

Bold(her)

Financial Literacy: A Path to Empowerment

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Lisa Bragg:

Imagine a world where managing your finances is no longer a source of stress but a pathway to empowerment, that's the world we're stepping into today. My guest is Saijal Patel. Saijal is a powerhouse in financial strategy, a former TV anchor, and the founder of 'Saij Elle'. Her mission? To make finance approachable and understandable, especially for women.

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I'm Lisa Bragg and this is Bold(h)er brought to you by BMO for Women, helping women make their next bold move.

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What was the financial literacy conversation in your family? If you're like many.. there wasn't one..but we did know about needs and wants Saijal what was it like in your family?

Saijal Patel:

This is what's interesting, Lisa Bragg. I grew up where we talked about money all the time. When I was seven years old, my parents showed me their paycheck and explained to me the different elements of it. That they had to pay taxes, that, this went towards something else, that they had this pension and union. I had a vague idea of what a paycheck meant. My mom would sit us down and say, "We have this much and this is how much that buys," or "When I go and buy this, I have to work X amount of hours."

I was around it all the time. It's interesting that you say that you didn't have money conversations because I thought my upbringing was normal. [chuckles] I thought everybody had money conversations. Then I realized when I was much older that, no, most people didn't have it. I say this, not to blame parents because I have this conversation all the time with parents. I think parents just feel one, there is a shame and stigma around money. If we talk about money, it's seen as uncouth. We're not supposed to. It's dirty.

The second thing is if parents don't have the financial literacy skills, then they don't feel comfortable teaching their children because they don't know what to teach. Those are some of the challenges that I've seen and frankly, I'm trying to break. [chuckles]

Lisa Bragg:

It is that we don't know what we don't know that comes into play with it. What was that aha moment that you realized, actually, I really need to make a course for this and that women need to have a better understanding of financial literacy? Was there an aha moment that you said, "I need to be that

person"? Because you have a great career as a broadcaster and a financial expert, but when was that aha moment that you realized this is really needed?

Saijal Patel:

Honestly, it was throughout my career. There were many aha moments. When I was a financial advisor and I started off as an assistant, I would notice that in meetings, a lot of times the female partner would not come to the meetings. I remember asking the brokers that I worked with, "Why are they not showing up? Why is it just the men?" It was interesting to me. A lot of times, they would tell me they're just not comfortable or their husband just feels like they're in charge. This is going back 20-some years.

Then fast forward, when I was a financial journalist with CNBC, I had a lot of female friends who told me they didn't understand anything that I was saying on TV. Some of them just thought it was very boring. That was an aha moment because I felt like you really need to understand how money works. Because as much as we talk about personal finance and personal management, there are lots of things, economic policies and government policies that are affecting our financial wellness. If you don't understand that, how do you vote? How do you have your say if you don't understand how money works?

Then fast forward, I realized financial literacy, again, it's a crisis as far as I am concerned. Then when I started looking at statistics, I realized how vulnerable women were. When you look at the literacy and what I'd like to call capability, which is actually more encompassing, it's not just knowledge, it's confidence, it's action, engaging with the financial industry, women fell behind men in every country. I did not find a statistic where women led men. That was worrying for me, especially when we're half the population. [chuckles] So I just decided I have to do something about it.

Lisa Bragg:

It's not just the dreams of today. It's that long-term security piece that we need to consider. Now I want to get into comfort because that's a thing, but you also meant boring. You said boring in your chat. How do we think about financial literacy as not boring? How do we get excited about it and excited about what really is our future? What do you do to light that spark in people?

Saijal Patel:

Oh, I love this question. [laughs] What I tell people is I said, "Look, anything that you want to do in life, whether it's buying a home or starting a business or traveling or anything that you want, requires money pretty much." I see it as maximizing your resources and understanding a strategy and implementing it so you can live your best life because you need resources, whether it's a paycheck or your savings. If I teach you how to maximize your resources as best you can, then you can achieve what you want. You can do more. I think who doesn't want that?

Lisa Bragg:

It's the whole knowledge is power type of thinking that by being in control of our finances, having the knowledge about it, that that's okay. We don't know what we don't know, but gaining that knowledge is the difference. How do we start to become comfortable? I know people always say, "Oh, I don't have confidence in this," and so I always talk about steps of courage to things, but do you talk about steps of comfort to getting into financial literacy conversations? How do you approach for all of us to get more comfortable with having what's essentially for some of us, a taboo conversation?

