



THE

FATIGUE

SUPER

CONFERENCE

**Recovery story: Radical responsibility
for the healing journey**

Guest: Alex Howard

Alex: So welcome to the Fatigue Super-conference, and this is going to be a slightly different interview because I am interviewing myself. This is part of ... I think it's going to be the first in our series of recovery stories as part of the conference, and for these stories really what we're doing is taking key themes out of people's recovery stories, and kind of using the recovery story as the way to kind of make some kind of key points around that.

We've recorded as part of the various online projects we've done here at the Optimum Health Clinic, we've created probably 50 or 60 recovery stories now in different places. So it seems more helpful in this context to highlight and kind of outline some specific kind of themes and ideas. So this one will be a little bit different because all the other recovery stories I'm interviewing people, but it seemed a bit odd to have someone else interview me on the conference that I'm leading, so hopefully I'll be able to keep it interesting just really sharing my own healing story.

The key theme that I want to get across in this session really is the concept and the idea of radical responsibility, as we'll come into in my story, really the turning point was the realization that if I wanted the circumstances of my life to be different, then I was going to have to be the one to change things, and that was quite empowering, but if I'm honest it was also quite terrifying. But it was the turning point. It was from that point really that I can say that my healing journey started.

But to back up to before that happens, I first started experiencing symptoms of fatigue that in time was diagnosed as ME chronic fatigue, just before my 16th birthday. At that time I like to think I was a relatively normal, happy teenager. I really lived for three things. I lived for music, I used to play guitar in a not-very-good punk-rock band, I lived for sports, I pretty much spent my childhood playing football, tennis, golf, cricket, I wasn't very good at sport but I loved sports and it was my way of, I guess, being with and connecting with

friends, and at the time that I first got ill I was also in a relationship with the girl that I had fancied for pretty much my entire time at school.

So my life was good, it was a happy time in my life, but I was just completing my, in the UK GCSEs so kind of a set of exam, and one morning basically I woke up and it's almost like if there was an energy supply going into our body, someone had pulled out that energy supply, and I just felt dizzy, I felt fatigued, I felt a little bit confused. I had been out drinking the night before, I was 15-years-old at the time, but as one does, and I'd never really had a hangover before and I thought, "Well this must be what a hangover feels like."

And for the next few days I just felt weird, I felt dizzy, I felt tired, but I kind of tried to push through, and then I ended up pretty much in bed with what was assumed to be a virus or flu, and this went on a lot longer than was expected, and I remember it quite well because it was either the World Cup or the European Championships in 1996, I remember watching lots of football, or soccer, on the television.

And I did improve a little bit, and I started doing a summer job that I had signed up to do, and then I crashed again quite quickly doing that. I then a month or two later started doing my A level ... started doing, I guess you'd call it college in the US, and was kind of okay for a week, and then just completely and utterly crashed, and it was a few months after that that I got the diagnosis of ME or chronic fatigue syndrome.

And I remember at the time being quite scared of what that diagnosis meant. I didn't really know anybody that had chronic fatigue at this point. I did know a teacher at my previous school who seemed to you know, not be an aspirational life, let's say that I wanted to live, she seemed to struggle a lot and suffer quite significantly. I was told, "Look, you know, it might take 6 months but you will make a full recovery you just have to kind of be patient."

So I just kind of resigned myself to the fact that this was going to be my life for a while and I was going to have to adjust to it, and then 6 months passed and to be honest I think I was worse not better at that point, but I was told I needed to take more time, and at this point my grandmother had an interest in food and nutrition, I'd made changes to my diet, as a kid who'd only eaten two vegetables, peas and potatoes, who pretty much would vomit or tend to kind of feel like I was going to be sick in the way that children do when they don't like trying new foods, to anything, even like carrots and tomatoes.

I used to eat tomato ketchup and tomato soup, but not tomatoes, example of the fussy eating children. I say that as a parent of three daughters so ... but basically just time kept passing and I saw a few natural health practitioners and again, nothing really changed as a result of that. Two years after I'd first

started experiencing symptoms I think it's fair to say I was pretty desperate. I was 18-years-old at this point and pretty much my life had passed me by.

