



THE

FATIGUE

SUPER

CONFERENCE

Recovery story: Overcoming the achiever pattern

Guest: Louisa

Alex: Welcome to the Fatigue Super Conference. And for this interview, I'm talking with Louisa about her recovery journey. And this is part of our series of stories where we're using people's recovery journeys really to highlight certain key themes and key areas that can be important to work on as part of the healing journey. And for this conversation, obviously we'll talk about **Louisa's** story, but also we're going to focus on the achiever patterns or the achiever subtype. And this is something which can be important both in terms of what we call predisposing factors. So, some of the various factors that can lead to someone crashing with fatigue or burning out in the first place. And there's a whole number of these different factors. This is just one example of that.

Alex: But this is where, effectively, we're defining ourselves by what we do and what we achieve in the world. This is where we can end up constantly pushing ourselves beyond our capacities and beyond our limits, and that ultimately becomes quite draining and quite depleting for our system.

Alex: So, the achiever type is a factor in terms of predisposing, but it can also be a factor in terms of perpetuating the situation of what's happening. So for example, as energy comes back, we tend to use it to quickly, or we try to push ourselves towards recovery, or we have too many goals along the recovery path. So these are some of the things particularly we're going to explore as part of this. And I think the best way to listen to this is, yes, listen to it as a kind of story and a kind of inspirational journey, but also see if you can track yourself in terms of some of these tendencies, some of some of these patterns.

Alex: So, firstly Louisa, thank you very much for being brave enough to share of your story.

Louisa: That's all right.

Alex: So, should we just start a little bit with just some of the kind of background in terms of before you got sick in the first place, what was your life like then?

Louisa: I was very busy. So I had graduated, and then went straight into working and volunteering over the summer, and then started the Masters. So I was very busy. The Masters was quite stressful. It was just a lot of work, and I didn't have much of a break in terms of from graduating, I kind of rolled into the next thing and to achieving the next thing. And for the Masters, during the week it would be lectures, and then going home and doing homework or course work. And then over the weekends, I would be doing extra reading. And on top of that, I was doing lots of sports because I've always loved that. So, that is where I was just before I crashed.

Alex: And what were you do your Masters in?

Louisa: It was epidemiology, so the study of epidemics.

Alex: Interesting. Interesting.

Louisa: Yeah, it was pretty cool.

Alex: Yeah. And then, the circumstances of you crashing, what ... how did that play out? What happened?

Louisa: So during the Masters, I was very tired, but I just pushed on through. I just didn't think anything of it. I just thought I was tired because nothing like any had ever occurred to me, or it never come up in my family or friends. So, I just pushed on through. And then one day, I just, I got up, and I felt really weird. And walking was like I was walking through mud that was up to my waist, just everything was such hard work. I tried going into uni, and I was on the tube, and I was like, I can't do this.

Louisa: So I went home, fell asleep, slept all day, woke up really hungry, ate and went back to sleep. And, then a few days later, I tried going back to uni, and I think I lasted one day and had to leave early. And then I never went back.

Alex: Okay. And in that kind of early few kind of weeks or month or two of what was happening, what did you think was going on? What was your, either the medical explanation or your interpretation of what was happening?

Louisa: So, before my crash or after?

Alex: So, after your crash.

Louisa: Yeah. I think it was all too weird for me to be worried about anything at the beginning because it, I've just, I just thought I was overtired. I didn't really ... I think because I was so exhausted, all I did was eat and sleep. And then after about a month, I started working at continuing the Masters from home. I had every intention of continuing my studies. And my glands were really up and down, like every day they would come up and then go down like within a few hours. It was very weird.

Louisa: Well I just thought it ... was like some weird flu. And then, about a month after that of trying to keep up with the studies from home, I just realized I couldn't continue. And that's when I started to worry and freak out. But I still ... So I arranged with the university to interrupt my studies and restart the following year. And so, in hindsight that did not help because I had this pressure of being fit and ready to restart my studies in like nine month's time.

