

## **334: Female Firefighters and Emotional Resilience (with Kerry Wisdom-Henbest)**



### **Full Episode Transcript**

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**Jen Riday**

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## **334: Female Firefighters and Emotional Resilience (with Kerry Wisdom-Henbest)**

You're listening to the Vibrant Happy Women podcast. I'm Dr. Jen Riday. And on this episode I'm talking with a female firefighter friend about emotional resilience and trauma. Stay tuned.

Hi, I'm Jen Riday. This podcast is for women who want to feel more vibrant, happy, aligned, and alive. You'll gain the emotional, physical, and spiritual tools you need to get your sparkle back and ensure that depression, anxiety, and struggle don't rule your life. Welcome to the Vibrant Happy Women Podcast.

Hey there, my friends, we're talking about trauma today, specifically from the aspect of firefighting and being a first responder. I've been thinking a lot about this analogy, maybe many of you listening are not first responders, or fire fighters but imagine everything that is required to be one and how we could learn from them as we respond to crises and traumas in our lives. In this episode I'm talking with a friend of mine, Kerry Wisdom-Henbest who was one of the first female firefighters in the state of Florida.

And what she learned through that process about emotions and stuffing emotions versus feeling emotions, and healing them, and overcoming those daily traumas that firefighters and first responders face. I love the idea of increasing this ability, maybe adding it as a protocol. Unfortunately, Kerry, you'll hear in this episode says, "Jen, the firefighting world is not ready for a protocol about emotions yet."

But it got me thinking, what would it look like in our lives if we were to set things up with protocols like you'll hear Kerry describing in this interview? Protocols for how when we get home we back our car in just like you see the firefighters backing their truck in. And we clean it all up and we have it all ready, and we have everything ready to respond to the next crisis, just planting that seed in your mind because that could be an interesting concept.

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And as you'll hear me talk about in this episode, I get excited, I say, "Kerry, what if after they back the fire truck in, all the firefighters are required, have the protocol of sitting down and saying what they're feeling? I'm feeling stressed, that was really awful seeing that kid burned by his car, smelling the gas. It makes me worried." She said, "No, not ready yet." But I thought by extension what if we a little bit more emotionally intelligent here perhaps, more focused on emotions, what if we did something like that in our daily lives? Many of you do it at the dinner table.

So, listen to this interview and think about how you can have protocols in your life. Think about being a courageous first female to do something, maybe you're breaking a pattern in your family or at your work and then think about emotions and trauma. There are so many parallels between being a first responder and just being a woman in general. Now, one is definitely more trauma filled I think. But combining the two, being a woman and a first responder, Kerry has all my admiration and I'm in awe of her.

So, without further ado let's dive in to this really awesome and eye opening interview.

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Jen: Hey everybody, welcome to Vibrant Happy Women today. I'm here with my friend Kerry Wisdom-Henbest. Let me tell you about her. Kerry Wisdom-Henbest is a retired fire captain who lives in South Florida with her husband, two young adult boys and four rescued animals. Her rewarding career and marriage to another first responder has led her to understand the struggle of being frontline. She loves to help first responders find balance and build good habits.

Through teaching and coaching sessions, she assists our heroes with discovery, ownership, mastery and ensuring that self-reliance becomes

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self-resilience. I love that. Kerry loves anything outdoors and finds her own balance in gardening, crafting and hubby time. Welcome to Vibrant Happy Women, Kerry. Kerry: Thank you so much for having me, Jen, it's fabulous to be here.

Jen: So, you were a firefighter and that is so cool because you were telling me, only 8% of firefighters are women, is that correct?

Kerry: Yeah, that's the stat as of, I think 2018 it was, it was 8%. And most of that percentage, a large of it is volunteer firefighters, one in 10 to 12 depending on the department.

Jen: One in 10 to one in 12, wow, okay. So how did you become a firefighter?

Kerry: I bartended for seven to eight years really thinking to myself, I didn't want the sit down job. I didn't want the office, what was that go-getting? And then my father introduced me to a fireman in Utah. And he said, "You're really strong, you can lift the kegs, have you ever thought about becoming a firefighter?" And I said, "You know what, sounds fun." So, I became a paramedic first because there was a three year waiting list for the fire academy back then. And then did some prevention classes, then went to the fire academy. And I became a firefighter in 99 and then got hired in 2000.

