Brain Coaching: Rewire Your Brain to Overcome Anxiety, Sleep Disruption & Fear Transcript

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Introduction to Functional Edge and Guest Helen Dugdale

I mean, we all have needs, but it almost has this negative connotation to it. And then the guilt brings up. If you do put yourself first, and there's all sorts of flow-on effects, just because you are valuing yourself and maybe putting boundaries in doesn't mean you've suddenly turned into an egotistical narcissist or an uncaring person.

If you start to value yourself, other people will start to value you too. Absolutely. That's great. Subconsciously, it has a flow-on effect. Welcome to the Functional Edge.

I'm Dr. Julia Ward, and this is where science meets real-world strategies for living healthier, sharper, and stronger. From uncovering hidden environmental toxins to unlocking peak performance and mental clarity, we cover it all.

Ready to take control of your health and thrive? Let's dive in. Hello and welcome to the Functional Edge podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Julia Ward, medical director and founder of Balanced Body Functional Medicine.

Today we're honored to welcome Helen Dugdale, founder of Australian Brain Coaching to the show. Helen is a certified brain coach with training in psychology, wing wave, NLP and EMDR.

She specializes in helping people recognize how their brain responds to fear, anxiety, sleep disruption and performance blocks. Through evidence-based brain coaching and retraining strategies, she supports individuals in creating lasting change in mindset, resilience, and well-being.

In this episode, Helen will share her insights on how the brain learns, adapts, and can be reshaped to overcome entrenched patterns, offering practical tools to help you unlock mental clarity, emotional balance, and peak performance.

So stay tuned for an engaging conversation that promises to empower and inspire your path to wellness. Thank you so much for joining us, Ellen. Oh, it's a pleasure.

Thank you for having me, Julia. Yeah.

Can Chronic Anxiety Be Reversed?

So in your experience, is chronic anxiety actually one of the more reversible conditions when the right brain-based tools are used? Yes, and I want to be able to give your listeners hope that it doesn't matter how long they've had anxiety, it is possible to overcome it.

Of course, it's always better to get onto it early, but there is still hope that you can overcome anxiety with the right tools and resolve the original trigger and then use the tools that I'm helping you with to be able to move forward and have a more stress-free life.

Wow, that's amazing. So from a brain health perspective, how important are foundational lifestyle factors like movement and nutrition in anxiety and depression?

And where do you see them being underutilized? Movement activity and nutrition are very important, but sleep is equally or even more so important for brain health.

But movement is great. Even if you're chair-bound, you can still move, move your arms. Nutrition is important because of the gut-brain connection. I think a few people have heard of that topic recently.

That's very important. I'm not saying be strict about your diet all the time, but the 80-20 rule is quite helpful. Look after your nutrition 80% of the time and maybe lash out a bit for 20% of the time.

So you don't want to live life too boring. But looking after your gut health is very important and that has an effect on your emotions and on your hormones.

Lifestyle Foundations for Brain Health

So every part of your body's systems interrelates. And then it could affect sleep. Usually it does affect sleep. And then people get anxious about their sleep.

So it's like a downward spiral. Yeah, yeah, absolutely. We hear a lot about rewiring the brain. Can you explain what that really means? And does age limit our ability to create meaningful changes?

It's never too late. Another reason I want your listeners to be hopeful is that you're never too old to change. Your brain has plasticity, neuroplasticity.

You can change, but with habit and with repetition, you can change your habits and your thought patterns. So in our brain, we've got synaptic connections.

And when your brain is telling you to do something or your nervous system is telling you to do something, they're firing together. And I'll give you a good example.

If someone's right handed and they hurt their right hand and they have to start using their left hand, at first it's a little bit awkward and you think you're never going to get there.

But after a while, because you're your right hand, you can't use it. After a while, you are able to use the pen in your left hand, you are able to use the computer mouse, you are able to hold the coffee cup in your left hand.

And that's your brain rewiring the neural connections to telling your left hand, hold the cup this way, hold the mouse this way. So after a while, those messages are going down to your left hand telling what to do now.

So that's an easy way to understand how your brain can rewire itself. There's a saying that the synaptic connections that fire together, wire together.

So the more you do it, and I'm doing this with my fingers, pretending that they're the synaptic connections firing together. Yeah. So the more you do it, the more that's likely to take hold and your old habits will fall off.

It's called neural pruning. When you don't use something, you use it or lose it. So if it's an unhelpful habit, that will drop off and your new helpful habit will take hold.

