



Powerful Practical Strategies to Manage Stress

Guest: Dr Heidi Hanna

Alex Howard: Welcome everyone to this session where I'm talking with Dr. Heidi Hanna. And we're going to be exploring the relationship of stress and trauma. And I think challenging some of the ideas and perceptions that people have around what actually stress or trauma is, how it affects our body. We'll also cover some practical pieces as well around how you can better manage your own stress and traumas in your own life. So, Heidi, firstly, welcome. Thank you very much for joining me.

Dr. Heidi Hanna Thank you. It's great to be here again with you, appreciate it.

Alex Howard: Yeah. Thank you. So just to give people your professional bio and then we'll all sort of jump in.

So Dr. Heidi Hanna is the chief energy officer of Synergy Brain Fitness, a company providing brain based health and performance programs to individuals and organizations, a senior researcher with the Brain Health Initiative and a fellow and advisory board member for the American Institute of Stress.

Dr. Heidi is also an instructor at Harvard and a regular lecturer at Canyon Ranch Resort and Spa. She's a New York Times bestselling author who's written several books, including *The Sharp Solution*; *Stressaholic*; *Recharge* and *What's So Funny About Stress*.

So Heidi, I think a good place to start is probably just to give a bit more of a definition of what do we actually mean when we're talking about stress and talking about trauma? Because I think people can sometimes have quite a limited definition of that.

They can think that stress is just being kind of stressed out in the workplace and think well, that's not me, therefore I don't have that in my life.

So what do we actually mean when we're talking about these things?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Yeah, and Alex, I would take that even a step further to say not only do they say that's not me, I don't have that, but they usually say, and if I do, I want to keep it, so I'm not letting you take it away from me. Because people become a bit dependent on stress as kind of an energy source to get things done. So we wait till the last minute, oftentimes we get that rush of adrenalin that happens when we experience stress.

But there's so many pieces of the stress definition that I think really need to be unpacked for people to understand. One of them and you use this term already is that there's a big difference between being stressed and being stressed out.

So to go all the way back to what is stress. I think the easiest explanation, easiest definition is that stress is what happens when demand exceeds capacity. So that could be physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, social, financial, operational. Any time that demands are higher than what we have capacity for at the current moment, we experience stress reactions. And those reactions happen pretty quickly at the base of the brain and throughout the nervous system. And we have this beautiful kind of dance of things that happen to try to keep us in balance.

Many people I'm sure have heard of homeostasis as being that state of balance that we want within the body. But there's also something called allostasis, which is the change process. So in a short term situation, let's say there's actually a true emergency happening in the building and we need to run out the door. We trigger the release of chemicals like adrenalin that give us that fight or flight reaction pattern that most people are familiar with. Now, if the fire alarm was going off for a week or a month or if we didn't know when it was going to end. There's actually a slower series of reactions that happen and more of a chronic state that is more freeze or faint. This is driven primarily by the hormone cortisol. And of course, anytime this is happening, there's really a cascade of things occurring in the system. So stress is just the gap. Stressed out is when that gap gets to be too much.

So again, using that analogy, fire alarm goes off, I have to run out the door. I actually utilize the adrenalin, I do so quickly, problem solved within a short period of time. And it appears that for the most part, that needs to be resolved within about 30 minutes. So really, it's not very long before it's going to really go to that more chronic state. So timing matters, duration matters, intensity matters. All of those things really matter when it comes to how those reaction patterns occur, as does even things like our circumstances. Maybe we'll get to this a little bit later.

But for example, when we experience stress, even stress, that's more chronic in nature. But we feel socially supported. We also then trigger the release of a chemical called oxytocin. And new studies have shown that when we have even cortisol, which normally would break us down, plus oxytocin. It actually starts to build us up, creates neurogenesis in the brain and allows us to be more adoptable.

So that's a big part of it and I think for each person really understanding what is my relationship with stress, where does that come from? What are my previous experiences throughout my life when we start talking about trauma? How does that relate to the lens through which I see my stress experiences? Because that's really going to determine what kind of stress signature we have, which is essentially how stress shows up for us.