Jen: Wow. That's so cool. And you were a firefighter in Florida, right?

Kerry: Yes. Yeah, South Florida.

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Jen: Okay, so you were a firefighter, we all see shows, well, many of us see shows like Rescue 911 or all of these shows of how it is to be a firefighter. How is the reality different from the shows?

Kerry: Very different. Obviously, the big screen is there to entertain us. There are many struggles that are not really heartfelt or real, everybody that goes to work in the stations, we all have families, and responsibilities. And not everybody's having sex.

Jen: Yes, totally.

Kerry: There's not a lot of drama inside the fire station it's more of just the camaraderie and the brother and sisterhood.

Jen: Yeah, I've heard you use the phrase, my brothers, and my sisters. I think that's really special. Tell us more about how you develop that sense of brotherhood and sisterhood, where is that coming from?

Kerry: I think that the majority of people go to work for eight, ten hours. They don't experience a home atmosphere with their coworkers. So, you're thinking about breakfast, lunch, and dinner. You're cooking together, you're doing laundry, you're cleaning a house together. There's a lot of table talk where you really are finding the little special, everybody comes with their own little love, and you grow around that. I miss it immensely, but I just felt it was the best for me to leave. But I still, I have dreams and I just love the fire service.

I love, if you're looking for an extension of your family, that's where you're going to find it.

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Jen: That's really cool. That's really cool. So now you're retired but before we talk about that, you're doing amazing things in the world for first responders. And I think it applies to all of us because we all need to manage the traumas, big T traumas and little t traumas that we face every day. So, you have really great wisdom for that. But tell us about becoming a leader, how do you rise in the ranks of the fire service and how high you got. Also, your husband, tell us a little bit more about being a dual firefighter family. Two questions.

Kerry: Yeah. So, the dual firefighter family, I'll hit one that first because my husband and I met in paramedic school. And we did kind of rise through the ranks. I was a lot more on the family side, so my husband was teaching at the academies. He's now a chief. I never wanted to become a chief. But at my department I was the first female to have children. And then I was also the first female to become an engine officer. So, I spent a dozen years as an engine captain before I retired.

And I just absolutely adored making the decisions. I was always very heartfelt about I have to be able to make the decisions. I'm an alpha personality. And I had a great time towards the end of my career really reflecting on my journey. I did spend quite a few years being bitter and not loving my career. But at the end I left with my head held up high and it was very rewarding. And my husband also, he would not trade anything for the fire service, we love it.

Jen: Interesting. So, tell me more about the parts that made you bitter, the struggles of being in the fire service. And then also I know your family, they call you mama, right?

Kerry: I was Medusa for a while because you do get tired of running on rescue. We always have the saying, you can run the wheels off the rescue truck. A lot of people do call 911 and it's not really an emergency. So, you

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end up doing a job that is not necessarily as exciting all the time as you thought it would be. And then Medusa was just a headstrong, don't mess with me. And then I matured, we all age and go through our changes. And then I became mama who just, I was really protective of my crew.

I was really protective of the struggles that my crew was going through and how to bring them out shining the best they could. I think that that's the internal part of your family. So, the whole family is the big fire service and then the people that are on your crew are your tight little, you know, that's the mama bear aspect.

Jen: I love that, And now that you're retired, you were telling me that they still call you mama. They really are family.

Kerry: They are.

Jen: So, I might get the lingo wrong, but you were the leader of your crew, right?

Kerry: Yeah, so one fire station I was in charge of I was the captain.

Jen: As captain let's think of a time you were called to a scene and kind of help us understand your role as the captain, how you were divvying out what everyone should do, that kind of thing.

Kerry: So, on a general fire incident a captain would arrive, assign all of the duties, I mean we all have protocols, so people, you know, each individual that's sitting in each seat knows what they're supposed to be doing. But I'm in charge of all radio communications. I'm in charge of making the calls, asking for more assistance, when to charge the line, how many patients we

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have on scene, what kind of patients they are, whether they're going to go to specific facilities, trauma or medical.

