



## WellnessCast™ Conversation with Phil Stutz, MD, and Barry Michels, JD, LCSW, bestselling authors of The Tools and Coming Alive

**Musical Opening:** So ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. [Leonard Cohen, *Anthem*]

**Sarah Weinstein:** Hi, I'm Sarah Weinstein, the External Director of the Wellness Project at Stanford Law School. Today we have a special episode of the WellnessCast™ that my co-host, Joe Bankman, is going to do alone, because he goes way back with our guests, Phil Stutz and Barry Michels, authors of the New York Times best seller The Tools, and their new book that just came out recently called Coming Alive. I'll be back for our next show in November. Now, I hope you'll enjoy this intimate conversation between friends.

**Joe Bankman:** Welcome to the WellnessCast™ I'm Joe Bankman, professor at Stanford Law School and also a psychologist. I'm going to start off today talking about the category of famous therapists. At any given point in time there's always a few of those around. They tend to develop reputations as great clinicians and then prove to be great writers, connecting with the public in the same way they connect with patients. We've been lucky enough to have two of them at Stanford: Irv Yalom and David Burns. My guests today, Phil Stutz and Barry Michels, fall into that category. They first got national attention when they were described in a *New Yorker* profile as go-to therapists for those on the creative side of the entertainment industry. Their first book, The Tools, sat on the New York Times best seller list for almost forever, and they have a new book out: Coming Alive: Tools To Defeat Your Inner Enemy, Ignite Creative Expression, and Unleash Your Soul's Potential.

Welcome Phil and Barry.

**Barry Michels:** Thanks so much, Joe.

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah, thank you.

**Joe Bankman:** Barry, you and I were associates together in Biglaw, or what passed for Biglaw, way back when, and have been friends for a lot of years. As a therapist, I've learned a lot from your and Phil's writings, but it's been a real thrill as a friend to see your success. As my mother would say, using some Yiddishisms, I get a lot of naches and I like to kvell about you.

**Phil Stutz:** Are you Jewish?

**Joe Bankman:** You'd never guess, yeah.

**Barry Michels:** Not in a million years. I appreciate it, Joe. I have to say that you were actually one of the people who really made it okay for me to quit the practice of law. You actually pointed out that the one thing I really did enjoy at our law firm was that, for some reason, other associates and employees would come to me for advice, and I was reasonably good at giving it, and even more important, I just enjoyed it.

**Joe Bankman:** It's really great to find that a life path that you've taken, even if it's not the right one, can often lead to one that is the right one.

**Barry Michels:** Exactly.

**Joe Bankman:** Guys, our goal today is to give listeners a taste of what you're about. The title of the book talks about an 'inner enemy'. Phil, do you want to say a few words about what that is?

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah. When I started out as a shrink, I'd just finished my psychiatric training, actually I had a lot of patients pretty soon. I would say within the first year I had a fairly full practice, which was unusual, and I think the reason that my practice filled up so quickly was because I was an enthusiast, and some of the enthusiasm would rub off on my patients. Whatever kind of problem they were bringing to bear, they came in with, my attitude was, we're going to really basically cure you, and I'll do whatever it takes, I'll do anything, to help you get over the problem. At first that had a very salutary effect on the patients. Through my enthusiasm a lot of the patients were improving. Maybe their stuff didn't go away completely, but it certainly got less, and there was some sense of progress.

I was getting a swelled head, "Oh yeah, I know how to do things that most therapists can't do. I'm not constrained by the limitations of psychoanalysis, psychotherapy," whatever. But then something happened which freaked me out. What happened basically was, all the progress that these patients made, at some point or another, went away, and they ended up back where they started from. It was worse than being back where they started from, because not only had their progress been nullified, but they also lost faith in me and they lost faith in therapy in general. The therapy had actually been a negative for them. Some of them were quite angry at me about that, because I made promises that

I couldn't actually keep. So, that's the setup for what I was facing at that time, and I was really young.

It happened so many times with so many patients, finally I was able to feel what was going on and why everybody was regressing and going back to basically where they started from. And the only way I can describe it is, there was a force that was acting on them that was fighting against everything we were doing, and it didn't particularly matter what the problem was. In other words, it could be anything from high anxiety, it could be somebody who's a compulsive gambler, it could be somebody who couldn't control his temper, somebody who's depressed and didn't have the wherewithal to change their life or to take a risk or whatever. It didn't matter; I could literally feel this force.

