Resilience: Your Essential Pillar in Your Menopause Journey Transcript

(Transcripts are generated by AI and may contain errors)

Introduction and Guest Background

Hi, everyone. Welcome to Mastering The Menopause Transition Summit. I'm your host, Dr. Sharon Stills. And as always, I'm thrilled to be here with you and bring you another amazing interview.

And to those in the DrTalks family, you may recognize my special guest today as he put on his own summit not too long ago. And so my guest today is Dr. Stephen Sideroff.

He's an internationally recognized psychologist, executive and medical consultant and expert in resilience. One of my favorite words, optimal performance addiction and behavioral medicine.

He has published pioneering research in these fields. He's an associate professor at the Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, and he was the founder and former clinical director of the Stress Strategies Program of UCLA Santa monica Medical Center and former clinical director of Moonview Treatment and Optimal Performance Center.

And like I said, he was the host of the Reverse Inflammaging Summit Body and Mind Longevity Medicine. So I love your bio. It's fantastic to have you here.

How are you doing today? I'm doing great. And it's such a pleasure to be here with you, Sharon. Fantastic. So, like I said, you hosted your own summit, so I'm sure a lot of the viewers know you.

But for those that don'twho are just joining in DrTalks for the first time, if you could just tell us a little bit about you and how you got into the specialty field that you got into.

Of course. Of course. You know, I actually started my career in brain research, and I was really interested in what how the brain learns and stores memory.

And I did a lot of work in neuroscience, but wasn't able to ask my subjects, which were animals, what they were feeling and what they were experiencing.

And I wanted that was really important to me. And I wanted to have more direct contact with people. So I switched into the clinical area and when I did, I realized that the most important, impactful thing in people's lives that makes the greatest difference is stress.

How people handle stress and the growing amounts of stress and the complexity of our lives is really the the most significant factor in people's lives, because your life can be going along really smoothly and nice until you start adding the stresses.

And what I've noticed and what I noticed was that coping abilities begin to fall apart, whether it's an individual or a relationship.

From Brain Research to Stress and Resilience

Also, what I noticed is that stress leads to not only emotional mental symptoms, but also physical symptoms. And so I really engaged in programs to help people deal with stress.

And then the interesting thing that I learned is that we all have this love, hate relationship with stress. On the one hand, we recognize it's a problem.

There's too much of it. But on the other hand, people always seem to seek it out. Mm hmm. So that led me down this really interesting path of noticing and learning about people's resistance to dealing with and then how to

overcome that.

That resistance. And so it shifted from a focus on dealing with stress to a focus on resilience, which is a more positive concept that people can really grasp.

Yeah, I want resilience even though they have an ambiguous noose around stress. So that's how I got into it. And I developed my own model of resilience that I teach to people.

It's a nine component model. It's very comprehensive. And and I love helping people become more resilient. Mm hmm. Well, let's dive into that, because I.

I have always said for I've been a physician now for 21 years, and from the very beginning, I always said stress is 99.99999, 99% of all illness that we experience.

And so I'm tracking right along with you. Right. I totally agree. And I was going to ask, because I know you also did a lot of work in addiction and you touched on it because that is true.

I think we don't think of we think of addictions as drugs or alcohol, but we can be addicted to stress. We definitely can be addicted to stress. One of the things I like to point out is that if you if you think about all the successes in your life, what you'll realize is just about every one of our successes has been associated with stress.

If it's giving a presentation, if it's completing a project, if it's a meeting, a deadline, all of which lead to success, all of those situations have to do with stress.

And so one of my early mentors, when I was my first position as a teacher at McGill University, was Donald Hebb, one of the pioneers in neuroscience. And he was the one that coined the phrase Neurons that fire together, wired together.

And so we've got this connection in our brains connecting stress with our successes. So it makes it that much more difficult to really want to challenge how we deal with stress, because it's it's helped us in so many different ways.

Mm hmm. That's really interesting, because I remember thinking, my my dear Jewish father, God bless him. But I always felt like when I first started my clinic, he was always like, if I wasn't stressed, then I couldn't be successful.

And I and I would say, no, you don't have to be stress to be successful. Well, we can we can unwind that. But he just you know, it was like if I wasn't stressed, I was doing something wrong.

So that's very interesting. Yeah. And and you had a good point there where you say on wire because literally that's the process to unwired those two by finding a new way to rewire the brain, which is possible, we can direct our brains wire in certain ways if we have the right air.

