Sleep, Trauma, and the Nervous System

Sleep is key to our resilience. And yet sleep sometimes won't happen. In fact, sleep is one of the most common issues that people have when they have trauma patterns in their body, in their system, unresolved trauma.

So what is happening now? We're in this interview. We're going to talk about how to get to sleep better and where to start. But sleep really happens in one of the states of our autonomic nervous system.

We have three states. And when you are waking up in the middle of the night, then your system is in the sympathetic state. And let me share a picture with you so that you can understand the different states as we're going to talk about in this interview.

If you're waking up in the middle of the night, can't go back to sleep, then your system is in the sympathetic state or anxiety. Now, when you are waking up in the morning and don't want to be waking up, you would rather be asleep.

You don't want to get up to face your day. Well, that's not the sympathetic stress state anymore. Your body's actually in the trauma state and the trauma physiology.

And so that's down here at the bottom where it's called the dorsal vagal freeze overwhelm. When you're waking up and don't want to get up, that is where you are at.

When we sleep the best, we are going to be in parasympathetic and a social engagement state. Now, this is also where we are the most resilient, and that's why sleep helps us get to this place when we are sleep deprived, we are either going to be in sympathetic or we are going to be in that trauma place.

And so sleep actually helps us be more resilient by getting us into the parasympathetic. And yet sleep is often the result, or sleep is often the result of being in sympathetic or overwhelmed.

And so we've got to break this cycle. Now, how do we break the cycle? How do we actually address trauma? There are three essential components, and in this interview we talk about one of them quite a bit, and that would be the somatic piece.

And in the 21 day journey, that's exactly what I'm helping people with. So in this 21 day journey, we're starting with this piece here, which is the body or the somatic work.

Now I choose to start people here because even though the parts work, working with the stories and the narratives that we have, the belief systems that we have, and especially working with the biology of trauma, what we're talking about here on this summit, the fact that trauma has become our biology and our biology keeps us stuck in a trauma physiology.

Where I start people is the 21 day journey. And this body work or this somatic work. Why? Because when we do that and we can learn how to create a false sense of safety for ourselves, it changes the other things.

Just like what we're going to talk about in this interview, where it changes are sleep this we have evidence of that. So those people go into my 21 day journey.

They experience 26% decrease in their daily physical pain, 28% decrease in sleep issues just by doing that somatic essential element. So you're going to need all three of those for your whole healing journey.

But just starting with the somatic, where can we even mention this specific exercise in the interview today? And being able to address that already will help with the sleep issues.

Now, to help me with this conversation on sleep is my good friend Suzie Senk.

How Trauma Disrupts Sleep

She is a functional medicine practitioner, holistic sleep specialist, speaker, author and mother. She offers integrative solutions to modern day sleep challenges and helps people of all ages get a better night's sleep quickly and easily.

What she does is she creates personalized, developmentally appropriate, gentle sleep solutions for families with young children and profound yet practical custom wellness programs for teens and adults.

She has been someone who I have found very useful in terms of bringing in the practical solutions for some very challenging issues around sleep. So let's dove into this interview and talk about trauma and sleep and how to break this cycle and actually use sleep to build our resilience and allow more space and capacity to do trauma work.

Suzie With all that sleep is for especially for those who have experienced trauma and they need sleep in order to even do the trauma work. Let's give them some facts for how to sleep when sleep won't come.

So for those people who and you know this because you've been through the 21 day journey when when people's systems are just so anxious and so burnt out, what I mean, tell us even just how better sleep can help them.

First of all, just have greater capacity and greater space, greater resilience for doing trauma work. Right. So as we were talking about just before we got started and I know I am preaching to the choir here with you, Dr.

Aimie, sleep and not being able to sleep and the issues that cause trauma and cause the trauma response are so high and they go so hand-in-hand and they're so intrinsic with each other because it's basically the same physiological process in the body and then the same experience that we have.

And so it's kind of a chicken and egg situation because especially when we look at PTSD, for example, we don't know whether it's the sleep deprivation that's causing the PTSD or the PTSD.

