



The Crucial Impact of Childhood Emotional Neglect

Guest: Dr. Jonice Webb

Niki Gratrix Hello, everybody, and welcome to the Trauma and Mind Body Super Conference. I'm very excited to introduce everybody to our distinguished guest today. We have Dr. Jonice Webb.

Now, Dr. Webb is a licensed psychologist. She's a recognized pioneer in a previously overlooked topic of childhood emotional neglect.

She's the best selling author of the best ever books, totally ever written about emotional neglect I think, in my opinion. *Running on Empty: Overcome Your Childhood Emotional Neglect* and *Running on Empty No More: Transform Your Relationships With Your Partner, Your Parents and Your Children*.

Dr. Jonice, thank you so much for taking part on the Summit. It's an honor to have you on such an important topic.

Dr. Jonice Webb Well, thank you so much, Niki. I'm really happy to be here. I agree, I'm really happy to have this topic covered.

Niki Gratrix Yeah, it's really crucial. We've been talking on this Summit, the big sort of theme on the Summit was about adverse childhood events (ACE) and developmental trauma. And in the big ACE studies, it shows there's a huge impact on health as well as those other areas of our life when we have developmental trauma and emotional neglect is part of that. But it tends to be the most overlooked. And yet it's incredibly endemic and it's incredibly detrimental to people in their lives.

Could you share with people how childhood emotional trauma and how does that affect people in their lives? You know, in adulthood, how does it manifest? And then we can maybe talk about symptoms of that as well.

Dr. Jonice Webb OK. So it's interesting. You said adverse childhood events. The ACE thing that people are talking more and more about, which is so great and important.

I think the important thing about emotional neglect is that it's not an event in most cases, it's the failure of something to happen. And this is why it gets so overlooked. And it's so invisible. Basically, the definition is when it happens, is when a parent fails to respond enough to a child's feelings while they're being raised and while their brain is developing.

And so when you grow up in a family that's not noticing, paying attention to, responding to your feelings, you get this message that your feelings are just irrelevant or unwelcome. And so you just push them down. You learn basically, you get trained as a child to push your emotions down and away and just kind of wall them off. And different children, as they grow to adulthood, some have their feelings very, very well sealed off. And there's all sorts of levels of that. Some are less sealed off and just don't have full access to their feelings. But either way, you grow into adulthood, maybe thinking you had a great childhood because you don't remember non events, you don't remember not being responded to the way you might remember being, you know, emotionally abused or harmed physically in some way. So then growing into an adult, you lack access to this vital resource that you really need in order to survive and thrive, which is your emotions. And it really takes a toll.

Niki Gratrix So I couldn't agree more. As someone who also experienced this in childhood and came to realize that, and your book was one of the things that helped me understand it. I'm so glad. Yes. And everybody I recommend your book to is like, 'Oh, my goodness, this is it. This is the missing link'.

I think it seems to be really, we don't seem to be in an emotionally intelligent society. That's part of it. But one of things I've noticed, like when you look back on childhood, you could have been looked after physically, like perhaps your parents cooked for you. You went and did things and they put you in the car and you went all over the place. And they were there physically. But they just never asked you how you feel, how you felt. And that never came up. And that's that kind of thing. How does that affect people?

Maybe a few more examples in terms of how maybe this affects their adult relationships, maybe even how they are in their career? Well, how it affects some of the practical things in their adult lives.

Dr. Jonice Webb So before I answer the second part, for the first part of what you said, the example that I always give of how people fail to see emotional neglect in their childhood is when they say, you know, my parents were at all my baseball games or I had a stay at home parent. And both of those things are great parenting, but it doesn't mean that they noticed what you were feeling or responded to it.

So now to answer your question. So when your feelings are blocked off, you are missing this vital resource which should be giving you direction, connection. Our feelings are what connects us to other people, what enriches our relationship, what forces us to deal with conflict and actually engage with people on a more meaningful, deeper level.

Our feelings are the most deeply personal biological expression of who we are. And so when you're disconnected from that, you're literally disconnected from yourself. And so when you grow up emotionally neglected, as an adult, it's really hard for you to know what you want, what you feel, what you need. And you also feel like there's something wrong with you. I call it the fatal flaw because it really is ubiquitous in CEN people, people with childhood emotional neglect, to feel that there's something different about them compared to other people, something missing in their lives.

Some people say they feel like they look around to see other people living a life in color and their life just feels grayscale. And they're not depressed necessarily, not clinically depressed. You know, maybe they are, but not necessarily. And just not having your feelings leaves you feeling like you're kind of unmoored and ungrounded and undirected and disconnected. Unfulfilled. All of that. It's kind of hard. People have a hard time putting a name to it. But that's what I'm trying to do, is give people the words and the name for it.

