



Case Study: Rewiring perfection

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Jess Thompson - [00:00:15]

Welcome to the Fatigue Super Conference, my name is Jess Thompson and I'm the Director of Psychology here at the Optimum Health Clinic. I'm joined today by Nikkie Foster, a very experienced psychology practitioner, also at the OHC.

Hi, Nikkie.

Nikkie Foster

Hi.

Jess Thompson

And today, we're doing part of our series of real life case studies where we're talking about cases with, clients' permission, of people that we've either worked with historically or we're working with at the moment as part of either our psychology department or nutrition department.

I wanted to give some context to the model we work with to help people who are watching this video to understand some of the language that we're using.

So at the Optimum Health Clinic, we have a model of chronic fatigue syndrome, which forms the structure of the way that we understand the illness and work with it. We use the analogy of an overloaded boat, which is sunk, either gradually over time or suddenly after a final trigger, to help people understand the predisposing and perpetuating factors of their condition. So the boat is the person and the load on the boat represents the various puzzle pieces they may need to address in order for their boat to float again.

On the psychology side, we think about the person's ways of being in the world, and we call these the psychological subtypes which are the achiever type, the helper type, the anxiety type and the trauma type. And we look at how these ways of being have over time caused the person's body to enter into a state of stress repeatedly, which can often lead to a higher stress baseline day to day.

And for some people, this has been the case since early childhood as a result of their experiences. So their system may have spent very little time in a safe, connected, healing state.

We work with people to help them identify the patterns that cause stress and teach them different tools to reset their nervous system to the healing state, where recovery can actually start to take place.

Very often the experience of being ill, with all of the symptoms this brings, causes the system to enter an even higher state of stress as the person grapples with the questions around what's wrong with them. And fears around never getting better. We call this state, the state this creates the maladaptive stress response.

We also have a road map of the different stages of the illness. So stage one we call deep rest. This is where a person is so depleted and exhausted by being in a state of maladaptive stress for so long that all they can do is rest.

Stage two is tired and wired, which is, as it says, basically the energy that is there is being used up by the nervous system and the stress response. And often in this stage, there can be feelings of anxiety, overwhelm, plus tiredness and other symptoms.

Stage three is called reintegration, and this is when someone has calmed down the stress response, they've come out of maladaptive stress and they're in the process of bouncing the boundaries and reintegrating back into life.

Today, we're discussing the case of a woman who identified strongly with the achiever type perfectionism and also the anxiety and trauma type. So with this client, Nikki, can you describe a bit about her background and what was going on for her when she first started working with you?

Nikkie Foster - [00:03:11]

Yeah, of course. So this client didn't actually have a formal diagnosis of chronic fatigue syndrome, but had had symptoms since about 2005. She'd seen a gradual improvement over 3 years or so, by focusing on work stress, and she was in a high pressured PR role. Improvements lasted a few years and then she gradually declined again.

So she came into the psychology department through our group psychology program, and it became quickly clear that she was booming and busting with two main elements of stress. One was work and one was family matters. She was in stage two, so what you referred to as tired and wired, and related to achievement anxiety profiles, as you said, as well as having trauma from work and from childhood, but found that quite difficult to acknowledge. She was also working with nutrition.

Her top symptoms were lack of energy. So she was currently having to, or at the time when I first met her, was having to choose between work, social life and fitness and all three things, as they are for most people, were really important to her. This lack of energy varied wildly between day to day. Sometimes she wasn't up from the sofa, other times she was on her bike riding.

She had associated depression and real issues with clarity of thinking or brain fog, as it's often known. And this third symptom was really the scariest one for her to cope with.

Jess Thompson

So this person had quite a range of symptoms, which is common in this client group. Can you describe where you started with the work and perhaps why that was?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, of course. So as a sort of general overview, we worked together for about 2 years and then did 6 months of monitoring with no sessions just to ensure the recovery was robust. But where we started was actually around acceptance of reality.

