Addressing the Social Root Causes of Chronic Health Conditions

Guest: Dr. Leonard Jason

Alex Howard: So welcome, everyone, to see this session where I'm really pleased to be talking with Dr. Leonard Jason. Firstly Jason, welcome and thank you for joining me.

So I think this is going to be a really important conversation, and I think it's a piece of this overall trauma jigsaw that we've actually not spoken to in the way that I think we'll do today.

And I think in a sense that - Dr. Jason and I were just talking before we started recording this - probably a few reasons why that is one of which is that this is in some ways the piece that needs to be addressed to really deal with the underlying causes which are causing much of what's happening in trauma.

But this is complicated. This is multifaceted. Lots of different interconnected pieces that are going on. So we're going to be exploring, addressing the social root causes of chronic health conditions.

For people that aren't aware of Dr. Jason, just to give a little bit of his background, Dr. Leonard Jason is a professor of psychology and the director of the Center for Community Research at DePaul University in Chicago.

And he's a former president of the Division of Community Psychology of the American Psychological Association.

Dr. Jason has edited or written 30 books and has published, I had to check this number because I thought it was a typo, 800 articles and 100 book chapters.

He served on the editorial board of 10 psychological journals.

Dr. Jason has served on review committees at the National Institute of Health and received over forty six and a half million dollars in federal research grants.

So, Dr. Jason, I think a good starting point here, we talked about the ACEs research in a few different places as part of this conference, but I think it sort of forms a foundation from sort of the rest of this dialog that we're going to come in to.

So do you just want to say a little bit about that research and its relationship to complex chronic illnesses?

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yes, what I'm going to be talking about today, are really the best steps to create the kind of social change needed to address childhood adversity and other types of

adversity that people experience and thus reduce later chronic illnesses and in particular, inequalities.

And what reforms are needed to basically accomplish that? So that's that's really the underlying message that I'm going to focus on during this interview.

Alex Howard: So this is the original ACEs research, which I guess is now 30 or so years old, one of the things that were sort of overwhelming from that was the relationship between the events that happened in childhood and our later health in life.

Do you want to say a bit around that, to some of the key findings of that and I know that also you've got some sort of challenges to some of those findings as well.

Dr. Leonard Jason: Sure. You know, researchers and theorists widely recognize that there is still a deleterious, long term impact of interpersonal violence that occurs in childhood on various aspects of physical and psychological health.

There's a consistent understanding of this finding. And I'm sure that a number of the individuals presenting the Summit will review those research.

Findings from a number of studies point to this relationship between abuse history and the symptoms associated with fatigue. And that's kind of my specialty. But prior findings for increased rates of abuse, history among individuals with what's sometimes called chronic fatigue syndrome or ME / chronic fatigue syndrome was sometimes referred to as ME/CFS have often been influenced by non random sampling methods.

For example, medical facility studies of abuse may be biased toward an over inclusion of frequent medical care users. So in an attempt to control that problem at my center we looked at a random community based sample.

My colleague, Dr. Rene Taylor. He's now at the University of Illinois, found that the prevalence rates of sexual and physical abuse history among individuals with this illness called ME/CFS are comparable with those found in individuals with other conditions involving chronic fatigue, including other medically based conditions.

But individuals with ME/ CFS did not demonstrate increased likelihood of reporting a history of traumatization related to interpersonal abuse. Actually, individuals with ME/CFS consistently demonstrated a decreased likelihood of reporting a history of sexual, physical and death threat abuse.

These findings contradict some of the prior reports indicating that individuals with ME/CFS as a whole are more likely to report histories of sexual and physical abuse. And I might mention the two issues that are critical here.

One is trying to basically get a representative sample and not a biased sample. That's important. And the second issue is really trying to determine, do we really have individuals with ordinary fatigue, which really is prevalent?

Almost twenty five percent of the population has some fatigue at any given time versus this other thing that we're calling ME/CFS, which is a much more serious, debilitating illness. And that differentiation is often not made in some of the studies.

Alex Howard: And yet one of the things that we do know to be true is and I think that's an interesting distinction you're making there between the sort of more severe debilitating and the sort of more ongoing nature fatigue that people can experience.

