Introduction to Emotional Trauma and Sleep

Welcome back to the Sleep Deep Summit. I'm your host, Dr. Audrey Wells. And today for the next guest, I have Alex Howard, who is the founder and chairman of the Optimum Health Clinic, or OHC.

It's one of the world's leading integrative medicine clinics and Alex is also the creator of therapeutic coaching as a methodology since March of 2020.

He's been documenting his therapeutic work with real life patients on his YouTube series called In Therapy with Alex Howard. Welcome. Thank you for having me.

Yeah, it's a pleasure to have you and tap into your expertise because today we're talking about something serious, but I think is not discussed enough when it comes to sleep.

And that's emotional trauma. Specifically how emotional trauma impacts your sleep. You know, I'll tell you, one of the things that I talk about a lot is how you have to regulate your nervous system to get to sleep.

And I think that definitely has some parallels and is in the bucket of having emotional trauma. So I'm very happy to highlight this today. Yeah, great.

I mean, one of the ways that I think about it is sleep is a natural state. And if we think back to back to the caveman days, you and I are running around hunting wooly mammoths and saber tooth tigers and all of that stuff.

At the end of the day, we know hopefully that we're safe and the fire starts to burn down and then we surrender and we go to sleep. But if that wooly mammoth or saber toothed tiger we've been hunting through the day is now hunting us, and we know that there's a danger and there's a threat, it's not physiologically safe to fall asleep.

And so we're going to stay on edge. And what's often happening with emotion and on process and unhealed emotional trauma is for our nervous system. It feels like there's a threat and therefore we can do everything else for sleep.

We can balance hormones. We can balance blood sugar. We can make sure we get sunlight in the mornings. We can make sure that we manage sleep patterns in all of these pieces.

But if I'm nervous, system is unsafe. It's really hard to get that quality sleep. I totally agree with you. And one of the things I say a lot is that when I counsel people who have difficulty getting to sleep or returning to sleep in the middle of the night, there are certain themes that come up in the way that they're thinking.

They're thinking, I'm not enough.

How Trauma Disrupts Nervous System Safety

They're thinking I'm not safe or something in their life is not congruent. And that feeling of safety is so important that, you know, it's oftentimes helpful to reassure yourself with just the simple sentence, I am safe.

Yeah. So in in my body of work, I talk a lot about the impact of childhood trauma on adult development. And just to say a couple of words about trauma.

I don't necessarily just mean trauma in a more classic sense of PTSD, trauma like we've been in a war zone or a car accident or something, which is kind of overtly obviously traumatic too, to our nervous system and to our lives.

I also talk a lot about what I call covert trauma, which are these much more subtle developmental experiences that still shape our lives. And so if, for example, we grow up in an environment where we know as an idea that we loved and we know is a basic idea that we're safe and so on, we don't actually feel that in our nervous system.

Then that shapes us and that shapes what we learn about ourselves, what we learn about other people, and what we learn about the world around us. And to really develop emotionally in our healthiest and most optimum way, there are certain core emotional needs that we have.

And it's just like knees to our physical body. Like food, water, oxygen and so on. These needs are they're not things that are nice to have. They're things that are critical for healthy emotional development.

You know, we can survive childhood without the optimum amounts of food, for example, but it will fundamentally impact how our body develops, and we will likely have impacts in that later in our life.

And so I talk about that being three core emotional needs that we all have. And when those needs are met, it gives us a resilience. It means that we develop a healthy, well-functioning ego structure.

When it doesn't happen, it shapes us in a lot of ways. And so just briefly, those three core emotional needs, as you mentioned, one of them are boundary trees, safety and love, boundaries being the ability to say yes and to say no.

So to say to someone else, yes, come closer or no, move further away. But also with ourselves, like an adult life, to be able to say, yes, I'm going to commit to this new healing plan that I recognize I need to do, or no, I need to stop this relationship or this habit or this behavior or so on.

So we need to have healthy boundaries in childhood, and we also need to have a sense of safety. And as babies, we get this in curriculum session with our caregivers.

So small baby or small child is held by mom, dad, grandma, foster parent, whoever it is. And the the regulation in their nervous system tells the baby's nervous system that they are safe.

There's no amount of of words or explanations. It's a it's a it's a nervous system, kind of meeting, a mirroring that happens when we get that as a child.

We then learn how to self-regulate on nervous system as an adult. If we don't get that as a child, we don't learn how to self-regulate, which is why people end up with all kinds of challenges and difficulties in their lives and then this core emotional need of love.