Alex: So was that almost a sense of like, right, that's the goal, I have to be recovered by this point?

Louisa: Yes, absolutely. And at first, I thought maybe that could happen, but then as time went by, I really freaked out about it, and it was just like an added layer of stress, like not only was I freaking out about what was happening to my body, I had this freak-out of oh my God, my life has been turned upside down, and I can't keep control of it. I won't be able to restart next year.

Louisa: And for me, by interrupting my studies and restarting a year later, that was already quite a big thing for me just because in my life I was very set on goals, and achieving them, and just moving on to the next one. So that was a big thing for me, anyway. And then when I realized I wouldn't be able to do that, it was really devastating.

Alex: Yeah. And I think it's a classic example of people approach recovery with the same mindset that they approach life, which is part of what may have caused them to get sick in the first place. Right?

Louisa: Yeah.

Alex: That it's like you were someone that was pushing yourself on different levels, and then you end up in this kind of health situation, it's like right, well I need to then, I need to kind of control this and kind of push my way kind of out of it, which is completely-

Louisa: Absolutely, yeah.

Alex:It's just ... doesn't work very well.

Louisa: Yeah.

Alex:Did you get a diagnosis of anything at this point? What was the kind of medical perspective on what was happening?

Louisa: I saw my GP, who has always been very kind. But she said to me, "People just sometimes get this, and then they have it for a year or so, and then they get better," which is actually really unhelpful because when I first heard that, I was like, wow, a whole year of feeling like this, I can't tolerate that. But then, after a year and still not feeling better, I was like, the GP said it would be a year or so, what is happening? It was just really, in all ways, it was really unhelpful.

Alex:And of course, you said it was going to be nine months or a year as well, right?

Louisa: Yeah.

Alex:So you have a few sources of this milestone, yeah?

Louisa: Yeah. And then when I was officially diagnosed, and I was referred to an annual CFS kind of, it was like a meet-up lecture. There were about 15 people who had had the same diagnosis all in one room. And there were two nurses explaining to us the basics of boom and bust. And that, I did not appreciate that at all because the nurses said, "Don't expect to fully recover." And that just wasn't okay. I just, I was not okay with that because where I was then, I was like, I can't live the rest of my life like this. I have to have the hope that I will recover. So that was the diagnosis.

Alex:Right. Not particularly inspirational diagnosis. And you say that-

Louisa: No, it wasn't.

Alex:You say there was a kind of emotional upheaval, like what were some ... When you had set this goal that you are going to recover, and you had this expectation, then at that point that hadn't happened, what were some of the emotions that you felt?

Louisa: At first, complete denial. Like, oh, I'm fine, I'll get that ... fine. And I just wouldn't think about it. I just wouldn't let myself think about it. And then, every now and then I would just have these huge ... like upheaval of grief, and anger and sadness all in one. And it was, yeah, they were huge. But they were quite good because they got it out.

Alex:Yes.

Louisa: You know, they got the emotion out. So yeah, and then, so it was a lot of either denial or torment. And then eventually, by working with the clinic at this stage, I then came to accept-

Alex:How did find Optimum Health Clinic, just ... ?

Louisa: Well my aunt, she read the article by that harpist.

Alex:Oh, by Claire Jones, the former royal harpist.

Louisa: Claire Jones, yeah. Yeah, my aunt read an article about her illness and recovery, and so that's how I heard about the clinic.

Alex:Okay. So you came to Optimum Health Clinic, and you were helped, I guess to realize that there were things you could do proactively in terms of supporting recovery. Yeah, so I dropped you, so just carry on from there.

Louisa: Yeah. So with the clinic, it took me a while to want to work with the emotions because I kind of felt like if I listen to the emotions of, oh, I might not get better by this date, then I would have to accept that I wouldn't get better by that date, and I was ... okay with accepting that. Did that makes sense?

Alex:Yeah, yeah.

Louisa: So it took me a while, but then over the course of several months doing a lot of work with emotions which I had never done in my life before, I came to accept it, and kind of I felt like it wasn't the end of the world that I couldn't restart my studies. So that took the pressure off in terms of wanting to recover by a certain time.

