



THE

FATIGUE

SUPER

CONFERENCE

Recovery story: How meditation supports healing

Guest: Linda Hall

Alex: Welcome to the Fatigue Super Conference and this I think is going to be a really important conversation. I'm talking with Linda Hall who is going to be talking really from a couple different perspectives. Talking from the point of view of somebody who has had various experiences with fatigue, chronic fatigue, over the years, but also as a meditation teacher who has worked with a range of different people and over recent years has had some very popular meditations online and YouTube and different places. But Linda's also been running online meditation groups with us here at the Optimum Health Clinic for I think it must be 12 or 13 years now.

So in some ways this is part of our series of recovery stories or healing journeys as part of this online conference. But also it's an opportunity for us to talk a bit about some of the benefits and some of the ways that mindfulness and meditation practice can support people in their healing paths. Also some of the daily meditations are going to be from Linda as well so you'll also have a chance to do some meditation practice with Linda.

So Linda, firstly, welcome. Very happy to be talking with you.

Linda: Hi Alex and hi everybody. Very pleased to be here.

Alex: Linda, we've known each other quite a long time, the last time that we recorded we did your recovery story I think on Secrets to Recovery back in 2007, and it's always a pleasure talking to you and I'm happy to be sharing your story with the community. So maybe as a starting point, let's just go back to before you first had your own symptoms of fatigue that in time became chronic fatigue. Maybe say a bit about how you were prior to that. I know that you would describe yourself as having been quite a sensitive person but also a bit of a driven perfectionist. So, yeah, let's start there.

Linda: Yes. I can remember myself as always being sensitive. Sensitive in every sense of the word. I'd bliss out very easily, and I'd also tend to get anxious and upset very easily. I always put this down to my premature birth. I

remember my Cranial Osteopath telling me that I was governed by the stress response of my sympathetic nervous system and so that would always be my default mode. I guess you just get on with life as best you know it. I didn't really think I was much different than anybody else but I know that I had some self esteem issues which was probably the reason behind my perfectionist and achiever patterns.

Linda: The years leading up the onset of ME, I had some very challenging situations, personal situations, in my life. A long term relationship broke up, my father became very ill and subsequently died, I moved out of a much loved home I had for many years and had to pay for the mortgage for the first time so I was working too hard. And all of these things came together and I fell ill with chronic bronchitis which didn't go away, it lasted for about four months. My immune system obviously wasn't coping. I was diagnosed with post-viral fatigue. And to cut a long story short, I was eventually, not actually diagnosed, I never received a diagnosis for any, in those days it was really hard to get a diagnosis. I remember I was referred to the psychology department at the hospital and they told me that I had a very sensitive nervous system, if I lived on a desert island I'd be fine. Yeah, exactly, it wasn't much of a help.

Linda: So, as time went by, the post-viral fatigue got worse. I developed systemic candida, really quite severely, and I forget how, because it was some years ago now, but I saw a blood microscopist and, if that's how you pronounce it, and he set about trying to clear my system of the candida. One of the things he did was he suggested that I have my mercury fillings removed because he thought I might be suffering from mercury toxicity. But again in those days I was much less of awareness of how to remove amalgam fillings. Is it amalgam, or-

Alex: Yeah, yeah.

Linda: Yeah. Safely. And I had about 30 removed in the space of about six to eight weeks which flooded my system with the mercury. My immune response couldn't cope with it so I went deeper into ME symptoms. I began to, well I was already suffering from extreme fatigue and I was also suffering from sensory overwhelm, and sore glands and sore throat and all of that sort of thing.

Linda: And I guess I went from one specialist to another for the next six years trying to make sense of what I had, trying to get it clear, the candida kept on coming back. I'd clear it and it would keep on returning. And by chance I was recommended to the Optimum Health Clinic. And it was through coming to you guys that I understood the mind body connection in a way that I hadn't done before with my condition. Although I'd been practicing meditation

for many years, I sort of saw it as something almost outside my day to day life so it would be rescue remedy at the end of the day. Or at any time during the day to make me feel better.

Linda: I didn't see that meditation skills could be used, certainly mindfulness for instance, throughout my day to help me understand how the way I was thinking and the way I was behaving was impacting on my symptoms. In hindsight now, I realize that all those years ago I'd never understood how to manage my sensitive system. It was always way up on the excitement scale, on which is the same as the stress scale because the body doesn't know the difference between stress caused by anxiety and stress by either doing things and getting overexcited or stimulated.

Linda: Over some time there was a sort of dawning of understanding that if I was going to recover, I really needed to be able to, I won't say control because I don't really like that word, but modulate or moderate my nervous system, to bring it down, not just when I was meditating, but again and again throughout my day.