You mentioned it as well when you said we have this fear that we're not enough, that the core emotional need of love as a child is not being it's not knowing that we can have very loving parents, but the way that they demonstrate love doesn't meet that core emotional need.

So, you know, a story that I told in my most recent book was a eight year old boy who'd been sent off to boarding school because his parents believed it was the place to get the best start in life, the best education, the best exposure to experience.

And so it was enormously financially stressful for them to send their son there. They went through great personal sacrifice to be able to make that happen because they loved their son.

But the experience for him was one of being rejected, sent away and not having that core emotional need of love met. And so I always want to really make the point it's not about whether we were loved or not.

It's about whether that meeting of that core need actually happened.

Core Emotional Needs: Boundaries, Safety, and Love

And so going back to the point here, when we don't get those core emotional needs met, we have these events and experiences that happen that then shape us and they impact us, and then we can go through life without really having this in a sense of of safety.

I mean, we don't have this in a sense of safety. It's really hard to go to this place of surrender, in this place of falling asleep, which is light. It's like a mini death. Every night we surrender, we let go.

And we're no longer in control of our experience. And so a big part of in my experience of working with sleep issues, particularly in the more complex expressions of sleep issues, a big part of it is learning how to meet those core emotional needs for ourself and in the context of safety, learning how to self-regulate our own nervous system so we can really, truly calm to that place of safety.

You know what you're saying is so meaningful? Because I think that there are these emotional needs and people kind of get through their day by distracting, buffering, overworking, TV, phone, all these things.

But it's only when they're they're laying down and it's quiet, it's dark, and they're kind of with themselves on a on a fundamental level that these needs can come out.

And one of the things that I've always kind of struggled with is to try to recruit people to this idea that your sleep is so fundamentally important. In our culture, we sort of discount sleep as something that's negotiable or something that, you know, we can do later or do a catch up.

And I worry that the emotional need kind of gets pulled along with that, that, you know, we can work on it later or no, it's not that big of a deal, but I really have as a sleep problem.

But I think these emotional flags, these red flags that come out when somebody is trying to sleep. I think so we we talk in the therapeutic coaching model a lot around emotional defenses.

The ways that we defend and from feeling our emotions. And again, you spoke to some examples and say one is avoidance and distraction. So during the day, avoidance and distraction works pretty well, particularly with with cell phones, right?

You can I mean, it's that amazing thing that every time someone's got a spare moment, like waiting for the bus, you know, sitting on the loo, waiting for the timer to go off.

When dinner's in the oven, what does everyone do? They go to their cell phone and they scroll social media. And so we can distract it throughout the day.

But the real measure of the quality of one's emotional life is how they feel at 3:00 in the morning when there's no distraction, because that's when you know what's really going on and what you really feel.

Exactly. I like to say that whatever is keeping you up in the middle of the night, that is where you need to be coached. That's where you need attention.

And it's you know, it's hard when you wake up in the middle of the night because you've already satisfied some of your sleep need. So you're really kind of left there with your mind after midnight, which does not look the same as your mind at 10 a.m..

That's right. That's right. And and at the same time, here's how I look at it. So a lot a lot of my work over the years has been that people have complex chronic illnesses, particularly fatigue related conditions.

So we've worked a lot people with fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, Lyme disease and so on, and like sleep with these kind of complex conditions. They're multifaceted.

And so I absolutely am not going to stand here and say the only thing that's important to resolve sleep is emotional

healing, emotional trauma. And the same thing is is true with fatigue.

It's not the only piece that's important, which is why I love summits like this, because you get to hear from lots of pieces of the jigsaw which show up for different people and in different ways, and those unresolved emotional pieces, which may be for some people, the most important piece.

For other people, a piece of the picture of why they can't sleep. Sleep is just one symptom of that of that issue. Right. And so it may be the most irritating symptom, like it's the reason that someone's listening to this summit or the reason why someone's consulting with you or with me or someone else.

But that unresolved issue is likely infecting a bunch of other things as well. It's likely affecting someone's intimate relationships. It's likely affecting someone actualizing their real potential in their life.

It's likely affecting someone's health in other ways. And how I look at it is when the pain gets bad enough, like when the sleep history becomes bad enough that the someone starts to really pursue pathways of help.

There's also a gift in that because we actually get the opportunity to deal with those things that otherwise we don't deal with. And then, you know, you get you get people that get to sort of the end of their life and then look back and go, Oh my God, I just wish I'd had I dealt with that 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago.

