Introduction to Stress, Anxiety, and Brain Retraining

So we're constantly in that fight or flight state. So people get into chronic states of stress and those chronic states of stress are not what our body's designed to do.

And that then turns into chronic states of anxiety. And that essentially is a step where even once we step away from work and we're trying to relax, we're still anxious.

So stress is an acute response to our environment, but anxiety, when it become a habitual response to our environment. This is Doctor Talks, real talk from real doctors on the issues that matter to you most.

Welcome. Today on Think Well, Age Well, I'm thrilled to welcome my friend Ashok Gupta. He's a renowned neuroplasticity coach, researcher and creator of the Gupta program, a powerful mind-body healing protocol designed to retrain the brain and calm the nervous system.

I've referred many patients to the Gupta program, as well as suggested that my staff do it as a team. And Ashok has dedicated over two decades of understanding the brain's role in chronic illness, especially conditions like chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, long COVID, and more.

His work is grounded in both the latest neuroscience and in ancient wisdom traditions. He's helped thousands of people around the world, people I know personally, recover their energy, vitality, and joy.

In this conversation today, we're exploring how brain retraining can support not just healing, but aging well. We're going to dive into the science of neuroplasticity, the nervous system's role in chronic inflammation and cognitive decline, and how emotional regulation and the limbic system retraining program can enhance resilience, mental clarity, and wellbeing as we grow older.

Ashok, welcome. Thank you so much. It's lovely to be with you. I want to hear first about how you got into this. I know you have your own healing journey that led you down this path.

Will you share with our listeners what that was? Yes, so like many of us who are getting involved in these types of novel approaches to health. We've done it as a result of our own pain, pain to purpose.

So my journey started in the mid nineties when this type of approach wasn't really understood. And I was studying as an undergrad at Cambridge and I had some kind of virus and I didn't know what it was.

And then all of a sudden. My symptoms got much worse. So the virus seemed to go, but I started feeling more and more unwell. I started having headaches, exhaustion, fatigue.

I couldn't do anything. I literally opened up a book, textbook, and I couldn't read the words on the page, which was really strange for a young man.

Ashok Guptau2019s Healing Journey and the Origins of the Gupta Program

And I would go from doctor to doctor and they would say, we don't know what you've got. We don't know what to call it. There's no treatment for it. And by the way, you might have this for the rest of your life.

Goodbye. And so for a young man, that was just like a brick wall in front of me. Like, what am I going to do? No one seems to be able to help me. And I had to figure this all out on my own.

And I just couldn't take no for an answer. I said, no, there must be a reason I'm feeling the way I am. And they

diagnosed me with something called ME or chronic fatigue syndrome, which many of your listeners may have heard of.

Long COVID, we might know it as now as a kind of modern version of chronic fatigue syndrome. And I then made a contract with the universe in my lowest moment where I was almost suicidal.

And I said, if I can just get myself 30% better, 70% better, hopefully a full recovery, I will dedicate the rest of my life to helping others with this condition.

Because I met hundreds of others who were untold suffering, untold pain and misery as a result of these types of inflammatory conditions. And I remember one very poignant moment, Heather, where I was in a bookstore in Cambridge.

So in the mid nineties, we didn't have chat GPT and all these research tools we now have. You actually had to read stuff. So I went to a library or rather a bookstore and there was a self-help section and then there was a medical section and the neurology section.

And there was one book that was just jutting off the shelf. And I don't know why you can't explain these things. It just called to me. It just said, this is just, you know, I don't know.

I just reached for that book. That book was called The Emotional Life of the Brain by Professor Joseph Ledoux. And he was the foremost expert in the amygdala and PTSD reactions in the brain, et cetera, at that time in animals.

And I read that book and I thought, wow, this is it. This is what is going on in the brain in these chronic conditions. Different to PTSD, but some of the similar factors in the amygdala.

And so I did a lot of research and I created my own ad hoc brain retraining techniques. And I managed to retrain my brain and get a hundred percent well from chronic fatigue syndrome within around six months.

That was incredible. And I thought, wow, this is it. And I wrote a medical hypothesis in 1999, which was published in 2002. And then I set up a clinic to treat others.

So then I started treating others with chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, mold illness, pain. And then in 2007, we published the first neuroplasticity program known as the Gupta program.

And since then we've conducted six independent clinical trials. And that's brought me to this moment here today with you. So many of our listeners are deeply interested in preserving their cognitive function and of course brain health generally as they grow older.

And how can retraining the brain play a role in maintaining that mental clarity and emotional resilience as we age? Yes. Well, it's interesting because most of us, when we think of longevity, we think of hacks.

They're biohackers. They're trying to figure out which supplement or which enzyme or which brain fuel is going to support the brain. How are we going to live longer?

We're all looking at that one silver bullet that's going to impact us. Actually, what the research shows is if you look at all the different factors involved in all-cause mortality, in wellbeing, in longevity.

Actually, a lot of them are nothing to do with necessarily something on the outside, a supplement, a chemical. They're actually to do with something on the inside, our mindset.

And so brain retraining says that essentially all of us live in this unconscious world. And what I mean by unconscious is most of us are on automatic pilot day to day.

And I take the example of a car. So a car is essentially a tool. Yeah. But it is not up to the car to tell us where to go.

