



## Conscious Life presents

### Nervous System Regulation for Hormonal Happiness

Guest: Eliza Kingsford

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#### **[00:00:09] Dr Anu Arasu**

Welcome, everybody. I'm Dr Anu. I'm a hormone and functional medicine doctor and co host of the Hormone Super Conference. And today I'm joined by Eliza Kingsford. Eliza is a psychotherapist and she's a nervous system practitioner, which means that she helps people regulate their nervous systems. She's also the author of *Brain Powered Weight Loss* and has been featured on Dr Phil, Dr Oz, and NBC Health. Welcome, Eliza.

#### **Eliza Kingsford**

Thank you for having me. Excited to be here and chat with you today.

#### **Dr Anu Arasu**

Thank you. It's such a pleasure to have you. So, Eliza, tell us about the nervous system and how this relates to hormones.

#### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yes, I mean, you know, the nervous system has become a bit of a buzzword these days, I think, in the last couple of years or so, and I think most people don't really understand how it practically applies to them. "So why should I care about my nervous system? What does that even mean when someone says regulate the nervous system?", right.

And so, as the nervous system applies to hormones, I think one of the easiest ways to understand it is that you've got the sort of experiences of your life that actually have a physiological impact in the body, meaning your experiences of your life can actually change hormonal pathways or impact hormonal pathways based on how the nervous system is experiencing the environment around you.

So just by way of a quick example, let's say that you are a young child and there is significant trauma or there's significant chaos or something in your life, that that experience of what's going

on in your environment can actually change the signaling of your hormones, not only then, but throughout your life.

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Without this sort of conscious awareness of it, it can happen in the physiology, in the background. So I think that's maybe one of the most...I think that's the thing that people can relate to most is how hormones and the nervous system even interact.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

Totally. So you're saying it sort of leaves an imprint, and is this quite a big thing? Is this a common thing that you're seeing?

**Eliza Kingsford**

It is a big thing. It is the big thing is what I would say. After having done this work for over 20 years now, I would say, just anecdotally, there isn't a single person that I have worked with in my practice that has not struggled with some nervous system impact or nervous system dysregulation.

I would go as far as to say, if I had to put a percentage on it, 95% of people who are struggling in my practice have some trauma or chronic stress or acute stress that has impacted their nervous system in some way. And so until we address that at the nervous system level, they stay stuck in these patterns and the things that are getting in the way of whatever it is that they want, right.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

And what does that look like when someone is stuck in one of these patterns?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah, certainly it looks unique and different for everyone, but I think one of the beautiful things that can happen when people understand the language of the nervous system better is that it gives them a way of describing what has been happening in their system, in their body that they couldn't understand.

And so what we do with nervous system work, where we start, is helping people understand the language of their own unique nervous system. And we do that by giving some education about what is happening in the physiology, why it's happening, sort of the natural progression of our body, the way that it was developed or the way that our bodies evolved in order to protect us and keep us alive.

So we do a little bit of education, understanding what's happening in the body, and then we tie it to their own personal experience so that they can understand the sort of the language or the flavor of their own nervous system.

**[00:04:53]**

And once those two things are accomplished, then they can start to become aware of, "Oh, wow, how often do I get activated into sympathetic dominance?", "Oh, wow, how often, and in what places, in what environment or with which people do I get activated? Do I get shut down", right.

When they start looking at it from the lens of "What am I experiencing in my system versus what is the story I've been telling myself about other people or about me or about environment?". So we forget about story and we focus on the system.

And when we can do that we can start bringing a lot more awareness to kind of how they're moving throughout their lives, how they're experiencing their lives, because what ends up happening is if we don't understand what's happening in our system, our brain is designed to make meaning of every experience.

So by the time we've made a story of our experience, a lot of stuff has already happened in the nervous system, and we miss this opportunity to change because we've made this story, and we get stuck in these stories. So to go all the way through with your question, people stay stuck in their behaviors because they're stuck in their stories, and that becomes homeostasis. That becomes safety. My story, my same behaviors, the same perceptions I have of things, that becomes safety.

If we can look at it from a different lens and hit it from a different angle, that's where we have the opportunity to disrupt habits, to disrupt things that we don't want to do anymore that we've been doing our whole lives. And the nervous system provides us, sort of, the window to be able to do that.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

Amazing. So it's like re-finding safety in the body.

**Eliza Kingsford**

Exactly. Yeah, you said that beautifully. That's the entire goal. It's not that we're always in safety, but that we can understand what safety feels like to us so that that becomes our benchmark going, "Does this feel safe or does this not feel safe?", right?