**Joe Bankman:** And of course the force is thwarting them in their efforts.

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah, that's correct. What I found, this was probably over the first two, three, maybe four years of therapy, I gave the thing a name, which, I just called it Part X. Partially because X meant, at least to me it meant, a mystery, but it also meant it will X you out, prevent you from making progress. That was the beginning of this thing.

**Joe Bankman:** We all have this enemy inside of us, leading us to the same unproductive behavior and thoughts again and again.

**Barry Michels:** Exactly. Look, what we're saying, and I know it's a stretch for people to think in terms of this intelligent being living inside of you thwarting you every step of the way, but even if you just call it the force of habit, it will do everything it can to hold you back. If you want to write a book or start a business, it'll get you to procrastinate. Let's say you do start the book, or go try to get a loan; as soon as you hit a setback it'll get you to give up. The most common form it'll take is, it's just that voice in your head constantly undermining you. "You're a loser. Oh my God, don't try that, you'll just embarrass yours. I know you're on a diet but you really deserve a break today. Just have that one donut." Whatever form it takes at any moment of your day, it's always working against you.

The real revelation for me when I met Phil was he was able to explain how this undermining tendency inside of you was actually the key to developing your potential. In other words, if you can use tools to overcome this inner enemy, then there's almost nothing that you can't do. It's interesting, I don't mean to go on and on, but the song that you chose for the intro to your podcast is a Leonard Cohen song that I love because of this one line that says, "There is crack is everything. That's how the light gets in." And that essentially expresses our whole philosophy of therapy, which is, Part X breaks you, it cracks you in some way, but if you can work with it, if you can use our tools to overcome it, then the light comes in. Then the potential really has space to expand.

**Joe Bankman:** Barry, it's a gorgeous line, and I wonder if we could ask all of our listeners to pause for a second, don't do this if you're driving, and think whether there's an anxious or depressed bully inside of you. Some repetitive pattern or force that's stopping you from getting to where you want to go.

Barry, now take me through an example of how that inner enemy operates. Your book is divided into descriptions of common problems, common inner enemies. One problem is addiction and impulse. Suppose I have an addictive personality, and it might be gambling, it might be alcohol, or sex, or a shopping spree, and maybe everybody likes to do some of those things, but for me it's always 24-7 in my mind as the primary reward. What do I do?

**Barry Michels:** Joe, you think this is a podcast, but actually we've organized an intervention.

**Joe Bankman:** [laughter] Thank you!

**Barry Michels:** We've got friends and family members standing by. [laughter]

**Joe Bankman:** In that case, surfing the web is what I'd like you to focus on.

**Barry Michels:** Look, this affects everyone. Everyone. One of Part X's favorite tactics is just to get you to give in to one impulse after another, whether it's food, or drugs, or updating your social media page. When my phone pings, I'm like Pavlov's dog. It's really hard not to interrupt whatever it is I'm doing not to check it. What we do is, we give you a tool in the book with which you can control *any* impulse. Let me explain the philosophy behind the tool, and then if you want I can run you through the tool.

**Joe Bankman:** I'd love that.

**Barry Michels:** The philosophy is like this. Think about it: if you crave something outside of yourself, whether it's ice cream, a cigarette, checking the news for the latest outrage, then something must be missing inside of you. If there weren't some sort of emptiness inside, you wouldn't feel impelled to fill it. You'd have more of a take it or leave it attitude. Sometimes you can control that impulse with sheer willpower: "I want to check my phone, I'm not going to let myself do it. I want to, I'm not going to." That can be successful sometimes, but the problem with that approach is that it keeps the focus on the outside world as the source that's going to fill you up. The best you can hope for with that approach is, I've successfully controlled *this* impulse but I'm still left with a gaping hole inside. That's what, in AA, they call a 'dry drunk', and we can talk more about the psychology of that if you're interested.

But what would happen, just ask yourself, what would happen if I gave up on the outside world ever filling me up? After all, it never really has because I still keep wanting these things. What would happen if I gave up on the outside world, turned away from it, and just looked inside and paid attention to the

emptiness? Simply visualize a void inside of me. Strangely enough, this is where the magic happens. Because, and just go with me here, if you can stare into the empty void and stay calm, the nothingness turns into a somethingness, something that can actually fill you up inside. That is a much more permanent answer to addiction and craving.

