

63. How To Overcome Trauma - Justin Sunseri

How To Overcome Trauma

Justin Sunseri is licensed marriage & family therapist as well as the host of the [Polyvagal podcast](#).

In the interview about Trauma we discuss

- how to recognise Trauma,
- How to acknowledge Trauma,
- how to deal with Trauma, and
- how to overcome Trauma

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02:44 This Episode Is Not Intending To Trigger You

06:39 We Want You To Feel Safe

09:25 What Is Trauma?

12:44 The Trouble With Strategies

16:27 A Safe Adult

22:23 You Reactions Are Autonomic

27:00 Do Many Traumas Compound?

33:45 How Mind fullness Can Help

39:46 How Movement Can Help.

46:02 How Crying Can Help

Transcript:

Bill 0:00

Sometime down the road, they realised that they've done a physical recovery. But there's some ongoing trauma from that experience. And I'm not sure if I've got a grasp on what happens with trauma, when you experience many traumatic events. But too many traumatic events over a lifetime, compound and become a big one. Or like what happens when you are traumatised many times and then you're dealing with the trauma of a an injury from stroke, for example. And it seems like it's a more overwhelming space for people to overcome trauma, if they haven't dealt with their traumas over a lifetime.

Intro 0:45

This is recovery after stroke with Bill Gasiamis. Helping you go from where you are to where you'd rather be

Bill 0:52

Bill Gasiamis here, this is Episode 63 of the recovery after stroke podcast. And today I'm speaking with Justin Sunseri, from the Polyvagal podcast, about trauma, how to recognise it, how to acknowledge it, how to deal with it, and how to move on from it. Justin, welcome to the podcast.

Justin 1:16

I am super happy to be here. Thank you so much.

Bill 1:18

And I'm really pleased to have you man when I came across your own podcast, the poly bagel podcast and we'll get into that in a little bit. I got really excited. Because you're a therapist, a family therapist and a marriage therapist. Tell me a little bit about the work that you do.

Justin 1:34

And the titles a little bit misleading. It's marriage a family licensed marriage Family Therapist though I'm able to work with pretty much anybody. So I I've

done currently I'm a therapist in a school district. So I work with mostly high schoolers. I've also worked with little kids, I've done family therapy, I do parenting groups, I've been in those for the past 11 years or so. I've worked in substance abuse. So the amount of the leeway that I have with the degree is and with the licences pretty vast. So just the marriage and family therapy doesn't quite capture everything that we're able to do.

Bill 2:08

Yeah, great.

Justin 2:09

But right now I'm working in a school district with doing therapy with high schoolers.

Bill 2:14

When I heard some of your episodes, it seems that the theme for your a lot of your episodes of the podcast are about trauma. And you start every episode of your podcast talking about the possibility that this episode that you're about to do is going to trigger people. Why is it important to have that conversation at the beginning of your episode? And? And does that we'll just say that that was important to hear at the beginning of the episode this

Justin 2:44

The simple is there's there's a I guess, a couple different layers here. The simple answer is because I don't want to trigger my audience. I mean, I know it's bound to happen. I know that as we talk about trauma, and we keep the podcast very safe, we don't talk about details it's not necessary. I know that people who have survived the trauma going to go there anyways. So I don't need to explicitly, really, you know, say those details out loud. So we keep it very general. But you know, I wanted the best I can to educate in a safe way.

Because I want people to be able to benefit from it and grow from it. So that's the easy, simple answer is I want this to be a safe experience.

Bill 3:22

Yeah.

Justin 3:23

Little bit more complex answer would be that if we can, I don't know if we've

gotten this far yet. But, but if we can approach these things little by little, in short segments, it will increase our ability to handle them in greater doses so that when they do have a flashback, when they are talking about these things in therapy, that they are coming at it from hopefully, it's something called the vagal break. Hopefully, their vagal break is a little bit strong. We haven't gotten that far. But yeah, but basically, they'll be able to handle it. The next time we talked about it a little bit easier.

That's kind of the idea is this help someone by just by having new information. And I'm hoping by having new information and a nice solid explanation for why they went into a shutdown state or why they're stuck in a fight mode or free flight mode, that having a new explanation that in and of itself is can be very relieving. So the next time these things come up, it might be a little bit easier. So that's couple minutes, easy answer, but also a little bit more in depth as I don't want to help people build their ability to tolerate these things.

Bill 4:32

That's beautiful, because so that's a lovely way to start a podcast, by the way. And the reason I say there's a great way to start a podcast is because you're doing exactly that you're giving people the opportunity to learn something new, understand the application of what they learned. And then when it's time for them, and they're feeling brave enough, start applying it to their own experience of trauma, and then have little baby chunks of achievements, things that get through that allows them to get eventually to that higher level challenge that's causing them the drama in their life.

Justin 5:07

Yep, learning these things can just by themselves can be so illuminating. And so normalising and reduce the amount of fear and blame and self judgement. And that alone is a huge relief. Because it's like you've lived through the trauma, the trauma still lives within you. People are having nightmares about it, they're having flashbacks during the day. So that's already there. Plus, they have all this, like self judgement and blame and shame. And you know, I should have done this, I should have done that. If we can at least bring a new level of education and alleviate those thoughts of it was my fault sort of stuff. If we can at least alleviate that. Just by learning information that can be very healing, I get messages from people saying, like this, just hearing this was it was a big deal for me.

Bill 6:01

It's a big deal, because now they starting to learn what they didn't know they needed to know. And having that awareness is just a brilliant thing. Because imagine the first time you going through life, majority of your life experiencing something and then you learn something you didn't know you needed to know to help in the healing. And that is often I see with the people that I coach and the people that I speak to about stroke, I see that that first thing then starts to expand and become this next thing. And the Curiosity takes over. And it's like, well, if I if that was good for me, and I realised that now, what's the next thing that I need to find?

