SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

Why You Say "I'm Fine" When You're Not (and Why "Just Speak Up" Hasn't Helped)

with Jenn Fast · Day 5, Friday, October 30 · The Polite One

You said it this week. Maybe to your doctor, maybe to your partner, maybe to whoever asked how you were holding up. You said, "I'm fine." You heard yourself do it, and some part of you knew it was not true.

I want to tell you about the appointment that ended 30 years of me doing that. I was sitting in a cardiologist's office, and the doctor looked at me and said, "It is time to decide if your career is compatible with your health or not." Not "Have you tried yoga?" Not "Maybe take a vacation." "Is your career compatible with your health?"

I'm going to come back to that office, but first you should know who is talking to you, because it matters for everything that comes after.

Hi, I'm Jenn Fast, and I am so glad you're here. This is "Why You Say 'I'm Fine' When You're Not, and Why 'Just Speak Up' Hasn't Helped."

I am an author, a coach, and a reinvention strategist. I work with women in midlife who are moving through the transitions that never seem to arrive one at a time: perimenopause, a career that stopped fitting, kids leaving, aging parents. I also host a podcast called The Comeback Show.

But before any of that, I spent 30 years in corporate, the last ten of them as an executive assistant to the C-suite, which means I spent a decade in rooms where my job was to be useful and discreet and quiet. I was very good at it, and I was raised to be good at it. In my family and in my culture, the message was consistent: be seen and not heard. Do not rock the boat. Take up less space. So I want you to know that what I'm about to say, I am not saying from the outside. I spent 30 years telling people I was fine when I was not.

Which brings me back to that cardiologist's office. Here is the part I need you to hear, because it is the whole reason I am here talking to you. That cardiologist was not telling me anything new. My body had been sending me that exact message for years. Dread that arrived on Friday afternoons instead of Sunday nights. Tension that started in my neck and climbed into a headache. Acid in my stomach. The gray weight of getting dressed every morning. I had received every one of those signals, and I had translated every one of them the same way: I

need to be tougher. I need better habits. I need to optimize harder. I had been saying "I'm fine" to myself for years before I ever said it to the doctor.

Now, if you have told anyone you are struggling in this season, you have already been handed the advice. Advocate for yourself. Speak up. Be your own best advocate. Push back if your doctor dismisses you. And I want to say something careful about that advice, because the people giving it mean well, and they are not wrong about the goal. It just has never worked for you, and you have probably decided that is because of something missing in you. Let me tell you why I know that is not it.

In my corporate years, I joined employee resource groups: the Asian American group, the women's group. Both of them taught us to self-advocate. Both gave us real frameworks for speaking up, for naming our contributions, for asking for what we deserved. I used them, and when I did, I was told I was being aggressive. I was told I was self-promoting. And once, in a meeting, I was told that my tone sounded like a scolding mother. A scolding mother, by another woman. Can you imagine anyone saying to a man that his tone reminded them of a scolding father? No. Because when a man speaks with authority, it gets called leadership. When I did it, it was a problem to be corrected.

Here is the thing nobody in those trainings ever said out loud. They taught us to advocate. Nobody told the managers to be ready for it, or to reward it. Every self-advocacy script you have ever been handed quietly assumes the room is going to receive it. Well, that is the missing piece. The script is not the hard part. The room is. So when you use the words and it goes badly, you do not conclude that the advice was incomplete. You conclude that you are bad at this. You are not bad at speaking up. You were trained not to.

I told you I was raised to be seen and not heard, to not rock the boat, to take up less space. Here is what happened when I walked into a world that wanted the exact opposite. Speak up. Be assertive. Advocate. You are a woman in a male-dominated industry, so be louder. So I tried that, and you already know how it went.

And so I learned the way you learn when the rules are not written down anywhere: to live in the exact register that was allowed. Helpful enough to be valued, quiet enough to stay in the room. I heard a CEO say once about an assistant he admired that the best thing about her was that she did things with no fanfare. I heard that, and I thought, yes, that is a compliment. I should be more like her. It took me years to understand what those words actually meant. She does what she is told. No one has to thank her for it. No one has to see her as a whole person with opinions and ambitions and a point of view worth hearing.

And then there was the meeting that taught me the rule underneath all of it. I spent the last ten years of a 30-year career as an executive assistant to the C-suite, and the last six years in the human resources department. So I was in the room for conversations about compensation: who gets promoted, who gets a raise, who gets told politely that their performance is not quite there yet. In one of those meetings, I listened to people who make several hundred thousand dollars a year talk about how employees should be grateful just to have jobs, and that an extra dollar an hour was a large ask. I went to my boss afterward and said I had found it hard to hear. And I was told that I should feel privileged to be in those rooms at all, and that executives needed to feel safe expressing their opinions.

Executives, with the power and the money and the decisions, need to feel safe from people like me. I think about that a lot now, about whose comfort is treated as non-negotiable and whose is treated as optional. If you have ever wondered why "I'm fine" comes out of your mouth before you can stop it, that is the answer. Somewhere along the way, you learned that your comfort should be the flexible one in the room.

