Rewire Your Nervous System for Lasting Resilience with Dr. Arielle Schwartz Transcript

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Introduction to Trauma Recovery and Resilience-Informed Therapy

Hey friends, I'm your host Dr. Elizabeth Samanta, the intuitive psychiatrist, and you're listening to Stepping Into Soul Power. Friends, got a treat for you today.

Right now, we're going through some tough times in this world. There's a lot more conflict. Unfortunately, there's trauma. People are really going though it.

And we have someone who is an expert at healing trauma and really reclaiming your power. But what's so great about it is the how, is how she does it in such an innovative way.

She is and expert and trauma recovery and she bridges neuroscience, psychology, spirituality and has a Center for Resilience-Informed Therapy. Dr. Ariel Schwartz, welcome to the show.

Thank you, thank you. It's truly a pleasure to be here with you Dr Elizabeth. I have been looking forward to this. i really love when we have folks in our psychiatric community that integrate the wisdom of the body and really can kind of do body mind soul work and you are unique and i'm so excited to have this conversation with Likewise, so there is a specific type of therapy that you do.

It's resilience-informed therapy, and it excites me. But there are people out there who don't know what that is. Can you tell us a little bit about resilience informed therapy?

Yeah. Actually, what resilience-informed therapy is, is that it's an integrative model that incorporates a variety of other existing modalities. So it is not in itself new, but it a synthesis.

And so those existing modalities include somatic psychology or body centered psychotherapy, EMDR therapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, parts work therapies, and all of that housed within a relational framework where we have the ability just really just feel comfortable and connected with each other.

And then from there, we can also incorporate what we'll talk about as applied polyvagal theory or basically nervous system regulation within that whole context.

So I like to think about resilience-informed therapy as this kind of broad highway with a lot of lanes and that when we work in this model, we can seamlessly move between parts work and somatic work, and EMDR therapy and relational work.

And feel like we're just having a smooth drive, switching lanes, but it doesn't feel we are moving out of the highway. I love it. So as a psychiatrist, I hear all of those things and I get excited.

Just I've seen such great things with EMTR, with all those of things. But I loved that you're interweaving them. For those people who this work is a little bit new, can you be more specific about what are the benefits?

When they go for somatic therapy, when they for EMDR, what benefits are they getting?

How Resilience-Informed Therapy Works

Yeah, I mean, it's broad ranging and really what we're looking for is a greater sense of choice about the state of mind, a great feeling of control about how you relate to your emotions, greater capacity for self-compassion, and the ability to actually broaden the range of of emotional capacity.

So it's not so much about kind of regulating in a way that I always have to stay calm, cool, and collected, right? As you spoke about in your intro, we're living in really challenging world right now.

We are exposed to sources of threat in the news and perhaps in our own lives on a daily basis. And so knowing how to do you know, deep nourishment care for yourself and how to seek out resources that help you tap into that is really gold right now of like, okay, here's how I can come back and ground and feel centered and connected even if the world is spinning like this all around me.

Oh, yes. No, it's just like… It's incredibly powerful when you are able to step into any environment and figure it out. Can you tell us a little bit about what being in a chronic state of fight or flight does to our mind, what it does for our body, Yeah, good question at all of those levels.

So when we think about being in chronic states of the sympathetic nervous system, right, which is what forms the basis of that being a fight or flight, we're gonna have more cortisol.

We're going to have the resources of our body going out into the muscles into preparation for, as you said, fleeing something that's dangerous, protecting ourselves from it.

And so we tend to feel more muscular tension We tend to feel more vigilant and on guard. We intend to more anxious or prone to panic. And on the flip side, we tend have more difficulty with digestion, with rest, sleep at night, and it inhibits our immune system from doing its job, right?

And so we intend get more conditions that are related to basically not having a robust immune We might be more prone to just getting sick with everyday colds, or we might ultimately have more of a predisposition for things like cancer because the immune system actually needs to be on board to help us kind of recognize when cells are moving in a direction that's not healthy and our immune system will target and basically kill off those cells.

