Transform Stress For Personal Growth Transcript

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Opening Welcome and Guest Introduction

It’s Dawson here again, and I'm so delighted you are here. You know, you could be doing many other things right now. You could be playing Wordle. You could be catching the reruns of Game of Thrones.

You could be out at a sports bar betting on your favorite team. You could be doing all kinds of things right now. And instead, what you are doing is you are giving time to the most important person in your life.

You you are committing to your well-being. You are committing to your growth. You are being committed to your own transformation and transcendence. You are sharing in our community here this amazing set of ideas, inspiration and practices which has the ability to take the worst events of your life.

And literally, you've heard some examples of some shattering events that people have experienced and then finding out how to make those not just okay, but literally how we can turn those into fuel for our growth.

And it all starts with showing up and paying attention. So here you are. You're showing up. You're paying attention. You're loving yourself enough to be here.

I am so grateful for you because this is where it all starts. This is where shifting our lives and our reality is all starts. So I'm so glad to be part of this wonderful community with you.

So part of this one. Glad to be part of this wonderful experiment in learning how to take those things that challenge us, that might otherwise really pull us down into negative spaces in our hearts, minds and bodies, and turning them into the fuel for our growth, our progress, our transcendence.

I'm celebrating you. I'm celebrating all of us for being right here, right now. You're going to so enjoy the time with our next guest. His name is Ari Whitten.

His the founder of the Energy Blueprint. He is the bestselling author of The Ultimate Guide to Red Light Therapy and also eat for energy. He holds a master of science degree in human addiction and functional Medicine, and is also trained in sports medicine and performance enhancement.

He is a researcher who is obsessively devoted the last 20 plus years of his life to the pursuit of being on the cutting edge of science, health and human energy optimization.

You can find his podcast, programs and other resources at his website. TheEnergyblueprint.com Ari, thank you so much for being here. Thanks so much for having me, Dawson. It's a pleasure.

So what brought you to looking at this whole question of human energy and how to unlock it powerfully in our lives? Well, I've been a health geek on my life, since I was very young.

I got I got very interested in the world of athletic performance enhancement and in fitness and in body composition. So, I was an athlete from a very young age, and I was always interested in how I can become a better athlete.

when I was a teenager, I developed an interest in bodybuilding.

Ari Whittenu2019s Background and Energy Crisis

And my, my older brother was, an aspiring bodybuilder who was being mentored by a professional bodybuilder and was a personal trainer. And so from the time I was 13, 14 years old, I was kind of growing up in that world of fitness performance enhancement, body composition optimization.

And, that was my world. That was my obsession for, for many, many years from a very young age. I was reading, you know, college level nutrition textbooks by the time I was 14 or 15 years old. And, I'm now 40.

And it's this has really been a lifelong obsession for me. But what shifted things for me was in my mid-twenties, my later 20s, I got Epstein-Barr virus, I got mononucleosis, and I got it quite severely.

And, for many, many months after that, I was left with severe, really debilitating, chronic fatigue. And that was a really shocking experience for me because I had always been, you know, the fittest, healthiest, most athletic guy in my whole life up until then.

And all of a sudden, here I was with no energy, no ability to, sustain any kind of cognitive effort or physical effort just laid out in bed most of the day, not able to do a job, not able to study, not able to hang out with my friends or play sports or workout or be with my girlfriend.

And I was just sort of watching my whole life fall apart because I didn't have this thing that I had always taken for granted my whole life, which was energy and not not energy in a in a sort of woowoo, mystical new agey sense, but in the, in the, in the, in terms of the real physical energy that powers your body and brain.

I didn't have it. And, that was a very powerful experience for me to gain empathy for. This whole segment of the population turns out to be a quite large segment of the population that also struggles with chronic fatigue, with lack of energy.

that up until that point, I just couldn't even comprehend what that would be like. And now all of a sudden, here I was watching my life fall apart just because I don't have any energy.

And that was a catalyst for making me realize how important this thing called energy is to living a good life. This is this is what allows us to do all the things we want to do in life.

And if you don't have enough of it, instead of being able to pursue your dreams or do your job well, or study hard in school, or show up for your loved ones, or your kids or your grandkids in the way that you'd like to, you're kind of like, well, I'm just too tired.

It's too hard, right? It's hard to find the motivation to do something if you have to you you have to get over this, you know, just getting up off the couch or doing some low level physical task or mental task.

Cognitive task feels like climbing a mountain every time you do it. It's exhausting. And that's the price we pay when we don't have enough energy in our lives.

So for me, that experience really rocked my world and caused me to shift my whole focus away from the world of athletic performance and fitness and body composition, enhancement to energy, the science of energy.

The only problem was what I what I discovered, in the subsequent months and years as I shifted my focus there, is that there was no science of energy.

in fact, when you try to dig into something that would resemble, like you go on PubMed or Google Scholar and you start trying to search various things to understand what what is the science of energy?

