Introduction to Trauma and Chronic Symptoms

Welcome to this interview on the Biology of Trauma Summit 3.0. We're talking about the Trauma disease connection. And I'm your host, Doctor Aimie. And in this interview, this is one of my favorites.

You will learn one of the most important things about the trauma disease connection, how to decode a symptom like fatigue, and what the path of healing looks like.

But this is not just for someone who has fatigue. This is really any chronic health symptom. What's the trauma component and what does the path to healing look like?

This interview will be one to share with a friend and invite them to listen in on this interview. Not only can there be a trauma component to a chronic symptom, but living with that chronic symptom can be traumatic.

And if you have a chronic health symptom, you know exactly what I'm talking about because especially at the beginning, you don't know when things are going to get better, you don't know how things are going to get better.

You don't know who can help you. Life can be pretty bleak. Life can look pretty bleak. And so just living with a chronic health symptom can be traumatic.

One of the things you will learn in this interview is that there is no one magic pill. I know. I'm sorry. There is no one answer, no one solution. By the time you have a chronic symptom, there are multiple components that have contributed to the development of that symptom trauma being one of them, and whether it contributed to its origin and its development or because living with it has been traumatic trauma is now one component that needs to be addressed.

Let me say that again to make sure you heard me. When we have a chronic health symptom, there is no one magic pill, there is no one solution because there are multiple components that cause the development of it.

And now it's ongoing maintenance of it. And so when we look at what is our path to healing, we're not going to be looking for just that one thing. We're going to be looking at what are all the different components that I need to address?

And that's what you're going to learn in this interview. One of those components, one of those components is going to be trauma. Why? Because trauma perhaps was one of the contributing factors to you developing this chronic health symptom that's to be discovered.

Right. But even now that you have a chronic health symptom, because living with it is traumatic, trauma needs to be addressed, the trauma component needs to be addressed.

But what I want to share with you is a word of caution, because what I did myself and what I see many people doing is with good intentions, doing trauma work but in the wrong way and what do I mean by the wrong way?

Even the right things, but in the wrong order is still the wrong way. What will happen if you do trauma work in the wrong way and you have a chronic health symptom, you will experience a worsening of symptoms, you will experience a flare up of symptoms.

For me, it would be a flare up of chronic fatigue. For me, it would be a flare up of my autoimmune inflammation stuff, whatever your chronic health symptoms.

And maybe for you it's sleep, maybe for you it's your gut, maybe for you it's brain fog, but you will experience a

flare up of that when you do trauma work in the wrong way and again in the wrong way can even mean the right thing, but in the wrong order.

So this is why I teach a master class on the essential sequence for starting to address trauma. I cannot stress how important it is that you know the right order of things, the essential sequence, because if we do it in the wrong way, it will cause a flare up of our symptoms, even including chronic pain.

Any of our chronic health symptoms. Maybe you have had that experience so you can find a pocket book guide to the essential sequence on my website. And in fact, let me just share that with you here.

So if you go to the website traumahealingaccelerated.com, this is the home page and you scroll down and into the trauma healing resources here you have at the bottom of this list the essential sequence guide.

This is going to walk you through why the essential sequence is the essential sequence for addressing trauma.

Alex Howardu2019s Fatigue Onset and Early Struggles

Now, this is different than addressing stress. This is addressing trauma. So that is the essential sequence for addressing trauma. The essential sequence is safety, support and then expansion.

And here's what many people do wrong. They try to do expansion first, which will always be too much, too fast for the body and too much too fast is a definition of what triggers the trauma response.

So even good things can trigger a trauma response in the body when it's just too much too fast. We have to have the foundation, and when we have that foundation of safety and then support, we can move into expansion and have it be manageable for our body.

And how would we know that we don't experience a flare up of our chronic health symptoms? In fact, we actually start to experience resolution of those symptoms.

What are examples of expansion? Are so glad you asked. Processing our past, processing our childhood, analyzing our childhood, talking about our events, talk.

Talking about our traumatic events, processing those psychedelic work. A lot of a lot of therapeutic modalities are actually expansion in their nature, and they need to have that foundation of safety first and then support to be able to have that expansion be in a manageable way without causing flare ups of our chronic health conditions.

In that guide and that essential sequence guide on my website, and let me just share that with you again in this guide, the essential sequence guide download this guide because in this guide I share with you why safety?