Saijal Patel:

I do say this, everyone cares about money and I think everyone can acknowledge that. That's not a selfish thing. I think we all understand that we need money not just to survive, but to thrive. That's a basic acknowledgment that I think I try to get women comfortable with that and say, "That's okay." Prioritizing oneself so you can achieve things and take care of your family is not a selfish thing, number one. Two, it's interesting you talk about confidence because I feel like women in general are sent this message that you have to be confident first, and then you can do something.

That's not how confidence works. Confidence works by you acting, by you doing something and seeing the results, even if it's small. Then you start building the confidence saying, "Wow, look at that, I achieved this," or "Wow, I did figure that out. That wasn't so hard." That's how confidence comes. It's not the reverse. My program is also very biased towards action, even if it's small steps. I have seen this, Lisa, over and over again, I have women coming into the program who didn't have confidence, sometimes said, "I feel stupid I don't know this."

Then you see the progression and they're like, "Wow, this isn't so hard." I'm like, "No." They're very confident. They've erased so much of those negative narratives that they've held onto for a year. It's amazing to see, and it's incredibly rewarding for me as much as it is for them.

Lisa Bragg:

How do you get people going on this path then of mindset and really thinking about their financial literacy? What are some steps and some action things that we could do right now?

Saijal Patel:

I think we have to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I know it's a hard thing, but one of the things that I talk about is, we don't grow unless we get out of our comfort zone. We've done it many many times in our life. We didn't know how to drive at some point. We learned how to drive. For mothers, you didn't know how to be a mother. You learned those skills and you were motivated because of the love that you have for your family and your children. I say you apply it the same way. If you love your life and you want to fulfill it to the max, then you will learn some of the skills to manage your money so you can do those things.

Lisa Bragg:

What are some other action steps though that we can take with thinking about our mindset though that we're not holding ourselves back from this? Is there anything that we can do right now?

Saijal Patel:

I think getting started is the biggest step.

Lisa Bragg:

How do we get started?

Saijal Patel:

You can get started when it comes to financial literacy, read books, follow people that you trust, even on Instagram, read the financial section of the newspaper, and be curious. Ask questions. That's how you learn.

Lisa Bragg:

That's the starting step is just gaining that knowledge as we go. Then how do we get out of our own way on all this though? Because I think so many times, yes, we can read these things and we know what's good for us and yet we don't do what's good for us. How do you advise us to watch out for sabotaging our own futures?

Saijal Patel:

I do think it's one of the hardest things. We like to feel like we need to know a lot before acting, but the action part is probably the most important. I've seen this, when you act and you take those steps, automatically, your brain just kicks in and that's when you actually learn. Because as you're going through the process, you'll start asking yourself questions, does this make sense or this other thing makes sense? Then you go back and Google is our best friend. [chuckles] You can almost Google anything. Just like being curious and you'd be surprised at how quickly you build knowledge. By the way, you don't need a PhD in this. There's only certain basic things that you need to learn. A lot of it is about just making sure you understand how certain concepts apply to your life.

(MUSIC)

Lisa Bragg:

There are so many pressures around us. From being young and also currently right now where we are very much in a consuming culture where we go out and buy things to maybe self-soothe or it's going out with the friends and everyone wants to go shopping. All the different levels of stores now where you can really drop a lot of money now for one thing. It's really changing where you can spend. Some people do have shopping addictions too, where they want to go out and shop, shop, shop because that consuming makes them feel good. In the long run, then they feel bad and then it's a cycle back and forth of these behaviors. Do you get deep into those things too with your clients?

Saijal Patel:

I do, and it's actually a part in the course that I talk about. What's really interesting is women are often told, and if you talk to a lot of women, they'll say, "Yes, but I've been told I'm great at managing money." I say, "I think that's wonderful." We hang on to that, I think too much where I said, "How are you good at managing money?" They said, "I managed the household budget," and I said, "That's wonderful, but here's the thing, you can't budget your way to wealth and you can't budget your way to retirement. It doesn't work that way." Mainly because expenses are rising much faster than wages for everyone, but women especially, but this is for everyone.

I said, "You actually have to think about, as I say, the revenue side of the equation."

Lisa Bragg:

We can't just stop having the lattes to make the world go around the way we want it to go, right? That's a little done.

Saijal Patel:

Yes. Unfortunately, I think media sends women these messages around expenses, expense control, buy this, and how we buy it and what we buy. So much of it is tied to our self-worth and our self-esteem. Sometimes it's just being aware that this is happening and it's hard. We have to remember that trillions of dollars of marketing goes into this. There are big machines that collect so much data on us that we're not even aware of it when we're scrolling our social media feeds.

