What’s Your Body Trying to Say? The Hidden Connection Between Trauma & Health Transcript

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Opening and Podcast Introduction

It's not possible to make your anxiety go away. It is not impossible to get rid of the traumatic memories. And you wouldn't want to, right? Like they're built into part of who you are.

But what our goal is, is to take away the emotional sting that those have on you. So, you know, when you go to tell somebody or if you have to talk about something that you went through, it's like, I don't feel that lump in my throat.

I feel the air coming out of my chest. It's in way I'm not having panic attacks. And then as you build that tolerance, your anxiety had less of an impact and you notice it less and less.

Then it starts to function in a functional way rather than working at every hour on the hour trying to protect you, trying anticipate what could go wrong because you learn to rebuild that trust in the world and with yourself.

Welcome to the Functional Edge. I'm Dr. Julia Ward and this is where science meets real-world strategies for living healthier, sharper, and stronger. From uncovering hidden environmental toxins to unlocking peak performance and mental clarity, we cover it all.

Ready to take control of your health and thrive? Let's dive in. Hello and welcome to the Functional Edge podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Julia Ward, medical director and founder of Balance Body Function Medicine.

Why Alicia Specializes in Trauma Work

In this episode, I am speaking with licensed therapist Alicia Anderson about the deep connection between trauma, anxiety, and whole body health. We discuss how nervous system regulation, hormonal balance, and root cause healing can restore emotional resilience and mental clarity.

So stay tuned for an engaging conversation that promises to empower and inspire your path to wellness. Welcome! I am excited to be here. Thank you. Why don't we just start a little at the beginning.

Your practice focuses on women dealing with anxiety, trauma, and self-doubt. What drew you into specializing in this niche and how has your own journey influenced the way that you work with clients?

I've always been in trauma. I don't know that it was the plan, but it's just kind of how it worked out. A lot of my work has always kind been that way.

It was in hospitals, I worked with people with substance abuse addiction, and I guess what really pushed me into that niche was being in hospital, offering support to people who had been through these horrible experiences, working with people who are in crisis, you know, I worked with birth mothers for a while and adoption and that and kind of helping with them.

And I've always kind just kind gravitated towards that field and I think I really enjoy working women. I enjoy the connection that we have and i feel like I can be a safe space for them and somebody that they can relate to and can come to with their, you know, hearts in their hands and help them hold their hearts and say like, hey, I'm willing to sit there with you.

I could hear this with, and you can yourself with me in a way that you don't get in other places. And I think that's very like sacred to me and I am really happy that I have the opportunity to share that with Yeah, that's so important.

That's really important for healing. So when we think about mental health from a functional medicine perspective, we often talk about the gut-brain connection, inflammation, sleep, and toxins.

How do you see those elements playing out in your therapeutic work around anxiety and trauma? So my background is in social work and the one thing that social has that a lot of other counseling practices doesn't is it really considers the person and their environment and how those two things go together.

Holistic Factors Behind Anxiety

And that's kind of the, one of main kind style differences between like the Licensed Marriage Therapist and LPC and an LCSW is we've had that Always considering that person in the environment.

Environment shapes you, and it impacts you. And even down to, like, is my room cluttery? Like, I have a lot of discussions about, you know, what is your space?

Is your spaces, conducive to your conditions and what you're going through? Not only that, everything in your body is interconnected, right? Like one of the first meetings when I have with people, we're talking about like, what is it that you're putting into your bodies?

Because your food makes a difference, you know? If you fill your your with energy drinks, sodas, and sugars, all of those things are going to impact your anxiety.

And if you have trauma, it's going increase your fear. It's gonna increase you sensitivity to the world, then it is going make it really difficult to function in the And when you have those things that kind of egg on what you've got on as symptoms, they become worse and worse, and they grow.

And so, by kind-of narrowing down, we realize, like, all of these things affect our hormones. Like, if I'm feeding myself caffeine, that increases my anxiety, then I go out in the world and my anxieties increases just from natural things, my body's going to start pumping out those hormones in an effort to try and protect me.

when in reality it's like if I stop doing some of those things they're not because your gut absorbs a lot of these hormones and it impacts it. And if you're eating the wrong things it can kind of numb your guts in order to which sends messages to your brain and makes a difference.

Sleep is the foundation for healing. You're going to feel more on edge if you're not sleeping, you are going be more stressed, more reactive and irritable.

If somebody is having trouble with those things, I do encourage them to either we work on creating good habits or seeking support medically on like, okay, let's solve the question for this.

