Introduction to Trauma and Healing

Welcome, all. My name is Dr. Isaac Eliaz, and I'm thrilled to talk today about such an important topic. Trauma to transcendence. I've seen in my own journey as a healer, as a researcher, as a clinician, somebody who has been trained in meditation now for 50 years.

The value and the importance of understanding what trauma is. And it's much more common than we may even imagine. And it's effect on us on every level, from our cellular function to our biochemistry to our physiology, to emotional, in our psychological structure, to how we live our life and how we interact with our environment.

And I'm thrilled especially to talk today to my good friend Alex Howard. Alex is a unique person in that he has created a lot of very significant projects during his life.

He's a creator of therapeutic coaching and founder of the Optimum Health Clinic, and consciously Life. And he has created some of the largest summits in these topics, over a million people.

But Alex also went through his own journey, his own journey of healing. So he brings both of them into the way that he teaches that he shares. Now, I had the opportunity to be interviewed by Alex a few times, and Alex is I remember at least this interview in conversations where I said, wow, I can go to places we usually want to go.

And we really got to to very deep places. So I'm honored and happy to be on the other side and allow you to share your vision and your point of view of trauma, your understanding and how you think people can heal from it, and the importance of healing for it and what we can do.

So please welcome, welcome to to this conversation. Isaac, thank you for having me. I very much have enjoyed interviewing you. and I'm I'm really curious about where we can go together today.

So tell us a little bit about your own healing journey. Yeah. So my healing journey is a sort of.

Alex Howardu2019s Healing Journey

It's, well, so many books story like it is for all of us, but it's particularly it's a two path set, which is that, I had a physical healing journey in my teenage years, so I suffered from, me otherwise known as, chronic fatigue syndrome for seven years.

and really, for the first couple of years of that was, I think, like a lot of people in those situations waiting for scientists, doctors, medical professionals to, to find the answers.

And that didn't happen. and then I was really helped to realize that if I wanted the circumstances of my life to change, I was going to wait. And I might be waiting still now, or I was going to do something different in response.

And so I spent five years from the age of 18 on this very sincere and very committed, physical healing journey, which also included meditation, yoga, nutrition, and so on.

I made a full recovery and then really set up the clinic that I'd wanted to exist in those years that I had been ill, a clinic that had a personalized approach that was evidence based, that was integrative, putting together different perspectives.

And then I found myself at a point in my, mid-twenties where in a way, like in the outside of a view of my life, I achieved lots of things. I had the successful clinic and, you know, I was doing lots of things that I wanted to do with my life, but in hindsight, I wouldn't use these words at the time.

But in hindsight, what became very clear is I had significant unresolved childhood trauma, and that was showing up at the time with very severe anxiety and panic attacks, the inability to stay in an intimate relationship longer than than sort of two, three months.

and this particularly with the severity of the anxiety I experienced in these years, this real isolation pattern in response, like not feeling able to.

And it didn't help that I was a professional. And so I was supposed to have the narrative, I was supposed to have my stuff together. I'm not supposed to have have these kind of these issues and it became clear to me that there were two things in my childhood that had dramatically shaped how I was in relationship with my feelings and my emotions and ultimately with with my trauma.

the first was the my father had left soon after I was born, and I hadn't seen him again. And so a kind of deep grief and abandonment and the lack of kind of male role model showing me how to be a boy and then how to be a man, but also the void that created in the family system and the sense of needing to step in to the responsibilities, around that.

And then secondly, having a sister who had very complex and severe mental health issues that created a lot of disruption and instability and volatility, in the in the home environment.

So what these two things had done was firstly given me a lot of feelings and secondly, giving me some very clear structures and narratives around it not being safe to feel those feelings and that one shouldn't express those feelings.

And when people express their feelings, people get physically, emotionally hazard. so, so I was there, I was in my kind of mid 20s with, the severe anxiety and panic attacks.

And what I was helped to realize was to really there was no cognitive strategy or reframing or kind of NLP technique or coaching strategy that was, you know, things would help calm things down for a moment.

But the real driver of this was a constant needing to escape myself, like in needing to escape, feeling my feelings and emotions. And I could meditate and I could sort of go to a kind of a place that was sort of calm, but a disconnected place that that was calm.

And so I then did some very intensive, emotional processing work and went to all the places that one spends their life trying to avoid going to basically, I sometimes describe my job these days is it's figuring out the places that people least want to go to and holding their hand on the path to go there.

so it's like that. And that was kind of my, my journey of having to do that for myself. I just took credit for the complete complete that, that that story, when I really went to those places and I really got the support externally, but also developed the resource internally to really hold those places, the healing happens.