And so the goal is not to always be in safety, but the goal is to be able to recognize what people, places, things, situations, environments, knock us out of that feeling of safety and address it through the lens of the nervous system rather than through the lens of the story or context of the environment.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

And are there some experiential exercises that you do with people?

### **[00:07:10] Eliza Kingsford**

Many, yes. There's many, many experiential exercises. In fact, that's where people find the most profound change, is when they can experience it themselves. So, for example, one of them is called notice and naming. So we go through the process of noticing your flavor of your nervous system and then being able to name it more often.

So you're sort of bringing awareness. You're kind of bringing to the surface the experience of your three nervous system states. The three main nervous system states. And the more we do that and the more they experience it, the easier it is for them to recall or to pull up, "Oh, this is the state that I'm in, and this is how I can address it differently".

So, by way of very quick example, we have a client right now who a few days ago said, "I was going through this situation, and it was very stressful and frustrating. And my habit is to reach for the Hershey kisses whenever this happens, right? But I was able to recognize that I was in activation and that my system was in sympathetic response and as soon as I addressed my system and gave it what it needed to help regulate itself, I didn't even want the Hershey kisses. The Hershey kisses didn't even come into my mind as something that I wanted".

And that's just an example of, as we experience life through the lens of the nervous system first, then it ends up changing outcomes, the things that, our patterns of behavior, the things that we previously did to soothe a dysregulated system that we don't need to do anymore.

So just in a lot of my work, people do that with food, right? But people do that with many, many things throughout their lives. That's what we all do. We respond to our environment through the lens of the nervous system. And we all have our ways of coping and dealing and managing a dysregulated system. Food just happens to be one of the most common ones.

### **Dr Anu Arasu**

And what could somebody do instead of reaching for the chocolate? How could they regulate their nervous system better?

### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yes. So back to your question about experiential activities. So first we go through a process of recognizing the states of your own system, and then we go through a process of identifying the resources or the skills or the things that help move your system from state to state. And so one of the things that happens pretty commonly is somebody will say, "Well, if you overeat or if you're choosing Hershey kisses, why don't you try something else? Why don't you try an apple or try a bath or try a walk or something like that?".

And while it's well meaning advice, the issue that many people have is that it's not relevant or unique to their own specific system. So, for instance, if someone is in activation, so their system is in sympathetic dominance, and they have a lot of energy and they have a lot of anxiety, and they have a lot of frustration, perhaps what their system needs at the time is not a bubble bath.

**[00:10:26]**

There's not enough energy. It doesn't match the state that they're in. Right. So if that person can understand, "I'm in a sympathetic dominance, what my state needs when I'm in sympathetic dominance is a walk, or exercise or loud music or dancing or whatever it is".

The point is, we need to make sure that our coping skills and the things we use to regulate our systems are unique to us. Not only are they unique to us, but also they're unique to what state our system is in. So while a lot of well meaning self care advice is thrown around, sometimes it doesn't land because it doesn't match up to the state that we're in or to what actually regulates our system, right? It might regulate yours, but maybe it doesn't regulate mine, right.

And so to your question, yes, there are many things that people can do, but it has to be something that they know works for them and that matches the state that they're in. When they're in shutdown is not the time to do something that has a lot of energy. When they have a lot of energy is not the time to do something to shut their system down, and vice versa, right. So we do a lot of exploring about what works for them personally and uniquely.

### **Dr Anu Arasu**

And how does all of this relate to weight? Because you've written a book about this, correct?

### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yes. So, brain powered weight loss was actually mostly written at the time, mostly written from the lens of cognitive behavioral therapy techniques, which are still absolutely valid and helpful when people are struggling with their weight.

But since then, my work has evolved to include the nervous system, because what we've learned is that people are - in order to accurately reflect on ourselves - so in order to have sort of accurate self reflection and be able to take in advice, in order to be able to utilize things like talk therapy or being able to look at who we're being and reflect on ourselves accurately, we have to have access to certain parts of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, in particular.

And when we are in a nervous system state of activation or shutdown, we don't have access to that part of the brain anymore. So people will find themselves really frustrated. "I know what I'm supposed to be doing, but I'm not doing it", right. "I know this is not good for me, but I keep doing it anyways".

Prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for decision making, executive functioning, being able to understand the consequences of our actions. In order to have access to the prefrontal cortex, we cannot be in a sympathetic dominant state or a shutdown state.