Is this a perimetopause thing? Is it related to that? other hormones, thyroid, something like that, but it all matters. Everything that we do and we interact with impacts us on some level.

That's the whole thing is to address it on a holistic perspective so you're not hyper focusing on one thing because oftentimes we don't know. So to me it's important when you first meet with a therapist also go get your blood work done, get some of that done so that you can like rule out like what else could be there.

Right. Right, because it's rarely just one cause that's causing your issues, right? You can never just boil, oh, this is the one thing and you change that and everything's fixed.

Well, especially with women, our hormones change every month. We can't help it. It's just what happens. So it, it is not as cut and dry as we think of like, Oh, This is this.

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Could you walk us through a typical path you might use with a client who comes in saying, I'm anxious all the time and I don't know why?

What are the early indications or indicators that you look at beyond the surface symptoms? So when somebody first comes in, my goal is to get to know them and to Get to Know their history, right?

Because although they may not understand why now, their past may be a really good indicator as to why they're experiencing this. So my goal is to get to know who they are, kind of what makes them tick.

And then also just to look for like, how have they made it through life to to this point? Because I don't know why I'm anxious, could be a number of things, right?

It could that they're shutting down and that disconnect, you know, they disassociate.

Assessing Anxiety Through Client History

It be, that you they become overwhelmed and when their head is filled with that adrenaline, and they kind get confused and like a little bit scatter brain.

really important to really start with the history and work our way forward. And then also looking at like, okay, how can we make that connection? How do we better understand what's going on?

And what can I do to support you in kind of being comfortable with starting to touch on those uncomfortable emotions and deal with that disassociation or whatever it might be?

Yeah. Yeah, so trauma shows up in many ways. Some obvious, some hidden. How do you define trauma in your practice and how might it manifest differently in women compared to men?

So it's interesting because trauma looks different for everybody. I work in a unique situation where 90% of what I do is big trauma, right? Which I hate to say it like that, but I witnessing a shooting or something like that.

I tend to do things like, but there are also is a whole other side of that of like okay, you know, I do have some things that were big in my childhood that maybe you like wouldn't consider like natural catastrophes or anything like but they are really big.

A trauma is something that impacted you. that holds you back from living the life that you want and that causes you distress, right? And that looks different for everybody, whether it's feeling like humiliated standing in front of a classroom and not knowing an answer to a question and having people laugh at you or, you know, being bullied or feeling made to feel like you were responsible for your family's emotions.

Whatever it is, it can be different. And so my message to people would be like, there is no such thing as something that's too small. If you feel like that thing is bothering you, go get help for it.

Defining Trauma and Its Many Forms

Because it does impact you. You know, when people think about something they've been through, that little thing, it causes self-doubt. It causes you to have like a big inner critic and it grows that feeling, which can then grow your depression and your anxiety and all those things throw off your hormones and make you more susceptible to illness and everything else.

And it's not worth it. So if there's any question of like, is what I was going through traumatic? The answer's probably yes. Come in, get a little touch of it, it may not take that long.

Do a couple of sessions, let's work on it so that you can have your life. Yeah, that's awesome. So brain health and nervous system regulation are so important in both your work and mine.

What are your favorite techniques or tools like therapeutic lifestyle or mindset that you use to help someone reset their nervous and gain resilience?

I would say I do a lot of DBT, which is dialectical behavioral therapy, and it's kind of learning to sit with discomfort, right? Because we have to build what we call in the therapy world a window of tolerance, because it allows you to say, I'm comfortable with being uncomfortable.

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Another great way to do that is with EMDR, which is Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing, the best way the describe it, it's a little bit of meditation and a small exposure therapy.

When you have somebody who's been through a trauma, you're saying, hey, let's take a piece of that trauma. Let's break that down into a peace that's manageable, examine it.

DBT, EMDR, and Building Tolerance

refocus on it, we're going to put it over here and then we'll go on to the next part. And basically what happens is it builds your tolerance for it and it helps you to make sense or at least have compassion on yourself and for your situation of what you went through.

in a way that you can. So the eye movement and desensitization, what it is, is you're kind of connecting your right and your left side of your brain, right?

Your logic and you know, your creative side. You can say like, this part of things happened to me with my timeline, but I'm okay now. And so both of these things are really, really nice to have for people because the EMDR too, there's a part that's kind meditative.

which is important when you've been through trauma and stuff to be able to sit with your thoughts and when your anxious to able sit your thought because it's really hard to do that at first and it takes a lot of work to get to that.