Alex Howard: And of course, one of the challenges is that people normalize the stress that they used to experience in their life. And so people could become increasingly wired but not really realize the level of stress that they're experiencing.

Because it's just become, like taking your fire alarm analogy, it's almost like they've tuned it

out and just got used to it being there in the background. And after a while, they almost stop hearing it.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: And again, to take that to the next extreme, especially in today's day and age, they become dependent on it. So now they're kind of freaked out if they don't have it because it elevates them. So, I mean, even something as simple as getting out of bed in the morning is supposed to initiate a stress reaction. And is supposed to have the higher levels of cortisol that we actually depend on to get us up and moving around.

What happens for so many people nowadays is that they're kind of flat lining instead of oscillating. So if we think of the human system, everything is supposed to oscillate from heartbeats to brainwaves to blood sugar. Everything's supposed to have a rhythm. And when we get up and go and go and go and go and never recharger our own battery, then we start to essentially flatline. So our cortisol patterns, which are supposed to be elevated in the morning and lower in the evening so that we can sleep. That's supposed to happen in kind of the opposite pattern from things like melatonin, which is supposed to help us sleep. And what we see so often now is that people are driving themselves so hard. To your point, getting used to the sensations in their body that are actually telling them to slow down, and then starting to depend on that.

So they're exhausted in the morning and dependent on caffeine and sugar and even drama and stress to kind of get them amped up. And then at night, unfortunately they're tired and wired and unable to fall asleep, unable to stay asleep, dependent on sleeping pills and alcohol, or bad TV or whatever it may be, to just kind of try to tune all of that out.

So I think it's probably one of the most important things for people to understand that it's not so much the big problems in our life. And when we talk about trauma, we'll get into that a little bit more, that there's ways that these kinds of big stressors or traumatic experiences imprint on the brain and body.

And there's different ways that that happens when it happens over time with developmental trauma or just everyday chronic stress. Because I think most people will say, "well, I don't have trauma because I haven't been through these horrific experiences that we think about." But I think everyone needs to keep in mind that the human system is radically adaptable. I work with a group called Challenged Athletes Foundation that supports people who've had traumatic injuries or other physical disabilities and provides them with grant funding so that they can get back into sports. And I talk to these people often right after a situation like that. And of course, there's that initial experience of loss and grief and all of that needs to be processed. But they come back quickly and fiercely with this new mission and this new story. And they get back into the game because they have the resources that they need around them, they have a reason to get back into the game.

But so many of us are experiencing these little traumas and stressors and circumstances that slowly start to hardwire our negativity bias to be even more extreme. And this is where we can develop things like stress sensitivity. So I would say it's kind of on both sides of the spectrum. We have some people who become almost like stress ignorant or stress dependence. And then on the other side, we have people who become highly sensitive over reactive. That's what I've experienced my whole life since I was a child so I know it

intimately. And this is where we see more episodes of things like anxiety and depression on both sides of that spectrum, which I think the majority of the time really comes more from the chronic than the acute situations.

Alex Howard: Yeah. And so I think part of what we're touching into here as well is that there's the stressors like there's the things that the events, the experiences, the things that happen in our life. And then there's also our relationship to that. Like how we respond to that, what we make that mean.

You mentioned stories, like what's the story that we tell ourselves about that? So maybe say a bit about how important that relationship is to the stresses that we experience.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: So over the past few years, I mean, really diving into the research around this, I came up with a very simple framework. I think that helps people understand. I call it my stress 360. So essentially it's just looking at the stress in your life. Looking at all the components of it and you can go to deeper and deeper levels within each of these three areas. But just to provide the overview, the way I look at it is we have stress load, stress lens and then stress signature.

So stress load tends to be the things that people think about. It's really that demand versus capacity ratio and I actually have a stress 360 assessment. I have now had thirty eight thousand people take our test, free online people to get some information. So I'm getting some really good data. And I put in there either 20 or 40 questions, depending on the version that people take. They really look at different aspects of lifestyle. So how you eat, move, sleep, connect, take breaks, those types of things. And the number one thing consistently year after year is the perception or the feeling that there's not enough time to get it all done. So I'm going to come back to that in a minute. That adds a demand because it's really time oriented and time urgency has very clearly been shown in the research to totally change how we react in circumstances.