And then of course when the scene goes bad you're also in charge and you have to work your way through those things too. And the last month I was at work I literally had a fire every shift and it was just my send off, saying, "Okay, bye mama," and I was done.

Jen: Oh, my goodness. Describe for us, just so we can understand the trauma aspect, each scene can be a trauma, you had a fire at every shift for your last month. What was the most traumatic call you had? And just kind of describe that for us so we can feel what that might be like in a sense.

Kerry: In that last month, my most traumatic call was a car into the back of a fully loaded fuel tanker, and it lit on fire. And by the time the tanker had stopped he was fairly far away from the car. And he ran back with his extinguisher, and he had pulled the driver from the car. And I was supposed to be the second engine on scene. I ended up being the first and I had a new female firefighter as my firefighter. And I just remember the CPR was in progress by a bystander and I'm in full gear.

So that's not really optimal to do CPR or do medical care so you have to kind of, okay, I have a car on fire, what's my priorities? And then the patient was actually breathing so I just said, "Stop CPR." And then I noticed the guy was still breathing. I'm like, "Don't do any more CPR, he's breathing." And then the second engine pulled up behind me and I was like, "Okay, that's your patient and I'm going to go put out the fire." So, me and my firefighter put the fire out and then we came back.

I did get to see that patient in the back of the rescue truck and talk to the lieutenant who was one of my very close brothers. And just the burns and



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hoping he's going to be okay, and the smells, and just it was 2:30 in the morning. That's when they used to call me Medusa, was waking up in the middle of the night and I would just be like, "Oh my gosh, somebody better need 911."

Jen: Yeah. So, you go to these calls and what's standing out to me is you're really trained to step back and look at everything. You knew where the truck was, who was where, this person's breathing, here comes another crew. They can do this. We're doing that. They're in an ambulance. And then you mentioned the smells, it just sounds like the perfect storm for a trauma because your adrenalin's pumping in the whole shift. You've got these smells, later if you smell that I would imagine it could bring you back to that scene again and again because our brains are funny that way.

So clearly first responders deal with a lot of trauma, so I would imagine that's a huge issue at times. So, speak to the trauma of being a first responder and then go into how you're helping with that.

Kerry: Coming out of paramedic school you learn five steps in grief. And that was just for other people. You weren't taught, I mean they're teaching some of it now, the mental resilience, there's a touch on it. But I really feel like still the stigma of suck it up buttercup, just stuff it down, you'll be fine, just work out, have some drinks with your friends or family. That doesn't really help. You need to really know yourself emotionally.

I experienced nightmares, of 15 years on the department, so I was, I guess, the word, burned out was the word I used, "I'm burned out. I'm burned out." I can't say anything else. And the resources were always, you know, if you call the EAP you're labeled. If you have a mental illness, whoa, we're staying away from that. So, coming back to being the hero, as heroes we hate weakness. I mean Superman, there is no kryptonite in Superman's world. And it's just not true for first responders.

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We need to start being more self-aware and being able to, you know, the things that you've taught me, the polyvagal and the hot cold therapy. And really paying attention to your own emotional status, and fixing it as you go along. The feel it to heal it was so powerful for me because there were a lot of traumas that I had experienced that I had not healed from because they've proven that when you're in fight or flight your emotions are shut down. But you still consciously are experiencing something that's emotional when you see somebody die or you see somebody mangled in a car.

So, it's so important for first responders to start really learning these techniques. And they can do it personally. It doesn't have to be a group and don't ever tell a firefighter to journal. Now, I journal because women love to journal, I have 400 journals, I love them. I can't pick the color of the day but men, you tell a man to journal, and he'd be like, "What? That's not going to happen." So just those tools. Those tools need to be put out there and people need to start utilizing them. So, they don't be the suicide guy, or the alcoholism guy, or it's preventative, proactive and prevention.

Jen: Yeah. It's so fascinating, the fire house, we have these rules of keeping the truck clean and the fire house clean. And we've got our food. And they've missed an important aspect, how are we keeping our emotional house clean? It's not even taught. So, you mentioned learning feel it to heal it and about polyvagal theory from me. So, everyone, Kerry, went through the Vibrant Happy Women Coach Certification.