I dropped a year at school, I was struggling to go in for a few hours of school a day. I would go through months of being pretty much house-bound, periods of being almost bed-bound. I had constant muscle aches, headaches, obviously severe fatigue and exhaustion, dizziness, and one of the most frustrating symptoms I would feel exhausted all day, and I'd go to bed at night and I wouldn't be able to sleep, and there was this kind of tired but wired state which was immensely frustrating and difficult.

So after a couple of years I was really desperate. It wasn't that I wanted to end my life, I just didn't want to continue living the life that I was, in the way that I was, and I had a conversation with my uncle. My uncle was a little bit like Gandalf in Lord of the Rings, if you remember Lord of the Rings, he wasn't there very often, but when he was he always seems to have just the right words of advice in just the right way, before he would then kind of disappear off into the horizon.

And we basically had this conversation, it was a conversation by telephone, where he asked me a series of questions, and those questions were you know, in some ways, fairly standard kind of coaching questions that one might ask, but they really did change my life, and the questions were, firstly, on a scale of 0 to 10, how badly do you want things to change? And you know, I thought about it, and I was like, I would pretty much do anything to change the situation that I was in.

You know, I wouldn't kill somebody, and I wouldn't chop off a limb, at least not yet, but I would do anything. So I decided that I was a nine-and-a-half out of ten, I wanted to be honest about it because there were a few things I wouldn't do, but pretty much I would do anything to recover. He then asked me to make a list of all the things that I thought I could do that might help me get better, and a list of all the things that I thought made me worse.

So I put the phone down, I quite studiously started writing down this list, and on this list of things that I believe can make me feel better, there were things like learning to meditate, practicing yoga, studying nutrition and going deeper into the foods that I was eating and supplements that I'd started taking, working on my mind and my emotions and my psychology, and I should say at this point if anyone had suggested to me that chronic fatigue or ME was a psychological illness, it's one of the few things that would have given me energy to want to rearrange their face because it was ... to be told something that was so physical was psychological, I found disrespectful to put it politely.

But I did also start to realize at this point that I wasn't exhausted because I was depressed, but I was feeling depressed because I was exhausted, and so learning to shift my mindset could be helpful. So I had this list of things that could help make me better, and then thought about things that could make me feel worse, and I just had one thing on that list and that was life, it just felt like getting up and trying to get through each day was its own source of suffering quite honestly.

So I phoned back with my list and I was quite proud of myself, and we kind of talked through it and how those things might potentially help, and my uncle then asked me, "How many hours a day do you spend doing the things that you yourself believe could make a difference?" And I thought about it, and the answer was almost zero. I was doing almost none of the things that I believed might change my situation.

Now I had all kinds of excuses like, I didn't have much energy, I didn't have time, I didn't have knowledge, I wasn't able to go out and do classes and that kind of thing. But the truth was I had a list of things that I believed could help, and I wasn't doing them. He then asked me, "How many hours a day do you spend watching television?" Now the truth is, because I couldn't do anything else in life, I would spend hours lying on the sofa watching television.

In fact, I would watch pretty much every soap opera that was on TV. This was obviously long before the days of good quality TV shows, and a lot of kind of crappy kind of soap operas, and I was watching 7 hours a day of television. By the time I was 18-years-old I probably had almost a PhD in soap operas, I mean I was just spending hours watching stuff, but I had a good reason, it was like the only thing I felt like I could do.

But his point in response was, "You're spending 7 hours a day watching television, you're spending no time doing the things that you believe could help you, but you say you're on nine-and-a-half out of ten that you want to get better." To say that this conversation and this realization was a turning point I think would be a major understatement. It was a wake-up call of dramatic proportions, partly because it was fueled by how desperate I was with the situation that I was in.

So he then helped me come up with a plan, which included ... and I think it was starting off with half an hour a day of mediation, five minutes a day of very gentle yoga, that literally meant just kind of lying on a mat and kind of doing some breathing and kind of just very gently movements, going deeper understanding nutrition and psychology, I was going to start reading some books on health and healing. That was also an interesting thing because this wasn't really pre-internet, but it was certainly pre mass-use of the internet, it was pre-Amazon, pre-Google, so I don't think I even had a computer, so I

would literally go to the local library and I would find books, and then I would ask them to order books based upon recommendations of books in the back of other books that I'd read.