In fact, there's a great study called the Good Samaritan Study. I would encourage everyone to go and look up, that really illustrates this well where they were teaching people about the Good Samaritan law and the importance of taking care of each other. They had two groups. One was told they had plenty of time to get to their next appointment. The other time they were late and they had to rush and they looked at how they treat, it gives me goosebumps thinking about it. They looked at how they treated someone in need and the path between getting from here to there.

So these people who've just been taught the importance of taking care of each other and I believe it was even at like a seminary or theological school. Those in that time of urgency situation reacted totally differently and didn't stop to help. So I see so much of what's happening in the world right now is really being mad. It's not that people are as evil as they appear at times, but everyone's under this time pressure and urgency, and we live in an era of like we all have to hustle and hack and get things done. And, you know, it's making us crazy and I hate to say this, but I often just kind of jokingly say, it's making us crazy and stupid and fat and sick, all those horrible things and mean, and I could go on and on.

So all that to say that stress load is the type of thing often people think about, how we're taking care of ourselves? How much energy do we have physically, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, socially? And then the stress lens to me is really where I focus the majority of my research looking at stress sensitivity.

Because I grew up with this kind of distorted perception of the world around me, I started having panic attacks when I was about 10 to 12 years old so bad that I actually would faint. And it turns out I have a condition called Vasovagal Syndrome, which probably a lot of people listening to this who are interested in this field, either have experienced themselves or know someone who has. Mine is chronic based on anxiety, so if I do get overstimulated, if I let my stress reactions take over, I'm like the most severe example of a freeze or faint response. I mean, my system shuts down. And I work with Dr. Steven Porges, who I've had a chance to get to know and do some work with.

Alex Howard: He's going to be at the conference.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Oh, wonderful. So yeah, people will get more information about the Polyvagal Theory and how that works and you'll be like, "oh, I remember when Dr. Heidi talked about her experiences."

I'm so grateful for his work. So the stress sensitivity part for me and this is really ever expanding, it's what I'm doing. I'm actually doing a second PhD right now in global leadership and my dissertation is around human adaptability and how to help people create positive adaptability within organizations.

So I'm looking at this focus of how do we help people have a better stress lens. Because most of the research highlights that we can experience a lot of stress and really adapt well. But people with negativity bias in particular, which has components of both physiological and psychological elements, people with this negativity bias really don't function very well.

And so, in fact, in the research of my colleague Evian Gordon, they found that a hundred percent of people with depression and have an elevated negativity bias, which makes a lot of sense.

Alex Howard: For people that are not aware. Can you just define what you mean by negativity bias?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Sure. So we all have a negativity bias, which essentially means that we pay more attention to potential threats in our environment than potential rewards. So we can see this within the brain and nervous system in ways we react faster. So the fear centers of the brain react within about a fifth of a second versus a half of the second for more logical functioning.

We also have about five times more fear based circuits than reward based circuits in our actual neural circuitry. And you can really just ask anybody, I mean, do you pay more attention to good or bad? And the bad tends to stick.

My friend Rick Hanson says we are like Teflon for the good and Velcro for the bad.

Alex Howard: That's great.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Now, that being said, there are people on both sides of the spectrum. And so you can look at some of the resilience research that's already being done around things like the highly sensitive person.

Dr. Elaine Aaron, who has shown that about 15 to 20 percent of the population is likely highly sensitive. And other research that says probably 15 to 20 percent are less sensitive or more resilient. Which by the way, in my new adaptability quotient model, one of the things I'm trying to help people understand is that resilience is not really what we want. Resilience is bouncing back to where we were, adaptability and what I call pro-adaptability is adapting towards positive. So that's like post-traumatic stress growth, which we know happens and I think we need to kind of reframe that for people a little bit.

So there are these two extremes. Both are helpful at certain times, but both can be harmful as well, because you can have people that are overly reactive and burn out faster. And the research has shown that people who are highly sensitive, that do have especially early life trauma, but any sort of trauma, or excess stress in their life have higher rates of mental health issues, substance abuse, things like that.