So when we're stuck in the sympathetic nervous system and high cortisol, that has an inverse relationship with the functioning of ourimmune system. Wow.

Wow, so a multitude of different things that can really go haywire when we're in that chronic state. And I love that you made a really important point about like, you know, going from things as simple as an everyday code to like cancer, where it is much more serious.

Yeah, and I think that it's important to recognize that when we're looking at the health or the well-being of the nervous system, we don't wanna make the sympathetic nervous or that fight-flight state the total bad guy of this story.

We actually need our sympathetic system for ultimate health. Our sympathetic-nervous system also helps us do things like play and climb a mountain and dance and do a yoga practice, whatever it is.

So we wanna have the ability to mobilize. we just don' wanna be stuck there. And on the flip side, like sometimes where we can get stuck is in the opposite imbalance where were stuck in more of an imbalanced expression of the parasympathetic nervous system.

In the short run, our parasympathetic system lets us rest and digest and deeply relax, and it allows our immune system to do its job and helps us heal.

But sometimes trauma can lead us to get stuck in that parisympathy state. Like if you imagine I couldn't run away, I could protect myself, say no, call for help.

I'm rendered powerless and helpless.

Effects of Chronic Fight-or-Flight on the Body

At that point, if there's nothing I can do to stop the trauma or stop the stress or if it feels life-threatening, I shut down. And being stuck in that shutdown has a different set of health consequences.

Can you talk about those health-consequences? Right, because that's so important to recognize. I think it's the missing piece in kind of understanding healing and healing from adversity is recognizing that particular stuckness.

So what happens when we're stuck with an imbalanced expression of that parasympathetic system is that we actually don't have the normal checks and balances on our immune system.

And so if we think about normal parisympathy rest and digest, it's going to facilitate digestion. It's gonna facilitate that immune being kind of on board.

But when that's off the rails, what begins to happen is that we have more conditions like IBS or irritable bowel syndrome, or we had more reflux, we've like too much digestion going on.

We're going to have inflammation throughout the body because what does the immune system do? parasympathetic nervous system turns the immune system on and it's going to target what's wrong, right?

It's gonna target those unhealthy cells or it is going target a virus or a bacteria. But let's say that the system is stuck in the on position, it can start to targeted healthy tissue, and so we might start notice that we have achy joints, that inflammation that's contributing to migraine headaches or that we start to have symptoms that take us towards autoimmune conditions because the immune system starts to target the body itself when it's kind of left in that unchecked position.

That's such an important point to say this as a psychiatrist. What you're talking about is being able to Yes, we call it vagal efficiency and we'll talk more about the vagus nerve I'm sure, but we talk about this as a kind of nervous system flexibility or nervous-system agility where we can move between different nervous systems states and I am not stuck up here and not down here.

I have this ability to actually, I like to use this metaphor a lot, like be in the driver's seat of our nervous so that I'm not just pressing on the gas, I am not pressing just on brakes, right?

I can mobilize, come into a soft brake system, and I don't have to use that emergency brake and get stuck there. Well, let's talk about the vagus nerve.

There are many nerves, but this one seems to be incredibly important. If you can tell our listeners what is the vagus nerve, why is it so important? So, if you're new to the vagus nerve, it's our 10th cranial nerve.

We have 12 cranio nerves, and the majority of our cranios nerves stay kind of supraclavicular, right? Like they're above the clavicle, so most of cranion nerves are going to be around the eyes, the ears, muscles of the face, tongue, mouth and so forth.

They're basically going help us integrate our senses. Now the vagus nerve does that, but it also has an extensive network of circuitry that goes below the clavicle that descends into, obviously, in the throat, larynx and pharynge, then below that into your heart, into you lungs, through the diaphragm, all the way down into digestive organs and reproductive organs.