Niki Gratrix I mean, it could also lead to things like getting yourself into the wrong career because you don't really know what makes you happy. Or an excessive sort of obsequiousness or people pleasing, all because you're sort of focused on everybody else. Just like you don't know how to ask for what you need because you don't feel. So you wouldn't know. Right. This kind of thing. So, I mean, it can affect you financially. You could end up in relationships with overpowering people because you know, things like this, at least you see that clinically a lot as well.

Dr. Jonice Webb All of it. Yes, all of it. Everything you just said, I cover in my book in fact, because it's all very real. The way it plays out in relationships is really impactful because it does, you know, you just said, it makes it hard to be able to ask for what you need. It makes it really hard to be able to accept help from other people because, you know, growing up feeling bad, emotionally alone, you automatically assume that you're on your own. And so accepting emotional help from people, even any kind of help can be difficult. You know, one hallmark of CEN people is that if you ask them what they want, they'll say, I don't care. Whatever you want is really common.

Niki Gratrix Yes, yes. There's a lot of people pleasing. Are there any other poignant symptoms so that people can maybe self identify as, oh, that sounds like me. Any other symptoms of this where people would go, oh, you just said those symptoms. And that's me.

Dr. Jonice Webb Before we move on to the parenting styles, one that I didn't mention is emptiness. And that one can be a hard one to put words to. But it was one of the reasons I named both of my books *Running on Empty* is because that empty feeling inside is I think it comes from being disconnected from the very center of your emotions. So when you're disconnected from that, you just feel like something's missing inside of you that should be there. And I did hear that from client after client, which was part of what made me start to think, what do all these people have in common? And so that feeling of just sort of being empty is very common.

Niki Gratrix OK. And so I wanted to ask you, in your clinical experience, some of the common parenting styles, now you cover 12 different styles in your book, but we don't have to cover all of them.

But perhaps some of the ones that you see most commonly and perhaps, we'll say we can talk about Attachment Trauma and how that must be part of that picture.

Well, we've got the other conditions talking about attachment trauma and how the epidemic levels are on the rise as well. But that's essentially, this is attachment trauma. Is it a subclass of attachment trauma?

Dr. Jonice Webb I think it's definitely one of the major causes of attachment trauma. And the thing is, it's not traumatic. So the word trauma attached to it, I think, can make it sometimes, make it harder for people to own it and accept it. Right. There's a lot of people with emotional neglect who did get traumatized as children. A lot of people have it in a much more just subtle, over their entire lifetime sort of way.

And either way, it's extremely, you know, it has a huge effect. So, to put the word trauma on it, I try to be a little bit cautious about it. But it is traumatic. It is a trauma to the nervous system that just happens. Bit by bit over time. Day after day after day after day.

So the parenting styles.

So the most common kind of emotionally neglectful parent that I've seen overall is what I called the well-meaning but neglected themselves or the W.M.B.N.T. for short because it's kind of a mouthful. So these are parents who really want to do right for their kids and love their kids and try to do their best to give them everything. But they themselves grew up with parents who were blind to emotions. And so they didn't have their emotions responded to as a kid. So no matter what, they give their kids better than they had materially or even caring wise. They just don't have it, they don't have that emotional connection and support and validation to give to their kids. So, and this is, it's really, really common. It's also really, really hard to see looking back. These are the people who say, my parents were at all my baseball games. They drove me all over for soccer or whatever. And so I think the world is full of people who had those kinds of parents. It's a really common kind.

So I think there, besides those, there are two other kinds.

One is parents who are struggling and struggling themselves either with depression. So in my first book, I outline each specific kind of parents. But grouping them, I think makes them a little easier to think about. So the struggling parents are the ones who are, they might be depressed, they might have a child that has extra needs. They might have parents themselves who are struggling. They might be financially struggling and working four jobs. So they're just hardly ever around. But they're parents who mean well, but they just aren't able to be there for their kids. They're just not able to be there at that level because they're taken up somewhere else. And that causes definitely attachment issues because the child feels like they're, you know, they see their parents struggling and working and trying and maybe they end up caretaking the parent, actually. And, you know, that sets you up to be a caretaker of other people.

And then there are the the self-involved parents. So that's the third category. And those are people who are either, you know, parents who are narcissistic, maybe sociopathic, maybe with a borderline personality, although that can be a little bit more mixed, or who are a drug addict or drug abuser, addict of any kind. Parents who are just really living for themselves in the moment and not aware of their kids. And those are usually the ones that you can see better looking back, because you can see there was something wrong with your parents' behavior more likely. So in that way, it's a little bit helpful. But it's also really harmful because the child learns that love is all about the other person. And I need to be taking care of everybody else. So it even feeds that idea more that you don't matter.

Niki Gratrix Yes. That's great. And just to ask as well, if you don't sort of get that transmission, emotional energy, that connection at the emotional level. Do you see in your experience that it translates into, often, an inability to self soothe, sort of chronic feelings of a lack of sense of safety. Does that come up quite a lot as well? Or is that different?