So imagine the car is like your unconscious mind, your unconscious patterns, the habitual things that your mind does.

And you are the person sitting in the car. You're supposed to be driving the car. Yet 95% of the patterns that we run in our mind is like the car driving rather than us driving.

So we sit in the car and suddenly we think we are driving the car. We think we're conscious, making conscious rational decisions and thinking accordingly.

But actually we end up in the passenger seat and the car is basically taking us where it took us yesterday and the day before and the day before and the day before.

And we think that we're in charge and yet it's these unconscious patterns that are running us. And a lot of those patterns that impact on our health, our wellbeing, our longevity are those habitual patterns of worry.

Is there anyone out there that doesn't worry? We all worry, and that's okay. It's okay to worry, but does it become chronic? Does it turn into anxious thoughts or even anxiety?

Then it comes to things like anger. Do we have a lot of anger that's stored in our system that then can contribute to headaches? Do we have a lot of fear that can contribute to gut issues?

These emotions even have specific things that they cause in the body. If we recognize those types of patterns in our mental and emotional state, brain retraining, neuroplasticity, nervous system regulation, all of these are essentially ways that we can begin to retrain the brain and become the driver of the car rather than the passenger in the car.

I have a mental model that I share with patients, and I would love to take this opportunity to have you correct me if I'm not quite getting it right. Sometimes I notice, because I ask all patients about their stress levels, what their relationships are like, where they get purpose and meaning.

How Brain Retraining Supports Healthy Aging

creates joy for them, where they derive joy in their life day to day, how they manage stressors, what their home life is like, if they feel at home, if they feel financial stress, if they're going through legal issues.

You know, all of these things can kind of mount up. And when we have a lifetime, right, as we get older and we have a lifetime of relationships and worries that we've collected, sometimes there are these patterns of looping, is what I call it.

And often I see patients go, oh, yes, I know what that means, that looping. where the same sort of responses come up over and over again, like an anger pattern or a worry pattern or a kind of victim pattern or a it's my fault pattern or some sort of worthiness or lack thereof kind of patterns that people I think intellectually grasp do not serve them.

But they come from some childhood experience or from some traumatic experience and they're just kind of stuck in this pattern. And I I've said to patients I wish I wish everyone had access to the group to program before they finish high school like a healthy functional adult knows how to rewire the unhealthy looping patterns and choose patterns that serve them more.

And when we think about aging, what is life about other than enjoying it, especially at that stage where you're sort of reaping the rewards of a life where you've worked hard, raised kids, gone through a lot of the hard work.

And now you're in that golden age. And if you're stuck in these looping patterns of worry or anger or a lack of self-worth, any of these patterns that really don't serve us, there's a way out.

There's a way to capture more joy, more contentment as we age. And I feel like your process is that path. Can you

describe the path? Yes, because, you know, The things that you've mentioned there are so important.

So idea of optimism. We know that people live 15% longer when they're optimistic. This is Becca Levy's work out of Yale and she wrote the book Breaking the Age Code where she details this.

So yeah, absolutely. This is very well established research that people who are optimistic live longer. Exactly, those who have purpose seem to have a lower risk of death, where they have a purpose, a sense of meaning in life.

Those who practice positive emotions and gratitude, they have longer lives. These types of things are just so incredibly powerful. What you've described is absolutely the way we describe it as well, but we like to use little props because we think people learn through existing channels of understanding.

Let me introduce you to what we call Mike the Monkey. Hopefully, your viewers and your listeners aren't thinking, what on earth is going on now? I'm sure no guest has brought on a cuddly toy, but this is such a simple way that our clients can grasp it straight away.

What we say is that we are made up of little parts insiders that live inside us. And I don't mean multiple personality disorder or anything like that, but I mean different personality traits.

And don't we notice this, that let's say there's a slice of cake in front of us, right? And we've already had one slice of cake, but there's another slice of cake.

And it's like the little angel and the devil sitting on our shoulder. So one part of us will say, have the second cake, you deserve it, go on. And the other part of us says, no, we're trying to be healthy, we're reducing our sugar, it's not good to have that second slice.

So whilst we might think we're one person or one mind thinking everything, actually there are these different parts of us that are running the show, that is unconscious parts.

And one of those parts may even be the inner child that's been through trauma and negativity during childhood, that it's then still responding as if we're a child.

And so as an example, we call this part Mike the Monkey, which is our warrior. And so these parts of us, When we see them as personalities that live with insiders, and we use lots of cuddly toys, lots of puppets actually, to represent these different parts, then we suddenly realize, oh, that's not the whole of me.

That's a part of me. So I'm sure your clients say, oh, I'm a worrier. I'm an anxious person. You know, oh, I can't handle stress. That is when we're labeling ourselves and then we're making it true because the brain responds to your belief about it.

But if you say, actually, there's a part of me, a small part of me that worries. There's another part of me that sometimes get angry. There's another part of me that does this, because we're not like that all the time.

It's different parts come up and down. And then we realize, ah, I don't have to change my entire personality. I simply need to retrain these parts of me that, okay, if someone's criticizing me and I'm getting upset and feeling low self-esteem, That, not the whole of me, just because they're giving me some feedback, I can speak to this insecure part of me and say, hey, just because they're saying that, that's great.