Wow, kind of like practice makes perfect. Yes, exactly. And the Greeks philosophers said that 2000 years ago. So it's not something new.

How Neuroplasticity Rewires Habits and Thoughts

Aristotle said it 2000 years ago that we are what we repeatedly do. We probably all know someone who keeps telling themselves, oh, I'm bad at maths, I'm never good at maths, I'm always hopeless at maths.

Well, they probably will be because that's what they tell themselves. But if we tell ourselves something more helpful, more positive over and over again, that's how we will be.

And we can apply this to any part of our life. And with sleep too, I have a lot of clients who are anxious about sleep and they get themselves so worked up about why can't they sleep?

Why can't they sleep? And then all these adrenaline and cortisol hormones are racing around in their body and there's no way they're going to get to sleep.

because it's so anxious. And then all they can think about is sleep. And then your brain just concentrates on the word sleep. But if you were telling yourself to be calm, to be relaxed, those sorts of words, your brain gets your body into a relaxed state and sleep is more likely to happen.

But you haven't even mentioned the word sleep in your head. You're reinforcing the feelings and the thoughts of being calm and relaxed. Yeah. Yeah. I see that in some of my patients, they get in this sort of vicious cycle about stressing about sleep.

I'm not getting enough sleep. I'm not getting enough sleep. And then it feeds on itself and it's just, yeah. Exactly. And I had a client and he said, when I decided to stop fighting it, Stop fighting the lack of sleep.

In other words, what you were saying with your clients, they're getting themselves all worked up. When you stop fighting it and you say, okay, sleep's gonna be hard tonight, I'll just relax.

And then I've got a few practical tips that I can share with people about how to get themselves into a relaxed state. And eventually, sleep is more likely to happen when you're in that state.

That's great. Yeah. So one simple mental fitness or brain exercise our listeners could start today to support emotional balance. There's a few tips. One is, again, to repeat something good about themselves, something helpful.

Instead of Beating ourselves up over something and concentrating on that unhelpful thought. Come up with something more helpful, more positive like what do you like about yourself or what are you good at and just keep concentrating on that like I am a capable person or I'm good at what I do or something that feels comfortable to you.

or I am comfortable in my own skin or whatever feels comfortable to you. Just keep repeating that and taking deep breaths. The deep breaths puts oxygen into your bloodstream and it gives you some thinking space instead of going straight into automatic mode.

Gives you some time to think, right, I am not that unhelpful thought, I am any and whatever you come up with.

Breaking the Sleep Anxiety Cycle

Yeah, that's great. So many people intellectually understand what they should be doing to feel better, yet they still feel completely stuck. So from a brain-based standpoint, why does that happen?

Oh, that is so common. We all know what we should be doing. Why aren't we doing it? You know, our logical brain is saying, if I want to lose weight, why am I having the second chocolate bar?

Or if I want to stop drinking, why am I opening the second bottle of wine? Or if I want to get fit, why aren't I going to the gym or running around the block?

We all know what we should be doing. But why aren't we doing it? And there's a couple of reasons. One is our brain has got into the habit of putting ourselves last.

We're not doing it maybe because we think we're not worth it. Who cares? It's only me. I'll just sit on the couch. It's only me. I'll just have this second can of Coke or whatever.

The brain's got into the habit of reacting that way and putting ourselves down. Normally, they're not valuing themselves. They need to start valuing themselves and changing their habitual way of thinking.

Yeah, I see that a lot because I treat a lot of perimenopausal and postmenopausal women who have been, you know, mothers, wives for so many years and you're so used to putting others' needs in front of your own.

You're taking care of the kids, you're taking care of your husband, and it's such a habit to put your needs last. Then when it comes time when you do have, I mean, we all have needs, but it almost, you know, has this negative connotation to it.

And then the guilt brings up. If you do put yourself first and there's all sorts of flow-on effects, just because you are valuing yourself and maybe putting boundaries in doesn't mean you've suddenly turned into an egotistical narcissist or an uncaring person.

If you start to value yourself, other people will start to value you too. Absolutely. That's great. Subconsciously, it has a flow-on effect. Yeah, yeah, that's absolutely right.

So for someone listening who's struggling with anxiety or low mood and is curious about your work, what does the first step look like to get started? They can contact me via my website or Facebook and I'm happy to have a chat with them over WhatsApp or Zoom and that's free and I'm happy to have an introductory chat and I can put them on the right road.

direct them to some helpful tips. I've also got a one-page PDF that I've sifted through all the advice for to get better sleep. So bad habits to give up, good habits to start.