Shutdown States, Parasympathetic Imbalance, and the Vagus Nerve

And we can consider this this mind-body superhighway of communication where it allows what's happening here in your body to be well understood by your brain stem so that your bring can do an optimal job regulating body temperature, regulating heart rate, regulated your base respiratory rate helping your digestive system work optimally and all of your endocrine system organs do the best job possible.

Yeah, you know, it does a lot of great things and there are many ways of activating the vagus nerve. And so if you

could talk about the ways that you do it in your practice.

Yeah. So when we think about the vagus nerve, it works very closely with the other cranial nerves, like the trigeminal nerve around your eye, down around through your mouth and jaw, works with ocular nerve with nerves that go into your ears, the nerves around the tongue and your And so one of the ways, and let me back up for just a moment, why would we stimulate the vagus nerve?

In part because we're going to open up that channel of communication between your body and your brain so your can do the best job possible. And we might also look at what would be the outcome of stimulating the vagus nerve.

We're going to cultivate what we call greater vagal tone. What is the measure of vagial tone? Heart rate variability. It's the ability to transition smoothly and rhythmically between sympathetic and parasympathetic states.

So it's going build that vaginal flexibility or agility. Vagal Tone is basically the same thing we've been talking about, just another language for it.

And so how do we then stimulate optimal vagal tone? One is that we can naturally stimulate the vagus nerve where it comes close to the surface of our skin.

There's a whole, really a, whole slew of vaguss nerve stimulation devices that are out there now. The research on them is robust, right? There is literally 30 years of research out, there about looking at, initially they were looking right, into the neck or above the heart.

And it works a little bit like a pacemaker, except that it's sending those electroceutical signals to the vagus nerve to keep the vagus nerve basically functioning optimally.

But then they started to realize, wait a second, we can actually achieve these same positive benefits for things like rheumatoid arthritis and seizures and migraines and epilepsy, et cetera, we can achieve those benefits transcutaneously.

What does that mean? We can stimulate the vagus nerve through the skin. So where is the Vegas nerve close to the surface of your skin, in the sides of the neck, around your ears, and around the face?

You can go out there and purchase a $500 device, or you can use your free natural vagus nerve stimulation devices, which we'll call your hands and fingers, and your breath.

There's a lot of ways that we can get into this. So self-applied massage around your eyes, around ears, sides of the neck. deep breathing, mindful coherent rhythmic breathing yoga practices that again rhythmically alternate between feelings of energetic aliveness and rest are going to create that optimal tone.

I love that. If you want, you can get a device, but there is something you could do on your own that is free. It's so true. Is there a particular practical sequence that you've done with clients that has been incredibly helpful?

Yeah, so the, you know, I like to kind of be fluid with the sequences and I offer them probably more like you would think of as like a menu of choices because what I have found over the years is that I've literally taught vagal toning practices to thousands and thousands of students as well as to clients.

And what i find is, that some people say, wow, when you invite me to do that conscious breathing, i feel more anxious as soon as i pay attention to my breath.

So we might kind of look at that menu and be like, I don't like shellfish, right? Breathwork doesn't feel like my go-to right now, but is there something else on that venue?

Maybe it's self-applied touch, doing that massage around your eyes, your temples, you scalp, my favorite, ears, maybe that's your go to and you're like oh my gosh, as soon as I do that one I feel relaxed.

I'm going to put a check mark next to that on the menu. So we can start to experiment for every individual what feels like a yes, what it feels, like maybe what, feels I'm not yet.

Vagal Toning Practices and Personalized Regulation Tools

And even if we going back to that example about breath, because it's a common one that people are like, well, I don't like breath work, right. If we experiment with that one, we might notice that for that person, the reason why it brings up discomfort is that the feeling or the sound of the breath is linked in some way or another to a memory connected to trauma or adversity.

And if that's the case, breath work is still a valuable tool in the toolbox, but it's going to help us access the underlying trauma-related memory that then we can ultimately work with to heal so that hopefully down the road, you will change your relationship to conscious breathing and say, actually, I just developed a taste for that.