So for this particular client, nutrition showed that the reality of her body was that there was a number of things going on. You referred to the, these boatloads that we look at. And one for her was that there were issues with her energy production, so with her mitochondria.

She also had a benign pituitary tumor that was causing quite a lot of issues. And on the psychology side, we started with the achiever pattern and we worked with our stop process, honing down to a particular belief that was around effort, creating success. So she felt that she put a certain amount of effort in then success was more likely. And really success meant being safe and feeling good enough.

Her husband was super supportive along this and they would do the stop process together to address her booming and busting. So when she was pushing on good days and her, what we call catastrophic thinking, so kind of worst case scenario thinking on the bad days.

We finally introduced the idea of guilty pleasures to just allow her to just be, she was so used to pushing that actually for her the idea of luxuriously flicking through a magazine and sitting on a sofa was really quite uncommon.

Jess Thompson - [00:06:22]

OK, so it sounds as though acceptance was really key here in order for this client to make progress. I wonder, can you say a bit more about why this is so important?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah. So without accepting reality, it's virtually impossible to know what our body needs because we don't really know what it's struggling with. And I think for, it's true for many of us that there's such a change when we get sick, from what our body was previously able to do and thus what it used to need. And that in itself is tricky. But it's often more complicated than that because as human beings we're so good at protecting ourselves from the terrifying reality by denying what is really true.

So, of course, we don't do this consciously most of the time, but denial is one of the most powerful defense mechanisms that we have. So when something is scary, the brain helps us to stay safe by kind of denying it or distorting it. What happens then is that some of us fight the truth, others of us run away from it. Some of us find ourselves confused and bewildered by it all. But the outcome is basically the same. The reality is unintentionally and often consciously denied in an effort to keep us consciously safe from something we're frightened of.

So, you know, it's true for lots of people, as was the case for this client, the process of acceptance is really one of uncovering the truth at a rate that feels safe enough to have enough clarity about what current reality is so we can actually address it. So it is really important that we did that.

Jess Thompson

That makes total sense. Actually, it sounds as though what you needed to do was to help her to really drop the struggle with what was going on, whether that struggle was denial or ignoring, she was still struggling with that reality when she dropped that and dropped into acceptance it sounds like that really helped her.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. And what it meant was that we could kind of go into this next phase of the recovery process, which was where we started to, or she started to make some practical changes. She quit work. She moved house. She considered a career change and all these things she was able to do because she was able to really see where her body really was and what she wanted in truth.

Jess Thompson

OK, so those are some really significant changes that she made practically. And often there are significant stressors in a person's life which are contributing to their maladaptive stress response. But I'm wondering, obviously not everyone can make those big changes, and when someone can't do that, how would you work with them on those stressors?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, this is really about looking at the approach to those things. So we can approach something in a number of different ways, some ways are stressful to us and some aren't.

And really we break it down into a kind of fear based approach versus a trust approach. And actually, if we're approaching something with fear then it's going to be stressful, if we're approaching something with more of a trust in it or in the outcome, then actually it feels much calmer. And so there's a real value in being able to to kind of unpick some of that.

And what this really means is that if we fear things about ourselves, other people and/or the world, then we'll experience them as dangerous and therefore have a stress reaction to them. But if we can learn over time to be more trusting of ourselves, of others and the world, then we can more easily experience this as less stressful than we might otherwise.

And I think this is often why, I'm sure all of us have a friend or someone we know who is just not really fazed by things that we might be, and a lot of the time it's because the way that they're perceiving those things are quite different.

Jess Thompson - [00:10:09]

That makes total sense. We often say at the clinic, it's actually it's not what you're doing, it's the state that you're doing it in that's really key here. And by shifting from fear to trust the whole state changes. So the experience might be the same, or the situation the same, but the state that you're experiencing in it, is shifted from stress to healing.

