



## S2:E2 – Steven Dowd | Responding to Enforced Change

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**Beth Stallwood:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Work Joy Jam podcast. I'm your host, Beth Stallwood founder of Create Work Joy in this episode. I'm so pleased to be joined by Steven Dowd. And Steven was somebody that I heard of and had a chat with and was incredibly inspired by his story. And I'm not going to tell you more about it because you just need to listen to Steven story to really understand it.

[00:00:54] And he tells it in such an interesting way. And there are so many incredible lessons from Steven's experience from what could have been the most devastating was the most devastating thing that could happen to somebody to really taking that and learning how to make change. And we all get into this world a force change sometimes and think about it in our organizations and what happens and sometimes we're not in control of these things. In fact, quite a lot of the time we're not and it's about that attitude and the perspective you bring to it. I had an incredible time talking to Steven. In fact, a number of times I've spoken to him, always find the inspiration there, and I really hope you enjoy this episode.

[00:01:47] Hello, welcome to the Work Joy Jam. This week. I am joined by the fantastic Steven Dowd, and I'm going to let Steve and introduce himself. But when I heard about Steven. Had to go and [00:02:00] find him. And I stopped him and made him come on the podcast. So I'm really excited for Steven to share his story and to share his insight onto joy in life and not just at work.

[00:02:11] So Steven, over to you, tell us your story.

[00:02:17] **Steven Dowd:** [00:02:17] Well, thanks for having me on Beth. Really appreciate it. Tell us my story. So you, we, where do I begin? Well, why don't, why don't we start five years ago? About five years ago, I was working as head of recruitment for, uh, investment management company will called {?} a huge company.

[00:02:33] I used to run recruitment for the EMEA regions, uh, Europe, middle east Africa. Good job, uh, in a city you've been in the city for a number of years and I'm enjoying my trajectory. although I was just a regular guy, there was no superhuman DNA here. Good job, uh, in, in a good firm and going in the right way as many other people do.

[00:02:52] And, uh, I was training for a charity bike ride, a bike ride called Ride London. It's a hundred mile cycle around the city. And as I was training for that bike ride, I headed down to a

friend's house or to do the 10 mile commute into work beautiful day, you know, normal day. And it was about half past six in the morning so it's nice and bright and turned around a corner, not traveling at any speed. Really. I was doing about 80 miles an hour at a particular moment when I hit a barrier. Didn't see. And as I hit that barrier, I went over the top and I landed on my head. And as I landed on my head, I immediately snapped the ligament on the back of my neck and sustained a spinal cord injury that left me paralyzed from the middle of my neck down.

[00:03:36] I lost my arms, my legs, everything in between, uh, literally in half a heartbeat, you know, it was, uh, it was pretty intense. And so I was taken off from there to St. George's Hospital, which is a teaching hospital here in London. And they told me that my injuries were devastating, so devastating that they didn't know if I'd ever regain any of that control of my arms and legs again and I could potentially face driving around in a power chair with my mouth, for the rest of my life. And at 37 years old, that really wasn't what I wanted for myself. And so my wife and I, Helen had a really honest conversation and said that if that is going to be the outcome, then I don't really want that.

[00:04:19] Uh, and I don't want that for you, you know, you don't, I don't want you having to spend the rest of your days kind of looking after me. And, and again, we, it's not what we planned. Although the caveat to that is that many people do live very proud, capable lives, uh, in that situation. But every injury is unique and every response to that injury is unique.

[00:04:37] And mine was one that said this is too much for me. And so with that conversation in hands, uh, we agreed that a one way ticket to Switzerland was very much an option but that said, uh, the doctors, the consultant said to me, even though your injury is devastating, and we can't make any promises, we are purely coincidentally, we are running it clinical experimental research trial, which is funded by a spinal cord research charity called Wings for Life. I didn't know who they were at the time or what they do, but effectively what they do is fund cutting edge research all around the world, no matter where it is to try and find a cure for spinal cord injury paralysis. , so I happen to be very lucky to be in the right place at the right time when they were running this and they had funding for just 50 places.

[00:05:27] So the consultants said to me, if you wanted to be a part of that, you've got an hour to decide because part of the process was that you had to make a decision very quickly, it was all about swelling and reducing the swelling and the pressure inside the spinal cord. So obviously time is of the essence. So I had an hour to decide if I wanted to be a part. And if I did, I would be number 45. So it was right at the end of the trial and my wife and I had another conversation and said, well, Switzerland's always there. Why don't we give this a go and see, ye, there are no promises made but they can't make any worse.

So let's see what we can do. And, uh, within 24 hours I'd been put into and out of surgery and, uh, was there in intensive care. So, pretty, uh, pretty intensive times.

[00:06:16] **Beth Stallwood:** [00:06:16] Uh, we'll talk more about kind of what happened after that time, but what a thing to go through and it's like, I'm here and I'm thinking, oh gosh, it's one of those moments in time isn't it? And you always talk about being in the right place at the right time for the trial, for the medical trial, but also kind of being very just before that, in the wrong place, wrong time. And being in that situation. In a situation now where nobody could have predicted what was going to happen that day.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:06:45] Totally freak accident. It was, uh, I was doing all the right things. I had the right helmet on. I was traveling in, like I was aware of what was around me. Obviously I say that with a smile on my face. Cause obviously I didn't see the barrier, but, uh, but I was aware I was, I was doing all the right things in the right way and it was just one of those things.

[00:07:02] It was actually, I would argue that, it was very difficult to see that particular barrier. It was a very thin black barrier across a road, which is black tarmac, so it was kind of camouflaged from a color perspective, but then also the angle of the, a bar, the cross was exactly the same handle as the paving this low, as it goes off into the vanishing point.

So it was kind of perspectively camouflaged as well. So when I went back thinking my God, what an idiot am I? So I went back to the site of injury to see. How I, how this had happened to me, this is sometime later obviously. And, uh, and when I looked at it, I was like, oh yeah, I can see why I didn't see that.

