



Understanding our nervous system

Guest: Naomi Dake

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[00:00:10] Kirsty Cullen

Hi. Welcome to the Sleep Super Conference. My name is Kirsty Cullen and I'm CEO of the Optimum Health Clinic, and we are a UK based clinic specializing in fatigue related illness.

It's my pleasure to join the conference today to discuss how psychology tools might be helpful in improving the quality of our sleep. I'm joined by Naomi Dake, who is one of our own psychology practitioners here at the clinic. Naomi herself was previously diagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome and actually worked with the Optimum Health Clinic to regain her health.

Her successful journey with the clinic then sparked a change in career. And following completion of further studies, including the Therapeutic Coaching program, Naomi joined the team at OHC, where she is currently supporting many clients with chronic and long lasting fatigue. Naomi, welcome today.

Naomi Dake

Thanks very much, Kirsty.

Kirsty Cullen

So yours is a unique experience, but one, I suppose, that typifies practitioners at OHC, whereby, following your own health journey, you've actually joined the clinic and now you're supporting people with their health concerns. How does that feel as a journey of your own?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, it feels really amazing, actually. It feels a privilege to be in a position to be able to help other people. Having been through this journey ourselves, like the rest of my team, my colleagues, it's really, really important that there's an opportunity for us to work alongside people, partner them and really support them on their own journeys, which, again, as you said to me, are all unique.

But we know that there's a raft of, a wealth of, tools and practices that can really help people to recover from those types of conditions. And it's great to be in a position to be able to help people with that.

[00:02:14] Kirsty Cullen

Superb. And we are very lucky to have you and your expertise and your specific experience as well. I know it resonates really directly with the clients that we speak to. So if we turn our attention to sleep, which of course, sleep disturbance is something that we see in the clinic all of the time, I wonder if you could start by talking us through the role of the sympathetic nervous system and how that impacts our sleep and our sleep quality.

Naomi Dake

Yeah, sure. So we work mainly with the nervous system within the psychology team. Obviously, our colleagues on the nutrition side work with a much broader set of systems across the body. Our focus around the nervous system is really about helping people to understand it and also then to be able to bring it back down and to calm it and reset it.

Because essentially what's happened is in all of our cases as humans, the nervous system is there to protect us and to be on alert and look for potential signs of danger and to seek safety in order to be able to keep us alive, to help us survive. And so actually, when the body is going into a kind of stress response, we know that is incredibly normal and helpful and healthy.

However, what's happening when we work with clients who have, let's say, fatigue related conditions, we know that the nervous system has become chronically stuck at a high alert place of stress. And so the sympathetic nervous system has moved into what we call a maladaptive stress response. Instead of being able to come back down after a potential stress situation or threat or danger of some form, actually it's stayed at quite a high level and from that point it's normalized a state of stress as just what we do.

And that's what we tend to work with with clients, to help them to understand what's happening, what's contributed to that situation, but also what we can do to bring that back down again and ensure that the nervous system can trigger into parasympathetic nervous system.

Kirsty Cullen

Okay, ultimately, obviously sleep is of huge importance in terms of repair and recovery, particularly where there's a chronic illness involved. I wonder if you could speak to how that stress, anxiety or maybe even trauma directly impacts sleep.

Naomi Dake

Yeah, absolutely. As you say, sleep is so essential for healing and repair, but it is one of the common areas that we find in clients is disrupted and isn't working as effectively as it should for us. When the body is under a chronic stress response or a maladaptive stress response, what's often happening is the body, or the nervous system in the case that we're working with, has become overloaded and it's a natural response then for the body to start to shut down or dissociate in order to help the person to not be stimulated any further.

And so what we know and what we work with there is really understanding the loads on their boat. We use that analogy to help to see what's contributing to that stress response and what's keeping it high. And so we will look at things like the person's personality patterns. We look at some psychology subtypes that we define that often play out in long term behavioral patterns that can contribute to the stress response.

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We will also look at their emotions, their state, what state they're in most of the time during the day and what might be contributing to that, factors that could be influencing that. And that's really where we work to start to address what's contributing to those sleep disturbances.

Kirsty Cullen

And because sleep disruption is so prevalent in our particular client group, we can see a range of issues, can't we, in clinic? How would you commonly see those play out? So with a client presenting to you in the clinic room, what types of issues of sleep might they describe?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, so some of the common ones tend to be sleep disruption, so waking up a lot during the night or struggling to get to sleep, that's a very common one. You're essentially not getting enough sleep through the night. Or going to bed later because the system is activated and is struggling to drop down the brain waves into those lower gears that enable the body to relax into a deeper level of sleep.

