Introduction to Stress and Resilience

There's an optimal window level of stress that produces this optimal performance. Optimal functioning. And if we try and push that too far, our performance starts to break down.

And most of the time most people are operating at a stress level. That's gone beyond that optimal window. This is doctor talks. Welcome back to the Super Fertility Summit.

I'm so excited to introduce you to our next speaker, Doctor Stephen Sideroff. Doctor Sideroff. You're the author of the newly released book The Nine Pillars of Resilience.

You're an internationally recognized psychologist, executive, and medical consultant and expert in resilience, longevity, optimal performance, addiction, neurofeedback, and mental health.

You've published pioneering research in these fields, and you're an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Bio Behavioral Sciences, and Rheumatology at UCLA's Geffen School of Medicine.

You're the founder and former clinical director of the Stress Strategies program. UCLA Santa Monica hospital and formal clinical director, former clinical director of Moon View Treatment and Optimal Performance Center.

You've helped establish innovative training and treatment approaches in optimal functioning and mind body medicine in the United States and its states, China.

And and you've hosted summits on longevity, resilience and leadership. Welcome to the super fertility summit. Doctor Sideroff. We're so happy to have you here.

Well thank you. It's a pleasure to be on the program with you. Thank you. I'm really excited for this conversation. Your book is beautiful. You have so much to teach us about resilience in life in general, and how resilience matters for our fertility and our family outcomes and I, I personally think that one of the most critical challenges we face as a society and a human family right now is the ability to be psychologically and physiologically resilient enough to not only cope with, but thrive in the context of the stresses of the modern world.

And I'm really excited to dive into this conversation with you for all of the parents, aspiring parents, mamas, dad, dads, and parents of all genders listening to us today.

So thank you. Thank you for being here. I always like to start from the beginning, and it's to start in the beginning by thinking to the end, which is when we finish this conversation today.

What's the one thing you hope someone will take away with them if they don't remember anything else? The most important is, you know, people feel overwhelmed by all the stresses in our lives.

As you indicated, and most people feel like they're not able to get ahead of the of the curve because there's so much. And so the most important message at the end is for people to have hope, for people to have the belief that it's possible to learn better approaches to the stresses in their lives and to become more resilient.

And it's what I refer to, and it's related to one of my pillars, what I refer to as a growth mindset. And that's the notion that if the if you experience some shortcoming in how you're dealing with the world, with life, that it's not imprinted in your genes, it's not in your genetic, makeup, it is something that you could learn to get better at.

And so that shifting from that, it's impossible to that it's just a challenge for all of us to face. That would be the most important lesson. I love this so much.

So you said that there's hope and that you can develop better approaches to coping with the stresses that you face in your life. And I think that this is really critical.

You talked about a growth mindset, and it's the difference between thinking that I should just know how to cope with this.

Growth Mindset and Reframing Shortcomings

If I were going to know how, I would already know how I would be born with it versus saying to yourself, I'm having a hard time coping with this right now, or managing my stress and anxiety in general, but it is possible to master this skill of managing stress, and I'm going to focus on growing a little bit every day in that way.

I think that's absolutely critical, and I think it's something that's not talked about. We really need to be teaching children this in schools because it's it's one of the most critical skills to ensure survival, but also to ensure success in getting to live a happy, full, joyful life.

So I'm think so thankful that you're teaching this through your book and through your work, and that you're here today teaching us this in relation to fertility and pregnancy and the intergenerational transmission of health. Yes.

And let me add that it's not only if we if we experience a shortcoming in ourselves and we say, oh, well, I, this is just who I am, it does even more than that.

It hurts us in even more ways because it gives us a sense of inadequacy, and it's that feeling of inadequacy that then seeps into all areas of our lives.

And so I'm suggesting that any shortcoming be experienced as a challenge, be experienced as how do I grow this in there's always a way is always a way, there is always a way.

And that that really I feel that in every part of my being as somebody who's faced tremendous challenges and overcome tremendous challenges, to be where I am today, and I think all of us feel that way in some way or another.