And so one can legitimately take the perspective of feeling like they're a victim of the experience, because that's true from a perspective. I mean, my last book, it's called It's Not Your Fault.

So I'm very, very happy people to say so you take that take that perspective because it's valid. And it's also true that it may not be our fault, that things are the way that they are, but we can be responsive both for doing something about it and when we have unresolved emotional trauma.

It's fundamental, at least shapes our life. It's very difficult to be in a really connected, nourishing, satisfying, intimate relationship with our, you know, relational partner or our children or our parents or our friends.

If we've got all this stuff we're trying to avoid. Because what happens is whenever really here, we're always trying to get away from our experience. And that's why sleep is such a difficult place, because we can't get away from it.

In fact, to really sleep, we have to relax and surrender. And when we relax and surrender, we start to feel.

Why Sleep Reveals Unprocessed Emotions

And so it's we can look at it from the lens of being being a horrible thing we don't want to have happen. Or we can look at it through the lens of an invitation to do the work that has the potential to truly transform our lives.

If someone is watching this and they know they've got that invitation and where they are kind of pulled toward personal development, pulled toward resolving some of the emotional trauma, how would you recommend they start?

It's I think the first thing is we have to really recognize what's happening. And that's part of this this very conversation that we're having right now.

There has to be a recognition that there is emotional trauma, that it's unresolved and it's impacting what's happening in our lives. The next step is we have to examine, well, what's really happening here.

Like, where's this come from? You know, one way I talk about it is we all walk through our lives with a big black sack full of all the emotional experiences we have and processed.

And for some of us, that black sack gets pretty heavy and becomes pretty weighty. Never so often like the top opens up and all that stuff comes flooding out and we work really hard to try and shove it back down there.

So examining and understanding how we've been shaped by childhood events, childhood experiences and how they're showing up now. So we want to recognize what's happened, examine.

So I recognize there's an issue and examine what's and what's driving that. We then need ways to start late to break the momentum of those habits and those patterns.

And I see that from from a couple of perspectives. One, we need to really be able to see the way those things are playing out and to be able to to catch ourselves and stop the repetitive behavior, but also, we really have to retrain a nervous system because one of the challenges where that unresolved emotional trauma is we just normalize to living in a this disregulated state.

You know, going back to the example right at the beginning around, you know, the saber tooth tiger that that's hunting us. If we if we take that answer to modern life, you know, you and I are walking down the street and, you know, London or New York or whatever.

And this is a potentially good match for now with electric busses because you can't hear them as like electric busses that's coming towards us. And then we see it last minute and we leap out of the way when we get a big hit of adrenaline and cortisol and the stress hormones that that help us survive.

But sometimes it's like the bus or the sabertooth tiger is coming towards us all of the time. And so we normalize to that. And, you know, I remember years ago we first started the clinic that 20 years ago now, and people would come in and they'd be so disregulated in their nervous system that I would notice my system as an empath was starting to disregulated in relationship to that person.

So I was just having to self-regulate myself to be in the presence of this person. And then I would talk about the relationship between stress and the nervous system and what I call a maladaptive stress response.

And they were saying it makes complete sense logically, but that's not happening for me because they're so normalized to being in that body. It doesn't seem that something's abnormal.

And so we have to have ways to reach, train the homeostatic balance at the point of homeostasis. And that nervous system has shifted. So we have to have ways to train that back to balance.

And so that's the first three steps. One, there's a couple more. So we want to recognize, examine what's happening. We've got to stop. It's in the stopping and the beginning of the slowing down of the system that we start to really feel the emotions that we've been trying to get away from.

So another way of looking at a maladaptive stress response or a dysregulated nervous system is it's a set of ways to escape feeling our feelings. So when you start to rebalance the nervous system, you start to feel the feelings.

And that's where we have to do that. Emotional healing work. And to do that work, really what we're then learning to do is to go back to those three core emotional needs of boundary safety and love.

We have to learn to meet those needs for ourselves because as children we are dependent upon our caregivers to do it for us. The the burden slash gift of adulthood is that we now take responsibility for doing that for ourselves.

So we do our emotional healing work and is doing that. We're then transforming our relationship with ourselves and with the world around us. So just to summarize what we just talked about, there's really there's five steps and we just went through them.

So and the five steps make up the acronym of Reset. So there's recognize we we examine what's what, where that's come from.

Recognizing and Processing Emotional Defenses

We stop, we do our emotional healing work, the emotions, and then we transform our relationship with ourselves by meeting these three core emotional needs.

