Why You Don't Feel Like Yourself Anymore (What Your Nervous System Has to Do With It) w Jessica Long Transcript

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Introduction to Midlife Stress and Breathwork

Something that I hear from so many of my patients and women who are reaching out to me is that doing everything right, or at least I think so, but I just still don't feel good. I don't feel like myself. And especially when we are entering midlife, maybe entering perry menopause, we just don't know what that thing is that we're missing.

And my guest today, Jessica Long, is breaking down why that might be. And she experienced this herself. And she really broke this open and was able to once again connect with herself and feel like herself again through some really powerful methods. She is a trauma-informed breath work facilitator, a certified menopause coaching specialist, and host of the incredible podcast Midlife Advice. She's been in the fitness world for over 20 years. She really knows her stuff and dialed in so many pieces of her own health and found that there was still something missing.

And that thing ended up being breath work. Or at least breath work was the tool that she was able to use to really reconnect with herself, understand what her body was trying to tell her, and be able to build her capacity again for life. And this is something that I've noticed in again in in the women that I work with that so many of us have so many things on our plate. The kids, the job, the family stuff, just so many things in this time in life. And our body also becomes much more sensitive to stress which I think a lot of women don't realize. And there becomes this breakdown. Our nervous system is just at a loss and not able to keep up. And so using a tool like breath work to be able to get back in touch with our body, use our breath and our body to signal to our brain that we're safe, we're able to basically supercharge everything, build our capacity for stress, build that resilience again in our body. And things in our body that maybe aren't working at its best, our digestion, our hormones, they're able to work better again just by giving our body that safety signal.

So, she offers some really incredible, very actionable tips that I think you're really going to enjoy and find useful and very approachable in my mind where it's not some big overhaul that you have to do. It can be a very simple thing that just is added into your daily life that you can start to create change and feel it pretty immediately. Jessica, thank you so much for being with me today.

>> I'm so happy to be here. It's an honor to be on your show.

Jessica Longu2019s Path from Fitness to Menopause Coaching

Well, to start us off, I'd love for the listener to hear a little bit more about your story and, you know, what brought you into supporting women in midlife through breath work from, you know, coming from Pilates and holistic health and that kind of more that route.

>> It's a long winding road like most of our stories are, right? I actually started in the corporate world and marketing and I started teaching fitness on the side and then realized, wait a second, I like my side hustle better than my job. And so I decided to open a fitness studio and leave the corporate world. And while I was owning that studio, I started learning more about other aspects of health and wellness too. Like we would partner with nutrition companies and do eating challenges. And I knew once I sold that studio that I wanted to learn more about that. So that's when I became a health coach. And it was very soon after that that I started experiencing my own pmenopause symptoms, which at this time had never heard that word before. So I had no idea what it was. And I was newly postpartum. So, I actually thought it was postpartum hormones. Went to my doctor, a post-menopausal woman, by the way. [laughter] It got totally dismissed by her. She also didn't use the word permenopause, which then triggered me to go back to my health coaching school and take their advanced hormone health course and learn more about what was going on in my own body. And it was so fascinating and just so empowering to understand what was going on that I started teaching pmenopause workshops.

And I started having people knock down my door like, "Will you please teach this to my clients, to my students?" And so I did that for a while. And naturally out of that came the podcast where I just wanted a bigger forum to be sharing this type of information and all the things we talk about. And you know, as as you know, I'm I've been a fitness instructor for almost 20 years. I'm a health coach. I've got my physical fitness dialed. I've got my nutrition dialed. I dialed my sleep. What more could I possibly do? Why do I still not feel like myself? Why do I still feel shitty a lot of the time? And I thought I had good stress management habits in place, but it turns out I didn't. I was doing talk therapy, which is wonderful, but it's not enough. And that's when I went out seeking something else. I knew that was the one pillar that they teach us about in health coaching school that I really wasn't nailing. And so, I started doing breath work. And mind you, I'm coming from a history of trying to do meditation so many times and enjoying the the result, but having a really hard time creating the habit. So, I was so skeptical. But breath work worked for me because it gave my body something to do.