In other words, we can't be dysregulated in the nervous system, or we don't have access to that part of the brain that helps us make good decisions. So you can imagine, as somebody who struggles with their weight, who has a desire to make really good decisions, they do, they have a desire to, "I know what to eat. I know what I'm, quote, supposed to be doing, but I don't do it".

**[00:13:43]**

Well, we know that, step number one, we can't be in a state of dysregulation and also make really, really good decisions for ourselves at the same time, because our access to that decision making is turned down or shut off.

So, to your question, how does the nervous system pertain to weight? Well, we have to have access to certain parts of the brain that help us make good decisions. And dysregulation in the nervous system is one of the biggest barriers to being able to do that. So there are more, but that's a really powerful one, right? It all starts from there, and you had said it earlier, is there safety in your system? That's where we start. Safety first.

If there's not enough safety in your system, or if you're constantly moving into a dysregulated system all day long, then all those decisions that you want to make and good decision making process, you don't have as much access to that. So it can be really frustrating for someone who doesn't understand why they're not making the decisions they want to make. And this is a big key piece of that.

#### **Dr Anu Arasu**

I mean, we've all experienced that, haven't we, that with chronic stress, people's weight changes. I mean, sometimes they put on a huge amount of weight, sometimes they lose a huge amount of weight. But for sure, this state of chronic hormonal imbalance, chronic nervous system regulation, has huge impacts. And what I'm hearing from what you're saying is that if we don't do anything about it, we can actually just spiral downwards. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

#### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yes. It's such a beautiful question, and I'm really careful to answer it delicately because what I have seen in the progression sort of of my career and the different people that I have worked with is that what happens is that if we're in a chronic state of dysregulation or we don't ever learn to regulate the nervous system differently, it may not show up immediately. The impact may not show up immediately, but over time, the sort of chronic accumulation of that nervous system dysregulation ends up being things like autoimmune diseases, thyroid issues, issues with insulin and different hormonal imbalances.

The way I think about it, this is why I'm trying to be really delicate, because I don't want anybody to hear that if you have something that you're struggling with medically, then your stress caused it. However, the way I view it, the way that I think sort of lands most accurately, is that if you're driving a car and you've got your foot on the brake and the gas at the same time, the first year you do it, no big deal. The second year, you do it, no big deal. But over time, you are going to wear out those gas and brake pedals because you're putting too much stress and pressure on the car.

So it may not be immediate, but the accumulation of that over time tends to wear something out in the long run, right? So if we're not learning better regulation skills and how to regulate our system over time, there is some issue that tends to emerge and we don't exactly know what it is, but that's

what I have seen, is that the accumulation of that chronic stress over time turns into something, right?

**[00:17:37] Dr Anu Arasu**

So helpful. What's your favorite regulation? Nervous system regulation habit?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah. So my system, particularly just the way that I grew up and the things that landed for me, movement in nature is just part of my...that's part of my nervous system regulation. It lands for me, it works for me, it kind of always has. And so depending on what nervous system state I'm in, whether I'm in activation or shutdown, some type of movement always moves me into or out of that state, right? So it won't always be a certain type of walk, but it will always be a walk, right?

So, depending on if I'm really activated, it might be a big hike behind my house, and that will help regulate my system. If I'm in shutdown, it might be a very slow walk around the neighborhood. And that doesn't work for everybody if they don't like being active or if that doesn't feel good in the system, right.

So, for me, nature and movement is always part of my regulation. It's a joke in our household; my partner and I, he will say, "I think you need a walk!", right. He could tell that my system is in a place where I need some regulation. And so we'll say, "All right, time to go for a walk", that's it for me, definitely.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

Are there some tips that you think people listening could implement right now in their lives?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah, I would say sometimes it can feel really complicated. When we're using words like sympathetic dominance or activation or shutdown or even just hearing about the nervous system, it can feel really complicated. But one of the best things we can do is bring awareness to what feels safe in our system and what doesn't. And I use the term "safety". When I'm using it it's from a physiological perspective, not what we would think of as safety, as in, am I about to get hit by a bus? That's not what safety really means in this context.

The way that we can best understand it is, "Does it feel good or not good?". I know that seems like an oversimplification, but things that feel good in our system can usually be synonymous with safety. Things that don't feel good, maybe they feel dangerous or stressful or overwhelming or hurtful or pressed or anxious.

When things don't feel good, that's our indicator that there's a lack of safety. And a lack of safety usually, if not always, means some dysregulation in the system. So, I think one of the things that people can do easiest, most accessible, is just to recognize what people, places, environments, situations, bring those little pings of a lack of safety doesn't feel good, right.