Justin 6:39

That's exactly, that's exactly it is. You tell someone who's survived a trauma and is not is kind of, you know, really stuck in a very raw place, we'll just do some meditation for them. It's like Nana, we're not, we're not quite there yet. My level of safety, my level of ability to tolerate what's going on inside of me is not even close to being able to close my eyes and sit still. But I'll listen to a new piece of information in doses at a time I'll do that. And is that is exactly it is that so I can tolerate that. And I'm a little bit curious about the next episode.

And I've noticed something that I have noticed that with my podcast looking at my stats, cuz I'm kind of stats obsessed with from the first episode where there's a drop off from the first episode of the second episode, there's a drop off. And maybe it's because the podcast or one only gets worse. It's good. I've heard from people. I've heard from people saying, I've listened to the first one like three times and I just, I'm not ready to get to the next one. That's, that's totally fine. There's no rush, there's plenty of time, it will be there forever.

But I've heard that from people who tell me that I'm not quite ready to get to the next one. And I see that in the stats, there is a drop off and then once people get the episode two is pretty much it stays, you know, look at the stats sort of stay pretty much flat as far as people aren't dropping off as far as listenership. But uh, yeah, if we can get a little bit of curiosity going. I think it's like a snowball effect. And that, you know, eventually they may be open to therapy, or meditation or yoga or whatever that looks like for them as far as their healing process.

Bill 8:12

Yeah.

Intro 8:13

If you've had a stroke, and during recovery, you'll know what a scary and confusing time it can be. You're likely to have a lot of questions going through your mind. Like, how long will it take to recover? Will I actually recover? What things should I avoid? In case I'm make matters worse, doctors will explain things. But obviously, because you've never had a stroke before, you probably don't know what questions to ask. If this is you, you may be missing out on doing things that could help speed up your recovery. If you finding yourself in that situation, stop worrying, and head to recovery after stroke calm, where you can download a guide that will help you. It's called seven questions to ask your doctor about your stroke. These seven questions are the ones Bill wished he'd asked when he was recovering from a stroke. They'll not only help you better understand your condition, they'll help you take a more active role in your recovery. head to the website now, recoveryafterstroke.com and download the guided it's free.

Bill 9:25

Can you give me some kind of a explanation about what trauma is? It doesn't have to be a dictionary definition. But what you feel trauma is?

Justin 9:36

We have to trau, trauma this we have to go a little bit deeper. But the basic idea is that you can there's a couple different paths to trauma. And one of them is a chronic disruption of connectedness and I forgot who said it was probably [Dr Porges](#) chronic disruption of connectedness which means that your connection with a safe adult, especially pretty much in childhood, it was chronically disrupted that might be through abuse or abandonment or neglect, but that you were not able to have a safe and solid relationship with safe adult.

So that was a chronic issue and that leaves you in this state of flight potentially from abuse usually from like abuse emotional abuse, or in a fight state or a completely shut down alone withdrawn state. As no fault of the victim it's that they didn't have the safe caregiver to build a healthy attachment with so that's one path trauma. The other path to trauma that I would label as surviving at least one acute intensive episode where you were sympathetically charged like you wanted to run away you wanted to fight but you weren't able to do so. And that might be because somebody immobilise you are something I was to me traumas usually from another human being like a tiger attacks you you don't actually I

guess you could be traumatised yeah you'd be traumatised. Yeah, that's right.

But um, but I always think about from human to human though. But um, but the shame is that there was that because that was my point is that when you survive a car crash, there's no shame. You can be traumatised, but shame is always connected human beings, I think. But yeah, so the second path of trauma, I would say is that you've survived a thing, like you want it to mobilise, you want it to get out of the situation, but you were stopped from doing so. And so your body went into this freeze state where you're highly charged, like your motors running, but you can't escape.

So you kind of like shutting, like, it's like you're hitting the brake and the gas at the same time in a car. And it can, the day to day experience might be something like panic, where you if someone's had a panic attack, you're extremely charged up, the thoughts are running wild heartbeats going, but then they freeze up. And I think it's like a of a day to day flow of experience of freeze. So I think it's two paths to trauma, which is a chronic disruption of connecting this or surviving at least one of these extremely intensive episodes where you cannot escape even though your body is ready to escape, or find somebody off.

Bill 12:20

On your website, there's a statement that says that trauma has been a constant underlying factor with nearly everyone I've worked with since 2008. And therefore, those people who are traumatised, are they having trouble in life generally speaking, and are struggling to have strategies to get through life because this underlying trauma is rearing its ugly head?

Justin 12:44

Yes.

The only thing I would, the caveat here, when we say that they're having trouble with strategies, they're not even in a place to strategize. So when you're traumatised, one of the things that gets compromised is your ability to think clearly make a plan, you're always kind of in this like flight, fight or shutdown state. And biologically speaking, when we go into those states, we really compromise our ability to think clearly, and to be able to problem solve, and to be able to cooperate with other people to you know what I mean, like, those those skills as cognitive, higher functioning kind of skill to get lost or compromised.

So it's not just a matter of, I can't strategize it, or I can't cope. It's like, my body's not in a place to be able to learn a new coping skill, or to apply it effectively. I'm always in this defensive state where my body thinks that I need to run away or fight or hide or be invisible. So it's, yeah, absolutely. Because I've worked with the adults I've worked with. The parents I've worked with, they're carrying stuff from their childhood, the adults I've worked with in parenting groups. It's the way they parent and the things that they're doing that they want to change, like yelling or being abusive, or whatever, is directly connected to it always is connected the way that they were they were raised by their parents.