Alex: And I think it's perhaps a good point just to take a sidestep for a second and just ... I think often people can have all kinds of perceptions of what they think meditation is. They can think it's tied to specific religions, or it's a practice of transcendence, or a practice of kind of having a blissed-out kind of mind. So maybe just say a little bit before we kind of continue with the story about how you kind of, the way that you conceptualized meditation and how that's relevant to the mind body relationship you were just touching on.

Linda: Okay. There are a lot of myths about meditation and I would say that there are many different types of meditation that suit different types of people and suit whatever their particular focus is, what they want to get out of meditation. For myself, and it still is, very much a body-focused in this world, in this real world way of managing, helping my body rebalance itself through breathing, through how I organize my attention. I mean, the body is the most extraordinary organism that has a template for balance. If you give it the right opportunity, it will move back of its own accord. The nervous system will come down, out of the fight or flight response into the relaxation response, which is where you want it to be to support the healing process because the relaxation response is the body's natural repair, restore, replenish, relax mode.

Linda: And I think one of the myths that isn't helpful with meditation is that it's all about attaining a blissful state and an empty mind. So a lot of people can start to meditate and be put off because they find their thoughts come in, and yes, that's what the brain is designed to do, and it's what even the most experienced meditators, it's what happens to them. You just learn to,

the trick is to come away from those thoughts and back to the physical, back to your breathing, slowing your breath down, back to being in your body, and it's through being more aware, being more body focused, but being aware from a slightly, or observing from which mindfulness is I guess you would say from the slightly self backwards, that you can notice for instance if you're holding on to your breath, so you can let your breath out. If your shoulders are held high, you can let your shoulders down.

Linda: So for me it's very much about being in my body, noticing what's happening, and allowing my breaths and an attitude of mind, the attitude of mind for me is I just use the word allowing, it's non judgemental, it's allowing a space for this amazing organism of mine to move back towards balance. And that involves, that journey which is a sort of journey you go on as you come to sit down to meditate, it involves the whole of you. So with this mindful way of just noticing what's happening in the moment, you may notice you're being hard on yourself because this is the way that you normally are, and you notice the stress that's causing. So you breathe that out and you become, you soften that being hard on yourself.

Linda: Maybe you notice that your system is organized around being ready and waiting to do and you notice that that's causing you tension, so you breathe that out. So it's a many layer process for me because unfolding awareness and going with the flow and letting this do the rest-

Alex: Absolutely. And it's very practical, it's very, as you say, very body focused, and it's really what you're talking about is helping shift your nervous system as you're saying into a calmer, healing, more restorative state. It's not about, as you said, blissful states of mind, it's not about trying to get somewhere else, it's not about trying to transcend and kind of get away from, it's actually the opposite. It's actually being in body and helping guide one's body into a healing, nourishing state.

Linda: Absolutely. There's a wonderful quote by, I think her name is Mary O'Malley, I may have got that wrong, she's written a book called What's in the Way Is the Way and for me that says everything. You know, the uncomfortable pains, the tension, the stress, the anxiety, if we push it to one side or try and push it out, it's still going to be there and it's just going to build up like steam in a pressure cooker. But if you move towards it with an attitude of allowing and accepting and trust, you'll be able to move through that through your breaths and absolutely.

Alex: So then let's kind of sidestep back into your story. So you've had these various symptoms and in time had had a diagnosis of ME slash chronic fatigue, you'd come to Optimum Health Clinic and we'd kind of you help to

understand more about this mind body relationship and how it was directly relevant to your healing process. What happened from there?

Linda: So alongside, I guess it goes without saying, I was receiving really valuable, essential support, I'd say, from the nutrition department and the psychology department. And so in my own meditation practices, and bearing in mind that I'd always been very sensitive by somebody who would ... With my own meditation practice in the past, I would, I guess you could say I approached it in the same intense manner as I had everything in my life. Full on, intense. I even used to get a bit, sort of you could say, high with it. And I remember one of my mentors, who's a very well respected healer, used to practice something called biofeedback. And she put some sensors around my wrist, around the base of my thumb, to record what was happening with my nervous system whilst I meditated. And also some sensors around my head to gauge my brain waves, I would say, because when you meditate you come down from beta, to alpha, to theta, and so on.

Linda: And she told me that as I meditated, my brain waves were coming nicely down but I was sending my nervous system, or rather the dial that was registering my nervous system, off the scale. I was actually meditating the way that was overstimulating me.

Alex: Interesting, very interesting.

