



Managing stress and burnout after trauma

Guest: Cornelia Kastner

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[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow

Hello, and welcome to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be joined by Cornelia Kastner. Welcome.

Cornelia Kastner

Hello, Jaia. My pleasure to be with you today.

Jaia Bristow

Thanks for joining us.

So as well as being a dear friend, Cornelia is a clinical psychologist, an occupational psychologist specializing in stress prevention and life crises. She works with individuals and organizations on sustainably reducing the level of stress experienced in everyday life. And you can read Connie's full bio below.

So today we're going to be talking a bit about stress and burnout as a symptom of trauma. So to start us off, can you tell us how stress and burnout are actually connected to trauma?

Cornelia Kastner

Generally, stress, burnout and trauma are connected in two specific ways. On the one hand side, trauma itself can be considered a very intense experience of stress. So if we look at how the body and mind react in a traumatic experience, it's the same systems that are triggered. It's our fight and flight response that's triggered by trauma. And a similar reaction is elicited by a stressful experience, normally to a way lesser extent. There are similarities in the mechanism itself.

On the other side, we can also observe, and research has also shown this, that traumatic events that we experience or trauma that we experience, be it through early childhood or also a shock trauma as an adult, can really influence our nervous system. It can influence how our stress system will, in the future, react to stressful situations.

So, more or less trauma can change our stress systems or can influence our stress systems so that the stress systems react a bit more strongly to future stressful experiences. And that can also mean that trauma can cause a bit of a vulnerability for us towards stress and burnout.

[00:02:18] Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And so I guess my next question is, why is it important then, to manage our stress levels?

Cornelia Kastner

Especially for people who have had previous traumatic experiences, and that can be anything from obviously more childhood related traumas to more, let's say, chronic traumas such as bullying or even harassment. In the end, it makes people more vulnerable towards stress experiences. And therefore, it is very essential to actually keep an eye on the level of stress you experience in everyday life in order to make sure that those symptoms don't escalate.

Jaia Bristow

And how do we do that? How do we monitor these stress levels?

Cornelia Kastner

So I guess there's a few steps to it. I normally recommend to my clients that as a first step it's important to really start feeling that connection with yourself. So to just start even noticing how your body feels when you're stressed.

And I don't know what your experience is, but this can go really from feeling like your stomach's cramping up, some of my clients actually report that their eyelids start fluttering, so that's a very typical sign of stress, or people who clench their jaws in the middle of the night. So all of that shows us that our stress levels are increasing. While there's different signs, everyone has a very different experience of it.

So it's important to also get to know yourself and to reflect back on, wait, when did this even start? So before the crisis hits you check in with yourself. What did my body show me? What did my psyche show me? What signs of stress did I notice? And that's how we physically, and how we really can have a look at tracking our stress levels.

But then as a second step, we also need to reflect on what caused it. So then the second step would be to really see, okay, how does the stress level change? What changes is it? It just works. Is it my private life? More or less, how does my energy battery look as well?

Jaia Bristow

That makes sense. So as you're saying it's monitoring physical symptoms, like fluttering eyelids, I know I have that one, stomach cramps. More recently, stress manifested for me in literally throwing up at night. Like I was waking up and throwing up. And I knew it wasn't food poisoning because it was every second night. And I couldn't understand why. And I realized it must be due to stress. So we have all these physical symptoms that can manifest in our body. So it's noticing those symptoms and then understanding where the stress is coming from. I think you were saying.

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely yes. And ideally, you're speaking about actually throwing up at night and having very severe symptoms. Ideally, we can even go a step back from that, were there any warning signs before the more severe physical symptoms happened? For example, did you notice that, I don't know, for

some people they struggle to fall asleep a bit more than usual. Or maybe it's just that their appetite changes a little bit. So maybe it's not the full on symptoms, but already fast science. Ideally, we want to go a step back and to start noticing stress earlier and earlier. And that's how we can also almost teach ourselves to notice stress before it causes any physical impact.