[00:07:38] Ye. So ye, no one could have predicted it really, it was just one of those things, and I spent forever thinking that kind of well, forever, I spent a long time and my dark moments thinking, wow, Why, why me? Why that day? What have I done that deserves this kind of outcome? But actually one of the biggest, uh, one of the biggest benefits, uh, was a conversation I had with one of my intensive care nurses.

[00:08:04] And he was very honest with me actually, if you, on, uh, on many levels, which is wonderful. Cause a lot of people weren't actually for fear of litigation, but he kind of didn't have that. And, he said to me every time, I'd say why me? He'd say to me, well, why not you it's going to happen. So why not you?

[00:08:23] And actually that was whilst it felt harsh at the time. I was like, oh, you, it, what the hold on. Uh, actually when I sat and thought about it and gave myself time and space to think about it, it was a really poignant comment to make, because why not me? If, if, if it had to happen to someone and I was that person at that time, then actually I'm in a position where.

[00:08:45] Other things can happen both positive and negative. So it's, it's not a personal attack. It's not because I've done something wrong in some there's. None of that sort of stuff is just, it was just a freak accident. It was quite powerful to have that actually as a, as a backup.

[00:08:59] **Beth Stallwood:** And how interesting that actually at the time, when you're hearing that comment, it feels harsh.

[00:09:05] And now it's probably the thing that really helped. And often it's just a reflection here on when people hear feedback that's really direct and you feel it's harsh is how often that stuff in the future is the thing that you reflect on and go actually, that's exactly what I needed at that time. It just doesn't feel like what I needed at the time.

[00:09:21] **Steven Dowd:** [00:09:21] Oh no, of course. And, uh, and that happened all the way through my, uh, through my process journey. Obviously I went from neck down processes, nothing below the neck, uh, felt like hope was gone, but actually in hindsight it gave me and I had to develop a lot of resilience skills, to kind of flex those muscles in order to then deal with other things that came later.

[00:09:43] , some of them weren't even paralysis related, but it was the worst thing that could have happened. But actually, if you. Reframe the worst thing that can happen to you sometimes, like you say, it can give you different skills, different perspectives, and potentially affect your outcome in a different way than you would have otherwise had.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:10:01] Sure. And, and, and one thing I'm just really thinking about here, as well as the idea. And probably comes back to that nurse at the hospital. He's telling you why not you is you can do in life, whether it's a serious as this situation, whether it's medical, whether it's about work, whether it's about your career, whether it's about a relationship you're in, you can do everything right.

And everything can still go wrong. So you were doing the stuff that's good for your health. You're cycling. You're trying to be, you know, you're commuting to work while you're cycling. You're doing all of these things, but that's not going to stop something happening.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:10:35] No. Exactly. And, but then equally, I think it's, it's also about perspective, isn't it?

[00:10:41] Because things happen to everyone every day, sometimes they're awful, but also some of the, most of them are just almost negligible to the point where you don't even notice them. Right. It's only when it has a very serious outcome that it becomes a very serious issue, but yeah, I mean, it's, uh, it's, it was one of those things that changed the course of my life. But in many ways, I'm kind of glad that it did. It's opened up doors. He's opened up opportunities. He's opened up ways of thinking about different scenarios. And now I even get to share my story with people like yourself and with some of my keynote speaking clients around how they can develop their own toolkits when facing change, when facing force change, particularly, and particularly around things like crisis.

[00:11:27] How do you develop resilience skills? You don't just need them in the moment, but you can develop them for when you need the later. Uh, and that's been, it's been really interesting.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:11:37] And tell us a bit more now, now we kind of had the story up to the point of, , the surgery that you went into. Tell us what happened after the surgery and how you got to where you are now.

**Steven Dowd:** I'm lying in bed in intensive care. I've got nothing below the neck. I'm just a head on a pillow, looking up at the ceiling tiles, feeling very alone, despite having huge amounts of support from friends and family and colleagues and, and, and, , consultants and all sorts, and then I start to get some sensation.

[00:12:16] And that sensation I'm getting back. I can only really describe as like being on fire. It was literally like boiling oil being poured over me, 24/7. I went from down both my arms. He went from below the point of injury. So halfway up my neck, down to my waist, I still had nothing below the waist. But it was the most intense pins and needles I could describe, uh, by an order of magnitude, uh, absolutely horrifically painful, but again, talking about reframing. I used to sit there and think, God, this, if this is what it's going to be like, if this is the it's, this is as good as it gets. I don't think I'm going to be canceling my Switzerland ticket. So ye, but we, again, when I say we, my wife and I reframed it as again, along the lines of, well, at least it's improvement.

Yesterday had nothing and now you're on fire, but at least that's a step in the right way. , so ye, we used to celebrate these almost like little wins on a regular basis. So I'm lying there in bed. And, uh, day one, I start to get some sensation. Then day two, I opened my eye and I look across to my wife and she's on my left hand side.

[00:13:24] I put my left eyelid across and I say what's 200 days from now. And she said, it's who she worked it out. And you said, it's December the 22nd. Why is that? I said, give me Christmas day and I'll be back. And that was my promise became known as my 200 days, promise to Helen that became my motivation every day to try and normally fail, to get something back, but just kept on trying and trying and trying a thousand times a day until something would happen.

That first thing that happened was a twitch of my left thumb. A little bit like that Kill Bill moment. You know, when she's looking at a toes and wills it to happen, uh, I was doing exactly that and, uh, and eventually my left toe twitched, and I thought, oh, was, was that a spasm? Cause I get these body spasms even today.

[00:14:13] I still struggle with, with major global body spasms, but I thought, what is that spasm? Or did I do that? And I tried it again and it moved. And I thought, oh wow. If I can do that, what else can I do? And I just redouble my efforts. And now I was trying and failing 2000 times a day to try and get something else to move or something else to, to, to feel in some way.