It's good feedback. I don't need to feel like this is the end of the world and I'm being put down and I should feel anxious and low about myself. And that's that retraining.

And the two key factors are the repetition. So how often you speak to yourself lovingly and kindly and compassionately when you're reacting in an old way.

And then secondly is essentially the intensity of positive emotion. So if you've got a very negative emotion, then

what it will require is a corresponding positive emotion.

the kindness, the compassion that you speak to yourself with rather than, oh, look, you've done it again. You've started feeling low about yourself. So then you start telling yourself off for doing the very thing that you don't like and that makes it worse.

So absolutely, these are unconscious patterns that live inside us. And if we treat them as different personalities, it's a lot easier to retrain them as discrete parts of ourselves rather than thinking, oh, this is just the way I am and I can't retrain my entire personality or way of being.

And people will say, but hang on, if I've always been a pessimistic person, can I be an optimistic person? I truly, and I'm not just saying this because we're in the arena of personal development, I genuinely have seen it time and time and time again with people around me who've been dedicated to personal development and brain retraining.

And in myself, I was an incredibly, incredibly anxious person. I literally couldn't even go out because I was so anxious, almost agoraphobic. And now I would say I'm completely different to that.

I don't feel that anymore. Wow, yeah, this is so powerful. And I'm wondering, can you talk us through, so say someone signs up for the program or starts to go down this path or even when you started down this path, what is the process?

You've mentioned what I hear is sort of making these unconscious patterns conscious, right? Becoming aware of them sounds like an important piece. But take us through sort of the steps from being agoraphobic to speaking in public and being in crowded rooms.

Like what is, and enjoying it. I've certainly seen you at conferences and you seem to enjoy networking and talking to people and connecting with people.

I would never have guessed that at some point you were fearful of going out in public. So what does that transformation process look like? Yeah. So we can give that example of, you know, that intense anxiety.

The Three Rs: Relaxation, Retraining, and Re-engaging with Joy

So imagine, and many of the listeners, we all have a certain level of anxiety in certain situations. So I'm sure everyone can relate to this. So imagine whatever it is that you're anxious about.

There are three steps, three stages in order to overcome and retrain your brain and overcome that. Now we call these the three Rs of the Gupta program.

The first R is relaxing or regulating the nervous system. If your brain is hyperactive and worrying and thinking about lots of things, it's not flexible.

It's not trainable. Like imagine if you're sitting down to have a piano lesson because you want to learn the piano. If you're stressed out and your mind is busy, are you going to be able to really learn the notes and retrain your brain and create new neural pathways?

It can be very, very difficult. So calming the nervous system is incredibly important. And that's where breathing techniques, visualization techniques, meditation techniques are so powerful.

Is that first layer of let's get the mind calm so it can be more flexible and plastic. And the reason that's important is imagine that your habits of thinking are like river channels in a mountain.

So imagine you've got a mountain and the rain falls on the mountain. What does the rain do? Where does it go? It starts forming river channels on the mountain.

And imagine that's the same as your brain. There is thought energy, which is like the rain, and it falls on the mountain. That is all your neurons in your brain.

And then the water starts flowing through specific neural networks that becomes your habits and your personality and way of thinking. And so with those river channels, if the ground is frozen, It's very difficult to divert the river in a different direction.

So you imagine the left-hand path, the left-hand river channel is anxiety pattern. You know, I'm anxious about people. I'm anxious about the world. I'm anxious about my achievements.

So that is a river channel, but you've got to divert the river onto the right-hand side where the river channel is. I'm relaxed. I'm confident in myself.

I'm happy with who I am. I love myself. That's a different pathway. the ground is frozen. So we've got to unfreeze the ground, thaw the ground. And that's where meditation and breath work and relaxation come in.

So now we can begin to loosen up the soil. We can start digging a different river channel and getting the water to go in the new river channel. That's our first step.

And part of that step is that for any change to occur, we have to step out of The pattern. So imagine there's a part of you that's anxious about whatever it is that you're anxious about in life.

Normally we are associated with Mike the monkey. We are Mike the monkey. We're identified with it. But we can't change that pattern unless we step out of it and observe it within ourselves.

So rather than I am anxiety, I am anxious, we say, ah, there is some anxiety within me. There's a part of me that feels anxious. I want to do that. I'll give you a perspective.

I just want everybody to like take a minute because so often I have anxiety, right? And I think there are other languages where it's slightly different.

There's like, for you to say there's a piece of me that has anxiety versus identifying with anxiety. I have anxiety. This is a very, very different relationship with that diagnosis or that experience.

Absolutely. Yes. And you're absolutely right. For all of us is to take a moment to just appreciate that key differential, which is actually for me, the core of personal development is not being identified with your unconscious patterns, but the ability to step out and observe it as a kind, compassionate witness.

Because if you step out and you go, oh, look at me. Look at all my patterns. I'm so stressed out. What's wrong with me? You just double the problem. The witness hasn't helped anymore.

Right? So we're stepping out and becoming the witness and saying, oh, my dear beloved mind. Look what my dear beloved mind is saying now. Look what it's doing now.

How funny. How interesting. Yeah. And then you don't take it so seriously. And So part of why we do meditation is not just to feel relaxed. That's one aspect of meditation.