For example, if you Google that right now, it'd be interesting to to see what you find. but certainly ten years ago, more than ten years ago, when I started exploring and building out this topic, there was very little to speak of.

I would say to provide a very brief summary within conventional medicine, almost nothing that there's no no paradigm, no, no conceptual model to understand what causes fatigue or what are the mechanisms that regulate our energy levels and what do we do about it?

Mainly what they do for people with chronic fatigue. And we could talk specifics if you wanted to delve into this. But

the main things they do are antidepressants, cognitive behavioral therapy and stimulants as needed.

they don't really address things beyond that level. they say, oh, you maybe you're depressed. Here's some antidepressant drugs. We can give you stimulant drugs. Right?

But that's that's not a real solution as I. And nor does it really address the root causes of the problem in the first place within, alternative and more natural health circles and functional medicine circles, especially at that time, all of the conversation was very centered on this thing called adrenal fatigue.

And, and initially, you know, a lot of the people I respected and studied in natural health who were talking about adrenal fatigue, I had heard about it and read about it for many years.

So I assumed when I was fatigued that that's what I must have. I must have adrenal fatigue. and there's a very long story that I could give here. But in the interest of of time, what I'll say is that when I started to dig into that topic, I quickly discovered that there is really no science underlying this thing called adrenal fatigue.

And, it's mostly, mythology rather than something that's actually grounded in good science. and the vast majority of, of people who have chronic fatigue do not have any kind of abnormalities in adrenal function or cortisol levels or HPA axis function.

So when I discovered that, I realized, whoa, neither in conventional medicine nor in natural health circles, in functional medicine circles, does anybody really seem to have a solid scientific understanding of fatigue, of what regulates and controls human energy levels, what's causing chronic fatigue, and how do we recover our energy levels or optimize our energy levels.

So that sparked my interest even further, because now I said, well, you know, I've I've been a health geek all my life. This is my passion. This is my obsession.

Now, I'm really interested in this topic because it seems like an area that nobody understands. Well, maybe I can apply my obsession to this and build out a scientific framework for understanding what regulates human energy levels and how we can optimize that.

And that's what I've been doing for more than a decade now. So there is the science. And, there are now more developed ways of understanding what that is and how we can start to shift those, functions of our body.

What, whether any emotional or spiritual dimensions of that time for you. So there you were at that very young age and you were debilitated. And obviously it felt terrible, as you mentioned, not be able to go out and play and do all the things you used to, used to doing.

Well, were there any kind of besides the turning your obsession to finding out information that could shift you physically? Were there any emotional or spiritual components of that part of your life?

Many, many emotional components. One, one thing that comes to mind as you ask that is at at the time, I was working a very hard, manual labor job. I was working on a on a fish farm, actually, doing.

Like, pretty extreme manual labor, going from pond to pond, hauling buckets of fish, you know, moving them to a tractor, hauling big, heavy weighted nets with with leather in it, you know, for hour after hour and in extreme heat oftentimes.

Identity Collapse, Illness, and Recovery

And, And when I got sick with mononucleosis, also called, the kissing disease, depending on what country you're in, in the United States, they call it mononucleosis in the UK, in many other countries they call it, glandular fever or some places called the kissing disease.

So if anybody's wondering what mononucleosis is, that might go by a different name in your country. but, I worked with a group of, of guys, mostly former military and special forces guys, very, very, very tough, very strong guys. And, one of the things that happened after I got sick was I was not able to show up to my job, and I didn't have the physical energy to do that.

And there was a there was a very deep emotional and psychological thing that I had to deal with, of feeling like all these guys were going to judge me as, as being a sissy or something like that, that, that oh, here I was, I just had a cold and, you know, I was making such a big deal out of it.

I was a hypochondriac, I was exaggerating, I was trying to get out of work and things like that. and so for fear of all of that judgment and shame, I ended up trying to push myself to go to work and to continue to do work, even when I was very sick.

And, and I ended up making myself quite a bit worse in that process. So I would say to answer your question, that was the biggest thing that I had to deal with during that time is just working through all of my own fears, around being judged, or yeah, being judged negatively by, by other people that I'm working with and realizing how much the fear of judgment is causing me to do things that are actually quite bad for my health.

So let's pause there for a moment. Let everyone reflect on this for a moment, and you know that I have you pause every once in a while in interviews and we think about what I guess just said, and we apply to our own life.

So here I had this shot with self-concept. He'd always been this highly athletic person in this highly demanding physical job. And he could do it. He could master it without ever occurring to him that he might not one day be able to do that.

And suddenly that absolutely firm pillar of his concept of who he was disappeared. What do you do when that happens? What and when did that happen for you?

Take a moment now before we share more of our story, to reflect on a time in your life when you have had a central plank of your identity collapse, and it may have been circumstances very, very different from ours and may have been something that happened to you emotionally and could have been when your perfect marriage to suddenly disappeared overnight, unexpectedly.

