



Conscious Life presents

Neurodivergence and Stress

Guest: Lee Harbour

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview, I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Lee Harbour, a member of the Psychology team at the Optimum Health Clinic.

He originally engaged with the clinic as a patient back in 2016 after suffering from ME/CFS. It was through this journey that he became aware that he had no relationship with his emotions, and the trauma that he was carrying.

Through therapy and joining Therapeutic Coaching practitioner training, Lee was offered a role at the clinic. Shortly after he discovered he's autistic and has ADHD, something he calls a huge revelation and a real catalyst for stepping into himself, and finding comfort in who he is.

While working at the clinic, he started to see common themes in neurodivergent individuals that he experienced in his own journey, and developed practical ways of supporting people from a place of intrinsic value. And reversing the theme of being broken or wrong, with the central question of, what if it was okay to be you? Lee Harbour, thank you so much for being with us today. I wanted to start with how do you view ADHD?

Lee Harbour

That's a really interesting question, and also quite a huge question to try to answer, but I like to try and make it as simple as possible. Rather than going into it, because it is a complex thing, or a complex way of being in the world, but it can be really helpful to have one simple central focal point, who then bounce off, not as a way to avoid the complexity, but one that can hold it.

This is the way I view all neurodivergence. I try to bring it back as essentially underlying all of it is a nontypical sensory experience of being in the world.

Depending then on the makeup of that nontypical sensory experience in the world, that then leads to different behaviors that would then be termed as Autistic, or ADHD, or Tourette's, or Dyslexia.

[00:02:16] Lee Harbour

The way I see ADHD is one flavor of that nontypical sensory experience of being in the world. Some of the pieces that make that up, is also another way of looking at it, is our brains filter out essentially the information in the world.

Our brains are what dictates what comes in, what doesn't come in, at what pace it comes in. I think what can be commonly seen in ADHD is that almost the filter is very open, lots comes in and it can feel very now.

An example of that can be say turning up to work in the morning, there can be a sense of, all of a sudden, everything that needs to be done that day can become very immediate in your mind. There can be the sense of, this is all here now, and I have to do this now.

That can be a helpful way of seeing the filtering of information. With ADHD, there's often that, it all comes in, and it all feels very immediate, and then that in itself is a very overwhelming experience. Then what we then see is ADHD traits are a reaction to that discomfort of everything coming in, and how to process that.

Alongside that there's also different ways of seeing the world as well. When you've got more information, or less information, or it's coming in in a different way, you will then potentially see things differently to those around you. ADHD people can be very creative and have different views and different ideas. I see as a nontypical sensory experience in the world, and then a nontypical layering of filtering of how that comes in.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. Absolutely, and also, it reminds me of when we have the trauma conference, it's not a joke but the thing that I always say with amusement, is that I've interviewed hundreds of people about trauma, and I always start with, what is trauma? And I get hundreds of different answers, not because there isn't an answer, but because each person answers that based on their lens, their area of expertise, their experience.

It's not that there's one answer, that any answer is wrong, or that if you can't define it one way, that it's not a real thing. It's that every person is going to have a different experience with it. While some things are overarchingly true diagnostically, the interpretation, as you were just speaking to, like your experience, and then the interpretations out of that nontypical experience are going to weigh in on what your conclusions are, and how your behavior is affected.

Lee Harbour

What's interesting about how I viewed it is, I'm ADHD and Autistic myself, and came... It's interesting I'm a very curious person, but from a what's my experience of it? I've done a deep dive into, what's my actual experience? What's actually happening here? I haven't really done much research around the literature and the science around it.

I'm actually a bit naive when it comes to the science of ADHD, but I think that gives a really nice perspective of then actually what is my experience? And how do I experience that?

[00:05:47] Lee Harbour

Then through working at the clinic, working with a number of neurodivergent clients, I was just seeing that lived experience was very... There were common themes that were occurring again and again and again. I was like, so this isn't just my ADHD experience, this is the same as other people.

I have read wider around the literature, and view different accounts on Instagram, it's the same experience just given, as you say, different lenses, different words. But it's essentially the same thing we're all trying to describe.