But I think it's still very much the case, is it not, that we recognize that an increased ACE's score in childhood is likely to lead to an increased level of whatever it may be in terms of impacts upon ongoing health in adulthood?

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yes, I think those are the conclusions that most people would agree with. We just don't want to in some ways target particular groups and indicate all their problems are due to some type of early childhood focus when it could very well be something different.

So, for example, some individuals who have illnesses like ME/CFS, it might be that, for example, they got mono or they got Covid 19, which is happening right now. And we know that if a person gets mono, which is caused by the Epstein Barr virus, something like 10 percent are going to have difficulty six months later. We know that.
So that there's a certain group that are going to have what's called post Viral fatigue and going to have complications.

Well, with Covid 19, the same thing, there is going to be a number of people who are basically not going to recover and are going to have long term consequences for these individuals we want to be very careful of sort of saying, well, the reason that they didn't recover is because of something happening in their childhood as opposed to the virus, which is really causing the damage.

Alex Howard: And often these things are also impacted upon in multiple different ways, right? It's rarely reduced down to it's only this one variable. It's normally a combination of different variables that happened and different levels in different ways in someone's life.

Dr. Leonard Jason: And that that's why one needs to really do what's called longitudinal research to understand these types of problems. For example, Dr. Ben Katz at Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago and myself at DePaul have been studying four thousand five hundred undergraduates and we have basically their data and blood samples when they are well, and then five percent of them develop mono.

And we then follow them over time to see which ones recover and which ones don't. That's called a prospective longitudinal study. And if you really want to understand illness, if you really want to understand these types of conditions, you've got to really try to get them when they're well and find out what the biological and psychological dimensions are so that you have a sense of what might be driving these illnesses as opposed to just the occurrence, as you said, of about mono.

We really need to see what they were like before that and what our predictors of who's who gets well, who doesn't.

Alex Howard: Yes. So I want to take a slight tangent, and then we'll sort of cycle cycle back into some of this around the role of social injustice. And I was having a quick look before we started recording, of a free book. I think we can link to it in the notes of the interview. And one of the metaphors you use in there are people sort of drowning in the river and pulling them out versus going upstream.

You talked about first order versus second order change. And I think this is a really important dialog that often is negated, particularly in practitioner communities, because people are so focused on trying to help the individual without recognizing what's actually what's actually causing many of these issues in the first place.

So do you wanna say a bit around what the role of social injustice is in chronic health conditions?

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yeah. You know, I think just really to start with, when you kind of use that example of, you know, say you're on a beach and someone is drowning. Well, you certainly want to get there and bring them in, or they're falling off a cliff there's not a railing. You certainly want to deal with those people who have a problem. That's cool. Kind of like psychotherapy or medical models. We help them. We don't want to stop helping people who are at risk of drowning or having other serious Covid 19 symptoms.

But if we just focus on helping people with problems, we're missing something important. And that is prevention.

So just think about a beach. If you were to maybe teach people how to swim so that when they go out into the water, they don't have that problem of not knowing how to swim and then ending up possibly at risk of drowning.

Or if there's a cliff, you might have railing there to protect people from falling over into the water. So if we can think about how the environment and some training can help people early on, we can actually do a better job of helping people through prevention.

And the reality is, almost all our interventions and money goes toward treatment. And we don't want to stop treating people, but we just want some fair share toward more of public health or a what's called a community psychology. Because I'm in psychology, perspective on prevention needs to have a clear focus if we're going to solve lots of the personal and social problems that individuals face.

But let me just kind of, again, talk about violence for a second, because truthfully, violence is everywhere. And, you know, we see that with the protest movements where we have individuals being victims of violence. And in those protests, as you know, in June 2020, are going around the world based on things that happened in this country, in Minneapolis with the brutal murder of a innocent person.

So whether it's mass shooting or terrorism basically, the interesting thing is actually physical violence overall, if you look at hundreds of years is actually less now than it has been in the past. But we don't feel that because really violence takes lots of forms that are not just, in a sense, someone being a victim of a hit or some type of gun.

