



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Trauma sensitive mindfulness

Guest: Dr David Treleaven

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[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow

Today I am so happy to be joined by David Treleaven. Welcome, David.

Dr David Treleaven

Thanks, Jaia. Really happy to be with you.

Jaia Bristow

I'm really happy to have you with us today.

So, David is a writer, educator and trauma professional working at the intersection of mindfulness and trauma. He is the author of the acclaimed book *Trauma Sensitive Mindfulness* and founder of the TSM Community.

So, David, let's just start with defining a couple of things. What does mindfulness mean to you?

Dr David Treleaven

Well, we could probably spend the whole time here. When I talk about mindfulness, especially today, I'll be talking about it in a pretty traditional way, meaning our ability to have a form of sustained, present moment attention. Really, our ability to know what's happening when it's happening. The technical term for this in trauma work would be dual awareness. I'm conservative in that way because a lot of people also talk about mindfulness and meditation as related to compassion, which, yes, there's elements of compassion. But for the sake of this conversation, I'd love to keep it with that more traditional definition around sustained present moment attention.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I think that's a great definition. And how is mindfulness connected to trauma?

Dr David Treleaven

Well, the headline of my work is that mindfulness, that skill, that ability to know what's happening when it's happening, that can be very helpful for people that are struggling with trauma and symptoms of traumatic stress. And it can also run people into difficulties. So it's a bit of a double edged sword.

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Basically, it's like asking anyone to pay close, sustained attention to their inner world of the present moment. That's a big deal. And I imagine many people in the super conference have been talking about this. And it's an especially big deal when it comes to traumatic stress, for reasons that we'll probably get into and unpack a little bit.

So the relationship is, it can be a positive one, it can also be a more challenging one. And we can become skilled at knowing how to help people or help ourselves navigate this path.

Jaia Bristow

I'm really glad you brought that in, because I think sometimes people come in and are like, this is perfect and will fix everything. And so I really appreciate the fact that you talk about it as a double edged sword and that it can be really helpful and supportive, but it can also be really challenging. So can you see a little bit more about, well, let's start with the positive sides and how it's helpful.

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah, sure. Well, I'll tell a personal story about how I came here because that'll frame why I got interested. I was someone who had a pretty challenging experience where I was on retreat, and what you just said, where I came to it with a pretty positive frame. Everyone was practicing meditation, that I knew, and they were having really positive experiences. And so I thought, well, then I should be having the same experience. I ended up having really difficult experiences, which open this conversation around trauma.

Let's start with where it helps. Basic headline here is that mindfulness in the empirical literature, we'll talk about enhanced self regulation. So when we meditate, when we practice mindfulness, we'll often have increased body awareness, increased emotion regulation, or also increased regulation around our attention. You might have experienced this, or others, when you're practicing. It's like we have a flashlight, we're more able to be able to direct that flashlight of our attention where we want.

That comes in really handy around trauma, because with traumatic stress, and especially when we're having symptoms of ongoing traumatic stress, which is often known as post traumatic stress, our attention can be grabbed by intrusive thoughts or memories or sensations, or we might feel out of control around our emotions. So mindfulness actually gives people a confidence or strength to be able to work with themselves in more effective ways.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And now let's talk about some of the challenges of working with mindfulness and trauma.

Dr David Treleaven

Yes, this is where I focus most of my attention. I just got curious about 15 years ago and really asked that question. I was running into a lot of people who had had challenging experiences, and I just got curious, why would that be the case? And specifically around trauma. So we could talk about these 12 different ways but the main idea here is that when we're experiencing trauma, we're often experiencing what's known as traumatic stimuli. So that could be intrusive thoughts or memories or flashbacks, or really intense sensations that are often painful and dysregulating.

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So trauma really challenges this idea that time can heal all wounds. So imagine for a moment that you're, I think you're a meditative from a little bit I know of you, but just imagine that you're someone who's coming to a meditation for the first time. You've experienced trauma so you have this dysregulation, you have these painful sensations, it's difficult to simply be with your experience. You go into a meditation hall or you're on Zoom and someone's basically asking you to pay close attention to your experience. Often we start with the breath, as an example.