Alex:And how was the balance between needing to kind of be proactive and use certain techniques and do certain things to support recovery with the place of listening to your body and listening to your emotions, the kind of, the doing quality versus the being kind of quality. How was the kind of interrelationship between those?

Louisa: I much preferred to be like the stop process because it's, you can work at it. It's like logical that you can work it out in your brain. You can kind of be in charge of what you're doing. I preferred that at the beginning, but actually, as I did more work with emotions and processing emotions, I came to much prefer the EFT because I think that's just what I really needed because I hadn't ever known how to process emotions for my whole life.

Louisa: So yeah, I started with doing recoveries, so, oh I need to do something today to help my recovery, and that would normally be a stop process. And then eventually, I got to the stage where I realized it's not about doing something to recover, it's about just trusting that it will happen on its own accord if you let it. And to let it happen, you have to just feel what your body's telling you and give it what it needs.

Alex: What was the impact as you were using these various tools and techniques in terms of your actual physical recovery? Like has that impacted upon your energy and your symptoms?

Louisa: I think the first massive step was feeling more peaceful in my mind because I felt so tormented about being out of control with my body just feeling awful and my life just kind of upside down. So I felt a little bit more at peace with it. That was the first step, and that kind of opened up the opportunity to a little bit more in terms of going for a walk when I'm not, making sure I walk for 10 minutes and then recording that and trying to improve it in two week's time. It was, it came from a much more natural place, if that ... Does that make sense?

Alex: Yeah. And it sounds like it was more kind of base energy to work with, so you were having to be less kind of controlled and kind of careful in terms of what you were doing?

Louisa: Yes. Yeah, definitely. I definitely got more energy from processing everything that was going on in my mind and all the emotions. At the same time, I also had to deal with a lot of fear that came with trying to do a little bit more. So if my body felt like it could do something, my brain would kind of be like, wait, last time we tried this we crashed. So it was kind of, yeah, I had to process lots of different layers of stress or things holding me back to try and protect me, but actually to some extent, they were holding me back.

Alex: Yeah, it was a kind of maladaptive stress response. Just to people who are kind of not familiar with that, that what can happen is that when we've done certain activities, and we've done too much too quickly, and that's caused us to crash, that after a while, what can happen is we start to do new things, our whole nervous system kind of activates as a way of trying to protect us from crashing again. But then the actual maladaptive stress response, actually that's what's causing the crash more than the activity, potentially, because it's so depleting and draining to the system.

Alex: Something else I wanted to touch on here as well is that one of the key elements of an achiever pattern is that we're trying to kind of collect or gain self-worth by doing certain things. So kind of at the extreme end of that

equation, someone believes that they need to become financially very successful, or famous, or beautiful, or perfect, whatever it is, because then people will kind of love them. On a more kind of subtle day to day level, it's often pushing ourselves beyond our limits because then we can feel like you really gave something an effort, and we're therefore a kind of good person for kind of doing that.

Alex: There's lots of different, subtle ways that we're trying to kind of gain self-esteem through the achiever and through pushing. And as we stop doing those patterns, often we have to work with those self-worth issues in a more kind of effective, wholesome kind of kind of way. What was your experience of that when you were kind of catching and breaking the achiever pattern, but then kind of supporting your kind of self-esteem in other ways?

Louisa: Yeah, I definitely have that. My whole environment from since I was a child has been achieving is good, being productive is good. So I really struggled with not being able to do anything or say that I've worked towards something or I've achieved something. That was really tough. And I think firstly, just being aware of it, that really helped. And then after becoming aware of it, I kind of got really angry at it, and I started thinking that that whole achiever subtype was really bad.

Louisa: And so, then the next stage was realizing that it's not about being good or bad, it's just about choice. If you can choose to look after your body or choose to switch on the achiever type and do something that you really want to do, that's what it, that's the key. It's about choice.