It's because it is multifaceted, you can then also come at it from different angles. We're all talking about the same thing, it's just how we describe the thing, using a different set of words that then land in a different way. The reason why I lean more towards that experiential piece is because really your experience is the only thing you do know is real, and do know is there, and what underlies a lot of ADHD, and neurodivergence, is a lack of trust in your experience.

If you can bring people back to really being curious of their experience, and rebuilding trust in their experience, it's quite an empowering shift. I don't intentionally avoid the science, it just keeps for me on a practical level, it becomes more pragmatic to just work with the experience. That's not negating any of the other viewpoints, because I think they're totally valid, and I have done reading into them. I think this lens is quite useful for genuinely helping someone in navigating their experience.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. So much of what you've already said, especially you earlier said something about when you come into work, and there's all of these tasks to be done that day, and the overwhelm of all of that, and an inability to sort, and prioritize, and manage what needs to be done.

I thought of the feedback that managers sometimes will give to people when they're being evaluated and it's, doesn't know how to prioritize tasks. That seems pretty unfair if you have a neurodivergent mind, it's like, yeah, that's how my brain works, I'm going to need some assistance in doing that, because my brain is not necessarily incapable, but that's just not how my brain works, that's not the strength of my brain.

I say that just to ask about the second separation wound, as you call it, and the trauma that can sometimes come with ADHD.

Lee Harbour

I think it sets up a shame cycle. Going back to that in psychology, it's often written about that we have this separation wound in childhood, where the moment we recognize that we aren't one with our mum, that we aren't one with our environment, we are a separate being. In acknowledging you're a separate being, you can start to recognize that things become conditional. You start to get that sense of, okay, if I do this, I'm loved. If I don't do this, then I'm not loved. That's seen as a very big piece that people work through that trauma, essentially for their whole life, there's always things going on.

[00:09:10] Lee Harbour

Whereas with a neurodivergent mind, you go through that, and then you start to notice, well, actually, people don't experience me the way I experience the world, and start going to school and your peers see things differently, or they find things really easy, that you find really hard. You just start to notice, get this pervasive feeling of, I'm different, and that I'm different very quickly turns into, well, I'm wrong.

Then what that does is it shuts down all curiosity. When you're a child, it's really hard to be introspective, you can't be introspective and curious. What it does is it shuts down that sense of even knowing that there's something wrong, and that you might even need to ask for help. You just start pushing through, and masking essentially, you cover up that you're different, and then within that, no one really knows you're different or struggling.

All you get, is those things of like, oh, could do with better timekeeping, isn't organized, fidgets too much, talks too much, is distracted easily. It creates this further deepening of, I'm wrong, I'm wrong, I can't do this properly, I need to be better.

Then what I often see at the clinic are people that have been diagnosed as adults, like I was myself, at that point people come in and say, I was there myself, this sense of needing to be fixed. I thought I was totally wrong and broken. I can spot it straight away, people will say things like, I need someone to whip me into shape. I need someone to give me a good kick up the backside.

Straight away, I start getting a sense of someone that's that harsh on themselves, then I think going to the experience, like going back to the office example, the way you can start... The rejection can just happen in every moment through the day, they become so deep and entrenched that your whole day is literally just lived in shame and frustration.

Perhaps, often people with ADHD struggle to go to bed on time, so you wake up in the morning before work, you're tired, you're already angry with yourself because you didn't go to bed early enough, and then you can't find your car keys to leave, then you're late for work because you've been struggling find anything. All the way on the way to work, you're telling yourself what idiot you are because you lost your car keys. You get into work and then you're already overwhelmed, and then you're hit with the task of the day, and it's this sense of overwhelm.

You've got the genuine overwhelm of the sensory experience, but then you've got this layer of constant judgment, constant needing to fix yourself. That's another layer of stress. It's that cycle. You are swilling around in shame and trauma essentially, you're retraumatizing yourself perpetually through that experience.

Meagen Gibson

That's really the lens through which, and why we're talking about this, is this stress cycle, whether it be outside induced, inside induced. You talked about when you get diagnosed, and even if a child has an intervention early. I say that word intervention, I don't mean like a bunch of people coming together, I mean intervention, and trying to help a child succeed, and get them the support that they need.