And a lot of those things will also help with anxiety.

Building Emotional Balance with Self-Talk and Breathing

Wonderful. And I said before about the deep breathing. That's a couple of good things about that. As I was saying, it gives you some actual breathing space to stop and think, how do I want to react from now on?

Do I want to go down my same old automatic reaction or do I want to be like this? just gives you time to think and then maybe repeat what you want to say to yourself.

What do you want to say to yourself to boost your self-esteem? Yeah. And that only takes a few seconds, but you have to repeat it over and over again.

Okay. What are some of the earliest signs that the brain and nervous system are under chronic stress, like even before anxiety or depression become obvious?

Well, usually sleep is affected, but some people have stomach issues. They have the churning stomach where the stomach acids have going haywire or some people actually get constipated from too much stress, they get pound up.

Some people the anxiety comes out in skin rashes or sweating or heart palpitations. So get on top of it before it becomes habitual or chronic. And that means day after day, month after month.

And then people start to think, oh, this is the way I am. I can't do anything about it. But they can. You can still do something about it. Other people, it might come out in terms of phobias or fear that might have bladder problems.

But there's no medical reason. It's an anxiety related cause. Right. So I would recommend to people, get all the medical things sorted first. Because what if there is a medical problem that you can sort out?

Right. Sort out medical problems, or is it an environmental problem? Something that's setting you off? Those are fairly easy to sort out. Or if you've got aches and pains, sort them out before they start disrupting your life.

Because a lot of people, they will have aches and pains that's going to impact on the quality of their life, then they'll

start getting anxious about it.

But they don't sort out their aches and pains because they think, oh, it's only me. I've got to do this. I haven't got time to go to the doctor. You know, it's only a twinge.

Why People Stay Stuck Despite Knowing Better

I'll be right. And next thing they know, it's disrupting other parts of their life. Yeah, yeah. So how do past stressors or unresolved emotional experiences continue to influence the brain's responses years later, even when life feels relatively stable on the surface?

Yes, yes, good question. A lot of my clients might have had something that's happened 40 years ago and it's been unresolved, but they think that because they've pushed it to the back of their brain, they've dealt with it.

Yeah. But they haven't. All they've done is pushed it to the back of their brain into their amygdala, and that's where the emotional memories are stored.

And in times of stress, those unresolved emotions will come to the fore and will take over your logical thinking. Yeah. So you really do need to get to the bottom of what is the original trigger.

And sometimes that's tricky, sometimes it's obvious, but sometimes it's not. And it doesn't have to be anything sinister or anything bad, but it's something that has had an emotional effect on you, maybe years ago, and it's created an habitual way of reacting.

Like, I had a client who's in his 50s or 60s, and we worked out it was something when he was nine or 10. His family called him stupid. And he took that to heart.

And because of that, he reacted that way a lot of the time. And he said, he played up at school, he got sacked from jobs, he played the fool. And then when it came later in life, no one really wanted to be with him because he said in his own words, he said a swear word.

And then he was really, really low, very, very down on himself. And then we worked out what it was. And then he realised his family probably don't even remember saying that.

Yeah. And he said, they're all nice people. He said, I don't know why I'll let it get to me and hang on to it for so long. But he didn't realize that was the trigger.

So once we worked through that, like he wasn't really stupid. He wasn't really dumb. So we worked on how he wants to feel from now on. And you could see the weight lifting off his shoulders.

That's wonderful. So that's just one example. And it wasn't even that bad. what happened to him. But it started off an habitual reaction in his brain that he is supposed to act this way.

Right, right. Amazing how just one little thing in certain people, because obviously not everybody is going to have that same reaction. Yeah. And I had another one with someone who had a fear of heights.

And it's not because, well, she thought it was because she'd fallen out of a tree.

Stress, Boundaries, and Valuing Yourself

But it wasn't. It was something else. Once we worked on that, she realized she's not going to put herself in danger by hanging off the edge of a cliff or something.

She will go over a bridge. She will go up into a 30-story building, which she wouldn't do before, but she is comfortable doing it now because she used to get into full-blown panic mode if she was looking out the window of a

30-story building.

You know, some people get the heart palpitations and can't breathe and get an adrenaline rush. Well, she doesn't get that anymore because we worked out what it was that triggered it in the first place.