Louisa: And if your achiever is on overdrive like mine was, you don't actually have a choice because you don't have the choice to look after your body because that's not good enough for the achiever. That's what it would like for me.

Louisa: And I think just through working, working through all of these different layers and becoming aware of them all, I think that self-awareness really helped me just trust that I was a good enough person. And so, I didn't have to prove to others that I was good enough because I had achieved X, Y, Z.

Alex: Well there's always this, there's an interplay between the inner critic and the achiever. So the inner critic is the part of us that's always judging us, and assessing our self-worth, and saying that was rubbish, that was crap, you should have done that better, bah-dee bah-dee bah. And the more we judge ourselves, the worse we feel about ourselves, the more we then feel we need to push and achieve to then feel better about ourselves. The more space we get from the inner critic, the less we're beating up on ourselves, the less then we

feel this need to go off and push ourselves and achieve to gain kind of self-worth and self-esteem through doing that.

Alex: So it sounds like as you were working on the achiever pattern, you were also working on your inner critic, and you were calming and settling that. Then what often happens is we have more natural contacts with our own innate sense of goodness and our own innate sense of self-value and self-worth, which is not dependent upon what we do and what we achieve, but it's just part of kind of who we are in a sense. Is that kind of right? Is that how you experienced this?

Louisa: Yeah, that's definitely how I experienced it, yeah. Absolutely, just having that space to just realize that you are enough, that was really big for me.

Alex: And also, what you described about almost turning on the achiever pattern is also quite common, right? There's when you go, "Oh my God, this has been such a source of suffering and misery in my life. Well this must, therefore, just be bad." You almost you want to exercise the achiever pattern out of your psyche, in a sense.

Louisa: Yes. And I would get annoyed whenever I was around people who evidently had the achiever subtype. I'd find that really annoying and frustrating.

Alex: And I think it's a tricky one, and I think it's quite, it's a little bit like a pendulum, which is kind of too far one way, and it kind of has to find balance, almost has to swing too far the other way. And so, you can almost get these kind of ... I remember in my own self a number of years ago almost being allergic to my achiever qualities and being allergic to other people's achiever qualities.

Alex: So it was almost like, it's a little bit like the kind of newly reformed alcoholic now thinks that anyone that wants to go and have a glass of wine is like the most terrible, awful person or the person that's kind of given up eating meat and now thinks that the whole world is kind of like ... It's very easy to kind of swing in our kind of positions, but actually there's lots of wonderful, great gifts that come from that push and that drive. It just has to be done in a sustainable way.

Alex: Just like the helper pattern, there's lots of wonderful gifts and being a helper, but if you do it in a way which is unsustainable, then it's not really good or helpful for anyone.

Alex:How did the, as you were kind of ... How far are we at this point down your kind of chronic fatigue journey, and what impact was this then having in terms of your overall recovery?

Louisa: It's hard to tell when it will happen because it was so gradual with me, but I would say when I felt really at peace with who I was, and I didn't have this achiever subtype driving me and affecting my symptoms, that was probably going on from two and a half years after starting at the clinic, yeah, because it was gradual with me. Like at first, I just didn't want to deal with it because I was so attached to the achiever. And then as you said, the pendulum swung, and I was so anti the achiever, and it took me a while to get to a place where I realize, okay, this is about choice. Do I choose to achieve something today, or be productive, or push myself a little today, or do I choose to really sit back and listen to my body and see what it's telling me?

Alex:And what else were you doing apart from working on the psychology side and working with the tools there? Were you doing either work with of Optimum Health Clinic on nutrition, or elsewhere, or what else were you doing in supporting your recovery?

Louisa: I did a lot of stuff. I never really stopped looking for what was wrong with me. I knew that psychology was a huge contributor to me being ill, but because I come from a bioscience background, I was just adamant that there was a physical thing wrong, and I really wanted to find it. So I did a lot of blood tests, and I did a lot of nutrition work. So before I got any, before I started the Masters, I'd been to Ghana, and I had a stage of being convinced that I had some tropical disease, and which caused a lot of stress and anxiety. So, yeah, that's why, that's when I did lots of blood tests, which didn't come back with anything.