Why is safety the first step? Why is support the next step? And what do I even mean by those? Because it's probably not what you're thinking, but when we experience a flare up, we need to listen to our bodies.

And in fact, if you are not sure if trauma is a component for your chronic health condition, when you experience a flare up after doing some form of therapy, that is one way to know, to identify, Oh, I've got a trauma component to my health symptom.

Now, I hope that you don't have to do that in order to learn about a trauma component. I'm here to help you not have to do the mistakes that I made from my body, but be able to teach you those things so that you can have a faster path to healing than what I did.

But we have to do safety and then support. And this is why I created the 21 day journey to lead people through this process of laying this foundation of safety, then support, and then the tools for expansion to help make sure you are doing it right.

What you think are just simple somatic or mind body exercises and the 21 day journey are actually starting to change your biology, change your physiology.

How do I know that? Because of the physical health symptoms that people experience when they take the 21 day journey. So I'm going to show you here that when people go to through the 21 day journey, they are experiencing changes in their physiology.

I am not addressing anything in regards to supplements, diet, lifestyle, biology, labs, testing nothing and the 21 day journey yet because as you will learn in this interview, that's not where we start.

But already just with this mind body connection, the somatic exercises look at this 26% decrease in daily physical pain and actually I need to update these numbers because this number actually should be 28% decrease in GI symptoms and a 28% decrease in sleep issues.

So this is evidence that this mind body connection, this somatic work is actually changing your biology, changing your physiology. And we use a word in this interview called regulation, which will provide you the clues as to why that is happening.

So if you are looking to reset your nervous system, do the mind body connection want to make sure you're doing it the right way? Then the 21 day journey would be very valuable for you and I am leading the next group through a 21 day journey in September.

Now for this interview, I am super excited to have my friend and colleague Alex Howard join me for this. And he is one who I have great respect for his work and we're going to start this interview with his story of fatigue that will surprise you, because that's not the Alex Howard that you see today.

The Alex Howard of today is CEO of the Alex Howard Group, an international group of businesses which includes leading clinic, the Optimum Health Clinic, an online learning platform called Conscious Life Online Coaching Program, the Reset Program and Professional and Training Programs.

Alex's passionate about making physical and emotional healing accessible to everyone after his experience and in the last few years, his own Summit Super Conference series has been attended by several hundred thousand people.

Now, in fact, you may have already attended one of his summits, and if you have not, I highly recommend you check those out and I usually tell you when those are because I strongly support his work.

He has published academic research and publications such as the British Medical Journal Open in Psychology and Health and is the author of Why Me and Decode Your Fatigue.

So with that, let's jump into this interview and learn about decoding your fatigue with Alex Howard. Alex, it's so good to have you here. And I know that your story really started with your own fatigue and this surprised you because you were otherwise healthy.

So give us a rundown of your story. When did your fatigue start and how did it present for you? Well, firstly, Aimie, thank you for having me. I always really enjoy our time together and our conversations.

Decoding Fatigue: Loads, Systems, and Nervous System Regulation

So yeah, I developed severely debilitating fatigue symptoms. I just before I turned 16 years old and I thought up until that point I was relatively healthy and relatively normal.

I don't know what either of those times really mean, but 16 years old. But nonetheless and I woke up one morning and it was almost like if there is a flock of energy into your body, someone had just pulled it out.

And initially, of course, it was thought I had a virus and I'd just been doing a bit what they call at school GCSEs, a big set of exams here in the UK and doctor said, you know, it might take a few weeks, you just need to rest and you know you'll feel better.

And a few weeks became a few months and I'd been going back and forth to my to my doctor during this time and they the diagnosis then of me, otherwise known as chronic fatigue syndrome was used.

And the I said, well, how long is it going to take to get better? And they said, you know, it could be 3 to 6 months. And I remember having turned 16 at this time, six months felt like a life sentence.

If you told me at the time that it wasn't going to be six months, it was going to be seven years. I don't quite know how I how I would have responded.

So to cut quite a long story and to be a bit shorter a couple of years into that, I'd been to see various medical doctors, alternative practitioners, naturopaths, nutritionists, and my grandmother was quite forward thinking in terms of natural health and so on, and basically nothing had improved, but a lot of things had got worse.