And I don't know if they've I don't know how if they realised how traumatising those things were. And I think we as adults, we laugh those things off like yeah I put my mom or my dad hit me or whatever like that we laugh it off. But that sticks with us, that affects the way that we parent, it leaves us in a state of, of being more aggressive, or being more anxious. Like it affects us. Yeah, absolutely. day to day in the kids, I've worked with that use drugs. They're attempting to, they're in some sort of traumatised state day in day out. And they're attempting to get relief from that, to regulate their defensive state, even though they're not capable of it, just by thinking their way through it.

But maybe a drug might be able to help them out and help alleviate what they're going through. So yeah, it's absolutely, absolutely underlying, the kids I work with that. Don't go to school or have lost motivation. It's not just because like, there's always something underneath that. Absolutely.

Bill 15:15

So they're trying to change their state, because the state that they're experiencing regularly is unproductive, it doesn't help them, it makes them feel unwell. It makes them act out, it makes them not be able to connect to people. And I imagined that it makes their life just seriously difficult as far as being able to move through life and attend and turn up to the things that people need to turn up to on a regular basis to consider themselves to have a successful life. Not not based around stuff or cars or anything like that. But just generally being able to function, yeah

Justin 15:48

basic functioning, when you don't have a safe attachment to a parent or you feel like that a parent, even though they might be in your life, but they emotionally are

not connected to you, that's gonna affect your daily life that I mean, to not to be so alone. to not have the basics of a safe connection with an adult for a kid is that's crippling? Like, what? Why would I go to school? What does this even matter? And I don't think they're cognitively like picking out like, that doesn't matter anymore. I'm not gonna go. But if you don't have the basic building blocks of life, just a basic, safe, healthy attachment, nothing else matters. It just doesn't matter.

Bill 16:26

Yeah.

Justin 16:27

So their motivation level is not just about it's like they're in this shutdown state where they've lost their the motivation just, it is like just gone. That seeing the importance of their own future, and the value of of school, or the value of challenging themselves to do better, like all this stuff is just gone, it doesn't matter anymore. They don't they don't have that fundamental piece that we build on, that we have, like, we have to start with the safe, adult, a parent, and then build on that from there. We don't have that, like it really throws everything else off.

Bill 16:58

Yeah,

Justin 16:59

that's like that's the template for friendships. That's the template for relationships. And if your parents have abused you or abandoned you, that's your template, sadly, not that it's I don't think it's, I think untreated or ignored or stuffed down, and it can definitely be chronic. And I don't want to say permanent. I don't like that. But you have to be chronic. But it doesn't have to be permanent. I don't think and I've seen I've seen the people I've worked with get some a lot of relief from that and be able to have healthy relationships and friendships and do better in school. So it's not, it's not a life sentence. I don't think

Bill 17:35

yeah, I think all, this is

Justin 17:36

just happening.

Bill 17:37

Yeah, I think it's some of the old parents can be unlearned, and new parents can be learned. And it's a process. And I imagine that people can go through a number of years of learning what they need to know so that they can leave, deal with trauma, leave it in the past where it belongs, and then move on. But coming up with regards to leaving trauma in the past? How is it that people deal with it? Is it that they live it in the past? Or is it that I've dealt with it somehow, like what happens when people can move forward from the trauma?

Justin 18:10

Well, it's, I don't want to I don't want to pick it your language here. But the way we the way we work things is really interesting play, there's nothing wrong with what you're saying

Bill 18:20

please, please

Justin 18:20

at all, because that is no for real. That's like the common language that we use, like, let it go Leave it leave it behind. But for someone who's in a traumatised state, it's, they don't choose to First off, of course, they don't choose to carry this stuff with them. But it's not that they're the issue is that their body is stuck in a defensive state. So that the thing they survived is fresh within them, it's still alive with them, and they're going away, they easily easily go back to that scary place, or that time or that memory or wherever it was, even when they dream like when they're asleep, they can't escape it.

So it's not a matter of just unlearning something, or, or leaving something behind. It's not a choice exact, it's not a choice. If it was they would choose to stop, you know, living through the right thing. Yeah, of course. So it's it's definitely not as a matter of learning something new or letting something go. It's a matter of going from the defensive state that you're stuck in and moving up into a and I say up because of the way that we're built. Just the biology that the circuitry for being shut down is down in your gut, the circuitry for being mobilises in your chest. And it's circuitry for being safe and social and having healthy relationships and connection is a face to heart area.

Bill 19:41

Okay.

Justin 19:41

So that's why I say up. Yeah. So when you're stuck in a traumatic state where that means you're in flight or fight, which is like you're stuck, your heart beat is going all the time. If you're if you're stuck in a shutdown state, you're going to like your speech, you're stuck. You know what I mean, you're going to feel depressed, you're gonna feel numb, you're going to feel this like pit in your stomach. So the issue is not leaving things behind. It's, it's allowing, what happens is Peter Levine is really good for this is allowing that stuck trauma energy to work its way through your body. And it's much more difficult. I know me just saying that.

Bill 20:21

Yeah, that's ok

Justin 20:21

but but it's so it's letting that energy come through. And that might be through therapy, or yoga, or meditation or whatever. But working your way up back into your safe and social system. And that's really the alleviation of traumas is to be able to let the energy go, let the stuck energy, work its way through your system. And then to be able to come back into a safe and social state people that are traumatised have a really hard, they work hard, and I hate to say they have a hard time with it, because it's like they're choosing it. But being able to tolerate things like eye contact, it's a very scary experience. And you'll hold being able to hold eye contact is kind of important for social engagement.

But you know, so if they have, trusting someone can be difficult. People in a defensive state are going to interpret the world as scary, they're going to interpret the world as being aggressive, or something to run away from. So that it's not because they're defective, is because they're stuck. They're stuck in a defensive state. So it's not like they're doing something wrong. It's just that they're their body is stuck in a defensive state.

Bill 21:28

Now, when you say the body is stuck in a defensive state, is that stuckness occurring in the autonomic nervous system?