It gave my mind something to focus on. And I stuck with it and completely saw a change in myself. Like once I was regularly practicing this, I noticed that I wasn't saying anymore, "Oh my god, I don't feel like myself." I wasn't having overreactions to small triggers.

I was staying much more even, more regulated. And I just felt more like myself and more proud of how I was handling myself. And so that's the winding road that brought me here. And I am not one to gatekeep. Like I want everyone to understand how simple this is and how much better it can make you feel.

>> Wow. Well, I think so many of the listeners right now are just thinking, "Oh my god, that's me." you know, doing everything right, trying to eat all the protein and doing the weightlifting and all those things and just still feeling that missing piece of still not feeling great. So, so I feel like already that's so helpful, I'm sure, for them to hear their own story in your experience. And I'd love to hear from your experience because I mean this is something that I hear from my patients a lot of time as well. Like I just don't feel like myself and and from my standpoint, we're looking at the physical things also. we you know often see something there especially if they haven't done anything yet but from your experience after you had done all those things and really dialed in those other pieces in retrospect do you have any understanding behind the why that was the missing piece for you yeah and I feel like this is not part of the conversation a lot and to your point looking at all the physical things is so important so please do that and I did that and you got to get those dialed too cuz sometimes it can be something like that that you can fix pretty quickly and feel great. But if you're like me and you feel like you've done all the things and you're like what else could I possibly do? There's this concept of introsception that I think isn't discussed too often and neither is nervous system regulation which is hugely important to everyone but particularly midlife women who have even a harder time regulating cortisol when estrogen and progesterone plummet. as you well know.

Why Midlife Women Feel Disconnected from Themselves

So introsception is our ability to sense what is happening in our body and understand our feelings. So our brain is constantly getting messages from our organs, our muscles, our nervous system through our vagus nerve about what is happening in our body. So for example, stomach rumbling. Okay?

Then your body gets that message and interprets it and says hunger. And then you decide what to do with that information. I feel hungry, therefore I'm going to eat. And it can be basic things like that, like hunger or the need to go to the bathroom or you have a sore muscle. But this is also our ability to understand how we feel, right? Am I feeling anxious? Am I feeling depressed? Am I feeling happy?

Am I feeling sad? And get that message soon and respond accordingly. And what happens with so many of us in midlife when life is so busy and noisy and loud and a lot of us just tend to have our focus outward almost all the time. We've got a job, we've got a relationship, we have kids to manage, we have parents sometimes to manage, we have a house to run. All of these external factors that we're constantly taking care of means our focus is external and outward all the time. And then things get really busy and really stressful. And then our estrogen progesterone decline and then the cortisol is even more disregulated.

And then and then and then we don't feel like ourselves because we're not connected to ourselves anymore. It's like that noise gets so loud that you can't even hear your body's own messages anymore until they're screaming.

So you don't sometimes don't even know you're hungry until you're hangry. That would be one physical example. Or sometimes you don't know you're stressed until it's time for bed and you're so wired you can't go to sleep and you're so exhausted and you don't know what's going on. Well, you've been in a chronic state of stress all day, all week, all month, who knows how long. When you quiet that noise and ground yourself in safety, that's when you can hear yourself again. You can tune into your body and actually hear, "Oh, I feel this and I feel it here." and start to process those emotions. And it's that ability to hear yourself that makes you feel like yourself again because then you can make decisions much more easily based on who you are and what's important to you. All of a sudden, saying yes to things that you don't want to say yes to, it becomes really easy to say no and hold the boundary.