Now, for many people, that might be helpful but for some people that can lead them directly to focus on that traumatic stimuli that I just mentioned. And the issue here is that if we pay too much attention to the traumatic stimuli, if we hyper focus on that stimuli, we can actually end up tricking ourselves into feeling like the trauma is happening again.

So imagine you're in the meditation hall and you're someone who had a trauma where you were really holding your breath, you're were really scared and there's a lot of terror. So you connect with those sensations that we're connected to the traumatic event. But we can't always distinguish in the moment that that happened in the past. That's the thing with trauma, is replaying over and over again in the present moment. So unless you have some skill to be able to work with this, you can end up just applying basic instructions, coming back to that tension, and you end up overwhelming yourself in the process.

So that's the basic idea here. People end up connecting with their trauma, it's too much too fast, they don't have the tools to work with it, and so they end up either leading meditation or meditation is not helpful. I'm curious, actually, I don't know if it's the first time you're knowing my work, but does that make sense?

Jaia Bristow

It does make sense. It makes a lot of sense. Because a lot of trauma work is towing that fine line between feeling and digesting the trauma without retraumatizing the person. So what you're talking about is how easy it can be for someone who's done a lot of trauma work and not done much meditation mindfulness work, to tune in and suddenly it's all amplified. Suddenly you become aware of things that you might have been repressing. And so it makes a lot of sense.

Dr David Treleaven

It's so great that you said that. I'm so glad that came up around what you said about trauma, that trauma work often is about the skill between, what I'd term, exposure and avoidance, or exposure and resource. So trauma work is not just about helping people be comfortable or trying to avoid actually the difficulty, it's expanding their capacity to be able to be with traumatic stimuli and eventually integrate and heal their experiences.

So that is the skill or the dance of this work. And most of my work is to say to people who are newer to the topic, hey, there's nuance here. We need to train around trauma. And if you're just applying basic meditation instructions that could run you into trouble, so what would we need to know?

So what do we need to know?

[00:08:19] Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. Great question. Well, most of the meditation teachers or people that I meet, the first place we start is, how do we do no harm? How do we ensure that if people are coming to practice, we're not making matters worse for them?

And so I'd say the first thing we can do is simply just have the conversation that we're having. I think even just having simple awareness of the fact that mindfulness is something of a double edged sword, that's in some ways, like 30% 50% of the process, just having that awareness.

And then I'd say what we can do is to become trauma informed or trauma sensitive in our work. And what I mean by that is basically that we are informed about trauma, and that we're sensitive to the needs of people struggling with trauma, in the particular context we're practicing. So there may be people who are watching this who are guiding people as coaches or one to one work, or maybe you're a meditation or a yoga teacher, wherever we are, having a basic awareness and being trauma informed and trauma sensitive is a great place to start.

And I'd say it basically means you can recognize trauma symptoms and you can respond effectively. And that's huge. Just to be able to notice when trauma is happening and then to be able to know what to do. Should we talk about what to do or go ahead?

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. That was what I was about to ask you, especially in the context of meditation, what are some things people can do?

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. So it's quite a journey I'd say. If we take on the responsibility of saying, I'm going to work with trauma or I want to be trauma informed, it's a whole path. But there are some really simple things that we can do. And one example would be giving people choice and agency, or ensuring that we're feeling a choice in our practice.

So let me give you a quick example that was a light bulb moment for me, and it was actually in a trauma sensitive yoga class. I'm using trauma sensitive and trauma informed quite as symbiotic, as overlapping. I was in a trauma sensitive yoga class and they had these tokens at the front. Have you seen these, about the assist? This was totally new for me.

So in yoga there's, I'm not sure if you know, this was new for me, sometimes people, the teachers would give physical assist. They'll come, they'll actually deepen you in your posture. And in a trauma sensitive context being touched in an unsolicited way by a teacher that we may or may not know, that can be evocative. We could say that might not be trauma sensitive because maybe we experienced some form of interpersonal trauma and being touched in an unsolicited way, it's unhelpful.