And, and then, you know, the anxiety and the a lot of the issues I had just sort of fell away like they were symptoms of the I want issues themselves.

They were symptoms of an issue that that was unresolved. and that really changed my work. you know, I really worked much more in a coaching based way up until that point and integrating sort of emotional healing, psychotherapeutic work, somatic work with practical, solution based therapeutic work has really been my, my life's work, since that time.

Well, you know, you you brought some so many key points. I was, I was writing notes, each of them really worth an hour of discussion because of their of the effects.

But, and I will I will revisit them because you really covered not only pitfalls in healing, but also pitfall in meditation that the almost universal, the idea that we need that calming will do the trick.

No calming will do the trick. When you stay calm and when you don't stay calm, the storm comes back. So calming is a very good the numbing, healthy meditate healthy process that helps the body.

And it's one of the more obvious, benefits of basic with the mental in meditation. But it doesn't solve the issue to solve issue, you have to to tackle it.

You have to go into it, you have to rest into it. And that's actually the real principle that the day and night in meditation, very hard to get to. But really is is the ultimate solution from a meditation point of view.

But I know you've talked with trauma and over this time you also you developed a model. So share with us your approach of of the four stages of trauma.

The ECHO Model of Trauma

Yeah, yeah. So, you know, one of the great blessings of my, my adult life, running, you know, conferences like this and getting to interview, you know, many dozens, I guess, down to the hundreds of experts and asking many, many people the question, what is trauma?

So when I was writing, my, my last book, which is called it's Not Your Fault. and it's needed to define trauma and I and I'm not going to lie, I felt certain pressure to to try and do it.

Well, I had the opportunity to ask many other people that definition and what I came to realize was trauma is really it's not it's not the events. It's how our life is, is how those events echo through our life.

And I came up with this acronym, the description of of echo, like something happens and it echoes through our life. But also seeing that as an acronym, really a four stages of trauma.

What people are most familiar with is trauma as the the kind of overtly obvious traumatic events like would be defined in adverse childhood experiences like physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional neglect, you know, alcoholic parent, parent who's incarcerated.

And so on. And obviously those those events are automatic events. But actually sometimes the things that shape us the most are not those overtly traumatic things that what I would call covert traumas.

You know, maybe not. You know, one day at school, like we're super enthusiastic, we're bouncing around the classroom. We so we put our hand up, we get it wrong.

Everyone laughs, the teacher laughs, we come home and we're like, we're just tender. And what we need is to feel some safety, to feel some love, to feel that it's okay that that we just we had a misstep in that moment.

And what we get is being rewarded for not feeling. Maybe we get told, you know, well done for being a big boy or a big girl or, you know, boys don't cry or, you know, whatever it may be.

We have lots of experiences like that that basically teach us that our feelings are not safe, our feelings are not okay. You wouldn't necessarily call it a trauma, but it sets up a set of beliefs and narratives, for our lives. So the first stage of trauma is the events.

It's the things that happen. But it's not just the events, it's the context within which the events happen. We all have three core emotional needs the need for safety as a baby.

This is where we get curriculum action with our caregivers. The UN nervous system is, is held and and taught to feel safe through, kind of childhood and adult life.

It's really having the ability to self-regulate, nervous system. So being able if we get impacted, triggered or distressed by life, that we have a place inside of ourselves, of safety, that we can land back into, second core

emotional need is the need for love in childhood.

That's really knowing we're loved for who we are, not for what we do. Through one of the real, kind of building blocks of real self-esteem and self-worth.

And that really sets up how we're in relationship with ourselves. Like, if I feel sad or I feel angry, do I still love myself in that place? Like, am I allowed to have that feeling or that emotion?

And then we have the core emotional need of of boundaries, like the ability to say, yes, I want more or no stop to other people, but also to ourselves.

Like, no, I'm going to stop this thing that's destructive in my life, or yes, I'm going to commit to this thing I want to do. And in a way, the quality that holds that as a quality of strength, like cultivating and growing our sense of strength, how healthy the boundaries we receive in childhood are determines our it's a key determinant, determinant in our resilience and our capacity to commit and follow through to hard.

Thing is in in our adult life. So we have the events, we have the context within which the events happen, which is basically were these three core emotional needs effectively met for us in childhood.

This is not a comment on whether our parents loved us or not. In fact, whether they loved us or not is not that relevant here. It's whether they were skillful in meeting those needs for us.

Can have parents that loved us, would literally throw themselves in front of a train for us, and the way that they gave us safety was constantly trying to push us to be stronger, because that's what they thought would give us safety.