Nikkie Foster

Right, yeah, yeah. And that's exactly what we were really, what we started doing in that next phase then was looking at this internal transformation once she'd done that, that external transformation, if you like, in terms of all of these external practical things, we really then needed to turn our attention to the internal stuff.

Jess Thompson

I think that's a really important distinction. Sometimes clients I work with will ask me whether if they could go to a desert island, no stressors, would they get better more quickly? And the answer is potentially yes, but they would still have to return to their lives and would therefore be facing the same set of stresses again, so the key's often not about necessarily changing external factors that create stress, but more the internal factors, so their thoughts, feelings and beliefs, so they respond to those stressors differently.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. And I think this is why for many people, recovery might not take long, but robust recovery really can take time because transforming those internal factors that create stress does take longer often than transforming those external practical things. But actually, it's much longer lasting and thus the key to a robust recovery.

So at this point, we move much more into working more deeply on the childhood shaping of her personality, because this is often where these ways of being come from.

And for this particular client, a model that we use in the clinic, regularly, called the Enneagram was super helpful for this client. So the Enneagram for us is really about helping us get clarity on these ways of being or patterns of thinking and patterns of stress. And for this particular client, she recognized herself as an Enneagram Type One, which is a perfectionist and effectively was kind of defensively fawning or people pleasing to be able to stay safe because she didn't really feel she belonged.

And we worked with it in a couple of contexts. So we worked with how it played out in recovery, how she needed to get recovery perfect. How this perfectionist filter was, how she was seeing her past. One of the things that I mentioned at the beginning was there was a lot of family stress going on at the time. And one of the filters, I guess, for her was that she felt like she was being punished for doing

the right thing or the moral thing in relation to family issues, because actually she learned that she had to be perfect in order to get love, because unconditional love, the ability for people to just love her for who she was, wasn't really available.

And then we dropped into a little bit more of a kind of deeper perspective of this. And we were trying to look, we did look at what perfectionism was really about defending against. Which for her was about the fear of the unknown. So she felt, or part of her really believed that if she was perfect then this would give her reliable outcomes rather than unknown outcomes. So the more perfect she was, the more consistently she could predict, or so she believed, her future life.

And then we finally looked at different ways of viewing perfectionism. So there's a lot of spiritual work around this and spiritual teachings on what perfectionism really might mean. And for her, that was quite useful to just gain some other perspectives on perfectionism.

Jess Thompson - [00:13:55]

That sounds really helpful work, and it sounds as though the perfectionist pattern was really perpetuating the maladaptive stress response in some ways. And do you find this is actually quite common in the clients that you work with?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, I think it's really, really common. Perfectionism can be part of personality and it can be a learned way of being. So what happens is that when we come from a helpfully, trusting place this perfectionism can be idealism, which is a wonderful trait, of course to have. And we can, at the same time as being okay with what reality is, we can want to move things on.

And actually both of those positions are quite trusting. We're okay with where we are, but we want things to be different maybe in the future. When we come from a fear based place, perfectionism often ends up dominating and the prevailing approach is effectively, if it's not perfect, it's not safe or I'm not good enough. If I'm not perfect, I'm not good enough. And this is really stressful and energy consuming. And as a perfectionist by nature and nurture myself, I definitely get that one from the inside.

Jess Thompson

That can be helpful can't it, when you can really get it from the inside.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, it's what I really empathize with because I've been trying to perfect things myself for a long time and it kind of doesn't work, which is disappointing.

So yeah. So we were then looking really about reintegrating some of these new beliefs into a new way of being. So this was at the point where she started to bounce her boundaries. You know, her world was starting to get bigger. She re-entered into a new career, a different space in her relationships, and she started doing a bit of digesting of her past so it didn't filter so much into her present. And she was able to identify a kind of fix it role from her parents that was playing out with work colleagues and actually allowed her to walk away from this in a much more helpful way, in a much more supportive way for her.

Jess Thompson

It sounds like she had to really be able to see that pattern before she could change. And of course, that's an important part of the work.