Linda: Absolutely. I didn't actually take any notice of this because I ... And it didn't make any sense. Just like I had been warned by various people that I was likely to have a breakdown in my health, some years before I did, I never took any notice because it was all I was used to, it was the way I used to being. So, coming back to this time when I had more of a greater understanding of the mind body connection, I started meditating in a much softer way, much like I've just described to you where I ... I guess maybe one of the gifts of being sensitive was I was very in touch with what was happening to my system whilst I was meditating.

Linda: So I used to follow the process of what it felt like to relax, what was happening on a physical level, what was happening on an emotional level, and what was happening on a mental level. And then I'd find ways, I'd explore ways in my meditation to reach those states quicker, I mean, not because I wanted to get there fast but to actually if you like. For instance, with relaxation, I noticed that relaxation seemed to me to be about a softening of everything, my muscles softened, the tension inside me softened, it felt like my nervous system softened. The way I was approaching myself, the way I felt about myself, was less hard edged. The way I was engaging with the world around me, if you like, the moments softened.

Linda: So I brought this self concept of softening in and sitting back in because it also felt like my brain, my mind, the inside, felt more comfortable as I sat back from things. So I explored and played with these different ways of meditating and that's how I teach meditation, by the way, with patients in the clinic now because it's an easy way in, I find, for most people to meditate. I think it's worth mentioning that it fascinated me that even after five minutes meditating, my symptoms would abate. My vision would get clearer, my brain fog would lessen, I'd feel more connected to the world around me, more connected to myself. And I thought gosh, if this happens in just five minutes of meditating, my system has a chance of me getting better, there's a chance of me recovering. Something isn't completely broken, in other words.

Alex: And that's a very powerful, immediate piece of feedback, right? That you can use a tool and effectively have that ... I think that's often, be it meditate, be it some of the other techniques that we use on the psychology side, as you know, that there's something which is incredibly empowering for someone to realize that I am not a victim of these things that are happening in my body. It's not necessarily that there's this technique I can use and it's miraculously everything kind of goes away, but you can have an impact and it can be a relationship, a collaboration with one's body and one's symptoms. And I imagine that was very empowering to discover that at that point.

Linda: It was, and it helped me to see, very clearly, was that I could only do this through being in the present moment. And being a driven personality, I was always ahead of myself, always thinking of the next thing to do, I'm also very creative so it created my wanting to be quite greedy, it's always wanting to create something.

Linda: So I think this is a really important thing, again, for patients who are maybe considering learning to meditate that it will help give them an experience of being in the present that is positive. Because so often our experience of being, what we might call being present, when we're ill and we have distressing symptoms, just makes us feel worse because that's what we're focusing on, we're focusing on the distressing symptoms, the pain, the fibromyalgia, or the mind fog, or just the brain going round and round and round and making us feel wired.

Linda: As I said, the body is an amazing organism that will move back towards balance if you allow it and through meditate, people can get an opportunity to really experience being in the moment, as being something that is restful, that makes them feel positive because as we relax, we're producing feel good hormones, rather than stress hormones. It's a wonderful opportunity to notice patterns in thinking that aren't helpful because when you create a space to slow down and calm your mind, you'll notice things or patterns

coming up, you'll notice our critical patterns, anxiety patterns, whatever your thing is.

Linda: And of course noticing it is actually a really good thing, I know you teach in the psychology department because it gives you a choice, you notice the effect that that's having on you, the effect of thinking in that way. Because you're noticing from your observing, mindfully, which is mindfully as I said just to remind those who don't know much about it, it's just a way of observing from slightly having stepped aside. It allows you to recognize that you're doing it to yourself, you're doing those bad feelings to yourself, and like the STOP process, it's much like the STOP process, do you really want to do that? Well it's a good way of breaking old anxiety patterns and behavior patterns.

Alex: And I think one of the reasons why that can be so important is, you were talking about, for example, having symptoms, using your meditation practice and things calming and settling. Often what's driving back up those patterns, which is then reactivating those symptoms, is those patterns you were talking about. And so I often think about it as there's a few stages to this piece of work, that there's being able to calm things enough that symptoms start to switch off, and the systems start to settle, but then it's also dealing with those underlying patterns which are then turning things back on again in the first place.

Linda: Absolutely, and of course the psychology department is so important in helping people process issues that perhaps lie at the root of getting ME in the first place and the symptoms. And I know that meditation really supports that, that self development process because it is empowering, as you say. It also encourages a health relationship with yourself, a healthier relationship with yourself because it's one of the traditions of meditation.

