



Letting go of our false identities

Guest: **Natasha Todd**

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:00:15]

So hello, my name is Anna Duschinsky, and welcome to this next of our series of recovery stories.

I'm here with Natasha Todd. I've actually known Natasha for about 12 years. We figured out didn't we? As Natasha was one of my clients and then went on to do the training course and has had her own successful practice for around 7 years.

So today, Natasha's here to share her own journey, her recovery journey from chronic fatigue and the insights and learnings that she gained through that process.

So welcome and thank you.

So shall we start with the point at which, it's a funny point to start, I guess, but I know for a lot of people there is a build up, but they only realize retrospectively how long that build up has often been for them. So I often start with people at the point where you crashed, I guess, where you suddenly realized that something had to change. So what was going on for you at that point?

Natasha Todd

So at the point of my crash, I had three young boys who were aged 4, 6 and 8, which in itself was quite stressful. I was also working in an American city law firm two days a week as a guinea pig for part-time for them. And it didn't work. They clearly couldn't manage part-time. So I was under a lot of stress there. My husband had lost his job so I very much felt like I had to go out to work. And I absolutely hated my job because I was having, it felt like I was doing 300 hours work in 100 hours each week, plus having to be perfect mom and come home, make meals, put my children to bed, start working again.

And I basically just burnt myself out completely. So I remember walking with the boys one day in the park and just realizing I couldn't actually get myself back to the car and ringing my mom and saying, can you come and take my boys away? I can't do anymore. And that was the crash. From then on, I was in bed.

Anna Duschinsky

OK, so it went very quickly, very severely to you really could do very little. You were basically in bed for really quite a few months weren't you?

Natasha Todd

Yes, I think completely bed bound probably for 3 months, I would say, but for about 8 months I wasn't able to be in my own home looking after my own children.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:02:53]

Yeah, yeah. And you've already, I guess, picked up on a couple of key themes that, you'll know we hear a lot from people who come to the clinic. One of them is just the pushing, the trying to do it all really. You were doing a part-time job that wasn't a part-time job, trying to be that word, perfect sticks out, right. Trying to be the perfect mom. So tell me about that. What did that mean to you be the perfect mom?

Natasha Todd

So, everything had to be done 100 percent for me. So even if I was working very hard, I had to put the right meal on the table for the children. And I wanted to be that, I wanted to be the one bringing them up so I was kind of always on catch up from those two days that I was working and needed to give them my time, my energy, my thoughts, my worries. I was just wanting to be there 100 percent for them. Getting it right, whatever that looked like.

And I felt the same at work. Failure was not something I could contemplate at all. So when I was at work, I was also struggling to get it right and get it perfect. So it was just yeah, it didn't matter what I was doing. That pressure was there.

Anna Duschinsky

And if you look back, kind of retrospectively, obviously that was the point where everything fell apart and you had to make a change. With hindsight, was there a build up to that point without you necessarily having recognized it?

Natasha Todd

Yes, I would say that probably ever since I went away to boarding school when I was 12 and I was very homesick, I was very shy, I was, yes, sensitive. And I had to cope and grow up overnight. And I think that's when that strategy started of just, OK if I work really hard and I achieve and I get it right and I'm perfect, that kind of feels safe. I can cope if I do that.

So I think at that point I really used my brain and my head and my intellect, and that was from where I kind of live my life. And that was the start of pushing, needing to succeed. And it was probably honestly a build up from then, all the way through to age 40 without realizing it. It was just a bit more and a bit more, a bit more of that kind of pattern going on.

Anna Duschinsky

And how had that played out for you then? That pushing and achieving, obviously, to some degree, you know, you kind of done well. You'd become a lawyer, you'd got the job. And that's the funny thing about these patterns, isn't it? It works to a degree, right? There is a level to which it does give us what we're trying to get. It does meet the need. What had been the fallout from that prior? As I say, it tends not to be a point where we suddenly crash and nothing had led up to it. What had been the fallout from that pattern for you then over the years, do you feel?

Natasha Todd

I felt before that crash more and more that I was overwhelmed. So emotionally I wasn't coping. I was very stressed. My relationship with my husband was under strain and I was kind of giving myself a hard time as well. So I went into more overdrive and I just became more and more exhausted and more and more feeling like I was a bit out of control.