[00:12:35] Meagen Gibson

You don't have that self-objective evaluative characteristic that you would by the time you're in your mid-twenties. Like you were just saying, you can't reflect upon your neurodivergence as this thing that just makes your brain work. All you can think is, I struggle in class and everybody makes fun of me, or whatever the situation is. It's not until adulthood, so regardless of when you get diagnosed, in adulthood there's still a reckoning to be made in your relationship to the ADHD.

Lee Harbour

It's your whole relationship to yourself really. To think about that stress cycle, if you're constantly rejecting yourself, you're creating cortisol and adrenaline, you're creating those stress hormones that are moving through you, and then that makes tasks even more difficult.

You've already got this difficult sensory experience in the world, and now you've got the additional difficulty of judging yourself all day. Then you've got the third difficulty of the constant stress hormones, that are also very uncomfortable to have moving through your body.

I think it's that piece of the first step you can make to change in your relationship with yourself, is a place of making sense of your experience. Because if people just see ADHD as just a list of symptoms, it doesn't really explain why they're experiencing those symptoms. There's still a sense of well, what do I do with this? Whereas if you really know, oh, gosh, actually so much information comes in my brain, that it makes sense that I find it really hard to remember when to put where I put my keys, because my brain is doing a million things, and it doesn't really care where I put my keys.

Or if you get so excited by something that your brain just gets hooked on it, and then you don't go to bed on time, and it's making sense that, okay, maybe I... Starting to make sense of the way you're behaving, or reacting, or showing up in the world, is the first step of being able to accept yourself.

A couple of examples I've had with people, is often you hear people saying that they find it really hard to remain present in a conversation, and they feel really bored in a conversation, so they feel like they're awful people for it.

Whereas I reframe it as well, it sounds like you're trying way harder than the other person to be in the conversation, because it's much harder for you. If you can acknowledge how hard you're working to do supposedly simple things, you can start to give yourself a bit of a break of, oh maybe, gosh, actually these things are really hard.

What often comes with ADHD, because a lot can be spoken about, as in think about the positives. What are the positive attributes? I think that's really important, not from a place of, just focus on the positive and the bad stuff will go away.

Meagen Gibson

It's not the positive psychology bypassing part.

[00:15:42] Lee Harbour

It's about seeing the balance of your whole self of, okay, there's stuff over here, and we can often focus on the things we can't do well. Because what can often be the picture in ADHD is the things that we can't do well are the stuff that 95% of the population do without thinking.

Then there's stuff that we can do incredibly well that only 2 or 3% of the population can do. We just park that like it doesn't matter, we're just like, oh no that doesn't. If you can be, well actually no, I'm just a fairly fine-tuned machine, like a sports car. It's really good at doing stuff, but you can't take it on country roads because it will really struggle. I don't think that's a perfect metaphor, but it's this idea of seeing the whole of yourself.

I've worked with people who are incredibly successful and do some amazing things, yet they're totally hung up about the fact that they can't do their tax return on time. That's what's the focus of their mind. Whereas if you can start to make sense of your experience of, oh, actually, the reason why I can do this, big picture thinking, and I can have this amazing creativity, is because my brain lets in loads of information.

Then the flip side of that is that it makes small, more menial tasks feel impossible. If you can really see that, then I guess to me, that's the first step of, oh it makes sense that this is my presentation in the world.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So much of what you're saying, and why we're talking about it, is because it's important to help other people understand that. For me in particular, this is normal, this is a normal experience. I have two neurodivergent kids, and we're constantly talking about, "Well it makes sense that you struggle to do this because of XYZ, or this is how your brain works."

They're very differently neurodivergent, to keep my life interesting. The one procrastinates a ton, he's incredibly autonomous and very self-sufficient, and responsible when it's things he's really interested in, and everything else is going to get procrastinated. It's a huge form of frustration for him, he hates it.

To be able to reframe it for him and be, "Okay, this is just part of how you don't struggle to do this, or this, or this, in great and wonderful ways. But algebra is a struggle for you, guess why? Because it's not fun, algebra. Of course, it makes a lot of sense that you struggle to remember to do your algebra homework. Come on, man."