That was such a mic drop. Oh my god. So good. I love that it it makes so much sense when you say it that way and I think again no one is thinking that of like I don't feel like myself because I'm not even connected with myself and as you say that I mean even just this week I one of the patients that I followed up with this week she is the classic midlife woman she's done so much for her health but she's in the sandwich generation it's like she is taking care of literally everyone in her family and she's like yeah I have not been doing the best job of even eating and like like she's not checking in with herself. And the one takeaway that I had tried to give her was check in with yourself like every day see what you need. Just ask yourself what do I need?

Where am I at? And I think that's so beautiful the way you described it that we can get those messages from oursel. And it isn't like that's so simple.

That's not complicated to have to do some crazy thing. It's literally just listening to what your body is already telling you like those hunger cues, the tired cues, whatever.

>> That's so powerful. And bring up too how sensitive we are to stress in midlife also because again I think most women don't realize that like oh I've my whole life I've been able to handle this I've been able to handle this I can do it and suddenly as those hormones shift our ability to deal with stress like we're just so much more sensitive to it and we can't hang anymore so >> exactly we're we're more sensitive and there are more external contributing factors right like when you were 25 I'm just going to use a generic example maybe you weren't married yet you didn't have kids yet. You didn't even have the pet yet. There were a lot fewer things to manage and take care of and now things are just way more complicated and you've got the compounding declining hormones on top of that are compounding that. So yeah, and and it is simple. I like that you brought that up. It's very simple, but it doesn't mean it's easy because it's out of our norm. We are not used to slowing down, stopping, paying attention, listening. And a lot of us don't even know how to do that. We don't have the first clue. How do I tune in and listen to my body? I don't know how to do that. I don't know when to do that. I don't have time. So, a lot of these objections come up. And I totally get that. And that's why I love breath work so much because your breath is always with you. You always have the ability to slow down and take one deep breath. Sometimes that's all it takes.

sometimes more. But it's so powerful to just take that pause, take the breath, and with practice, you learn how to hear your body again. >> Yeah. I feel like we're also trained to not listen to our body so often. Like just just push through. A lot of us have got the messaging like no pain, no gain, and you know, if you're tired, drink some more coffee, that kind of thing.

And so that's even makes it in my opinion even harder. It's like no, I've just been pushing through this whole time. Now I have to actually listen. How do I even do that? So, >> well, exactly. Pushing through got us to where we are. And we're in a good place.

We are career women. We have the marriage, the kids, the house, whatever. All the things we always said we wanted. So, thank you. Identity, the hustle identity that got me here.

Breathwork as a Simple Tool for Nervous System Regulation

But here's the thing, that identity doesn't take you to your next level from here. You have to make that shift if you want to feel like yourself and feel good as you move into that next step.

with that where maybe where is that first step that a woman could take when she's like I have no idea where to

start. >> You mentioned one thing that I love maybe just like taking a deep breath.

>> Are there things also that you would kind of like guide people through or like first steps? >> I mean I love breath work right and it's because you can do it anywhere. You can do it in your car after drop off. You can do it in your office right before or after a tough meeting. Anywhere. Like literally anywhere. You can do it while you're waiting in line at the grocery store or you're getting frustrated or you're on the other end of a frustrating phone call. Like it it really could happen anywhere. You're in control. Um and the we talked about the Vegas nerve before about that's how our brain and body communicate with each other. So it's birectional communication superighway. 80% of that communication goes from body to brain, not brain to body. We all walk around thinking our brain is in charge, but it's not. And if you actually omit the body part of it, you're omitting 80% of what's actually going on. So tuning into your breath, changing your breath, let's just give one example of extending your exhale longer than your inhale. That's one way your body communicates via the vagus nerve to your brain. I am safe and therefore I don't need excess cortisol right now. like you can tamper that down and once that gets regulated, everything starts feeling better. So, it's this tool that you can use to communicate to your brain safety and that's when your brain says, "Oh, okay. Well, then we can regulate this hormone and this hormone and we can calm this function down. We can turn digestion back on." All the wonderful things that happen when your body feels safe.

