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's not possible 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 don't 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, you know, your anxiety had less of an impact and you notice it less and less.

And then it starts to function in a functional way rather than working at every hour on the hour, trying to protect you, trying to 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.

Why Alicia Specializes in Trauma Work

Hello and welcome to the Functional Edge podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Julia Ward, medical director and founder of Balance Body Functional Medicine. In this episode, I'm speaking with licensed therapist Alicia Anderson about the deep connection between trauma, anxiety, and whole body health.

We discussed 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's worked out.

I started out, I guess a lot of my work has kind of always been that way. I was in hospitals. I've worked with people with substance abuse addiction. And I guess what really pushed me into that niche was being in hospitals, offering support to people who had been through these horrible experiences and then working with people who were 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 of just kind of gravitated towards that field.

And I think I really enjoy working with 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 can hear this with you. And you can be yourself with me in a way that they don't get in a lot of other places.

Holistic Factors Behind Anxiety

And I think that's very like sacred to me. And I'm really happy that I have the opportunity to share that 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 work 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 and that's kind of the one of the main kind of style differences between like the licensed marriage therapist and LPC and an LCSW is we have 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, like, you know, what is your space?

Is your space, you know, 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 body?

Because your food makes a difference, you know, if you're filling your body with, you know, energy drinks, sodas and sugars, all of those things are gonna impact your anxiety.

And if you have trauma, you know, it's gonna increase your fear, it's gonna increase your sensitivity to the world, then it's gonna make it really difficult to function in the world.

And when you have those things that kind of egg on what you have on as symptoms, they become worse and worse and they grow. And so by kind of narrowing down, we realize like all these seasons affect our hormones.

Like if I'm feeding myself caffeine and that increases my anxiety, and then I go out in the world and my anxiety 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 those hormones and it impacts it and if you're eating the wrong things it can kind of numb your gut in order to which sends messages to your brain and it makes a difference.

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

And so it is one of like, if somebody is having trouble with those things, I do encourage them to either we work on creating good habits or, you know, seeking support like medically on like, okay, let's solve the question for this.

Is this a perimetopause thing? Right? Like, is it related to that? Is it related to, you know, 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 you 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.

Assessing Anxiety Through History and Symptoms

Right, right. Because it's rarely just one cause that's causing your issues, right? You can never just boil it. 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's 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?

Like, 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 get to this point? Because I don't know why I'm anxious could be a number of things, right?

It could be that they're shutting down and that they disconnect, you know, they disassociate. It could be, you know, that they become overwhelmed. And when their blood is, or when their head is filled with that adrenaline, they kind of like get confused and like a little bit scatter brain.

It's 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.

Defining Trauma and Its Many Forms

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.

Yeah. 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 do a lot of like oil-filled accidents and you know, rape or witnessing a shooting or something like that.

I tend to do things like that, but there are also as a whole another side of that of like, okay, I do have some things that were big in my childhood that maybe you wouldn't consider like natural catastrophes or something like that, 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. And that looks different for everybody, whether it's feeling humiliated standing in front of a classroom and not knowing an answer to a question and having people laugh at you or 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 because it does impact you.

You know, when people think about something that 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. And, you know, come in, get a little touch up.

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 system and gain resilience?

DBT and EMDR for Nervous System Regulation

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, right?

Because it allows you to kind of say, like, I'm comfortable with being uncomfortable. It's not possible to make your anxiety go away. It's not possible 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.

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

Another great way to do that is with EMDR, which is eye movement desensitization reprocessing, which the best way to describe it, it's a little bit of meditation and a little bit of like a small exposure therapy, right?

And so when you have somebody who's been through a trauma, you're kind of saying, hey, let's take a piece of that trauma, let's break that down into a piece that's manageable, examine it, 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 your, you know, creative side. So 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 of it that's kind of meditative.

which is important when you've been through trauma and stuff to be able to sit with your thoughts and when you're anxious to be able to sit with your thoughts because it's really hard to do that at first and it's 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?

Environmental Stress, Mold, and Life Changes

And have you collaborate or recommend collaborating with other healthcare 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 lot of little things happening that led to this big thing feeling as big as it. is you know and sometimes it is you know you're going through a divorce and you're you know a stay-at-home mom and now you have to rebuild your life and you're financially going to be expected to be independent in six years and like whoa you know but there there is a lot to that and it's about recognizing it's again going back to that very first thing we talked about is nobody lives in a bubble Nobody's situation is in a 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 toxic mold, they feel like 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 lot of energy, you know, they were teachers, they were investors, they were, you know, fitness fanatics, and then they get this toxic mold, and then all of a sudden it's like, how come my memory's not what it used to be?