Dr. Jonice Webb I think the safety part comes more from everything we're talking about, the emotional neglect combined with a parent who is harmful in some way. Or unpredictable.

Niki Gratrix Right. Right.

Dr. Jonice Webb But pure emotional neglect leaves the child feeling more unknowable. Unseeable, invisible, unimportant, invalid. And, you know, those are a lot of big negative words. And so it's not always a huge blob of all that.

It can be different amounts of that for different people, but just a general feeling of not being important enough to state their needs. Say what they think, what they want, what they need, what they feel. Just kind of a one down sort of position, OK?

Niki Gratrix Great. OK. So that's a great explanation for that as well. OK, so I guess that the important point is, how do people heal and can they? Where do they start? And maybe even some practical steps you might have for people.

Dr. Jonice Webb Yeah. That really, believe it or not, is the good thing about emotional neglect and that is, that it can be healed. And I always tell people and it's absolutely true, it's not a disease or an illness. It's just something you didn't get as a child. And you can give it to yourself as an adult. So that's really the silver lining of this whole thing. Because the thing that you didn't get is, you still have it. It's in you. It's your emotions. You still have them. They are there and they're walled off, yes. But the wall can be broken down and not all at once. You just chip that wall down. So that's the goal in terms of recovering from emotional neglect in childhood.

And so some of the ways to do that are, I think, the biggest, most powerful intervention that a person can do is to start actually paying attention to what they're feeling and ask themselves, what am I feeling right now?

And in *Running on Empty*, my first book, there is an exhaustive list of emotions words in the back that I encourage people to read and use, go through with a highlighter and, you know, get familiar with those words. Because if you grew up in a household that didn't talk emotion, it's amazing. Really, really educated, intelligent people will have like three emotion words, and that's really all they use.

But we all have so many emotions going through every day. And so when you start paying attention, just that alone can make a difference.

Niki Gratrix So while it's a really helpful step up, are there any other steps or practical things that people can do, we can talk about some of the other resources you have lined up.

Dr. Jonice Webb Yeah. So in addition to that, besides. So once you start trying to, you know, pay attention to your feelings, trying to accept them for what they are instead of judging yourself for having them.

And I developed a tool called the IAAA, which helps people like, accept and process what they're feeling, especially when you're first starting out with this. It can be scary to start trying to feel more. And then as you start breaking your wall down and having more feelings, knowing what to do with them is the key. Because feelings aren't you know, they can be unruly, they can be powerful, they can be difficult. So break. You know, doing this a bit at a time and then starting to learn what to do with your feelings.

So this IAAA is “**Identify**” what you're feeling. **Accept** it. **Attribute** it to a cause - where's it coming from? Why am I feeling this? And is this feeling telling me to **Act**, to take an Action of some kind? Because all feelings are nothing more than messages from your body. So that helps you process what is my body telling me? And what do I want to do with it?

So sometimes it can really help to get some help with this, especially if you started having stronger feelings, you know, then trying to find a therapist who understands and can help figure out how to start managing and processing what you're feeling. But once you start this process, it takes over and makes a huge difference.

Niki Gratrix Okay. Lovely. Just out of interest, do you have any sort of viewpoint to observe, just from the cultural perspective, because it does seem to me like we have an epidemic. I mean, it's a cultural thing that we play down emotions, it's almost like you said, maybe classified as slightly more of a feminine thing. And we're sort of you know, we live in a patriarchal society.

Do you have any insights, or comments on sort of what you perceive is happening culturally as well. Anything about that in the wider context?

Dr. Jonice Webb Yeah. I mean, if you think back and I've written a couple of blogs about this, about the, you know, the silent generation that was followed by the baby boomers. And so it's just been, I think, part of the culture that you don't feel emotions. There's just no room for that in life. You're supposed to be fighting for success. You're supposed to be fighting, you know, for safety back, you know, back in previous generations, it was safety. Now it's material success and physical success. You know, our big focus on sports and all, that's great. But the whole idea of having emotions just gets buried and kind of looked down upon, like you said.

And I know, I think it's different in different cultures. I get lots of emails and messages from people from all over the world saying their culture has, you know, this is rampant in their culture. So I think different cultures deal with emotions differently. But the key is just don't pay attention. Assign them the value they deserve. But don't let them run the show. You know, that's just in a summary where I hope we're heading.

Niki Gratrix As a society we could end up all feeling our feelings again, we'll become like sort of crazy and narcissistic.

There is a creative process. So my own history, I did this actually. It's almost necessary to go a little bit self-absorbed, just be like oh that's my feeling. And I'm feeling this now. So we have to go really internal, I found, to do that. And then I could sort of let go of the self absorbed and actually focus on other people to get well after I'd found myself.