I like that on my menu now. Oh, that's beautiful. So things that just really strike home, like I that you tailor it to the individual that it's not a one size fits all, but you're really being mindful about what their preferences are.

It starts with something like what we call in the applied polyvagal work, something called neuroception, which is the ability to access the felt-sense signals from your body about what feels nourishing and what unsure and maybe not so safe and what feels dangerous.

And so we have to essentially build the self-awareness as I would call kind of step one, right? And then from there we can start to apply the tools and build that capacity to really track like how is my nervous system giving me the signal back in return that that is actually producing the result of where I feel more connected more grounded, more alive, but not anxious, relaxed, and not collapsed.

That is great. I was just thinking because you brought up trauma and certain types of breathwork might trigger some things. And it made me think about who's a good candidate for this type of work.

Is there a particular type? Yeah. I would say that everyone's a good candidate, right? Like, there's no one that I think wouldn't benefit from some vagal toning practices.

And, you know, and because we have a wide array, like, let's go to another vagus tonic practice, cold water exposure, it's very popular. We see people jumping in ice baths.

Do I like an ice path? No way. It's not pleasant for me. little bits of cold exposure. I can do a cold run at the end of my shower. Yes, I could feel the aliveness and the tingliness.

That feels like my level of yes to that one. But in terms of who's a good candidate for this, everyone and I also think that preventatively, even if we're like, well I don't have trauma, do I need this?

I want you to think of vagal toning practices like brushing and flossing your teeth. It's like nerve flushing. We're all going to feel more connected as a result.

And the challenge when we have a history of trauma is that sometimes doing something that helps us feel connected to our bodies feels vulnerable at first.

In those situations, we want to turn towards a practice that's going to open up that mind-body channel of communication with sufficient support. So that why therapeutically we call ourselves co-regulators.

We're like, okay, I'm going be in the journey with you. we're going to track together how your nervous system responded to that touch or to the breath practice.

We're gonna notice if more freeze came up or if you responded with an ah and a sigh and yes. And if we notice that more tension came, we are going hold that together.

Wow, wow. He said something. If we do this, we will feel more connected as a result. Can you give us a little bit more? Are you talking about connected to ourselves?

Connected to other people? Like, what's the context? Help me understand. love this question, because I would say that one of the big pandemics of our world right now is that of isolation, right?

We have really a catastrophe happening around us where we have grown more distrustful of each other, the polarization, and the lack of clarity about who's on my side, who is against me, what's safe out there.

Connection, Intuition, and Healing Trauma

And we often also carry those kind of you know questions about safety even inside of us like am I safe for me right am i going to betray myself by getting lost like simple things like i'm gonna get lost on scrolling the internet for too long and the next thing i know i've been in this uncomfortable position and i lost an hour of my day and whatever it is like how do we be so gentle and and compassionate with ourselves around all of it but in terms of more connection i think it's everything you named like When I feel more connected on the inside, I'm going to make wiser choices for me.

I am going rebuild a sense of trustworthiness between me and me that I will make intelligent choices about what I eat and when I My body is going to give me feedback about whether what I'm eating is actually digestible.

It's going help me make choices about who I relate to and is that other person really nourishing or am I going into a fear response and how do I want to wisely deal with that?

But when I can deeply trust myself to make those intelligent choices, it also helps us with our relational intelligence, right? Like we have a better capacity to be in connection even in the midst of difference and even the mist of conflict without jumping into reactivity.

I can pause, I take that mindful breath, ride the wave of a strong emotion without jumping into making my point and pushing somebody further away inadvertently.

Wow. You said trust self. And then I thought about intuition and just how this might play an important part in the development of intuition. Yes. Yes, so gorgeous.

I love that you're linking it back here. So very often the way that I loved to locate intuition from a body centered and a nervous system perspective is that your intuition lives here, it's like gut, belly, wisdom.

That there is a way in which, I mean, we all have different ways in, which we like get a hunch or get an inkling about something or we sense into something.

