoking. You know you've got to do this, but you don't really want to. It's going to be hard to embrace that change, even if you know you've got to do it.

On the other hand, if it's something you're excited about, say, moving across the country for a job, or to be near family, or whatever the reason may be. It's going to be hard and scary and there's a million steps you have to do and you're going to leave things behind. If you're excited about what's ahead of you, you can hold on to the reasons you're excited about to get you through the change.

[00:23:06] Kathy: Then, the follow-up, of course, would be when we are feeling that resistance, how do we invite that enthusiasm? Are there techniques that we can do to maybe turn it around a bit for ourselves so we can view it in a more positive light?



[00:23:21] Ellen: That's an excellent question. I think it depends largely on the person, the case, the moment. I can say looking at what you are resisting, breaking it down, is it fear-based? Is it evidence-based? To use the same moving example, if you're moving across the country and you're not excited about it, what are you worried about? Are you worried about what you're leaving behind, which would be evidence-based.

If you're worried about what you're going towards, that might be more fear-based. If you're afraid you're not going to make new friends, well, you don't really know that, do you? Let's look at that. What could you put in place to start making new friends? Let's address that concern. Let's see what actionable step you can take. That's for the negative part.

Let's also look at the positive part. What are the benefits that are going to come to you by moving across the country? Maybe you're moving to an area where the cost of living's a lot cheaper. Maybe you're moving to an area that's got natural beauty. Let's try to pick up on those positive points and really work on getting excited about those as well as overcoming the negative.

[00:24:38] Kathy: Yeah, what a difference one friend might make and having that connection. That's a wonderful example.

Also, too, you mentioned the words *clarity* and *insight*. I think, sometimes, especially when you're in the pre-contemplation or the contemplation phase, you can get lost in because the words are big: it's values, it's purpose. These are big,



big life questions, but that's what actually gives the clarity and the insight so you can be more concrete.

How do you work with your clients to try to get them to that point where they can see clearer what it is that they're trying to accomplish and therefore, you can put the action plan in place?

[00:25:24] Ellen: Well, I think you hit upon the right word, *values*. There is a value exercise that I've developed to use with clients to help them really uncover what their own values are. I learned this in the corporate world. We had to do it for a company I was working at, and I thought, "Oh, how silly."

As we went through it deeper, I thought, "Yes. This is hard. It's not silly. It's hard." Applying that to my coaching clients, we worked through this exercise to figure out what did they really care about in the world? What is important to them? If they're going to be doing something and there's misalignment, they're not going to feel good about it.

For example, if you graduated law school and you want to be a lawyer and you did it because you weren't sure what to do after college - a lot of people I went to college with ended up doing that. You go get a job in a corporate setting and you're just not feeling it. This person, this hypothetical person, really cares about a lot about the arts, but felt like they had to go into law to make a living.

Well, then, okay, maybe we can align those values somehow. Maybe you could get a job not in a corporate setting but in a law firm that does work for artists, that has



artists rights or copyright laws or something that helps further along what you really care about. Then, your values are more aligned and you're going to feel much happier about the work you're doing and less hating Monday morning. It's important to understand what your values are so that you can work towards that kind of alignment.

[00:27:11] Kathy: I love that example because it's using the structure. It's like you don't have to make this complete pivot. You can use the structure that you've created for yourself in a more aligned way.

When I look back now at my corporate career, I can see the things that were really important to me, especially when I was a younger person. I just wanted to see the world. I wanted to be exposed to other cultures and people. My job actually allowed me to do that. It allowed me to see all different parts of a company. I couldn't think of going into an office and doing the same thing every day, day after day after day. Even though it was within the structure, the learning and the experience were more aligned. It wasn't even conscious. Now, I see it looking back, but sometimes, you don't even realize that you're doing some of these things.

For the listener who's intrigued by this, I suggest that you look back at your current situation and see how you're doing that. Then, to your point, how might you do that more? I love that example about the law firm that's serving artists. That's a beautiful bridge.

[00:28:20] Ellen: Yes. If you can possibly find a way to use the existing structure, so much the better.



[00:28:25] Kathy: Let's talk about the person that actually does want to make a big change. What I'm finding, and I wonder if you see this, too, with your clients who are more in the midlife phase. It feels to me that we almost forget how to dream big. We can always see the next step. We're very good at executing. We're very good at producing. When it comes time to define a new life dream, it's almost as if we have blinders on.

I'm curious if you've had that experience. If so, how have you helped your clients see beyond that into what possibilities are at midlife?

[00:29:03] Ellen: Well, I draw upon something that sounds completely antithetical to what you're suggesting, which is my Lean Six Sigma training.

[00:29:11] Kathy: [laughs] I did not see that coming. [laughs]

[00:29:14] Ellen: Nor did I actually, but when you said, "Dream big," I immediately thought of blue sky. I learned the concept of blue sky from my Lean Six Sigma training.