And that that five step process is really the heart of the reset program, which is an online program. I've run for a number of years. What I find that's important is we have to do the work in that sequence.

So if people jump in and start trying to change everything that's happening without really recognizing, examining the impacts of the history that is going off sort of half, half cocked, like we're not dealing with the right pieces if we try and do the emotions work before bringing some regulation to the nervous system, we don't have the sort of the safety and the grounding to be able to do that.

But if we just keep trying to calm the system and we don't work with the emotions, the system just keeps ramping back up again because it's a defense mechanism to get away from from the emotions.

And so it's important to follow, in my opinion. It's important to follow that sequence and it takes some time, just like it takes some time to take decades to end up where we are.

Doesn't that take decades to heal? But it does take some time to bring back to that that place of balance. You know, I feel like you just dropped some really valuable knowledge for everybody.

I mean, literally a blueprint for going from where you're at now to a place where you're more regulated emotionally, more evolved as a person. And I think that's the place where a lot of people kind of see themselves as actualizing into the person that they want to be.

A couple of things. One is that, you know, in this modern age and probably as part of distracting ourselves from feeling what we want to feel, there's almost no white space available in the day to kind of do this work.

And I want to point out for everybody that I mentioned a little bit of this before your brain in the nighttime is having a negative bias. That is not the time to do your emotional work.

You really have to carve out time in the day where your frontal lobes are online and you're you're more capable of doing this stuff. Now, you mentioned something that I really want to crystallize for people, and this is kind of speaking to the type of patient that I've seen who says they have a monkey mind or they just want to shut their brain off at night.

It's a person who's very cognitively oriented. I think the idea of emotional processing is very hard to kind of encapsulate. Could you explain that a little bit more how to process or manage emotions?

Yeah. So firstly, just to say emotional healing and processing is so important that your nervous system thinks it's more important than sleep, right? So just to make the point that we may be neglecting it during the day, but our system, which is designed with self-preservation at its heart and core, is like, this is so important.

We're not going to let you get to sleep until this gets dealt with. Right. So I think that firstly, that that's an important point. I love that. Yeah.

Secondly, it's really hard to understand even the concept and the idea of emotions when we're disconnected from them. So I remember when I first started learning psychology because of my own health challenges and my mid-to-late teens, and I'd read books on psychology and, you know, say kind of understanding, you know, the mind and the emotions.

And I'd be like, just because the mind doesn't, psychology is just thinking. And, you know, someone would when I first got into having my in therapy, they would say, you know, how do you feel?

And I'd say, Well, what I think is and I'd give a very articulate, well thought out thought process about what what was happening. So to even start to work with feelings and emotions, we've got to understand the ways that we're

defending and escaping and getting away from those feelings and emotions, because we have to move through those defenses enough to be able to actually start to feel.

One of the ways I talk about emotional defenses is that the walls that we build in childhood to keep us safe become the walls of the prison that trap us in our adult life.

Right. And so maybe the way that we survived childhood was we mentioned earlier emotional defenses. Another emotional defense is what we call state changing.

So when we use drugs, alcohol, food, sex, overworking, they're not these things are all necessarily right and wrong, but it's the relationship we have to these things that we use them to change how we feel in our emotional body.

So let's say as a child that we had a really difficult and overwhelming emotional experiences and the only potential drug we had access to was maybe food at that point.

And so we noticed that we overate a lot of sugary food as a way to try and change how we felt. And then we got to our teenage years and maybe we discovered marijuana and then maybe we discussed Scott with cocaine and we and we gradually sort of escalated the interventions that we had available to us.

But really what we were trying to do was self medicate our feelings and emotions that we didn't know how to process and how to deal with. So we built these walls up to sort of protect ourselves, to kind of get away.

And it worked. We survived. And the problem is, though, the thing that we did to survive is now the very source of suffering and pain in our lives now.

And so to understand the importance of emotional processing in healing and even what that is, we first got to understand that that's maybe a place that we've done a lot of things to try and get away from what was a few sort of cliched phrases, what we resist will persist.

You can't heal what you don't feel, and so you can't heal your emotions and disconnect from them another way I look at it is when we have a trauma as a child and going back to my very broad definition of trauma from the start, it doesn't have to be the classic adverse childhood experiences like physical abuse, sexual abuse and so on.

It may just be a bit like the example I gave, just not having our emotional needs taken care of when we can't escape physically, like we can't leave the situation because we are literally dependent upon the family structure for physical survival, because we need food, shelter and so on.