So I walk into the class and they have these tokens at the front. There are two sided tokens. And on one side it basically said, "I'm open to an assist", and on the other side, "no, thank you". And you place the token at the front of your mat and it was a way to communicate to the teacher whether or not you want to be touched. And I thought this was so smart. As someone who brought a trauma informed lens to yoga, it's empowering the student and at the same time it's empowering the teacher.

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So a lot of my work is around doing this inside of meditation. So should we talk about choice, like how we could bring that in?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah, definitely.

Dr David Treleaven

So one simple example would be about anchors. Do you want to do a short practice? Just do a baby practice here for people?

Jaia Bristow

Let's do it.

Dr David Treleaven

You and I can do it, and then other people can do it.

So typically, as you know, we'll often start with an anchor or object of attention in meditation to strengthen mindfulness, really, to cultivate some mental stability and concentration.

Often the breath is what's chosen as an anchor. It's dynamic, it's helpful, it's traditional in practice. However, for some people struggling with trauma, the breath is not going to be an easy place to focus, based on everything that we've talked about so far.

So let's do a practice. This should be a couple of minutes. And a trauma sensitive practice would give you, or whoever is listening, choice, an agency around the anchors that you're choosing, not to just avoid discomfort, but to actually find an anchor that's going to help you get the most out of practice.

So we can just take the posture that we want to be in for the next minute or two. You can have your eyes open or closed. And we can just take a moment here together to check in, notice where you are inside of this session and conversation. We're going to work with three different anchors. Just a short little practice here.

And the first anchor or object will work with sensations that are not connected to the breath overtly. So that might be the sensations of the feet touching the ground, or the buttocks on the chair, or even the hands on the thighs or generally pressed together. Just taking a moment to connect with an object not overtly connected to the breath. And if you find yourself lost in thought or distracted, just gently bring your attention back to this object.

We'll shift to a second anchor, which is sound, we're hearing. So bringing attention to the sounds in your environment, the general soundscape around you. And for a moment, letting this be your anchor. Sounds come and go but you can be present the experience of hearing as an anchor, a place to rest your attention.

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And then for the third anchor, we're going to work with the breath. So bringing attention to sensations at the nostrils or the rising and falling of the chest or the abdomen, just letting your attention rest here for a few moments. And then finally just noticing, if we were to do a practice for the next ten minutes, a simple meditation, which anchor would you work with? Maybe it's one of these three. Maybe it's something different. But just noticing for you which anchor felt best for you, helped you cultivate that concentration. And then we can shift from that practice.

Go ahead.

Jaia Bristow

I'm curious, you gave the choice between three anchors, which, for me, the sound was really helpful, but choosing one specific sound, because if not, I just got distracted by all the other sounds.

Dr David Treleaven

True.

Jaia Bristow

And then during the 10 minutes, for example, or 20 minutes or however long people sit, do you recommend coming back to the same anchor again and again or switching between the three different anchors?

Dr David Treleaven

That's a great question. So I'd say the main principle in it is that the person...So we have some form of choice inside the practice, that we're not fixated on the breath, for example. I met many people over the years with this work who didn't know that they could shift to sound, for example, that sound worked for you.

But in terms of your question, I'd recommend staying with one anchor for a set period of time, because really, the work is to cultivate that muscle of concentration and attention. And in my own practice, I found that if I started to skip around, it was more that I was bored or I just wanted to try a different anchor, and I wasn't actually dropping into some of the benefits of practice of sticking with an anchor.

So I'd stick with one. But just knowing that you have a choice if you start to feel overwhelmed inside of practice, I think that's usually useful for people.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think that's so important, that sense of choice, of autonomy for people who have experienced trauma. And I really love that example you gave about the yoga teacher and the two coins because consent is so important. And again, it comes back to autonomy and feeling like we have some control over our own body and what's happening to us when it can be so traumatic for people. So thank you for bringing that in. And again, I also really appreciate the fact that you specified that it is good to choose one anchor that works for us. So we have the element of choice and autonomy, but then to stick with it so that we're still practicing mindfulness and not just switching

around and letting our mind jump between different anchors and getting distracted or bored, which defeats the purpose of the meditation practice.