For those people that don't know what that means, really, it means open up to limitless possibilities. Blue sky means think about everything, don't exclude anything, and don't put any limitations on it. What's the most, the best, the openness that you can think of? Don't put any limitations on.

Then, the next thing I would say is, "Okay, let's reign it in a little bit. Let's maybe lighten the color blue. We're not turning it any other color, but maybe it's not



intensely blue," because there are going to be some realistic limitations. Just tone it down a little bit.

Then, I would pull in something from my coaching training, which is a buzzword that everybody hears constantly these days, but I do believe in it, and that is *manifestation*. What do you want to manifest out in that Universe? Putting it out there, what-- you've got nothing to lose.

Now, this does not mean you're not going to take any real action. It doesn't mean you're not going to approach it with some logic and realism, but it doesn't hurt to put out there what version of that color blue you want. Then, you do start gradually bringing it in, getting a little clearer.

Say, you want to find a job that allows you to travel. Well, at the beginning you're thinking, "Oh, Peace Corps, great, I'll go to Africa." Then, you're thinking, "Maybe not. Maybe I could work in some international company and actually work rather than volunteer," or, "Maybe I don't want to go to Africa. Maybe I want to go to Asia or Europe or something." Then, maybe there's a company that has an office in one of those places.

So, you start to hone it in, bring it in a little bit, but then, you put it out there, too, and you start making connections and you start taking the steps that you would normally need to take to make something happen. You don't go from dream big to, "Oh, nothing can work."



You try to find that spot where you're keeping going, you're opening doors, you're thinking, you're allowing possibilities to happen, and then, you're also gradually introducing some actionable items, like, "Oh, let's call that company or let's email, find out who's in charge of that headquarters and send them an email. Maybe I could set up an informational interview." Then, you can start making things happen. What you don't want to do is go from intense blue to shutting yourself down.

[00:32:15] Kathy: Yeah, I love this idea of working both sides. You're working on both ends toward the middle, with action on one side and this dreaming big on the other.

I think what we tend to do as we've gone through these cycles is, well, what's the next plan? I think we're good on the action part for-- in most cases, we can figure that out, but we're not seeing that big blue sky of what is even beyond that. What is beyond the bluest blue I can think of? What's beyond that? The actions start more realistically, but you're not putting a cap on what the limit might be. I love that.

[00:32:57] Ellen: Yes. I think that it's really important to allow yourself to dream beyond your own expectations.

[00:33:06] Kathy: Yes. I'd love to wrap up with something that you mentioned before as well, which was self-care. I'm curious, your thoughts on how do you support your clients to ensure that they address their well-being?



[00:33:19] Ellen: Well, I remember when I had my first child, my doctor congratulated me on how well I was taking care of myself. She said, "I'm writing a book about it because so many new moms don't get it." Again, it's that same reference to the oxygen mask. I realized early on if I didn't take care of myself, I was no good to him or anybody.

For me, what that means is sleep is really important. There's a fabulous book called *Why We Sleep* by Matthew Walker that talks about the importance of sleep and how to get it. For me, that's really important. We all have things that make us feel normal and good. I need a certain amount of exercise. I need a certain amount of feeling treated and indulged. I also need to feel somewhat in control of things. I'm basically introverted. I need to recharge my batteries in ways that work for me.

Everybody's got their own methods, but I've identified what works for me. I know the balance I need to hit to feel recharged and able to give out again. That's what I mean by self-care. It's that well-being. It's feeling like you're showing up your best self. You can't do that if you're tired, hungry, sick, cranky, whatever those other things are, so take care of yourself.

[00:34:46] Kathy: "Get sleep," as Matthew Walker says. I will link up that book in the show notes. I'll tell you, whenever I read or listen to his stuff, I feel like I will never get there. [laughs] Yeah, that's the gold standard for sleep.

Speaking of show notes, tell us a bit about your offerings and how listeners can get in touch with you.



[00:35:06] Ellen: Well, go to my website. It's ellenrothstein.com. I've got a way to contact me there or you can email directly ellen@ellenrothstein.com.

[00:35:26] Kathy: I'll take care of that and such a wonderful conversation. I thank you so much today, Ellen, for joining me. I really do appreciate your time.

[00:35:33] Ellen: Thank you. I've enjoyed this immensely.

[music]

[00:35:38] Kathy: Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until our paths cross again, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

If you know anyone who could benefit from today's episode, please pass it on. And many thanks for supporting the show by subscribing and leaving a review. It means a lot and it helps others find their way to our circle.

If you'd like to access the show notes, have a question you'd like addressed on a future episode, or would like a transcript of this episode, visit www.AthenaWellness.com/podcast.

Until next time, be well!

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[00:36:28] [END OF AUDIO]