It could have been, when your investment collapsed or you lost savings that you were counting on for buying a house, for retirement, for raising your children, for your education.

It might have been in the domain of life that is quite different. It could have been a spiritual teacher that you were highly invested in and that you really believed in.

And a bit of great help to you. And certainly that person was, for example, shown to be involved in a scandal. What was it when some hugely important part of yourself, spiritual, material, mental, financial, suddenly just collapsed?

And make a note of that time now for the time being, just make a note of that in your journal. We'll do more work with this later on, but for the time being, think about when some central pillar of who you believed you were in the world suddenly crumbled, and you were then face to face with who you were actually now, without that, that pillar.

So you obviously applied the, the same determination and the same, intellect and the same persistence to find the answers that you had brought to earlier things you done.

And you also, though, had to deal with the emotional reality that you had pushed yourself even further initially, and now you couldn't do it anymore and had to accept this, this new version of self, which I imagined was, difficult for you.

It was very difficult. And, the one other layer to the story was that I didn't even have a diagnosis at that time. so the initial diagnosis that I got was strep throat.

They put me on antibiotics at the, at the, at the doctor on penicillin, and that didn't do anything. In fact, I got worse during that period. so during that, I think it was maybe 6 or 8 weeks that I didn't even know that I had mono, and I had never had any prior experience with this.

So I didn't know what I could have. You know, I had only had colds and flus prior to that. I was also second guessing myself, right, do I? Why? Why is it taking me so long to to get over this right?

Like it's just a sickness? What I maybe I shouldn't show up to work, you know, and, Yeah. So it took, I think, about eight weeks to actually get a diagnosis back and to, to understand that I had mono to understand that I had a serious illness. But.

Yeah, now, I love what you said a minute ago, actually, in the sense that it was very much a collapse of this self that I had been in my whole life. Right?

I had always been the strong, fit, healthy guy, and all of a sudden I'm the the one. And I was in a large group of of people of, about, 2 or 300 kids and mostly in our 20s at, at this place that were, that were having this experience for six months.

And I was the one, literally the only one who was asking for, special services to, to, not be able to go to work for that period of time. You know, I had worked for the first I think it was the first four months or something.

But then I was sort of out of commission and everybody was seeing me not go to work. And, you know, being laid out in bed and, you know, there was yeah, there was a lot of intensity of the, the psychological, the emotional, the spiritual journey that that entailed of this collapse of myself and all the fears of judgment and having to to work through that and my own judgment of myself in the process.

Of profit is worse of the judgment of people around you. There's judgment, people around you, real or imagined, and then zero self judgment enough. And our harshest inner critic.

So the ones inside our own minds absolutely. Yeah. And Fortunately, you know, I was able to, to, to work through most of that and, and it ended up being something beautiful, being being serving as a catalyst that gave me so much empathy for other people in that situation and wanting to help find answers.

And, you know, using the fact that I had this background in science to dedicate my life to building out answers so that other people hopefully wouldn't struggle the way that I did.

Yeah. And so you began to do that. Of course. You then began to write and you began to share and, then how long was your recovery after you began to find the leverage points to, to shift your body?

I would say it was about six months. That was really bad. And then probably 12 months to get back to full function. so 18 months in total. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

And so what lessons would you want to share with people about that process? Like if you could give yourself in that, say, walk over to that bed and give your younger self, some wise counsel advice.

And if wanted to give people who are sharing in our community now some wise counsel advice about what do you do when your self-concept collapses, about what do you do when you can't do things you you used to able to do when you had that fierce inner critic inside your head who's been driving you on in where you know you just can't make the next step.

And yet, you know this part of yourself that's really onto you, the part of the self that's really criticizing you and often is relentless about doing that.

And here you are. You aren't able to function properly and you have this fierce inner critic and you've had this part of the self collapse. What would you share with that younger version of yourself and people and that similar

situation?

It's an interesting question. I've never been asked that. normally I really focus on the learnings and insights that I gained in the subsequent years and, you know, delivering sort of the science of how do we optimize our energy levels and teaching the science of health more broadly.

I don't generally talk so much about my own personal experiences. In this case, I would love to tell you that I navigated this well or that I, Or even that I had some specific insights of how I could have advised myself back then to navigate it better.

But I'll answer your question in a slightly different way. one of the things that I've been writing a lot about lately, one of the chapters of my upcoming book is about psychological and emotional resilience and I think that a lot of us, you know, and this is this is because of cultural narratives in our society.

We operate in this kind of delusion, in this kind of fantasy, that we can be strong and powerful and resilient in individuals without going through bad stuff, without having to go through hard times and stress and challenges and adversity. And, I, I think that it is, a toxic narrative to a large degree to believe that we can arrive to a place of great inner strength and wisdom and resilience without growing through, going through difficulty in our life.

So in that sense, coming from that frame, and there's much more I could say about that in the science of that, and the physiology of what I mean by all of that and what what is resilience and how do we cultivate it.