Lee Harbour

I think it is that, and people flog themselves because it's like... My one is I can't do recurring meetings, if someone tells me a meeting is done fortnightly, I just can't work out, I don't know why, I still don't know that, I just can't work out how to... I'll put the first one in, I sit there and I'm like, one week, what week is it? I can't work out what week it is.

[00:18:42] Lee Harbour

Yet I know I can do lots. I think it's the incongruity that people really struggle with, is that how can it be true that I'm intelligent if I can't do these simple tasks? I think humans... I like this from existential psychotherapy, is this idea of being a human is one of living in the world in inherent contradictions.

As humans, we want a clean narrative of either I'm a clever person, or I'm not a clever person, or I'm a motivated person, or I'm not a motivated person. With ADHD you get these real contradictions. I often have the energy where I want to do something equally as much as I dread doing it.

That's a very weird experience to hold in your body. But if you can start to be open to that, hey this is my reality, and perhaps that's okay. I guess what you start doing, is you start shifting from that stress cycle, because you're starting to connect, that's one of disconnecting.

In every moment we can either choose to... This is how fragmentation happens, we can either choose to reject our experience, and we push it away and we say, "no, I don't want that." Or we can become curious, and open to it, and say, "Okay, this is difficult, this is uncomfortable, perhaps wish it wasn't this way, but actually I can connect to this, and I can open to this, and let it in."

That's the shift, and coming back to how the hormones... You move away from the stress hormones, and start moving towards the more connection hormones of oxytocin, serotonin, gaba, and things that make your body feel good, and make you feel good in the world, rather than leaving you in perpetual stress.

That can feel very... Sounds very simple to say, okay, I'll accept this. I guess the way it works is that if you lose your car keys, you can't find your car keys in the morning, rather than giving yourself a hard time all the way to work. What that would look like is you just going, okay, it's happened again, not ideal, but it's okay, I've found them now. It's that being really patient with yourself, and being okay with it.

One of the stumbling blocks to that is that, what I've seen a lot, and this I certainly saw this in myself, because there can be such a lack of trust in the underlying self. One of the objections that always comes up to this is, well I do need to do these things, so if I start accepting myself, then I'll completely go off the rails, and I'll never be anywhere on time, and I'll be rubbish at this, and I'll be rubbish at this. There's such a fundamental lack of trust.

I guess the underlying question is always, what if it was just okay to be you? What you come up against there is, no it's absolutely not okay to be me, I have to make myself better at this, I have to do this.

Whereas what I've noticed is the absolute opposite, is that when people turn towards themselves and connect, they get some space. They can be with their experience, they can breathe, their body moves into a different physiology, and you're not at war with yourself. Then you are present with the tricky sensory experience in the world, but you haven't got the stress hormones on top of it, you haven't got the judgment on top of it, you've taken away a fairly big chunk of what makes things difficult.

[00:22:11] Meagen Gibson

What you just said is so relatable to so many people, even if they're neurotypical. That feeling of, if I allow this to be true, and if I accept this, then the whole... The floodgates will open, and I won't be able to stuff it all back, the snakes will be out of the box, and I can't put the lid back on. Such a relatable thing in so many different ways.

And that self-trust of opening the box, maybe one snake falls out and you're like, okay, there's a mess, but I can clean it up. Talk about bad metaphors, I'm talking about snakes in a box, we're doing great with our metaphors.

That self-trust piece, especially if you've encountered daily friction with the outside world, and the way that you work, and your inside environment, and how you're relating to yourself, I'm sure we're talking micro-acceptance acts every day, and self-trust?

Lee Harbour

It has to start small. Part of the saying it has to is, I don't know if this will always be the case with everybody, but what I notice is that you start to reverse the shame cycle. But in doing that the shame comes to the surface. If you do do something differently, as you start to change and you start to accept yourself, what you might notice is the feelings of shame come to the surface. Because it's the constant monitoring and flogging of self that is fueled by shame, but it stops you feeling the shame.