I know that as part of your work, you actually asked this client what she had found to be the most helpful aspects of the work that you've done together. Can you share a bit about that with us?

Nikkie Foster - [00:16:21]

Yeah, absolutely. So she gave me quite a number of things. The single biggest thing for her was using the stop process. She still uses it now. And as I said before, her and her husband would use the stop process to help her really see things from a different perspective, really regulate. And she was really committed to doing that. And yeah, and it was really valuable for her.

Jess Thompson

Can you say a bit more, sorry jumping in there, a bit more about that stop process? Kind of what it is? Why we use it? When we use it?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah. So the stop process is a really great tool for working with, either thought patterns or beliefs. Ideally what we're looking at is being able to try and get to a level of belief. So if we're, we were talking before about that fear versus trust perspective on life, often what will happen is stress will get created by the fear perspective and the stop process helps us to notice firstly when that's happening, and also particularly notice the effect of it on our body.

I think so many of us might recognize there's some sort of stress somewhere, but we don't really realize the impact physiologically that has on our body. Stop process is a great way of starting to connect those dots.

Then we're just looking at basically creating a pattern break to be able to say, OK, if I recognize that my system is, you know, I'm thinking of this particular fear based way and it's having a huge impact on my body. Let's just take a breather for a minute and let's look around and see if there's a different way of looking at this.

And once we start challenging the old perspective, we can start looking at what might be new more helpful perspectives that are more trusting, that are more healing and thus ultimately change the state that we're in.

And over time, by using that process regularly, it allows us to move from these fear based patterns, or ways of being, into much more trusting ways of being and actually rewire the way our brain works. Which means then on a longer term, bigger term level, the system is a lot less stressed a lot less of the time, which is why it has such an impact on fatigue and other symptoms.

Jess Thompson

Absolutely. And it's also, part of it is about coming back into the body. The notes in the mind can be super busy with some really quite unhelpful thoughts. And part of that stop process helps people, kind of guides them back to the body, which is where the information lies that they actually need to be connected into.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. I think, again, a lot of us don't realize how wise our body is and how really the answers are in there. And if our attention is so up here all of the time, which for lots of us I think it is, because we probably just learned that that's the way to get through life. Actually, we miss all of the information in the body and it actually becomes really difficult to live life in a way that feels authentic to who we are because we're missing half of the, or probably more than half, of the actual answer.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, absolutely. OK, what else did you find helpful?

Nikkie Foster - [00:19:33]

So the group program, the 90 day program, she had a, well her words were she had a massive reaction to it, which for her really meant this must be doing something. So she had quite a strong emotional reaction to some of the work that we did. Both when we did the stop process, but also some of the framework around what we see, how we see chronic fatigue syndrome, like what you were saying in your introduction, so this idea of the boat load.

And what that meant for her, that reaction really meant that we got it for her, you know, it was the first time anyone really had understood what was going on. And so she really bought into our approach pretty immediately, which meant then she went away after the 3 days that we had together in clinic, convinced that this was going to really support her. And so she was really committed, as I said, to doing the stop process and other things.

Jess Thompson

And that's very often the case isn't it, when people come along for the first time, they feel that actually somebody really gets it, somebody understands, they've been so misunderstood in different places and having a kind of structure which they can see themselves in can help bring that sense of trust and control really, someone gets it and they're going to help me to work on the things that need working on.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. And I think this was one of the key pieces in terms of what allowed us to start working with acceptance of where she really was because she had now a framework that made sense to her. So actually, accepting reality was a little less scary than it had been before this framework had been presented.

She also said that she really liked this concept of rewiring. So the fact that we can have stress based thinking patterns, stress based ways of being in the world, and actually we can rewire those in our brain to a very different way of being. And she uses this concept a lot now in her current job when she's working with really anxious kids as a teacher. So it's been not only really instrumental for her personally, but also in how she works herself.