The Reset Framework for Healing and Regulation

When we can't escape physically, we escape in our minds. And so we go into daydreaming, we go into fancy about the future, we go into the narratives, the stories, but we learn to disconnect and to not fail.

So when it comes to emotional processing and emotional healing, often people will say, well, I don't I don't feel anything. I'm fine. There's nothing wrong.

I just have lots of anxiety, for example, which is which is the nervous system speeding up or I suffer from addictions, which is a form of self-medication, or I suffer from depression, which is a form of a freeze response of a shutdown that's happening in the system.

Or I just have really low self esteem issues, which is a rejecting of oneself and one is experience. And so typically people don't come to therapeutic work reporting emotional trauma, they come reporting the symptoms of emotional trauma or they come reporting these emotional defense strategies to not feel those feelings and emotions.

And so as we then start to work through to want to then go back to art, to answer your question, if we we start to work through those feelings and those defenses from the feelings and emotions, we often start to discover there's a

whole load of unattended and unprocessed stuff that's there.

There's that that the short and simple answer, although this is obviously a big area, but the short and simple answer, this goes back to what we were saying a little bit earlier, that for a child to develop in an emotionally healthy way, they need their caregivers to meet these core emotional needs for them, the needs of boundaries, safety and love to do our as an adult.

As we said, we are now the burden or the gift is that we now have the responsibility to meet those needs, to be able to heal our emotions. We need boundaries.

That means that we to say yes to ourselves. We have to say no to other people. Sometimes we have to create the space, the distance. We have to prioritize our healing.

We don't want to be in a situation where the only time that our emotions can get our attention is the middle of the night. Like we need to carve the space of boundary.

That space. We then have to learn how to build that in a place of safety. And that means learning how to self-regulate. On nervous system meditation, yoga, tai chi, qigong, breathwork.

There's lots of different strategies or ways to do that. We need to learn how to build that place of safety and the real act of emotional healing is loving ourselves exactly where we are, which is the invitation for our lived, immediate experience to unfold.

And so what I mean by that is, let's say we have a feeling of sadness and what we learn in childhood was feeling sad, is weak or big boys or girls don't cry or whatever it may be.

And we feel the feeling of sadness and the acts of love is to be truly present and attentive and interested and curious in that feeling of sadness which invites it, which means we may cry, we may feel some release and some of that emotion that us.

But then when that emotion moves, it's moved and healthy, emotional, a healthy emotional life is like the water in a river that can freely flow. Sometimes there's a big cascade of water that's coming in.

It needs to be able to move. But what we don't want to be doing is building a massive dam, which just means the water pressure gets bigger and bigger and bigger.

It also means the water starts to fester and it starts to get toxic and it starts to then, you know, and this is where we can have a relationship between unprocessed emotions and physical health conditions in different ways.

And so it's very simple. Theoretically, it's obviously a lot of it takes time and it takes work and it takes patience in the lived experience of doing the work.

Resources, Programs, and Where to Learn More

But it's really giving our it understanding how we defend and then it's giving our emotions, the boundaries, the sense of safety, the interest in their love to allow them to actually move to. Fantastic answer, really great.

And I think that these ideas are so important as people lie there in their relationship with yourself, you know, you're just kind of marinating in it in the middle of the night.

And so if the viewers of this video are suspecting that there are coping mechanisms that are maladaptive, if there are things that are really holding you back from processing your emotions and accessing that ability to even re parent yourself in a way that's more healthy, I would really encourage you to reach out to people that can help you with that.

And there are lots of different mechanisms to go about that which are entirely personalized depending on what you need. Alex, it's been a great time talking to you.

Can you tell us how people might find you and learn more about the clinic that you run? Yeah, of course. So the easiest place to go to is my Web site, which is AlexHoward.com.

And there you'll find signpost towards all the different things that I do say to the Optimum Health Clinic or say to I have a YouTube series where we film people therapeutic journeys.

You mentioned it in the intro In Therapy with Alex Howard So the signpost towards that Towards our therapeutic coaching practitioner training. So we also train people and how to work with other people.

And also you'll find AlexHoward.com links to my books and a free five day video series, which takes a lot of what we're talking about here and gives a lot more sort of detail around, which is called Decode Your Trauma, which really helps you go back and look at the core emotional needs, look at childhood and see how that may be playing out in life. Now that sounds really useful, and I thank you for bringing that to our attention because that will be so valuable, especially for people who are just getting started with this idea that they could really improve by addressing their emotional life.

Thank you so much. Alex Howard. Thank you for having me.