But highly sensitive people who grew up in nurturing environments where they're taught that sensitivity is a blessing instead of a curse. And they realize they're more creative, more spiritual, more intuitive, all of these wonderful things that healers tend to be. If they know that and they know how to manage it by taking care of their own battery as well then they actually thrive. They perform higher on levels of emotional intelligence and even mental intelligence. So it's all what we do with that. Essentially, it's like plasticity. Is it plastic for good or plastic in a more negative way?

Alex Howard: Because I think one of the things, one of the perspectives people can take is that this is just the way that I am. And there's a sort of very disempowering look at it from a kind of locus of control perspective. It's like, well, I can't change this therefore, I'm just sort of a victim of what's happening.

I think that's something I'd like to get into a little bit of, what are some of the ways that we can actually change both our lens and the way that we adapt and we respond to things. But maybe before we come to that, just can you say a bit about the impact, that acute and chronic stress, and I think we can include trauma in that definition as well.

The impact that it has on the brain and on our nervous system, how it actually is impacting upon us. Because I think, again, sometimes people can underestimate the impact, they can think, well, it's just a psychological thing or perhaps it just impacts upon kind of hypertension. But there's so many ways that actually it's really impacting on the brain and the body.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: So to finish up and this will tie into that really nicely, to finish up the three areas of the 360.

The last one was stress signature and stress signature just so people know and they're not left without that final piece is how it shows up for us. So the signs, the symptoms, signs to me are the quicker things and they could be things like headache or back tension or irritability. I mean, it can fall into all those categories and then a symptom is something more long term, weight gain, weight loss, insomnia, too much sleep.

Usually both sides of the spectrum of what is ideal for us. So all of that to say that, these are just signs and symptoms, that something's out of balance and it's easy for people to then try to treat the symptom with oftentimes medication, and things like that. When the symptoms are really just a warning sign of what's going on at a deeper level that needs to be resolved. And to your point, a lot of people for a long time have assumed that, if we look at mental health, for example, that that is a disease. And so it's something born in that needs to be treated and medications the best way to do this.

And I'll say again, as I'm always an open book, I have had times in my life where I've been on five different medications, didn't know what planet I was on as doctors tried to figure out the right kind of magic potion and it was awful.

So what I researched and really discovered out of my own kind of just needing to figure out a better solution is these other types of strategies that we can do to start to shift that. So before we adjust it we have to really understand what's going on. So this is my stress mastery formula, really simple, assess, appreciate, adjust. Assess what is really happening and there's a lot of levels of that. It's oftentimes if we're coaching or consulting with people, what is the demand capacity ratio? What's going on with demand capacity? What is the lens? And we can do that with a simple screening and what are those kinds of signs and symptoms that are showing up? That's the first part. What's going on? Why is it there? Then the appreciate part is really understanding, well, why is it there?

So first, understanding that our stress reactions are designed to help us survive and even thrive and sometimes they do. Sometimes we get rewarded by the intensity that we bring and if we do that from time to time, it's fine. But if we do it for too long, it's not okay. So when we shift into an appreciation mindset of really understanding why this is happening and how it's trying to help us. Then we can also understand what's happening as a result that's not serving us and where we can make the adjustment.

So I think to your question, what's happening under the skin, as my dear friend and unfortunately a late colleague as he passed away earlier this year, Bruce McEwen has done extraordinary work on. I mean, Stephen Porges, Bruce McEwen, Evian Gordon, all of these incredible people that I've come to be able to call friends and I'm so grateful for.

Bruce is the one who really put all of these concepts together in an integrative way. And he's got some great lectures and articles people can read online talking about what happens when stress gets under the skin. So that's kind of the term he uses and he was one of the first ones to discover in the lab. He ran at Rockefeller University that stress hormones like cortisol actually kill brain cells and in particular those around the hippocampus, which will start to affect memory and learning.