Linda: You learn to value yourself and appreciate and love yourself and in that way you're able to value life and appreciate other people and love other people. And so what you're learning in will support all the other practitioners working, including I have to say, nutrition work because anything that, just like the psychology work, that calms the nervous system will help the body cope with the various protocols, the nutrition protocols.

Alex: So let's then take the next two steps in terms of your recovery, so as you were, in a sense, you were making sense of a tool that you'd already been using, but using in quite a different way. And you were bringing in these different facets in terms of understanding more of the kind of psychological patterns dealing with some of the physical imbalances or weaknesses. How did your healing path evolve from this point?

Linda: Well it wasn't the easiest of ones because I was going through a very rocky relationship, a new relationship, which was the opposite environment that was necessary for my body to heal. That ended and at that point I was able to focus a lot more on my recovery and make a real commitment to it. I began using the meditation, if you like, extracting the meditation techniques as skills, that's life tools to use throughout my day, again and again.

Linda: So a bit like the STOP process, I ground myself, I notice the way I was breathing, I come back to the present, and all of that stuff. Now how did it happen? It was interesting. There came a point where I moved home again, and I decided to take some time off completely to ... Because by this time I'd already begun to become a lot more robust in my body, my symptoms weren't as extreme as they had been, and I was able to do quite a bit. So I decided I'd decorate my house, with a bit of help.

Linda: And after two months of doing this, putting the paint brushes down, I realized that ... Because I hadn't been, well not exactly because but I think it helped, that I'd been focusing on something completely different than watching my health all the time. My body had taken the opportunity, it was like bouncing my boundaries, to get significantly better still. And I realized that I'd made a really good recovery, I still had some gut issues, but I was able to run with my dog, I was able to go out to the cinema again, I was able to go into a supermarket, and be with friends.

Linda: I'd actually, in attending your wonderful psychology training course which was immensely helpful, and that was some years ago. Since then, it's been an interesting journey, as I think it is for some people, perhaps many people who've had ME and made a good recovery. There may still be some issues that, health issues, that still need sort of balancing, managing, and I've been continuing to manage health issues around my gut. And two biochemical disorders that I was more recently diagnosed with has put the final piece of the jigsaw together for me, in why I got ME in the first place, because these two disorders mean that my system generally doesn't have the amount of minerals and vitamins it needs in order to deal with stress and healing. I also am intolerant to histamine, which means that my system is constantly stimulated which causes stress.

Linda: So I've been using my meditation skills and all the stuff from the psych side, that you guys taught me, to manage my condition and I accept that this is how I am, I don't have ME anymore, but I do have some issues that affect my health. So I guess you could say I still have a chronic health condition, but it's something I've learned to accept and manage and I lead a really, really good life. And that was one of the ways that I, you know, it's my mainstay.

Alex: Well I guess that's what I'd think would be great to hear more about, is how mindfulness through meditation practice has supported acceptance, how it's supported a sense of finding joy in your life despite the fact that there are a few edges and boundaries in terms of that?

Linda: You know it's almost got second nature now. As I know you teach at the clinic, when we're looking to change our behavior and thinking patterns, we're literally growing the neural pathways, the new neural pathways to do that. So sometimes, because of the chemical disorders, I do get dips in my mood, what I'll now do is be able to notice that dip and shift my, rather than stay with that feeling of feeling low, I'll shift it on to being aware of something that is ... Without having talked about it. You know, without being news agey about it, just onto something that is positive, that is worthwhile, that gives me sustenance or fulfilled.

Linda: I'll notice when my stress levels, again because of these disorders, are going up a bit I'll read, like reading the road when you're driving your car, I'll notice what's happening. I'll read the signs, the warning signs, maybe I'll feel a little bit tense around my shoulders and little bit tight around my head and little bit intense. So I'll breath out, I'll do some grounding.

Linda: Mindfulness, it's really helped me see that worrying about something, allowing something that's unpleasant to, allowing yourself to dwell on it, serves no use or purpose. The only purpose it serves is to make you feel worse and, for me especially, heading towards, or well in my shall we say late in middle age, life is too short. I certainly might go back to when I was much younger, like most people, I would just run with ways of thinking that made me feel scared or upset, catastrophizing, being really hard on myself, being self critical. I just take that as being the norm, everybody does it I think, until I learned that you don't have to do it. And I think that's the gift of mindfulness, or one of the gifts, it helps you understand that you don't have to think and behave in ways that work against you.

Linda: It's all about where you place your attention. I choose to place my attention on my love of nature, my love of my work, rather the headaches I might get sometimes or the discomfort in my gut.

