

# “Every failure was my best teacher”

Olympian Dame Kelly Holmes chats with career and confidence coach Dr Claire Kaye to share some truths about her career and how her struggles, as well as her triumphs, have made her the formidable woman she is today.

**When I was a kid, dreams were like fluffy clouds; nice ideas but not really something most people think will happen.** But deep down, I did believe in mine. From about 14, I knew I wanted to be in the army as a physical training instructor and to be an Olympic champion.

Those dreams only started to feel real when I saw what was possible, like watching Seb Coe win the 1,500 meters, which I already ran at school. First, it was seeing that it was possible and then thinking, okay what is the reality of making that happen?

I was not academic, but I had fire in my belly and sport gave me purpose. For me, it always starts with passion – that is what drives everything.

**If you just talk about things they'll never happen.** The possibilities only open up when you have a go. In sport, it is not just about running fast it is about hitting target times, and that takes maturity; losing a lot, staying in the game, and pushing through. It is a journey. You need talent, passion and

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a clear plan. Most people give up before they even get close because what they are trying is hard or overwhelming, but you have to take the rough with the smooth and keep going step by step.

**There were loads of times when self-doubt crept in.** It was usually when people around me questioned whether “it” was even worth it. They’d throw out little comments like: ‘Why put yourself through all this heartache?’ That kind of negativity doesn’t help when you are already struggling to find your way.

The truth is, self-doubt is part of the process because nothing is easy, and you cannot see the full journey ahead – you only see that looking back. When self-doubt hits, I try to remind myself how far I have come already. We get so focused on pushing forward that we forget what we have already achieved.

In sport I look at my wins and personal bests and think, ‘How do I tweak my training? Who do I need around me?’

What else do I need to do?' I see barriers as challenges to figure out.

It's never a straight line, more like the M25 with all its curves and slip roads and detours rather than a straight motorway. You might take a wrong turn, learn something, then get back on track. I always think that every failure was my best teacher, better than school anyway.

**When you are good at something it just feels natural to keep going.** It is not about being bigheaded, it is just part of who you are. Sure, I might never have become Olympic champion, but my mantra has always been: "If only" is too late. If you do not give something a proper go and keep at it, you will never know what you could have achieved.

Sport is tough. Keeping your body and mind strong when everything seems to let you down, that is when quitting feels easiest. But if I gave up at the first hurdle, I would never know how far I could have pushed myself.

Now when I hit a rough patch, I take a step back and reflect. Life is like a big puzzle: some pieces fit easily because we have done the work, while others need support or time; some are not meant to fit because perhaps they are not right for us. We can be way too hard on ourselves, chasing unrealistic goals that do not suit us.

The key is knowing why you want something. Is it to prove something to others or because it truly matters to you? If it is not for you, it will not keep you going.

**I have seen so many women losing sight of who they really are, especially when life gets busy with family, relationships and work.** We tend to quiet down our own ambitions, as if it is not okay to want more or be more. That attitude must shift.

Too many people go through life thinking, 'I wish I had' or, 'There is no point'. But honestly, most are not truly happy with just settling. Sure, you can be content with parts of your life, but deep down we all want to grow, do more and be more capable. If you tell yourself you are fine just as you are, then you are doing yourself a disservice.

**If someone is feeling stuck, then it's important to prioritise.** We all have so many ideas and dreams, but life is busy and those ideas just sit there. Two years later we are still thinking about them while someone







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else has started. So, start small. Even just five minutes a day. See if that fire is still there. It does not have to be massive – it could be a hobby or something simple that satisfies that itch.

We tend to want to do everything at once, so write down what you want and why. What would it add to your life? Knowing your why helps you focus on what really matters.

And here is the thing: it’s not selfish to put yourself on the list. We all get caught up in family and work but if you do not give yourself some priority you will never feel fully alive.

**My message really is what I said before, that “If only” is too late.** You don’t want to look back and think “If only”. Stop waiting for the perfect time, all the credentials or permission from anyone. Just start. Even a small step counts. That knot in your stomach when you look back and wonder “What if?”, that’s the real regret. So, pick up the phone, read that article, take a tiny step toward what excites you. It does not have to be perfect or big. Trying is enough. Because starting is where everything changes.

### DAME KELLY’S TIPS TO START TODAY!

- Start now – no excuses. “If only” is too late.
- Even five minutes a day is a start. Try. See what lights you up.
- Be clear on your why. Passion fuels persistence.
- Doubt is normal – but keep going anyway.
- Reflect on how far you’ve come – that’s your evidence.
- You matter. Put yourself on the list.
- Progress beats perfection every time.

Dame Kelly Holmes founded The Athena Effect, creating empowerment events for women. For more, visit [athenaeffectevents.co.uk](http://athenaeffectevents.co.uk).



Former GP Dr Claire Kaye is now a coach working with women to rediscover career confidence, find clarity and take back control of their lives. She has just launched her RISE approach self-coaching online course for women. Find out more at [drclairekaye.com](http://drclairekaye.com).