Whereas when you start to accept yourself, you let the lid off the shame, and then you can start to process the shame and the trauma that sits. It needs to be slowly, in the sense of I don't see it as just a self-acceptance journey, I do see it as a trauma healing journey. Because you've gone from a place of feeling... I guess talking about different definitions, definition of trauma is an experience that you're overwhelmed by, you didn't have resources for, and you had no one to talk to about it. That completely ticks all the neurodivergent boxes as a child. Again, that's to different degrees for different people, but I think it's something to consider.

Another piece that a lot of people with ADHD experience is the resistance to things. There can be this very physical sense of, I guess what you would call procrastination, but essentially that's resistance to doing something. The way I like to reframe that is, if you've been told from a young age that when you try and do things, you're doing it wrong, or you're stupid, or it's essentially a place in you that's trying to stop you doing these things, because it's afraid you're going to be shamed for it.

Some ADHD stuff out there is like, buy this journal that will make lists and stuff. I imagine on some level that's helpful, but that's still a sense of there's something to fix. Whereas actually, if you can move toward the resistance, okay, maybe it's okay to procrastinate, can I welcome this procrastination?

Again the fear is, if I welcome the procrastination, I'll never do anything. Whereas actually, it is just a message from your body saying, are you sure you want to do this? If you can really let that through, and let it be there, then it is energy, and you can settle.

[00:25:48] Lee Harbour

I guess all of this sounds fairly simple, but to put into action, it is difficult because you are turning the tide of moving away from yourself, to one of letting it in. I think it's one of those things that once the idea lands, I think it lands for good. It can be tricky to get to land and to get to stick, and it can be a tricky journey to unpick.

I think once it's landed, maybe my brain, maybe it makes sense of this, and you start to become curious without even needing to put effort. It is something that starts to gather its own momentum. But at the beginning, it is like a tanker ship that does need to turn 180 degrees, and that's a lot of work, but once it's turned, it will just slowly keep going on.

Meagen Gibson

It's funny to hear you describe that because I was actually saying that exact, not that exact example, but this idea of millions of micro-moments, and then it feels like it happened all at once. When we're talking about the effort to make change, and how monumental each tiny movement feels at the very beginning, and then you're like, I don't remember why that was so hard. It feels easier. It's not like it's over, I don't have to deal with it anymore. It's just that used to feel so hard, and now it doesn't anymore.

Lee Harbour

I think it's almost like a fundamental rule of change. Our brain doesn't want us to change because our brain is like, even though things aren't perfect, we're surviving. Our brain is like, well, just keep doing it because you're alive. All you need to do is do something as simple as walk a little bit slower, start recognizing when your brain's going, why are you doing this? Why are you walking slow? It's like it doesn't take a lot to provoke your brain to kick in and start telling you to go back to what's normal.

If you go into it recognizing those rules, because again, it can be quite disheartening if you do something that's really positive on this journey, and it leaves you feeling quite uncomfortable. But again, if you can understand that, and make sense, or make sense to feel uncomfortable, then it becomes easier. Then, as you say, once you've moved forward, you look back and you think, oh, gosh, I've made quite a lot of progress.

I really do believe in this approach because something I've seen, another common trend I've seen with people that speak around all neurodivergence, is that really the key piece that changes things for people is that building self-acceptance.

That doesn't just mean, can I accept myself for being ADHD? Can I accept myself being autistic? It's the true moments of being invited to do something and your body going, I absolutely don't want to do that. And you being able to be honest and say, this doesn't work for me, that's self-acceptance.

Self-acceptance isn't looking in the mirror, and telling yourself you're great. Self-acceptance is that you do something that you feel frustrated by, and you can accept the frustration. You can accept that things are difficult, you can accept that things are uncomfortable, and within that it is all about things settle down.

[00:29:14] Lee Harbour

Rather than trying to fix anything, it's about letting yourself settle, so you can assess yourself from your genuine experience in the world, rather than just through a lens of your own judgment of yourself in the world.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I want to come back to the hormone piece just for a second, because if somebody is seeing this session for the first time, and they're not clear about all the systems that are impacted by the hormones produced by stress. How will you feel that in your body, especially in a neurotypical way? What are all the systems that are impacted by stress via hormones?