So let's dive into that and dissect that a little, because we're we're speaking to all of these women who are either going through the menopausal transition, have been through the menopausal transition or are or know they're headed there.

And we have been taught in our society that this is going to be a stressful time.

Stress, Addiction, and Rewiring the Brain

And my whole mission and why I do this is to educate and empower women to say, no, it doesn't have to be a stressful time. It can actually be a very beautiful time.

And so I think our audience is really primed to rewire and relook at that. So you talked about, first of all, resilience. I just that word makes me tingle. I just love that word.

But can you just give us your definition of resilience so we're all on the same page, right? Yes, certainly. I have what I think is the broadest onset of resilience, which is optimal functioning moment by moment.

So most people who talk about resilience talk about bouncing back from adversity, and that's an important part of it. But if you don't handle some other things, such as emotional, you wind up getting into more stressful situations then you actually need to get into because you're you're trying unconsciously to heal wounds through behavior that will never do it.

It just creates more stress. So the broadest definition of resilience has to do with optimal functioning. And it starts my first pillar of resilience is your relationship with yourself.

And so here I address how people have a tendency to be hard on themselves. They have a tendency to be judgmental and critical and then to project that on to others, be concerned about others.

And all of that creates stress. That's the result of how we relate to ourselves. So I at the very heart of resilience, I encourage a more loving and accepting and compassionate relationship with ourselves.

Mm hmm. And then the second pillar is with others and with others. It's making sure that you spend more and more time with people who share that perspective in less and less time with people who are judgment still and critical.

Mm hmm. A lot of times I get in the audience, I get Snickers, like, okay, how do I deal with my husband or wife or mother or daughter or son might be judgmental or critical.

And that's where another important piece comes in. That's how to set boundaries. A lot of times a lot of our stress comes because we allow too much toxic energy to come in within our boundaries.

We do this by buying into the judgments of others. We do this by worrying about, is that person not going to like me if I say no to them? And so another piece of this is being able to set boundaries.

So there are all of these points.

Defining Resilience and the Nine Pillars

The nine my nine pillars of resilience are your relationship with yourself, your relationship with others, as I just described, your relationship with something greater.

So this has to do with having meaning and purpose in your life, having a spiritual belief that broadens your horizon and helps you deal better with daily hassles.

The next three pillars have to do with physical balance and mastery. And this is very important for your audience because it's about finding ways to bring your body into balance.

When your body is in balance, you handle more physiological disturbances better. The next is your mental balance and mastery. And this is mindset how you approach the world.

You approach it from, okay, whatever happens, I'm going to handle it. Or do you shrink from difficult situations? Do you label things as or this is difficult which already sets you up for more stress?

Or do you handle it by saying, I can do this, I'm able to or, Hey, if I make a mistake, it's okay. All of these things help us manage stress and be more resilient.

The sixth is emotional balance and mastering, and this is where we manage our emotions. And one of the keys to managing emotions is taking care of unfinished emotional business, not carrying emotional baggage.

And so it's important to notice if you're carrying feelings toward a certain person, that it only hurt you to care where

if we're angry or upset, we're not angry and upset up in our heads.

It's in our bodies and if we want to avoid or deny the feelings, bodies literally have to hold those feelings in. All of this interferes with optimal body function.

It interferes with the flow of energy in the body, which then effects symptoms, physical symptoms. So it's important to be able to resolve emotional, unfinished business.

And people will say to me, well, but that person just, you know, you're crazy. They're not going to listen to me. Or if I say something to them, they're going to get angry at me and it's going to get worse or or you know, I'm holding anger toward errant that's already dead.

The good news about this and it's very important is that you don't need another person to finish your unfinished business. This is because if you did, you'd be stuck, right?

Someone is no longer in your life. The good news is that what's unfinished is what you carry inside. And the way to resolve that is to find some way of getting the feelings out.

But within the concept context of acceptance. So if you're angry at somebody and you know, you can't approach them with it because they won't handle it that well, you still need to get that anger out.

You can write a letter and then tear it up. You can beat on a pillow, but realize that what you're doing is simply getting the unfinished emotional business that's inside of you out.

And when I say within the concept context of acceptance, I mean this person is the way they are. I'm not going to be able to change them. I need to not that I like it, but I need to accept that reality.

And if you express the feeling within that context, you can let go of unfinished business. Last three have to do with presence your ability to be present.