Anna Duschinsky

OK. Out of control, exhausted, overwhelmed. And it sounds like the world around you, your world was suffering from that. Your emotional world, but even the relationships, your close relationships were struggling or suffering as a result of that.

Natasha Todd - [00:07:19]

Yeah, definitely.

Anna Duschinsky

So the point at which you crashed and obviously you had to make change, how did you cope with that? And what were the kind of stages of going from that crash point to the beginnings of real recovery?

Natasha Todd

So in terms of physically what the illness looked like, do you mean?

Anna Duschinsky

Partly that, yeah absolutely. And then what were the kind of steps that took you towards?

Natasha Todd

I think to start with, the beginning of the crash I ended up in bed, I was staying at my parents house. Actually, it was total relief because someone had taken away all the worry, all the pressure, all the stress and this job I hated I couldn't do anymore.

So to start with, the illness was a lovely excuse to get out of this horror I was in. So I think I thought I had a virus and I was told it would take 6 weeks. So, I rested for 6 weeks and thought, I'm going to get better. And then, of course, at the end of the 6 weeks, I wasn't better at all.

So that's when I got the diagnosis. I went to a diagnostic consultant and he put me on amitriptyline, which he promised me would sort it out. You just take a little bit more each week and then there's this magic moment where your energy comes back. So I tried that and it was very helpful in some ways because I started sleeping again, which I hadn't been doing. So I could get up at a normal time of day or start my day and I had a little bit more structure to the day. But I kind of went up to a certain dosage and started coming back down again. And this miracle never happened.

So sort of 6, 7 months later, I decided that was not the route I wanted to take. I was really into nutrition and this just didn't feel right being on these drugs. And so that led me to looking for the next piece. And that's where I found the 90 day program at the OHC. And I guess when I met you.

And I think the start of that 90 day program was a real turning point for me, because it was the first time that I had ever heard of the concept of there kind of being another way of looking at life. The fact that I had a choice, that I didn't have to be pushing myself all the time, or it just, that kind of, that we have the ability to maybe see it in a different way, which could feel different.

And that was pretty mind blowing for me because it was just like someone was talking another language to start with. But I was really intrigued. And as I started learning the tools and doing the course, it really felt right. Just doing the nutrition side, the psychology side just felt right for me. And so, that gave me some hope and motivation to really keep going with it. So I think that was the start of really looking at everything in a different way.

Anna Duschinsky

Really interesting. So two things really strike me in what you're saying. The first is how you describe your life as a horror. It was clearly, something was very out of sync for you at that point. And for illness to feel like a relief. It's not a nice place to be, right. You have no energy. You couldn't do anything. And yet that was a sufficient, it was a movement away from something that you were clearly really struggling with. So it shows you how bad it could go, right? For that to feel like you were happy to be able to be in bed and be ill.

Natasha Todd - [00:11:23]

Yeah.

Anna Duschinsky

And the other thing that strikes me in what you're talking about is that moment, which a lot of people talk about either being a moment or a more gradual process of recognizing that there could be another way. And again, you talk about the kind of strategy that you developed going to boarding school and suddenly having to cope and finding that, OK, I'm just going to be good and be perfect, I'm going to get it right and that will enable me to cope, to function in this world that you're thrown into. And you talk about that sensitivity.

So, again, we find these coping mechanisms, don't we, these ways of being in the world. And it often takes a real wake up call for us to recognize that there could be a different way of functioning, a different way of seeing the world.

So can you, I mean, so you talk about a different language. Can you tell me a little bit more about that for you? What was it about that language? Talk about choice and the idea of there being another way, but what kind of, specifically, do you think was the wake up call? Or was different as you began to realize there was another way?

Natasha Todd

I think what I had done without realizing it was I had completely disconnected from who I really was. So, when I went to boarding school I couldn't be sensitive. I couldn't have these emotions because actually I was pretty unhappy and homesick. So I disconnected from that and chose to be quite tough and quite capable and quite strong and to achieve and succeed. And that became my identity.