Well, that's wonderful. Many of my patients have chronic complex illnesses alongside anxiety or low mood. How do you see nervous system dysregulation showing up in physical symptoms?

I've had people with psoriasis and eczema. And then after we've resolved the anxiety, the psoriasis has gone away. Yeah, that's amazing. That's one example.

Another one, I've had a few clients who have diarrhea every morning because they're so anxious. And they sort of dread the start of the day because they know what they have to go through.

Yeah. And so we worked out what was the reason for the anxiety that was causing these stomach problems. And they would started looking forward to waking up in the morning, getting out of bed and not having to do what they always used to do.

That's awesome. Yeah, that's great. What are some of the common mistakes that people make when trying to like fix anxiety on their own that may actually keep the brain stuck in a threat pattern?

Yeah, well some people think that talking about it might help in the first place, you know, like a problem shared is a problem halved, but that can only go so far.

Okay. You really need to resolve the original trigger because if you don't resolve it, it will keep popping up.

Recognizing Chronic Stress in the Body

and setting you off balance again. So you really need to resolve the original trigger because sometimes just talking about it will embed the problem. You have to be able to then move forward.

So that's what I do. There's three stages. The first stage is to identify the original trigger. It might be what you think it is or it might be something else.

Then the second stage is to resolve that and that's where I use the EMDR method. Do people know what EMDR is? The Eye Movement Dissociation and Resetting?

Yeah, let me just give a brief definition for our listeners. I get you to move your eyes left, right, left, right, left, right. So it's left brain, right brain, left brain, right brain.

And talking about the issue until you can think about it without getting so upset. So it's reducing the emotion and bringing in the logic. How do I want to feel from now on?

Do I want to let this past emotion keep ruling my life? So that's where EMDR is good, left, right, left, right. Left brain, right brain, left brain, right brain.

And it's similar to REM sleep, rapid eye movement sleep. And I feel like I'm going off on a tangent, but I'm explaining EMDR. There's been a lot of studies done on REM sleep.

That's where your eyes are flickering left, right, left, right while you're asleep. That's in light sleep. And they've done the studies that people who have good REM sleep are less anxious the next day.

And people who are less anxious have good REM sleep. So that's a positive cycle. If you're anxious, that reduces the quality of your REM sleep. And if you have less REM sleep, you are more anxious.

So we want to overcome that. And that's where EMDR is like REM sleep, except we've identified, we've pinpointed the original trigger. Okay. So that's the second stage of my methodology.

The third stage is, well, what now? We've had the nice talk, we've identified the trigger, now what? So I help you set up a plan, a strategy that you're comfortable with to be able to move forward.

So it's not just have a pleasant chat and say goodbye.

Unresolved Emotional Triggers and Long-Term Patterns

I'll help you with the strategy. What are you comfortable to implement in your life from now on? Instead of going down your old pathway, what are you comfortable saying and doing now?

So I don't tell people what I think they should do, but I'll help them come up with a strategy that fits in with their lifestyle and what they're likely to follow through with themselves.

Great, great. How long does it typically take for people to notice meaningful shifts when they start doing this kind of brain retraining work? Well, you can see results sometimes in the first session.

That is amazing, especially when we've uncovered the original trigger and used the EMDA, they think they have a big sigh of relief. but it takes at least three or four sessions to really get you into the new pattern, the new habits.

So one session will make you feel good, but then you need a couple more to really embed your new habits and your new way of thinking and feeling. Nice, nice.

So it's not like you need 10 or 20. Yeah. Three or four is usually enough. Okay, okay. And then some people think, oh, well, if the brain training has helped me with that part of my life, maybe it'll help me with this part of my life.

So that's a good thing too. I have a few athletes too, who put themselves down even though they've done all the training and they know they're good. When it comes to competition time, it comes to crunch time, they lose the plot.

And one of them kept saying on competition day, don't mess it up, don't mess it up, don't mess it up. And guess what? He messed it up. And so we worked out why they were doing that to themselves, even though they knew they were good at what they did.

They knew they were just as good as the competition. So we worked on that and came up with a strategy, what they were going to do and say from now on.

So they would keep repeating instead of saying, don't mess it up. They came up with the saying, I've got this, I've got this, I've got this. Yes, a lot more positive.

Yeah. And a couple of weeks later, they rang me and said, guess what? I'm national champion. Wow, that's awesome. They were over the moon because they knew they'd put in the training.