[00:18:34] Dr David Treleaven

Definitely. Just tie it back to 15 minutes ago when you talked about that nuance in trauma work between leaning into discomfort but not overwhelming ourselves and knowing when to lean in and back off. It's really the same thing here, where yes, choice, yes, agency consent, of course, for sure. And at the same time, communicating to people the point of a trauma sensitive mindfulness, at least in my humble opinion, is to actually expose ourselves also to difficulty, to challenge, to strengthen the capacity to be with what might have been overwhelming and too much for our nervous systems at the time.

So it is this constant dance of, when do I lean in? When do I back off? And mindfulness is great for that because we learn moment to moment, whether to do one or the other.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. In my work, I lead workshops on power, privilege, and prejudice, so looking at systemic privilege, and so there's a lot of trauma work in that as well. And I use mindfulness tools, nonviolent communication tools, and lots of others. And one of the things they really distinguish is the difference between uncomfortable and unsafe. So you need some discomfort to be able to process this stuff and evolve. But as soon as it gets too unsafe, that's often when trauma is being triggered, and that's the moment to back off a bit and make sure that we can set boundaries and that we have autonomy.

So again, always giving people lots of choice about what they participate in and what they don't, but encouraging people to challenge themselves and be uncomfortable at times. And it sounds very similar to what you're talking about.

Dr David Treleaven

I love that. And I don't know if you find this in the work, but the moment of backing off can feel really bad, because if we're starting to move towards where the pain or the locked energy is in a system, because it sounds like you're working with larger social systems, the idea of actually slowing down can feel totally counterintuitive. It's like that's why we came here. So I'm curious for you, in the moments that you're saying, "we're starting to feel unsafe, let's slow down", I imagine there might be some people who go, "I've been waiting for this conversation for a long time". It's similar in trauma work where it's like, that's the reason I'm here, and it can feel very counterintuitive to back off. Does that happen in that work?

Jaia Bristow

A little bit. I can't think of a specific example, but definitely moments of guilt might arise or shame which comes up in different ways. But I think it can come up at that moment. Or impatience, or trying to dive too deep. But again, it's often a lot of group work, so it can be quite supportive rather than one on one work.

Dr David Treleaven

It's great. One of the distinctions that I'll make in the trauma sensitive mindfulness work is between being with and working with. That in our lives, at any moment, there's going to be moments where

being with, which is really mindfulness at a core level, in a non judgmental way, simply be with our experience, not try to push it away or pull it close, that is the move that's the medicine. And with trauma, and I guess life more generally, there will be moments where actually working with our experience, that's the move.

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And that can be counterintuitive in a contemplative community, because if you're with a being with group and you say, I think the move is to do some resourcing practice or let's go for a walk or let's have some dyad work, people can go, no, that's just us backing off of what's uncomfortable. So I appreciate what you're saying about learning that balance. And that's one way I talk about it, being with and working with.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I'm so glad you brought that in. I think that's a really good distinction, and I think certain people can lean more towards one or the other, as you say. Mindfulness is more about being with, and sometimes there's some difficulty with working with, and other people get caught up in the working with, and struggle to just be with at times. So that's a great differentiation.

Dr David Treleaven

100%.

Jaia Bristow

Let's talk a little bit about trauma sensitive mindfulness and the current times, the wonderful pandemic, COVID pandemic. And I'm obviously being very sarcastic when I'm saying "wonderful", but can you talk to us a bit about how it can be supportive with that?

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. I launched a program around trauma sensitive mindfulness for practitioners right as COVID was really coming into full. I don't even know how to say it. Right when it was really hitting. And I think it caught us all off guard, about this massive shift and pivot to doing mindfulness and meditation online, for example, and then working with people whose nervous systems were completely jacked for good reasons.

So I'd say it's an important time to be trauma informed or trauma sensitive generally. I think it is in all cases, but especially with COVID. We have people, families and communities who are under so much significant and prolonged distress, over time that can actually end up creating traumatic symptoms or at least nervous system dysregulation.

So my contention with people is, if you're in a room of people it's safe to assume that there'd be a person there or a couple of people who are actively struggling with trauma. And so I think having awareness of different tools that we can bring in, we can talk about a few more if you want, but self regulation tools, inside of the context of meditation can be really useful.