>> Yeah. And I feel like again that's so much more approachable in my mind. I think for a lot of people especially who are high achieving busy women that you don't have to just quiet your mind and like have it be empty. I think there's a big misconception with meditation for example you have to have an empty mind.

People are like what? Yeah. >> How am I supposed to do that? Like my my brain is always on. And so I love that that we're actually using the body to message the brain. Hey chill out it's okay. And have that signal of safety.

And it's so much more easy for us to do because we're actually doing something rather than just all of a sudden not doing anything. >> Exactly. We give your body something to do, your brain something to focus on.

And we never say I never say turn your brain off or try to calm all of your thoughts. It's more about where are you putting your focus and attention. And it's an opportunity to turn that focus from outward to inward to get all these wonderful benefits that you get from being tuned in to your intuition and inner and you mentioned in your experience you were doing the talk therapy and another one you know a lot of people talk about mindset that are also you know these big things and like you just need to change your mindset but why in your opinion does that not work or not work completely?

in this arena. >> It's a piece of the puzzle and I loved talk therapy. I'm going to do it again at some point. I think it's so helpful and wonderful. So, don't give that up.

But it's one piece. And so it goes back to what I said before, which is if 80% of this communication from between your brain and your body is starting with your body and if you're just ignoring your body and trying to fix your thoughts all the time, you're [clears throat] missing a huge piece of the puzzle. And the wonderful thing too is if you adopt a body first approach, breath work being my favorite one, then you actually can experience much better results from your talk therapy. your mindset coaching work because your body's coming on board too. So it's it's not that it doesn't work, but it's one tool and it needs a complimentary body first tool for you to reap the best benefits.

And I I think especially when someone is in that like a lot of people are stuck in fight or flight, their nervous system is so disregulated that talking through things like you said, it's not enough to create that shift for a lot of people and create that safety like some element of safety.

I'm sure when we're talking through things and people aren't running away when we say the worst things we can think of, whatever. Of course, that gives us some feedback of safety. But I think yeah, getting into the body and telling the body that it's safe is such an important element.

>> Yeah. And and I'll give a personal example too, through years of talk therapy, I kept hearing over and over, maybe you can relate, you need to work on acceptance. And like you need just need to accept. And I'm like, I can't

do how. And I would I just remember asking her over and over how how how do I do that? How do I do that? And the tools she was giving me just were not computing. And it's because I was harboring resentment in my body and I can't accept until I can release that.

And my breath work practice has helped me move some of that. I am not there yet by the way.

Why Talk Therapy and Mindset Work Arenu2019t Always Enough

Like I will be a constant work in progress on this. But I've seen more movement in that space and gotten so much closer to acceptance that feels really good than I ever did through talk therapy just through my practice of breath work. So it's in that case it can be complimentary too cuz like maybe if I was only doing the breath work I wouldn't know that acceptance is what I was working on but because I've gotten that input from my therapist work on acceptance then that's something I can work on through my breath work session.

So they really complement each other nicely. >> Yeah, that's beautiful. And I've heard that from other people too where Yeah. the well in the conversations where if your sematic body can feel calm, then you can also go into a therapy session and approach things from a calmer place and maybe get a little bit more clarity on what you're working on and so on and so forth. They like you said, they can just complement each other so well and and probably be able to push things forward. So I think a lot of people who do talk therapy like they get a lot of benefit but some people start feeling stuck >> about the same thing over and over again.

>> Yeah. heard that from people or even my husband hopefully doesn't mind talking to me talking about this but like gratitude was one thing he was suggesting and he's like uh like completely stuck on how do we just sit down and feel grateful when his body was in fight or flight and he like was dregulated and he needed to be able to get to that feeling of safety before he could then let his mind think I'm so grateful for this because he was like in survival you can't really be grateful when you're in survival it's very hard >> yeah and you can't you can't really feel much of anything else when your body's just trying to keep you alive. And >> to your point, yeah, absolutely. I'm actually I've talked to several mindset and career coaches in the last couple months who've told me, "Oh, I teach my clients breath work. We breathe in our sessions." And I'm like, "So interesting and good for you because you're going to get so much more benefit from the work that you're teaching them if their body is regulated." So, I feel like it's starting to trickle into the therapy and the coaching worlds a little bit more for that exact reason. Yeah, definitely.