Violence includes includes things like mass incarcerations in this country, in the U.S. where I'm from we have millions of people who are in prison. And what are they learning in prison? And that's a tragedy.

So, yes, we need to think about inequality, poverty, racism and those things are violence. And that's what you're hearing some of these protests about that people are not willing to put up with some of the structural barriers toward equality that so many people are asking for.

But let's go a little deeper about violence. We need to probe into our distant past to uncover the roots of aggression and figure out what can be done about it. So I'm going to go very far back and say that we've actually inherited instincts that are both aggressive and cooperative.

Let's look at the genetic looks, the roots of some of our closest animal relatives, chimpanzees. They can be cooperative and kind, but they can also be aggressive and violent as they fiercely fight for territory, and systematically kill members of other groups.

So we have inherited these instincts and both aggression and cooperation can be seen throughout our history, within our genes. We have the potential for the expression of abusive expressions of power and violence. As well as cooperation and caring.

I believe the high levels of aggression can occur when forces that control and regulate this inner violence begins to break down.

Alex Howard: Say a bit more about that. That's a really interesting point. So when that breaks down, that initiates a violence as a response?

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yes. So when I'm going to try to do now is just provide some historical markers that have influence, whether this breakdown occurs or not. And again, these historical markers are things we don't necessarily think about frequently when I think they underlie some of the breakdowns that occur, that regulate and moderate some of these instinctual forces that we have, as all other animals have as well.

So this historical analysis is critical. And let's start out with ten thousand years ago, our species changed from being hunter gatherers to domesticating animals and farming the land. By securing a more stable food supply cities emerged that provided us with enormous benefits. But there was a choice point to why they continue to sanctify, appreciate our connection to the natural world or to repudiate and sever this connection. If we think we need to dominate and control the world seen as dangerous and in need of taming, this introduces a lack of balance with the natural world, which introduces a breakdown in a regulatory factor inhibiting expression of violence and aggression.

Let me look at another historical piece. Just to help us think about history. The scientific revolution led to many wonderful advances in medicine and other areas. For example, our planet was no longer seen as the center of the universe and we had descended from chimpanzees. Major discoveries.

But this revolution ushered in another choice point, we could use these discoveries to solidify our appreciation of the natural world. Or we could believe that our universe is just filled with dead matter, ruled by laws of mathematics and physics with old religions, past rituals and myths just considered superstitions with no meaning.

Such a conclusion could strip away reasons for living which could also undermine social controls that moderate, aggressive, instinctual forces within us.

A third factor that's just worth considering from an historical point of view; the industrial revolution began in the early eighteen hundreds. Spurred on by advances in the scientific revolution.

Slowly, there was less need for the vast majority of humans to toil on the land as mechanization allowed for tremendous advances in food production and in time, for improvements in the quality of life. But as people move to cities for some, their former connections to a rich web of life, encompassing family and community may have begun to erode. Here is another choice point to stay connected to family and friends in somewhat impersonal cities or live with few connections to the community.

Aggression is more likely to occur for those who are living alienated and isolated with few networks other than those in ever intoxicating Internet world.

Alex Howard: So the further that we get from our connection to nature, to our family, to our communities, the further we get from that, the more likely we are to come from a place of violence in the broadest definition of what we mean by violence.

Dr. Leonard Jason: So. So just think of this. Think about people who are in jail, in prison when they come out of jail, in prison. They are looking for two things. Safe place to live. And basically a job where they can make some money.

So if you think about these two things as being critical, what do we end up doing?
We end up generally not giving them steady employment or a safe place to live.
They actually end up often going back to where the original problems occurred.

So if you have a person who is in an apartment, may be homeless, let's just say they have an apartment and they've got a television set and their television set is their best friend. Think about the implications of that person being able to rehabilitate and reintegrate into community. What they need is something that we have failed as a society to figure out how to provide. And that's a sense of community, richness of rituals and also a sense of connection with their environment, that's not trying to dominate and control it, but it's trying to live in peace with it.

Those things are structural issues that we need to confront if we're going to deal with the violence that's in our society, that ultimately brings its cruel forces to early adversity. And those victims are the ones who get impaired and hurt for life.