And so, I had to keep doing that to feel okay. And I think what happened, or started to happen, as I worked through the course, was I realized the pain of that disconnection, the pressure of that continual having to be this capable, strong person when actually that wasn't really me.

So, the first piece of it was realizing that you're holding all of that and you can let go, and it's just that concept of letting go of all of it, is just massive. And I think then it was realizing that I was creating my own horror through that pressure. And so by gradually reconnecting I was sort of coming back to something that felt better and gave me some more choices.

Anna Duschinsky

Interesting again that idea of what began as a coping mechanism, that did work, it worked to a degree. Becoming the root of horror of you living a life that was genuinely so painful for you, that you would rather be in bed unable to function.

So really, really interesting, and I like what you're saying there in terms of how that became so much of an identity for you that you had to keep playing that out to feel OK. And really, it was only at the point where everything fell apart that you began to question, or had to question, the identity that you'd created for yourself and to realize it wasn't you, it wasn't actually terribly authentic to the person that you actually were. What was the process for you then, of beginning to untangle some of that or unpick some of that?

Natasha Todd

Uh, well, obviously the tools that we learnt during the 90 day program really helped. So having the awareness of what I was doing to myself was the first piece, because I had no idea how judgmental I was, how hard on myself I was. The kind of concept of self compassion just didn't exist. So that was one big piece, I think. And it wasn't an overnight thing. I can't, even now I'm not sure I can say when that happened. It almost just, you just get to a point and think, oh, yes, it feels a bit better. And yeah, maybe I am sort of treating myself better. But that was definitely a big piece of it, is using the stop

process on what I was doing to myself, that voice in my head that was just telling me that if it wasn't perfect, I'd failed.

So that was that was a very big piece. And I think another piece was working through one to one in the therapy sessions, just that understanding of how I'd got there and that ability to make it safe to reconnect the emotions.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:16:48]

So absolutely. The awareness is the start point to even see that that is the case, that's what we're doing, that that is the identity we've created and how we're doing it. And, yes, what you say around understanding how that has come to be, I think for a lot of people we're not quite sure how we've got that, even if we can see it, begin to see it, it doesn't necessarily make sense. So beginning to unpick or make sense of that world. And yes, finally, as you say, starting to make it safe to reconnect to our bodies, to our emotions, for a lot of people that can feel quite scary can't it?

Natasha Todd

Yes.

Anna Duschinsky

So for you as you went through that process, we've talked a lot I suppose, about your insights about the fact that you realized that you'd created this identity for yourself, that that was disconnected from your authentic self. What, retrospectively I guess, what were the other insights that you've gleaned through this process?

Natasha Todd

I think I realized somewhere during the illness that I didn't want to go back to that old life. I actually, and I started to see that the illness was almost a gift because it needed to come along. And if it hadn't come along my life, something else would have gone wrong. So it was that realization that I'm meant to be on this journey, this is a journey I need to be taking.

So, and I think that really helped because it wasn't an easy journey. There were some bad moments in it, but it helped me to come out of those bad moments a bit quicker because I knew that it was part of where I wanted to go. I wanted to create something new. I didn't want to go back to the old.

Anna Duschinsky

Really interesting. I think really important as well, the recognition for some people who we see there can be a rose tinted view of life before they got ill. And it's quite interesting that, of course, if life was that good, then we probably wouldn't, for the most part, I'm not saying this is always true, but for the most part, we probably wouldn't have got to that point of crashing and becoming really ill. So there is something, I guess, about seeing it clearly, seeing the reality of what's been there for you. So interesting what you're saying for you there was an instant recognition that you didn't want that and that was really helpful.

And also that sense of it being a gift, there being a reason for it. Again, it's a very useful frame, isn't it, to have around what's going on. Because it kind of makes sense of what's happening for you in some way. It gives a reason or purpose to what you're experiencing, because it means that you're going through it in order to move towards something which will be better, that will feel better.

Natasha Todd

Yes. So I think it gave me that hope, which wasn't there all the time, because they're obviously always tough times that you're going through, but it would come back and I would remember it and it would help me take that next step.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:20:18]

What were the tough times? I'm just thinking about people watching this and listening to this and who might need that comfort that those tough times are normal. For you what were the tough times?