So if I had the visual from his many articles and I reference this all the time, what you would see is that the brain is organized in a very specific hierarchy from bottom to top. So we process fastest at the bottom. Some people refer to this as a lizard and monkey and human brain, there's other things you can call it. It's also sensing, feeling and thinking, which is typically how we refer to it. And so within that, there's different things that happen as we experienced stress or trauma. And that's really a little different depending on if it's what I call capital T trauma, like one time or developmental lower T trauma.

The three main things that are happening is that the amygdala, the fear center, is getting stronger. So like a muscle that's being worked out, it works better. So that's typically why you get hyper sensitive, even if you're tuning it out mentally, your body's really reacting to that more and more. And with these changes, by the way, we see changes in chemistry, structure and function. So different chemicals being released, different things actually literally within the neurons themselves and the glial cells between neurons, and then how they all talk to each other essentially. So that amygdala, the fear center is getting stronger all the while the hippocampus, which helps us to remember things like I just mentioned, is decreasing its strength and capacity and connections to the prefrontal cortex. Which would normally help us to problem solve and work our way through this. And that part of the area is atrophying like a muscle you haven't worked out in a while.

So there's this dance between the three and the latest research that Bruce was doing, and when I say latest by the way, usually it's like 10 years ago but it takes so long to get these things in the public. But a lot of the stuff they were looking at was also showing that while the hippocampus is communicating less with the prefrontal cortex, it's actually communicating more with the amygdala and the fear center.

So that's where a lot of those like post-traumatic stress situations are coming from, where you literally feel hijacked by your own brain because you're overreacting and under responding. And that's what we want to try to help people bring back into balance.

Alex Howard: And that's where people often can feel their bodies in a stress response, even if their mind is saying this is unnecessary, this is unhelpful even trying to be mindful and calm the system. But there's almost what feels like a response out of their control at that point.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Absolutely. And that's why sensory prompting or priming is so important and I often speak about what I call coming to your senses. So because the sensory part of the brain reacts faster, we can use sensory cues intentionally to help kind of recharge our brain from the bottom up.

Things like essential oils, massage, physical exercise, healthy nutrition. I mean, it's all common sense stuff, but what a lot of people don't realize is that these things are super powerful and the more you do them.

Now I'm looking for the one I just had in my hand and trying to figure out where I set it down, there's one over here. That's hysterical. I always have something in my hands, but that's why. So I have different gemstones and rocks, I have my stress monkey I squeeze and reminds me to breathe and feel positive. I always have at least some sort of oil blend and all

of those things are designed to help me with whatever it is that needs rebalancing. Either to get more grounded and I use these stones for that, things from the earth, or try to spend time in nature. Or even to bring more focus and clarity and attention to my prefrontal cortex by using essential oils that are citrus or peppermint and they're more uplifting.

And I think, just to kind of wrap this up, that it's important to think about what we can do proactively so that we're training ourselves to then be able to shift more reactively in the moment. And to me, that's stress mastery. It's not that we get rid of the stressors of our life, but we learn how to identify what's happening, assess, appreciate, adjust quickly. And the more we do that, the more we really strengthen that pro adaptability that we have to grow stronger as a result of the circumstances that we're in.

Alex Howard: I think that's a really important point, because one of the things that I often see working with people, for example, with chronic fatigue, is that a factor in them getting ill in the first place may have been that they were taking on too many external stressors. And that's kind of their ability to say no, perhaps not being in place and there was a strong achiever driving pattern.

So part of that path to healing and to recovery is learning to take away some of those stresses and say no to those things. But what can sometimes happen is that the breakthrough at one stage becomes the limitation at the next stage. And so it starts to feel like the way to manage life is to have no stress in life and it's almost like they go from one extreme to kind of almost ultrasensitive, must not have any stress.

What I like about what you're saying is that it's not about going to either extreme. It's finding a way to adapt and how to manage and how to learn better skills and strategies to navigate through.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: And in fact, a life without stress would be the worst possible thing. And I know that you and I can understand and appreciate that a lot of people would think I'm totally crazy for saying that. And the two examples that come to mind quickly are:

Number one, the highest spike in human mortality is actually within about six months after retirement. So, of course, those people are older in age, but what we really see happening is that they go from being on all the time to suddenly coming to a screeching halt. They actually lose the stimulation to keep adapting and to keep showing up in life. And it's why we have to work really hard to redefine what retirement is for people so that they're mentoring, and they're volunteering, and doing other things in their community to really keep them active.