[00:05:49] Jaia Bristow

And so it's the more subtle symptoms. And then I guess in my situation, for example, it's because I've had a very stressful time recently, which is in large part due to trauma. I've lost a family member, I went through a break up, I've survived some assaults, and it's been an intense period.

And so you were talking about the links between stress and trauma, but as a psychologist who specializes in this, what are some tips that you give to your clients how to, what does someone like me do in a situation like this where there's not even the time to necessarily go back. It's like I'm in it. There's all this stuff happening in my life, what does one do to manage that?

Cornelia Kastner

If you were one of my clients the first thing that I'd probably do is say, congratulations. Because the first step that you've already achieved is to notice in this very difficult time, with a lot of traumatic experiences, that you're struggling with it. And that's already this first step that I mentioned about noticing, that's something you've already done.

And from here, we would now go into different methods and different aspects of, A, managing stress in the moment. And, B, trying to prevent stress for the future as well.

So, managing stress in the moment, one aspect that's hugely important is managing your energies. And that's what I already mentioned as well, with regards to checking in on your battery levels, because each of those experiences is not just a strain on your system and does not just influence your actual physical stress system, but it also causes your emotional batteries to drain. It is a stressor on your psyche as well. And that's something that if we're aware of that, and if we can make sure that we find good ways of recharging those batteries, of balancing it out, of not overextending our energies, that's definitely something that we can do while we're in the midst of it.

Jaia Bristow

So what are some examples of doing that?

Cornelia Kastner

So, for example, seeing that you're in the middle of, or if someone is in the middle of a proper crisis or a traumatic experience, it's very important to maybe also show self compassion for ourselves, so not expect too much of ourselves. We quite often think, oh, well, it's one event, two events, three events, but I just need to keep functioning. So this idea of keep functioning is quite often something that, yes, it can help us push through a short time or a short period, but it's still something that puts strain on our bodies.

And generally our mind is equipped to deal with stresses in the short run. But we don't want to keep pushing and keep pushing and keep pushing without ever stopping and recharging. And for recharging, what does that mean? It means to take the pressure off yourself. It means to take time to

relax, to spend moments with loved ones, for example. To have positive connection, to invest time in experiencing, even if it's a tiny little bit, but experiencing joy as much as it's possible in that moment.

[00:09:30] Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. So I'm hearing a lot about observing one's body, observing the signs and managing the stress levels before we get to a stage where it's overwhelming and where it's too much to deal with. Focusing on things like self care, on monitoring energy levels, on keeping an eye on the battery levels, as you're saying, on recharging the batteries, if we notice that they are depleted. And I love the examples you've given of finding things that bring us joy, finding moments of nourishment in our lives, of connection and support.

And what happens if we get to the point where it's a bit too late and we haven't monitored our stress levels and we have reached burnout?

Cornelia Kastner

So generally the state of burnout is really what you just said. It's more or less the body tries to keep up with stress levels for a long, long time, and at a certain point it just can't anymore. It's been fighting the stressor. It's been resisting against the stressor for too long, and now the rest of the energy, the rest of the resources are depleted.

And what happens then is quite a difficult question, because the experience, the individual experience can be slightly different. So some people drop into quite an anxious state. Some people feel depressed. Some people actually develop more physical symptoms. In any case, it's still possible to come back out of burnout.

But one thing that we notice is the sooner we can stop and the sooner we can intervene, the better. Because even burnout can become chronic if we're not starting to find measures, to find ways to actually work against it and to get back to healthier states.

Jaia Bristow

And I think that's so important, first of all, defining what burnout is as that point, that breaking point when the body and the mind just can't cope anymore, from what you were talking about, and that's why it's so important to not always feel that need to just keep pushing through and keep going when we're stressed. Which so often happens. We get caught in this cycle of, I'm stressed, I have so much to do, I have to keep going because I need to get it done and then I'll be less stressed, but it actually makes us more stressed. And once the body's gone through that for a certain amount of time, we reach burnout, as you're saying. And that we can even, if we're not careful, have chronic burnout. So I really appreciate what you're talking about, about slowing down and intervening as soon as possible.