It is in meditation we are observing the thoughts and maybe we'll have lots of thoughts in meditation from the worried part. That's okay. What we're observing and becoming the witness.

So for us to change our unconscious patterns and a lifetime of might be negative thoughts, it might be worries, it might be pessimism, it might be inability to handle criticism from people, sensitivity, all these patterns.

We observe them and say, there's a part of me that feels like this. Okay, great. We've been able to witness it. The second step, the second R of the program is the retraining of the brain.

And what that means is, unconsciously, each time you come up against that situation, let's say it's speaking in public or let's say it's getting feedback from your boss and you're, you know, you're, ah, you are going on the left-hand path.

So you're automatically, your mind is going on the left-hand path. You're experiencing anxiety and worry. Each time that now happens, because you've got the awareness that this isn't me, this is a part of me.

It's about shifting to a new way of being. So that's when you go from the left hand path to the right hand path. And of course, as you have the program, you'll know we have a big twister board that you put on the floor and you retrain your brain with this big twister board.

And you divert the river along the right hand path. And you might say, Ashok, can we just do that once? And then it's done. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

The beauty of the human mind as well as the tragedy of the human mind is that these things take commitment and repetition. If we just did it once, said to our brain, right, don't be anxious anymore.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? But it is our commitment to this. So this is where we keep digging the channel on the right-hand path. And then the next day we accidentally might go on the left-hand path again.

Ah, the awareness. Let's go down to the right-hand path. So it's moment to moment awareness of what our little friend in our mind is doing. and thinking about what we're thinking about.

Normally we're just thinking, worrying, emotional reactions, but this is now thinking about what you're thinking about. Ah, my mind is doing this, my mind's doing that.

People might describe that as mindful, being more mindful in mindfulness around what's going on. And then moment to moment, we are shifting the thought energy to the right hand path and using a bunch of skills that help us deepen that into our nervous system, make it reality.

And we can talk about the different aspects of how we do that. And then the more we do that through repetition and kindness and intensity of positive emotion, we dig the new right-hand path, the old river bed is gone.

And now it becomes a new habit. Your new habit is I'm an optimistic person. My mind knows how to do this new pattern. I've dug the new channel. And so when new thought energy comes, new rain falls on the ground, it automatically goes down the right-hand path.

And that is now your new identity and the new you. So there's three key ingredients, repetition, self-compassion, and positive emotion and imagination.

The third step is then once we have shifted that pattern, we keep retraining. These aren't necessarily sequential, they kind of happen altogether. The third step is what we call re-engaging with joy.

And I love the fact you talked about joy and having that with your clients. That we might retrain our brain, but if we are then not understanding our stress triggers.

And we're not understanding what brings us joy. Then when the brain gets all frazzled and stressed and whatever, if we allow that to happen, the brain becomes less neuroplastic again.

And it might go down the left-hand path again, because that's what it's used to. So in that case, understanding our purpose in life. What brings us joy in life?

the ability to have relationships, whether they were romantic relationships, friendships, family relationships, and creating deep bonds with people and support networks.

all of these things then consolidate the ability of the brain to stick to the right-hand path because now it has a swell of positive emotions and positive experiences that bring it joy.

And no one's saying, we've got to walk around all day in life with a fake smile on our face thinking that, you know, polyanna, life's great, there's no problems.

Of course not. But in that mindset, We are able to handle challenging times, difficult times much better because we've created inner resilience and that resilience has come from not being identified with our worries, being able to step out and be the witness to then retraining our mind towards more positive mindsets and growth and expansion mindsets.

And then taking time to re-engage with joy and develop relationships and all of those things. I believe that that three step process in life. enable us to be healthier, happier, for longer.

So it was relaxation, then it was the retraining, and then repetition. But wait, there are three. Re-engagement. Re-engagement with joy. Okay, so these three steps.

And in there, we heard words like neuroplasticity. So to put this back in the context of thinking well as we age well, Neuroplasticity is essential for cognitive function as we age.

Our brain needs to be able to be exposed to new things, engage with those new things, and to create those new synaptic connections. This, when we're oriented in this direction towards neuroplasticity, we're not in that fight, flight, freeze, defend mode.

We're in that rest, digest, and heal mode. We've got to be. And that's why relaxing is the first step, right? In order to be neuroplastic, we have to be relaxed typically.

And so I love, there are so many pieces here, also that resilience theme, that what we want to do is work, it's like bicep curls. What I'm hearing you say, we go get exercise, we go do strength training so that we get bigger muscles that help us with balance, that help with BDNF, brain drive, nootrophic factor.

There's so, so, so many reasons that we exercise as we age. And these exercises, right, getting into that relaxed state, becoming conscious, doing the retraining.

All of these pieces are like exercise for that brain neuroplasticity where we build more resilience when life throws the next stressful thing our way.

Am I understanding that right? You got it in a nutshell and we actually say the three R's of the GUPS program lead to the fourth R. The fourth R is resilience.

And the way we look at this is imagine a dove, imagine a dove flying. Now, how does a dove fly? Well, it needs three things. It needs two wings and it needs tail feathers, right, to be able to direct itself.