**[00:20:50]**

We can know that that means there's probably some dysregulation in the physiology, and we would want to address that. So just bringing awareness to it is so powerful. And then secondarily, and probably separately, in a separate instance, we would want people to start to understand, "Okay, well, what helps me have more safety, right. What makes me feel good, and what things do I do on a regular basis that don't feel so good?". Just that information can help us start to become aware, "Oh, my system is living in a lot of lack of safety or a lot of safety".

We can just start to become aware of how we're experiencing our day, how we're going throughout our day. Of course, there's a lot more to that, but I think those are things that people can do really simply with just a little bit of awareness, right.

### **Dr Anu Arasu**

It's very interesting because you talk about what feels good in the body. And one of the things I've heard a lot from people is that sometimes if they've had trauma, they can attract more, that they can almost be this kind of spiraling downwards. And is it the case that we can just lose a sense of what feels good or that we are familiar with what doesn't feel good? What's going on there, from your perspective?

### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah. And that's where the layers of some complication come in because, for someone who has a history of trauma, what is true is they can absolutely - and they do often - get attuned to hyper vigilance, right. So, number one, we all have attunement in our nervous system, and we are attuned by the environment that we grew up in, all the people, places, situations around us, and we get attuned one way or another.

So if you think about somebody who has a lot of trauma or stress in their history and their background, what they were attuned to is perhaps being on high alert or hyper vigilant to the people around them, "What's going to be the feeling when my parent comes home? Is it a good feeling or a bad feeling, right? Am I ready for a fight? Am I ready for something difficult? That's not going to feel good?".

Their system, from a very young age, starts to pick up on what we call neuroceptive cues around us to be ready for whatever it is that they need to do to protect themselves. It's very non conscious. It all happens subcortically so below the level of their awareness, right.

But that little kiddo's system very much gets tuned to scanning the environment around them, looking for the danger because they needed to when they were a child in order to feel ready for their environment. The problem is, even when they move into a safe environment, the system already knows how to do that really well, right?



**[00:23:56]**

And it doesn't mean that automatically...It doesn't mean that automatically it changes meaning even if the kiddo gets into a safer environment or they have healthy relationships with people, or they grow up and grow out of whatever environment they were in, their system is still tuned to that hyper vigilance.

So, when you say "It just seems like people kind of attract these things", well, it's not on purpose, and it's through no fault. But quite literally, if your system is constantly looking out at the world around you and sensing and looking for danger, you're going to find that, right? You're going to find that danger much more easily than someone who feels safer in their environment and doesn't interpret things through a lens of danger. So again, it doesn't mean that it's somebody's fault or they're asking for it or they're causing it.

It does, however, mean that our systems become hypervigilant and attuned based on the environment that we grew up in. And the impact of that can stay with us well into adulthood. We learn what to expect from others. We learn what to expect from ourselves. We learn how romantic relationships go. We learn how friendships go. And if we're attuned to that negativity from the very beginning, then our system continues to look for that negativity in our lives to make sure it's protecting us from it, even when it doesn't have to.

So these are some of the impacts that a dysregulated nervous system can have into adulthood and it shows up in our everyday lives: food decisions, struggle with substances, struggle in relationships, struggle with parenting, struggle with work environment. I mean, all kinds of places.

### **Dr Anu Arasu**

Wow. So it's a whole resetting of, I think you use the word homeostasis at the beginning, but someone's baseline. It's a whole resetting of the body to find, perhaps maybe for the first time, safety in the body.

### **Eliza Kingsford**

Yes, and thank you for reminding me. That was the other piece of it that I wanted to say, is that to someone who grew up in an environment, something like that, where they needed hyper vigilance, that becomes homeostasis for them.

So at some point their system says, "Okay, in order to be safe and alive and thriving, this is what I expect". And so that dysregulation is their normal. It is, quote, "safe" in their body to have disruption, to have chaos, to have that negativity. Again, it's another adaptive survival mechanism in the body but the body moves its homeostasis to that baseline level, right?

And so to your point, when people are saying, I don't really know what feels good to me because perhaps they've spent their whole lives in this dysregulation because that felt normal to them.

So, yes, to answer your last question, it is about systematically guiding people to safety in the now and helping them feel safe in that environment. You'd be surprised at how many people say, when

we're looking for, sort of, love and connection or something, that people will say "That doesn't feel safe to be connected with someone" or "It doesn't feel safe to hear a compliment from someone".