We will often see insomnia, we will see waking up early and not being able to go back to sleep. Anxiety is a very common one and all of those things are obviously impacting upon the quality of the sleep that the person is getting and the quality of rest during the day as well. Those are probably some of the most common ones.

Kirsty Cullen

And I know certainly I have seen a number of times typical what I would call fatigue night owls where that circadian rhythm has flipped completely. So whereby I have a client who really can't sleep maybe until 03:00 or 04:00 in the morning and they'll sleep through then and they'll perhaps not wake up until midday.

But they find it very difficult to break that reversal pattern and restore a sort of normal circadian rhythm whereby they're waking up in the morning and attending to the day and then being able to get to sleep at around 10:00 at night. Do you see that as well Naomi? Is that something you come across?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, we do and I know from my colleagues that they see a similar thing as well. It's very common that because people's patterns and stress during the day, their emotions, their thought patterns, their level of what we might call fight or flight or freeze within their system, that's covered within the polyvagal theory of stress, what we're seeing then is that playing out through the day and making it very difficult for the body to shift state and be able to calm itself down in time for what we would normally recommend, those sorts of bedtimes between 10, 11 at night, trying to get that a little bit earlier if we can, helps to get some of those pre midnight quality of hours into our system.

And yeah, we often see people going to bed early hours of the morning, sleeping through to lunchtime as you say. But what we're doing and what we're seeing in that case is people are missing

some of those important daylight hours in the morning that could be a really good opportunity to begin their day connected with nature.

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Waking up gradually, trying to, particularly through autumn, winter, trying to access as much of that natural daylight as possible. Which we know really is helpful for the brain and for the body to absorb as part of its natural mix of healing ingredients that it needs. It's a very individual thing. We recognize that.

There are certain things that help with that and there are certain things that can be put in place in terms of those evening rituals and practices that may be useful to help people, to help their system to calm down. I'm very happy to talk through some of those as we go as well.

Kirsty Cullen

And light is an incredibly important sleep regulator and it's something we'll touch on more in a moment. And I know that Martina, in our nutrition chat she's going to talk a little bit more about it.

I guess the other sleep pattern that we might see in clinic as well is that desperate attempt to try and catch up with sleep. So the practice of daytime napping, so maybe taking a couple of naps during the day or a nap into late afternoon, which can be a typical energy crash point, but of course, potentially then that disrupts a descent into normal bedtime and can knock that on by a couple of hours as well, can't it?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, absolutely. And fully understand why when we have those crashes, we can feel as though there's almost no option but to sleep. What we found with clients and certainly what I've worked on with clients, is looking at different ways of getting some quality rest in those periods regularly through the day. That perhaps aren't just sleep, that actually are other practices.

It might be a form of meditation. It might be having a gentle walk, outside if possible. Or sitting outside, connecting with nature, if the weather allows for that. It could be doing a relaxation, it could be doing something creative, actually, that's very absorbing, that doesn't take a lot of mental energy. I've actually been doing some mindful coloring myself and that's been really nice and quite cathartic, quite relaxing. For some people I know they really enjoy putting on some gentle music, some background music, or maybe even doing some restorative yoga.

I think those are some of the other practices that can give our body an equivalent quality rest without having to be sleep, which then, as you say, can disrupt the nighttime routine and pattern. So I think we definitely try and encourage people to think a little broader in terms of what else they could potentially do in those slots during the day.

Kirsty Cullen

And I suppose those practices encourage a positive association with rest as well, don't they? Because there's also that horrible pattern whereby sleep evades us. And so we actually become quite obsessed with the business of sleep. So we start to clock watch, we start to note down the amount of sleep hours. And I've certainly seen clinically an understandable obsession growing around sleep which ultimately negatively impacts on the whole business of sleep.

[00:14:13] Naomi Dake

Yeah, it really does. It unfortunately becomes a bit of a vicious circle and I think we can probably all relate to that in some shape or form. I know I've seen myself looking at the clock and thinking, oh goodness, I've now only got 4 hours sleep, or 5 hours, 3 hours sleep, whatever it may be, before the alarm.

Definitely what helps is to try and, certainly in our case we focus on everything else around sleep so that we can help to build a more positive relationship with sleep. And for us, I think what we know as a team and as a clinic is that if we can improve or reduce the level of stress, improve the quality of healing within a person's environment and their internal system, their own body, then actually sleep tends to follow.