Lisa Bragg:

The consume, consume, consume. Oh, it's just in the little-- and that goes from actually something I want, then I start thinking, "No, it's something I need because I need to keep up with the Joneses or keep up with someone else", and then we get into this cycle. It's a lot of pressure on all the social media feeds too, where you think you're seeing someone's regular day, but actually, you're just seeing their really theatrical day. You're not seeing behind the scenes of all of it.

Saijal Patel:

You're not. I have a saying, I said, "Wealth is what you don't see." [laughs]

(MUSIC)

Lisa Bragg:

I find we don't stop to reflect on ourselves enough and our spending habits. Any ideas of how we can actually stop and reflect so we can gain this knowledge of how we're going to move forward?

Saijal Patel:

I think the reason that we don't stop and reflect is it comes back to the shame. I don't think we want to acknowledge it and then we feel bad about it. Again, it's that avoiding. If I pause and stop, I'm going to start feeling bad about myself. Here's how I try to help women frame it is that one, you're not bad. You may have made poor decisions, but again, you didn't know. Maya Angelou always says, and I love that quote, when better, you do better. That's the first thing, having compassion for yourself. The world's not ending because you went out and got into a little bit of debt or even a lot of debt. You can fix those things.

I think this is part of society too. We take too much of a black-and-white approach. It's all or nothing. I'm good or I'm bad. I fail or I succeed. It's not like that. Money doesn't work like that. Nothing actually works like that. It is that comfort and it's that compassion of saying, just be okay. Look back, celebrate your wins because I promise you, you have had many. You wouldn't be where you are today if you didn't. Then think about, "Where's an opportunity where I can fix something or do better and what do I need to learn to shift that?" That's just being curious.

I really do think that helps. I think when we're so tough on ourselves, we tend to just pretend that it's going away. Unfortunately, financial security or not being financially secure, it doesn't go away. You can't close your eyes and avoid it. I always say you can't magically come up with \$100,000 or \$200,000. I wish it worked like that, but it doesn't work like that. Whereas when you think about health, you might have an opportunity to fix your health fast. You can take medication for it. The doctor may say, "Okay, get out for walks or anything," but money just doesn't work like that.

Lisa Bragg:

I think we need to start saying, "Hey, let's have these conversations amongst ourselves." We're starting to see it where people are wanting to say, "Let's have a conversation about our income." Where we know we're not always being paid what the next person is being paid. Having some of the conversations around that, it really liberates all of us. It's, necessary for all of us. It's not just good for some of us, but necessary for all of us to have those conversations. Do you get excited when people starting to have those conversations in the world?

Saijal Patel:

Oh, yes, absolutely. Lisa, I get asked a lot of times, "Hey, what do you do?" When I tell them, I can't stop the conversation. Everyone gets excited about it, which tells me that everyone cares. Everyone cares and they're curious and they want to learn and that's fun. That's fun for me.

Lisa Bragg:

Do you ever hear anyone saying "Oh no, we shouldn't have those conversations anymore"? We have this ingrained idea that we shouldn't be talking about finances. It's a taboo, but we all know I think that it's a throwback to an older era different era, but do you ever have anyone say, "You just shouldn't talk about that"?

Saijal Patel:

I don't and I don't know if it's because I'm able to create that safe space. I'm not sure. Honestly, it's why I went into this because I felt like so many people would come to me with their financial problems and divulge their deepest secrets and of course, it's all confidential. I would never say anything and I thought "Wow there must be something that I'm doing to allow for them to feel comfortable without that shame and speaking about it." I haven't experienced it, but I know it's there. I know it's out there.

Lisa Bragg:

What do you suggest on starting up those conversations with people that we care about?

Saijal Patel:

Let me tell you, they've said this, that women when it comes to partners or married partners, they rather talk about sex or death before money. So that says something, doesn't it? Because I think again, it just triggers a lot of emotions from both parties. I always say I don't think it's money. I think the conversation starts with, "Honey, we want to achieve these things. Let's sit down and talk about how do we see our future? What are the things that we want to achieve? How do we see our retirement?" Then it is how are we going to get there?

It's inevitable. You actually have to talk about the resources and that helps. Now, the other thing is recognizing that because we all have different money personalities, your partner is also going to have a different personality and that's okay. Now we often get into fights with our partners, it's very common because we're not always on the same page, but I think we have to create that safe space. Because they've gone through something and they've seen something and again, it's not right or wrong, it just is what it is.