Yeah, yeah, that's great. You mentioned that you treat life changes like burnout and social anxiety. In your experience, how much of what we label as anxiety is actually rooted in unaddressed physical or emotional environmental stressors?

And have you collaborate or recommend collaborating with other health care or functional medicine providers? You know, I think It's very rare that, you know, I think a lot of what, when people come in to see me, it's mostly because of they've had something in your life, a big thing that's kind of ballooned out.

Most of the time, there was a lotta little things happening that led to this big things feeling as big as it is, and sometimes it it. You're going through a divorce and you're a stay-at-home mom and now you have to rebuild your live and your financially gonna be expected to be independent in six years and like, whoa.

You know, but there is a lot to that and it's about recognizing it. Again, going back to the very first thing we talked about is nobody lives in a bubble.

Nobody's situation is in bubble, right? Family dynamics play a huge part in our emotional wellness, you know? Environmental, if you've had toxic mold, which I know you treat, But my people who have had They are completely different, you know, and they feel judged by other people You know a lot of people were living very successful lives

had a lots of energy, they were teachers, investors, fitness fanatics and then they get this toxic mold and all of a sudden it's like, how come my memory is not what it used to be?

How come I can't calm down? I'm always moving, I have no energy You know, you see their family dynamics start to change because they've changed and it's a lot on a single person to have to go through that.

So you really do have look at the big picture of like, why are we here? What has been going on in your environment and in you're home and understanding the relationships and to be able to really partner with that person and help.

Yeah, yeah. So in your work with women, how do issues like hormonal fluctuations, perimenopause, postpartum, menstrual cycle, intersect with anxiety and trauma?

Environmental Stressors and Functional Medicine Collaboration

And what practical steps do you suggest for listeners to begin addressing that connection? All of those things matter. So like for women, if you are feeling like your emotions are adequate, so like at the very beginning, just your regular menstrual cycle, you know, If you have like PMDD, which is, I think it's like PMS, but on steroids, hope I'm remembering that accurate, right?

Now that I am on the spot, who knows? I can't remember. you'll notice that all of a sudden, like about maybe 10 days before your period, it's like, OK, spike, my anxiety is super high.

And so it was like well, I can teach you all the calming mechanisms. We can talk about all your fears, but every month it could be different because it is going to be related to that moment when your hormones drop or increase or whatever it, and that's there.

So it important to kind of track those things because then that is when you need to go to the doctor and say, hey, You know, I've noticed, this is always like day 10 for me on that follicular thing.

This is where I'm at. And then it becomes a conversation of, you know what's the best way to treat this? Because if once you get on like, at that point, some people will be like okay, it's birth control or it changing your, whatever it is.

It's like you do that and your anxiety goes away. Yeah. That's that. And same thing with women who've had babies. It's like, okay, all of a sudden your hormones are going a little haywire.

You have your whole life changes in that moment when you're responsible for that little one. So there is some anxiety. There is natural stuff that goes around that and we can work on that But when it's persistent and you're like, I am putting in the work, but I'm exhausted and I've showing up and doing all the things and it is not working.

It's like okay, well let's talk to a doctor because now we know that it something that's about the body changes and hormones. So I think it really becomes a partnership in order to treat all of those things.

And then perimetapause, it's like all the sudden you're not sleeping and you are having hot flashes and do you don't know when your time of the month is coming.

I always refer to doctors on that one because just to be sure that it is peri-metapaus, because at that point in our lives it could be, you know, thyroid.

It could something else. to a professional who can look at the whole picture because our emotions are directly tied to our hormones because the hormones are what give us our emotion, whether it's oxytocin, adrenaline, dopamine, serotonin.

All of those things, they're all hormone related and it is all related to the brain. So it like you have to have that understanding. You have somebody who is willing to help you manage that.

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Many of my patients are very focused on detox, environmental exposures, and mold illness and they wonder, could this be contributing to my brain fog or anxiety?

And from a clinical therapy perspective, how do you help someone bring together both the external environmental aspects and the internal emotional ones without overwhelming them?

Hormones, Life Stages, and Anxiety in Women

Yeah, you know, I've worked with three people who are really battling toxic mold and, going through that process of, how do I start my life over and how to I function without feeling like, oh my gosh, there could be danger.

You know working in every bathroom corner and every closet has like a moisture thing or whatever it's about breaking it into pieces right and so to me it about shattering the traumatic event because what we want to do is we wanna take it and we break into small pieces.

and kind of figure out, okay, what about this part of it is it that's triggering for you? What about, this, part, of, it, is really creating fear, right?