[00:14:32] And then it started to happen. I started to get like a domino effect. I started to get a little twitch that I could control somewhere else on my body, maybe on my leg or my arm. I get a patch of skin come back online. You know, I never really lost the pins and needles and the being on fire bit for quite some time I did get a little tiny ones. Uh, every day and that happened for nearly nine. Well, it happened for 90 days. I got these tiny little winds and I know it's 90 days because on day 91, I did my [00:15:00] little daily review where I'd wake up in the morning and say, okay, what are going to achieve? What, what, what did we do yesterday?

[00:15:06] And by the end of the day, I'd look back on that one day alone and say, am I better than you. That was my benchmark. I didn't care about what happened before the injury. I didn't care what I'd lost. I didn't care where it was. I couldn't, I couldn't look back too far because I wasn't that guy anymore, you know, things are different now.

[00:15:23] So I couldn't benchmark against what I wasn't. I could only benchmark against what it was. And so I looked back at the end of that day, every day for 90 days on day 91, I remember thinking nothing much happened today. So we celebrated that as a win because that underlined the fact that for 90 days something had happened and we had a day that didn't happen was a great benchmark to show all the other stuff that had happened.

[00:15:45] So there was a strong kind of positive mental attitude to it. There was a strong, positive, uh, reframing, uh, of, of some of these very negative, very dark times. And I still have those times, I mean, don't get me [00:16:00] wrong. It's a positive mental attitude. Isn't the only thing that's going to get you through.

[00:16:03] You're not going to be skipping through the fields every day. And, and it certainly can't make you levitate, right? There are certain things that thinking positively, which is really important.

Can't do. So being open and honest about what it can and can't do is really good. But it was really helpful to be able to positively reframe things and to have an objective view about just being better than yesterday.

[00:16:24] That was one of my biggest, uh, one of my biggest tools. Really.

] **Beth Stallwood:** [00:16:28] It's so interesting. And your story is incredible. And also every time you're saying something, I'm thinking. How it relates to so many things in life and not just this big situation that you were in and the idea of having this big goal that was in 200 days, I am going to be back to normal in your, in your words for Christmas, I'll be back to normal.

But then accepting that every day is not going to be kind of zero to hero moment. You're not going to suddenly be [00:17:00] there and that it requires loads and loads of little bits of work and being able to deal with it, not working as well. And having that resilience to failing and trying again and failing and trying again.

And working through it whilst also kind of being in a massive amount of pain I imagined. And the. And the other thing I just really noted was when you said I'm not that guy anymore and comparing yourself to yesterday versus who you were before and how in life, in careers, in all kinds of things, there are times when we need to let the kind of previous version of ourselves go and be okay to be who we are today.

And I think that's a really interesting perspective to think about, you know, beyond your situation in all of our lives and luckily, not everyone is going through, uh, the size of a situation and horribleness that you had to endure there, but there are many lessons from it, even in our lives that might not have the big drama within them.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:18:01] Of course. And I think the one thing that I often will stop people when we're talking about my injury on is when they make that moment where they go and they it's very well-meaning. They make that moment where they go. I've got this like bad back, for instance. It's nothing like you went through, but I'd have to stop them and go, hold on a second challenge is your challenge. Your biggest challenge is yours. If it's 9 out of 10 for you, then it's still not out there. Ye, more or 10 out of 10. My, my, my challenge for me was extreme and paralysis is an extreme challenge for anyone but it's not better or worse than someone else it's not more or less meaningful than someone else.

I think that's a really important thing to not minimize your challenge. A lot of people, particularly women do this, where they, they minimize the, the struggles that they're going through because they feel they can't be vocal about it or they, they feel they can't share those things without feeling weaker or men do this particularly around sort of, man up kind of comments, which are absolutely poor, but those kinds of comments that are out there where there's this kind of masculinity around challenge, and you should be able to take on all of these things otherwise, what sort of out of you kind of stuff and I think it's really important to bring it right back and say to your biggest challenge is your biggest challenge, whatever that is. And you're totally right from a, uh, zero to hero thing as well, because having spent many years, as agency recruiter as executive headhunter kind of external to, to the banking world and then working directly in the banking world as well in inside the corporate.

[00:19:45] None of the wins that I've had through my career or through my recovery journey have ever been zero to hero. And none of them have been the big moment where you go, it didn't happen. And now it's here. I've always had goal setting as an important part of my life, whether that be able to on a personal basis on a commercial basis, uh, or, or corporate world a professional basis then I think having a north star as a major goal is a really important thing.

[00:20:18] Having a, a gold medal winning level gold, you know, like, but when people will set out for the Tokyo Olympics, I'd been training for four years to get to that one moment where they might pass the finish line, but they don't just rock up on the day of the, uh, of the Olympic games and just knock out gold medal.

That's not how it happens. In fact, the gold medal is the symptom of the hard work. If you do it well, and you just perform in the same way as you've been trained to perform, you forget about everybody else in the field and you just do your thing. It's either good enough, or it's not good enough on the day, but it's only a symptom of all the hard work you've done.

And I'm sure this will probably resonate with the corporate listeners, you know, have your gold medal winning north star goal, but have multiple goals in a day, you know, have the tiny footsteps, the tiny wins. And, uh, and that's how you can, that's how you can climb mountains. Right? It's that one step at a time?

**Beth Stallwood:** One of the words that's just coming up in my mind is I've seen it quite a lot recently is this idea that we will have comparatitus, that we're always comparing ourselves to other people. But that is for us and for our mental health and for generally our lives, when we compare ourselves, especially, and it kind of links to the other point I was going to make is we often see the winning moment.

So social media is full of like winning moments and you do not see the hard graft and the tears and the pain and the sleepless nights and all the things that go into making that you see the moment and people present that moment. And. It's so easy to get stuck in comparing ourselves our experiences to diminish our own feelings about things, because someone else has it worse than us, or because someone else has done loads better than us we're not so good. And it's like, actually, I really love your idea. Am I better than I was yesterday in some way? Have I progressed that? And that's a really growth mindset way of thinking about life. Isn't it. Am I better than yesterday, not comparing to am I better than I was 10 years ago, because I'm no longer that person.