Alex Howard: Because, of course, one of the challenges of social injustice is those that have control and have power are driving a place in those that don't of frustration and anger and resentment because they want equality.

There's a sort of human drive for life to be fair. And so you sort of get this power dynamic of rising violence in response, but then violence to sort of oppress and to sort of maintain those structures. And it seems to be that part of what we're seeing at the moment is a shaking of some of those structures in a way that is healthy.

Dr. Leonard Jason: So think of it this way. You know, we have a lot of attention in the US about police. And, you know, a police officer in New York state probably gets less training than a person who's being trained to be a barber or something along those lines.
So the question is, what type of commitment do we have toward making sure that those individuals who are in charge of, in a sense, trying to keep things peaceful?

You know, there's a lot of research that has suggested that sometimes when we bring into ourselves a role, we start thinking about ourselves in different ways. And that becomes an issue that we have to confront, that sometimes we basically, you know, if we have to represent ourselves as wanting to be connected with middle class, wanting to be connected with, in a sense, the powers that be, and then those are there individuals who don't have that same kind of vision, don't have those same opportunities and are feeling left out.

Every research study that has been done there has looked at those types of inequalities. Has said that the inequalities that occur make safety a problem for everyone. And the more inequalities occur between those who have resources, opportunities versus those who don't the more friction you will ultimately have. And we will all have more problems dealing with our immune system to be able to not get Covid 19, as well as being, in a sense, touched by violence.

Just one other thing that kind of mentioned that is think about our educational system in the United States. And I won't talk about, you know, other countries, but just the United States. We have a way of educating individuals that provides them an inferior education with resources, with materials, with books, with funding for those who are the least advantaged and those who are the most advantaged who have the most resources, are the ones who get the superior education as youth.

Well, if you have a system like that, those individuals who come through a system that's so poorly prepared will ultimately end up having fewer job opportunities and they have fewer job opportunities and pure feelings that they are connected with our society. They will ultimately have more difficulties in lots of areas of life, including health issues, as well as being able to work in our society.

So what we are experiencing now is a tipping point because there is going to be a major change in the types of work that occurs in the next 10 years, and that type of work is going

to involve those who can use artificial intelligence, who can work with machines and robots, and they are going to have privileges based on their education that those who don't have those skills will not have.

That big in a sense, divide increases between those who have the technological skills to take advantage versus those who don't. Some of these tensions that we are now experiencing could become even more explosive.

That's why the focus needs to be on finding new ways of helping us educate everyone so that everyone has the same opportunities to take part in this exciting, technologically really advanced new world that we're all moving toward.

Alex Howard: I think one of the real challenges for people that are of a certain level of privilege to understand is, you know, I think back to when it was now must have been sort of seven or so years ago, we had a day or two of riots in and kind of looting in London where I live.

And one of the things at the time that was sort of striking was that the vast majority of people in society were what are these people doing? They're burning our shops. They're tearing down our sort of like, how could they do that to this, you know, wonderful place we live. And of course, what I think it was people fail to realize is those that were doing that did not feel that they were part of that community. They did not feel that they were participating in the privilege and the opportunity of that community. For them, it was like, I'm happy to burn this down because I'm not part of it anyway.

And I think sometimes it's difficult when people have lived with, of course, there are different layers of different privileges that people have. But to sometimes understand the emotional state motivations of those that don't feel that they participate in society in the same ways

Dr. Leonard Jason: So what can we do? I think it is really kind of what we're saying. And let me kind of suggest some possible things that we possibly need to consider. Early adversity can be interrupted by our interventions as well as the current social conditions that we are now confronted with.

But we need to dig deeper, ust as an archeologist and trying to understand the customs, norms and values of individuals within context, which have been influenced by different historical eras, breakdowns of social and regulatory mechanisms as well as educational and economic inequalities have contributed to many of the symptoms of violence that we witness.

Interventions that reduce early adversity and promote social justice are better understood when examining whether you're trying to live in balance with or trying to inappropriately control nature.

Whether we see scientific advancements in knowledge as bringing meaning or invalidating our sense of coherence. And whether our social settings promote social isolation or a richer sense of community. Social change, agents who hope to reduce early adversity and create

meaningful, lasting change need to think deeper in ways to combat these types of social problems, to address power abuses and to optimize wellness and the sense of community.