Natasha Todd

So, it's always tough when you go backwards, and I think it's very common through the condition of chronic fatigue, it's not a straight line. So I would feel like I was doing well. And then for whatever reason, there'd be two weeks where you're back in bed. And I think that is always really tough because your mind immediately wants to say, oh, my God, what if I've gone back to the beginning and I've got another year to get back to where I was? So tough times, just kind of physically, when the health didn't feel like it was going in the right direction, it was that fear around what that meant. And being able to just rest and believe I haven't gone back to the beginning, this is OK.

But I think each time that happens, there's was a part of me that went, I can't do this again. Not again. So I remember that as being quite tough. It's how do you get out of that when it happens?

Anna Duschinsky

Again, such a common theme. When people get the cold or have some kind of bug, that absolute fear that takes over of, oh no, I'm back where I started. And then having to normalize, actually, people get bugs, people get colds, even people who are very well get bugs and colds. It doesn't mean I'm going back.

But yes, absolutely. And for you, what was it, do you think that eventually, maybe not at the time, in that moment, initially, but what was it that helped you most to reframe that or to make sense of that? Because you're right, those moments where you kind of go backwards can be real crucial points for people, because if you do spiral into the fear, into the anxiety, it can essentially lengthen that process. It can lead to a bit more of a dip than maybe that needed to be. So for you, I'm interested, what was it that made a difference? Or what was it that helped most in those moments?

Natasha Todd

I think I didn't do, I was going to say perfectly, but I don't want to use that word now. There were times where I was in it, so there might be a day or two or a week. But I think it was knowing and trusting that I had the tools, I'd done it before and I believed, I did believe that I could do it. I believed I was going to get better. I believed in the process or the journey that I was on. So I was fascinated in all the psychology tools, which is why I went on and trained in it.

So that helped because it all made sense to me. So I could remember, OK, you know, something in my mind would go, you need to do your stop process or your catastrophizing this or you're giving yourself a hard time. So something would come in to remember, actually, I don't need to panic about this. I can pick myself back up and create that belief and hope again and then do something to take that step out of it.

And of course, each time it didn't last so long. So then you have the evidence from the previous one to say, I know if I do this, it'll be OK in a week or a few days or something. So, yeah.

Anna Duschinsky

Really interesting. Absolutely. It's kind of recommitting, isn't it? You have those moments, as you say, I think that's so normal. You have those moments where you're really in it and you just, it's the end of the world, but then remembering, recommitting, reengaging with everything that you've learnt. And I always like that Einstein quote, "A mind once expanded can never go back to its original form". Once you have those tools in your mind, once you've got some experience of being able to create some change, that just triggers somewhere, reminds you to re-engage with it.

And as you say, the more that you've done that, when you've had a few experiences of coming through it, it begins to give you the evidence, the hope you can go back and go, OK, hang on. This happened before and I managed to come through it and it was OK. It worked. Yeah, absolutely.

Natasha Todd - [00:25:13]

And I think that piece of fear is such an interesting piece because it kind of comes up in subtle ways and in layers. And for me, I was really quite shocked a few days after I thought I'd recovered, found myself on holiday, going to bed the night before we were about to climb Snowdon. And it hit me out of nowhere and I thought I was recovered. And it was that last piece of fear that was left in my mind saying, what if you walk all the way up to the top and then you hit that wall.

Because somehow you don't forget that and there's no way back. You've got to walk all the way back down. And I felt it in that moment and I had to use those tools, even then it took me an hour or so to calm down. But I knew I could do it. And I got up the next morning and I did it. And I felt very liberated because I felt like sometimes these little last pieces linger and they come back and surprise you. And they're just a piece of that fear that has stayed, that memory that stayed there.

Anna Duschinsky

The experience can be quite traumatic. I mean, let's face it, the experience is suddenly not being able to walk down the street or pick up your own children or get back to the car. It isn't something, as you say, that is easily forgotten. And so it makes perfect sense, that little echo, even all that time later, after all the recovery work you've done and how far you've come.