And none of us are who we were 10 years ago. That's not how life works. And whether you've been through a major change of your life like you have, or whether you've just gone through life and you've grown up in the last 10 years, cause we're constantly evolving as people is Sar. Okay. So yesterday I was here, where am I today?

What have I improved? Or where have I got to. And I also really liked the fact that you had that, well, maybe we say, well, nothing's happened today and that's also something to celebrate.

**Steven Dowd:** Absolutely. I mean, I think there's a, I've got no problem with comparison. I think comparison is a good thing, if you can't measure it, you can't improve it.

So comparison is a good thing fundamentally, but understanding what you're comparing to and what the parameters are. That's crucial. I mean, the only thing I could compare myself to. [00:23:00] And then the only thing, and that's what I was yesterday, uh, from a historic basis. But then from a, from a progressive stance, the only thing I can compare myself to is my potential.

So if I'd run that day and I'd only given 10% of my effort, I might have improved, I might be better than I was yesterday with only 10% of my effort, but I'd have failed on my progress. Uh, I wouldn't have done what I could have done. Should I have put all the effort in, , but then equally some days, and don't, don't be wrong nobody gives a hundred percent every day. It's not physically possible. People would like to think about it. That kind of I love the comparatitus comment. That's great and I hear about all this like hustle that's out there and it's just ridiculous where everyone's giving a hundred percent every day.

[00:23:43] And if you're not working hard enough, you're not progressing enough. And it was sort of I would always try and give my best effort. You know, some days my best effort would be a hundred percent of my potential. And some days my best effort might be 50%. Because I'm just not able, I mean, I take this morning is a case in point, right?

[00:24:02] I have a really weird new body that I'm still getting used to five years later, where some days I can be on top of the world and doing incredible things, not just for someone with disability, but versus other people without disability, I've been achieving some incredible things. And then other days I'll wake up and I can't get.

[00:24:21] And today was one of those days. I was this, I literally had to drag myself, to, to do this call actually. And, and it was a really, I really wanted to it, hence why we're here, but oh my God, it was so much effort just to get out of bed and get up to the man cave and set up the audio so that we can have a chat, uh, and I'm not going to be proud of what we've done today. Absolutely. Because I've done all I can today and, and don't get me wrong. I'm probably going to go and crash. I'll do this school, but it's okay. I'm, I'm giving the best effort I can give rather than the best effort that it's possible that someone could give.

So I think comparing yourself to yourself is important and comparing yourself to your] potential is also.

[00:25:02] **Beth Stallwood:** [00:25:02] I love that idea of the balance between your potential and kind of where you've come from as well, because that will give you that sense of, you know, have I done the best I can. Could I be doing more?

[00:25:13] What else could I be thinking about? And that really future positive focus on it versus actually yesterday, I didn't do so good. Where I was at and now I felt a bit bad. And also I think there's something here for so many people and you know, myself included is, you know, I do not have a disability, but there are days and I've had them and I think maybe especially during lockdown where we've kind of been in this world, weird world where at three o'clock in the afternoon, I've just had to go to bed. We just have to do it like physically, if you listen to your body, it was like, I just need to go and have a nap. And I, I berated myself for it for awhile, and I think many people do, but some days, and again, if you have any challenges with mental health issues, if you have challenges with physical health issues, if you're just a human being, who's a bit tired being able to say to



yourself, actually, that's the best I could do today because today was not my best day. And I'm okay with that.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:26:09] I think being okay with that is the important bit, I think saying I've made my decision. I'm not going to make a decision and then feel bad about the decision, because that is just the way to depression. If you're constantly going to be undermining your own, decision-making by thinking it's not the right thing to have done, then don't do it.

But if you are going to make a decision, then back yourself, you, you need to be your MVP. You know, you need to be the player on your team that is the one that you back. Hmm. And if you make that decision for the right reasons, if you made it for the wrong reasons, then maybe you need to think about your decision-making but if you made it for the right reasons with the right parameters and that's beneficial to you and to others, and no one's getting hurt by you doing those things, then back yourself. I think that's that's important. And then try again the next time, you know, step up again, people we spoke earlier about the Olympics there.

I've been very lucky recently to have spoken to a number of people that have been involved, particularly in the rowing world that have been medalists and champions of all sorts around the world from all different countries. And the one thing that strikes me is that they turn up every day. They give their best effort every day, and then they put it to bed and they come back the next day.

[00:27:24] And. It's beautiful to watch. It's so incredibly simplistic in many ways, and don't get me wrong. There's a hell of a lot of complexity in professional sport at the elite level. Absolutely, even at the non elite level, but from a, from a kind of blueprint point of view, they all do the same thing and they all do it in the same way so they turn up and they give their best effort and they rinse and repeat. And, and that goes on for years until eventually that we said goal wins become symptoms. , well, there's no reason that people in the corporate world can't be winning their personal gold medals through their promotions or their project completions to the best ability or even awards.

I mean, we've all been accessed and well, we've all got a number of people have have had access to winning awards and whatnot. And it's a wonderful feeling when that happens. But you didn't win it because you just woke up on the day. You win it because of all that hard graft.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:28:19] And, and, you know, in the professional athlete world to see you getting up at five o'clock in the morning and getting out onto a really cold river, when you really just want to stay in bed and kind of making yourself do some of those things and, you know, interestingly, a lot of the athletes in the world talk about this idea that they have to have one high-performance name and a year that's at the world championships or won amazing high-performance moment every four years at the Olympics or the Paralympics. And it's the idea that you've spent all of that time and for that one moment in time, but that one moment in time, isn't the whole picture.

[00:28:52] It seems like it is, but it's actually the training and the investment of yourself and what you give to your teammates. And there's so many other things that are actually. Potentially even more important than whether you get up on a page, even when a metal it's the, the effort that really makes a difference.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:29:07] I completely agree. I mean, there are no podium moments without all of those things coming together, right. The stars have got to align even with my recovery journey. I mean, I had the right hydration, the right nutrition, the right timing around an experimental clinical trial that was happening. I had the love and support my friends and family.