Justin 21:35

Yeah. Yeah, exactly. So it's not a, I'm glad you said it. Because it's not a choice.

The autonomic nervous system is something that happens without our conscious awareness, it just happens. So being in a, in a defensive state, like fight, or flight or freeze or shut down, being in one of these states is absolutely not a choice. It's autonomic, which means you survived something, or survived, like an abusive home, the way you survived was by being in more of a flight mode or being in flight mode or being shut down. So you're stuck, your autonomic nervous system was either conditioned to stay there, or you had to drop there and stay there to survive and get your needs met. Or you you survive some sort of acute incident. And I hate to call an incident, but

Bill 22:20
experiences

Justin 22:23

yeah, there you go. Thank you. It's better. Yeah. But it's an autonomic thing. You don't choose to go into flight fight or shut down. You just do and, you do it in that sequence as well, which I think is really important is that ideally, we're in a safe and social state like you and I can make eye contact, even though it's a computer like, we're a good place, right. But if we were in a situation where we were being attacked, we would drop down into flight mode, we would get sympathetically aroused or heartbeat would increase adrenaline would start going, we'd go into flight mode, we want to run away, but we can't run away.

If we get cornered, then we dropped down into fight mode. And we become aggressive, we would use our arms, fists, we, you know, we fight. But if that didn't work, or if we were held down or pinned down, or if we perceived that we were being overpowered and had no chance we would just collapse, we would drop down into being shut down. But if we're held down while we're sympathetically active, that's called freeze we're so we have this sympathetic energy plus, we're being immobilised. That's called freeze. But it's autonomic.

We don't choose these things, we don't choose to run away, we just do all of us, that's the sequence of events that we do. And that looks a little bit different for each person. Because one person may be able to be able to tolerate more sympathetic arousal, one person may drop down into shut down faster than someone else based on their own history, history and upbringing and cultures and all kinds of stuff. But that that's the sequence of events that we go through is flight and then fight and then and then shut down.

Bill 23:53

Okay

Justin 23:54

And it's not it is autonomic, we get stuck there.

Bill 23:57

Can I just for the people listening who might be curious about what the autonomic nervous system is, according, as far as I understand the autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system that operates our eyes, moving our heart, it operates our lungs, it operates, the need to go to the toilet, etc. So it's those things that occur that we don't have to think about doing that just occur because the autonomic nervous system is what's managing those processes.

Justin 24:29

And breathing breathing, too, I mean, all those things that we don't have to think about, it just happens, and all those things, all of those things change. When we have to defend ourselves, we automatically our breathing automatically changes, it becomes more fast paced. Or we become more stiff, like our muscles tense up, all these things just happen without our conscious awareness.

Bill 24:50

Yeah. So we we've spoken a couple of times about sympathetic nervous system. And we haven't spoken about the parasympathetic nervous system. But what is the sympathetic part of the autonomic nervous system?

Justin 25:03

The sympathetic is when your is when the motor gets going, it's when your heart starts pounding. And you flight. i'm so sorry you run or fight your you run first. And if you can't run then you fight, that that's called the sympathetic system, basically, where your motor is going, and you have to be more mobile. That's the sympathetic nervous system, or sympathetic autonomic nervous system,

The parasympathetic autonomic nervous system is when is, it's actually a couple things. So ideally, it's when you're resting and you're relaxed. And you're you can meditate if you want to, that's ideally where we see that, but it's also this very, very old, evolutionary old system where we shut down completely. And this is fantastic for animals in the wild that are playing dead. Because of predator, you stand a better chance of living, if a predator will ignore a corpse and predators

will, they likely might ignore a corpse and prefer a fresh kill. So they, they will keep running after the herd while you lay down, and quote, unquote, play dead.

.Or if you have a predator, you know, kill or kills. But if a predator tackles you, and you go limp, and that predator brings you back to his cave, there might be a moment in there where you can escape. So if you stay in the shutdown state, nothing to choosing to. But if the body stays in a shutdown state, it's not like it's still present enough to look for that opportunity to escape. So while the predator is carrying you back to cave to feed it's cubs, wherever another person may come along, and challenge it for the victory for the prey for the prey, sorry. And while it's being challenged to pretty much spring up, like pop up out of the shutdown state and use its sympathetic arousal to then run away. So that's the sympathetic is fight flight. parasympathetic is the shutdown defensive state. But parasympathetic is also just the social engagement system.

Bill 27:00

Yeah.

Awesome. The reason I contacted you for this episode was because the stroke community, people experience a stroke, and then go through a process of healing the brain and attempting to heal the body and get back to walking, etc. And often what happens is sometime down the road, they realised that they've done a physical recovery. But there's some ongoing trauma from that experience. And I'm not sure if I've got a grasp on what happens with trauma, when you experience many traumatic events. But do many traumatic events over a lifetime, compounded become a big one, or like what happens when you are traumatise many times and then you're dealing with the trauma of a an injury from stroke, for example? And it seems like it's a more overwhelming space for people to deal with trauma. If they haven't dealt with the traumas over a lifetime. Do you know what I'm saying?

Justin 28:03

Yeah, yeah, I don't know if I have a great answer for you. But I do think it compounds I'm trying to think just based on my experience working with with the people I've worked with, like, yeah, there, I think there can be levels of trauma and that could be, you know, it's not uncommon for me to work with a with someone who has experienced, like, abuse in the home for a parent, but then also experienced the death of the one person that they could trust like a grandparent

usually. And so there's levels of, we can deal with the sudden death of, or even not, not just sudden, but we can deal with the trauma, really the trauma of losing the one person in your life that you're connected to. But that doesn't address the trauma of a lifetime of abuse, really, or abandonment, or whatever it is. So I do think that there can be levels of trauma kind of compound upon each other. And so it's not a super in depth answer. But I would say, yeah, I think that I don't know, I don't quite have that all mapped out.