Yeah, absolutely. I always say to people, whatever's going on before, the experience of going through this can be traumatic in itself. And that needs working through. There's also a kind of grieving process for it, right, to some degree, that has to happen as we recover as well?

Natasha Todd

Yes.

Anna Duschinsky

I know you've talked to me before also about that sense of isolation in it. Can you talk to me a little bit about that? Something else that I think people will really resonate with.

Natasha Todd

Yes. Yes, I think probably along with the fear. The other bit that I struggled with the most was that feeling of isolation on a number of levels. So it was feeling as though there wasn't anybody else who could understand what it was feeling like. So they weren't on my wavelength. And even my husband or my mother, people who were quite close to me, they just couldn't say the right thing. They just, because you just can't get someone to understand what that fatigue feels like.

And that's very isolating because there's no one really hearing you and validating what you're going through. And I think in terms of friends with chronic fatigue, you often look OK. So I could get to school and I could kind of climb out the car and wait for my children. And so people didn't necessarily give you the support that you were crying out for. And I didn't feel comfortable asking for help.

And I remember very clearly, actually, a session I had with you when I was saying, I feel sorry for myself, no one's helping me. And I remember you saying, well, do you think that you give out, do you ask for help? Do you give out vibes that you want help? Do people know you want help? And that really resonated with me because I hadn't realized that I probably appeared still quite strong and capable, so people didn't know what I was going through or what I needed.

So I think that isolation, just it feeling like that support wasn't there. And it was partly coming from me asking for it. And it's partly just the world doesn't know what you're going through. And yeah, I really struggled with that. And funnily enough, struggled with it almost more when I was coming out the other end. And I remember going to a friend's birthday lunch and just sitting there feeling as though I'd just come back from another planet and I could not, I just could not connect with these people and what they were talking about or what was important to them. And I felt this desperate isolation then because I thought I was better and I thought everything would be fine. And I walked back to my car and burst into tears. And just thought why have I come through this really hard time just to feel like this? And that was another piece of that real feeling of isolation.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:30:02]

It's funny, isn't it, that reintegration phase can be a really a challenging one. Actually, to some degree, almost the most challenging for some people, because, as you say, you've gone through this journey and the only way I can liken it to really, and I think we've had this conversation before, it's a bit like coming back from a war zone to a world that has not shared that with you. And you've been through this amazingly challenging, but also life changing experience and everything else around hasn't followed or caught up and it can feel like a real disconnect.

And yeah, I think coming into the reintegration phase as well, because you've worked so hard to get there you kind of, as you say, feel like well you should be done now, this should just all be great. But actually, there's more to do. There's a new world and life and how you are in that world to develop and to create, I guess, for some people. And that in itself has its own challenges as well. So I think that's a really important point as well.

So bring us up to date. You go through the training course. You obviously, it gradually gets you stronger and stronger. And not an easy road for you, I know, but one that you persevered with and got to full recovery. And so what does life look like for you today?

Natasha Todd

So, yes, very different, thank goodness. So I've obviously changed career from being a lawyer to being a therapeutic coach. And I feel energized, I feel balanced, I'm doing something I love doing, I'm passionate about health and wellbeing. I love my job. I love connecting with people. Which as a lawyer it wasn't really about that.

And I think I have a much better relationship with myself. And I think that's been a really key piece as well. And I'm being very understanding that life's not meant to look great all the time, but it's OK. You know, it's knowing that as a human we have bad days and that's OK. But just having that sense that I know where I'm going and I know who I am and it just all feels much more aligned and I make different choices now. I make choices to create that balance for myself so that I'm never going to get back to that kind of place I came from. And yes, so it's it feels completely different and fantastic.

Anna Duschinsky

Really lovely to hear obviously. I think what you say there about alignment, if we are disconnected, if we don't know ourselves or we've created an identity for ourselves in order to cope with the world, then actually the endpoint of that is never going to end up with us feeling aligned and connected and meeting our own needs really and having our values met. So it's never going to go well, really, ultimately, is it?

So I like what you're saying there about coming back to, all the work you've done is to come back to a sense of your authentic self.