How come I can't calm down? I'm always moving. How come I have no energy? And then… 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 to look at the big picture of like, why are we here? What has been going on in your environment and in your 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?

And what practical steps do you suggest for listeners to begin addressing that connection? All of those things matter.

Hormones, Perimenopause, and Anxiety

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, you know, like a very, I think it's like PMS, but on steroids.

I hope I'm remembering that accurate, right? Now that I'm on the spot who 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's like, well, I can teach you all of the calming mechanisms. We can talk about all of your fears, but every month it could be different because it's going to be related to that moment when your hormones drop or increase or whatever it is.

And that's there. So it's important to kind of track those things, because then that's 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, you know, at that point, some people will be like, okay, it's birth control or it's changing your whatever it is.

And it's like, okay, 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 some natural stuff that goes around that.

We can work on that. But when it's persistent and you're like, I am putting in the work, but I am exhausted and I'm showing up and I'm doing all the things and it's not working.

It's like, okay, well, let's talk to a doctor because now we know that it's something that's about the body changes on a hormone. So I think it really becomes.

a partnership in order to treat all of those things and then perimetapause it's like all of a sudden you're not sleeping and you are having hot flashes and 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 perimetapause because at that point in our lives it could be you know thyroid it could be something else some ways like you want to go 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's all related to the brain. So it's like, you have to have that understanding. You have to have somebody who's 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?

Environmental Exposures and Emotional Processing

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?

Yeah you know I've worked with three people who are really battling toxic mold and you know going through that process of you know how do I start my life over and how do I function without feeling like oh my gosh there could be danger you know lurking in every bathroom corner and every closet has like a moisture thing or whatever.

It's about breaking it into pieces And so to me, it's about shattering the traumatic event because what we want to do is we want to take it and we break it 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, you know, therapy in there that's like, okay, how can I reframe this?

How can I relook at this in a more tolerable way so that I can make sense of it? A lot of therapy is learning to tolerate and make sense and, you know, find an acceptance for what you've gone through.

Yeah, 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 to take a big stand with that. So they've done a really good job of being a custodian to their body and like, okay, I'm not putting in processed foods.

I'm not doing this. At the end of the day, I'm doing, you know, baths. I'm making sure that my medicine isn't going to be holding me back, you know, for them.

they lost some weight, which helped reduce their inflammation and stuff.

Inflammation, Nutrition, and Emotional Relief

And they've seen their decrease in their anxiety as they've done that. 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'm feeling like I can be more of myself. I have more energy. I feel more comfortable in not only from a confidence, but like truly a level of comfort under their skin, whether or not they want like AT and just like skis and all those things that come into this.

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's there because maybe If they have a super inflamed gut, that's not going to 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 is diagnosed with PTSD, a lot of times, and that's like a severe, you know, trauma, kind of the worst of the trauma thing.

And I always hope it can go on a mission. It's not, you know, this is not who you are forever. But it really starts at the beginning, right?

Rebuilding Safety After Trauma

When somebody comes in to get treated for PTSD, we don't talk about the trauma first. Because it's too much. You have to start with that person. They have to 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 car wreck and your brain is like, oh crap.

I was relaxing, right? I was just thinking we were safe, you know, everything was fine, we were going to work, but I was wrong. If I would have been paying more attention, I could have maybe prevented this.

I would have, you know, braked, I would 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, I experienced this trauma, like, I betrayed you, I failed you.

that's not going to happen again, not on my watch. So now I'm going to double down and you better believe we're always going to be on the ball. So what happens is your brain starts scanning constantly for danger, right?

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 brain's like, I have to anticipate, I have to be ready because I don't want this bad thing to happen 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 good. You have a potential for danger. And then you start looking for it. And then what happens is anytime you see danger, you see 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. And then you realize like, I can't trust anybody. I got hooligans, yahoos out there like running red lights. I got, you know, my friends, she was going to pick me up and then she didn't show up.

And how I failed myself. I couldn't even get myself out of this accident. And it's taking longer to shield than I thought. And so you have a lot of betrayal there.

So number one, you have 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 my life, then, okay, let's deal with this traumatic event.

Let's deal with, you know, the memories and the reactions of the stuff.

Finding the Root Cause in Therapy

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

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