And the other one is a study I always go back to, which is that people who win the lottery are usually less happy afterwards. And I always joke and say I could prove them wrong, so I think I should be tested. But the reality is that we all think that we will be happy as soon as, or we'll take care of ourselves as soon as. And what happens is to your point, we carry our mindset, our perspective, our stories with us along the way and now what happens when we're still not happy or we're still having these reactions. And now we had what we thought was going to be kind of the miracle cure for all of that.

So I do think it's important in each moment even to take an hour at a time, not even look at a day at a time. Take an hour and say, how do I optimize my energy in this hour to make sure I have the capacity, what's necessary. And the easiest shift that people can make, the individual and the organizational is to oscillate time and energy more effectively.

So 50 minute at the longest work hours I would suggest 20 or 25 minutes because people can bring better energy and attention and get more done when they have good healthy boundaries and parameters. And then you have to stick with that because people will say, "oh, we'll just do a quick thing" and then that runs over, which makes them late for the next thing and it's just this vicious cycle.

Keeping in mind that stress is highly contagious.

Alex Howard: And highly addictive, yeah.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Highly contagious, highly addictive. Absolutely.

Alex Howard: I like what you mentioned earlier as well, around, we need to have strategies to react when stress happens, but also strategies to be sort of proactive. So we're building up that adaptive capacity and that sort of resilience.

You mentioned a few things there and a few things a little bit earlier. But what are some of your kind of go to foundational pieces that you would encourage people to put in place as a way of supporting themselves?

I guess it's being reactive, it's being proactive and it's also if there's a history of particularly trauma with a small T where there's that sort of developmental impact that's happened.

What are some of the things that you find consistently helpful for people?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Yeah, I think because there's so many possibilities I always have to come up with some sort of framework to even try to remember what's possible. And I've been doing some work over the past couple years with a company here in San Diego called Reef.

They're actually a global kind of beach brand and I've been encouraging them to focus on how they can use their resources to support mental and emotional health. So, of course, we all know that this continues to be a big need and we were in certain circumstances that make it even more so. So when I was doing this beach brain study with them, I was looking at what it is that makes us feel so good at the beach. So, you know, the majority of people think of the beach, 80 percent.

So I interviewed a bunch of people and 80 percent of people when I said, what place do you think about when you think about relaxing or like your happy place? And I didn't prompt it with any particular items, 80 percent said the beach. So I was like, there is something to this, right? It's not just me. I mean, I moved to San Diego to be closer to the ocean.

So I started looking at all these factors, and so I organized them in my mind as the sand, the surf and the sun. And it actually helps me remember the different things because it actually

aligns with those three parts of the brain. So in the sand, it's really about how we get grounded. And if you're familiar with earthing and grounding techniques, things like spending time and nature, having those kind of sensory cues like we talked about, there are essential oils people can use, but also like feet on the ground moving more often, getting fresh air more often.

It's so important. And of course, to do any of these, you have to isolate and manage that time, which means setting those boundaries as we talked about. To me, the surf is like bringing in oscillation and a healthy vibration pattern. So breath work would be an example of that, getting a massage and getting things moving in your system. Also, sound cues, whether it's actual sound therapy or binaural beats, which may be a little bit more fancy or even just listening to music or listening to the sound of the ocean waves. Which actually research has shown listening to sounds of the ocean is most relaxing to the nervous system and also improves heart rate variability. So there really is something to this natural rhythmic pattern of the world around us. And then that top level of sun is not just like actually getting sunshine and vitamin D, which of course is really important. But kind of like, what are we thinking about? What are we focusing on? More of the mindset thing.

So things like gratitude, of course, focusing on what we have to be grateful for in each moment, even the difficult moments. It could just be the roof of your head or having food or having family. But we can always find something to be grateful for and priming the brain first thing in the morning and right before we go to bed with that kind of neural nudge in a positive direction is really important.