But coming from that perspective of appreciating that hard times are not just bad things, that we should figure out how to navigate with greater ease and less suffering, but understanding that there is such a thing.

Yes, there's such a thing as post-traumatic stress disorder, but there's also such a thing as post-traumatic growth. And we become stronger, wiser, more resilient people as a result of difficult times in our life.

So from that perspective, I would say there was nothing wrong with my experience, nothing I would do differently. I would, and I would answer by saying I would like to suffer in that experience just as much as I did, and have just as much psychological and emotional difficulty with that experience, so that I can get as much growth and strength and wisdom from that experience as I did.

Well, the difference between people who descend into PTSD and those who experience post-traumatic growth is that the people who are sucked into that cycle of suffering tend to be in a looping pattern, both biologically and in terms of thought and self-talk.

And so there obsessively claimed by those intrusive thoughts. The people who are able to use adversity for post-traumatic growth tend to find some leverage point to shift themselves out of that repetitive inner self-talk and being captured by the difficulty of their their situation.

And so what?

Resilience, Trauma, and Stress Tolerance

What are the lessons you learned about resilience you'd like to pass along, both in in your work and to other people in practical ways? Today? Resilience is is what is upstream of trauma.

It's the factor that is upstream of trauma. So I think that a lot of the conversation that we're having about trauma right now, and when I say we, I mean not just you and me, but I mean our society more broadly, I also have a podcast.

I interview lots of experts. I've interviewed lots of people on the subject of trauma, lots of trauma experts. and, and I'm very aware from listening to other podcasts other than the people I speak to personally, but, other shows, other conversations, books that I'm reading, I feel the conversation is, has shifted to a place where there is almost, A sort

of over identification with trauma, to the point where, everybody is, is a lot of people are being taught to, actively seek out the different ways that they've been traumatized and to think of them in a really bad way, meaning to think of them in a way that's like, you've been traumatized and just think about, you know, just sort of get in touch with all the ways that you have been traumatized by this or that experience.

And, a lot of certainly not all, but a lot of the narratives that I hear around that I think are largely counterproductive for many people. it is it is, in a way, teaching people to identify as being traumatized.

And, and, and and there's also sort of another, another overlay on this, there's this sort of political ideology that also teaches people to, identify or even virtue signal about the different ways that they've been traumatized.

so there's sort of an, I think at this moment, culturally, the site Geist is, is one of a, I would say, not a very healthy relationship with trauma. We are very focused on trying to think about and talk about all the ways that we have been traumatized and to desire to heal our traumas.

But what I think is missing from this conversation, actually, let me say one more point, which is there is absolutely a positive side to this because at different points in our in our past in, in history, we have had a, a cultural sort of, feeling that is opposed to allowing anybody to talk about their trauma, you know, and sort of suppresses that.

and so I think there's a beautiful movement in the direction of more acceptance of trauma, being more open to hearing about trauma, talking about trauma, normalizing it in a way, I think we've swung a bit too far in that direction, where there's too many people who are over identified and over focused on their traumas and the ways that they are, in many cases, feeling irreparably harmed by those traumas.

and I think what's missing from this, this picture right now, at this moment in time, is understanding that resilience is what is upstream of trauma. So in in the same way that, if I, if I, for example, like we, I often use the analogy of mussels, partly because my background is exercise science from a very young age and partly because it's easy for us to understand logically and visually.

It's something that we can see. and I think our brains understand this really easily. So, if I take, a physical stress, let's say lifting heavy objects, okay.

Lifting heavy objects is a physical stress on the body, and it induces some degree of what it's actually called in, in the scientific literature, micro trauma.

Right. The actual tissues, the muscle fibers, the tendons, there is damage to those, to those muscle fibers and inflammation in that area from this micro trauma of this physical stress.

If we are physically stronger, if we have prepared our body adequately by training ourselves to lift heavy objects regularly, we can engage in that exact thing.

Let's say, let's say I have these, this weight. Let's imagine this is, 50 pound weight and I do, you know, x amount, three sets of ten of lifting this weight in one scenario where I do not have a lot of physical, physiological resilience built into that muscle tissue, that activity causes a lot of damage to my cells.

It causes a lot of trauma or micro trauma to those cells. On the other hand, if I have trained that musculature to be strong, it is it is prepared to handle that stress in a way where it can handle it with ease without incurring damage and micro trauma.

From that experience. Okay, that that same principle is active at the level of the mind is active, that the level of this isn't just something that applies to our muscular capacity, but is also something that applies to our psychological and emotional capacity.

stress buffering capacity. And this has to do with the concept of the stress threshold. So at what level does your brain and your body register something as stressful?

If you have a very low stress threshold, it takes only a very small amount of a particular stressor, in this case, the psychological or emotional stressor to, exceed or overwhelm that that stress threshold, at which point you feel that thing as a stress, as being stressed out or burnt out or overwhelmed, if it greatly exceeds it, that's when we get trauma.