Now, in order to construct a tool, what we had to do, Phil and I, was come up with a symbol for that somethingness that's inside of you. And for all of human history the sun has been a symbol for abundant energy and warmth and life that just lasts forever. We decided to make the sun black. We decided to make it look just like the sun at a moment of total solar eclipse. Because what we wanted to do was have that visual remind you that you've essentially obscured this inner sun by trying to fill yourself up in the outside world over and over and over again. In other words, in a sense, the outside world has eclipsed your inner strength. That's the whole idea behind the tool.

**Phil Stutz:**

My way into this issue has to do with deprivation. For me, what I find is, if you ... You have something you want, you want to eat a chocolate cake, and you don't eat it. At that point you're going to have a feeling of deprivation, but once you take that feeling of deprivation and look inside yourself, the feeling of being deprived actually becomes like a flashlight. It actually helps you see inside yourself, and it has tremendous potential. That's what we call the black sun. Eventually the sun part of it, again, if you remain calm and you're repurposing your sense of deprivation, in a way you can remove the blackness, and the sun with all of its potential . It's not just that you can see it, you actually can feel it. I call that, I like to make up these little mantras, I call it "Deprivation is creation." My patients like it because they can remember that. It's a complete reversal of the experience of deprivation. It makes it potent.

One thing I forgot to say before about Part X which has a bearing on this, which is. Part X will create a small problem. Or it could be a big one, but let's say in this case you're overeating chocolate cake. Then, because you can't solve the problem that Part X creates, that's a sense of impossibility, that sense of impossibility starts to spread beyond the specific problem. That's where you get the modern person, so many people that are coming to us that want more out of life than what I've accomplished, and they can't. It seems impossible. The whole idea of using tools to nullify or to overcome the Part X symptoms, in this case it's an addiction to chocolate cake, that starts to build up the sense of possibility instead of impossibility.

**Joe Bankman:**

All of life is kind of a chocolate cake that we keep thinking is going to satisfy us, but no matter how much we get, even when we can afford the best chocolate cake, we're actually not any happier.

**Barry Michels:**

Exactly. I also want to pick up on something that Phil said about "Deprivation is creation." Because as crazy as this maybe sounds to people who are really just learning this for the first time, when you use this tool over and over and over again, you begin to look forward to your impulses, not because you're going to

gratify them but because you're going to be able to turn deprivation, the experience of deprivation, into something empowering. It's an amazing kind of 180 degree switch from our whole society's philosophy, which is just get as much as you possibly can. I'm actually looking forward to depriving myself, because I know that that leads to something really good coming up inside.

**Joe Bankman:** Barry, the point you just made is consistent with mindfulness, which a lot of our listeners have heard of or tried. Mindfulness teaches us to be aware of our desires, but understand that we don't have to satisfy them. In fact, accepting the desire without feeling the need to satisfy it is one of the keys to a mindful life.

**Barry Michels:** Yes, exactly. It's almost like punctuation. Part X wants to put the period at the end of, "I want it. Get it." What we want to do is extend the period out so it's like, "I want it. I don't get it. Interesting, what happens next?"

**Phil Stutz:** Yes..

**Joe Bankman:** I'm also thinking of the concept of distress tolerance, which is big and a very complicated word that describes a therapeutic technique called dialectical behavioral therapy, DBT. That's the notion that real strength comes when you can sit with the distress and see what happens then.

**Barry Michels:** Yes, exactly. Exactly. I would say that we're going just one step further from that, because those are essentially skills that are used to tolerate pain.

**Joe Bankman:** That's right.

**Barry Michels:** But this goes beyond that. What we're saying is, the pain of deprivation actually puts you in touch with a resource you never knew you had. There's something mysterious inside of you. In a larger sense, with the history of psychology, this is the difference between depth psychology and these more cognitive behavioral approaches, and to me it doesn't really matter, I'm not that into differentiating between the two, but I am into telling people that this isn't just going to allow you to tolerate deprivation; you're going to discover something inside of you that you never knew was there.

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah, I think that's worth repeating, it's so important. We're not into "curing," in quotes, like you have a problem and cure you. We're into finding potentials in each of us, which are a little different in each person. In therapy, using tools, if you can restore the sense of growth, of forward motion, that's not exactly a cure; it's more like transcending the problem altogether. We always try to keep that in the forefront. Where are you going, what's going to be meaningful for you, what's specifically meaningful for you, and if you can use the tools to overcome Part X and keep moving forward, that's actually more important than a cure, so to speak. It also helps people because Part X is relentless, and it's ruthless, and it's not going to go away. We call that ceaseless immersion.