[00:29:23] I have my own, bloody-minded determination to not give up and carry on. And if any of those things were missed the outcome would have been different, so not, not that all of those things are always in your control. Sometimes things are out of your control and I'm a big believer in making sure that you focus on the things you can change and don't focus on the things that you can't, but don't lie to yourself.

[00:29:45] Don't pretend you can change them if you can't and don't pretend you can't change them, if you can, which a lot of people do and it's understandable. It's totally understandable, but it's not. And if you can, and I spent a long time talking about this sometimes with, , with companies that if we can help people understand what they can change, and then they can really back themselves.

[00:30:05] Like we said earlier into making those changes, then positive things will happen. And if they can understand what they can't change, they won't waste that time. They won't be inefficient in their decision making or their thinking time, uh, around important decisions, uh, which could be otherwise distracting.

[00:30:21] If you're wasting time on things you just can't change. Other people do get very subjective and emotional about it. Those things that they can't change, you know, they lament the fact that they can't change them. And that's easy to do. I mean, when I was going there as a paralyzed person, I could have been looking back at and I did don't get me wrong.

[00:30:42] I had my four o'clock in the morning moments where nothing good happens. Plenty of those I've cried. My fair share of tears, believe me. and, uh, I could look back on those moments and say, I regret this, you know, I want this to be different. Of course I do regret it. Of course I do want it to be different, but, but I can't change it.

[00:31:03] So if I can't change it, I can't spend my time. It's, it's not healthy for me to spend my time there and it's not, it's just not progressive. It's not making, it's not helping me move forward by constantly looking backwards so I saw a really interesting quote the other day that said, don't look backwards you're not going that way and it's so true. And it just made me well, because I think it really is true. I think, I mean, the Freudian view out there would disagree and say, you need to understand where you've come from in order to understand where you're going to. And Bob Marley said something along those lines.

[00:31:37] Uh, and I think, uh, there is an element of truth to that. And I think understanding your pathway and why you got to where you got to is important, but I can't on a personal level. I couldn't spend much time. I couldn't afford to spend much time, going over all of the reasons why I was there. I can only really afford that time if I was thinking about the pathway from that position onwards.

[00:32:01] **Beth Stallwood:** And I think that, you know, some healthy reflection is a good thing, but what you're talking about here around the, you know, work on the things that are actually in your

control is so aligned to the thinking around work joy. And so many people that I work with who are in that kind of work gloom situation.

[00:32:17] So the opposite of the work choice stuff. Are that because they are, I think you used the word lamenting, they're stuck and lamenting about things that they have no control over. Like how other people behave. That is one thing you cannot control or things like, oh, I never got this promotion. It's like, okay.

[00:32:35] But if you're lamenting that, what are you doing to move forward to it? What are you doing about your potential to make it happen? Or, you know, where some people are stuck in organizations that just don't align with who they are and what their values are now, and may have been there previously, but there's some kind of thing stopping them working towards what's next.

And kind of really just getting stuck in that zone of things you're not in control of. And it's so, and that's subjective, emotional. It feels awful. But being able to see, and I'm just wondering here about your idea here of both thinking about how am I compared to yesterday and how am I doing about my potential could be a really good route out of that for some people.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:33:13] I think finding the time, carving the time out to spend quality time, talking that through with people that, you know, and trust. , that can give you good advice, I think is really important. I was very lucky that I had a lot of people around me, so I was able to talk about those things and I was able to talk about it very openly and I also think that, I mean, in my case, particularly process, uh, I was being helped by a ton of other people, but I was also helping them. Because with spinal cord injury, I was the one that suffered the broken neck, but actually in reality, we all suffered spinal cord injury and I use the word suffer a bit.

It's funny actually, uh, in America , or in, particularly in the world of those living with disability, the word suffer is a big, no, no, because not everybody suffers with spinal cord injury. At that time I was suffering, uh, and it felt like I was suffering. That's why I use that word really, delicately, but firmly the, uh, The world of spinal cord injury.

[00:34:13] Everybody around me had an impact. Everybody had the rock in the pond and the waves were washing over them. So ye, it was, it was important to focus on. What we could change together. Ye. Uh, where we were, uh, what the options were, how we were going to approach that, how we were going to get through it together.

Because it can be a very lonely place and that's not just process. That can be I've. I've done those moments at work as well, where you're still there at 11 o'clock at night and all the automatic lights around you have turned off. And it's just you and Bob from finance. Cause it's invariably, like I was a guy called Gareth, but, uh, Gareth from finance and I were the only people in the whole of a huge open plan office of hundreds of people.

[00:34:56] And it felt like it was three or four nights a week, you know, it was just ridiculous. And you were sitting there, just go, why am I doing this? I'm introducing myself to my wife on a weekend. What's going on here. and I think a lot of people go through that process. I think a lot of people it's, I think it would be churlish to say.

You just need to choose to be happy and choose to do the job you want to do and all that sort of stuff, because it's not that easy. Let's face it. Some people have mortgages to pay. They have limited options around the jobs that they can do or want to do or have the opportunity today. But I do think like somebody who might be developing a side hustle on the side of their, their business, , you should be your own side hustle.

You should be defining me limited. And what that needs to look like. Uh, and actually that steps back a little bit as well, to what we were saying earlier around being better than you were yesterday and not comparing yourself to the person you were too far long ago, because you're not that person anymore, but that the flip side of that is it's not just you that's different, but the whole world is different.

I mean, the COVID has shown us that in spades. Right. But even pre COVID, the whole world is moving all the time. And if you're not moving with it and in symbiosis with it, then technically you're, you're taking a step backwards in your own world. So, so you do have to be vigilant of where the world is going and how you're traveling with it and alongside it because you need to take opportunities and you need to spot opportunities, but it is very, very easy to have the weight of the world and shoulders and get blinkered by ridiculous hours or crazy deadlines or, or, or demanding clients, uh, and all that sort.