And you've talked a bit about some of the symptoms in the body that stress can manifest as or burnout can manifest. You've talked about depression, I don't know if you mentioned chronic fatigue, and other such things. Could you give a few more examples so people know what to look out for?

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely. So the thing with the physical symptoms is in the end, our stress system is directly linked to our immune system. And chronic stress can make it more difficult for our immune system to

function properly. And that's how there's the link between the physical symptoms and stress and burnout.

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Now, just to say this in between as well, that does not mean that being stressed because of one deadline for a short period of time is usually dangerous. I'm really talking here about chronic stress and chronic symptoms, of course.

But yes, absolutely, so as you said already, yes, chronic fatigue, as much as the definition and the origins are still not 100% definite, there's quite a tentative relationship between our stress axis in the body and developing fatigue symptoms. So there seems to be quite a strong link between our stress axis and symptoms of fatigue.

At the same time we also see a similar link between, for example, chronic stress, burnout and autoimmune disorders or diseases. So there seems to be a link between those as well. We can also see a very strong link between stress and inflammatory disorders or diseases.

So, for example, as you already said previously as well, with the symptoms of throwing up at night time, or I already mentioned the stomach cramping up, especially our digestive tract is quite strongly linked to our stress system as well. So any inflammatory diseases or disorders of the digestive system that can be really directly linked to chronic stress.

And then different mental or more psychological disorders are also linked. I already mentioned depression. I already mentioned anxiety. There is a bit of research done into dementia, but there's no clear findings on that yet.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. So I'm hearing how all these mental health disorders, like depression and anxiety, or a lot of physical disorders, especially inflammatory diseases, autoimmune diseases, chronic fatigue conditions, how these can all be, either caused by stress or at least definitely exacerbated by stress. And then we're also talking about stress as a symptom of trauma. So like you were saying, it's about often going back and noticing where things began and when the symptoms start, not trying to push forward it sounds like, but trying to come back a bit and stop and think back to where it's happening and break the cycle. Do you have any more to say about that?

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely. First of all, I fully agree. Yes, that's exactly it. So normally what I always like to do with my clients is that we work forward. Yes, because obviously we want to help relieve the stress immediately or as immediately as possible. But I also try to look back to see, where does my stress even come from? Why do I maybe have personal stress triggers? Why might it be that my stress system is a bit more reactive than the stress system of other people? So why might they react more strongly to different stresses of my everyday life? And that's where exactly that cycle of trauma comes back again. Well, stress is in the middle and can lead to different physical or mental disorders, or at least, as you said, exacerbate them.

If we also look at the link of trauma and stress, it also helps us see patterns. It helps us look backwards and see, can we maybe support clients in overcoming some of those barriers that have built up in the past already that actually increased their stress levels in today's life?

[00:16:18] Jaia Bristow

And so what are some examples of trauma that can exacerbate that? And are you talking about previous trauma, like early childhood trauma or more current traumas? And you're talking about triggers there as well. So is this a trigger off the previous traumas? Could you say a bit more about that?

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely. So generally, stress and trauma are linked no matter what type of trauma. On a physiological level, we can always say the trauma that happens in, it's called vulnerable phases, so phases where, for example, our brain is still in development. That, of course, does more for our brain development. So that's even more ingrained. That's why I mentioned early childhood traumas before already. So, yes, they definitely have an influence.

But we can also see that current traumas, shock traumas, let's say an accident or even chronic traumas such as bullying in the workplace, can have an influence on our stress system. So while maybe early childhood traumas have a bit of a stronger impact, also current traumas or traumas that we experience as adults can absolutely change our stress system. And, of course, also our experience of stress in the present moment.

And at the same time, if I talk about triggers, it's sometimes also quite difficult, because while we say trauma generally is considered an emotional response to a terrible event, but it's never entirely definable what a terrible event is. It doesn't always have to be an event that is something like a natural catastrophe or a major accident. Sometimes we can also look at smaller events as traumatic if our individual system can't cope very well.