Everybody's ceaselessly immersed in this counter force that doesn't want you to grow. When you understand that then you understand your task, which is to fight Part X with complete utter commitment for life, which is very different than a cure, so to speak.

**Barry Michels:** Yes. We're always, in our society, looking for a final endpoint. Phil's and my philosophy is there's no final endpoint until you die. You're constantly, constantly going to be battling with this. Which sounds like a drag, but the payoff is your potential is constantly expanding. You're constantly discovering new levels of excitement, enthusiasm, inspiration, et cetera.

**Joe Bankman:** Barry and Phil, let me go back to an addiction example and try to incorporate what you just said. You tell me if and when I give up the promise of my addiction, my chocolate cake, I become energized. How does that happen?

**Barry Michels:** What I do is, I just don't leave things on that level. Because I think Phil and I would both agree, we don't want therapy to be a discussion of intellectual ideas or concepts. When a person asks me a question like that, what I say is, "Close your eyes." What I'm going to do at that moment is just take them right through the tools so that they can actually experience what I'm otherwise trying to explain in an otherwise intellectual way, and then they're coming up with some counterargument why it's not going to work, or it doesn't exist, or they'll link it to some ideology that they don't agree with or something like that, which is another difference between the type of therapy that Phil and I do. It's very experiential. We really try to get past all of the logical intellectual arguments that people use, really that Part X uses, in order to deny them the experience that they actually want to be having.

**Joe Bankman:** So instead of trying to, in a way, understand this podcast in a kind of analytic way, what you want someone to do is to try one of those exercises that you have, and experience it, and see where that takes them?

**Barry Michels:** Exactly, because the moment we can create a new experience for a person, they have a foothold that they can go back to again and again and again, so when they're outside of my office and they're experiencing a craving for an ice cream cone, they can go back to that experience and recreate it and realize, "I don't need it. I don't need that ice cream. I feel filled up from within."

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah, and that force that fills you up from within is really the ultimate creative force. Because of the way society is going, there's more and more interested in creativity. Everybody wants to write a screenplay or whatever they want to do, and that's good, it's healthy. But the ultimate in priceless experience of creativity is when you can change your inner state. We call that a 'turnaround.' If you're depressed and you can bring yourself out of it, at least enough maybe to take the next step in whatever it is you're doing, if you have a bad temper and you can take the next step and control it, et cetera, et cetera, those are creative acts. The substrate that you're working on, your medium, isn't clay or marble or whatever, the medium you're working on is your own human soul.

That's the ultimate in, I guess you could say satisfaction, or confidence, or potency, is the ability to change your inner state. Part X then becomes a teacher, it becomes like a trainer, and you're developing the ability to do that, but it's only an effective teacher if you have the specific tools so that you can change your state right in that moment. There's no argument. It's not an intellectual thing. What we always say is, don't believe a word we say, but do what we tell you and see what happens. If nothing happens, fire us. The results speak for themselves.

**Joe Bankman:** I remember on WTF, Phil, you said something like, "the book only costs you \$20, or whatever it costs, and maybe it changes your life, and if not, you're out the \$20." Most people won't spend the 20 bucks on your book or others to change their life, and won't take other steps available to them. What's stopping them?

**Phil Stutz:** I'll tell you, from our point of view, Barry, and correct me if I'm wrong, but the key note to screwing people up, to demoralizing them, to making it impossible to them to really grow is what we call the realm of illusion. The realm of illusion is a final endpoint that doesn't exist, where you have what you think is the perfect life, and the perfect life is supposed to exonerate you from the three, what we call the laws of reality, which is pain, which you'll have throughout your life, uncertainty, which you'll have throughout your life, and the need for constant work, or effort, which you'll have throughout your life. Obviously there's inspiration, there's pleasure, there's love, there's all kinds of fantastic things, but those three negatives, if you will, aren't going to go away.

Here's what the realm of illusion is. Let's say a kid comes to, because this is what we deal with every day. A kid comes to LA, he's an actor, and he's all fucked up. He's not nice to people, his personal habits are terrible, he avoids auditions, you can go on and on. What he says is, "Yes, I know I have all these problems, but once I get to be a star," and that's what the realm of illusions is, "My problems will go away. I will be happy. I will be happy when I reach," whatever this is. Somebody else, it'll be money. Somebody else, it'll be marrying the right person. It doesn't really matter what the illusion is. The supposition is, once I accomplish whatever it is I think I have to accomplish, in this case it's to be a movie star, all of these problems are going to go away. That's ridiculous, none of the problems go away. None of the problems go away.