Just a quick thing. One way that I talk about this is something known as the window of tolerance. Basically the idea here from Dan Siegel. We all have a window by which we can most effectively function. And this is a window where we can tolerate our experience. And trauma will tend to push us

out of our window. We become hyper aroused or dissociated and shut down. The pandemic is really pushing on the window of tolerance for people. Meaning, I don't know if you found this, it takes less and less stress and input for us to be dysregulated. And it's hard to be mindful when we're dysregulated. So that's one thing I've seen with the pandemic. I'm curious what you're seeing around where this relates, and especially with the conference.

[00:24:56] Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I love the way you're talking about that because I often talk about trauma in terms of layers. And then the pandemic is quite a big layer, and so it doesn't take many extra layers or much else to trigger trauma responses. But I like the way you're describing it as narrowing the window of tolerance, as it were.

Dr David Treleaven

That's powerful. So you mean layers almost like a weight or something?

Jaia Bristow

Yeah kind of. So if you have one traumatic experience but you have plenty of support and your life is fairly easy in other ways, then it's not going to have the same impact as if you've experienced lots of intergenerational trauma and lots of systemic trauma and lots of personal trauma and then there's the pandemic. And then it all can feel very overwhelming. And then the slightest extra thing, like something can go wrong at work or a relationship breaks down, and there's the sorts of things that previously people might have been able to deal with, but suddenly are really struggling with.

And I'm noticing that in my immediate social circles and personal circles, I'm noticing that with people I'm interviewing for the conference, that people just have a narrower window, as you say, or just a much shorter fuse it feels like as well sometimes, before it just feels overwhelming.

And I have a couple of people who seem to be doing okay in their lives, but a lot of people are really struggling right now. And I think it's extra difficult because until this new variant there was a sense that the pandemic was coming to an end. Whereas the reality was we were still in it but consciously people were trying to move past it and ignoring it. And so I'm constantly reminding the people I'm talking to that we're still in the middle of the pandemic and that that's a thick layer on top of anything else that's going on personally.

Dr David Treleaven

Absolutely. I've been thinking about the image that's been coming up for me is around moss. And so this idea that you're talking about with the layers is really helpful for me. I love that image, and it feels really accurate. In the way that trauma, whether it's systemic, as you're saying, or whether it's a form of acute trauma that we experience, it will tend to limit our inherent resilience. And by resilience, I mean our ability to bounce back from overwhelm, from trauma, from difficulty. I know this is big in literature.

But I think of resilience much like moss, where we get tamped down, there's that pressure, and then we naturally spring back. And you're right, there have been so many layers, so much weight that has really pressed down on our resilience, which is really, in some ways, tied into our window of tolerance, what we can actually be present with. And so with that sustained with those many layers it is a tough time.

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Now inside of that I think mindfulness is still an incredibly useful practice. I don't want people to hear, don't meditate or don't practice if you're experiencing trauma. On the contrary, do practice. We just in this moment, I think this is to answer your question, in the era of COVID, in this particular moment, people might need extra tools in order to get the full benefits out of practice. And that's really what it's up to, is we're just expanding people's toolkit. Which is, I guess, the point of the conference.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. That's 100% the point of this conference. And I love the moss analogy. I think that fits in very well with my layer analogy. So thanks for bringing that in.

So let's talk a bit more about some of the tools that people might want to use.

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. So there's two different buckets inside of trauma sensitive mindfulness work. One is a whole list of different modifications that we can make. So that could be intake forms, lighting in a space, agreements in a space, different modifications to practice. How would people know if they were overwhelmed and needed to change? Like, there's a whole list.

And then on the other side, in the other bucket, it's also how we're being with ourselves, with other people, that embodiment really matters. So I'll say a couple more of the practical list, but then also there's a whole practice about how we show up with deep respect, compassion and curiosity for the lived experiences that people have had. Because actually, the research tells us it makes a big difference the way we are with people when we're talking about trauma. So just to have that caveat, there's also a whole different bucket.