And you when you when you talked about the feeling of inadequacy, it reminded me of the learned helplessness studies. And when you feel like you said, when you feel like this is just who I am, it harms you in more ways than you can be conscious of.

Because it's like saying to yourself, there's no hope for me, there's no help for me, as opposed to there's always a way and I'm going to figure this out and I'm going to be the person I want to be for myself, for my my future family and super babies, for my partner, whatever it may be, whatever your why is, whatever motivates you.

And it also reminds me on the flip side of the locus of control. And there's actually even research that shows that women who have a greater, sense or, locus of internal locus of control are more likely to have fertility success.

And I think that these are things that are not being talked about in the fertility space and the parenting space as well. And another part of this is that you're not only doing this for yourself, but you're modeling this growth mindset for your children, who will be your most incredible mirror.

And that that is really important. I would love for you to tell us, Stephen, how you came to be so interested in stress and resilience in your own life and in your own body of work.

You know, I started out in, in my career doing brain research, and I was interested in learning and memory in the brain, but I wanted to be able to ask my subjects how they felt about what was going on.

And when I was working with animals. I couldn't do that. That's right. That's exactly right. And so I really wanted to work with people to to really help them create change in their lives and, and feel better in their own lives.

And I very quickly realized, first in my work in addiction. And then as I broadened out into all areas of mental health, I realized that stress was one of the key modulators of how well we coped and how well we used the existing coping mechanisms that we had.

Because when you add stress, the your ability to cope starts to fall by the wayside. And unfortunately, the newest things we learn are the first lessons to be unlearned under stress.

And so I began focusing on how to help people better handle stress. And then quickly in that process, I realized how much resistance people have to dealing with their stress.

And so that took me down another path of exploring all of the, of, the reasons why we resist. And one of the and there are many there are very many. Some of them are due to our emotional wounds.

Some of them are structural. Stress response is really our survival mechanism.

How Stress Shapes Performance and Fertility

And we don't mess with Mother Nature, so to speak. We it's a survival mechanism. So we're loathe to try and, rain, rain it in, but it's important, in this process and in this how I developed from, my model of stress and stress management to a broader model of resilience was to focus on the positive aspects of stress.

So stress is a tool in us. Stress response is a tool to help us live our best life. Now it's interesting. Cleopatra, if you looked at all of the successes in your life, I guarantee almost every one of them was associated with stress.

There's so much truth to that. And isn't that really the difference between the type of happiness that we consider pleasurable versus meaningful? Right.

When when we achieve something that's very meaningful to us there, there's often some effort and even hardship involved in that, right? That's right. And so what does the mind do?

Neurons that fire together. Why are together. So we our brains have put those two things together success and stress. So there's a there's actually a tendency for us unconsciously to seek out stress because it's been associated with success.

And so we have to realize that stress is not bad or good. It's how we are in relationship with stress that determines whether it's good or bad. So we need a certain amount of it to motivate, to have focus, concentration, persistence, all the things that contribute to success in our lives.

However, and this is the key that people have to realize, there's an optimal window level of stress that produces this optimal performance, optimal functioning.

And if we try and push that too far, our our performance starts to break down our thinking, cognitive function starts to break down. And most of the time most people are operating at a stress level that's gone beyond that optimal window.

And that's because think about our day. Think about how we we jump from one stress to another without giving our bodies the opportunity to recover, to to stay in this place of balance.

We have many stimuli in our day that trigger danger, uncertainty, all of which triggers the stress response. But how many, stimuli situations in your day trigger safety recovery?

That's a great question. Probably very few for most people. Right? Right, right. And so we have to be conscious of this notion of balance. We have to be conscious of this notion of, yes, stress helps me perform, but if I if I engage the stress response too much, too long, too intensely, my, that optimal functioning falls by the wayside.

And that's the note that's contributed to my notion of resilience and my model of these nine components, which, encompass everything that is important to optimal functioning.