Bill 29:06

Yeah.

Justin 29:08

I would say, Yeah, I do think that. Yeah, I don't have a much more in depth answer for you about that one. But you know, if someone who has some sort of trauma they've experienced, and then they're confronted with a new experience that might be challenging, their body may be more primed to go back to a certain state that they that they were in, like, their body is kind of stuck in a flight by sort of state, when they're confronted with a challenging scenario, they're going to go they're going to drop down into that flight fight state, probably a lot faster than someone who has not survived. A any sort of trauma. Yeah,

Bill 29:48

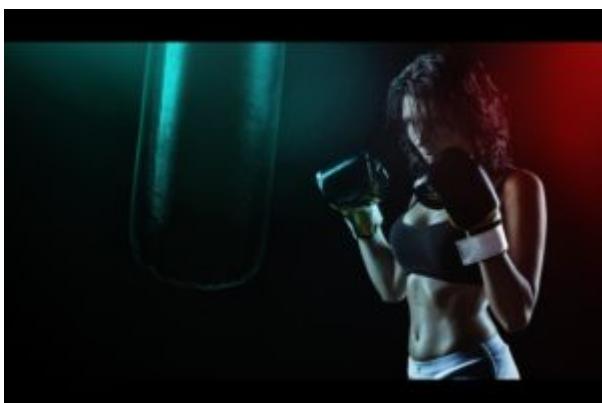
that makes sense. Yeah, that's so

Justin 29:50

okay.

Bill 29:51

When we're dealing with being stuck in a sympathetically charged situation in the body? How do we begin to become unstuck, from that sympathetic space? The



Justin 30:11

I wish I had a really easy answer, I have an easy answer. But it's not easy to do. And the easy answer is that the energy has to be used. But the difficult part of that is that you don't just move around, and it goes away. Meaning like, I think movement can be important. You know, like someone who's more of like a fight mode. I think boxing, fantastic for them. But, but mindless boxing, where you're just hitting stuff is not gonna be helpful,

Bill 30:42

right.

Justin 30:43

But but so the issue is attaching mindfulness, to your bodily experiences and sensations. And the challenge there is that if you survive trauma, and you're stuck in some sort of defensive state, being aware of that, and bringing mindfulness to your body sensations, is a terrifying experience, we're very comfortable sitting up here, in our thoughts, even if the thoughts are uncomfortable and full of blame, shame and whatnot, we can we can do that. But when when we're asked to look down and to notice, not only to notice, but to notice, and to hold on to and experience what is happening inside of us, it's a very terrifying experience. And that's, I think a big reason why people stay stuck in trauma is because it's, it is absolutely terrifying to, to look inward, and to notice what's there.

So but that that is the key is to bring mindfulness to what's happening inside of you. And then while you're doing, I mean, from my opinion, can be darn near anything. And I think it's possible to actually I know it is, and Peter Levine says so in his books that it's possible to release little bits of the little doses of these traumatic energy at a time. And he said, that was kind of I was reading what was in a book called in an unspoken voice, and he kind of laid out that the key is may not necessarily be to release it all at once. But it may be to little bits at a time to release this traumatic energy through safe experiences while being mindful.



So you can do that. I think if you're boxing or if you're doing you know, meditation, as long as you can bring, it doesn't have to be though it can be really like anything I with the kids I work with, or the teenagers I work with. We use fidgets in session, just there's like toys, just toys. But there's one in particular, that's it's just like a rubbery oval thing. And it has these likes, rubber spiky things all around it. So it's like this tactile sensation kind of thing. But it's pretty much unbreakable. And when kids are in a state of being more like fight mode, I'll give that to them. And I'll say here, play with this.

And it's interesting to see how each kid plays because it's always different. But for me personally, if I'm a little bit more sympathetically charged, I like to pull on it. I like to pull on it and like release my chest muscles, our muscles, like, try and break it. And just doing that doesn't do a whole lot. But when you bring mindfulness to it, and you notice how does it feel in my fingers? How does it feel in my bicep? how does it feel in my chest? and to really like notice it and experience it and to allow the body to go through what it's going to go through. If you do that, in little bits, that's that can be a safe way to kind of relearn about your own body sensations, your own body, to bring mindfulness to it, to learn about yourself, and to bring yourself a lot of I think love and respect and to really treat yourself like a friend in a way.

And listen to what's happening inside of you, rather than covering it up. ignoring it, stuffing it down.

Bill 33:44

Yeah.

Justin 33:45

So I think that's kind of the key is to bring mindfulness to these experiences. And it can be literally like, just what does it feel like to breathe deeply? What does it

feel like to breathe? And to really extend the exhale? In a very slow, you know, way? It's really noticed, like, how does that feel? And into it like, that just don't like to experience it and let your body experience without judgement. So mindfulness plus, what your body is going through without judgement, I think is kind of a big part of this.

Bill 34:20

Yeah, and it sounds like without judgement, without putting a meaning to it. So if you're in a safe space, and you're experiencing, you've allowed yourself to experience this trauma, and you becoming aware of how your body's responding and reacting, but you're in a safe space, and you can not put a label on it at that moment, then it'll be really a good place to observe what just happened so that you're aware of what's occurring. Is that sound right?

Justin 34:45

I think so. The you know, judgments are, are an obstacle to healing. It's a or I don't like saying healing to becoming unstuck. It's an obstacle to because you're not broken or not. There's nothing to heal. It's an issue of becoming unstuck. So yeah, those judgments, the self blame, and all the shame that these are obstacles to becoming unstuck. And I know it's not as easy as just turning it off. Like it's not a light switch. But the more that you can come from a place of genuine curiosity. Like, I really want to know how I'm feeling and I really want to experience what's happening inside of me versus what's wrong with me. And why am I feeling like this?