Having that open space and again being curious as to so why do you want to achieve this or why do you value this or tell me about how you grew up in the conversations you had around money and why you think this way about it. Just being curious I feel really helps.

Lisa Bragg: Now, I'm curious about your 20 / 80 rule.

Saijal Patel:

There's so much focus on financial literacy, and I always like to say literacy is about 20% of the battle, 80% is behavior. That's actually what predicts success. Again, I use this analogy, if I was in a room full of people and I asked everyone, "How do you lose 10 pounds?" Everyone would be able to tell me. They'd have maybe certain differences, but overall, they probably mentioned okay, you have to eat better and more vegetables, and you have to move more or exercise. That's literacy.

Now how many of the people in the room would be able to lose that 10 pounds and stick to it? That's behavior. So much of the things that we do or don't do when it comes to financial success, it has a lot more to do with our behavior and our attitudes and Then obviously that leads to action or inaction

Lisa Bragg:

Are there common things that you know from all of your experiences that we can all start to adjust?

Saijal Patel:

I think what it is surrounding yourself with the knowledge. What I mean by that is look, we are a product of our environment. If we don't consume anything that is financially related. That's a reminder for us. We're not going to be thinking about it. I'm not saying you run out and follow everybody on Instagram that talks about finances because unfortunately, there are things out there that I wouldn't trust but turning on the financial news once in a while just being around that.

One of the things that has worked I think in my course is having that community of women so they feel like, "Okay, there's a place I can go and I know that the women in this program also have the same goals." Because it can be lonely, If you're around people who don't talk about money or don't have these priorities where you're making this a priority and they're not It's tough. You want that support. It's like you saying, "I want to exercise, and no, I don't have anyone around me that does the same thing." We're a product of our environment and I always say willpower is finite by the way. It's an uphill battle.

I think just saying to yourself, "Look, how do I introduce financial literacy so it's in my spear?"

Lisa Bragg:

It's finding those friends, that community. That's one of the behavior changes. Is there anything else?

Saijal Patel:

Books, there's tons of great books out there. Just picking up and reading a bit of it.

Lisa Bragg:

What do you say to those people who say though it's almost that they've given up already, "I have no money to invest," or "I don't earn enough, it's never going to work"? What do you say to get them and saying, "No, we can start to move towards these healthier attitudes"?

Saijal Patel:

When they say that, I almost-- and I'm not saying that might not be the case but often I think again, it goes back to what do you value? Goes back to human nature. They're just associating more pain in doing this than pleasure. Again, it's trying to shift that belief and saying, "Okay, what's your pain point right now? Are you feeling the pain?" They're like, "Yes, I'm stressed." This is the opportunity to shift that and getting them to do that because I think a lot of times they feel like "Ugh, it's not going to work." Again, it's because they don't know what they don't know.

I can tell you I've been doing this for so long, it's not that hard. It really is not that hard. I think sometimes we just make it complicated, the jargon and all those things, but it isn't hard

Lisa Bragg: I think that's the thing. It seems like it's so complicated and somebody just needs to open that door of knowledge to us.

Saijal Patel:

You don't have to know everything. The whole idea is again, being curious. Saying "Hey, I didn't really understand this. Do you understand this? Why don't we learn together?" I go back to my parents, they were immigrants that came from India. Their first language was not English. It's really interesting, Lisa, that I think part of why I learned so much at a young age and my brother did is out of necessity. They were reading statements and they didn't really quite understand it, so they would ask us. My brother did my parents' tax returns when he was in grade seven. It shocks people but they were like, "We're not giving it to an accountant. [chuckles] It costs money," so he did it.

This is how we got financially literate. Why I'm making that point is my parents didn't know, we learned together, and that's okay

Lisa Bragg:

No matter what, if you don't know, you don't know and that's okay and we can move forward with where we are now. It's being willing to tell those stories like you just shared and saying, "Oh, we never had conversations. It was taboo, so I really don't know." I may be embarrassed that I don't know these things because no one ever talked about it.

Saijal Patel:

Why would you know?

Lisa Bragg:

Exactly.

Saijal Patel:

You can't be embarrassed with something that you weren't expected to know.

Lisa Bragg:

Sometimes I think people feel like "Oh, it's so late. I'm in my 40s. I'm in my 50s. I'm in 60s." You know what, every day is the first day to get that knowledge. It doesn't matter. It's just starts today, isn't it?