How did you decide to make that pivot? You retired from being a fire captain essentially and then you're becoming a coach, where did that come from, that huge change in your life?

Kerry: I think that it was not only on a personal level but also a professional level. I just love helping people. I love being a pivotal part and seeing people transform into something that they really want to be. It's from the

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new hire at the fire department that is so self-conscious and just can't. And then all of a sudden you see that guy or that girl two or three years later and they know their stuff and they're confident in their skills. And it's the same way with your mind. You have to be proactive about your emotions.

And then me becoming a coach was just something I knew I wanted to help, especially other women balance, having toddlers. My girl friend has a two year old at home and she's coming home with no sleep, running calls all night long, training new people. The stresses of being, you know, when you're a female the microscope's a little bit more magnified on you. So just helping them see, you're going to get it done. Make sure you check-in with yourself. These are the things I would be doing, just to handle the calls. I have loved this journey, I really have, I've absolutely adored it.

Jen: And it's such a need, you went through something, you managed it yourself, but you saw a huge need. You had your Medusa years and then you became mama. Now you want to give back to that community. For anyone listening, whether they're a first responder or not, what advice would you have for handling those day-to-day traumas, whatever we do for a living or however we spend our time?

Kerry: Well, first and foremost I think that when you're getting into the fire service, you have to look past all the bells and whistles and expect, you know, I mean you should be expecting to see traumas. So, building the foundation of picking the right fire department, that can be pivotal in your career. The routes that you possibly might be able to take in the future. And then concentrating on surrounding yourself with people that are also on the same page as you.

There is people that will bring you down and they'll become weights on you. And then there's the people that are going to propel you forward and make sure that you're doing what you're supposed to be doing to take care of

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yourself. That positive aspect is imperative to handle the traumas throughout your career.

Jen: Wow. Surrounding yourself with the right people. And then if you were to face a trauma right now, if you were back after learning what you've learned in the coach certification, how do you handle those emotions in the moment now? You mentioned feel it to heal it but walk us through your most recent stressor or maybe mini t trauma and how feel it to heal it or other tools help you process emotionally?

Kerry: My biggest recent trauma was almost a year ago and my oldest son got COVID, and he had delta and the day before his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday he was put on a vent. So, I lost my first fire chief to COVID, that was back when they put them on the vents in the beginning. And then they were kind of figuring out that the vents weren't the best thing for COVID patients. But my son was placed on a vent, he had hemo Pneumo, so blood in his lungs. But I knew, there was an amazing doctor that kind of got us in just to say goodbye.

And two days later I got it, so I was really sick. And then my son self-extubated, he took his tube out at day five in the middle of the night and I knew that that was the sign that my son was going to live, that he was going to be fine. "Don't keep sedating me, I want to live." And they do where they put the patient prone and then supine prone, and then supine which is proven for COVID patients to be amazing. Now my son is going to be 21 at the end of this month.

And just going through those emotions, I know that the baggage would have been much, much heavier for me seeing him, loving him, worrying about the future if I wouldn't have done the feel it to heal it. And the journaling, and the seeking other women coaches that have helped me because now there's residuals when you have something like that. I'm a

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little more sensitive to my son but then I'm a little bit harder in areas. And it's changed our life. So, he's on his way to becoming a police officer, I don't know how two firefighters did that.

Jen: Because, don't police officers and firefighters have a bit of a competitive putting each other down kind of thing going on or is that just on TV?

Kerry: No, it is very true but it's very a lot more lighthearted and much more fun. They pick on the firefighters because we're always technically in the recliners. But we always say, "You just picked the wrong academy, we don't know what you did there."

Jen: That's hilarious. So even though you lived that experience of facing his potential death, you said goodbye, that was a trauma in your body. Describe to us how that felt for you and how feel it to heal it helps you to move that trauma through instead of allowing it to be stuck like so many would.