Flexibility. And then the last one is power, which I define as the ability to get things done. That's that's the comprehend my comprehensive model of being resilient is optimizing alone each of those nine dimensions.

Mm hmm. All my favorite things. You kind of got it all covered there. It's. I think I like. Which one should we dove into? I mean, because this is this is what it's about.

And I think at this time in a woman's life, it's such an opportunity. Like I always say, menopause. And I put parentheses around the pause, because this is exactly who knew that you had the program. I wanted them to do it.

But I want women to pause not just that their menstrual cycle is causing, but that this is an opportunity to pause and gaze backwards and see where you've been and then come present and see where you are, and then look forward and see where you want to go.

And you you can't get where you want to go if you're holding on to things and what you talk about is truly the mind body complex, because I know I you can think that you've let go of something, right?

You can intellectualize it, but often you're still, you know, what do they say? The issues are in the tissues and so you can still be holding on to it.

And so you need those kind of tools like you're talking about. And and sometimes it it's not just one time writing a letter or beating on the pillow. It can be a process of letting go of the layers depending upon how serious the hurt was or just how much it affected you.

I agree. There are always layers there. Always. We're human. It's a complex. And that's true. Yes. And boundaries. I think maybe if you could just expound or give some examples or tips, because I think for women, that's always

you know, we're taught as little girls, you know, don't say no and people please and do the right thing.

And and so I think for women, having good boundaries is I remember when I did my boundary work few decades ago for myself personally, but my, my friend like gave me a crown and she was like, you are now the boundary queen.

It's like, Oh, and I got a cape and it was like a big deal because I had no boundaries. And my life, my relationships were so stressful. Yeah. Yeah. So it's interesting.

I just, just the other day I had I was working with an executive who has a lot of trauma in her childhood. And she was realizing that when she dealt with the CEO of her company, that she always felt a little bit bullied by his approach.

And of course, it taps into childhood experiences, as is so often the case. So what we talked about doing is, first of all, I explained to her what I referred to as our second skin.

And our second skin is is sort of like this invisible boundary that sort of like arm's length out side of our selves. And we all have a certain sense of, you know, if you stand next to somebody and you move closer and closer, there's a point.

It starts to feel, hey, you're getting a little too close, right? Well, that's an indication of where that person's sort of psychological boundary second skin lives.

Boundaries, Presence, and Aging Mindset

And I was I did a little experiment with her to experience this second skin, so to speak, and to encourage her to think about that as her protective layer.

Mm. But it's an active process. So if she goes in and we, we did some dress rehearsals around this, she goes in to meet this other executive who can be a bully.

She has to remember before she walks in about her second skin so that she doesn't give that other person. And all of this is unconscious. People don't do this usually consciously, but she doesn't give that person an opportunity to say or do something that's going to be either hurtful or bullying.

So she goes in knowing, I have this second skin and I'm not going to let his energy enter that boundary that I'm setting up and I'm going to be I'm going to make sure as I walk in and I visualize this boundary between me and and so she reported back to me a couple of days later that it actually made a difference in how she was able to be with this person, because without it and in the past as he bullied she shrunk. Mm.

We tend to do when we get really shrunk and then she even lost her ability to find her own strength when she started with this boundary. And so it didn't, it wasn't able to penetrate, she was able to feel her strength and then she handled the situation so much differently.

So it's a it's a a tool, a technique that people can use and experiment with. Okay. Where's my second skin? Is it right here or is it out here? Let me let me visualize it.

Let me imagine it when I come in contact with other people. Mm hmm. I can so appreciate what you're saying. I part of my background is in mindfulness based stress reduction and mindfulness.

And how, you know, what you said in the beginning about resilience, not being just bouncing back, but being present in the moment. And so what you're talking about is a tool of being present.

And when you're present, then you can make a different choice rather than going in, having the same reaction and then kind of beating yourself up. Oh, I should have said that I didn't do this.

So what what you're saying, what I hope everyone is getting is that like you have the power to step into the moment and have a different experience when you're when you're consciously aware of it.

And it might not go perfect the first time, so don't beat yourself up for that. But just starting to step into the present and seeing changes. So I have to ask, what would you say to women?

Because it is a common thought as you're aging that it's stressful, you're using losing your youth or your glow or your body or your beauty or and we don't we don't think like that around here and where we're working to to change that conversation.

But what would you say to women? How would you guide them on how that can be a different experience for them? Yeah, I and I think is, is so important in my in my practice and my experience.