I want to be clear about something before I go further. I am not a hormone expert. I am not a clinician. I will not interpret a single symptom for you, and I have nothing to say about testing or treatment. There are people far more qualified than me for that, and you should listen to them. I work the other half of the system, the life half. And from where I sit, the two halves have been amplifying each other for years before anyone names it.

Here is what I mean. A woman who has spent 30 years absorbing everyone else's discomfort was never doing that on infinite capacity. She was doing it on a reserve, and that reserve was quietly subsidized by being younger, by sleeping better, by a nervous system that had more margin in it. Perimenopause withdraws the subsidy. So the swallowing that worked for three decades stops working. And what surfaces looks like rage, or reactivity, or a sudden, flat inability to keep being accommodating. And she is told it is hormonal. It is hormonal. I am not arguing with that. But it is also 30 years of unsaid things arriving all at once in a body that can no longer hold them down.

And here is why that matters practically. If she only ever hears the hormone half, she goes off to fix her body. If she only hears the psychology half, she goes off to fix her mindset. Either way, she walks out with half an answer, and she quietly decides the leftover part is a personal failing. That gap is the only thing I am here to talk about.

So let's get practical. Minimizing is fast. It is faster than thinking. By the time you notice you did it, you are usually already in the car. The goal is to move that noticing earlier, from the car into the room. And you do that by learning two things: your body's tell and your mouth's tell.

Your body's tell is physical, and it is specific to you. Mine was always the same sequence: a tightening that started in my neck and moved up into my shoulders, then a headache, and then something churning in my stomach. For years I called that stress. It was not just stress. It was my body telling me I was about to agree to something that I did not, in fact, agree with. Yours will be different. It might be heat in your face, a held breath, a smile you could feel arriving before you chose it, the tension and ache in your jaw. Your assignment, and it is the whole assignment, is to find out what yours is. Think back to the last time you said you were fine and you were not. Not what you said, but what happened in your body the second before you said it.

Your mouth's tell is easier, because the phrases are almost universal. "It's probably nothing." "I don't want to be difficult." "I'm fine, just tired." "It's not a big deal." "Sorry, this is probably silly." Every one of those is a disclaimer you are attaching to your own experience before anyone has even questioned it. You are pre-discounting yourself, saving them the trouble. Listen for those five phrases this week. You don't have to try to stop them yet. Just hear them.

And when you catch it, there is one question that does more than any script I know. For years, the question I asked myself was, how do I manage this better? The question that actually broke the spell was, why am I so committed to managing something that is hurting me? Those are not the same question. The first one assumes the arrangement is fine and you are the variable. The second one puts the arrangement on trial. Ask yourself the second one in the room, while the tightening is still in your neck.

Now I have to tell you the part most people leave out, because leaving it out is why their advice fails. You are going to say the true thing, and sometimes it is going to go badly.

Let me tell you about a team-building event. We were packaging food donations for a shelter. Genuinely good work. My table decided to do it assembly-line style. I have ADHD. My brain needs to take a process from start to finish, so I said I was going to take my supplies to the end of the table and work through the whole process myself. I was still at the table, still talking to everyone, still contributing to the same outcome. I just needed to do it differently. Someone said I was not being a team player, and when the boss came by, that person made sure to point it out again.

And now here is the part that actually changed me. I survived it. My career did not collapse. I did the thing that worked for my brain, got labeled as not a team player, went home, and it was fine. That sounds small. I know it sounds small. But I had spent decades believing that any deviation from what was expected of me carried real and serious costs. Finding out that the costs were survivable was not small. It was the beginning.

So I want to give you a different measure of success, because the one you are using is guaranteed to keep you quiet. You have been measuring whether you spoke up correctly by how the other person reacted. If they received it well, you did it right. If they got defensive or dismissive or told you your tone was a problem, you did it wrong and you should not have said anything. That measure hands your voice to whoever is in the worst mood that day. Being called aggressive or difficult or too much is information about the room. It is not a grade on your performance.

So the new measure is this: did you say the true thing, and are you still here? That is it. That is the whole bar at the beginning. Not, did it work? But, did you survive it? Because once you have collected a few of those, the fear stops running the conversation.

And the conditioning does not only take your voice in meetings. It takes something quieter than that. It teaches you that your read on a situation is less valid than the room's consensus, that your needs are inconvenient, that your knowing is not something to act on. Getting that back is the actual work. Not a new job title. Not waking up one morning feeling confident. Just learning again to hear the signal and believe it.

You are not behind. You are not broken. You were trained, and training can be unlearned.

If this landed, I made you some things for the practicing part. One is called the Self-Trust Reset Challenge: seven days, one small action a day, small enough that it does not feel like a confrontation. You will find it linked to my profile, at Reinvention with Jenn Fast. To help you with things like emotional regulation, focus, and organization, my book is called Executive Function Unlocked, and I have written it specifically for those of us navigating midlife and beyond. You can find it in multiple formats on Amazon. And if you want to keep this conversation going, my podcast is The Comeback Show. There, I share inspiring stories from women with a reinvention story, a comeback story, or an origin story.

Thank you for spending this time with me, and thank you for being willing to ask whether the story you have been living was written for you or by someone else.