And one of the things that had got worse was my cycle logical and emotional states had become more and more desperate, really. And it wasn't that I was severely fatigued because I was anxious and depressed.

I was anxious and depressed because I was severely fatigued and I couldn't do any of the things I wanted to do. I lived in pain. I could I be exhausted all day.

Then I couldn't sleep at night. I would struggle to do an hour or two of schoolwork a day, and then it would be all the things that would have brought me joy I couldn't do, because the tiny bit of energy I had I was using to try to do that schoolwork.

And I basically had a conversation with my uncle, which helped me realize that if I wanted the circumstances of my life to be different, then I could spend the rest of my life waiting for the doctors and the scientists to find the answers.

And I think 25 years later, I'd still be waiting. Or I could make it my life's mission and purpose to find a way to recover. And of course, I had all kinds of narratives.

I was 18 at the time. Who was I to find the answers? This was pre mass use of the internet, so you actually had to go to a library and order books. It's difficult.

It was kind of the opposite problem of today, where there's almost too much information. There was no information ready that was out there and but that enormous rage and frustration at having my life taken away from me was then channeled into this very proactive path of recovery, of reading books, doing meditation, yoga in time, doing psychology work.

And there was no one answer. But what there was was many different answers, like pieces of a jigsaw. And over a five year period, I was then able to find my pathway back to recovery and and along the way, really, the commitment I made was that if I found a way out of this situation, I would then dedicate my life to helping others to do the same. Wow.

So I can only imagine being at 16 and thank goodness that they did not tell you that it would be seven years without being able to cope with that and even fathom what that would look like.

But in the process, you've developed two maps for fatigue. Tell us about those. Yeah, well, those maps came came later. And I, I went went on to set up the clinic that I'd wanted to exist in the years that I'd been ill, which, which, which was and is called the Optimum Health Clinic.

And along the way, I mean, we've worked with tens of thousands of people over the last 20 or so years of people

with complex chronic illnesses. A lot of them were fatigue as a primary symptom.

And the realization a little bit like had been on my journey, there is no one answer. There are many different answers that then you need maps to figure around how and why and where or when different things will work for different people.

In fact, a few years ago and I wrote a book about the work that we do with fatigue, which was called Decode Your Fatigue, because to me, before you can map someone's path to recovery, you have to decode what's actually going on.

And so of these two maps, the first map is a map of of decoding. And the second map is then a map of a path to recovery. And so that first map in terms of of of decoding fatigue, the first thing is, I think often people think, well, isn't it just genetics?

Isn't it just that I was I was I was born to be this way. And the research on genetics and complex chronic fatigue conditions is that, yes, there is a modest impact of genetics and there's been twin studies that show that if one is identical, twin of one that has a fatigue condition, there is a slight increase probability, but it is small in the scheme of things statistically and it certainly doesn't explain it.

And more importantly, as I'm sure you've had other speaking about as part of the summit, we have to look at epigenetics and the fact that one might have a genetic predisposition towards predisposition towards something, but that says nothing about how likely they are actually to manifest that based upon lifestyle and behaviors and and life experiences and so on.

So there is a small genetic piece, but then we have to look at the different ways that one responds to themselves and to their lives. And so this there's an important psychology piece, and I want to just caveat this by saying, I am not saying the fatigue and related conditions are caused by psychological conditions.

I'm saying the psychological conditions have a factor. They are a piece of a jigsaw, but they are also determined partly are epigenetics. They also determine how we respond to other things that happen, which I'll talk about in a moment.

So there are certain what I call energy depleting psychology's ways of relating to ourselves, relating to other people, and relating to the wider world, which are inherently draining and depleting things like being a helper, placing everyone else's needs as more important than our own well-being and achiever.

Self-worth is defined by what we do and what we achieve. Body says stop rest. Personality pattern says Keep going. Now, I know that, Aimie, you and I would never be guilty of any of these things, nor would any other people watching that.

Watch our interview. Going to say, if I have no personal experience. No. Exactly. Exactly. So there's this. There's five of these different personality patterns to help achieve anxiety, perfectionist and controller.

But then there are the loads that happen to our system. These can be environmental loads. So things like toxins, things like viruses, Epstein-Barr virus, main sample, COVID 19 being another example.