That's when we get so much damage, so much harm that that we call that thing trauma. so what resilience is, is resilience is how do we build up that stress threshold so that we take more and more of what life throws at us, the things that used to stress us out, or maybe even used to cause some degree of trauma and not not to minimize of, of course, the most severe kinds of traumas, but to take as much as possible of life's stress stressors and turn it into things that our body can handle with ease, instead of things that stress us out that our brain and body register perceive as stressful.

and make it as, non damaging to our body as, as possible. That's what resilience is. So we're looking at how do we build the capacity to stress proof ourselves, to inoculate ourselves against stress so that we can resist stressors when they come our way?

handle them with ease, and even when they do exceed our stress threshold to bounce back quickly from them. So I think many of us have this idea of resilience as a purely psychological construct, that it's this thing, it's like a personality trait.

It's largely immutable. We either have it or we don't. And it describes this quality of of, of bouncing back from adversity or hard experiences. But resilience is not just a psychological construct.

It is something that is is based on many different capacities in your system, physiological and psychological capacities that are essentially your capacity to resist stress and resist being damaged or traumatized by stress.

So, I think personally that there is a bit too much focus on the trauma itself and not enough on what is essentially the antidote to trauma, which is building resilience.

And we're used to that concept of a set point when it comes to pain. For example, we say somebody has a high pain tolerance and we can apply that same analogy to stress.

And what is your stress tolerance. So think now just for example, if you were to take a best guess at the moment and guess as to what is your personal level of stress tolerance, what's your number?

And score it from 0 to 10. So zero is no stress tolerance, ten is is maximum. What is yours right now? Today, now this is something you're writing in your journal.

I won't see it. I won't see it. Nobody else here is going to know what it is. It's just a dialog between you and yourself. And it's going to be something which you can use for reflection and as a beginning point to bring into place the resources to raise that tolerance.

And you'll see this happen in all kinds of ways that people are able to do that. There are people who are highly resilient. And so something that they couldn't have handled a while back, though, they become stronger.

They can handle this. They raise that number. That number is higher. What is yours is yours right this very moment. Write that down. After that, we're going to take a look at some of the ways you can raise that number and deliberately, consciously and in advance of the next stressor, proactively build up your number.

So we'll take a just a brief break now for you to make note of your numbers zero through ten. What is your number on that scale of your level of stress tolerance?

So now let's get into some of the ways that you believe we can raise that number. And there obviously are so many ways you mentioned psychologically, spiritually, physically there all kinds of things we can do to make ourselves more resilient.

Let's get into what some of those are. Yeah. It's interesting this I think this is another area where there needs to be a shift in the conversation. because if you look up resilience online and we look up like sort of anything related to the topic of stress and the effects of stress, and what should what should we do about this problem of, of stress and how it damages our health?

I would say what we generally find is a lot of information that says stress is really bad for us. And what we should do is generally try to minimize it, escape it, get rid of it, and relax away our stress.

And, and so there's a whole, you know, very prominent field around stress management that generally is what it's referred to as, and it consists of lots of different practices, a lot of relaxation practices, different kinds of ways of de-stressing, mindfulness meditation practices, yoga, breathing things like that, things to calm us down, basically.

You know, we're all sort of wound up. We have this thing called we live very busy lives where go, go, go. We're hustling. We're trying to do things, get things done constantly.

We're all wound up and anxious and tense and stressed out and overwhelmed all the time. And we need stuff to help us calm down and relax and get rid of the stress.

and there's certainly utility in this. There's absolutely a place for it. but there's a couple of, of big problems with this. general kind of way of, of relating to stress.

one is that the beliefs about stress being harmful to our health are themselves harmful to our health. Okay. There's there's an emerging body of research that has basically shown that people who believe stress is very harmful to their, to their health are more harmed by stress than people who don't believe this.

So, one of the most famous studies on the subject is called, does the perception that stress felt affects health matter, the association between health and mortality.

And what they did was they they took, nearly 30,000 U. S. adults, and they asked them two questions. They essentially asked them, how much stress have you had in the last year?

That was question one. and most of the studies that examined stress, sort of just look at that layer of the story, which is essentially how much stress do you report being under?

How stressed out do you feel? Right. And if you just look at that, how stressed out do you feel? How much stress have you had and health outcomes? You're going to find one particular thing.

But what this study also did is they asked a second question. Do you believe that stress is harmful to your health? So this created different subsets of people.

You can imagine essentially for subsets of people, you people who have low stress levels in their life and they either believe that stress is very harmful to their health, or they don't believe stress is harmful to their health and people with you.

It could be sick, you know, moderate stress and and so on. But let's just say for low stress and high stress, people who report having lots of stress in their life, and they either believe that stress is very harmful to their health, or they believe that stress is not harmful to health.

And what this study found, which might confirm some most people's intuitive feelings and beliefs about stress, is that the people who had high levels of stress in their life, who reported being very stressed and believed that stress negatively affects their health, had a 43% increased risk of premature death during this.