Dr. Jonice Webb Can I say one thing about what you just said? You're calling it self-absorbed. And one of the things that I find in people with childhood emotional neglect, rampant, is a fear that when they, if they do this work, they would become selfish. And there is nothing self-absorbed at all about turning your attention inward, asking yourself, what do I feel right now? Accepting that as just you can't choose. I can't choose my feelings. It is what it is. It's how I feel. And then, you know, using that feeling in your life that's being authentic to yourself. And I've never seen, of all my work with all the CEN people I've worked with, I've never seen a single one become self-absorbed or narcissistic in any way. I don't think it's possible.

Niki Gratrix OK, that's good. We're all so concerned about that aren't we, like that as they see us.

Have you found any value for people doing any kind of body based work, like yoga? And have you found that helps. So actually yoga and meditation are two quite different things. Does yoga help people with this specific case?

Dr. Jonice Webb Absolutely. I mean, I view yoga as meditative. It's like a meditative physical activity. And so, and I recommend meditation to people all the time, who have CEN. Just because it's like a way to train your brain to learn how to turn inward. And it can feel like a battle to CEN people in the beginning. But if you keep working at it and working at it, you're training your brain to be able to focus in on yourself. And if you have trouble with that, yoga can be a good option because it is physical and it's usually taught by someone else who's help structuring you through it. And so both of those practices, I think, are extremely helpful for CEN people.

Niki Gratrix In my experience, people go into intellectualizing everything then not realizing they've intellectualized the world. That is what I did and part of my getting out of this was yoga and getting used to breathing, breathing into the body as well, kind of meditative breathing where I would focus on feeling into my body. And for a long time I was numb I didn't feel anything. And it took me a long time before I even felt anything. So it was quite the journey. And then I sort of discovered I'd been in what I called my dark room and then I felt joy. Oh, I really felt this like, oh, that's what that's called. So maybe. Does that sound like your experience? I actually wanted to share that to have people not give up and know that it takes time and if they feel numb to stick with it. Right?

Dr. Jonice Webb Absolutely. Every time that you turn your attention inward and try to contact a feeling, you're taking a chip out of that wall and you don't have to feel anything. Just imagine there's a thick wall. You're chipping through it. So you just did a chip. So it's a success just doing it. And then at some point, if you just keep doing it, keep doing it. You will chip through and then it's not going to all flood you at once. It's going to be very gradual. That's how it works. So, yeah, keep at it.

Niki Gratrix OK. Lovely. And anything else that you want to comment on or expand on that we may have missed in the context of the wider Summit or questions about anything for the audience so they can recognize any other tips?

Dr. Jonice Webb Well, I would like to let people know that it is if you try to identify yourself as having CEN based on childhood memories, that can be a really hard thing to do because you are trying to remember unmemorable things, which are basically non events.

And so I'm in the process of training a lot of therapists on how to talk with clients about this and how to help, how to see it in their clients who don't see it in themselves and then bring it up to their clients and start working on it with them.

One of the things that really can help people figure out if they have CEN is a questionnaire that I created based on my experience with my clients and with all the people I've interacted with, with CEN. And it doesn't ask about childhood. It asks about your current feelings about your current life and your current situation. Things you like and don't like. And basically, it's just twenty three yes/no items. And it's on my Website. People can go there and take that questionnaire for free and then they'll also receive my newsletter, which they can unsubscribe from any time if they want to. And get lots of information that way.

Niki Gratrix Lovely. I was glad you brought the questionnaire up. Great. I think there'll be a lot of people signing up for the questionnaire. That's on your website?

Dr. Jonice Webb Yes. drjonicewebb.com or emotionalneglect.com is easier to remember. And that works, too.

Niki Gratrix And you've also got other resources online, right? Do you have any kind of online programs? Do you still see people one to one or do you maybe work with practitioners you've trained now?

Dr. Jonice Webb I do both. I see some people one to one, although that's pretty limited. Yeah. And then I have an online childhood emotional neglect recovery program called Fuel Up for Life. That's on my website as well. And it's a five week - although once you're a member, you're a member for life - program that's online and also has a support element to it as well. So that's an option. Also, as I said, I'm training therapists and I have some programs for therapist trainings, which are also on my website. All of it's on my website drjonicewebb.com.

Niki Gratrix Lovely. Great. So I encourage you to go to her website. And also, frankly, just read the book, it's really accessible. You just read it really quickly. I found I did anyway. It was just, so many bells go off and sort of insights from reading the book. So I just want to thank you so much for the work that you do. Thank you for bringing this to the world and highlighting it, because there's a lot of suffering out there related to this. And it's really great. I believe so. Thank you so much for taking part in the Summit.

Dr. Jonice Webb Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure.

Niki Gratrix Great. OK take care and we'll see you in the next episode.