But I think that there's a very core, universal process in which our gut has a very simple language. You're digestible. Your nourishment. I'm going to let you in as part of me.

Or you feel Not so safe. I'm not so sure that I can digest this. Maybe that feels like it's just extraneous. It's waste and I could let that move through or maybe that feel toxic and poisonous to me and the gut gives a clear no, I am going to eject that as quickly as possible so that i can keep the whole system safe." But the gut, belly, wisdom is as true about the food that we ingest as it is about relationships, the news, world around us, and the choices we make.

Our gut is going to help us sense into, that feels like a yes, maybe, extraneous not so important, or a no. Yeah. And when we listen to that intrinsic embodied source of intuition, we are better able to make those wise choices about who I'm moving towards.

I'll back up and give a real clear example because I think examples are really helpful around this. But like working with an individual who experienced a lot of chronic childhood trauma, one of the things that she had to do in order to survive that home was she has to cut off from her embodied knowing.

I need to depend on these people, but those same people that I'm dependent upon are not safe for me. The chronic feeling inside of something doesn't feel right, you know, when I'm a child and I am completely dependent on you, I actually have to dial down that knowing in order to keep my attachment system up and running.

In order stay close to someone that I also receiving these facial expressions and voice tone and body language or maybe they're hurting me that are all cues of threat.

So I learn how to die down the felt sense of my body that knows that threat And then fast forward into adulthood, we'll call that dissociation, that disconnection from the sensory knowing of the body.

Then fast-forward into adulthood, I don't have that felt sense to help me guide my decisions in the world. So I'm guiding my decision from a thinking about what should be right rather than a felt-sense of what actually feels safe.

Wow. So, so profound. You talked about using this as preventative and this very much excites me because I feel like a lot of psychiatry is all we wait until stuff hit the fan.

And can you paint me a picture of how we might be able to incorporate this into our schools? Oh, 100%, 100%. I've got a friend and colleague in the field that brings this in to schools and teaches teachers about nervous system regulation so that they can bring it into their classrooms.

Using Nervous System Regulation in Schools and Closing Reflections

I don't know if you've met Nikki Elliott, but she's an amazing resource out there for how we apply this information into schools and with kiddos. And as parents, right, like bringing this in so that we can help our kids feel safe enough to listen to their bodies, going back to classrooms, like all of the sit still in order to show obedience and learning and got all the kids squirming in their seats and trying to like, you know, be a good learner.

Like, what happens when we bring more movement into education or desks where we've got little bicycle deskt or, ways that we can not feel like we have to override the signals of Wow.

So important, so important. I do want to ask just a personal question. What does stepping into soul power mean for you? You know, I love this in so many ways.

There is a way in which locating the soulfulness as a embodied spirituality is something that to me feels like the most empowered state that I can live from because I'm filling my skin, I am resting into the felt sense and from there I feel like I could handle whatever comes my way.

And I love to teach other people how to live from that place. But there's something else that stands out for me around the word soul. And it's a definition that I've used for many, many years, and it locates soul as the seat of meaningful experience.

And I really love that because I think when we're in alignment with our values and our purpose and a sense of meaning in the world, and we can do that from bottom up and top down, then we've got that kind of full mind, body, spirit living.

Wow. You just said something. I can handle whatever comes my way. Yes. Yes, and I love that you're so passionate about teaching people to do that. I know that our audience is going to want to get in contact with you.

Let us know how can they connect. Yes. So it's Dr. Ariel Schwartz, and that's kind of the easiest way. Like if you just Google that one, but you can go to my website, which is drarielschwartz.com.

I have a second website that is resilienceinformedtherapy. com that talks a lot about a of my professional trainings. And I'm running many, many programs that are all about nervous system health with the Shift Network.

And even if you just go to YouTube, Dr. Ariel Schwartz, there's some 250 classes out there to guide you into

embodied yoga practices and applied polyvagal theory.

Wow. Dr Ariel Schwarz, thank you so much for being on the show. It was an absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me. If you haven't heard it yet today, I appreciate you.

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