And in Western psychology, we've traditionally gone down the cognitive route of just looking at talking therapies. And they are still important and powerful, but they've often been done in isolation.

So that's one wing of the dove, but a dove can't fly with one wing. The second wing is often what's been practiced in the East, which is self-awareness, breath work, meditation, building that muscle of being the witness versus being identified.

Now imagine you put those two together, which is what we do in the program, the cognitive and the Eastern approaches. And finally, the third R of the program So one of the wings is retraining the brain.

Neuroplasticity, Resilience, and Lifelong Brain Change

One of the wings is regulating the nervous system. And the third wing, the tail feathers is the re-engaging with joy and purpose, which is giving you a direction in life.

Those three things then make the dove resilient. Then it can handle the wind that's coming at it. It can handle whatever is thrown at the dove because it's got those three strong aspects within itself and they all build that resilience.

And when it comes to neuroplasticity, so the idea of neuroplasticity is that we used to think the brain was fixed. We were born, we have a certain nature and nurture experiences in the first five to 10 years of life, nature being the genes that we have.

And then our mind's pretty fixed for the rest of our lives in terms of our vulnerability to illness, our personality, how our body responds to threats.

And then we realized actually, no, the brain keeps changing. The example of this is if the brain didn't change, then it means that we could only learn a musical instrument or learn a song or learn a dance or learn how to drive when we were young and we could never do it when we're older.

It doesn't matter what age we are, we can still learn a new skill. We can still create new neural pathways, whatever age. We had a gentleman who was 85. And he's from New Zealand and he had fibromyalgia and he had mold illness and he had inflammatory problems.

And we thought, okay, someone at 82, 83, we'd love them to do the program. You know, we wonder what kind of results they will get because we also own that old mindset of, well, at that age, you know, you're pretty much fixed, right?

You know, within six months, he got himself 80% well, 80% well. And for 30 years he'd had pain and fibromyalgia and all that. I said, what are you going to do now?

And he said, I'm going to travel the world. I want to do all the things that I've always wanted to do because I now have the freedom and the resilience to be able to do that.

And that burst apart all of my preconceptions and limitations about human brain. it doesn't matter what age you are, if you're committed to something, you can make it happen.

I mean, there are stories of people in the 80s and 90s are still running marathons. Now we've still pretty much got 99.9% of the same DNA. We all share it.

And that shows if someone's got that commitment to go beyond their comfort zone, even in the 80s and 90s, they can run marathons. Now, once again, I'm not suggesting people go out and run a marathon right now, but it shows us the possibilities of what the human mind and body can actually do.

So neuroplasticity, the idea that our brain is wearable and flexible even in our later years. And actually, and you're the expert on this, we know that as people get older into their seventies and eighties, sixties, seventies, eighties, it's really important that they use that gray matter.

So whether it's puzzles, whether it's learning a new skill, whether it's keeping intellectually sharp. those things can maintain our mental health and then our physical health as well.

And the research shows that actually dancing is very, very powerful because you get three in one for that or four in one for that. So you're getting joy.

You are getting the physical movement. So you are using your muscles, you're sweating, you're getting out of breath. So you're getting that physical exercise, which is great for the brain.

And thirdly, you're making new neural connections. So when you do and follow a dance routine, you have to make neural connections between your brain and your physical body.

And doing that approach we know is incredibly powerful for people in terms of health and longevity in the later years. Yeah, you talked about the twister mat being part of your program and how there's this physical element to retraining the brain.

And the way we talk about it is dual task exercise. So with dancing, I agree, there's so many dimensions here, right? Because you're stimulating the brain not just physically in terms of telling your body what steps and where to be in space, but also you're getting this cognitive engagement of you have to remember the steps.

You're getting the cognitive engagement of the auditory stimuli, of the movement, of the social connections. There are so many elements to dancing. And we see this also with yoga, right?

When you have an instructor cueing you and you've got to remember, okay, right foot or left arm. You've got to be engaged in that cognitively. And so I think this element of that twister metaphysically engaging, you know, obviously the balance here is a little bit different where sometimes the physical component is going to be more the forefront and sometimes the cognitive component or the emotional component is going to be more the emphasis of these exercises.

But when you engage both, we see in the literature that you get exponentially more benefit from whatever activity you're doing. This is really exciting.

So I want to go to a little bit of anatomy. At the very beginning, you mentioned that book that called to you from the shelf in the bookstore, and the amygdala.

So the hippocampus and the amygdala are neighbors. Can you go into a little bit of how the limbic system, and especially overactivation of that limbic system, can play a role in our memory in that hippocampal center?

What are the connections between those? And how might fear or anxiety or depression kind of have a role in the potential risk for neurodegenerations as we age?

Sure. It's very interesting neurology. So I love geeking out on this stuff. We know that in the limbic system part of the brain. And when we say limbic system, this is a part of what we call the mammalian brain.

So all mammals have this brain, we might call it the unconscious brain, the brain that takes in incoming information from the body and is more instinctual and reactive and responsive to keep you alive at a physical and kind of emotional level.

And within the limbic system, as you mentioned, a few brain structures are very important. One of them is the amygdala and there's two of them that sit behind your eyes.

And essentially the amygdala's job is to take in all the incoming information from the body and the environment, judge as to whether it's threatening or it's emotional relevance, and then create the emotional response or the physiological response.