So they'd be viral loads or environmental loads. They can be trauma loads, adverse childhood experiences is a good example of this. And all genetics. Our personality patterns determine often how those loads do and don't impact us.

So example might be that somebody gets Epstein-Barr virus or glandular fever and they recognize that body is sick and it needs rest. And so they do the sensible thing and they rest and it might take six months for their body to recover from that.

And if that person was born in a world of financial privilege 30, 40, 50 years ago, they probably went somewhere

like Switzerland and they lift up a mountain and they just wait it until until that body recovered.

Somebody else who maybe has learned to define their self-worth by what they do and what they achieve like and achieve a pattern, body size rest. They say, screw you. I've got to hit this deadline.

I've got to achieve this thing. And they just keep on pushing through it. So I think one of the misunderstandings sometimes is we can overly fixate on the loads and not look at the environment, the internal and external environment within which those loads happen.

So we have the genetics, we have the personality patterns, we have those various loads that then results on an impact on our bodily systems and that the separation of the systems, well medicine overly separates, mainstream medicine focuses on one.

But we also need to recognize that you can have three people with fatigue and the actual system, which is the origin of that fatigue is different. So particularly we talk about the immune system, the endocrine system and the digestive system, and you can have one person where the impact on the bodily systems is that they have developed small intestinal bacterial overgrowth or SIBO, and they are not breaking down the nutrients in their food effectively.

And that is the primary source of their fatigue. Somebody else, it may be that their adrenals have consistently overworked and they have ended up with low cortisol, testosterone, whatever it may be.

And that's the source. Somebody else. It may be that their immune system has become overactive, oversensitive, and they now have reactions to lots of things that are not real threats to their system, and that's what's depleting them.

So just to summarize this first, Max, I know I've just talked to you for the last crop management. It's that there's a genetic piece, there's the personality patterns, there's the loads that hits us, and then there's the systems that that that impacts.

And also, of course, those systems are interconnected. And so that cyber example could affect our hormone balance, which could then affects our capacity of our immune system to respond effectively, for example.

So it's really important to not just look at something like fatigue from the point of view of a symptom, which is what fatigue is. A diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome is not a diagnosis.

It's a label for symptoms. We have to then go a number of steps further to use this map, and there's other maps out there as well to really figure out what's actually happening for that individual.

Which is what brings a lot of the help, because then we can look at what are the true root causes and so much of functional medicine is looking at root causes, but this is like going to the root of the root of the causes and being able to look at.

And what I'm hearing you say, without having said the word yet, is what affects our regulation of our nervous system. Yes, all of these different loads are going to be impacting the regulation of our autonomic nervous system.

And that is what kind of runs the operating system for our body. Putting one person more at risk for developing fatigue because of the downstream effects on those systems from that dysregulation.

Trauma, Mind-Body Healing, and Recovery Pathways

Yeah, well, one of the ways that I, I think a lot about this is that the you need to decode what's happening physiologically and psychologically in someone's experience.

But a given of what is also happening is when you suffer from a condition where you don't know what's wrong, why

it's wrong, should you rest? Should you push through?

Will you ever recover? Is this treatment going to work? Is there the kind of normal response to that is for our nervous system to start to amp up because we are in physiological fracs, it's light.

It's not a perceived threat like a natural threat that we don't know if we're going to get through the day without feeling horrendous or without crashing or without doing doing too much.

And so where is our nervous system is designed to respond to acute stress. So like, you know, you and I walking down the well, you and I thousands of years ago walking down the path and a sabertooth tiger jumps out at you and I walking down the street in London and the big red London electric busses coming towards us.

We don't see it. We suddenly see it. We get an immediate adrenaline call. So and that is a healthy stress response. But when it's like the bus is chasing us all of the time, that stress response becomes maladaptive and then a nervous system becomes trained to be in a state of constantly being on, apart from the fact that that is inherently depleting and draining in of itself.

It also blocks on natural capacity towards healing. It's like if you and I, which, you know, I want us to get a car loan to keep that car clean. You might stitch the skin together, but the body will hill that same.

You break a bone as long as you as you are, you set the bone and it doesn't heal crooked like that thing if well since hip get set properly, it heals crooked and we have that natural capacity to heal.

But when we're in a state of maladaptive stress response, that healing capacity is, is, is not there because of all of that resources going on to perpetuate the cycle of being in that stress response.