That's then causing the sleep challenges. But either way, you cut it. You have to be able to sleep well in order to be able to heal from trauma. And so when we're looking at someone who is what part of your audience who might be listening to this and they're dealing with or they suspect that they might have trauma, making sure that you prioritize getting good sleep is so important.

But it's very, very frustrating because frequently people who are dealing with with trauma and wanting to heal trauma are also really struggling to get good sleep.

And so you were asking, what are some hacks that people can do in order to be able to sleep better at night? So the first thing, especially when we're dealing with trauma, is that you really want to think about what's going on for you throughout the day and try to decrease the amount of stress that you're experiencing in the day.

And you were so wonderful to allow me to experience the 21 day journey, and it is such a perfect option for people. One of the things that I love about the 21 day journey is that it it's not it's not a talking about process.

It's a doing process. And that is exactly what we need to do in order to be able to sleep better. We need to shift our bodies from being in this hyper vigilant state at that.

Unfortunately, when you have experienced trauma, it is in way too high of a percentage and you need to actually do the things that's going to that are going to make your nervous system experience calm and experience a sense of safety during the daytime so that you can then sleep better at night.

Because if you're in an amped up state all day long, there's absolutely no way that you're going to be able to then shift gears and be able to sleep at night.

So that's the first thing for sure. And this is true because I've noticed that many people will have so much adrenaline from their day because they're they're either in stress or they're causing themselves stress.

But they have so much adrenaline and literally adrenaline is still coursing through their blood. And then they go to lay down and you're not going to be able to fall asleep while that adrenaline is still coursing through your body.

And so the amount of stress that we're exposed to during our day will depend on how much adrenaline is still in our body, in our blood, when we go to bed at night and how much time we need to just lay there for it to finally pass.

Right. So just to explain this a little bit, we have cortisol in our body.

Daytime Stress, Blood Sugar, and Alcohol

That's a hormone that is supposed to be highest in the morning to wake us up, to help us have the energy to get out of bed. And then as we go throughout throughout our day, when we have a healthy system, the cortisol will decrease as melatonin is rising.

And then cortisol should be rock bottom in the middle of the night while we're sleeping. And melatonin should be high. Melatonin is the hormone that tells our body that it's time to sleep and that it's time to wind down.

Well, when when we have cortisol, not when we have dysregulated part of me. Dysregulated cortisol. And if we have it, the body is is basically burning cortisol for too long, then you'll get those surges of adrenaline so that your body can do the functions that it needs to when cortisol isn't able to, to, to do its job.

And so one of the other things that's really important that people would probably not associate with sleep or with trauma is making sure that you're eating a balanced diet with balanced blood sugar levels.

Because if you don't eat a balanced diet, then what's going to happen is that you're going to have a blood sugar drop or a blood sugar spike in the middle of the night, which is also going to cause those adrenaline surges so that your blood pressure can be normalized.

And so another hack is making sure that you're eating healthy, nutritious meals in a balanced way at regular times throughout the day and not snacking.

And again, this is one of those chicken and egg things, because people who struggle with trauma are already dealing with low energy. They're dealing with emotional dysregulation.

And one of the ways that people self-soothe is by going and getting foods, snacky foods, to help them either get through their day energy wise or just to help them feel better.

And so it's really important to kind of take back the reins of what you're doing and and be more conscious about how you're eating. And snacking is not good.

Ideally, what you want to have is three good sized meals per day that leave you feeling full where you don't feel hungry in between meals and you don't need to snack.

And so generally what that looks like is having enough protein about a palm sized amount of protein. So whatever your size and thickness of your palm and then having a big more than half of your plate filled with green leafy vegetables and then a little bit of carbs, complex carbs.

So again, that's the part that most people need to play with because some people need more complex carbohydrates. Some people need need less. But if you eat and end some healthy fat, so if you eat that way and you eat that way in a meal, then you should be able to easily feel full and satiated and get through to your next meal.

And that's going to help with your mood. That's going to help with your energy levels, and that's really also going to help with your sleep so that you don't get those adrenaline surges in the middle of the night.

Though, I was literally at a conference the other day and someone asked the question, What about those people who wake up in the middle of the night and panic?

And of course, the room is full of therapists. And so they're all thinking, oh, well, that person clearly has PTSD. And honestly, Suzy, the first thing that came to my mind was blood sugar levels.