This study, I think attract people for 20 or 30 years. So they actually looked at death as the outcome. This is a rare study, taking 30,000 people, tracking them for decades to actually examine stress and their relationship with risk of dying. And so, again, people with high who reported high levels of stress, who believe stress is harmful, reported a

much higher rate of dying prematurely, 43% increased risk.

However, the people who had a high level of stress but did not believe that stress was harmful to their health actually had a lower risk of dying than the people who reported having little to no stress in their life.

their beliefs were killing them. And and there's and there's lots and lots of research, particularly out of, Alia Crumb's lab at Stanford. She's done a lot of research looking at how the beliefs around stress, influence one's likelihood of being harmed by perceived stress.

So one one layer to the story that I think is very important is we've been inundated for 3 or 4 decades now in public health messaging and media messaging with all these headlines about how damaging stress is to our health.

And a lot of the research, the whole the body of research is also very flawed because a lot of it's based on animal experiments. The way we define the word stress semantically is a huge problem scientifically.

You can take, you know, rats in a laboratory and, subject them to experiments where they, they the headline of the study will talk about, you know, rats, you know, stress has X effect on rats.

And then when you look at the methodology of the experiment, it's like, putting rats in a, in a that of water where they have no ability to escape and taking them to the point of drowning again and again and again, or electrocute them, or putting them in a maze where they can't escape or subjecting them to, you know, rat very random periods of light and darkness where they, they have an inability to sleep or loud noises or things like that, things that are what are more similar to, I would say, being tortured in a POW camp than to the typical stresses of life that a human would experience.

And of course, being tortured chronically will have very serious effects on your health. but I think we need to be careful about how we use the word stress and what kinds of things we, extrapolate from those experiences.

You know, does the do animals being tortured nonstop for weeks or months on end? Does that translate into this brief couple of hours of being stressed out about something being harmful to my health?

I would argue clearly the answer is no. Based on the research. So that's one layer of the story, is that we need to, shift our attitude from this, this belief about the harms of stress, which I think has two negative effects.

One is that, it can cause people to, in a way kind of want to it subtly pushes them towards dropping out of life because life, full engagement with life, pursuing your biggest goals and dreams, trying to fulfill your highest potentials in life is demanding and will entail some challenges and adversity.

And the extent to which we adopt a belief system or a narrative that we need to avoid adversity and challenges because they're harmful to our health is oftentimes I've observed in many people, not all people, but in many people.

It pushes them into a place where they're so fear, so afraid of being in a state of stress, that they withdraw from life, that they live very meager lives.

They stop pursuing their goals and dreams, and being engaged with life in a, in a, in the fullest capacity because they are so afraid and intolerant of being in a state of stress.

So that's number one. the other the other thing that I wanted to say here is, the fear of, of, of stress itself is something that can basically induce a nocebo effect.

So when you believe something is very harmful to your health, you will amplify the negative effects of that. And this is essentially a form of anti resilience.

you are making whatever the objective effects of the stressor are, you are going to make that way worse if you

have, a fear of the harmful ness of stress.

So just so people understand stress is a highly subjective phenomenon. I'll give you an example. I was in France recently. with my kids, and I have a four year old and a seven year old, and I took them to, my wife and I took them to a tree climbing adventure course, and, you you kind of.

You wear harness, you hook in with, a carabiner to a rope that keeps you safe, and you walk on these sort of suspension bridges and move through obstacles and things like that.

And the the kids courses are oftentimes, you know, just a few feet off the ground or maybe 6 or 8ft off the ground at times. and it's very interesting to observe.

And my kids, especially my four year old daughter, and getting up on obstacles where she's even just two feet off the ground. I mean, she had a severe panic reaction, very, very intense.

Like like terror. Oh my gosh, I'm going to die. I'm going to fall, you know? And you see the same thing with the adults.

Training Resilience Through Hard and Scary Things

You know, in many cases the adults get up there, they start to get a little higher off the ground. Maybe they're 10 or 15 or 20ft off the ground. And you see people up there just paralyzed with fear, even though you're actually objectively, perfectly safe.

So, my, my wife and I are our rock climbers. For example, we're very comfortable being at heights because we've practiced it for many years. I wasn't always that way.

I was very afraid of heights when I started rock climbing. but now we're very comfortable being hooked in on a clip to, to a rope being 30 or 40 or 50 or 100ft off the ground.

so we go up there and sometimes stuck behind other groups, other adults, and you see people who are paralyzed with sheer terror of walking through this obstacle course 20 or 30ft off the ground.

and I see my wife right next to that person with a big smile on her face, totally relaxed. Right? The same exact objective experience. But subjectively, one person is in in a very extreme state of stress, even even panic, even terror.

and another person is is perfectly relaxed, has zero fear whatsoever, and is having fun, is has a smile on their face. Right. I got to observe this in my daughter who went from, from from that frozen with terror at the beginning to an hour later, having she had the courage and, you know, with some motivation and prodding from us, she continued to try and an hour into it.