And I've distilled it down into these nine components. And so here's the interesting thing. And if I had my graphs in back of me or in front of me, I would I would show you that the more resilient you are, the bigger the window of peak performance of stress you will have.

In other words, you can withstand higher levels of stress and still perform at your best when you're resilient. That's incredible. That's that's an incredible piece of information.

Right? Right. And that's another reason for striving for greater resilience is that you actually expand your peak performance window. So I want to make some connections here that I think are really important to underscore.

So you talked about the bell shape between in the relationship of stress to performance. So when you have too little stress and you have too much stress, you're seeing low performance and it's moments and poor health and poor health.

And what's interesting is that that same picture is mirrored in the birth outcomes, scientific literature such that we actually want a moderate amount of stress for the healthiest programing of our children, for our super babies.

So having too little stress in the prime of the period leading up to conception and during pregnancy programs, the the baby stress response to not be as agile in coping with stress, having too much stress can also adversely program the baby stress response.

So what we want is a moderate amount of stress exposure in the mom and dad that in the prime Esther or the people providing egg and sperm, and then in the mom during pregnancy so that we're programing our super babies for a healthy agile stress response that can cope with the outside world.

So we see the same thing. I think this is very important because most people are so afraid of being stressed in the prime Esther, so afraid of being stressed during pregnancy.

And then another thing that you said was that we want to turn our challenges. And I believe you also said our shortcomings into a, challenge versus effort tendency and opportunity.

This is something that we talk about in the prime Esther as well, that one of the ways we can be in that optimal stress range is to turn what we used to perceive as threats into perceived challenges or opportunities.

Like you said, I think that these are critical pieces of information because when we're in a place of stress and emergency, that is a stress that is emergency or threatening.

It's hard to be in a place of creation because the parasympathetic nervous system is what allows for ovulation and reproduction. So we need to be in our rest and digestion out of stress and emergency and trauma.

But when somebody has coupled together stress and success. What do you think that that looks like in the realm of fertility? So if somebody has experienced repeated failure in their reproductive lives, they haven't been able to get pregnant, they haven't been able to stay pregnant.

They maybe have had a child that wasn't healthy and they want to have another child, or they want to have the child. How how do they turn those repeated failures?

And they're the stress response, which is probably off the charts for them into an opportunity. And how do they couple that with success in a graceful and constructive and productive way?

What are your thoughts on that? That's a very important question. You know, I as you're talking about those examples, I think about, the peak performing athletes that I've worked with.

Yes. And in particular, peak performing athletes. I once worked with a, a woman skier, and she had a really terrible accident. And she was having a difficult time letting go of the memory of that accident.

And as a result, it got in the way of her performance. Of course. Yeah. So we can we can see the the analogy here, of people having the experiences that you just related to.

And so I'm feeling more stressed and more concerned. And. What we had to do is work through a grieving process with this athlete.

Grieving Loss and Letting Go of Outcomes

To show the residue of those experiences that she worked through, mourned the losses and then let go and when we continued the the practicing from a peak performance mental perspective, we had to let go of outcome.

We had to let go of expectation. We had to let go of what might or might not happen. Because for us to perform at our best, we have to be most present in this moment and allow the performance to occur or allow the behavior to occur.

Allow ourselves to just be in this moment. And so there's a similar lesson, for the for the women that you're referring to is whatever has happened, you want to make sure you fully grieved the loss.

You fully worked through the emotional upsets from that so that you move forward with a more clean slate as much as possible. It's you can't do it completely.

But to the extent you're able to let go and be present, you're going to do a lot better. This is so beautiful and important because you you said when we think about this from a peak performance perspective, and what we're looking for here is super fertility, which is essentially peak performance, fertility, what we need to do is to grieve the losses, grieve what has felt like a history of failure, and let down in this realm of life, and work through the residue of that, and then let it go, and also to let go of the outcome, let go of the desired outcome and the expectations.