So, for example, even now with the COVID-19 pandemic, that carries quite a lot of aspects of trauma with it, because generally we consider events that are new, unpredictable, uncontrollable, ambiguous, all of these aspects contribute to the stress qualities that an event has. And with that also make it more likely to be a traumatic experience for some people.

Jaia Bristow

I think it's really important what you're saying about there's not one category or one categorization of events that's classified as traumatic. It really depends on the individual's system and how much the individual system can handle. And so certain events will impact certain people more than others. And then, of course, there's layers of trauma. So someone who's already under huge amounts of stress and has experienced lots of trauma will probably be more heavily impacted by COVID than someone who has a very stable life.

And then again, there's also where we live, someone who lives in a city will be impacted in a different way than someone who lives in the countryside and their day to day isn't as impacted by the pandemic. So I think that's really important what you're talking about. And I'm wondering if you can say a bit more about these layers of stress and who is prone to being traumatized almost?

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely. Generally in research at the moment there's quite a few models that look at a two hit or three hit theory of trauma. Which more or less means that with each incident of trauma or intense stress, we might become more likely to experience stress more intensely in the future. So therefore,

also more likely to experience an event that's traumatic in the future. Which might mean that if we had, let's say, a first trauma in our childhood and then we experience bullying as a teenager, then that's already two hits where we've been hit with events that might be very stressful or even traumatic for us.

[00:20:20]

And if we have that in our past, then it would be also more likely that any future events that carry a lot of stress aspects with them would be experienced as traumatic as well. So, for example, that we might experience the pandemic as a traumatic event. However, you're also right that other aspects, rather than just our past experience of stress, of trauma, influences our coping. So depending on which resources we have within ourselves but also around ourselves, where we live, what our social network is, all of that also makes a difference in how we cope with events and whether they feel or I experience as traumatic, or is quite controllable, quite manageable.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's really an important point as well you're making there about the capacity one has and the resources and the support that we have internally and externally. So could you say some more about what can be supportive and what resources one might have in both those ways, externally and internally?

Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely. Generally speaking, I would say a lot of things can be resources without us even noticing they are. So even something like, I've got a habit of going to yoga every Thursday afternoon, even that yoga class that I'm used to, that gives me a routine, stability, a hobby, that can be a resource in coping.

But aside from things like that, any good relationships we have. And good relationships means from partners, friends, family, but also coworkers, stable relationships. That's a massive resource. And resources, of course, also mean can we get support from professionals? That's from speaking as a psychologist, from psychologists, over medical doctors, over coaches, over any other professional.

And internal resources, for example, means, well, how have I coped before? If, for example, I've developed some resilience skills, and I'm aware that actually, I got through previous negative experiences so I can do it again. That's a huge resource. So this even learning to trust in yourself and developing inner strength. So that's, for example, an inner resource. An inner resource could also be that you can rely on your own problem solving skills. But there's a pretty much endless list of inner resources and maybe a slightly less endless list of outer resources that we can try to fall back on.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. So what I'm hearing is that even if someone is more prone to trauma, whether that's because of their social identity, for example, their upbringing, the fact that they've already had three hits throughout childhood and their teenagehood or early adulthood, that it's not too late. That there are ways of developing these resources and gaining access to them externally and internally and having the support network one needs, or the support structures one needs, to work with trauma, work with stress, and either prevent burnout or heal and recover if we've got to that stage already.

[00:23:46] Cornelia Kastner

Yes, absolutely. So I think this is very important. It's good to be aware of the fact that if we've had previous experiences, if we're predisposed, to know that we might be more vulnerable and that we need to be more careful with ourselves. But that does not mean that we have to be a victim of burnout, that we have to be a victim of stress. It just means that maybe it's good to have an extra eye on preventing too much stress in the future.

Jaia Bristow

And so I think we've already touched upon some of this but let's give a few more practical tips on how to prevent stress.