So we've got the events, we've got the context. If the events are overloading or the core amount and or the core emotional needs are not effectively met, we go to the third stage, which is which is the H of echo, which is the homeostasis.

The balance of our nervous system shifts. So we go from being calm, safe, you know, healthy, secure, attached, securely attached to becoming dysregulated.

And that stress response, to put it in quick and simple terms. Also, the stress response in our nervous system is designed for sudden acute shock, where we get a hit of adrenaline and cortisol.

The shock passes and our system resets. If the events are overloading and the core emotional needs are not match over time, the homeostasis of our nervous system shifts.

We go into what I call a maladaptive stress response, like a healthy stress response that allows us to respond to danger, gets locked on and and we become and we get normalized to being in that state.

This takes us to the fourth stage of echo, which is the outcomes in our lives. In my in my example, my my life story, anxiety was one of the main outcomes, the outcome of a dysregulated nervous system, which is the result of core emotional needs not being met, and a number of events in childhood that became overloading and overwhelming.

But someone else's outcome could be addiction. But the way they've learned to self-medicate the dysregulation in their system is by self-medicating with alcohol or drugs or whatever it may be.

another example could be, health issues. The the ongoing impacts of that dysregulated nervous system is a chronic health condition, or it's an autoimmune condition.

It's, you know, it's mast cell activation, whatever. it may be another outcome could be depression that the I think often does. Depression is misunderstood.

People often think about depression as feeling sad all of the time, and it can feel like that. But often depression is actually an absence of feeling.

And that absence of feeling is a frozen nervous system. So the system has got so acutely dysregulated. It's frozen. Life just feels meaningless, hopeless, numb and empty.

But it's actually a product of a dysregulated nervous system. So just to kind of bring it all together, there's the events could be overt. They could be Kovat, they could be obviously traumatic.

They could be subtle experiences. There's the context they happen in whether those core emotional needs are met or not. There's the shift in the homeostasis of our nervous system.

Then there's the outcomes that happen in our lives in response to that. So when it comes to healing from trauma, and I think this is the really important point I want to make here, a lot of trauma healing work.

Mainstream approaches to addressing the symptoms of trauma is either treating the symptoms or treating the addiction, or treating the anxiety, or treating the depression or so on.

And you're writing this, treating the symptom. You're not dealing with a core issue, or it's an over fixation on the events that happened. But the events have already happened.

From my perspective, events already happened. What matters is what's happening in your nervous system now in response to those events. And then just the final thing I'll say in this patient, let let you respond, is that a big part of the healing work here is learning how to meet those core emotional needs for ourselves.

Right? Like in childhood, we're dependent upon our caregivers, the blessing the cast, one can say of being an adult. You don't get to have that victim story anymore because we're not the victim.

We have to learn how to cultivate safety. The cultivate love, to cultivate boundaries, and that creates the conditions that then allow our healing to happen, you know.

Thank you. Thank you for really for laying really the the map, the journey. And these are very wise words for everybody listening in that, you know, from decades of experience and talking to many people.

So you first I want to touch I want to go back to what is trauma because we actually go through endless traumas, endless all the time.

How Trauma Shapes the Nervous System

Some are overt and huge and most of the ones are covert, but they are reproducible and repeatable, often multi-generational and in the end result, they can be as devastating as something that is over.

So if we look from a definition of what is trauma, anything that we experience and we hold to and we don't just flow with, the moment is a trauma. It's a scar that makes us go to the past, to what you said, to water under the bridge.

So many people spend their life and go to many therapies to make a living helping people understand what already happened and is not going to make any difference.

So that's really important. And what what Alex is offering here is really this understanding of the of the mechanism and really what you can do it. And you know, you still didn't get into the specifics, but it's important to understand.

So in trauma can be a physical skull, an emotional scar, psychological scar and very interesting a very loving parent who is very fearful and doesn't feel safe, will broadcast it to his offspring, to his children, even with all the love they feel in this will really set the stage.

So safety is at the core because then we are not safe. We respond with alarm. So the bite there's alarm, alarm and protein like I do a lot of research with galectin three, but we get alarms within second.

And that's really what you are laying down is the is this is it automated autonomic nervous system. Right. So we either fight, we become reactive or we all we fear in flight and we isolate ourself.

Which was your your story in the messages. Well gentle relatively. But they came into a milieu of Alex the way you were sent you see. And that's, that's what happened.

So that's really important. The other thing I want to emphasize is a dysregulation of the nervous system. The nervous system is very sensitive and the dysregulation can be my new my newt micro inflammation.