Okay, now, now I'll try meditation, like, Well hold up. It's like, it really has to come from a place of like, genuinely, genuinely being curious. Just like a friend was like a really close, trusted friend. If they were having some sort of issue they wanted to talk to you. You wouldn't come at that with like, why are you feeling like this? And what's wrong with you? And why didn't you react this way you should you should have done this or that you would approach them with, I care about you. And I'm seriously genuinely concerned about you. And I really want to be here for you. So it's the same thing as to bring that level of love and curiosity to yourself and what you're going through in your bodily experiences and sensations and whatnot.

Bill 35:57

Yeah, I can relate to that. I remember, my early 20s, I did a fair amount of therapy

with a psychologist and I had some challenges that were just related to things that weren't so serious, but enough that they were interfering with me being fully active in my lifestyle, you know, in my life. It was and the challenges that I experienced were interfering with my work the people around me. And I definitely was looking back now in a fight or flight state, but not one that anyone would notice and say, Well, this guy's been traumatised.

So I didn't know what it was. And certainly, people around me didn't know what it was. They just thought I was an angry kid, you know, an angry guy. Yeah. And I remember going to therapy and bitching and moaning for the majority of it at the beginning. But then later saying, Why does my body feel this way? or Why do I act this way? or Why do I react this way? And then, once I understood why I was doing it, I would ask my therapist, why is why would a person say something like that? Not that she had the answer. But she was able to explain that we're all different. And we all have, we all come from different spaces. And she made it so that it wasn't a personal response to me, she made it, so that person wasn't actually personally attacking me, they were just expressing something. And maybe they didn't have the skills to express it appropriately. And I, and I didn't need to get upset by it.

Justin 37:29

Yeah,

Bill 37:29

and I should have taken it personally, that helped me quite a lot. It made me more curious about why people behave in certain ways and eventually ends up not contacting somebody like you to ask questions like this, so

Justin 37:43

Let me try and understand. So you were in more of a flight fight state? And someone would say something to you. And you would interpret it in more of a negative way. Right? Not that you chose to know the chose to

Bill 37:53

no,

Justin 37:53

but it just, it just happened. But and that's, I think, I'm glad you brought that up. Because when we dropped down to these defensive states, it changes the way

that we perceive the world.

Bill 38:01

Yeah.

Justin 38:02

And if we're in a fight state, for to fight mode, we interpret our world as more aggressive. And we be like, you know, think about the person that gets the wrong, I don't know, hamburger, McDonald's, they flip out. This is a person who's not in their safe and social state, they're in some sort of fight mode, for whatever reason. And they experienced that as a personal insult. You have insulted me by like, what's wrong with you, you're an idiot, like they, you know, call names and whatnot. And they yell and they, whatever, make a mess, maybe. But this is not someone who's able to rationalise and think clearly and and say, Oh, you're having a bad day, or like, it's not a big deal, whatever, like I can, I can wait two more minutes for new hamburger. So they're not in that place to be able to use those rationalisations. They're in a place of where they're they experience the world is threatening, or they experience the world as a as a danger. And so that that's where they're coming from, and they behaviourally react that way it was as well. The other thing that I love that you said, is that kind of what you were saying is, yeah, that's fair

Bill 38:59

enough, almost identical. So no matter who I interacted with, they were the problem. And I had real problems interacting with people. And after many sessions, and months, and even years, it got to the point where I was rational enough, and I was able to understand enough for my therapist said, Is there a chance that all the things that you've experiencing, were because of you? And not because everybody else was mad, or crazy, or rude or something? So that's what the end result was

Justin 39:27

It's not, And she's not wrong, but then you have to ask well, okay, but why? Why Am I mean, I don't.

Bill 39:33

That's it.

Justin 39:34

I think it's okay to ask why. It's okay to ask like a well, if it is me, Well, why where does it Where does it stop having come from? It's not like you're choosing to, you know, why am I in this sort of defensive state? And that'll probably connect with something from your past.

Bill 39:45

Yeah.

Justin 39:46

But the other thing that you said that I thought was really important was that nobody would be able to tell. Right? It. When we talk about these defensive states, we talk about them as if they're this one dimensional, very cartoony version, like someone who's ready to fight and box like, that's not necessarily reality. The reality is that people exist I mean less, in some sort of a gradient. So like, you may be more safe and social one day, but there might be 40% of you, that's in this like flight mode. And you might feel that as like a little bit of anxiety.

And that's kind of what anxiety is, is that your body kind of wants to run away. And that can intensify and whatnot. Or if you like sitting I get, I get bored out of my mind and meetings. And I like play with a ball. So my body is mobilised, I'm not really in a safe and social state. But I'm also not like running out of the room. So there's like a, there's like a percentage or a ratio, or, you know, I mean, nobody would know. But I know in my body that I'm I want to get out of here. Really, I want to get out of here. I'm born on my Yeah. But I'm also not in a place to like socially engage and whatnot. So I'm just fidgeting, like when you pitch it was stuff, you're kind of more mobilised, which means you're a little bit down the down the polyvagal ladder, we call it, you're a little bit down into your defensive state of wanting to run away. But you're not really running away, you're not in that cartoony version, where you're getting up and running away.



Bill 41:08

Yeah, I understand. With regards to what you said about movement that reminded me of something that I've seen previously in animals in the wild with an animal who's being chased down by the lion, the Gazelle for example, being chased down by lion gets away from the lion. And from time to time you see, in the documentaries, you know, that I watch on TV about animals, that Gazelle will do these really intense shake, at the end of the chase. So is that the type of movement, is that type of movement, creating that release from this trauma that it may have experienced, and is the movement that you're talking about helping to mimic this type of release, or are you aware of that

Justin 41:56

the way is the way it's supposed to happen and we are animals, they were man, just like the gazelle, the way it's supposed to happen is that if we're in a situation where we have to run away that we get sympathetically active, the point of the sympathetic activation is to have it is to release the activation and a burst of running. And then when we get to safety, we you know, our we come back to baseline. So that that's why we it's sympathetic activation, being flight and fight is not supposed to be chronic is supposed to be short term.