Cornelia Kastner

As I briefly mentioned before, I think there's always two perspectives to this. One is, what can I do right now? What can I really do in the moment to make sure my stress level is decreased? And one practical tip for that, that I always really like to give my clients and it's actually normally the first exercise I give most clients that come and work with me, is to even just try once a day to walk for a bit, let's say 10 minutes. Even if it's just to my car or to the next tube station. And for that time to leave your phone in your pocket, which is actually quite tricky for some people already. And to try to find your own speed in walking. So to try to figure out, rather than racing to the car or racing to the tube station, to really find a speed that feels good.

And by doing that we not only reconnect with ourselves a bit because we have to notice how am I feeling, but it also normally slows us down, and that can already really decrease stress levels in the moment. Or other short-term things are normally also rooted in the question of what stresses me at the moment? It can be something like we need to look at time management or setting boundaries, saying no. Setting boundaries towards, sometimes it's at work, or sometimes it's even towards family, towards friends.

And then if we look more at what tips we can give in the long run, then that's really where we start looking into patterns. So when we start trying to identify what triggers our stress. Just one example, I know that a lot of people are stressed because they feel like they have those, let's say, people pleasing tendencies. So they're putting a lot of pressure on themselves because they're worried about what others might think of them, how others might perceive them. And obviously, if we want to prevent stress for the future, then I always consider it hugely valuable to not only focus on reducing stress right now, but to also work on those patterns, because that's really what can change our general strategies and our general ways in how we go through life.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I really like the fact that you have those things to do in the immediate, like that slowing down. And I love that. I think I'm going to try and put that into practice, having that little moment every day when I'm not on my phone and I'm tuning into myself and I'm finding a pace that works. And as you say, it helps us slow down and reconnect with ourselves. Which means that then we can start monitoring where our stress levels, as you were talking about previously, which is so important to not get caught up in the cycle.

And again, I guess what you're saying about having those as either daily routines. Like most people, if they commute to work every day, then they're either walking to their car to the tube or to work or

wherever it is, so having those moments. And also having weekly routines like your weekly yoga class you were mentioning. So having those healthy habits incorporated into daily life and weekly life. And then noticing the unhealthy habits that we might have that are causing stress. And when we recognize those patterns, then it's a lot easier to break those patterns or to undo them or to counteract them and then break the cycle of stress, is what I'm hearing.

[00:27:54] Cornelia Kastner

I fully agree. Yeah. So generally, creating healthy habits and avoiding unhealthy habits can be a hugely important step. Because in the end, things that feel like a lot of effort and they're new and they're difficult to implement, chances are we're not going to keep them up. Whereas if we manage to even implement little steps, little moments that are healthy, that help us monitor and prevent, then in the long run, chances are that's going to make a way bigger impact than a measure that we're setting just once and then never following up with.

And still yes, also I agree that looking for those patterns, looking for any negative behavioral patterns that we've adopted throughout our life can also help us make it easier to live in a more healthy manner in the future.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Well, there's some great advice there, and I think it's really helpful to understand that we're not helpless when we experience trauma. It does cause an impact on our nervous system. It does create more stress, like physiologically and mentally. And at the same time, there are definitely things we can do to manage that.

So before we end, is there anything else that you would like to add?

Cornelia Kastner

All right. Well, people can find me on my website, which is www.cornelia-kastner.at

And the website will also be linked down below. And generally, I always try to provide some materials for guidance. I also have some online workshops and coaching programs so people can always reach me there.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And do you still have spaces? And do you offer one-on-one coaching?

Cornelia Kastner

I do offer one-to-one coaching and I currently do have a few limited spaces left. But there's also always a bit of turnover. So normally, if it's really important, I can always make space as well.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. So people who are struggling with stress and burnout can go to your website and contact you and have one-on-one sessions with you or check out resources that you offer online. Is that right?

[00:30:06] Cornelia Kastner

Absolutely correct. So there's always resources and I'm always more than happy to be contacted to also give a bit of guidance and support or go into one-on-one coaching.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

Cornelia Kastner

Thank you very much for having me. It was a pleasure.