Natasha Todd

Yes.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:33:41]

And then you can make choices from there. You can find a career that fits that. You can find lifestyle or friendship or whatever choices to be in line with that. And then that feels better. As you say, it's not like life is then perfect and there are no challenges in our world, but that you're living from a place that feels more connected, more authentic, more aligned with you. And then choices feel better. The path feels better. Yeah, really interesting.

Natasha Todd

And I think that word balance for me really, really resonates because I don't get that right all the time but I recognize when I go out of balance, OK, this is what I need. So I've got those check points and those things I can put in place when I realize that balance isn't there. And actually if we are in balance then everything just seems to flow a lot better.

Anna Duschinsky

And it strikes me there are two things there. The first is the awareness that you are out of balance, right, that there's a gauge, you've got a benchmark for what imbalance feels like and therefore you are more aware when you're out of balance. That's really important, isn't it?

And also, that piece that you talk about there in terms of, you know what to do, you have a toolkit of how to get back into balance. And it strikes me that both of those were things that would probably have been absent in your old version of you, your old identity. There wasn't necessarily a sense of what balance felt like, what it felt to feel good, to feel aligned, to feel in balance with yourself. And you didn't necessarily have the tools or understanding or knowledge to know how to recalibrate that as well.

Natasha Todd

And I think the other thing that strikes me talking about this is also that word control, because that was the piece, I think, when I was out of control you try and grab it and control more and more and more. And actually a big piece of getting that balance and being more aligned is knowing how and when to let go. Particularly when you've got children and you could worry about everything and it's learning how to have that kind of relationship to all that stuff and those people around you that feels kind of, yeah, balanced so that you don't over worry and you don't over parent and you don't, you know. So I think there is that whole understanding of being able to let go a bit more, which has really helped me as well.

Anna Duschinsky

It's not a word you've used, but what strikes me, what you're saying is that in order for that to be true, I guess there has to be a sense of trust or a sense of safety. Something to let go into, right? And very often, and I think back to you as that young girl at boarding school probably thrown into something that felt very overwhelming for you and very, I guess, unsafe at some level. And therefore, I guess it's finding a new way of saying, actually, it's all right to let go. It's OK to see what happens and to trust that that's going to be OK.

Natasha Todd

Yeah. And I think it actually goes back to what I was saying before, which is that relationship to self, because I think the difference is that through this journey, one of the key things is building up trust in yourself, trust that you can deal with difficult emotion and trust that you can deal with a situation and that you will be OK. And as soon as you can have that trust, which also involves obviously connecting, then it's easier to let go a bit.

Anna Duschinsky - [00:37:48]

Yeah, it makes perfect sense. Absolutely. And I can see, of course, how and why you're doing so brilliantly in your own practice. In fact, we are bringing Natasha in as one of our coaches in the therapeutic coaching course now, because obviously she's got such great experience both from herself and all the work that you've done. So it's lovely to talk to you about this all these years later and for you to share your wisdom in hindsight, and I guess in retrospect of the journey that you went through.

It's interesting, isn't it, how as you move away from it, how it gets clearer and clearer and your perspective around it becomes even more in focus I think. Is that your experience of it too?

Natasha Todd

Yes. Yes, I think that's right. It's sort of, and I think that is part of the ongoing journey of life, is you start seeing more and more of the layers and everything more clearly. And in a way, it doesn't stop here. I think, I'm still on a journey and there's still loads I can be doing, but I have a much clearer picture of where I'm going and what I want and where I've come from.

Anna Duschinsky

I really like that theme because I think it's something that people say quite often is, OK, so once you're recovered like that's done right? I don't have to worry about any of this anymore? I know you'll probably be having those conversations with clients as well. But you kind of go, well, it's not exactly true. There is this ongoing process of self awareness, of self development, of continuing to tune in. It's not like we kind of get better and drop all of that. It becomes part of how we operate in the world. That is a really important piece to be aware of as well, whether or not people always want to hear that exactly.

Thank you so much for sharing your journey, your story with us. Really appreciate it. And I know there's some really important themes that people will really be resonating with out there. So I really appreciate it.

Thank you very much.

Natasha Todd

Well, thank you.

Anna Duschinsky

And thanks, everyone, for watching and listening.