But here's the kid, and he works hard, let's say it took him five years, and he became a star, and he still feels like shit. He still can't relate, let's say, to women properly, as an example. He wants to write something, he can't write it, there's another discipline, et cetera. At that point, that's where you see a lot of these actors kill themselves, whether they do it overtly or they do it with drugs slowly, because their attitude is, "I did what was expected of me, and I was promised this illusionary life, and it's not here. I don't know what the hell to do now. I made it and I still didn't make it." That's an extreme case obviously, which I picked just so you could understand it, but the whole society is geared looking through these illusionary magical states to be in.



**Joe Bankman:** It's a little bit like getting into the best law school.

**Phil Stutz:** That's exactly it. [laughter]

**Barry Michels:** That's exactly what it is. [laughter]

**Joe Bankman:** We've mentioned your previous book, The Tools. What's the difference between the two books? If someone's starting off, should they start with the most recent one, should they start with The Tools, should they order them each in a box set?

**Barry Michels:** It's interesting, I'd be interested to hear what you have to say about this Phil. I feel that you could start with either book quite easily. I think each book is self-contained and stands on its own. I think that our newest book goes a little bit deeper, a lot deeper actually, into our philosophy. The first book was organized around the four most common problems that we see in psychotherapy, which is good, but what the second book does is, it goes deeper into those and other problems and explains the propagator of those problems, which is really Part X. I'm 50-50 on which one people read first. I think they'll get a lot out of both.

**Phil Stutz:** I think if they're naive to all of this stuff they should read the first book first, because it doesn't depend on any kind of theoretical system, et cetera. Then you just see that there are tools, and the tools are real, the problems are prevalent, there are a lot of other people fighting the same thing. We have some stories in there of people who won. And again, the tools are the bridge from a problem into a sense of greater prowess, potential, possibility inside yourself, whatever.

**Joe Bankman:** The first book is a little bit more concrete. If you're anxious it gives you a metaphor and a picture about how to treat your anxiety.

**Barry Michels:** Yes. I also, in the first book, we go through, really, sort of my transformation from skepticism to really getting that this stuff works, which is, I think, I mean, I've heard over and over again from people that that was very helpful to them, because we get pigeonholed as "spiritual," which is a word that means so many different things to so many different people. And to skeptics it just means, "get me out of here." I think it's helpful for people to read that part of the first book just to say, "all right, these people are not trying to ask us to convert to a religion or something."

**Phil Stutz:** Yes, I agree. Believe nothing we tell you unless you test it yourself and it works.

**Barry Michels:** Exactly.

**Joe Bankman:** So, two completely down-to-earth people asking others to kind of take a little risk, take a chance, and try to experience something.

**Phil Stutz:** Yeah.

**Barry Michels:** Exactly.

**Joe Bankman:** We like to end each podcast with a technique our listeners could use, and I wonder, Barry and Phil, do you have a suggestion for one thing our listeners might try?

**Barry Michels:** I'd love to just read the Black Sun Tool and have them try that. Would that be all right?

**Joe Bankman:** Fantastic.

**Barry Michels:** Great.

Step one is, close your eyes, again, unless you're driving, and imagine that there's something you want, and you can't have it, so you feel deprived. Make the feelings of deprivation as intense as you can. Now let go of the thing completely. It's as if it disappears and it's no longer available to you. Furthermore, let go of the whole outside world. It's no longer going to be a source for you. Instead, just turn inward and visualize an empty void inside of you. Just breathe, stay calm, stay still, and face the void. If anything, try to be a little curious, because you don't know what's down there. Now, from the depths of the void, imagine a black sun ascending. Its energy is warm and limitless, and it just keeps expanding until it completely fills you up inside. Finally, turn your attention back to the outside world. That black sun energy overflows and just surges out of you, and as it enters the world it becomes this pure white light of infinite giving. Essentially, you've become the sun.

**Joe Bankman:** Thank you Barry. And thank you Phil.

**Barry Michels:** You're welcome. Thank you.

**Phil Stutz:** Thank you.

**Joe Bankman:** I really enjoyed this conversation with my friends Phil and Barry, who have managed to connect with so many others through their books. I hope you did, too. For anyone who would like to access the resources from this podcast, including links to Phil's and Barry's books, please see our website at [www.law.stanford.edu/wellnessproject](http://www.law.stanford.edu/wellnessproject). Or. Google "Wellness" "Stanford" and "Bankman." Thank you for listening and please tune in again next time for another episode of the WellnessCast™