Alex Howard: So as a kind of approach, that absolutely makes sense. What are some of the practical ways that we can do that?

Dr. Leonard Jason: So, again, you had mentioned early on about first order and second order change. And certainly if you think about first order change like putting a bandage on it, there might be some infection that needs much more second order or fundamental type treatment.

So that's what we want to think about. Are we, in these troubled times, in a sense, seeing commercials where individuals and corporations are saying, we're with you? We're trying to kind of be sympathetic toward your cause? Or are they fundamentally going to try to restructure opportunities for those individuals who feel like they have been left out?

If we want to make systematic changes, are we going to, in a sense, continue to allow the educational inequities?

You know, in our country, in the U.S., our educational system really started out at the local level where communities in a sense pitched in money to provide schooling for those who lived in a particular town or city and that might have worked out fine in the eighteen hundreds.

But today, if we basically have an educational system that's financed by the community in which you live, then ultimately the rich suburbs around, for example, Chicago or London are going to have access to unbelievable resources that can give those youth who already have certain advantages even more privilege.
And if we have local areas that are under resourced communities and they have little access to the resources because their funding base is different, because the folks in those communities don't have the same types of jobs that have high incomes as those in richer areas.

So if you basically compound these social injustices and inequalities, then you're basically condemning a next generation to not having the skills, the abilities and the opportunities that will allow them to compete successfully. That's what we have to be thinking about. That's called structural change, and it's not going to be something that's going to be accomplished easily or quickly. It's going to be something that we're going to have to have a commitment to over the rest of our lives and careers.

Alex Howard: Of course, one of the challenges here, particularly in the political landscape, is investing in investing now for the benefit of the sort of medium, medium to long term.

And with political cycles being sort of four, five years and political parties, of course, focused on wanting to be reelected and maintain their position of power, it becomes a real point of tension about how we fund these sorts of interventions.

Dr. Leonard Jason: So the positive side is that you think about it, my generation, when I was growing up, I protested the Vietnam War. And that took a long time, you know, in the 1960s to the mid 70s before a tremendous amount of protesting eventually changed public opinion such that the United States was forced to get out of a war that had killed thousands of people in both Vietnam and the United States.

So we finally got something right by getting out of that war that we couldn't win. You can also think about the civil rights movement when you have someone like Mandela who basically kind of in South Africa is able to say, we are going to think about a different way of treating each other.

That is a significant kind of world event that we can look at; when we look at Martin Luther King, who basically was so instrumental in some of the changes that occurred in the 1960s with, you know, making it illegal to do some of the types of discrimination of even being able to go on to the lunch counter or go to different schools. That was a fundamental change based on nonviolence using really techniques from Mahatma Gandhi.

So we do have models; in the U.S. John F. Kennedy gave us a challenge - we could go to the moon and we did within a decade. So we can take on a task and we can accomplish it if we have the willingness to basically stick with it.
Focus on basically those people who have power and how they're going to have to be challenged. Work with those community grassroot organizations that are willing to challenge those powerful individuals and work for structural second order change, not first-order change. And all these things happen to the extent that we're willing to stick with it, be committed and not let ourselves get focused on something else, that basically is not going to keep that commitment that's needed.

Alex Howard: On an individual level, I think what you're saying is I actually find it very inspiring. What we are saying Dr. Jason, and I think of practitioners that are watching this who are thinking, well, you know what can? What can I do? I'm not a political leader. I'm not a community leader. I'm just day in, day out sort of doing my bit, helping people who are drowning the best that I can.

What can an individual do to be a part of the solution?

Dr. Leonard Jason: So, you know, I think one of our mistakes sometimes is saying that, you know, we're going to eliminate poverty. And people kind of say, OK, I'm going to try doing it and then when they're not necessarily successful, because that's such a large issue that they get discouraged.

So the question is, what are those intermediate steps where you can have a small win, where you can work on something for a long period of time and then working on something might be willing to be in prison like Mandela did for a long time, but basically sticking with it for a long time, staying committed. And that's what I think is the most important issue.

