

Becoming safely embodied

Guest: Deirdre Fay

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today, I'm speaking with Deirdre Fay. We'll learn about her radically positive approach to healing trauma based on 35 years of experience as a psychotherapist, an educator exploring the practical ways transformation occurs. Deirdre's message resonates deeply with those who may look successful on the surface but internally feel plagued by shame, anxiety, stress, depression, wondering why they're stuck in repeating relational and life patterns. Her third book, *Becoming Safely Embodied*, became a bestseller before it was published.

Thank you so much for joining me today.

Deirdre Fay

I'm delighted to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So I want to start just by talking about what being triggered is and how people get triggered. There's a lot of talk in popular culture about being triggered. So really, what is that, and what's your take on it? And when we're triggered by a situation or a person in our lives, what do we do?

Deirdre Fay

That's such a great question. So when we're triggered at least psychologically or psycho-spiritually, what is happening is something from our present moment is activating something from the past that we haven't fully metabolized and digested, and it pops into this moment as if it's happening now. And it is happening now. We're in the moment. It is happening. But the reason the charge is so big is because it never got digested back at another point. And what tends to happen is it just grows bigger and bigger the less it completes itself.

Well, the other piece of it is when we have had trauma or neglect on an ongoing basis from when we were younger, it lives in us in these early ages. And we know the brain doesn't develop instantaneously. It takes time. So the first three years are when the brain is developing itself, and we don't have a narrative understanding. So when something happens to me at a young age, I feel it, I experience it. I don't think about it.

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And so, what happens then is I am swirling in this world, and that's the air that I breathe. But then as I grow up, I now am thinking about this experience and making sense of it from a thought perspective, but if I haven't integrated it in, they're going to be separate. And so then later on in life, somebody says something or does something or I do something, boom! This old stuff gets "paahh," and it pops out, and it's overwhelming to us. And we think, what is wrong with me?

What I've come to see after years of doing this and having it happen to me is that it really is meant...triggers are meant to awaken that stuff so that we can process it in the moment and move through it and have a better experience.

Meagen Gibson

And something that you said I want to follow up on is about the volume of the experience or the trigger, right? So it's not that there's not any truth in, like, somebody said something that hurt my feelings, right? Like my feelings have been hurt. It's not that that's not true. It's the volume at which you express that and the reaction to that instance based in the trauma that hasn't been integrated and processed. Is that kind of what you're saying?

Deirdre Fay

Right. The charge is the undigested material, and the charge then links to this moment, and it links to all the dust falls of thoughts and feelings and interpretations we've had about it all those years. And that's what makes it so messy.

Meagen Gibson

And it's a brilliantly designed system between our brain and our body, collecting information over time. There's a purpose to that. It's meant to keep us safe and to organize our brain around being able to perceive what's safe and who is safe and give our body signals, these kind of old operating systems in our brains and our bodies around when we were cave dwellers around, like, this situation is not safe: run! Or this person is not safe: get away! So these kind of old operating systems that collect information for us and give us signals when we're in a situation that's not great for us, but at the same time when they malfunction, when you're sitting next to somebody on the couch and they say something that upsets you, you want to escape and burn the building down, that's not necessarily that operating system working in our favor, is it?

Deirdre Fay

Not at all. So much of what I learned about this and developed myself is that I had lived in a yoga ashram back in the 80s and 90s and did a lot of yoga, a lot of meditation. And then when my own trauma history came up during that time, I was left, like, what happened? How do I deal with this? And I began to really put together a lot of the ideas from yoga psychology and attachment theory.

So if we look at it from a yogic perspective, yoga says that there's prana, life force, moving through us all the time. It's moving through us and around us at every moment. But as we're growing up or as situations happen, they imprint on us. They imprint, as we say, on our consciousness. And as that imprint lands, and we don't digest it and move through it, it gets deeper and deeper, and there's a word for it and how it knots into our system.

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So what happens is prana is still moving through us, and it hits up against this knot, and it's trying to jostle it clear and let it move, which sounds okay, but when we're in the middle of it, when life is coming through with a volume and saying, "Let go, let go," we're like, "No, no, no, you don't understand. I got to hang on." This is painful stuff, and we forget that prana's main goal is to return us back to ourselves, to bring us home to our own heart. And so that's the inner fight that goes on.