She's starting to to do things in a relaxed way. And we went back a couple days later, and now she's doing it with a smile on her face. Right. So stress is a highly subjective thing.

It's it's mediated by your perceptions and your your beliefs about it. And and this by the way, this is what this is the principle of exposure therapy.

This is sitting in the stressor long enough that your brain can engage in cognitive reappraisal. And you start to learn what's called top down control, where your prefrontal cortex is now able to interact with the circuitry, the stress and the fear processing circuitry of the amygdala and hypothalamus in a way where you send signals back and forth enough, you sit with the stress or your brain goes, oh, I'm actually safe.

Oh, I'm actually safe. I'm not falling to my death. I'm not dying. And you can now you can now dissociate that trigger that that stimulus or trigger from the fear and the stress response through exposure therapy, through

cognitive reappraisal and, and further, if you train your mind and I do this with my kids right when they're in this situation, I remind them how to be calm.

I remind them, you're perfectly safe. Take a breath. You can you can relax. You can have fun. You're perfectly safe. Look, you know, I show them all, even fall off the thing and show them that.

That it holds me and that I don't fall down to my death. Okay? I'm safe. Daddy's safe. Right? I'm not falling to my death. You're perfectly safe. So I remind them to allow their brain time in while in the midst of that experience to cognitive reappraisal cognitively reappraise that situation, and for them to start to cultivate what's called top down control, the ability of the prefrontal cortex to calm down the amygdala, the fear and the stress processing circuitry so that you can learn the skill, the capacity of equanimity, of being calm and relaxed and serene in the face of a potentially stressful or triggering scenario.

And, and this what I just described is a key element of resilience. It is training our brain and nervous system how to be in a physiological stressor, how to be exposed to those stressors, but to maintain calmness and relaxation and equanimity and nervous system balance, and the ability for higher order thinking instead of, you know, going into an extreme anxiety and panic reaction.

This is a skill that can be cultivated, and it's, foundational to what resilience is. So you have two things going on there in your life. You have one is the feared stimulus.

You have the stressor. And the second thing you have going on is some kind of support system. Could be daddy falling off and you seeing that it could be your own prefrontal cortex saying, look, I can see that this is perfectly safe.

There's the carabiner, there's the cable. So whatever your support system is, you're adding that in. And there are, two things going on here. There's both that stimulus and there's also that method of support.

And that eventually leads to what in psychology we call memory reconsolidation, you actually we consolidate that stress or into your memory banks now, not as a feared stimulus but as a neutral one.

And so it's a very powerful practice. And before we go, I want to have you do one last exercise. And that is I want you to grab your journal one more time.

Ask yourself fearlessly. Ask yourself. Where have you been holding back? Where have you not done something that life is calling you to because of your fear of overwhelm, fear of stress, fear of novelty?

All the things that are holding you back? You know there are so many voices in our head, it'll start jabbering and telling us that we shouldn't do this when we know that there is some way in which life would love to pour through us creatively and move us to a whole new level, and we just don't do it.

One of the things I heard Wayne Dyer say several times was, it's a tragedy if you die with a music you could have composed, sung, performed inside of you and so many people do.

So think about, what are you saying over here and ask yourself this question again. I'm not judging you. No is judging you. You aren't judging you. You're just being in contemplation.

You're being in the question where in my life have I let my fears? Whether it's fear of stress, fear of rejection, fear of other people's opinions, where have I let those things stop me from living my genius?

Just take a moment here. We'll take a few breaths while you're writing this in your journal. Right? And I will give you some space to do that as we take breaths as well.

And in fact, we never even got around to the main topic I was going to ask you about in this interview, which was about breathwork, which both he and I are enormous fans out for a lot of reasons, and so that'll have to wait till

later.

But, I just want to translate everything that I, that I just explained into something that is practical and usable, so that you don't feel like you need to travel to France to go to, treetop adventure course. Okay.

So the basic principle that I'm describing here is training your brain during a state of physiological stress into what's called top down control in your training, your ability to use your prefrontal cortex to cognitively reappraise the situation and to basically calm down the amygdala reactivity and to calm down the sympathetic nervous system activation.

And by doing that, you dissociate the physiological stressor from the mental response of anxiety. And panic. Okay, so we are learning, in other words, how to be calm and serene and have equanimity in the face of physiological stress.

And we can do this. What's really important in training resilience is that it needs to be. You don't want to just rely on the random stressors of life to do this.

You want to train it in a systematic way. You want to think of cultivating a strong mind and a resilient mind. in the same way that we think of cultivating a strong body in the same way we think about physical fitness with physical fitness, like do this kind of exercise.

Zone two cardio this many times per week for this many minutes and do weightlifting in a systematic and progressive way for this many times a week, we want to think about training our mind in a similar way to that, and one of the most powerful.

I'll give two really important ways to to do this. One can be summarized by saying, do hard things and the other one is do scary things. Okay? We cultivate our physical body through challenging it, through doing, you know, endurance training or lifting heavy weights.