But in terms of practically what we can do, another example would be working skillfully with our attention. Being very nuanced and skillful about where we are actually selectively attending. To give you an example, we just did that practice around three different internal anchors that we could work with. We might also have someone at different times use external anchors where I'm looking out at a tree. And I've worked with a client who said, "I want to practice mindfulness. I'm struggling with trauma. I can't be with (that being with, working with) I can't be with my inner world, but I can be with that tree. It's a place where I can cultivate mindfulness". So great. We start there. We move towards working with an external anchor. And this person worked with an external anchor for 2 or 3 months.

But it's ultimately what's going to help people strengthen their capacity to be with their experience in a moment to moment way. So that's another example of different practices that we can do.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's really helpful. And I'm curious to hear a bit more, maybe around posture as well, because I know that some people really struggle with posture and meditation. And again, it's uncomfortable versus... Sometimes it's good to be with a bit of discomfort but for some people, whether it's because they have health issues or trauma about being forced to sit still and not move, maybe you can say a little bit about that.

[00:31:07] Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. I really appreciate your confidence around trauma, because as we traverse the meditative path, we bump into these places and go, what about this? How would we work with posture, for example? So it's great, we can look at it from all these different angles.

We get back with posture to choose, but to your point we also want to make sure people aren't just moving away from discomfort. There's times where, as you probably experienced in your own practice, and all of us, times where we're just with the discomfort of a painful knee or back and other times where the move is to stick with it. And sometimes we move, sometimes we don't.

The key piece, you nailed it, is around immobility. That there are times where if someone is feeling like they're being forced into a particular posture that relates to, possibly a traumatic event for them, or that they're not in choice to be able to move, that could actually kindle a response that was connected to a past trauma.

Quick example, body scans. So in a lot of meditation programs a body scan is a traditional practice. 15/30 minutes, a very focused scan through the body. Sometimes relaxation happens, sometimes it doesn't, but we're focusing on the body. It's helpful for many people, including people who struggle with trauma. And then there will be people who say, if I am being told that the only move here is just to lie still and I'm being guided in a very direct way to pay attention to the body, that might end up confronting me with sensations or stimuli that I'm not ready to be with.

So does the person, or do we, know that there are options? Are there choices? So as I said in the instruction, it's okay if at some point you need to sit up and you can take a break. That's welcome, it's okay, and then you can come back to practice? So we're building in these layers to let people know there's choice. And while we're encouraging them to still stick with the practice.

Jaia Bristow

And I think one of the things that comes to mind as you are speaking, you talked about the body scan. You said it can be really helpful for some people, including some people with trauma and for others it will be triggering. And I think it's really important, for people listening, to remember that trauma can be very personal. So different people have different triggers. So it's not, just because you have trauma doesn't mean that you're not going to be able to do any of these practices, it doesn't mean that you can't meditate. But as you say, there's this element of choice and figuring out what's right for you as an individual and figuring out what works with your traumas.

Dr David Treleaven

What your naming is, to me, one of the most prized competencies that people who practice mindfulness and meditation end up having, is the ability to respond to the moment, to themselves.

So I'll give you a quick example of someone who said, when they came to practice, they were feeling really out of their body. They would dissociate. They had trouble connecting to their emotions. They were feeling really frustrated with themselves in life, in relationship, and it was related to a painful traumatic experience. And meditation, even though it was scary for them, over time they really cultivated this skill to know what was needed in a moment. Whether that was to do a concentration practice, whether that was to go for a walk and back off. Again, not to just be comfortable, but to actually respond to what was needed in a given moment which was missing from that person's life.

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They were feeling like I'm walking around in a body where I don't know, these signals are all telling me that the threat is happening over and over again. And so for a lot of people, it's reclaiming a sense of agency and choice and self regulation that can be really helpful. So, yes, meditation is great. It's really helpful for people.

Jaia Bristow

And I love what you're saying there about responding in the present moment, because that's what meditation and mindfulness is all about, as you defined very well in the beginning. It's about coming back to the present moment. And so as you're talking about being able to respond to the present moment and know what's needed for oneself and be self aware enough to have that, is such a fantastic tool.

Dr David Treleaven

It is the game changing ability for people who are struggling with trauma because it gives us, getting back to the original definition, that dual awareness to know that the body might be re-experiencing a trauma but in the present moment.