Louisa: Yeah, so I did nutrition with the clinic and a bit outside the clinic as well. And then now, it's just, I'm just maintaining that kind of good nutrition and supplements with the clinic. It's a bit confusing having two different sources of information, even if they do agree with one another, it's just better to have one source, I think.

Louisa: Yeah. What else? I don't know. I did try ... Oh yeah, I did a lot of craniosacral therapy, and I explored that kind of thing, so like helping my body and a bit of physiotherapy kind of exercises, that kind of thing.

Alex:Yes.

Louisa: Yeah.

Alex: And where ... Well, actually something else I wanted just to touch on a bit is as your energy started to increasingly come back, did you then have a ... What often can happen at that point is people get a resurgence of the achiever. It's almost like they kind of kept it at bay. And it tends to behave differently at different stages of recovery. Like at stage one, people really, kind of the crash, that you have to really just kind of put it to side. And then stage two, there's often quite a lot of work in terms of achievable, kind of come in, and then we kind of can be crashing, and we kind of back off and we kind of learn to keep it at bay. And then at stage three in the reintegration stage, it's almost like we've got more capacity to be able to kind of run away with these patterns. And so people can then find that suddenly the achiever's got a new force again. Was that your experience?

Louisa: Yeah, absolutely.

Alex: Say a bit about that.

Louisa: So, I had the capacity to do a lot, and so I did a lot. And so I went traveling, and when I was traveling, I realized I could do more than I thought I ever could. And so when I got home, I started working, and so I'm working part time, but I was also going to the gym and doing some sort of exercise every day, and I really went to town. And also my diet went out the window because I thought, yeah, I'm finally better, I can live just like all my friends, and I'll eat whatever I want as a kind of reward for getting better.

Louisa: But all three things, so starting work, doing exercise very intensively suddenly, and my diet going out the window, they didn't sustain for very long. So I am ... Yeah, and then, so I had a crash, and I was lucky that it didn't last very long, but it made me realize that I still have to keep my achiever at bay. And I'm still trying to find the balance of when I choose to push myself and when I hold back a little bit.

Louisa: But it was kind of, that mini crash, I mean, as I said, I was lucky it wasn't very long. But I take it as a gift ... It was my body's way of saying, "Remember where we've come from and don't take it for granted." And so I still appreciate where I've come from, and I want to always remember being ill, and respecting my body, and not just driving it just to achieve. So yeah, I'm still trying to find my balance now. It's going okay at the moment.

Alex: I think one of the things with these kinds of patterns is that there's a kind of ... as we evolve when we develop, it also kind of changes and morphs as well. And it's kind of, it's learning how to keep that aspect of ourselves in balance. So, if we're someone that by nature has a strong achiever pattern, or strong helper pattern, or anxiety pattern, or whatever, that may well always be

something we have to work with and something we have to work with balancing. And it's kind of we figure it out at one stage, then we kind of progress to the next stage, and we almost have to re-figure out how to be in relationship with it at that stage. Then we get that right, and then we kind of go to through the next stage again.

Alex: So there's a kind of ... Recovery has its own challenges, that it's like as we recover, the parameters also change, and then we have to figure out how to be kind of in relationship with that.

Alex: I'm curious as to, though, as you were ... as you went from being so limited in terms of what you could do, to then having increasing more energy and being able to do things, what was it like when you were kind of off traveling, and you were suddenly discovering that you had energy? What were some of the things that you experienced that where we're kind of milestone moments that felt great in that part of the process?

Louisa: It was such a weird feeling to be able to do things that I never thought I could do. Well I always had the hope that I was going to be able to do everything I did, but not so quickly. So, I went on a two hour hike when I was traveling, and I was on my own traveling, so I was lugging around a suitcase every three days to go to a different city or get a train somewhere. So I was really busy, and I wasn't doing any less than I would have wanted to, and I felt ecstatic. It was just the best feeling ever. And yeah, I mean, that's when I started being a little bit arrogant, being like, oh, I've completely recovered, I can do everything now.