But enough to set in my new imbalance in the in the homeowner system in the in the level of neurotransmitters that will affect us throughout our body.

So within this it's really important for us to really recognize it. Whatever. And also right we blame I was if why did we do it. Why didn't we respond differently.

The body always wants to survive. It will do the best it can in the moment. And once we acknowledge it and we don't fight this symptom and we really move forward, it's a big relief.

So thank you for all these all these concepts and I'll touch on some of them. But how how would you how do you go about it changing it. How do you go about creating the healing journey.

Yeah. So I think the starting point always has to be awareness about what's happening. Right. Like I sort of one of my catchphrases is, if you can see it, you don't have to be it.

And one of the challenges is that one can understand is a theoretical concept that, you know, a distant, regulated nervous system is not good, and you put something about it, but to actually recognize it in your own lived experience and I remember back in the early days of the Optimum Health Clinic and, you know, back in those days, everything was like in-person at the clinic.

This was before kind of, you know, online, medicine. And people would come in and they'd be so dysregulated in their nervous system that as an empathetic person, I feel myself feeling agitated in that presence because it was so palpable that the dysregulation and I'd explain some some of the concepts around a maladaptive stress response.

And I would respond by saying, you know, that I make so much sense, but I just don't think it's relevant to me because they've normalized. And when we live in a body for long enough, that doesn't become something that's, that's that's dysfunctional.

It's just that's just normal. Like, that's what we become normalized to. And so the first step to a healing is to recognize that the walls that we built to keep us safe in childhood, like the walls that we built to protect us, have often become the walls of the prison that now trap as an adult life.

And we often don't realize that we're trapped because we've got so used to living in that prison that that that's that's being created. And so when it comes to healing from trauma, the first thing is to recognize and to have awareness and understanding about how our history has impacted and shaped us.

But the awareness alone is not enough, right? Like I was I was just talking, talking to the team about that one of the one of my I was going to say pet peeves.

That's a very English statement. One of the things that that that annoy annoys me is that people can go and do a lot of therapeutic work and become incredibly articulate, describing and talking about their issues, but they're actually reinforcing the issue.

And the reason why it annoys me is that it's really well intentioned on both the part of the therapist, on both the part of the client, but actually what they've done together, as they've gone from a lack of awareness to increasing awareness to the awareness now becoming the story that actually keeps the person trapped where they are.

So we got to have the awareness, but the awareness then needs to move to a next stage, which is a stage of action, a stage of actually where we do like go back to what I was saying about three core emotional needs at the heart of really all trauma healing.

Paths to Healing and Self-Regulation

What there's many different methodologies and techniques and strategies and approaches. But really at the heart of all of that work is strategy is to meet those needs.

Like how do you learn to self-regulate your own nervous system is that meditation, is that breathwork? Is that psychedelics? Is that yoga? Is that tai chi, is that qigong?

Is that energy work? There's many, many, many different, different ways. But at the heart of so many, really all of those things, one of the key things at the heart is bringing back self regulation and safety to the nervous system.

The core emotional need of love by the one is doing, you know, affirmations or kind of inner child work or working learning to work with their feelings and their emotions.

It's about cultivating a loving place internally, which really, to me at its heart, is loving ourselves wherever we are and actually particularly loving ourselves when we're in the places where we weren't loved in childhood.

So when we're feeling rageful or angry or sad or disappointed or jealous or whatever it may be to be able to hold and allow ourselves in those places.

And so I want, I want to touch this point, because when you talk about walls, we actually buy or chemically and physiologically build walls, we build lattice formation, we build isolation and isolation, create a micro environment where physiologically, those physiology changes, for example, cancer can grow.

But we also create these boxes of reality where we isolate traumas and we spend a lot of energy maintaining them because they are secret. We can deal with them.

Like you say, first thing, we have to be aware. Like we open, we open the closets. And when we keep these closed, it takes a lot of energy. And exactly when it's some of the main energetic patterns of chronic fatigue, is it?

It's not that we don't have energy. We spend it on books seeing different concepts in our in our being so and so that and what you're describing. And there is almost always a certain stage of disconnect.

We need to step away from being so into the dysregulation and say, now I can watch myself, but we do have to go back and feel okay and feel the same spaciousness and love within the experience.

And that's what you are really talking about. We have to learn to love ourself as we are. I know for me personally, it's many in the last few years that like you say, they become I thought I tell them I love myself, but it's a reflection of loving others.