Because in doing so you allow yourself to be most present, which in turn allows you to have that peak performance that you seek. Yes. So I think this is very a really important model that we're applying to the fertility journey and reproductive potential power and success.

One thing I want to, because I work now almost 28 years with the mamas, the the couples, the families in every level of detail and what I can, what I can feel on their behalf right now is how do we do this when it's a longer process than a 90 minute soccer match or a three minute down hill ski?

I don't even know if that's the right word or length, but I'm just giving an example. There's a that's a much more defined period of time where you have a clear sense of what to expect in terms of the the container and the timing of that container.

Whereas getting to your baby can feel like such a mystery in terms of the amount of time that it will involve. And so how do you have thoughts? And this isn't an easy question.

So I don't expect anyone to have the answer. But I'm wondering how do we let go of the outcome and the expectations when we don't have a clear definition of the amount of time we need to do that for? Yes.

Very good question. And I want to begin by note noting something in the way you presented it to me. Okay. You said, well, you know, okay. In the situation with the skier or something like that, where it's just about, you know, a few minutes, however, you know, these women have to go through this for nine months.

And that's so bigger, different, etc.. And that's where we make the first mistake, okay? That first mistake is how we frame the issue. Because as soon as we frame it as, oh, this is going to be more difficult, we already are going down a negative path.

We're to we're going down a path that says, oh, this is going to be more difficult. And so as much as possible, we want to notice and avoid going down a path in which we set things up in a more, making it seem more difficult.

So it is whatever it is it's going to be. And we have to look for in a creative way, some way to approach it that makes it more doable. And so if it's a longer period of time, okay, we break it down into smaller units.

If it's a longer period of time, okay. That's more opportunity to be with the process and learn and grow and and figure this all out. Because ultimately how you engage, is is a key.

I want to engage from a positive challenge perspective rather than, oh, this is a problem. Oh my goodness, we have so much time. There's so much time for something to go wrong, etc.

etc.. No, it's there's so much time. Let me find a way to appreciate every moment of it. It, it may be very it may be. And this is parenthetically between you and me.

It may be more difficult, but we don't focus on that because that magnifies the difficulty. We want to focus on creative, how it's possible. That magnifies possibility.

I love that so much. And we have a saying in the Prime Minister protocol, which is even if it has been long and hard up until now, it doesn't have to continue to be long and hard.

And so we get to release the identity of struggle and being in the loop of struggle. So this is absolutely, a perfect frame for the the way that we approach this in the Prime Minister protocol as well.

Three Keys to Resilience and Safety

And the other thing I really want to underscore about what you said is that if this ends up taking longer for a particular person, then that means that there's more opportunity to be with and in the process.

And one of the things that will be so hard for a woman who is very much in the thick of that struggle right now, I'm a woman, man. Any human to to wrap their minds around if they're in the thick of the struggle right now, is this one thing that every single family tells us after they Prime minister?

Invariably, when they get their super baby, they give thanks for how hard they had to work for them because they are fundamentally changed for the better, and they know that they are exactly the parent that that super baby needed them to be, and they don't know if they would have been had they had just had sex and gotten pregnant like they thought they were going to do from the beginning.

So I know if you're listening to my voice right now and you're so in the thick of it and you can't imagine ever feeling any sense of appreciation for the pain that you've had to go through, I can tell you invariably that is what we hear.

So, there there is there is still that hope and that that beauty to find and to look forward to and what everything that you've said today, doctor set off, really, really emphasizes and encapsulates that for us.

I would love for you to share your three takeaways that those listening to us right now can immediately start using to have better health, to have better reproductive health, and probably even more importantly, better emotional well-being and resilience, which facilitate better health and better reproductive health.

Certainly I think that the first is what we've been talking about with regard to a positive mindset, a growth mindset, so that anytime you encounter something that's difficult, you see it as an opportunity.

I think this is it is certainly one of one of the keys because, you know, there's this notion of resilience as the ability to bounce back. And I say, you know, that actually is wrong.

You don't want to bounce back to where you were before the stress occurred. If you engage in any kind of

challenge in your life, what you want to be doing is bouncing forward.