Saijal Patel:

We underestimate how much life can change in five years or ten years. Lisa, to your point, I've had women in my program saying, "Yes, but I'm 40 or I'm 50 and I haven't really started my retirement journey." First of all, it's better than nothing so you start now and you have to remember that most of us are going to live until we're in our 80s or 90s. If you're younger, you're probably going to reach 100. We're living a lot longer. That's a lot of time to build wealth. You're not going to take all your money out to spend in one year. You're going to take a portion out and the rest, you can grow in a safe diversified portfolio. You have lots of time. We just underestimate that.

Lisa Bragg:

That's great advice. I know we want to bring in experts as we go on this journey, so we might already have a financial advisor. As we start to take off that shame mantle that we wear, how do we have a conversation with an advisor to say, "You know what, I don't understand what you're saying." Because it's so many people who are experts, they want to show you that they're an expert, so they will use all the jargon. Where actually a really good expert is beyond the jargon and they can make it simple for that person who's just right in front of them and also give you the stories of someone who's right in front of them.

How do we say to that person, "I'm curious, but I don't know, can you help me?" Because we feel that shame when we do that.

Saijal Patel:

Exactly that. Let me just step back, Lisa. I feel like the media sends these messages to most people that you're supposed to do it yourself. You're supposed to invest and you're supposed to whatever. Just manage everything yourself. I've been in the industry for a long time. There's a lot of things that I do myself, but I can't. Actually, if you want to manage your entire financial plan, which is not just investing, it is cash flow management, it's tax management, it's retirement planning, it's estate planning, all these things, you actually have to delegate to people.

I always say this, what does the CEO do? You're the CEO of your money. You delegate to people who are smarter than you in those specific areas, but that doesn't mean that you blindly hand it over and not get involved because at the end of the day, it's your money, and it's your future. I always say it is okay to delegate, but you must get involved. To your point around advisors, I agree. I think I always feel like they're human too, so they want to show that they're adding value. Sometimes they go down this wrong path of using jargon and only focusing on performance.

As women, when we show up, have that conversation with them. There's nothing to be ashamed of. I do it all the time. There's no stupid question. You can literally say, "Here's my goals. Here's what I think I want to do. Here's what I value. Can you just explain to me how a plan and your solutions are going to help me get there?" Start there. I think often we make preconceived judgments about each other. I think advisors do the same with their clients. I think sometimes clients may think, "Oh, this person might be out to get me." You don't know. I think it's just about open communication and discussing what's important to you.

I find that when you do that, most advisors I've met, they're incredible. They want to help their clients but sometimes they don't know how because they feel like it's like pulling teeth and so I don't know how to help them because they're not really telling me what they need or what's important to them. That partnership is really important.

Lisa Bragg:

It's really understanding what is success for you. What is your own success values? What are your values? Where do you want to go? What does success look like? Because maybe it's not having, a billion [chuckles] dollars in your portfolio. I'm just putting a big number out there because who knows what your numbers are? Is it that you really want to make sure that you are set up and that you're going to some exotic island for all of your retirement or that you're never retiring, but you want to have, trips and doing lots of great things? What is it that matters to you? It's really that self-reflection piece and that curiosity about yourself that helps start that knowledge and that information.

Saijal Patel:

It's your money, it's your life, it's going to be your retirement. It's important that you have a seat at the table to make sure that your values are reflected. If you happen to be in a relationship, again, your partner is going to have different perceptions of and views on where the money goes. Again, I'm not saying that's right or wrong. I'm just saying that it's different. You have to have a seat at the table to say, "Okay, that's great, but here's what I want to achieve, and here's what's important to me." How do we work with an advisor to make sure that we're able to reach those things together and we are moving forward in the right direction?

Lisa Bragg:

It keeps feeling like we're always going through some sort of economic time and it just keeps happening. It's been a long time of the concern about the economy. Any idea of how we can keep ourselves emotionally healthy as we go through this time?

Saijal Patel:

It's tough for a lot of people. What I'm hearing a lot of is the helplessness, with inflation and the economy and the uncertainty around it. Again, that's why I go back to the financial literacy, because if you understand how money works, if you can set up a good plan, trust me, a good plan is pretty sustainable. you're setting it up. You might be making tweaks once in a while, but just by doing that, you'll feel more comfortable and confident in weathering these storms. Because like I said, certainly not immediately, but we can't control so many factors that are affecting our financial health, but we can control what we do.

What is in our control is that financial capability piece. Building the knowledge, getting a plan in place, making sure we're engaged. That's the piece that we can control.

Lisa Bragg:

Those are some good first steps. Thank you for being with me.

Saijal Patel:

Thanks for having me.

((Music))