And in the final, or the final thing that she kind of felt was really important was emotional freedom technique. So she had real cynicism to this at the beginning, but actually felt that in our sessions EFT was really great for dealing with acute distress or explore issues like the, I must fix this pattern, that I mentioned from childhood.

Jess Thompson

Can you just say a little bit about emotional freedom technique just for those people watching that don't know what that is?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah. So it's also known as tapping, so that's sometimes how other people have come across it. It's effectively an acupuncture based tool, but acupuncture without the needles, where you tap on particular points of the face and the body, and that tapping sends soothing signals to the fear based part of our brain, while we're focused on a particular issue.

So the idea really is that we bring up something that is distressing for us and through tapping those particular points, we create soothing signals that really allows the system to recode and change what something distressing really means for us.

So it's a really nice tool for understanding things, for dealing with the stress, actually, also for dealing with symptoms, that's one of the ways that we use it in clinic too. Because, of course, they can be really distressing and stressful.

Jess Thompson - [00:23:07]

Absolutely. I wonder if it's common for people to feel skeptical about EFT and how you might work with this?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, and this is something I really empathize with, too, as I was totally, totally in that camp as well. So I start by letting people know how normal it is to be skeptical about it. Let's face it, we're tapping on a bunch of points on our face and our body, it looks a bit weird when we get introduced to it. And I will also work with the cynicism. So I will get them to tap directly on the cynicism and tell them to just give it a go and decide for themselves.

Most people, when they start doing EFT we often start with symptoms because it's a nice way to work with EFT begin with, they realize how beneficial it is and then quickly don't really worry about how strange it seems because it helps so it kind of doesn't matter.

Occasionally what I will do is I'll point people to the wealth of research that's out there, because actually there's a huge amount of research and some people want scientific evidence of, which there's plenty.

So, yeah, so that's kind of how I work with EFT. And it was one of the things that we started with, with this particular client. But again because often when the experiences EFT is really working, it's reducing the stress or it's kind of reducing distress about symptoms, people use it because people want to feel less distressed about the stuff that's distressing them.

Jess Thompson

Absolutely. That makes sense.

Nikkie Foster

So the other key thing then that she mentioned was realizing that even though her real instinct was to tackle the traumas that she'd been through. And actually, she tells me in hindsight, she thought I might be avoiding working with them on her because I suggested that we start with everyday things to reduce the maladaptive stress response. What she's able to really now see and value is, that it was absolutely the right approach for her. And she's never really had to do any major trauma work to stay well, which she's really grateful for.

Now, of course, she might want to do some of that later on, and that's absolutely her call, but actually it wasn't key for her to get recovered.

Jess Thompson

And often people do assume they'll need to work through their trauma in order to get into the healing state and with this story and many others we've worked with, that isn't actually always the case. And can you say a bit more about why that isn't always the case?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, totally. So trauma, of course, is something that contributes to the stress state as it often leaves us feeling that we're not safe, that others aren't safe or the world isn't safe. But it's far from the only things that are stressful.

So when we can work these other things, the day-to-day things, actually it's much more impactful and less painful than digging into traumatic experiences from our past. Because there are plenty of times in day-to-day life for most people that the stress of trauma isn't being triggered, but we're still stressed out.

So, for example, something I work quite commonly with, that's rarely linked to specific traumatic events, is things like the stress of keeping on top of the home, housework, kids, all the stuff that needs to be done. And all those things, of course, are really hard for those with regular fatigue. And it can bring up a lot of stress that isn't necessarily deeply traumatic.

Jess Thompson - [00:26:32]

Absolutely, it's often working on those day-to-day stressors that actually over time really makes a difference to the maladaptive stress response when people realize they can be in a healing state and don't need to work through that deep trauma, necessarily. And of course, sometimes they do. Everyone's journey is different. But in this case, it's interesting that she came into it with an assumption that she would need to, and actually you did so much foundational work that it got to a point where she didn't.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. And this is one of the reasons why, you know, we're always keeping an open mind and making a kind of constant reassessment of whether that trauma needs to be worked with or not. And often I'm having those conversations with the clients really quite early on, because sometimes, as you say, it's absolutely true that we need to change tactic and the trauma does need to be worked on in order for the system to calm. But actually, sometimes it really isn't the case.