What you want to be doing is finishing a stressful experience by learning the lesson of that challenge, so that you grow from that experience. That's the idea to grow from these experiences so that the next stress you encounter, you've grown your capacity, you've grown your ability, and it'll be easier to handle the next one.

And so the more we actually face challenges in our lives, the more we are growing our capacity to handle new challenges. So I would say that's a that's a key.

The second key is how is my first pillar of resilience, which is our relationship with self. And it's very important to be loving and accepting of ourselves.

Much of the time we're critical, judgmental. We feel we should have done better. We didn't do it well enough. All of this comes from what I refer to as our old or primitive Gestalt pattern messages.

We got, we received, we learned in childhood, and then we start treating ourselves that way, being critical, hard on ourselves. The you want to create an optimal, healthy, loving relationship with yourself that comes from a place of love, compassion, acceptance, support, self-care, and joy.

Mercy. The qualities that you want to look for, find, develop in your internal voice, in how you talk to yourself. So I would say that would be the most the second most important.

And then finally the third most important is the recognition, as we talked about earlier, that there's so many stresses in our lives, but very few opportunities times, triggers for recovery, for turning on the parasympathetic recovery branch of the nervous system.

You know, our bodies have two choices. We can go into defend and protect, or we can go into heal and grow. And particularly for your audience, they they need to be in that heal and grow state.

But as long as we feel like there's a danger, as long as we're triggering the stress response, we actually are telling the body, this isn't time for having a baby.

That's dangerous. It's dangerous out there. We have to wait until it's safe. And so I encourage people to look for islands of safety in their day, in their lives.

I love that, and that could be, you know, every time you sit down for a meal saying, literally telling yourself, okay, I'm completely safe right now, I can relax and enjoy this meal because we'll digest it better.

When we end the day, we want to be able to say it when we go to sleep, we want to be able to say it as well. Now here's another key here Cleopatra. When you're with a friend or a relative can you say to yourself, I'm on an island of safety, or are you with somebody who may be critical or judgmental of you, which causes you to go into a stress response?

That's right. So you want to maximize relationships that support islands of safety. You want to maximize the people you're with who can help you, support you being in a state in which you can let down your guard so that you can take an emotional nourishment.

This is so, so important. And when you talk about the third key and being able to signal opportunities for safety because the body has the choice to either be in sympathetic defend and protect your it's famine, it's war out there.

It's it's not safe out there. And that's the signal the body is getting even if it's not really famine, war, a threat to your survival. And then the other branch, the parasympathetic, which is heal, grow and create.

And we always say in the Prime Minister that the, the energy and effort of survival is in opposition to the energy and effort or receiving of creation.

So this is exactly what you're talking about. What the two branches of the central nervous system, and that one of the places where we most need to signal safety that is overlooked is in our relationship with ourselves.

Right. And I want to take that one step further, even because you made the connection for us that being able to signal safety within and outside of ourselves is often highly dependent upon our interpersonal relationships, our relationships with other people, whether that's in the home, in the workplace, where we spend so much of our lives and it's going to be really hard to signal safety inside of yourself and to have a peaceful relationship with yourself.

If you are surrounded by people who make you feel unsafe or where you can't let your guard down and you don't feel supported, and that that's absolutely critical for people to understand and each one of those keys that you just talked about has direct ties to our fertility and pregnancy and intergenerational health outcomes.

Definitely. And that's why I have nine pillars to my model, because there are nine different aspects of this that are all important. For example, another thing that I say is that we either lead from an open heart or we lead from protecting our heart.

And when you have emotional wounds, this is my sixth pillar of resilience and success is emotional balance. And mastery. If we're carrying emotional wounds where we tend to want to protect our heart and again, that's a defensive posture.

And so therefore it's really important for people to identify the, emotions, feelings that they're carrying.

Emotional Wounds, Self-Protection, and the Path Forward

What I refer to as emotional unfinished business, that those need to be worked through because they interfere with being able when when we have those, we have our wall up.