**Beth Stallwood:** And the, in the work joy, and everything to do with work, we're definitely not in the zone of, you know, you should just be happy with everything that's going on. It's not about being happy all the time, because I personally think it's unrealistic. And I think it's a lot of pressure to put on yourself to be happy.

Because happiness, isn't something that you can feel constantly because things happen outside of your control. I think when we're talking about work joy, we're talking about, you know, are you doing that stuff where you are investing in your own understanding of yourself? Are you reflecting on it? Are you finding the moments of joy?

[00:37:08] And one thing you said earlier was around this idea that, you know, you remember the really awful moments. You remember the really great. But that, of that big chasm in the middle of those things, there are good things that happen in the neutral zone and are we recognizing them and understanding them and do we get enough of those?

[00:37:22] And can we, can we cultivate some more of those moments? Can we take a bit more control of some of the stuff that is in our control? We forgotten we are in control of it. And I love the idea as well of like using the community around you. And obviously you had your family and community and all kinds of people that are supporting you.

[00:37:40] And to remember that they're there to do it, but they're not mind readers. They do not have crystal balls as to what you need. You know, if you understand what you need, go and ask them, get some understanding, get some ideas from other

**Steven Dowd:** [00:37:51] And they have their own needs as well. You can, you can take a lot, you can get a lot of joy from helping other people.

So even though you might be your problem, you helping them understand their problem through your problem can actually be really helpful for both of you. So why wouldn't you. Ye. That's that feels like, that feels like an obvious thing to share, but it, whilst it feels like an obvious thing to share.

[00:38:13] It's practically not always as easy. So practicing, sharing, practicing, engaging other people in those kinds of things is something that is really important. I'm doing a little side story. My son is a university and he's probably on the autistic spectrum. We've never really matched. He tested, but we think he probably is.

[00:38:32] Ye. He is struggling at the moment like nobody's business to communicate his feelings. Uh, he's very caught up in essays and he's missing deadlines and he's sat up in his room. He's not for want of effort. He's up there like 12 hours a day, tapping away on his keyboard and then not producing the goods as it were.

[00:38:51] And, so we've had to have lots of honest conversations to say, look, tell us about what you're thinking, tell us about what you're feeling and he's really struggling to do that. So I'm very mindful that it's not as easy as just doing it. Sometimes you need to learn how to do it. And, uh, so we've put some practical tools in place where I'm asking him to email somebody don't care, who it is, about what he's doing, or to ask a question or to say, I found this interesting, or to just ask for someone's opinion on where he is right now on this particular essay, just do that twice a week. And I want him to blind copy me into it. And the reason I want him to do it is I want him to get positive responses from practicing those things, because the more you practice it and when you get positive reinforcement, the easier it becomes to do and so yeah with Leon, uh, he's now going through that process and it's only been a week, but he's actually getting some really positive feedback and it's becoming easier for him to open up about some of those things that he otherwise would have been very closed about. So finding those practical tools I think is, is, is important as well.

**Beth Stallwood:** Just making one step, taking one step towards it and not expecting yourself to suddenly be able to do it straight away. And little practical, easy to do things that build that. And I do think that when you get into that situation where it does feel overwhelming where work or life, or study, whatever you're trying to do is overwhelming is I do think many people tend to retreat into themselves and thinking that they have to come up with the answers and they have to fix themselves.

Actually, I think that's where some of the gloom stuff really thrives is when we go into ourselves versus talking to other people, getting some perspective, getting other people's perspectives on our work, getting some feedback, getting some recognition, getting some help are all the things that can really make a big difference.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:40:42] Totally agree. I think there's someone said to me awhile ago, can't remember who it was now, but someone said to me, oh, I know who it was. It was a performance coach. I was talking about. Not feeling good enough, like that kind of imposter syndrome, like someone was going to tap me on the shoulder any moment ago.

[00:40:56] Excuse me. Why are you here? And he used to say to me, I'd get really caught up in it and it would be really challenging. And so. He used to say to me, so what's your review say every year. So

it always comes up. I've gotten outstanding performance on this and I won this award or I've been promoted to this or this pay rise or whatever you're saying to me.

[00:41:17] So why is your opinion more important than all these other people that have made it happen? So let's, let's just check your ego for a second there. Why are you, why is your decision about you not being good enough better than all these people that prove otherwise. And, uh, and I, I sat there and I had to kind of smile to myself because it did come from a position of pretty strong ego.

Actually. I was like, well, ye, because I obviously know be better than everybody else, but actually reality that the truth was different and when I could objectively look and use other people to help me objectively look at those scenarios. Then all of a sudden I could take a lot more joy in the work that I was doing and in the awards that I was winning and the pay rise I was getting and, and it wasn't] me feeling bad about all of those things happening. It was me feeling good about those things happening and actually, as we probably all feel, uh, good begets good. Often if you're feeling good about something. Good things. You know, if you're driving, if you just bought yourself a new Toyota, you're gonna spot Toyotas is around.

So what do they call your activating system? Ye. So, the psychological pathway of spotting things, when you're all kind of sensitized to them, we'll get yourself sensitized to being good at stuff. Get yourself sensitized to joyful things. Okay. So sensitized to wins and you know what? You might just have a few more and might enjoy a few more.

So thank you Trevor, for that, the performance coach.

**Beth Stallwood:** Thanks, Trevor. It's a great bit of advice there. And it's certainly one, I think many people including myself can take a little bit, like why do you think your opinion is more important than what everyone else says? , it's a really, really good way of looking at it and what I'd love to do now, if you can, if it's okay with you, is we kind of got to your story from up to 90 days and you had this massive 200 day goal.

[00:43:06] Tell us where you got to that and where you are now.

**Steven Dowd:** Well, ye, there's a. Four years in between there. So I'll speak at speed, but I'll cut out the Rocky montage in the middle, but effectively, 90 days I, uh, I had nothing much happened on day 91 and then incredibly, uh, I stood for the first time and I started to take my first tentative footsteps and, uh, there's a video actually.