And that's what we've experienced in clinical practice for a number of years, that if we take the focus off sleep itself and look at all of the things from a psychology perspective that would be around thoughts and beliefs, it would be around how we're responding and relating to our own emotions and how we're processing those. What our personality patterns draw us to and prompt us to do through our behaviors. How we're seeking a sense of meaning and validation and purpose in our days in our life.

Those sorts of things, I think, create more opportunities for healing and therefore a calmer nervous system, which then gives you a better chance of quality sleep as a result of that. So I think that's something that we've certainly seen often in the client group, that it's taking that negative association away from sleep and focusing proactively on what we can do in all of the other areas that we can control.

And then trusting the body that it knows how to do that, knows how to heal and it knows how to sleep and rest and repair. And we don't have to tell it how to do that, it will do that for itself. But our job is to create the healing conditions that enable the body to feel safe enough to drop down into being vulnerable, which is what we are when we're asleep. And if we can do that, then it really helps the body to be able to take over and do what it knows how to do.

Kirsty Cullen

Perfectly summarized. And knowing that the sympathetic nervous system and activation of that system is so unhelpful for sleep then, how do we actually counter that? So how do we directly support the parasympathetic system to encourage that key rest and repair?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, so for us, the kind of work we do, we're focused all around how to calm and reset the nervous system. And that is really around how to nurture and be more in the parasympathetic nervous system. And for us, that means lowering the maladaptive stress response, knowing what's gone into driving that to be where it is, and working out with each person what creates their own version of a healing state.

And that links back into Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory, the safe and social state, the ventral vagal, that's where we're looking to help people to be, and that will be different for each person. But commonly there will be times where the body, for the most part of the day, is feeling safe. And it's

feeling that you're feeling in your system that you can engage with people, that you can relax, you can be calm, you can connect, you can feel grounded, you can feel positive emotion.

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And when we're in that state, we're not activated. So we're not in fight or flight, we're not in freeze. We're in a place where actually we know that fundamentally we're okay. And that doesn't mean that we don't have issues, problems, aches, pains, whatever it may be. But actually underneath that, we know that we're fundamentally safe and okay.

And for us, what we're doing is working with each individual to work out their own healing recipe, thinking about whether mental energy is going, what thought patterns are playing out, what beliefs might be supporting them or getting in the way. And we know that understanding both of those sides of the coin is really important. Do they have achiever patterns playing out, helper patterns, perfectionist patterns, controller patterns, anxiety patterns?

Those are really incredibly common coping strategies that we've developed from being incredibly young, certainly less than six or seven, but often it can be pre verbal. We can learn those ways of being to keep ourselves safe in the world, that actually when we get to adulthood, we realize that those things aren't quite so helpful anymore and they don't quite fit in terms of a response to a situation that we need now.

But looking at those can be really helpful to help people to gain the self awareness and the insights, to decide what's helpful, what's not, what might need to be brought back into balance. Because those things aren't wrong in themselves, it's just that we might have got them out of balance, we might be overusing them, so they've become almost overplayed or an overused muscle or strategy. So yeah, pacing is a really key one.

Knowing more about yourself, being able to really know your boundaries, know what's okay for you both from an energy perspective, but also behaviorally, emotionally, what are you prepared to accept and what do you actually want to say no to? What do you want to protect yourself from that you don't want in your life? What do you want to reduce in your life because it's perhaps not as good for you.

Things like emotional styles, we would look at that as an area to see how we are relating to our emotions. We would look at self care and we would look at, very holistically really, the whole picture of what's going on for that individual and help them to build that recipe that brings them back into that calm, safe and social healing state as much of the time as possible.

And one of the really good messages I'll just share is you don't have to be in that state all of the time to be well. Actually, you just need to be in it more than you're in the stress state. And that will be helpful in terms of sleep, but also in terms of general wellbeing as well.

Kirsty Cullen

And setting that expectation is really important, isn't it? To sort of avoid perpetuation of a perfectionist tendency that tries to artificially create that space all of the time. Which of course isn't realistic, is it?

[00:22:07] Naomi Dake

No, it's not. And I've tried, but I realized it doesn't work. And actually we don't need to do that. We don't need to get it right all of the time. We just need to be really aware of what takes us out of that calm, safe and social state and how to minimize those, how to reduce those and how to add things into our life that maybe we've not had before.