And when we have our wall up, we don't only block negative feelings, we also block positive feelings. And it makes it more difficult to take in emotional nourishment.

So that's another important key in this whole sort of, complex of resilience is noticing and addressing emotional wounds. And I just want to point out that that defensive posture of leading from protecting the heart is a hypervigilant state, which in and of itself is a tremendous psycho physiological stressor which keeps us in the defend and protect and, and, and kind of blocks us from that energy and that, that place of receiving and creating.

And that's really, really important to to emphasize for people. This conversation has been so tremendous. And I there's so many more things that I want to ask you about.

I want to encourage everybody to get your beautiful book because there are few things that I can think of as being more important than cultivating a culture of resilience within ourselves and within our families.

And we talk all the time about having an intentional super family culture. And for me, resilience is at the top of the list for that, because with that, we can we can do all things, and without it, everything is very hard and very effortful.

And so, in closing, although I would love to not close, but in closing, I would love to hear doctor center off if if you if somebody could do only one thing to take care of their, their fertility and their future super babies in your mind, what is that one thing that.

Well, the one thing would be to get my book. Yeah, my book covers it all in. My book does more than that. In my book. I wanted to do more than just give information.

I wanted to get results. Change is difficult. Most people feel like, you know, how can I do all of these things to change? And we see change is all the way down the road.

And I have to go through this whole process to get to that change. And in my book, I create this construct of the

past. And the past is right here, right beside you every single day.

And it's defined by my nine pillars of resilience. And that means that you can have success today simply by taking a few of the steps that I suggest. And it puts you on the path.

And once you're on the path, you can breathe a sigh of relief. Okay, I'm doing what I can do today to be on the path, taking me down this road to greater resilience.

And so it creates hope, and it makes it seem like this is possible, so that every day, all you have to do is ask yourself one question. Am I on or off the path?

And if I'm honest, the path the book gives you just do some quick steps you can take to get back on to the path. And so the book is full of these steps that people can take that put them on the path, growing their ability along each of these nine dimensions.

I love that so much. Am I on or off the path? It reminds me of this quote. I love it and I think we feature it early in the Prime Master, which is when the time is upon you.

Start and the pressure will be off. Just starting and knowing that you're heading in the direction that you want to head in reduces psycho physiological stress tremendously.

I love that so much. And then last question for you what is super fertility mean to you? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What does it evoke for you when you hear that term?

So super fertility fits very nicely with my own model of peak performance. It means to me it's and I'm going to be doing a podcast, starting this summer of the intersection between resilience, peak performance in leadership.

And so when you talk about super fertility, it's about it encompasses all of those three because it's taking ownership of your life and it's finding the optimal way of moving forward.

I love that so much.

Super Fertility and Closing Thoughts

Super fertility is the intersection of resilience, peak performance and leadership because it is taking ownership of your life and finding your best way forward.

That is so beautiful. And I just want to echo what you said, which is that there's nobody who can give you your super fertility. It's yours to create, it's already inside of you, and it's yours to tap into.

And thinking that someone is going to come and save us, someone's going to make it happen for us. Someone's going to give it to us. Is a is a really disconnected and disempowering place to come from.

And I love, love this definition of super fertility that you have provided for us. Thank you so much. You're welcome. You're welcome. What a beautiful conversation.

Thank you for the blessing of this conversation for all of us. And I really just coming back to having an intentional super family culture requires leadership and being an intentional leader.

So in so many different ways, this conversation is meaningful for fertility, pregnancy, but also for what comes when you finally have your super babies in your arms.

So thank you, Doctor Sideroff, for being here with us today. It's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me. Thank you. And thank you to you listening time is our most precious and important resource, and we appreciate so much that you have spent your time here with us, and may you be blessed by the time that you have spent here with us.

I'll see you in the next interview. Thank you for tuning in to Doctor Talks. We hope today's episode has enlightened and inspired you on your path to optimal health.

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