I'll flick it over to you so you can have a watch but, or a link maybe on this for others to see, but there's a short video footage of me, uh, walking out of my mom's house. Uh, I couldn't bear to stay in hospital and a minute longer than I had to. So every weekend I was going off to someone's house somewhere using hospital, but like a hotel release and in hindsight. But I was off at my mom's place and, uh, and she said to me, well, with your wheelchair, how are we going to get you into the house, put ramps up and we're going to do this.

[00:44:12] And she was literally, she's a bit handy. Anyway, she was talking about like building ramps and things. I said, well, why don't I just walk? Why don't I just try and walk? So we drove over in the

car, I got to my mom's place. And, uh, and this, this video, I won't ruin it, but this video is basically me walking out of my mom's house, back to the car to go back to the hospital.

And that was the day I took my first steps. And then again, Rocky montage, lots of physio with the traag guys at St. George's and then a whole bunch of work, that was done. At home and through external physios as well, a day, 200 rolls around this Christmas day, my house, uh, 2016. And, uh, again, there's another video I'll send you a link to as well, where I walk again, very tentatively. I walk our Christmas Turkey to the table and I complete a promise to myself and to my wife that I would walk again. Uh, I, I wasn't a hundred percent back to normal, but I was pretty bloody close compared to her. And, uh, let me say before thousands of little wins got me to that.

[00:45:18] Okay. It got me to take those first steps and thank God I didn't drop our Turkey.

[00:45:24] **Beth Stallwood:** I was going to say, was everyone more excited about the walking or more worried about whether the Turkey was going to get dropped?

[00:45:33] **Steven Dowd:** So 200 days comes around and I'm like, so I'm not a hundred percent back to normal. So I haven't completely fulfilled on my promise. I'm still paralyzed today. I still have elements of paralysis today. However driving around in a power chair with my mouth, for the rest of my life, to be able to walk a Christmas Turkey to our table in let's face it 200 days is what six months.

[00:45:58] Uh, I'd beaten the odds. And, uh, I'd been able to complete promises to myself. And so my family and my friends and, and even people that had heard the story that we're watching, you're on social media and things. People I'd never met and have never, and probably will never meet. That were inspired by that journey and it was great to, to know that you're inspiring people that you don't even know you, you never know who you inspiring. And that for me is a good enough reason to carry on doing it because someone somewhere will get something from it. And that would just change the way they think it'll change the way they act and it will change their outcome. And so, ye, so that was pretty intense.

**Beth Stallwood:** Amazing. And, tell us a little bit before we go into the quickfire questions. , tell us a little bit about what you've been doing since. So you've been doing some amazing work and I think a little summary of what you've been up to would really help our listeners understand what you do.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:46:53] Hm. So, well, I, I learned to walk into a hundred days now with bloody naked. So a boxing day by house 2016, uh, I was lying on the, the couch, uh, having Bailey's on my cornflakes, watching the bond film, like every self-respecting boy should do. And, I decided I wanted to do something new because I mean, I'd effectively won my gold medal.

[00:47:12] Right. So what do we do from here? And so I decided that I was going to set up a charity fundraising efforts, and I was going to get back on the bike that I felt. And I was going to cycle the a hundred miles that I didn't get to do because of my injury. And I was going to do it in 200 days from that.

So I said about another Rocky montage and, and again, in the interest of time, uh, 200 days later, these lights are found myself at red bull headquarters on my bike, strapped up to a turbo trainer, which is effectively where you remove the back wheel and put it onto a flywheel. So I'm not riding

on the road, but I'm riding against the equivalent pressures and speeds and things that you would do normally.

And, uh, and I cycled those hundred miles. And, uh, and I came in 20 seconds short of my six hour goal. So ye, I was able to cover those hundred miles and then I did a few other things I learned to run again, uh, took part in the wings for life, world run, which is happening again in may, if anybody's interested, check that out, uh, wings for life, world run.com.

And, uh, so lots of run again in that. And, uh, I used to run kind of five Ks before my injury, not many, but here and there, uh, when I was running this particular race, I didn't stop until I got to seven K. So, not only was I running further than I would normally run, but I was running with an injury as well.

[00:48:27] And, uh, so ye, I was really, really proud of my achievements there and I learned to ski and then I became the first quadriplegic to virtually summit Everest on my stairs at home, over lockdown. To raise money for Wings for Live , and also for the NHS. And and then just recently in February. So whatever that was six, seven weeks ago we just concluded the world's biggest, fully inclusive indoor rowing event for charity where we had 11 countries and a thousand people [00:49:00] in row machines around the world rowing for 2000 hours, , collectively in a four hour window, uh, with a five hour live stream attached to it. So, so ye, there's been a few things that have been going on from a charity fundraising perspective that have all been based around, uh, overcoming adversity, overcoming challenge...being fully inclusive to include people with disability, as much as those without, but whether it's, I, I'm not being founded about the word disability in many ways, because ultimately it's just challenge all of us face challenge, and you don't have to have a broken neck for that to be a challenge. You don't have to have a mental challenge for that too, or a mental disability for whatever word impairment they go, for that to be your challenge. So it's been important to me to do physical things, to include everyone in that, and to raise charity, uh, funds to find a cure for spinal cord.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:49:58] Amazing. And we will put some links in there to those amazing charities as well and the work that you've been doing, uh, when we pop this podcast out in the big wide world, , what I'd love to do is to continue chatting to you for another four or five hours, because I'd love to hear out the Rocky montage and what actually happens in those times, because all the hard work happens, right in the montage north, in the achievement. Uh, we need to be mindful of our listeners time as well. So I am going to move on if it's okay with you to some quick fire questions. So the first one, and when we ask everybody who comes on the podcast is what is one thing that's always guaranteed to bring you a little bit of work joy.

**Steven Dowd:** [00:50:40] One thing, that's going to bring me a bit of work joy. I love a podcast. I'm a big fan of working with something on, in the background. Uh, our world is, uh, normally, uh, radio 4 running in the background is the kind of things you into my life. But when I'm not listening to the radio, I have podcasts running as well. Everything from business through to sport.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:51:03] Brilliant. And you can listen to this one as well. You can ask yourself.