Kerry: Yeah. So, I can only compare that weight to putting on my air pack and just the whole weight of it and it wasn't balanced. I didn't have my hip strength. And it was just my whole chest and my shoulders, and everything was just drained out of me. I willed it in my head. I saw him coming home. I did all those positive reflections but feel it to heal it when you name it, and you label it, and you see it, and you just see it in a different light, that perspective kind of changes and it just lightens up as you move it. And you just keep on thinking about the reflection of it being positive.

I know that's kind of hard but if you sit with it long enough it can change anything.

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Jen: And now you're taking tools like feel it to heal it or aspects of polyvagal theory, which to give you all a rough idea. Polyvagal theory is addressing your nervous system, when you're in fight or flight, how to come back to safe and social. When you're in shutdown and freeze, how to move back through fight or flight to get to safe and social. So, you're teaching skills, how do you foresee kind of getting this message into the culture of firefighters but also all first responders?

Kerry: I think that that's really the keys to the fortress for me. I'm looking for the keys because I want to unlock it. And I know the stigma, I know that you're either all the way on one side or all the way on the other of the process. And I'm searching for that happy medium and I know that the introduction early on when they first enter the academies and EMT school.

That's where I think that the easiest outlet is to ensure that they at least have that foundation, that even if they don't really take it to heart, that maybe four years in or five years in when they see something, they're like, "Man, that really is bothering me. What can I do about it?" And then they have those tools. Because everybody remembers the five steps of grief. They taught it to us so just that reference point.

Jen: Yeah. I mean I imagine after a call you back the truck in, everyone's seen firefighters doing this. I'm sure you clean it up. What if it was just a protocol that, okay, we all sit here and we're going to feel our emotions, what are you feeling, where is it in your body? Can you imagine just having that be a step, how much better it could be if you could get something like that going?

Kerry: I don't know that we're quite there yet. I think that the future generation, just like I worked with a lot of men that had never worked with women.

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Jen: So, they would not be ready to feel their feelings is what you're saying, we're not even there yet? Okay. Okay. I'm dreaming.

Kerry: Right, maybe one-on-one. Maybe one-on-one if you find that right person, or you see that person that you feel like you know needs assistance or help. But it would have to come from somebody like they teach, the IFF teaches these classes. But they're now getting one more person on there that's been there, that's done it, that's seen it. And it just makes it so much more receivable. You're open to it, say, "Okay, well, it's not a doctor telling me, it's this person that's been there and seen the action that's actually saying this worked for me."

Jen: Okay. So, you've been there and done that and now you can start sharing as an insider, that's unique, that really is.

Kerry: Yeah. I think that some people just – that hero aspect is still very strong. It's just, it's the, I'm a hero. I don't need it. But you go home, and you drink, a whole bottle of whisky, that's not normal.

Jen: Oh my gosh, yes. Well, I love what you're doing in the world. I hope, I have a friend whose daughter is going into the fire academy, and I immediately thought of you. Kerry, the female firefighter who's all about helping women do this in a healthier way, but helping everyone have emotional skills. And what do you call it, self-mastery? You can't even call it emotional resilience, you have to call it self-mastery to tackle that hero aspect.

Kerry: Right, no emotions, no.

Jen: No, I get you. Well, where can people find you if they want to kind of be on your radar and follow what you're doing in the world?



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Kerry: Carry C-A-R-R-Y Wisdom.com is my website. And I'm just getting started. I have a Facebook page under the same title and hopefully entering the Instagram world in some sort of sense here soon. Social media has been my nemesis just like the Keiser sled was at the academy.

Jen: But you're going to master it.

Kerry: I will, I will definitely master it.

Jen: That's awesome, carrywisdom.com. And then are you Carry Wisdom on social media as well, C-A-R-R-Y?

Kerry: No, I changed that because my name is K-E-R-R-Y.

Jen: Okay, so Kerry Wisdom, one of the Kerries.

Kerry: So Kerry Wisdom.

Jen: I love that.

Kerry: Yeah, Kerry Wisdom.

Jen: Well, thank you so much for being on the show today. I'm excited to see what you do in the world and way to go chasing after your dreams, I mean you retire from one thing, you're ready to step into the next version of you. I do want to ask a kind of a quick follow-up question. How is life different with your family at home? You were a firefighter, now you're a coach, how is everything different? It's just so interesting.