Louisa: And also, actually, because I was so much better, I was interacting with people who obviously had never had anything wrong with their health. And so I started comparing my life with theirs or kind of relating myself to their values, I guess. So, if someone was talking about a really high-powered job, I was thinking, oh God, I need to do this, I need to get back into the rat race kind of thing. So that didn't help keep the achiever at bay, but I think just being aware of it now is just so great. And also, I think, I really like having this awareness and this extra layer that I have that other people don't seem to have because they've never had a problem with just driving themselves into the ground. So yeah, does that answer the question?

Alex: It does. It does. The question is also what is life like now? As you're kind of coming into the later stages of the kind of recovery process, what's ... when you look back on who you were before this whole experience, how have you changed, how are you different?

Louisa: Well, I'm such a different person now just in terms of being so self-aware, and I'm so much more grounded. So before I was ill, I was very introverted and quite shy. I ... got, I felt anxious going, I don't know, going to like a drinks party when I knew I wouldn't know anyone, that kind of thing. Not really bad, but just I had that unconfidence. And now I'm just, I just feel that I'm enough, and I know myself, so I'm really keen to be in situations interacting with people who I've never met before because I really enjoy it now.

Louisa: So that was one thing that I've massively changed in. And I've changed by interests in terms of work. So, I never went back to you need to complete the Masters because I realized I didn't actually want to do it. And so, the work I'm doing now is a different field. I'm still using science, but it's in a different field and ...

Alex:What are you doing now?

Louisa: ... really enjoying it. It's more like sustainability and environmental stuff now.

Alex:Kind of like what you learned to apply to yourself in terms of sustaining yourself, I guess, looking at it..

Louisa: Yeah, it's so true. Yeah, and having your self-awareness, that is such a big thing, being aware of the impact that you have on the environment, for instance ... It does actually come in quite handy. Yeah.

Alex:And this is a kind of final question for someone that's watching this that feels like they're kind of identify in what we're saying, they can really see that according to themselves, but they can't imagine being in the world differently, like it feels impossible to not be constantly kind of driving and pushing themselves. What would you say to someone that feels that way?

Louisa: I can definitely relate to that. Oh, I'd say just start with being aware of where the achiever comes in, and where you feel you have to be in control, where you have to do something because it ... not right at the moment. Just be aware of it, just that that's the starting point. And then slowly, just slowly test it to see, Okay, let's see what it's like to sit back and not be in control for a while, stuff like that.

Louisa: And never give up because there were so many times when I just couldn't see me recovering. There were so many times when I was like, if I would listen to recovery stories, and I would think, oh, that's probably not like me, or whatever. And so never give up. I'd say that as well.

Louisa: What else? And for the achiever, don't worry. I was worried that I wouldn't do what I want to do, or I wouldn't be successful if I let go of the achiever, and that's not the case at all. I still want to do lots, and I still want to achieve and be successful, but it's just coming from such a nice, peaceful place, and it's not coming from a hectic, frantic place. I ... now have a choice, and I still choose to be proactive, and productive, and achieve stuff, but it just feels much more balanced now.

Alex: I think that's great, and that's really great. And I think it's a journey, and it's a challenging journey, and it's a journey that takes a lot of guts and determination. And the kind of irony there is that the quality that really helps us work on the achiever is the achiever. It's that kind of determined kind of sometimes kind of stubborn kind of quality, which also allows us to see things that are hard to see and to persist when it feels challenging.

Alex: And so it's almost like the more someone says, "I can't change. I'm such an achiever," the more I think that you can change because you're an achiever, and you have to be patient and gentle with yourself in the process.

Alex: Louisa, thank you so much and for being so kind of open and honest in terms of sharing your story. I think a lot of people would have been resonating with this. I really appreciate you sharing your story. Thank you.

Louisa: You're very welcome. I really hope it helps people.