[00:51:10] Next question is what book are you currently reading?



[00:51:15] **Steven Dowd:** [00:51:15] I I'm not a big reader, but I do listen to audio books. Uh, that's how I take the information. So I'm currently listening to The Long Win by Olympic silver medalist, Cath Bishop, uh, which is a fantastic audio book for business, as much as it is for sports.

[00:51:33] So if you're interested in that kind of thing, then I would highly recommend it.

**Beth Stallwood:** [00:51:37] I highly recommend it to Cath is a wonderful friend and partner of work joy. She was actually the first ever episode of the Work Joy Jam was a lovely recommendation that the book is incredible. Her thinking is amazing. I love every minute of it, so I would definitely recommend it either in the, uh, reading version or in the listening version.

They are both excellent. Ye. What is the best or most useful bit of advice that someone has given you in your lifetime, that you find yourself always coming back to.

[00:52:10] **Steven Dowd:** [00:52:10] Uh, I'm going to step back to that same ICU nurse. The sage piece of advice bar, none that I was given was in the dark times, you're going to need rope ladders.

You're going to need things, tools that you can use to get you out of those dark moments, , to find your joy effectively, to find your way back but don't rely on trying to find them when you're in the middle of it, practice them in the good times. So ye, I practiced a bunch of, uh, visualizations that allowed me to, develop a muscle resilience muscle.

[00:52:44] Using visualizations so that when I did go into those dark times, I was able to get myself back out of them relatively swiftly. And what I found as well is that by having them in the toolkit and by practice, I mean the good times and having that kind of muscle memory I didn't get into those spirals anywhere near, as often as I would have done otherwise.

[00:53:02] So ye. Practice, practice your resilience tools in the good times so that when the bad times come, you already have them.

[00:53:09] **Beth Stallwood:** Brilliant such great advice there and something that I'm sure we can all take on. What I would love as well for me is what is one super practical bit of advice that you would give to our listeners that they could, something easy that they could go and do today or tomorrow, and the next day, maybe build a habit around it that would help them to maybe have more resilience or help them to get more joy in their lives.

**Steven Dowd:** That's been more challenging. I would say I'm a big fan of the word choice. A choice is regardless of the situation, whether you can or can't control something, you can control your response to it. So I would look back at those things where you felt out of control, maybe pick two or three of recent times.

Look at what happened, look at how you responded to those things, whether it was positive or negative, and trying to understand why and how you got into that mindset. , and dissect that down, you know, be scientific about it, try and be objective about it as well. Don't have a value judgment about whether it's the wrong thing to do.

Just look at what happened and how it happened. And then if you can understand those mechanics, then maybe that will help you be a little more objective when it comes to making those decisions in future difficult situations.

**Beth Stallwood:** That's really great advice and understanding it, and then thinking about how you might use it into the future.

Thank you so much for coming on the podcast today. It's even, it's been a wonderful conversation and, where can people find out more about you and the fantastic work you're doing?

**Steven Dowd:** So, whilst I've now left the bank, I am now a keynote speaker on forced change, challenge and crisis resilience.

They might as called challenge specialists, speaker so [www.stevendowd.com](http://www.stevendowd.com) uh, it's been revamped to the moment actually, but [www.stevendowd.com](http://www.stevendowd.com) is there. And so you can certainly connect with me through that but also I'm all over LinkedIn on a regular basis. And so ye, very easy to, to find it.

[00:55:07] **Beth Stallwood:** [00:55:07] Brilliant. Thank you so much, Steven. It's been a joyful conversation and thank you so much for sharing your story and your amazing advice.

[00:55:18] Thank you all for listening to this episode with Steven, there are so many things that I could comment on and take away, and I'm sure that you all have many things in your head to achieve. But I'm going to pick out a couple that were really my big takeaways here. And the first one is this thing around comparing ourselves.

[00:55:40] And I know in my own world and with people I work with the comparisonitis is one of those things that are many of us struggle with. We look at what's going on on social media. We looked off. Family, where are they at? Where am I at? Where do I fit with them in that? How, how do I compare] with our colleagues?

And it is so true that that's not particularly helpful. Number one. Okay. You know, part of what really goes on in other people's lives. So we're often seeing the shine outside, not the work that it took to get that. And I really. Steven's advice about comparing yourself today against yesterday and towards what you could do tomorrow.

[00:56:20] So you're both looking forwards and looking backwards, but it's always compared against yourself. And also that admission that you can say to yourself today is not my best day and be okay. When sometimes you might be taking two steps backwards. When you want to be taking two steps. I also love this idea of having that really big, bold goal that maybe seems at the time completely out of reach, but breaking it down into so smallest, smallest, what am I going to do this minute, this hour, this day?

[00:56:51] And the idea that success, whatever it is that you want to get to wherever. Might be for you, whatever your worst day looks like moving beyond that. And many of you, I hope most of us will not have a worst day as bad as Steven's worst day, but that doesn't mean it's not an important thing for you to be considering.

[00:57:11] And the idea that it's really made up. A thousand little wins, little actions, little moments where you take your attitude, you get some perspective and you do something with it and you make that choice. I really hope you enjoyed listening to this episode. I know I really enjoyed speaking to Steven. If you are interest in finding out more about Steven, we'll pop the links into the show notes.

Really interesting speaker and I think you will find really inspirational more things from him. Also, if you're interested in more things to do with Create Work Joy and creating, cultivating some joy in your working life, do you make sure you're following us on social media? We are asked to Create Work Joy on LinkedIn

Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. We also have a website, [www.createworkjoy.com](http://www.createworkjoy.com) where you can find more about Work Joy Way which is my signature 16 week coaching program, and also Club Work Joy, which is our new growing community of people who wants to get more joy in their working life.

And to do that through collaboration with others and some exciting news to come on that in the following months. Thank you all for listening today. And I will speak to you soon.