Right? Right. Yeah. And in addition to food, a lot of people who struggle with trauma or who are super stressed out lean on alcohol in order to relax them in the night.

And that is such a no no because it causes blood sugar surges in the middle of the night. First you get relaxed and you then you feel tired and you fall asleep.

But then inevitably the the liver and the the blood sugar will wake you up in the middle of the night in order to kind of detoxify the alcohol content that's in your body.

So not not using alcohol as a way to help yourself deal with the trauma or the stress that you're experiencing. It's another really important thing to do.

And instead, you could. Sorry, Aimie, I see you were going to say something. Instead, you could replace it with a different kind of relaxing ritual. For example, or taking a bath before bed.

And Epsom salt bath is a fantastic choice because it's going to get magnesium into your body, which is really, really important for sleep. It's also going to, in the short term, increase your internal body temperature and then cool you down.

And and having a drop in your body temperature is another way that your body gets cued that it's time to sleep. So a calming bath with maybe lavender, essential oil and Epsom salts would be a fantastic alternative to that nightly glass of wine.

Or that nightly bowl of ice cream. Exactly. That was like in my mind what was going to come out of my mouth next. Yeah. Yeah. Because I remember when I was still in the middle of my stress and burnout in my old way of living.

And it was so frequent that I would get to the end of my day and I'd be so exhausted from having pushed myself all day and all this stress that I'd had that I would overeat in order to relax.

And then that process would make me so tired.

Creating a Sleep-Supportive Environment

I think just the overeating would make me so tired that I would fall asleep, but then I would wake up feeling awful and I would wake up in the middle of night.

I'm feeling awful. I'm feeling hot and sweaty from all this food that I ate and my body is trying to burn off those calories. And of course, it was never healthy food.

It was the the carbs and the fat as well, with that with the ice cream and the sugars. And what a vicious cycle that was. Because then, of course, I wake up the next day and I'm tired and I don't feel well and I still have this kind of like hangover from the food of the night before.

And so I'm starting my day already stressed, already not feeling well, and I repeat the cycle again where I push myself all day long, and then I use food before bedtime to help myself relax, to fall asleep.

But then it does not give me restful sleep at all. I. I have done the exact same thing more times than I care to count. And here's the thing that I noticed in my experience of that is that when the immune system is hyper vigilant, when we feel like we cannot stop, because if we stop and this might not be a conscious thought, but if we stop, then there will be a danger.

If we stop, it's a threat to our life. Like that's what the the subconscious, subconscious mind and the nervous system thinks is that if we slow down, we will die.

And so it's almost a, you know, at least for me it was a non conscious and unconscious way to just keep going. You know, that extra a little bit of sugar at the end of the day was, Oh, that means that I can just get a couple more things done and then everything might be a little bit better instead of actually having the, the self-care, the awareness of self-care and the prioritization of that, to be able to go, you know what, it's nighttime, it is dark, outside.

There is nothing beneficial that I am going to be able to accomplish for the rest of my day. So it's time to be done. It's time to let the day go and relax and put it all behind me and do something for myself.

And I think that that's really, really difficult for a lot of people who are dealing with trauma. And it's, again, one of the things that I absolutely love about the 21 day journey, because it it requires doing that that journey.

It requires you to do those things that you wouldn't normally prioritize for yourself because you just don't think that they're important. But that journey walks you through and kind of forces you to, to, to take that time and to reprioritize in that way.

And I will say that there are many people who take the 21 day journey, not necessarily everyone, but there are many who in the middle of it find themselves with that same realization that it hasn't felt safe for me to relax, it hasn't felt safe for me to slow down.

And I wasn't even conscious of it. I wasn't even aware that that's why I was pushing myself so hard. That's why I've been keeping myself so busy, and that now that I am doing these things that promote a sense of relaxation, promote a sense of safety, I can actually get anxiety with that because it doesn't feel safe to relax yet.

Yeah, and then, of course, how is your body going to sleep? Right. Because sleep requires us to relax. I mean, we can fall asleep with exhaustion, but it's not going to be restful sleep.