This is isn't only women, but men have these issues as well. It manifests a little bit differently based on where we get reinforced, what reinforce what our reinforces are.

So with men, it's more about what they're able to do. Mhm. But, and, but yeah it's one of the things I like to say whatever is going on in your life, there's always a best way deal with it as soon as you recognize that, as soon as you say that, that there's always a best way it immediately directs you, directs your thinking in a positive direction.

Because now I'm thinking about what's my best way as opposed to focusing on what's wrong. Mm hmm. Again, it gets back to mindset. How do we handle this from a mindset perspective?

And that's one part of it. Another part of it is what you're talking about is a major, major challenge. Make life challenge that doesn't go away. Because in all of our lives, as we get older, we lose function, we lose beauty, we we age, we get older.

So you have a choice of how to deal with it. Am I going to run from it or am I going to embrace challenge again? Mindset. There's so much of the my answer to you is about having people find the best mindset to do it.

And this mindset is this is the one of the major challenges in my life. This is an opportunity for me to step up my game to handle this major challenge.

And part of it is simply accepting what is the reality of that, because you can't run from it, you start running from it, and you just have to keep running faster and faster because it's going to catch up to you.

So it's like a lot of other things in our lives that we need to recognize that change is the normal course of events and come to grips with that. So it's all about finding a way to be accepting with what is.

I have a rock and engraved and it says the only constant is change. And as you were talking, I was thinking that like, why isn't your resilience program taught to children?

Because I think we we miss we get there is so much to say. Like as you get older, you get wiser and we we miss. It's kind of like, you know, I kind of woke up in my forties.

I mean, I've been on this journey all along, but in my forties I kind of really settled into this aging journey and this life journey and was so present with it and can really appreciate it.

But it's like you have all those last years because you weren't really aware of it in your teens, in your twenties and so forth. And so I just wish that we could, you know, I know algebra must be important somewhere, but like I feel like this is such, this is such important stuff that we should be teaching the children so that you grow up.

And when you are in your twenties, you're really knowing, okay, these are my twenties and I'm going to get to later decades and you just have a different awareness of it.

I think it would help the aging process. It wouldn't be so shocking because you're kind of going along and all sudden you wake up and you're 55 and you're like, Wait a second, half.

My life is gone. Yeah, yeah. So I haven't put it to children, but I have done programs for parents about how to raise resilient children. Mm. And so that's, that's been something that has been very rewarding to be doing and I think it, it get, if you're, if I'm doing it that way, I am reaching for children indirectly.

I love that, I love. That I wanted to get back. I missed the piece in my answer to your last point when you asked me about the challenge of the changes, and I want to I want to say that in the process of dealing with the changes, when you if if you start feeling angry, sad, sad, upset, a loss before you go, I'm going to handle this.

Chronic Illness, Self-Regulation, and Personal Resilience Tools

It's it's still important to allow yourself the space to feel all those feelings, feel them so that you can let them go before you then take on the challenge.

And that is an important. Area, those feelings you want to deal with them first. So I want to make sure I. Yes, yes, we don't want to just suppress. We want to experience.

I'm glad you reminded us all of that. And it's there. When you were talking, I was thinking, you know, and I say this a lot, but you just so cementing it in that mindset truly is medicine.

And there's, you know, as you age, I experience like personally, like I can't just walk into a room and get everyone to do that, you know, a man to do exactly what I want behind the desk, you know, when I may have been able to, you know, do that in my twenties and thirties.

And now they're calling me ma'am. But, you know, that's okay because I have my my wisdom and my my sense of who I am and my I was addicted to stress. I grew up in a very stressful environment, and that's what felt normal and safe.

And so there's all these flip sides. And so it is it's like what you're saying is, I think that's such an important take home. You can complain and you can focus on what's wrong or you can look for what works and what's benefit all.

And that is with aging and it's very individual for for women. And you have to really see what it's about. You know, a big one is the hair. So the hair starts going gray and you can look at it as, you know, gray is your streaks of wisdom or your whole head of wisdom, or you can look in the mirror and just hate what you see.

And you can you can have options. You can find hopefully an organic natural hair coloring if you're if you choose to do that. But you can have options.

And but there's great you know, gray can be beautiful. And if you if you embody that wisdom is beauty, then it'll show up differently. And you it's how and I always think the the energy when you were talking before about how you treat yourself and how you relate to others and the way we love ourselves is the way we teach others to love us.