But what happens with people who are abused, or grow up in homes where they're, you know, abused, that they become chronically in these states of flight and fight, and that's not what they're for. So it that causes all these sort of health issues down the line, or potentially could as well as relationship issues and all kinds of stuff. So these activations are supposed to be short term, even when you go into pull shut down and you collapse. That's supposed to be short term, when things are safe, you pop up out of it. And that's where you see the more of the shaking, there is a Polar Bear video online that Peter Levine has, where the polar bear is running away from a helicopter chasing it,

Bill 43:08

yes,

Justin 43:09

that's what's happening.

Bill 43:09

Yeah I have seen irt

Justin 43:10

and they tranquillise it while it's running away. So it's very simplistically active, it's running away, and it can't run away. And so what you'll see us doing is, is using its teeth to signal like back off. So it's actually it's like, fight state while running away. So but it's sort of it's given the signals of like back off. But then while it is sympathetically activated it gets it gets immobilised because it's shot with the tranquilliser. So as it goes under, into it shut down into it's forced shut down state, it still has all that sympathetic arousal inside of it.

So it's still prime to run or fight. But now it's shut down. So it's stuck in, in the video, as it comes out of the shutdown state, basically, as a tranquilliser wears off, and it comes out of the shutdown state, it starts to shake and tremble, and it's breathing becomes really spontaneous. And that's, it's, it's kind of like it's releasing the sympathetic energy coming up back, coming back up to a baseline. But animals do that, no problem, human being, but they don't have like human beings don't. And human beings when we get into a shutdown state, or if we get in to, when we feel those feelings of wanting to shake things off, it's called crying, by the way, when we cry, we can both are breathing a spontaneous it start from our gut, you know, we spasm our muscles tighten.

We do all these things are out of our control. But when we feel these crying, when we feel a need to cry, come on, which is the need to shake? In just very simple terms. Yes. When we feel that, come on, we stop it and we say, you know, be strong.

Bill 44:39

Wow.

Justin 44:40

You know what I mean, especially, especially men, right? We say actually not, I won't even say that. Because the kids I work with no matter what gender they are, I think it's more of a cultural thing that the belief to like, be strong. Get over it, leave in the past, we say these two things to ourself. And so it keeps the energy it kee, it doesn't allow us to shake off the energy through crying,

Bill 44:57

wow.

Justin 44:58

in a healthy way. That's really what I think crying is about. And when you cry, when you successfully cry, you feel better, you feel lighter, you feel like I've let something off my shoulders, like there's something has shifted, and you're able to, like connect with people and whatnot. Especially think about like, I think there's certain crying that you do like, when you're alone, that you're crying. But it doesn't seem to help. And I hear that a lot from people is that when I cry, it doesn't help. But that's the it's like this sort of unsafe crying, it's crying full of judgement.

There's all these thoughts going through your head about how weak you are, how you should get over things. And so it's not a safe crying experience. But when you go to like a funeral, and people are crying together, it's more of a safe crying experience. And it's really more of a cathartic sort of like you're letting that that grief and that sympathetic energy out from the person, you know, that passed away that brings all this stuff along with it. But that's a different type of crying. It's a safe crying and you're with people. And so it actually does seem to help at least for a little bit in that moment. Right?

Bill 45:57

Yeah,

Justin 45:57

it doesn't solve the problem of the proof. But it helps.

Bill 46:00

Yeah, it helps.

Justin 46:01

That's the difference.

Bill 46:02

Yeah, it helps you at that moment. And I recall, experiencing the loss of loved ones and then crying on a number of times in a number of situations after that person's past. And every time the crying did feel like it released something and every time it was okay, because it was about the passing of somebody. And I have experienced, people who experienced stroke will often wake up with unregulated emotions. And part of what seems to happen for people after a stroke is they, they cry a lot. And I was one of those people. And I did get a lot of uncomfortable responses from people who are around me at the time saying, you know, you

shouldn't cry, you know, why are you crying man, you know, everything's all right, you know don't worry about it.

Justin 46:48

So that's not, it's not a safe experience and crying for you. Or anyone, that situation may not be a safe experience, if you're being judged for this natural process that your body needs to go through. That's not exactly helpful. But your body knows what's up it about your body knows what it needs, but then it has other people judging it. And then if you take those beliefs on that, you know, I am weak or I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't get over it. All you're doing is solidifying the fact, all that, that energy within you that grief, sort of shut down sort of energy you know

Bill 47:18

Yeah, many years ago, about four or five years ago, I went into the training and it was the first time I read about understood about the work of Stephen Porges was through a friend of mine, who was a gentleman called Grant Soosalu who wrote a book called multiple brain integration techniques, together with a gentleman called Marvin Oka. And one of the trainings were learning to understand the intelligence of the head, the heart and the gut, and how those things can be tapped into to understand emotions better, for lack of a better way to or enough time to give you the complete detail of it.

So in this experience, at the training, they spoke about, he spoke about the Polyvagal theory. And then one of the exercises that we did was the shaking exercise. And he asked us to relive a traumatic experience that was as close to a two out of 10 on the scale of dramatic, right, so I went through this process where I just put myself as a child back into a space where I was getting attacked by my brother, just standard brotherly love kind of stuff. And I remember reliving that experience, and then part of the exercise was, while you're reliving that experience, start shaking and do the shake from the bottom of the toes all the way up through the body out through the fingers, and, you know, up into the head, and continue to do that. And I remember doing that, getting to a point where I was in tears, after having felt like exactly what you just said, had a safe cry in a safe environment, about this situation that I never, ever thought would have been traumatic. But it seemed to do something deeper. And it seemed to release something far greater than I ever could have in my head worked out. And that makes me feel like I have a better relationship with my brother because of that.