And then establishing coping mechanisms, you know, like a little, maybe a, little CBT, therapy in there that it's like, OK, how can I reframe this? How can, I re-look at this in a more tolerable way so that I can make sense of.

A lot of therapy is learning to tolerate and make, sense and, find an acceptance for, what you've gone through. Yeah. So we're learning a lot about how inflammation affects mood, anxiety, and cognition.

In your practice, do you see emotional breakthroughs when clients also start addressing physical inflammation through nutrition, sleep, or detox? You know, I have one person I met with this week who it's been his mission to truly like, they're very holistic.

You should take a big stand with that. So they've done a really good job of being a custodian to their body. Like, okay, not putting in processed foods.

I'm not doing this. At the end of the day, you know baths, making sure that my medicine isn't going to be holding me back, for them, they lost some weight, which helped reduce their inflammation and stuff.

And they've seen their decrease in their anxiety as they done that. Because, and I really think, you know, when they talk about it, they'll say like, now that my inflammation is under control, I'm feeling more at peace.

I am feeling like I can be more of myself. It has more energy. all those things that connect intonation. Yeah, I think that's really important. And one of these often overlooked kind of aspects of anxiety is that, you know, we need to address the inflammation that is there because maybe if they have a super inflamed gut, that will not be good for your mood.

You're not going to be able to make these neurotransmitters that you need for calmness and everything else. I talk a lot about the autonomic nervous system with my patients.

and how trauma can keep people stuck in that fight or flight kind of mode. How do you help clients reestablish a sense of safety in their bodies? And what have you found most effective for nervous system regulation?

So that's a big question, right? Because establishing, so when you have somebody, like let's say somebody's diagnosed with PTSD, a lot of times, and that it's like a severe, you know, trauma, kind of the worst of, the trauma thing.

And I always hope it can go into recognition. It's not, this is not who you are forever. But it really starts at the beginning, when somebody comes in to get treated for PTSD.

Mold, Inflammation, and Emotional Health

We don't talk about the drama first. Because it's too much. You have to start with that person. They have restart building trust with themselves, right?

Because when you go through this big traumatic experience, what happens is your brain is like, let's say you're in a car wreck. And you were driving to work and you got in this carwreck and your I was relaxing, right, I just was thinking we were safe, you know, everything was fine, we are going to work, but I, was wrong.

If I would have been paying more attention, maybe I could have prevented this. I'd have slowed down five seconds so that car wouldn't have hit me. And so your brain kind of goes into this mode of like, okay, experiences this trauma, like I betrayed you, That's not going to happen again, not on my watch.

So now I'm going double down and you better believe we're always going be on the ball. What happens is your brain starts scanning constantly for danger.

And you are pumping then at that point, you're pumping that cortisol, that adrenaline, all of that stuff into your body all the times because even when you don't need it, because your brains like, I have to anticipate, a have been ready because I don' want this bad thing to happening again.

And you lose that, it kind of makes you think like as it's doing that in order to protect you, your brain is sending messages, right? You're not safe.

You handle this. This isn't the, you have a potential for danger and then you start looking for it. And then what happens is anytime you see danger, and you somebody else in a car wreck, You see somebody run a red light, It reinforces that thought.

Well, what that does is it decreases your self-esteem. And then as you kind of start that, that process keeps going in this like winding tornado and it works its ways down.

So you have way less self esteem. Then you realize like, I can't trust anybody. I got hooligans, yagoo's out there like running red lights. My friend was going to pick me up and then she didn't show up.

How I failed myself, how I couldn't even get myself out of this accident and its taking longer to shield than I thought.

Rebuilding Safety and Trust After Trauma

And so you have a lot of betrayal there. So number one, you to reestablish trust with yourself. Restart working on that self-esteem. looking at what is it that's consistent in my life, how can I build trust with the world, building those coping mechanisms and then moving forward to, okay, now that these things are set and I'm feeling a little bit more stable in life.

Then, OK, let's deal with this traumatic event. Let's do with, you know, the memories and the reactions of the stuff. But it starts way back. Yeah, nice.

So in functional medicine, we always ask why, like what's driving this symptom? How do you bring the same curiosity into therapy when uncovering deeper roots behind anxiety or trauma responses?

I think that's, how you function is exactly how I function, right? We have to understand the why, we have understand to the core fear, if you're somebody who has a history of childhood trauma, is it that I'm not safe that is creating the fear or is is something like I don't matter.

I'm not value. Yeah. Or is it something that, you know, I am not good enough? I do not deserve better. Something's wrong with me. And so as you're talking to people, what they're coming in for, it's about recognizing that that's the first