Right? Yes. And and our energy the energy speaks loudest. And so we what we embody and what we put out will, I think, will either rise people up to you or they'll just fall away because you'll be too happy for them.

Well. My seven Pillars presence. I talk in terms of two directions. So the presence of being aware of our environment and ourselves and our environment is one direction.

But then we also project our presence out into the world and people pick up on the kind of energy that we have. Sometimes it's conscious, sometimes it's unconscious.

MM What about the stress of being chronically ill and, you know, really feeling bad in your physical body? How do

you help people work through that? Because I'm sure there's women who are listening, who are not just struggling with hot flashes, but perhaps have a severe autoimmune disease or a diagnosis of cancer.

And and that's a lot to handle it. It is. And it presents a certain challenge because a lot of times, as you try and do the thing that's good for you, which is a relaxation exercise and meditation, sometimes that's when a person notices their pain the most.

Because a lot of times we engage in stressful activities because it raises the noise in our system, sort of masks the pain. And when you calm down, you start to notice and more so it is a challenge.

But still, the goal is to find ways to turn on the healing components of your body, the parasympathetic recovery branch of the nervous system. And so if you make that a lot of your goal of your intention with your work toward reducing pain and try and tolerate what happens when you're in doing that relaxation, my experience is that it will ultimately be helpful, but you may have to kind of overcome some initial greater awareness of the pain in your body.

Mm hmm. Yes, we. We can definitely suppress a lot of noise by being involved in stress. So I'm so curious, what are your favorite like? What's a stress free day like in your life?

What are your favorite tools to use to to handle the stress you encounter? Well, I exercise is very important to me. So I mountain bike, I rollerblade and play racquetball.

And it's those activities that really help me get all of that tension out. If I've been working hard and what lately, I've been very, very busy with a summit.

That's one thing. Relationships and being close to people and being in close relationship with my wife and my children and friends, that's also a source of what I refer to as emotional nourishment.

So but I practice biofeedback on a regular basis. Biofeedback is a way of training my nervous system to go into a place of calm. And I fortunately it's part of my work.

So when I do it with others, I'm like benefiting myself. But when I'm not, I make sure that I do some of that myself. And one of the things I've noticed as I've gotten older is that I have to pay more attention to doing the things that keep me resilient because the body wants to take me in a different direction.

So so I have I have noticed that I have to be more and more conscious to do the things that help me stay in balance. Can I ask, how old are you? So I just turned 76, but I did my last year.

When I turned 75, I did my biological age measure of how your body is aging. And it came out at 55. I was going to say 42. Came out at 55.

Biofeedback, Biological Age, and Closing Resources

So I'm actually doing some research right now looking to see if people who score higher on my resilience questionnaire do better from a biological age.

I would bet they do. I think so as well. Yeah, that's fascinating. Well, you are you are inspirational. And thank you. You know, I want to offer to your audience my resilience assessment booklet.

So it gives an explanation of each component of my model. And then it has a 40 item questionnaire that people can take in self score. They can get their profile along these nine dimensions.

If they email me, Sideroff@ucla.edu, I'll send it out to them. Oh, thank you. I want one of those. Let's send it to you. I think I've been practicing all year.

Program not knowing you had the program. Right. All those pieces are so, so important and just so go in alignment with the method of of health and healing and and that it doesn't my my hashtag is not all medicine comes in a pill bottle and so this conversation really, really drives that home and we still have physical bodies we need to attend to.

But the mindset and and I love your need definition and for me the new definition of of resilience and you are living proof. I know you're a man, but you are human and we are all human.

Whether we're men or women. And, you know, look at all that you're doing. And I want this to be the norm. Like, I don't want to say, Oh, my God, look, he's 76 and he still mountain bikes and does work like, oh my God, that's amazing.

Like, I wanted to just be the norm because it can be the norm if we change our mindsets about what aging is. I agree. That's going to work. And so thank you for being a guiding light and a pillar in in making that the norm and for all the beautiful, I could talk to you for like weeks on end about this, but I know your time is short and we appreciate you being here.

And thank you for that generous offer for the listeners. I hope you take him up on it and just, you know, after this talk, just really I invite you all to just really ponder and think about the different pillars.

And did one, you know, it's not something you just snap your fingers and do, but did one pillar speak to you more and could you start to investigate and get curious and kind of see what that's about for yourself?

So that's what I wish for you all. And we'll be back with another great talk here at Mastering The Menopause Transition. So thanks, everyone, for. Thank you, Sharon.

Appreciate it. Thank you.