Justin 49:12

Sure. Yeah. You've released some sort of stuck energy, which has then changed the way you think about your brother, right? Yeah. You're not carrying that around exactly anymore. But I think the key here is I think the shaking is helpful. But you're also in an environment where you're encouraged to be mindful, you're encouraged to feel what you feel you're around other safe people. Like there's a whole package that comes with that. It's not just that you're shaking.

Bill 49:34

Yeah,

Justin 49:34

it's that you have permission to it's in that in the culture of that room itself. it's acceptable. It's encouraged. It's a good thing. So the whole package, I think, sounds like it was really ideal. So if people listen to this, and just go home and shake, I don't I don't know how helpful that is.

Bill 49:49

Yeah,

Justin 49:49

I know. It was like a shaking movement that I don't know too much about that.

Bill 49:52

Yeah.

Justin 49:52

But I think the key is being mindful. And I don't think you have to recall a specific traumatic event. And if you're ready for that, go ahead. But if you're just more curious about where you're at, and I would start with just noticing what's happening, what are you feeling? And where are you feeling? And really, just from a place of curiosity, start with start with like a benign area, like how do your toes feel? Like literally just how do your toes feel? And when you move your toes? How does that feel? How does that affect your breathing? How does that affect your calves? How does it affect it? Just like just be genuinely curious, and start from there? And then if you feel something, be curious about that, just notice it. I think that's it's a safe way. But if you I'm really worried about telling people who've experienced trauma and are stuck in some sort of traumatic state, go home and shake and think about it wrong. Yeah, I agree.

Bill 50:40

No, I agree. I wouldn't encourage it either.

Justin 50:42

Absolutely. It's a whole like, it's a package like you were in the right place with the right people in the right, like it was it was the whole package was there.

Bill 50:50

Yeah, that's important that you said that, I wouldn't have said that. But it's important that you said that to give people the context of how it happened, when it happened, and why I got a result and you're right. I don't shake at home on my own. Like, I've never done that before. But this was an interesting experience. And it was brought forward to us, it was suggested to us as part of what we saw with the video from the polar bear, and what we were learning about Stephen Porges work. So you're right, it was the complete package of education, plus experience and then support afterwards. So that's exactly how I would prefer people to go about it. Absolutely.

So now, as we come into the end of the podcast, I just wanted to get a little bit of an understanding about what your p

Polyvagal podcast is about. And I asked you that because I think the work of Stephen Porges is really important. It's very difficult to explain. And I think it's important that people who are experiencing trauma in any aspect of their life, especially after stroke, understand some of it and understand how they could apply some of the work of Stephen Porges. So I'm just curious about how how

about your podcast and what it's about and the th



Justin 52:05

The podcast is the first nine episodes, are um are me talking about the political theory. And in very simple, very safe terms, no details, no trauma, stories, nothing like that whatsoever. Just very easy to understand concepts about flight, fight, freeze, shut down. Talk about shame, talk about generational trauma. So there's some difficult things, but I think I handled it in a very respectful, safe way. That's like nine episodes worth of just pure information, I share a lot of like therapy examples or examples of the school system.

And then I brought on a co host. And now she and I are hosting together. Her name is Mercedes Corona. She's a co worker of mine, we're good friends. And so from like episodes, 10 to 14 is a lot of school based Polyvagal theory. So we apply the Polyvagal to the school system. And now we're doing this thing where we're applying the Polyvagal theory to therapy, and what therapy should be like, and we're sharing bad therapy examples that we got from people on Instagram.

So we lay out the basics of the Polyvagal theory, and now we're more doing or how to apply it to everyday life. And because it's not just like a theory that sits in and of itself, it really affects, we're everything that we do, because it's the it's the Connect, it's like the theory of like how we connect as mammals and how we shift down to defensive states. So it's, it's ever present, like and everything that we do in our lives. So now we're just talking about how to apply that I think therapy is a very big deal for people or for our audience, at least. There's a lot of therapists who listen, there's a lot of people that are going to therapy, or maybe maybe done with therapy because of bad experiences. So that's kind of the focus of the

podcast of the podcast is how to explain Polyvagal theory in very simple terms, and then how to apply it to daily living as well.

Bill 53:54

Yeah, beautiful. Now, Polyvagal just before we wrap up Polyvagal is what?

Justin 54:00

the vagus nerve is that is literally the the nerve that connects the brain to the body. So we, in my field, we talk a lot about brain body, but no one really explains it very well, until my opinion, Dr. Porges. And so he was able to explain the connexion between our bodies and our thoughts and our experiences like this. He did a fantastic job. So the vagus is is the nerve that connects the brain to the body and in through the autonomic nervous system. So Polly means more than one. So there's one Vagal conduit, but that connects to these different branches of the sy of the autonomic nervous system. So just multiple uses for us. That's why it says Polly

Bill 54:44

Awesome. Justin, where can people go and find out more about your podcast and the work that you do?

Justin 54:49

The po, the Polyvagal podcast is available on all major listening platforms. JustinLMFT.com is my website where you can, I have a blog I answer all the time. I love answering questions. Justin LMFT on Instagram is the best place to kind of get new quotes and content like videos. We do live streams there every Sunday night before we record our episodes, which is a lot of fun Mercedes and I do a live stream. So yeah, JustinLMFT.com or Justin LMFT on Instagram are probably the best ways.

Bill 55:23

Excellent. Justin, thanks so much for being on the recovery after stroke podcast man I really appreciate it

Justin 55:27

You're very welcome. You're so welcome. Thank you for inviting me

Intro 55:30

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