And so the idea of you suddenly standing up to do a presentation in front of a hundred people. when people's amygdalas really start shooting off there.

So the amygdala says, oh my gosh, look at all these people here. This is a threatening environment. But that amygdala is designed for when we were cavemen and hunter gatherers.

So most of the dangers were physical dangers. So rather than your brain having some kind of a response, which might be relevant to this emotional situation of people looking at you, it starts responding as if you're being chased by a wild tiger, which is often the example given.

So then our heart rate goes up, our blood pressure goes up, the body starts sweating, muscles get tense because we are getting ready to fight or flight.

Fight being the anger emotion, flight being the fear emotion. So when we fight, we get angry, that's the supporters in the fight, and then fear being that response.

And in that particular moment, when the body is getting into that fight or flight state, the amygdala is, we know, activated. And then that impacts on the rest of the brain.

The rest of the brain is getting ready for survival. We're in that survival response. Now those survival responses are only supposed to be occasional.

So those fight or flight responses are supposed to be occasional, a few minutes a day or a few minutes a week when we're getting physical dangers. But in our modern world, we're not living according to our genetic inheritance.

So now we're sitting in front of desks, sedentary, getting stressed about which email we need to respond to, how many hours we're working, whether we're doing well, the pressure of work.

And so we're constantly in that fight or flight state. So people get into chronic states of stress and those chronic states of stress are not what our body's designed to do.

And that then turns into chronic states of anxiety. And that essentially is a step where even once we step away from work and we're trying to relax, We're still anxious.

The Limbic System, Stress, and Memory Decline

So stress is an acute response to our environment, but anxiety, when it becomes a habitual response to our environment. And then what happens is as the amygdala is firing off continually, it becomes more reactive.

That chronic stress then impacts on our hippocampus. So the hippocampus normally acts as a brake on too much stress because it is also our short-term memory center.

it's a way of calming down the stress levels, but then the chronic stress impacts on the hippocampus and it actually shrinks. And it doesn't have that ability to now control and inhibit our stress response.

And it also impacts on memory. So if you're really stressed, you know, we all have this thing, someone tells us, oh, can you remember such and such? And you're thinking, oh yeah, now what was it?

What was it? The harder you think, the less you can actually remember because memory is much more powerful when we're relaxed. The more stress we have, our memory starts reducing.

Our cognitive function starts reducing. We start emotionally hijacking the prefrontal cortex, so we can't think clearly and rationally. When this becomes a chronic response, we know that then it impacts on inflammation in the brain, inflammation in the body.

Now the inflammation is degrading the strength of all of our neural connections and our physical body. Once that starts going on, then we get into chronic spirals of stress, which then impacts reducing neuroplasticity and of course contribute to perhaps a compromise in our longevity.

You know, as you're describing this person that is experiencing this chronic stress, I can't help but think of the caregivers out there, right? And often it's that sandwich generation.

It's the adult child of someone who has dementia, who is worried about mom. Can mom stay in her house on her own, independent the way she wants to, a little bit longer?

Or is she going to get lost? Or is she going to cause a car accident? Or is she going to leave the stove on? or is she going to have a fall in that worry that you're about to get that call at the same time you're raising kids or you've got a house that needs to be managed and travel and work and a relationship and all of these needs that need to be met all at the same time in life.

So this is a very high stress time in life to be caring for someone else. And then there's also the child who is a caregiver. I have been talking to patients this week who are running to the ER, wondering if they should call 911 or if it's okay to just take their loved one.

And that stress, in addition to sort of the, I call them micro griefs that people experience when they're caring for someone with dementia, where that person sort of slowly moves from being a partner to becoming a dependent, right?

It's that, okay, they used to manage their own appointment, but now they can't make it to the hairdresser or to the dentist on their own. I've got to be the one to remind them and take them.

And every time I have to repeat myself, there's this little piece of me that is saying goodbye to that loved one and that relationship that we had. And this is why we need that resilience that the Gupta program brings, right?

Because this can be a very hard time in life. And when we have these practices, when we have this retraining program, when we have that that purpose and joy, that re-engagement with the things that bring us joy.

We have the resilience to deal with this time period. And when I talk to caregivers, particularly after the fact, after they've unfortunately lost a loved one, they wouldn't give it up for anything, right?

They're so grateful for the opportunity to have had that time with their loved one. but they also wouldn't, you could pay them to do it again, right? And so it's how do we create that resilience to get through these challenging times in life so that we can enhance the joy and enhance what we're grateful for in that connection with that person?

I'm wondering if you've had caregivers kind of come through the group to program and how people especially stay motivated when they feel like they're juggling so much.

How do they stay aligned and make it through the program? You keep saying six months, so I'm wondering is that about what people sign up for and commit for?

Yeah. So lots of things here. We have a minimum, we call it a minimum three month program to make it manageable for people. But learning these skills is not something that you just do on day one.

It's something that you practice. So a minimum of three months of practicing these tools and techniques. And of course, when you see the benefits, then you would want to continue for six months.

And in some ways in our modern world, I don't know how people survive without these tools. I flip it on the other way. The modern world is crazy. We are not designed for the way that we are living right now.