Lee Harbour

Your whole body is affected by stress, and it really can be a full-body experience. If you think about the feeling of overwhelm, it is a sense of everything is too much. That can be like a pressure in your head, your adrenals, you can even feel the throbbing. You can sometimes feel throbbing through your body, because you've got adrenaline and cortisol flowing. You can feel very overly reactive. You can get hot face, or you can get really cold, you can actually feel frozen, you can feel completely incapacitated, or you can just feel incredibly anxious.

It can show up as anything really that feels like things are hard. When you're not full of stress hormones, things should feel okay, and you should feel like you can just flow. Obviously there can be challenges, but you feel okay. Whereas when there's stress hormones, there is this sense of that this is too much. Sometimes that too much leads you into a hyper-arousal of fight or flight, and other times it leads you into a hypo-arousal of being shut down.

Living in that place perpetually shifts your balance point in your body. Your nervous system is what sets pace in your body, and if you're constantly in stress, your nervous system just parks itself there, and then that puts a lot of pressure on it.

Then all of the symptoms we see in ADHD get exacerbated because living in perpetual stress is almost living in some form of ADHD itself anyway. Because you become hyper-vigilant, that's essentially what stress is. You become more vigilant to your surroundings, so more information is coming in, it's coming in quicker, your brain is seeing it as a threat. It's all the things that make your experience feel faster, and more uncomfortable, and intense.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I wanted to really validate that for people because stress wreaks havoc. Anything that is working to keep you alive, bare minimum is impacted by stress, your digestion, your breathing rate. You did a great job of explaining to people what that's going to actually feel like. Like your face is flush, or you're tingly, or all of those things are happening that are the things you'll notice, it might take hours for you to notice that you're not digesting properly, and all of the other things that come down the line, that aren't necessarily response and reaction. Thank you for outlining all of those.

[00:32:38] Lee Harbour

To take it further, chronic stress does lead to burnout. My journey through this was starting with one of fatigue and developed into ME, looking back it was autistic ADHD burnout. It was this piece of, if you can't be yourself in the world, then it's incredibly stressful, and your body can only hold that load for so long before something tips out of balance.

Autistic and ADHD burnout are very real things. Not just scare people, but that can be the eventual outcome of that constant... Because you're essentially stepping beyond what your body can actually do, you're stepping beyond the resources your body has.

Meagen Gibson

I'm glad that you brought that up because that is part of your background, and part of the work of OHC, and can't be overlooked. There's a lot of different ways that people can arrive at that high stress over-functioning that's going to totally take out your system. And neurodivergence is certainly one of them, if not accepted and integrated into your life in a way that helps you respond, in a way that works for you.

Lee Harbour

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

Lee Harbour, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Lee Harbour

Currently it would be through the clinic. I work for the psychology team at the Optimum Health Clinic. I wouldn't say I specialize in working with neurodivergent individuals, but I think it's definitely an area I'm developing, and would like to move into further. There is a large crossover between fatigue and neurodivergence. The fatigue community is overrepresented by neurodivergent individuals. It would be a case of coming through the clinic, and if you particularly wanted to work with neurodivergence and that side, then you could request to work with myself. That would be the best way currently.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Lee Harbour, thank you so much for being with us today.

Lee Harbour

You're welcome, it's a pleasure to share this, I want people to be able to know that there are things they can do to, be empowered. It's not always looking for an expert, there are things we can do ourselves, it's we need the right piece of guidance.

[00:35:23] Meagen Gibson

And you've given everybody plenty of things to start with today, thanks again, Lee.

Lee Harbour

Great, thank you.

Alex Howard

I hope you enjoyed watching this interview with one of our practitioner team here at the Optimum Health Clinic. You may not be aware that the Optimum Health Clinic is a sister organization to Conscious Life, which is hosting and producing this online conference. If you want to find out more about the work that we do here at the Optimum Health Clinic, you can request a free information pack. You can also book a free discovery call by going to our website, which is www.theoptimumhealthclinic.com. Thanks for watching.