We cultivate our mind, our inner strength mentally and emotionally, psychologically through challenges as well. Not just trying to relax away our stress or escape our stress, but to intentionally, deliberately engage in psychologically and emotionally strenuous things so that we can grow stronger and more resilient and do the way that we can.

and take everything I described in that story of that adventure course and train it in our daily lives systematically, is to understand that when we engage in hard things like exercise, like learning new skills, whether maybe learning a new instrument or something like that, or, or taking on any difficult physically or mentally difficult thing.

It could be Sorna, it could be a cold plunge. It could be breathing exercises and breath holding. To loop that into this discussion. We are when we do these things, we are actually invoking a physiological stress response.

Okay, that's not a bad thing. I know we all associate that stress this word stress with a negative thing, but exercise, sauna exposure, cold exposure, breath holding practices actually create a physiological stress response.

And if we can pair that with the intentional mental practice done simultaneously to while we're engaging in those those physically difficult activities, if we intentionally work on training our mind to be calm in that state, when when we're getting in that cold plunge and our brain just wants to freak out and and say, oh, this is so uncomfortable, this is so painful, I gotta get the hell out of this thing.

If you bring in the mental training aspect of teaching yourself how to be calm in a scenario that you want to escape from, that is difficult, strenuous, painful, uncomfortable, you are cultivating one of the core skills of resilience and similarly with doing scary things, we are cultivating courage, which is another essential component of resilience, which is another aspect of tamping down the fear and stress response reactivity and increasing our stress threshold.

And this can be for me, it's rock climbing. At surfing, I play with fear. I have relationships with, things that create

some degree of fear for me. You know, there was a shark attack just down the beach, a couple days ago here, where I live in San Diego.

so every time I go in the ocean to surf, you know, I'm thinking about that. Big waves for me are even scarier than sharks. it could be public speaking for you.

It could be challenging yourself to socialize in a with a new group. When when you're when you have social anxiety, but intentionally engaging in things that scare you a little bit is a way to cultivate courage, which is a way to cultivate resilience, which is a way to to actually train your brain into being mentally and psychologically and emotionally stronger and more resilient.

So that's that's the last thing I wanted to leave people with here. So let's do one final exercise as well. And that is I'd like you to write down in your journal just one way in which you will challenge yourself in the next seven days.

Now, not talking about something that involves traveling. We're not talking about something which involves long term commitment. What is it that you fear that you might do in the next seven days to build your resilience?

It might be. Ari, I hate to sound like the wimp I am, but for me to be that cold shower, I try it. I try to change my habits and and do Wim Hof type cold showers.

And got to say, I totally fail to do that. So, so for you, you may be as much of a wimp as I am, and that might be your your scary thing. It could be going and talking to somebody that you, feel hesitation in doing.

Are you mentioned public speaking? What is it for you that challenges you? Just go and do that thing right in your journal, right this very moment. I'll give you a few seconds to do that.

What will you do? What will you commit to in the next seven days? Okay. You're saying to me now by writing in your journal, Dawson. Ari, this is my commitment.

Absolutely firm commitment. I'm going to do this in the next seven days. Not having to think about doing. But I want you to decide right now what you will do.

So when I phone you and email you seven days from now and say, did you do that thing? you'll say, I did it. So, you know beautiful And that's a wonderful way to get started.

And I'm glad you use the word commitment. What will you commit to? Because the one thing I would, I would add to what you just said is, again, to think about cultivating inner strength, psychological resilience in the same way we cultivate fitness.

And in that sense, I want to think, I want people to think about consistent training and ideally systematic and progressive progressive training. So we want it to be of the right dose and intensity of of the challenge and the right frequency and consistency.

So if I go do if I go run a marathon once a year and I don't work out the rest of the year, it's not going to be something that really builds my fitness in a in a sustainable way.

I'm probably mostly just going to create damage and harm more than anything. so I would also encourage people, what are you going to commit to starting that hopefully is a practice you will keep doing.

And make that a second entry in your journal. So that's something you'll do to meet your fear the very first time. And then what is it that you might do long term that's going to raise your set point, that's going to make you that more resilient person.

So when you next have a big life challenge, you built up those muscle fibers, you built up those intentions, you built up those neurons in your brain to be able to to meet that are it's been so inspiring to connect with you.

Thank you so much. I, I feel that, not only is your external work important, but you've really spent a lot of time on the internal work here with us today, and I feel as though bringing out that that aspect of what you offer has been so profoundly moving and meaningful for me.

I'm so grateful to you. And thank you for having me on, and it was an absolute pleasure connecting with you and your wonderful interviewer. And thank you for all the insightful commentary you added to this.

Yeah, and thank you everyone for being part of this community of growth learning. Stay tuned. We'll be back soon for the next. It is fantastic series, challenging all of our set points and moving to that high level of transcendence.

Thank you. Till then.