It's almost like we are breeding people to be anxious and depressed. The devices that we're giving people, social media, the political situations, it's like we have to take care of our own mind.

There is this idea of the man and the saw, the woodcutter. So the woodcutter is in the forest and he's chopping down trees with his saw. And he's chopping down the trees.

I've got to chop down these trees. I've got to be productive. And eventually over time, his saw becomes blunt. It no longer has that sharpness. And so his friend says, hey, you need to sharpen the saw.

I don't have time for that. I've got all these trees to chop down. That's often how we're living in life is that we become so kind of task focused or we become so self-sacrificing a lot of ways that we're not taking time to sharpen

the saw.

And that's the equivalent of self-care. That whatever we are doing in life, The other analogy, when we get that announcement on the plane and they say, put your own oxygen mask on before you help young children.

And the people who are what we call helpers or rescuers as their personality traits, they will say, oh no, that's so selfish. Why would I put my own oxygen mask on?

I should help others first. But by the time you help others first, it's too late for you. So actually you can only be a help to other people around us.

You can only genuinely be there for others when you've got your own energy and strength and resilience within. So putting yourself first is not selfish.

That is something that we have to get into our minds. It is actually something that is a demonstration of self-love and self-care, and it means then you can be the best that you can be for others around you.

And we talked about traits. So the people who have what we call the helper traits, this was Mike the monkey, but he's now going to have a double role of being the helper personality or rescuer.

Many of us have this helper trait, especially when we've got relatives we're looking after, where we feel like I'm only a good person if I'm completely sacrificing my time, my energy for the family or my elderly parents.

Otherwise I'm not a good person. There's some guilt and shame that can come from childhood or other places that can inform that. And if we're living in that mindset, we never feel like we're good enough.

I'm still not doing enough. And we have to recognize that pattern and say, hang on, no, that isn't helping me. That's just making me more stressed, more worried.

I can let go of this, this helper, rescuer trait, because actually when we're in that helper, rescuer mode, we feel resentful actually. So we initially are helping people, but then we feel this resentment, you know, is this what my life's come to?

I'm just there all the time, 24 hours with this other person. And that doesn't help either. It's just leaking energy every time we feel worried, resented for what the situation.

So self-care, self-care is so important. So that's where we call it the four pillars of health. MEND, M-E-N-D, the four pillars of health. M stands for mind.

So that's making sure every day, even if it's just 10 minutes, some breathing, some meditation, some relaxation for you. E is for exercise. And of course, we all know exercise is good for us, but just making sure that you're spending just five or 10 minutes each day.

So with some physical activity at a minimum, even a good brisk walk can do it. N is for nighttime, essentially sleep.

Caregiving, Self-Care, and the Four Pillars of Health

So making sure we're getting our sleep, you know, at least our seven hours, seven and a half hours minimum. And then D for diet that we all know about.

So we hear a lot about in health circles, but those four pillars of health, as long as we're making sure we're getting some of that. And within the mind component is also the social aspect of making sure we aren't just having a kind of mono life, just looking after people, but we're getting the opportunity to have our social network as well.

Those things can increase that resilience. And one of the things that can help us with that is reaching out for help.

So rescuers and helpers don't want to get help from others because they think I should be able to manage this all myself.

If I'm not, then I'm not good enough. that guilt and shame comes in. So how can we make sure we're reaching out for health and support from others around us?

And anyone listening now, I really think it's something that we can actively do, that what holds me back from reaching out for health and support? Is it my own ego?

Is it that I don't want to feel like I'm a burden on others? Is it that I want to feel capable myself and therefore I have a belief that reaching out for help makes me weak?

What is the belief system we have that stops us from reaching out for help and support? Put those in place because you're depriving other people of the opportunity to be helpful and be of service, to do something good in their lives.

That's the way to flip it around. You're depriving them of being a good person. And so reaching out and getting help is so important. We see this on our support groups.

It's like magic to watch people who are in similar situations. I know from my experience watching people go through the journey of dementia and growing old that often you feel alone, especially as a caregiver.

You can feel like you're the only one going through this and it can be very isolating because it takes up all of your time and you're running to doctor's appointments and this and that and it gets harder to get out of the house and meet people and it's harder to have people over and there's lots of comorbidities, right?

Okay, so dad also can't hear and I'm taking care of him but he can't hear and he has a wheelchair and there's all these other things that start to come up and pile up.

You need more help but it can make it harder to ask for help. And yet when people get into these groups and they find community in that and realize that they're not alone.

that there's resources out there and that people in these support groups can connect them with resources, that people can just relate, that they can say, I see you, I hear you, I've been there too, I know what it's like.

That is so healing, so helpful. And then sometimes within that community, we can start to practice these things. In our support groups, we always start with mindful breaths, right?

So it starts to create those habits and those patterns and give us that experience as a group when we might not otherwise do that when we're just caught in our day-to-day, checking off the boxes, getting through the day.

So this is just so exciting, Ash, to hear that there is this very clear path through your program, that you have so much experience applying this program to many different kind of diagnoses, if you will, for many different conditions, but that really this is something that can be applied to anyone.

I think most humans can get the benefit of creating a structured path for retraining the brain so that our patterns serve us. I'm curious, do you have any examples of how these tools directly help people reconnect with purpose and joy and vitality as they age?