You know, I can just talk about myself at DePaul University, which is in Chicago. You know, I've been committed to social change and we helped, for example, develop a program in clinical community psychology training to go out into the world with this different

perspective of prevention. We also created a community psych PhD program so that people could be trained just in the systems analysis we're talking to. And we helped create that program at the undergraduate level. We have the concentration in community psychology so students can actually become a B.A. in community psych. And we've just opened up a master's program. Terminal master's in community psychology also. So that student can get a masters after two years or a combined program of taking four years as a B.A. and then an extra year for a master's.

So in one setting, we've created literally hundreds of opportunities for people to get trained to then go out into the world and bring about change. So sometimes what's most important is think about your own setting that you're in. Think about the community. Think about the work setting. Think about the neighborhood. Think about what you can do to make a difference.

Stick with it. Bring about social justice. Create opportunities for others. To the extent that you basically think local, you impact global.

Alex Howard: I think what's also inspiring and I think important about what you're saying as well is, as much as caring about social justice issues is an act of kindness and an act of loving care for one's community. It also pays dividends back for all of us.

Going back to what you were saying earlier, that when we live in a society with a significant imbalance of privilege, that it creates instability and suffering in the system for everyone.

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yeah, I think our personal safety is something that is connected with our community and our nation and if we think just in a sense, a very kind of self focused way of what's in it for me and why am I being persecuted and why am I having some of my resources being taken away? We miss that larger picture.

I think it's very easy for some, for example, politicians to, in a sense, urge us to basically think selfishly, think about your own narrow interests. Just think about getting what you need for yourself. And that's a pathway toward disaster.

And to the extent that we think about really our vision is our community, our family, our friends are people who we live with and the folks who we are part of as a nation to the extent that that breaks down, we all become vulnerable to some of the types of violence that could easily erupt as we have seen already happen.

Alex Howard: And in a sense, that eruption, when those communities are being ignored and not being listened to, may be a necessary part of that rebalancing in this, and as you've spoken to, driving that process of change.

Dr. Leonard Jason: Yes. In a sense, you have someone who whispers. You don't hear it. They cry. You don't hear it. They yell and they scream and you don't hear it. And at some point, you have to say, we need to listen to those messages there.

You know, in a sense, we're all in a forest and we're trying to figure out our way out. And this is kind of some of the great work of Mythologists who have basically said one of our challenges is to find our way.

Joseph Campbell, some of you probably know some of his work. Well, there's going to be guides and there's going to be voices and there's going to be kind of strategies that we hear. Do we listen to them? Do we get the sense of those guides that help us with these really prominent mythological adventures that we all face? To the extent that we're willing to basically kind of say, hey, I am going to honor this intuition. I am going to listen to what I am saying and what other people are saying to me.

Then we have a chance of collectively finding our way out of this forest that we're all in so that we can ultimately get to that Holy Grail.

Alex Howard: This is a very important conversation, and I really appreciate the way that you're speaking to a complex issue from a place that's also passionate and inspiring as well. I think that that's a very helpful lens to come at it from.

Dr. Jason, you've also recently Co Edited a book at which we reference at the start, *An Introduction to Community Psychology; Becoming an Agent of Change.* I think that would be a helpful place for people that want to understand more about this. We'll put a link to it on this page.

So anything you want to say about what people can find through that book?

Dr. Leonard Jason: So that's an interesting process of, you know, just think about these small steps that you can take in my field, which is community psychology, students often have to pay a couple hundred dollars to get their textbook and some students don't have the money, so they basically lose out that resource.

So a group of us actually around the world decided to put together an online free introductory community psychology textbook written by 50 people, 19 chapters, and it's all available to anyone.

So the point is, if you want to make change, sometimes one can use the Internet. One can use online materials. One can provide types of resources to people who need them, who can lower some of the barriers to participation either in class or other things.

So this product is providing a free introductory textbook to anybody in the world is really the exact example of what we're talking about. Keep it focused. Make it concrete. Do something. Change the world.

Alex Howard: That's the perfect place to end. Dr. Jason, thank you so much for your time. I've really enjoyed this interview. Thank you.