**[00:27:34]**

And that's because their system was attuned to protecting themselves for that for so long. When they finally receive a compliment or something, it can cause such dysregulation in the system so we have to gently and systematically bring more safety in. And again, we do that by a lot of awareness and evaluating the system and understanding what feels good and slowly turning the dial this way, right?

But I think people often are so hard on themselves, they feel like "I'm pushing someone away" or "I'm not doing it right" or "I'm messing up somehow". And when we can think of it from a different lens, "No, your system was tuned this way", and "your system developed this for good reason".

One of the guiding principles is that all of our behaviors are adaptive survival strategies, even though they don't make sense or even though we might not understand it. To this system, there was a reason why we developed that behavior, and it doesn't make it okay necessarily, we don't excuse behavior.

But if we can look at it from the lens of okay, "Why might my system be needing to do this in order to protect itself?", we can start to get really good information about how to build more safety there.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

When we talk about this, it just brings home how powerful, well, this whole conference is. But I mean, this subject of hormonal imbalance and nervous system dysregulation, because it shapes our entire reality in a way.

**Eliza Kingsford**

It does. It shapes our entire reality. That's not an overstatement.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

And where can people find out more about your work if they want to read a bit more or perhaps find out how you can help them?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah, absolutely, [elizakingsford.com](http://elizakingsford.com) is my website and on social, same Eliza Kingsford, pretty easy to find. I do a lot of teaching and talking about the nervous system and how to systematically start shifting it. But you said it so beautifully.

I mean, in my view, after having done this for 20 years, and learned a lot of different things along the way. The nervous system really is the ground zero for how we experience our lives. And if we can get better at it, we can absolutely change the entire experience of how we're showing up and how we're living. It's that powerful.

**[00:30:16] Dr Anu Arasu**

And can people get better? I mean, is it a hard journey or is it doable? What would you say to the people?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Absolutely doable. And I will even go as far as to say, people have tried so many things. And in my view, the nervous system piece is often the thing that people are missing in order to get better. And if we start from that foundational level of safety and move up from there, not only do people get better, they get better quickly. More quickly, because they can recognize all of the cascading events start. I mean, events, meaning all of the cascading choices and behaviors and the things that come after nervous system regulation.

So not only can people get better, but oftentimes they will say, "This is the thing that I have been missing in all of the other things that I've tried". What's even more interesting about the nervous system is that I've had many, many people will come in, they've tried everything, right? Like, that's kind of the tagline when people get to me, "I've tried everything". Once we do some of the nervous system work, they can go back and try many of the things they've already tried, and it will work differently, right?

So not only do they get better, but now the options are open to them of, "Oh, you can try this, and you can try this, and you can try this, and it'll all work differently!" because there's more regulation in the system, so it's beautiful. I always tell people in my life personally, there was a line of demarcation before I understood and knew about the nervous system and after, and there's sort of no going back. Once you understand its impact.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

How has it changed your life? Has it been significant in your own life?

**Eliza Kingsford**

It has been significant in my own life. I mean, honestly, it has changed communication with my partner. It has changed parenting with my child; she speaks sort of through the lens of her nervous system. It has changed the way I view people in my life, communication with clients, truly everything for the better, in my opinion.

And in my own system, it has allowed me to not only live more regulated, but understand in the times where I get dysregulated, how to bring myself back quicker, have more capacity and flexibility in the system. So my experience of life just has more peace in it. And then when I'm more peaceful, everyone around me that I'm co regulating is more peaceful. It just has this sort of cascading, rippling effect.

**[00:33:06] Dr Anu Arasu**

And last question, if there's any take home message for our viewers, what would it be? What's the one thing you'd want them to take home?

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah, I would say learning to...I think the two most powerful things people can do is, number one, understand the states of their own system; what are the unique flavors of your nervous system state? And number two, understand the resources that you have at your disposal in order to shift you between states.

Those two things can make a powerful difference in your life and I understand that there's more education needed behind that, but there are really, really, what's the word I'm looking for? There are really good trained nervous system practitioners, there's really valuable nervous system practitioners that can teach you what your nervous system states are and how to recognize what your regulating resources are.

You know, I do that, there's thousands of clinicians and practitioners in their field that do that. If you can find somebody that can help you understand your state and what resources you have, it can change your life just like that, just by understanding those two concepts.

**Dr Anu Arasu**

Eliza, I feel like you've picked us up and put us down in a different starting place and it feels so good. Thank you so much.

**Eliza Kingsford**

Yeah, thank you for having me. This was wonderful. Thank you.