In fact, Dr. Robert Nava has done some fascinating research on cell danger response. And looking at that, our mitochondria, which are like the sort of powerhouses of our cells in terms of metabolizing and actually making energy, they have two functions.

They have the function of making energy and they have the function of danger signaling, i.e. spreading internally within the system there is a threat and we need to respond to that threat.

And when we are under danger appropriately, our cells will prioritize the danger, signaling over the energy production. So when you live an amount of up to stress response, apart from the fact that you just haven't got energy available for healing, you're not even making energy in in the way that you should be making it.

The final thing I'll say a moment of that stress response is that a little bit like we so many years ago must be 20 or so years ago now there's a series of bombings in London and prior to that, people would leave their gym bag on the London Underground and sort of no one would really notice and somewhat left their, you know, their gym bag, whatever their suitcase, whatever it might be. And post the bombings, of course, everyone was was hyper aroused at the threat that it may be a bomb.

So someone would leave their gym bag and the whole of the London Underground would shut down because there was a bomb threat. So that was a disproportionate response to danger.

Same thing happens with the immune system. When we're in a state of maladaptive stress response, we start to react to supplements, foods, chemicals that are not actually dangerous.

But our system is misreading the cues and it's seeing things as dangerous that are not. So this dysregulated nervous system, this maladaptive stress response, has an enormous impact on all kinds of functions within our system, which directly then impacts our capacity towards making energy, our capacity towards healing, and just our general wellbeing in day to day life.

So with this maladaptive stress response, is this the trauma response, Alex, or are you seeing this maladaptive

stress response as different than trauma?

How are you defining trauma in everything that you're describing today here with the fatigue? The trauma has a number of different roles and sort of crossovers within fatigue.

So maladaptive stress response is a response to trauma. So taking fatigue out of the picture, when we go through trauma, our nervous system becomes over, activated or disrupted later it in response to that.

But living in a maladaptive stress response is also traumatic because you're living in a state of unsafe time, you're living in a nervous system which is which is fundamentally dysregulated and also these personality patterns that we spoke briefly about earlier are often in of themselves coping strategies in response to trauma.

So for example, that achiever pattern that we touched on a couple of times, maybe what we learned as a child is love came when you achieved or state you felt safe when you when you helped and cared for other people, you then felt safe.

And so we have these kind of core emotional needs and we develop these patterns to help us ensure that we meet those needs. And so trauma has all kinds of sorts of crossovers and places with end fatigue and you don't need to heal all of your traumas to recover from fatigue because by the way, there's lots of people without fatigue that have lots of unhealed traumas.

But you do need to address the ones that are in the way of your healing. And so if there assess an unhealed or unresolved trauma as that a driving, for example, a maladaptive stress response, then you need to work with those for your nervous system.

Then to be able to rewrite your leads and to come back into a healing state. And I know that so much of your work that you tell people they have to do in order to work with this, is this mind body connection?

Why is that important here? How is that going to be helping fatigue to do mind body work or or. Well, I think I should probably back up first and say that when I was suffering from fatigue, one of the few things that would give me temporary energy was someone telling me it was all in my head because I wanted to fight them.

It was because it felt so much like I wasn't being seen and validated in the lived physical experience that that that I was having. But then along my healing journey sort of recognition was I could, I couldn't leave any stone unturned.

And that meant that I couldn't deny the reality that that was also what happened. Psycho emotionally also impacted what happened physically and what happened physically impacted what happened, psycho emotionally.

And so for the reasons we've just been talking about in terms of the maladaptive stress response and so I, I then sort of opened to this idea, the learning to regulate, not that we were using these kind of words 20 year, 25 years ago, but but learning to regulate my nervous system started to have impacts on my marketing process.

And over the years, having worked with tens of thousands of people through the OP some health connect. For some people, resetting their nervous system is a piece of the jigsaw for other people, it is most of the jigsaw and for some people it's a piece or a step on the journey that until they do it, they can't do the other pieces.

And so I would I am very careful not to infer that you need to do all of this work on your nervous system to recover from fatigue. And at the same time, the vast majority of people need to do some at least of this work, to be able to recover from fatigue.

And so when I look at your story, Alex, 16 is a pretty young age to have that severe fatigue. I think that a lot of people start to have their fatigue a decade or two decades later than what you did.