It's the restful sleep. When we can go into sleep feeling that all is well, I am safe and so I can rest. It's a very different sleep than the exhausted rest of just falling asleep out of exhaustion.

Yeah. Collapsing. Collapsed. Yeah. And you know, I was listening to something the other day and it it's interesting because biologically we are designed to sleep.

However, due to all of the insane chaos of our modern lives, it is not normal to sleep anymore. You actually have to work at sleep. And so even for someone who's not dealing with trauma, you have to consciously stop your life, put away the devices, turn off the lights, do all the things that you have to do to create an environment for sleep.

And that's weird because it was never like that before we had all this technology, but now we have to consciously work at sleep. And so for someone who's dealing with trauma, that's that's doubly the case because not only do you have all these external stimuli that are telling you there's no reason that you need to sleep, you can keep doing whatever it is that you're doing because the lights are on.

And, you know, the the Wi-Fi is going when you're dealing with someone, when someone has trauma, it's also their internal system that's also saying you can't go to sleep, you have to stay awake, you have to stay aware.

So for someone who notices that they have trauma patterns and their system is more sensitive, more reactive to the sensory environment, whether that be lights, whether that be sounds, whether that be wi fi.

But their system is just in general more sensitive, more reactive. What are those things that they can build into their environment to help them get that rest that they need?

Okay. So you've probably heard of sleep hygiene. And sleep hygiene is kind of an umbrella term for all the things that we can actively do that we can actively control about how we approach sleep.

And I know because it's used so frequently, it can be something that's easily dismissed. Oh yeah, sleep hygiene, whatever. It doesn't really work when in reality, for at least 50% of the people who are struggling with sleep challenges, if they just are really dialed in their sleep hygiene, their sleep would come back online and they would sleep through the night, no problem.

So when we're talking about environment, we're talking about things like light, your exposure to light, I call it your light diet. So what type of light you're being exposed to, at what types of times of day and making sure that you get early morning sunlight because that cues to your body that it's time to wake up and it helps with that cortisol, melatonin production cycle that I was talking about.

And then also making sure that you're not exposed to blue and green spectrums of of light after sunset. And again, this is really tricky in our modern culture because if you're using normal light bulbs, they have mostly blue light coming out of them.

If you're looking at screens, it's mostly blue light. So you really need to make a conscious choice to do something different. And so that might be changing out the light bulbs in your house, making sure that they are dim at night using red light bulbs instead of the regular compact, compact fluorescents at night, or using a type of circadian rhythm glasses.

If you're going to need to be on your computer at night, those are things that can help with the light. Also making sure that your the the bedroom is super dark because you want it to be like you're sleeping in a cave.

And if you if you're exposing your brain to and your eyes and your skin to light at night, it's going to tell your your brain that it should be awake in the middle of the night.

And so those lights that are coming that have that blue spectrum of light are telling your brain that it's high noon at any time of the day or the night, and then it sends your body into that hyper vigilant state because it's supposed to be alert.

So it's really counterproductive for someone who's trying to sleep.

Breathing and Safety Practices for Better Sleep

Well, also. Oh, sorry. Go ahead. It's not going to be enough for someone just to wear an eye mask that blocks the light from their eyes. Because if their skin is still receiving the light, their skin is still receiving that message of, hey, it's time to be awake.

Right? And so and unfortunately, even if you don't have the lights on in your house, if you live in an urban environment, there's ambient light from all around you.

And so getting really good blackout shades is really important. There's so many things that we need to be aware of, especially with someone with a hyper vigilant immune system.

Because even if you get blackout shades, if they're off gassing, that could be something that's keeping you awake at night. So making sure that you're that you have natural, chemical and natural materials in your bedroom is very, very important for someone who has a hyper vigilant immune system.

Also, that temperature drop at night is going to be really important if you have a a thermostat that has the same temperature all day and all night, then you're not getting that cue from your body that it needs to be that it must be

nighttime because it's it's cooler.

So you want to make sure that it's much cooler at night while you're sleeping. Another thing, especially for people with trauma, is making sure that your bedroom environment is a place where you actually feel safe because there are different triggers for people who've experienced trauma.