Jess Thompson

Absolutely. Yeah. Anything else that was really impactful for her?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah. The other thing that she mentioned was being introduced to the Enneagram actually, because this really helped to see her perfectionism and again, in her words, how she'd been governed by anger for about 20 years.

So she was really able to see the ways that her perfectionism wasn't serving her. And also the real value of it, you know, we talked before about how perfectionism is also idealism and how important that is in the world. But if it's more governed by anger or it's kind of fear centric, if you like, it can become really stressful.

Jess Thompson

Absolutely. Something else we often say at the clinic is, if you can see it, you don't have to be it. And it sounds like the Enneagram really helped her to see it. And gave her a choice about whether to be it or kind of how to be it.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely.

Jess Thompson

So interesting. Can you talk us through how this client is doing now?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah. So she's got a really good routine in place that allows her to keep her mind in check, if you like, and anticipate her body's needs when life is busy. She uses a lot of meditation and mantras which

allow her to be in a kind of wise witness mode and thus really circuit break these automatic reactions. You know, we all have...

Jess Thompson - [00:28:50]

Jumping in. I was just picking up on that wise witness mode. Can you say a bit more about that?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. So it's that place where we can observe the part of us that is reacting and be able to soothe it, give it what it needs without kind of being in it.

So we've got this distance, and actually one of the things that the stop process is so brilliant for, because by having a bit of a circuit breaker to say, OK, hang on a second, part of me is reacting in this way, this stress way, and actually it feels really difficult on my body. We actually get the choice. And wise witness really allows us to create that choice.

Jess Thompson

Absolutely. And stop process kind of facilitates that journey of developing your own wise witness to yourself, doesn't it?

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, completely, because it's absolutely a muscle that we can cultivate. And it's often one of the things that meditation is so valuable for as well. So a lot of people, you know, when you combine the stop process plus something like meditation, both working in slightly different ways, you can really strengthen that wise witness mode, which means it's much more easier then to, in a highly reactive moment, to be able to step back from it rather than just react by default.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, absolutely.

Nikkie Foster

So, yeah, so the other place is she was saying she feels really like the Optimum Health Clinic now is a bit like her own accident and emergency. So something difficult happens in life. She can reach out. She hasn't had to yet. But actually, the fact that she knows it's there and she knows we're there feels really reassuring for her.

Jess Thompson

She knows we're there and I'm sure things will be going on in her life, but so far, she's been able to navigate them herself. But of course, that's part of our role is to kind of be that confident companion with people and get them to the point where they can experience stressful things and they know what to do without us and it's lovely to know that we're absolutely there to support them if they need it. But it sounds like she feels fully equipped now to be able to deal with things herself.

Nikkie Foster

Yeah, absolutely. You know, it's been a long time since our work ended, and she says she knows that we're there, but she hasn't had to yet which just shows.

Jess Thompson

Yeah, absolutely. And am I right in thinking that she's working full time? I know she changed careers.

Nikkie Foster - [00:31:18]

Yeah. She's working full time as a teacher. So it's been a very hectic last year, obviously with COVID and everything. And she's loving it, doing really well. She's also been able to finally balance, the kind of exercise boundary. She's gone jogging recently for a few miles, which, you know, if we go full circle back to some of her symptoms, one of the things she was having to choose between was work, social life or exercise. She couldn't do all three, and now she absolutely can.

Jess Thompson

Fantastic.

Thank you so much Nikkie, for sharing this case study with us today. I know people watching will find it really helpful.

Nikkie Foster

Oh, my pleasure. It's been lovely talking to you.