They knew they were just as good as everybody else. Yeah. Why did they keep messing it up? And anyway, they said that just as they were about to start the competition, they found themselves saying, don't mess it up, don't mess it up.

And then they stopped and said, no, no, what am I going to tell myself? I'm going to tell myself, I've got this, I've got this, I've got this. And then they just went with the flow.

That's awesome. Yeah. And I was thinking, you can use that same thinking in other parts of your life, not just in sport. If you keep saying to yourself, oh, I'm hopeless, I'm never any good or don't mess it up or…

Physical Symptoms Linked to Nervous System Dysregulation

don't be this, any of the negative stuff, unhelpful stuff. If you say to yourself, I've got this, or I can do it, or I am capable, something like that, something that rings a bell with you, you can do it.

Yeah. Especially if you know you've put in the work, you've put in the training, you know you're capable. Yeah. Well, switching gears just a little bit, I'm just curious, how did you get started in this line of work?

Yes, a lot of people like to ask me that question because I actually started out in science back in the 70s. and I went into scientific research for about 20 years.

And during the way I went back and I got a science qualification then went into research. And then I went back and got a teaching qualification and I taught science at secondary schools.

And then I went back into research and then I started my own business in personal development, running personal development workshops, communication skills, confidence skills, goal setting, leadership skills, those sorts of things.

And I thought I should really go back to university and study psychology. So I signed up and I got a postgraduate diploma in psychology and that was about 12 years ago or something.

And while I was doing that, my friend in Germany told me about this German method of psychotherapy called Wing Wave. And so I looked into it and I thought, well, if my German friend thinks it's good, it must be good.

You know, we'd been friends for 40 years and she said it was great.

EMDR, REM Sleep, and Helen's Three-Step Method

So I went over to Europe and trained with the German psychologists who developed this method. And that was 11 years ago, and it is brilliant. It backs up everything I learned at university in psychology, but it's got the practical aspect.

Like I was saying, identify the trigger, resolve that original emotion, and then come up with a plan to move forward. Okay. So this is like a wing wave therapy then that you're doing.

And a lot of my male clients, like, you know, a lot of men wouldn't come and see a psychotherapist, especially in Australia. But they say what they like about this method is that they've got some practical tools that they can take home and work on.

It's not just, as I was saying, it's not just having a nice chat. They've got some practical tools. So that's my history. I started out in science, then teaching, then psychology, and then WingWave.

Wow, that's great. Well, for listeners who feel discouraged or skeptical because they've tried many things already, what gives you the most hope about the brain's capacity to heal?

Well, all the research that's gone on about the neuroplasticity of the brain and that all says that you're never too old to change. It's just being persistent and creating a habit.

Like I had a 94-year-old client. who was so anxious she couldn't sleep and was getting herself worked up and she lost interest in a lot of things that she used to enjoy doing.

So we worked on the anxiety. She started sleeping through the night and feeling good about herself. And the doctor said, well, I can reduce your medication now because you don't need so much, because she was more relaxed and sleeping better.

And she was 94. So you're never too old. That's awesome. That's really great. Yeah, that was lovely. Yes. So we'll put your information in our show notes, but if you want to just give a shout out to your website so people can find

you.

How Brain Retraining Creates Lasting Change

Okay. Yes. It's www.australianbraincoaching.com.au. And I've written the book, Put Insomnia to Sleep, which I think you already have a copy. And that's available through Amazon.

Yes. And it's full of tips, it's full of references, scientific references in the back. Cause when I make a statement about anxiety and sleep or something, it's not something I've made up.

I've got research to back up what I'm saying. And I've got case studies too. that people can read and say, oh, yeah, that sounds like me. I'll give that a try.

That is wonderful. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. This has been really valuable information. I'm excited to share with my listeners. Thank you for having me.

I hope people have got some tips out of it. Again, if people want to contact me, I'm happy to give them a free 30-minute chat and we can talk about what their issues are.

That's wonderful. Thank you. Thanks everyone for joining me on the Functional Edge. I hope today's episode gave you fresh insights and practical tools to level up your life.

If you found value in what you heard, don't forget to hit the subscribe and share button with somebody who needs it and leave a review.

Helen's Background, Hope, and Where to Find Her

It's the best way to support our mission of bringing powerful health solutions to more people. So for more resources, updates, and behind the scenes content, visit drjuliaward.com.

And until next time, stay strong, stay healthy, and keep living on the functional edge. Thank you for joining me on the Functional Edge. I hope today's episode gave you fresh insights and practical tools to level up your life.

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