And so I recommend and you do this so well in the 21 day journey, but specifically the practice where you go through your house and you and you touch the walls and you make sure that you're grounded and that you feel safe in your space, especially you want to do that for your bedroom and make sure that everything in your bedroom is something that feels safe to you.

So for example, if you experience I'm just going off on a tangent here, but if you experience trauma from from being in a negative relationship and you still have a picture of your family and someone in that family member, the family member that you experience trauma with is in your bedroom.

Get it out of your bedroom. That's not a good thing for you. And it might not be something that you immediately associate with feeling unsafe. So you really have to go into your bedroom with a conscious awareness and an A and an open mind of feeling what feels unsafe to you, even if it doesn't make logical sense if if you go into your bedroom and you're like, You know what?

That's just not right. Do it. Do it differently for for yourself. And then the one other thing that I want to mention is EMFs, because EMFs are something that there's a lot of misinformation out there.

There's a lot of confusion about EMFs. However, if you're someone who is hypersensitive or who's dealing with trauma, I would definitely recommend that you get all of the electronics that you can out of your bedroom and try to sleep in a EMF mitigated sleep sanctuary and see how it see how it is for you.

Because not everyone is as sensitive EMFs as as some people are. But if you're dealing with trauma, it's definitely something that I would look at. And it really might be the difference between you feeling like you can get a good night's sleep and not.

I would imagine that for someone who's come along in and saying, I've tried so many things, right, I've tried so many things. And being able to just take one of these one of these hacks, one of these tools and saying, all right, I'm going to give this a try and I'm going to just implement this.

Even just with one of these things, it's possible that they can experience an improvement in their sleep. Obviously, the more that they apply, the better and better see that they have the potential of having.

But even just starting with one thing could start to make improvement in their sleep. Absolutely. And the other thing to know is that nobody gets a perfect night of sleep every night of their lives.

And so it's going to be a process, especially when you're when you're dealing with a hyper vigilant immune system and hyper vigilant nervous system. It's going to take a while for your body to heal.

And so be patient with yourself. Be patient in the process. And if you wake up at night, definitely don't turn on bright lights. Don't do things that are stimulating for yourself, really.

You know, breathing is a is an excellent option to do. In the middle of the night, there's fox breathing, which is a really simple breathing technique where you just breathe in for 4 seconds, hold it for 4 seconds, exhale for 4 seconds and hold it for 4 seconds.

And you can just do that while you lay in bed and relax and see what happens. You know, if you allow yourself to do that for 3 to 5 minutes, you might find that you're able to fall back asleep because again, what you're wanting to do with what's happening when you're waking up in the middle of the night and you can't fall back asleep, is that your body?

Your nervous system is in a sympathetic state and you're trying to get it back into a parasympathetic state. And one of the quickest, fastest, oldest time tested ways to do that is to change your breathing and see see if it works for you.

So for a person who's starting to look at all of this, is there one suggestion that you would have on this is where you can start? This would be a really simple thing to start with.

Definitely plan on doing it all. But this is a really simple, the easiest thing to just start with. What would you have them start with? I really feel like for this audience, for your audience, Amy, and for the people who are who are listening, the most important place to start is thinking about safety and and how a person, how you need to feel safe.

Like, what is it that you need to feel safe in your life? And if you're taking care of that, then it's automatically going to dramatically improve your sleep and end and help you sleep better.

So what are you going to start with today? You're going to start with the Epsom salt baths at night. I love those. My system loves those with that lavender Epsom salt.

Or are you going to start with cooling the temperature down? I also do that. What are you going to start with? The blue light blocking glasses? What can you start with today?

Just start with something now. Don't wait for perfection. Just start with what you can right now. And even if you just improve your sleep 5%, even if you just improve your sleep 2%, that will be worth it.

To just give your system a little more resilience for going into tomorrow. Don't forget that you have resources here and that you can purchase all of these interviews so that you can come back to them at any time.

Reference them, reference the tools rest presents, the strategies, the hacks that are taught in these interviews, all these interviews in this entire summit, so that you have everything that you need.

You are well-resourced for living life differently. I'm your host for this summit. The Biology of Trauma 3.0, where we're exploring the trauma disease connection.

And I look forward to seeing you on the next interview.