And then I'd wait like a month for those kind of books to come in, or I'd go into a bookshop and try and order in books. But I started reading, and basically the hours that I spent watching TV got swapped for reading books, and over the next five years I think I read about 500 books on psychology and health and healing and meditation, mindfulness, and it wasn't that I started doing these things and things dramatically improved. In fact, a year later I had made modest improvement to say the least.

In fact I had a massive crash a year later when I did my A-Level exams, and I had another very kind of bleak and dark time. Along the way I saw 30, 40 different practitioners. I pretty much spent my entire student loan ... I managed to have recovered to the point I could go to university, and doing a degree like psychology the great thing was you only had about ... I think in the first year 15 hours a week of lectures, in the third year about 5 hours a week of lectures, so I could spend a lot of time resting.

But I must have seen 30, 40 practitioners. I spent my entire student loaning on supplements and health. I was taking at one point about 70 supplements a day, something I would not recommend anyone necessarily be doing, but my healing path became my life, and it's not that ... you know, I look back and you know, we talk in the Optimum Health Clinic Model, and you'll hear about this through other recovery stories and through other sessions in this conference, we talk about the achiever pattern, and in hindsight knowing what I know now, there's lots of things that I would have done differently, and I absolutely went into an enormous achiever pattern where recovery became my life.

And that was a double-edged sword. It was probably part of the reason why I eventually made a full recovery, we'll come back to that a bit more in a minute, but it was also an enormous amount of stress went into that healing process, which I would say wasn't necessarily so helpful. I went down all kinds of dead-ends in terms of things that I tried, and I think of the things that can be so difficult as a sufferer, is that we go to a particular practitioner, and perhaps we read, in those days it was leaflets and these days websites, and we read the testimonials and they talk about people that they've helped, and initially we start to get excited, like we invest hope that this is going to be the answer for us.

And then each time it turns out it's not the answer it's so devastating in terms of our hope and feeling demoralized, that after I while I noticed I had to work really hard on my own motivation, because it's like I didn't want to be

disappointed again, I didn't want to try something else and discover something else that I believed that was going to be the answer was just another source of disappointment.

And you know, it takes a lot of emotional investment to kind of keep yourself on that track. But what I did start to realize was there were a few things that did seem to help. They weren't dramatic for me, they took time, but meditation and yoga helped getting into a healing state, helped calming down my nervous system, helped getting deeper quality rest and better quality sleep. Working with food and nutrition things like learning to balance my blood sugar by eating in time, more good quality protein, getting more nutrients in through juicing, getting more energy from food seemed to help, certain supplements in terms of working on some of the digestive issues I had.

I went through some difficult detox periods, but ultimately did make a significant difference. So there were lots of pieces to this jigsaw, but clearly for nutrition and what we would now call at the Optimum Health Clinic, you know we recognize the functional medicine approach and there are many functional medicine experts as part of this conference. But that was another part of the jigsaw.

There are people that we work with that have kind of miracle breakthrough experiences, I didn't really have any of those, I just had gradual, steady progress, kind of ups and downs and the highs and lows, but it was a journey and it was a process, but there were ... it was clear that functional medicine nutrition was part of the jigsaw.

As frustrated as I found myself with it, psychology was important. I'd had some quite difficult ... what Niki Gratrix talked about as adverse childhood experiences. I'd had a number of ACEs, my father had left soon after I was born, difficult relationship with my grandmother, a sister that had lots of mental health issues, so there were lots of kind of traumas and difficult experiences that I needed to start to process and understand, and to work through.

So as I put in place these different pieces, I gradually started to see, after 2, 3 years of no progress, if anything, getting worse, a stabilization, and a starting to get better, and I remember towards the end of my first year at university, I was at Swansea University in South Wales here in the UK, and there I lived on campus which was on the beach, and I remember going for walks, kind of a 20, 25 minute slow walk on the beach in the mornings.

And it was like being in heaven, even though I still had symptoms, even though I still clearly had ME chronic fatigue, to be able to be on a beach, in the morning, moving my body and able to do that, was incredible, and I felt

like Rocky sometimes, you remember the Rocky films kind of running up the steps in Philadelphia? But I was just walking on a beach as a kind of 19-year-old man, and you know, whilst my friends at university were off partying and drinking, I was reading books.