And I'll end with my favorite. Other than going to the beach, I like to do both at the same time and that is humor. And a lot of people don't realize humor has been really well researched as a coping mechanism. And the more we look to find things funny, the more we actually appreciate humor and see things through a new lens. So for me personally, that was the thing I did for 30 days while evaluating my negativity bias. It was at the worst possible score. I was going through a major depression and I just decided every morning to find something funny, a video, an image, a meme whatever, and then share it with at least one person. And I did that for 30 days and my score went from the lowest possible to within healthy, still on the lower side, but very healthy and optimal.

And I think even that's important is like we're not expected to go from having a negativity bias to being the most positive person in the world. And in fact, I find those people really annoying sometimes and I am married to one, and I'm grateful for him. But that reality of just pulling ourselves out of the space where we're over reactive and not responding, and we have to create moments where we can pause and step back and think, is this the person I want to be? Is this how I want to show up?

And all those again, little nudges to our nervous system, especially sensory cues, are going to help us to just prime the brain to be in that more optimal state.

Alex Howard: I love all of what you're saying, but I particularly like what you're saying about humor, because I think sometimes the times when we most need to look at things from a kind of comedic perspective are the times when we're the most resistant.

And I find working as a practitioner can be a very delicate balance sometimes, of sometimes you could absolutely miss the mark and other times you take a risk. You think you're going to miss the mark and it's the turning point in the session where someone just manages to see it with a lighter perspective.

And it's almost like the more we refuse to see things from a humorous place, the more there's a clue we probably need to do so. Right?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: And that's usually what we see, people who are humor resistant. So I actually am doing a study right now and we'll make sure to share this with your community as well. I'd love to get some more data, but we're looking at, what I'm calling a stress mindset.

So it has elements in there of your negativity bias, but we're also looking at what we call stress appreciation and initiation. And it is important to know that you don't have to be funny to get the benefits. You don't get to tell jokes. You don't have to be a funny person. But you do need to see funny. You do have to cultivate your own kind of sense of humor.

So for me, that's why I tend to like show videos of babies laughing or other things that are just kind of silly and playful. I'm less of a storyteller, joke teller, but a lot of my friends and colleagues at the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, that's actually what we do.

We study it, but a lot of them are hysterical and are creating videos and doing all sorts of stuff. And maybe two nights ago, my husband and I just did a video spoof. I would never have imagined I would do something, but just like I said, stress is contagious. Humor is too, so have humor at home, as I like to call them.

Surround with people who find things funny, it makes it easier for you. And then you can start to let your filter down so that you may still kind of go, is this the right timing? Is this the right situation? Is this too soon? But you still find in those safe environments that you can start to share a little bit of healthy humor and it really does go a long way.

Alex Howard: Yeah, I think often the trick is that it's kind of coming from a place of genuine kindness and compassion. So you are kind of laughing with bringing humor as opposed to laughing at and judging.

And I think that's often the difference in how people receive something and whether they're able to find the humor or they feel that they're being attacked or being laughed at somehow.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: So two things I'll say to that, just really quick tips.

My friend Karyn Buxman, who is my mentor in this humor area, always says, first of all, "laugh at what you do, not who you are." That's the first thing and then the second thing, oh yeah, I just lost it for a second.

The second thing is "that humor is power and power can be used for good or evil." And that's true, I mean, we see humor in bullying and all those sorts of things. I think when you're coming from an authentic place and she has a whole book about how to use humor

strategically, that talks about those things like bond and situation and timing and things like that.

So certainly worth checking that out and people can search her information and find that.

Alex Howard: That's awesome, I think humor is a great place to end. Where can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: So HeidiHanna.com is kind of my homebase online and on there, I'm trying to get it all set up now with the circumstances of our current moment, trying to do it as quickly as I can.

I also have some free resources online at SynergyPrograms.com, and that's where you can find guided meditations, some of my favorite funny videos.

I even do a free energy audit with people that walks them through how to make sure you're oscillating instead of flatlining, so all that stuff is free and available.

Alex Howard: That's awesome. Dr. Heidi Hanna, thank you so much for your time, I really appreciate it. That's been a really interesting interview, thank you.