You mentioned the tail feather and having that directionality. Are there examples from people that you've worked with that really stand out? Yes. So we also have a kind of life purpose program, but we say do the three R's first in terms of the Gupta program.

But we also have like three workshops that we do on discovering your life purpose. And I really believe that actually deep down there is a purpose. There is a deeper feeling to move towards having meaning and purpose in our lives

if we just be still and connect to that passion and purpose.

And that doesn't mean suddenly, oh, I'm going to quit my job and go and milk mountain goats in Peru or whatever it may be, some kind of altruistic thing.

No, this is about actually bringing purpose into everything that you're doing. So we have examples that once people have had a chronic illness, it's been such a challenge in their lives that it's made them rethink everything that they thought was who they were.

They thought, okay, I'm somebody who works in an office job 80 hours a week, burns myself out, but earns a big salary and that's who I am. That's my identity.

The chronic illness is like an awakening to say, actually, this isn't who I am. This isn't who I choose to be. And then they decide to go into a different profession.

So there might be a career change. So I've had people who've now decided to become teachers or carers because actually that's more in a line with their heart.

So they've connected with what their authentic self wants to do. We've had others who set up businesses because actually they have a passion around a particular type of business that they want to run.

others have decided that actually they want to go back into their role, but they want to bring more purpose into that role and they want to do it more in a heartfelt way.

So these are all examples of where, once again, we're not running the automatic unconscious patterns of not only our own internal patterns, but society's patterns.

What society expects of us? This idea of keeping up with the Joneses that my job and my house and my car represent my identity and help me look good in front of my peers.

What a waste of human potential that that becomes the navigator of our soul. It's actually selling our soul. And people, when they go through brain retraining and they go through our purpose process, they suddenly realize, ah, this is my authentic self.

This is actually who I want to be. And it is Mike the monkey. So Mike the monkey says, I worry what people think of me. I worry if I'm earning enough.

I worry if I'm keeping up with my peers. These are all unconscious patterns we all have. Let's not think that only one person has it. We all have this.

And yet, if then those patterns and the monkey decides our fate and our lives, we're running on unconscious. We're like the car that's just taking us where it wants to go, programmed by society.

But we can rise above that and say, that's not me. This is the authentic me. And this is what I choose to do in life. And this is what is important. Sounds like just coming at it from much more intentionality.

So I ask everyone, what brings you joy at this stage of life? You know, what brings me joy at a personal level is connecting with nature. You know, nature is such a beautiful thing.

Nature is one of the only things in the world that doesn't want anything from us. It's only there to give. So you walk in countryside or in the ocean.

It's just life. It's just nature.

Purpose, Joy, and How to Access the Gupta Program

You don't want anything from it. It doesn't want anything from you, but you communed. with that being part of nature. That's something personally that gives me joy.

At a professional level, what brings me joy is really this work because There are so many people out there right now who are suffering from stress, anxiety, burnout.

There are so many people who are suffering from chronic inflammatory diseases like long COVID, chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, and now sensitivity and environmental illnesses, mold illness, chemical sensitivities, and pain.

And I would actually say 70% of the illnesses that someone goes to see an MD about What we call your immune condition syndromes they are essentially the brain getting stuck in conditioned pattern seventy percent.

And so what brings me joy is when we're able to give people a new way of being running just relying on pills they've got a new way of actually trading themselves of getting their health and longevity back to when people get their lives back.

The joy of that is unparalleled we love that. How incredible. Tell our listeners where they can find out more about you and the Gupta program. Yeah, well, we'd love for people to enjoy our free resources so they can go onto our website, which is GuptaProgram.com.

So that's G-U-P-T-A, GuptaProgram.com. And what's even easier, you can go onto the App Store or Play Store, type in GuptaProgram brain retraining, and then you can download the free app.

There are free meditations in there. There are free videos about what causes these types of chronic conditions. So you can learn a huge amount just for free from our apps and various resources.

And we even do free daily sessions on Zoom. So we have free daily sessions of nervous system regulations. People can just enjoy that. That's us attempting to give back in whatever way we can.

that is something that people can do straight away. So it's GuptaProgram.com. And that's something that's unique about what we do is on our app, we have these daily sessions because we can all do programs.

So many of us do self-directed programs. We stream stuff on the internet. But what our patients told us was that they were missing out on community and they were missing out on some regularity.

So we created something called daily GuptaSize. And these are daily zoom calls, Monday to Friday, where our trained coaches come on and they deliver the nervous system regulation and they deliver the brain retraining.

And that means it's live. Like we have 200 people a day coming onto those zoom calls. So they're getting a sense of motivation, a sense of accountability and something fresh and new every day.

And it has been a game changer, absolutely game changer. And so that's something that we'd love for your listeners to come and enjoy. What a phenomenal resource.

Ashok, thank you so much for taking the time out of your busy full life to share a little bit more about what you're doing. And also, you really provide hope for a lot of people who I think are struggling, that there's this clear path to reclaim some joy and resilience as we age.

So thank you, thank you, thank you for the work that you do and for sharing it with us here today. Thank you, Heather. It's been really, really fun. Thank you so much for listening to the Think Well, Age Well podcast.

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