I mean, even my own practice, it's something that late last year, I was really I was feeling this like there's something missing though, like we're doing the things and my patients are coming in sort of like we talked about earlier, they're doing all the right things. There's a missing piece and I just didn't have the tool to give certain people. I would tell them mindfulness, find a practice that works for you. And I'd mentioned breath work, but I hadn't really dove in it dove into it myself yet. And then once I did, I was like, "Oh, okay. Now I fully get it.

Now I understand for myself like how I can show up better even in my sessions with my patients how I can be more, you know, collected and clear and really understanding what they're telling me.

Like it's just it opened up a world for me. And so that's where I'm in the same place where I'm like, okay, we have some clear tools for people. And I have found that starting that early on in our work, all the results that we get from there are even more dramatic and incredible because again, we're we're creating that safety first thing. So then when we do the gut health stuff, it actually sticks and their digestion is actually working again. And when we do the, you know, detoxification and the whatever, it's all just the body's like, "Okay, cool. I can do this. I'm not stuck in survival anymore." So, >> oh my god, I love hearing that. That's such an amazing example of how we are holistic beings, right? We can't just treat the gut. Like, it doesn't work that way. So, that's so powerful to hear. And even another tiny example, like I did a little breath work session right before coming on here. So, breath work isn't just downregulating from a stressed system. It can also motivate you, upregulate you, give you some energy. And I thought, hey, I want to be motivated and I want to be like on Fuego for this interview. So, I did a little session before to like energize myself a little bit. So, it can it can help us in so many different ways. I love it. Yeah.

In my mind, it's like almost not hijacking, but like using the body to to get what you need.

How Breathwork Builds Resilience and Emotional Regulation

And it doesn't have to be something external external which I think is so powerful that they don't we don't need the caffeine only to get you know motivated and energized. We don't need you know alcohol to get us you know calmed down. We can do it from our own body get high on our own supply so to speak. Yeah, I was going to say, you know, one of the derivations of a certain type of breath work was they were actually trying to mimic the benefits of drugs >> in the body without needing the drug and came up with a breath pattern that gave you this natural high. So, exactly.

That's how powerful the breath is. It can help you if you're feeling constantly stressed, get out of that. It can help you feel energized when you're not feeling energized. It can help you sleep when you're having trouble sleeping. It can help you feel a natural high if that's that's what you're feeling like you need that day. But that's how powerful our breath is. And if you think about it, there's all these automatic functions happening in our body all the time, right? Like our heart is beating, what is our blood pressure, the digestion that's happening. And the one piece of that that we really can consciously control is our breath. And it's fundamental to how our body performs. So it makes sense that it's super powerful.

To take it back to again that woman who's done everything right and she's getting into this, you gave some, you know, powerful first steps like just starting to like slow down, breathe.

Maybe as she's doing that, is there sort of a time frame that she'd expect like, okay, I'm gonna do it for this long and I'm gonna feel this sort of way or sort of like so she can check in and know that she's on the right path.

>> Great question. And I think it depends on what your goals are. So, for example, like I have this free session for sleep. It's a 10-minute audio session that you can listen to if you're having trouble sleeping. And with a session like that, it's really common to see benefits after one session, right? Because you actually can fall asleep faster. Is it a panacea?

No. Is it going to work for everything? No. But it's a really wonderful tool to calm your body down. Let your body know it's time for rest. So, in that example, one session can make you feel so much better. If what you are experiencing is this I don't feel like myself sensation, which by the way was me for so long, and you're looking for the ability to feel more like yourself, which is definitely more complicated than I just need to fall asleep right now. Um, a regular practice is what's going to get you there. And everyone's going to be different in when they start seeing the results or even noticing, right?