I spent my degree doing the minimum I could to get through my academic work, although I did end up doing rather well in terms of my academic achievements, but my real passion was self-development, was health, was healing, and over time I gradually ... as I say, different things helped in different ways, and I gradually got to the point where I eventually made a full recovery, and it wasn't that that conversation I had with my uncle fixed anything, ultimately, what it did though was it changed my attitude.

I went from being a victim of what was happening, to being responsible for finding a way out of it, and it's easy to say ... you know, I had all kinds of excuses as I said, I was too young. I was inexperienced. I didn't have what it ... had it took to do it. You know, looking back now there weren't things like this conference. It was very difficult get access to good information. There weren't recovery stories online.

Ultimately that conversation made me realize that if I wanted to get well, I had to be responsible for it, and I hope that as I tell this story, and I'll tell you a bit more in a minute about what's happened with the Optimum Health Clinic since then, hopefully you can start to realize that this conference is an amazing source of information.

But knowledge is nice, it's action that creates change, and my recommendation is absolutely not that you start trying to put in practice everything you learn in this conference. Nearly always we need to work with practitioners to get support, and certainly here at the Optimum Health Clinic we have some of the best practitioners in the world, and you'll hear ... if you listen to the recovery stories each day, you'll hear some of their recovery stories. In the case-studies you'll see how we work with real-life patients.

But what you can do is use this as a source of information to track what the next steps are going to be for you on your healing path. Whether that's with us at the Optimum Health Clinic, or one of the 40 experts that we have on here, it's not my agenda, my agenda is that you realize that recovery is possible.

So after I recovered I wrote a book about it, Why Me? My Journey From ME to Health and Happiness, you can still get the ebook on Amazon, and I basically set myself up as a practitioner working with a whole range of things, with very little intention of working with people with ME chronic fatigue. I'd just spend 7 years going through the journey, I almost deliberately stayed away from other people with ME chronic fatigue.

And I didn't realize that there were so many other people that were out there, I'd felt incredible isolated, there was no social media back in those days, and my book came out and almost overnight I started being flooded by people that wanted help. In fact in that first year over 5000 people reached out to me asking for consultations, and that was really the birth of the Optimum Health Clinic.

The Optimum Health Clinic's now been going ... that was 16 years ago, the Optimum Health Clinic has in that time worked with thousands and thousands of patients, in fact we have about 1000 people we work with at any one time, in about 40 countries around the world. We have a team of 20 full-time practitioners that all they do is they specialize in fatigue-related conditions, using a functional medicine approach, using a psychology approach, that wisdom is light-years ahead of what I understood on my healing journey, but I guess some of the foundations were born there.

Over six years ago we became a registered charity here in the UK. So 100% of any profits that we generate directly go into supporting research, and he have published research in the British Medical Journal Open, which found statistically significant improvement at three months, using the approach that we used. We're currently setting up a randomized control trial with the University of Surrey here in the UK.

And really our passion is that there is no one answer, there are many answers, and the purpose of this conference is to bring together as many of those different experts that have inspired us, people that we've collaborated with, to provide a kind of ... you know, it's not that we're necessarily endorsing every single point, or every single principle, there's difference of opinion here, but what we wanted to do was give a sounding board to those different experts and those different ideas.

So really you know, kind of in reflection looking back, if I hadn't taken that radical responsibility I'm not sure I would still be alive at this point. Becoming responsible is not always easy, because with responsibility we also then ... we have to take action, we have to be the one that's going to do the work to change things, but this conference is an enormous source of information and I hope if you're new on this journey, it's going to give you a kick-start, if you're a long way down the journey, it's going to give you clarity in terms of the best kind of paths and ways forward.

Recovery from, you know, this broad range of fatigue related conditions absolutely is possible. If you feel overwhelmed going through the conference, I would strongly encourage you to focus on the recovery stories, the case-studies, use the daily meditation and yoga sessions, and yeah, dip into the

stuff that you feel inspired by, and obviously you can buy recordings for ongoing access.

But hopefully that just gives you a bit of a sense of some of my story, and some of what supported me on my journey to recovery.