They're connected with my heart. And from this perspective, my approach. Open heart medicine is exactly this. Because every cell in the body judges puts walls right, but the heart takes all the dirty blood.

So we take accepts it. So if we connect with our heart genuinely, automatically, innately, everything is acceptable. And from your perspective, Alex, we are built to do it.

We don't have to invent it. We just have to connect with it. And then when does a heart nourish itself? Selflessly?

When it's done with its work, it nourishes the whole body.

It relaxes and outside of the heart it nourishes through the coronary artery. So what you're talking about, I want the people listening to understand the self-love is not the narcissistic love that we see some leadership all over the world.

I said, I hear you referring to Isaac. It's really this self-love is part of loving others, and that is necessary in order to love others in order to melt our, our boundaries.

And that's why you got heart failure, which is fibrotic, which is a heart just become stiff. It build too strong of a wall. So in this sense it's really important.

The other thing you're telling people, there are different options, there are different combinations. And you need to find your own journey because the essence of trauma is stuckness is going to a place that already ended.

It's done. And what your principle, and really the principle of healing from drama is letting go and flowing. So in this sense, it's very, very important to be to really to be in this place.

So, Alex, why don't you and for the audience, a few more details about what you're doing, your center and how you actually address the healing for me, from the therapeutic, from what you offer, from your educational perspectives.

Yeah. Well, actually, the way I want to start to answer that is there is nothing that we do at my clinic or, programs or so on. There's nothing that anyone does that heals someone else's trauma.

Our just like so our physical body has a natural capacity to heal, right? Like, we we cut our skin, we break a bone. There's no drug that we take that makes the skin heal or the bone heal.

The human body does that. We might stitch the skin together. We might set the bone. We might take painkillers or, antibiotics to stop this. There's there's medicine.

There's a bunch of amazing things to, to, to help the kind of the periphery. But the act, there's no drug you take that makes the healing happen. The same thing is true when it comes to emotional healing.

There's no technique. There's no intervention that makes your emotions heal. What they do is they help cultivate the internal environment that allows that healing to happen.

So the ways that we work with people a number of ways, but a couple of things, particularly the focus on one is tools and strategies to help reset the nervous system, to calm what's happening in in the system.

How do you recognize that your system is activated? How do you stop it in that moment? How do you practice self-regulation, and then how do you learn to meet those core emotional needs for yourself?

So this the nervous system regulation is part of how you cultivate that safety. How do you cultivate a state of inner love? How do you establish healthy boundaries with other people, but also with, with yourself?

I'm a big fan of really good psychoeducation. I find it really empowers people to understand what's happening, why it's happening, the steps to be able to change it.

Programs, Resources, and Closing Reflections

I'm also that a really big fan of having practical things to do right. To get back to what we were saying a little bit earlier. The more we talk about the the story, the bigger the story ends up becoming.

Now we need to talk about it enough to understand it, but then the focus needs to be on practically, how do we work to change that story? and in terms of answer the question, so how do we do that even more specifically?

So we have, I have a very successful online coaching program, the reset program, which is, 12 week online program where people get that psychoeducation, but most importantly, the tools, the techniques and strategies, we train therapists.

We have a, therapeutic coaching certification, which is a two year training program to train people to, to work in, in this way. I also have a series of, of filmed therapeutic journeys on YouTube where people I've worked with, people we filmed both in the therapy room outside the therapy, which is a great way to really see this work in action and to see this work what actually happens in the real world, not what it says in the books.

And there's also a sense, well, you see it, you hear it. It's different than just reading or listening to to you, to the details. And what is the easiest way for people to find you?

Yeah. So the best place to go is my website Alexhoward.com. And there you'll find signposts to to my books to Otto. There's a, there's a really helpful, free five day video series that breaks down the echo model that we talked about in a much more detail, sort of practical sort of assessments that you can do.

As part of that, you'll find signpost to the clinic, to the professional training, to the YouTube series. So yeah. Alexhoward.com The that is the easiest one place to go, that signpost everything else.

Alex, I want to thank you for joining me is, a lot of topics on my list on this site that will will require another conversation. But this was a great, really a great roadmap and really, really understanding that we can heal from trauma.

It's it's part of who we are. And it's we have the physiology to do it. We have the capacity to do it. And so it really gives hope to people. And we really have to understand.

And it's there is no way I'm talking about the topic of trauma to transcendence. But within the trauma there's an opportunity for transcendence. It's right there.

It's finding the door for all of us. So thank you for sharing so many doors and your own story is inspiring and I'm looking forward to our next conversation.

Isaac, thank you for having me. I look forward to it as well. Thank you. Thank you.