Alex: I guess there's also a difference between focusing towards, you know, you before this journey really opened up, as opposed to focusing on outcomes and achievements and places you were trying to get to and the person you thought you should be. And the kind of almost inherent frustration that is often created by that because as soon as we do get to one of those places, we tend to just move the goal post and try getting somewhere else anyway. There is

something around your, kind of, inherent satisfaction and joy that comes from authentically being yourself in each moment in the world.

Linda: Yes. Yes, I'm just reflecting as to how much is that's down to my exploring and developing my sense of my own compassion, self compassion, and how much is mindfulness. I sometimes call it compassionate mindfulness because we do live in a world where we tend to be very goal orientated, very hard on ourselves, and, as I said, we normalize it, we don't realize we're doing it and it just creates so much damage.

Linda: So yes, I have learned to accept all of who I am with greater grace and I moderate that tendency to be ahead of myself, to be in the future, because it's only in the present that we can truly be nourished.

Alex: That's right. I often think about it as the difference between having a fast food meal where we feel full but unsatisfied and having a really well cooked homemade, organic, kind of nourishing meal that we feel full but we also feel satiated, we also feel satisfied by it. And I think that's, even when being present might be being present to things which feel difficult or challenging, there's something which is that the power of being connected with what's true which is still inherently nourishing.

Linda: Absolutely. I know it may sound corny to some people and maybe annoying to some people but there really is a gift in a challenge. And, as I often hear from the patients at the clinic who attend my ongoing meditation support groups that I run, they wouldn't have learned so much about themselves, wouldn't have understood how to appreciate themselves and appreciate life if they hadn't had been through the challenging process of coming up against all those challenges that ME, the symptoms of ME created, but also the coming up against and moving through, working through, the root causes, you know, the life issues that they were carrying with them in the present moment. Because I think that's what people forget, that every experience we've had is recorded in here, inside of your memory, and neural pathways.

Linda: And it's impacting on the present moment unless we have some awareness of that, that process, and engage with working through it, softening up and doing some healing. Then we're going to remain stuck in where we are, it's going to be very difficult for us to heal physically.

Alex: I'm mindful of time but just as we wrap up, for somebody that's watching this or listening to this, that thinks, "I've tried meditation and I can't do it." Like I remember, for example, when I first went to meditation class, when I was 18 and I've been ill for a couple of years and I was kind of desperate to try

something that might help. And I remember the teacher describing meditation as being like sitting at a station and your thoughts are like trains and the train comes but you don't get on. Which sounded fine except my station wasn't a local countryside station with two trains an hour, my station was like Clapham Junction with about 20 trains every second and it felt at the time impossible. For people that you talk to that have tried meditation or feel like they can't do it, or they struggle to stick to a practice, what would you say?

Linda: Firstly, don't expect too much of yourself and don't expect too much of meditation. Like learning anything new, it takes a little while but it doesn't have to be difficult, keep it simple. Meditate for five minutes rather than thinking of meditating for 20 minutes and notice what happens, the simplest of things that you notice, maybe as you begin to slow your breath down, because noticing supports experience. So as you notice as you breath out, for instance, that your whole body begins to soften, or that your heart rate beat begins to slow. Then that's positive information for you to take away from that sitting for five minutes. If you notice that as you become aware of the surface beneath your body, you feel perhaps a little bit more secure, then that's something positive. So keep it simple and don't expect too much to begin with.

Alex: Fantastic. Linda, is there anything else that you want to say before we close?

Linda: Just that it's been great to connect with you again, Alex, and to have this opportunity to talk about my journey and to share what's helped me with all the guys out there.

Alex: Brilliant, thank you, Linda. And I know people will be enjoying, I'm not quite sure of the sequence in recording this, but people will be enjoying some of your meditations on the days of the conference as well. Anything you want to say to people about how to get best ... Obviously we haven't yet chosen which meditations on which days, but is there anything, as a kind of general principle, you want to say about how best to approach this?

Linda: I would suggest that you look at the grounding meditations first so that it will help anchor you in the present moment and bring you down into your body, then look at the breathing meditations, and look at the loving kindness meditations. I think there's a meditation on wise witness that will help you just sort of witness things from a whole, compassionate place. And also please do get in touch with me, Linda@theoptimumhealthclinic.com if you're interested in joining one of the telephone meditation courses that are run with you, which are really brilliant.

Alex: Yeah, fantastic and people will find out more about those, but yes emailing you is a good way to do that. And Linda, thank you, it's always a pleasure. Our paths have crossed a few times over the years and I've always appreciated the value that you bring in terms of the groups that you run. And yeah, thank you for your time and great to reconnect and share your story.

Linda: It's been a pleasure, Alex, thank you.