Things that nurture and nourish our own sense of wellbeing and our own sense of self worth as well. I think when we can find our own route to feeling loved and feeling safe then actually everything else kind of falls into place which obviously then includes our ability to relax and our ability to sleep well.

Kirsty Cullen

Superb. So let's talk about those tools then. So within our OHC toolkit, as we often refer to it as, what types of tools would you provide to your clients that they can use to help foster this state?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, so we use a range of different tools and strategies and techniques with clients to really ensure that they're as resourceful as possible. And that's our aim every day when we work with clients is to really empower them, to know what's happening for them. What's the puzzle, what are the different pieces of the puzzle for them?

And so some of the tools we will use, for example, would be things like Emotional Freedom Technique or EFT. Some people will know it as tapping. That's got a whole field of research and science behind it that proves how effective that can be from a really simple technique that everybody can use and that really helps us to, it's a bodybased tool, so it really helps our body to be able to process and digest and release emotions and the energies that are associated with emotions.

Because we feel them and we have them. What we don't know is always with clients how they're relating to those emotions and whether they're using coping strategies to avoid them because they're uncomfortable in some way. Which again is really common, for most of us we've probably never quite been taught how to deal with emotions. So having EFT is a really great resource to be able to do that.

We also use a technique called the STOP process which we use on helpful thought patterns. So that's very much a mind based tool which actually helps us to be more present and be more in our body and connect more into our sense of safety which is where we can access that safe and social healing state. But it really helps us to interrupt those unhelpful patterns when we can see those playing out.

And I think we can probably all relate to those types of patterns around mental tennis, perhaps some catastrophizing or snowball thinking. Sometimes we might just have a head that feels like a food processor, it's mind blending, it's got lots of things going on there. We know that the mind can only really hold about seven different pieces of information at any one time, sometimes less.

And so when it's trying to juggle between those things or it gets more than that, it can then find it very difficult to sort through that and then calm the nervous system because the thought pattern itself can feel like a threat or a danger that will trigger a stress response. So we're working really at mind and body. There are other techniques that we would also use and recommend.

So mindfulness meditation. Guided practices. We would always encourage body movement in whatever form that is possible for people, depending on wherever they are in their health and energy

level. But yes, anything from very gentle restorative, yoga practice or breathing. That's incredibly helpful. All the way through to walking, swimming, cycling, dance, whatever is important for that person, whatever they enjoy, importantly, I think is great.

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And anything that we can do outside, I think we would always encourage that connection with nature. That mindfulness comes so much easier when we can just focus on what's around us and get out of our heads and out of those thought patterns. Bearing in mind, I think I read that there's between 60 and 80,000 thoughts a day that we can have as humans on average. There's an awful lot of activity mentally going on that can be incredibly helpful to step away from. And I think mindfulness is one of those practices that helps a lot.

Last one I'll throw in is probably a gratitude practice. I think even if you think simply of three things each day that you're grateful for, even if it's a certain view or a certain glimpse of sunshine, or a chat with a friend or some time with a pet, or just having a moment to yourself, having half an hour to yourself with a nice cup of tea or coffee or whatever it may be. I think those sorts of moments, the simple moments, are the ones that work really, really well from that perspective, that positive psychology perspective.

There's probably a couple of other things that I could probably throw in, but I'll just pause there.

Kirsty Cullen

And obviously many of us don't live alone actually. So how important can it be to kind of co-regulate with other members of the house, with partners, around establishing good sleep patterns?

Naomi Dake

Yeah, hugely important. I think having that support network, that support system around you is incredibly important. And if you have got someone at home with you or whether it's a really good friend, whoever it may be, it can also be a pet. I know for sure, my cat helps me with this. But being able to co regulate with somebody who is in a calm and safe and social state, who's feeling calm and relaxed, I think that's incredibly grounding for our nervous system

and incredibly helpful and healing, actually, to be able to spend time with those people. If we can as much as possible, because that helps us as well as the work that we'll do to self regulate our nervous systems. It just benefits even more if we can co-regulate with other people as well. As we're co regulating that's taking us back into that safe, social, connected place. And I think as human beings, we know we're a social animal.

So whether you're introverted, extroverted, it's still all relevant. I think that we all want to feel a sense of belonging, connectedness and a sense of understanding and holding from those people around us that we feel safe with, that we trust. And that obviously has a real beneficial impact then on well being and sleep.

Kirsty Cullen

Absolutely. And Naomi, are there any specific case study examples that you're able to share with us that demonstrate the positive impact of working on sleep and improving that sleep quality?