So your your system had a lot of loads. I'm I'm knowing you, knowing how you be able to decode all of this. And and that has been so much of the value that you bring to the world.

And thank you again for that. What were the specific loads that you identified in your system? What was that process for you? What did you what were the pieces that you needed to start to feel better so that we can give people some type of an idea of how this process was for you in the healing process?

Because I know that it it didn't recover overnight, but as you put pieces together, as you started to figure things out, a little bit would get better and then a little more.

So what were the specific loads for you, if you don't mind sharing that? And what was what was your process to finding the puzzle pieces for yourself?

But it's much easier for me to make sense of my own healing journey, sort of 25 years later, having worked with lots of other people. So I very talk about it with a level of insight that I would have loved to have had at the time.

But part of it was physiological. I had digested I had irritable bowel syndrome a number of years before I had chronic fatigue. So digestive elements was part of it.

It's like Clay, although was unproven, that I had some kind of viral load, which was a sort of tipping point. At the time that I got sick, I had significant where it's all relative but relatively significant childhood trauma in terms of the father, which left soon after I was born, and a system of severe mental health issues and kind of complex family dynamics and I then had a significant maladaptive stress response in response to being seriously unwell with understanding, no clarity of of of pathway forward from that.

And, and along the way, things like working with foods, nutrition, balancing blood sugar, working with things like adrenals, hormones, meditation, practice techniques to learn to calm the nervous system and it wasn't sometimes it was very targeted.

It was like there is this piece and there's this intervention.

Closing Reflections on Recovery and Resources

And other times it was more broad of working on issues around asking for help, for example, or working on issues around emotional healing or working on issues around calming of the nervous system.

And so it I think it's really important to have that clarity in decoding one's fatigue, to be able to map that affective path to recovery. And there are certain general principles which are generally helpful for many people anyway.

So if you could share one hope, like what would be that one piece of wisdom that you would share with others who may be struggling with fatigue and haven't found that map and their puzzle pieces yet?

Well, I think really the heart of this is the recognition that recovery is possible. I certainly wouldn't be is as arrogant as to say that full recovery is possible for every single person.

Because I don't, you know, the exactly the quote, but it's something on the lines of the more you the more someone knows about something, the more they realize how much they don't know about something.

Right. And so I think if they really cautious that people that talk in absolutes or talk in oversimplification around complex things because all that normally tells you is that they've got a simplistic view of a complex situation.

And so my observation is the vast majority of people can make meaningful progress on their healing journey, and no one has all the answers. And the more certainty someone speaks of they have all the answers, the more uncertainty you should have.

They have all the answers. And the reality is that there are many, many, many stories of people that suffer sometimes for long periods of time with complex, chronic illnesses that have decoded what's happening.

And then they found effective interventions to address that, and then they found pathways forwards. And so there is a kind of bizarre mainstream medical to mainstream medical narratives, one of which has historically been, we don't know what's wrong with you, therefore there is nothing wrong with you or there's something wrong with you, but we don't have the answer.

Therefore no one has the answer and you just sort of break down the level of arrogance in both of those statements. It's like that they know everything there is to know, and therefore, if they don't have the answer or can't see it, there is none.

Whereas the reality is these things are complex and there are many, many people these days doing amazing work, working with them that have found pieces of the jigsaw and ways to support people moving forwards and progress.

And indeed recovery is possible. You can see why I have such great respect for Alex and his work, his story and his experience and what he's done with his experience.

I know that you have been enjoying the summit, this interview. I highly recommend that you share it with your friends, and I also recommend that you consider purchasing these interviews so that you can have access to them at any time.

You can come back, rewatch them, you can watch the ones that you missed. This is a lot of information, but I want you to have all the tools. I want you to have all the resources.

Because like we talked about in this interview, there are many different puzzle pieces. And I don't want you to miss a major puzzle piece for your healing journey.

So resource yourself, right? As Alex talked about in this interview, we do need to be the one to find those answers for ourselves. We can have guides and mentors along the way.

I'm happy to be one of those guides for you, and I welcome you here, but we need to make sure that we are resourcing ourselves so resource yourself. This is one resource that you can have in the recording so that you can come back and revisit these at any time.

Thank you for attending this interview on the Biology of Trauma Summit 3.0. I am your host, Dr. Aimie, and I will see you on the next interview.