Kerry: My husband still has a few years left in the fire service. And there is a jealousy if I'm still in bed when he goes to work. So, I do try to get up and



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go for a walk and get up early. So, I don't want him to be too jealous. But I went through my first six months, I was a little like, "Oh, God, what do I do?" I garden a lot. I'm outside, I have an acre of property here and a dog, and three cats, and two adult children. I refer to my boys now as my roommates.

It's amazing to wake up every morning and just think to yourself, what do I want to do? I don't have to go anywhere. And that has revealed a lot of creativity which has been fun.

Jen: It almost sounds like a feminine energy. We all have both masculine and feminine, but do you see a difference in the energy of the two parts of your life?

Kerry: I feel like that the masculine for my 20 plus years in the fire service was very strong. Now that I'm retired my feminine energy is one that is not as readily accessible as my masculine was but not yet. I will master that too.

Jen: I personally grew up in a masculine energy so being more in the feminine, nurturing myself so I can nurture others, I think is really cool. So, I imagine you probably can't call it feminine energy in the fire and first responder circles I'm guessing. They might misunderstand.

Kerry: They might. They might.

Jen: I kind of want to ask a random, I've been contemplating this lightning round. So, I'm going to ask a random question for our lightning round. If today was the last day of your life what would you want your legacy to be?

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Kerry: That I, back to the word 'nurture,' that I loved and nurtured all those that came in contact with me after I took off my Medusa face, or snakes should you say. And after doing what I did for a living believe me, it could be my last day, I know that very, very well. So, if it's broke, fix it and love yourself every day doing it.

Jen: Awesome, I love that, great advice. Well, thank you again, Kerry, take care.

Kerry: Thank you, Jen, enjoy the rest of your day.

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I really love how Kerry went from being in a place, an energy of that tough guy, machismo, masculine energy, get it done, we've got to be tough. She recognized I'm feeling burned out. This isn't working for me anymore. I feel like all of us hit these places in our lives where we're burned out. And what's cool about Kerry is she didn't just stay stuck there. She started to explore and feel and process and she had ultimately pivoted. She recognized, hey, this lack in this culture here, this inability to talk about emotions really hurt me and I want to go and make a difference there.

And so, she joyed the Vibrant Happy Life Coaching Certification where I met her. I remember when I met Kerry, she was quiet and seemed calm enough. I was floored when she told us that she had been the first female firefighter in her area of Florida and that she had been a captain. And wow, how tough, how cool, how bold. And yet to see her throughout the weeks of our coach certification, soften as she explored her feelings, learn about feel it to heal it, processed her traumas, big T traumas and little t traumas and found herself again.

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And started to have this light kind of fill her up week by week as we had our classes talking about all the things we do in a coach certification. And now to see her going out into the world speaking at fire academies, starting her own podcast that's coming, hint, don't tell her I told you. Making a difference in the way that's aligned for her.

So, whatever you're doing in your life if you feel like a pivot would be in order, explore that, step into that. Lean into what feels amazing to you. Maybe it's backpacking across Mexico, maybe it's starting a podcast or just serving someone that lives in your neighborhood, whatever it is, lean into those little things that pull you, that feel good to you. That is what pivoting is all about.

Now, if coaching sounds like something you'd like to do like Kerry, I have to remind you that the Vibrant Happy Life Coaching Certification starts a new round in September. We would love to have you join us, it's a great opportunity to explore your thoughts, your feelings, and the results of your life so far and to learn tons and tons of tools to help you process emotion, resolve trauma and to help your kids and loved ones do the same. Some people use it for their families and at work, other people step into becoming a full on coach.

However you choose to use it, it is a lifechanging experience and it's such an honor to get to witness Kerry's lifechanging experience and how she's going to go into the world and make a difference as a coach. You can learn more about that at [jenriday.com/coaching](http://jenriday.com/coaching).

Alright my friends, I will be back again next week with another amazing guest. Until then make it a vibrant and happy week. Take care.

If you enjoy this podcast, you have to check out the Vibrant Happy Women Club. It's my monthly group coaching program where we take all this

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material to the next level and to get you the results that will blow your mind.  
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