[00:30:06] Naomi Dake

Yeah, sure. So I have a couple of recent examples that I've been working on with clients. One case, there's a lady who was experiencing quite a lot of high anxiety and really not sleeping very well at all. And that was obviously, as we know, lack of sleep will then feed anxiety, anxious thoughts and lead to symptoms, pain, aches, illnesses, lower our immune system and so on. So she was having a pretty tough time with that.

And what we worked on was we actually worked on helping her to connect to her own needs and to her own emotions. And we did some work on parts, actually, which are aspects of our personality that we all have, certain behavioral responses and strategies we've learnt, again, as very young children to develop and throughout our life to respond to certain situations, perhaps when we didn't have the full set of resources that we have today.

And by working with those and actually helping her to understand and to create her own healing recipe, what helps her to feel calm and relaxed and grounded, actually really started to make a difference. And what she noticed was that she was better able to set boundaries, she was better able to manage those relationships that weren't helpful for her in her life and create some appropriate parameters around those.

She was also able to develop a plan for what she wanted to do in her work life. And that involved making a number of changes that she had been anxious and worried about. And it led to her actually improving her sleep because she began to go outside more. She spent more time giving herself permission to do the things she enjoyed, like gardening and working on her allotment and reading and cycling.

And actually, as she then started to feel better about herself, the symptoms improved and she started to sleep better. So she had more energy. And actually she felt a lot more connected to herself and what she enjoyed. And I think she, like a lot of us, had grown up with the view that you should work hard and it was only through earning that that you could eventually do the things you wanted. But that was never happening in her life.

So being able to do those things unlocked a huge amount for her of safety and love and compassion for herself that enabled her to then prioritize her own well being and make changes that she needed to, which translated into improved health, improved sleep, improved ability to respond to things that could be stressful. So it wasn't that all went away and she was never stressed, it's just that she learned a more healthy way to respond to that.

And the anxiety dropped down considerably because her resilience and her belief in herself had increased. And it was a real pleasure to see how she was able to go through that and through supporting, working on EFT, the STOP process, parts work, it all really helped to create that healing environment for her that she needed.

Kirsty Cullen

I think what's so interesting about that case example is that fatigue, insomnia, anxiety can often feel like the ultimate example of a sense of loss of control. But actually what I'm hearing there was with the assistance of tools, there was a sense of self empowerment, there was a sense of getting back in the driving seat and being able to exert really positive control over what happened in the day, which resulted in, ironically, more control overnight and improved sleep, less anxiety, improved energy. So it's so interesting, isn't it, that switch in control perception almost.

[00:34:28] Naomi Dake

It really is, yeah, absolutely. And I've got other clients who have worked in similar ways. But as you say, very much about giving them control and empowerment over the things that they can influence and trying to worry less or interrupting those patterns, those unhelpful patterns around things they couldn't control or the things they might have been worrying about like not sleeping very well, or what other people were doing, what other people were thinking, what it might mean for the future.

All of those things they couldn't do anything about. But actually the things they could really make a difference to their sense of self and their sense of safety and of course their nervous systems would have ramped down and their stress response, their cortisol, adrenaline, all of that, was decreasing because they were giving themselves that anchor of safety by putting their energy and their focus on things that really did help and things that they knew made them feel good.

And that also meant dealing with the difficult problems and challenges and relationships in their life as well. That was a huge part of the work that we did, that we have to work through those things in order to come to the safety of the other side of them, but feel supported to be able to go through the process with that.

And it's by reducing those past loads, those past traumas, those past experiences, those relationships in the current as well that keep us in a stress response, and that those were the keys, really, to working with all of those clients and ultimately improving how they felt, how they felt about themselves, and also then how they were sleeping and how they were living their lives as well.

Kirsty Cullen

Naomi, thank you so much for sharing the benefit of your wisdom with us today, not only from a personal standpoint, but obviously from a clinical standpoint as well. It always brings the topic to life when we have case examples there.

If people would like to hear more about your work or find out a little bit more about what it is that you do and obviously the work of the clinic, where should we send them?

Naomi Dake

Sure. So it's been my absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me as well, Kirsty. Yeah, if people want to find out a little more about what we do, the website is www.theoptimumhealthclinic.com and we also have lots of content that's really interesting and exciting on various social media platforms. [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [YouTube](#). There's lots of videos I know on there from across the clinic on lots of different topics, so worth checking that out if people want to.

Kirsty Cullen

Wonderful. And I hope everyone has enjoyed listening today.