So a quick example, a client I'm working with who starts to have a flashback, but because they've been practicing meditation and mindfulness, they can actually go, I'm in this moment experiencing a reminder of the trauma. I'm re-experiencing the trauma, but I know I'm here with David, or I know that I'm in this room. And that ability to have that dual awareness, it opens so much possibility for integration and healing. So, yes, it's 100% about the present moment.

Jaia Bristow

So it's feeling it without being identified with it. And that's what you mean, I'm guessing, by the dual awareness.

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. That gave me shivers. Feeling it without being identified, which is really hard to do when we're re-experiencing symptoms related to trauma, is to just let them happen. It's super difficult because it's very scary. I feel like my survival is on the line. Why would I just not identify? I feel like I need to clamp in and contain it. So, yeah, that is the high stakes moment often in trauma recovery.

Jaia Bristow

And that's why having all these tools and resources at one's disposal is so important, so that we can get to that point by knowing that. By making sure we have all the tools at our disposal to feel safe, so that when those feelings come up we're not immediately identified with them, we can be like, okay, I'm in the room with David now, as you said, or I'm here, or I can move or it's okay, I don't have to stay sat still feeling this and remembering this time and reliving this experience of being pinned to the ground. It's like, oh, no, I can get up. I have autonomy. I have a choice. And that's why everything you've spoken about is so important.

[00:37:30] Dr David Treleaven

Thank you. Those are the people I'm often speaking to, the people who kind of white knuckle grip their way through practice and feel like they just need to be with the area. They just need to be with it and be with it. Yes, for sure. And then exactly what you said, there's times where we go to our toolkit, we tighten, we loosen, that can become the thing that ultimately helps us to be with. Which is why we often need to work with trauma therapists. It's someone who's there to help us regulate and they know, ideally, okay this is a moment that I need to lean in or back off, and they have the tools at their disposal.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And that's also why it's so useful for meditation teachers, for example, or yoga teachers to be trauma informed.

And you spoke at the beginning about the importance of recognizing and responding to trauma symptoms. And we talked about responding, but maybe you can say a little bit about, for example a teacher, on how to recognize that.

Dr David Treleaven

Yeah. It's really tricky inside of meditation especially, because say you're a meditation teacher, well, how would I know? Most of the people that I'm teaching, they'll have their eyes closed, maybe I'm interviewing every couple of days if I'm on a retreat. So it is difficult to know. But there are signs that we can actually track for without having to necessarily be trained as a trauma professional.

So the easiest way I found to describe this in a short way is to learn to track for what's known as dysregulated arousal, meaning this regulated nervous system arousal. So our nervous systems have, you could think of it like an accelerator and a brake. So we have the sympathetic nervous system, the accelerator parasympathetic the brake. When we've experienced trauma the brake and the accelerator are often really out of balance. Someone described it to me once, like the brake and the accelerator were both slammed to the floor.

So trauma creates a lot of imbalance and dysregulation in our minds and bodies. And we can start to track this both in ourselves and others. So just intuitively think of, what does it feel like when my accelerator is slammed to the ground? Hypervigilance, I'm sweating, my pupils are dilated, I have an exaggerated startle response, I'm agitated. Know those signs for yourself. And then on the opposite side, if your brake is slammed, what does that feel like? Dissociation, numbness, disorganized cognitive processing.

So we have these different experiences, and trauma will often lead people to cycle through both of these hypervigilance, dysregulation, then on the other side, that numbness. So if you find that you or someone you're working with has the accelerator and the brake slammed down, that might be a flag to have a conversation. It doesn't mean that someone's necessarily experienced trauma, I'm not saying that. But that's the easiest inroad, is starting to look for those signs of dysregulation.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I think that's super helpful.

[00:40:38]

David, I'm loving this conversation, but I'm aware of time so how can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr David Treleaven

Yes, you can go to my website, it's davidtreleaven.com. I'm happy with it. We did a webinar, it's a free webinar, last year. So if anyone wants to go a layer deeper into this and talk about the particular reasons that meditation runs people in trouble, what we can actually do about that, we have a free webinar there so people can keep studying. And there's free resources there as well.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

Dr David Treleaven

Thanks for having me, Jaia.