Sometimes the results are happening, but you don't notice because it just feels like you again. And then you look back and think, "Oh my gosh, I'm me again." And I didn't even really notice when that happened. But I can say for myself within 2 weeks, I knew, "Oh, this is something I'm going to stick with because I'm starting to feel more like me. I can see where this is going." And now that I'm a year into a regular practice, I can tell you that the amount of times that what would have triggered me before to react in a way that I didn't feel good about and then would beat myself up over for days and feel shitty for days about afterwards, the amount of time that's happening now versus before I started this practice is dramatically diminished. I mean it is so noticeable not just to me but the others around me who were on the other sides of those reactions. So that's like one my personal example. Other people say like their anxiety calms way down and they just notice, oh, I'm not having these anxious thoughts all the time or I'm not waking up in the middle of the night with this or I'm not thinking about worst case scenarios around my kids anymore. Like okay, that has finally calmed down. the overwhelm kind of in that same category of where you just start to feel like, oh, oh no, I got this. I got this. And the reason why is breath work helps expand the capacity of your nervous system. And so I like to think of these as bands, right? You've got like a band in the middle where if anything happens in my external world to me here or even my internal world, I'm going to handle it in a way that I feel good about. I'm good. But if something happens below that band or above that band, I'm either going to have a down reggulated nervous system or an upregulated nervous system and that's going to make me respond or react in a way that I don't feel good about. And this regular practice of breath work just starts to expand that band. So all of a sudden things that used to fall in trigger zone don't fall in trigger zone anymore. And I saw that for myself where a few weeks into my breath work practice, a trigger from my kids that would have set me off before I just watched it happen and I thought to myself, "Oh, that would have triggered me. I would have yelled two weeks ago. I

didn't yell. I'm good." Like I this is not my first rodeo. My nervous system knows what to do. I'm good. And that to me changed everything because leading into pmenopause I was a very even kill person. Pmenopause hits and I started having these rage outbursts that were horrible for me for everyone around me.

It would make me cry and feel terrible and breath work has really brought that back in where I just that's what makes me say I feel like myself again when I feel like I'm I can regulate my emotions more. M I love that.

Where to Find Jessica Long and Her Resources

And that's so beautiful just that you describe it like of course maybe like some things you'll feel overnight or you know immediately when you have that but just that a little bit of like being able to see those clues in your life of oh I can handle this. I can handle this. You know I'm not quite so you know in that thin band as you describe it where everything just throws you off. I I love the word resilience and this pairs so nicely with that that you should have more resilience than to handle life cuz like you mentioned during this time in life there's so much stuff and you can't just avoid it. You can't give your kids away and you know go live on an island or something. You need to deal with all those things and so just having the capacity to handle those is like arguably the most incredible gift that we could have just to be able to deal with.

>> Totally. It's life-changing. Beautiful. Well, on that, where can listeners find you? You described your 10-minute sleep audio that we'll definitely should put in the show notes, but give us some more information about where we can reach out to you.

>> Yeah, you can find all my work on my website, belong like we belong together belongwwellness.com. You can find me on my podcast, which is called Midlife Advice. Miranda's been a guest twice, so go listen to her episodes. And you can find me on Instagram at hey Jessica Long.

>> Perfect. Yeah. And your her your podcast is incredible. I love it. I'm also on your email list. I think maybe just from being a guest and then I was like this is so good. It's just like really simple and it's like one that I actually like to read. So yeah. A thank you. I appreciate that.

>> Yeah. Well, thank you so much for being a guest today. It's always so amazing talking with you and I again I think you have given so much value to the listener and I highly recommend they come reach out to you because you are such a gift with this in for women in midlife. You just give so much value. I appreciate it.

>> Thank you so much. Thanks for having me. It was my pleasure to be here.