And when we start taking the perspective, okay, I'm getting activated here. Just let it move through, let it rise, crest and fall. It's going to be completed. Maybe it's not going to complete everything at once. Maybe we have to take it apart bit by bit. What were the thoughts? What were the feelings? What is the body sensation? And make sense of it. But then what will tend to happen, it will link from this moment to where the original imprint was. And then it's like, you watch it with people all the time, they're like, "Oh right!" And somehow the stress of it is eased when that linking occurs.

Meagen Gibson

And since you brought up yoga and the title of your book, *Becoming Safely Embodied*, I've been guilty of this, and I've talked about this with other contributors, this tendency that we have to try to think our way through our trauma and think our way, like, we're going to learn enough or we're going to talk enough, or we're going to work the problem with our brains. And it's just not that simple, is it?

Deirdre Fay

No, I tried it a lot. When my first memories came up, I said to my therapist, Well, how long will this take? She said to me, Well, how long do you think it'll take? And I said, Well, you know, I'm in the Aries. I'm really strong. I can handle this. I said, six months. I'll give it six months. It's a lifetime endeavor. And it's out of that that I really come to believe that healing is an Olympian endeavor. It takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of effort. And the more we practice, the easier it gets. Bad English there, but that is what happens. But we have to take on that mindset of, like, I'm not a victim. Nothing bad. Yes, terrible things happened. But I'm an adult now. I can learn the skills and figure out how to do this in a better way so I have a better life. And that is one of the primary cauldrons of transformation that I saw with people working with them. It's almost to a fault. Every single one of us wants life out there to come in and make it easier for us here.

And I thought, oh, my God, that's so normal. Of course we want that. Of course we do. And we should have had that. As children, we should have had our needs met inside so that we form a self, a solid, sturdy, secure self. The research shows for three out of four of us that didn't happen. So what do we do? The hardest thing for us as clients is to say, okay, I'm going to shift. I'm going to recognize these needs that I have. I really want it to be easier for me to say, okay, I do want it to be easier. Let me find out what I need and want inside, and how can I shift so that I can know these needs and get my needs met on the outside? That knowing myself first, which is the wonderful thing about your work, is about becoming conscious inside so that I can be in relationship with the outside world in the way that I want.

Meagen Gibson

And something that I was thinking about while you were talking is something I've been talking through with a couple of friends of mine... We all share the same character trait when it comes to our trauma, which is this hyper independence, so the recognition of, if I can't control the outside world, then I can't control the people in my life, all I can control is me. So forget everybody, I'm just going to

be on my own. Right? And so if you could talk to that trauma response of how do I move to self-embodiment away from hyper independence, away from distancing ourselves from other people for self protection.

[00:10:47] Deirdre Fay

Right. Well, I guess one of the main places to look there is to see what were the circumstances that happened that had me, (and I qualify for that subgroup), what happened that I felt like I couldn't rely on anybody. Why did I develop that need to do it all myself? And what would happen if I transformed that into a secure vulnerability, an authentic connection? And we're afraid to. And why are we afraid? It's because of these imprints.

Okay, so let me pause and see. What could I do? How can I be with this? What is the need that's there? Well, if I'm super independent, it's because I'm afraid, what? I'm afraid that nobody will be there for me, and I'm going to be all alone, that I'm going to be hurt, and I'm going to be shamed and humiliated? Oh. Then we begin to see.

And this is a transformational model that I really put together. That first stage is all about "I'm protesting against something, I don't like this," and so I develop all these characteristics. Some people become hyper independent. Some people become really vulnerable and anxiously attached. So okay, I'm protesting against something. Something's not working. What do I need? What do I want? What would be better?

And this also comes from yoga. Yoga says for every something, there is an opposite. We live in union, but there's always these opposites we're working with. So how do I have something that's more nourishing, something that actually allows me to feed myself instead of being shorn from it.

What would it be like to be really independent, but to be a little bit more connected at the same time? We start opening that up. "Oh, but then it's going to be blah, blah, blah." We start looking at what's underneath it and what keeps us from having the connections we want.

Meagen Gibson

And so I imagine in a relationship, you have an instance where you're triggered, and obviously your responsibility there is first to self-regulate, right? Like to not communicate from and act from the exaggerated response of that trigger, to allow it, accept it, right? But to be able to re-regulate yourself down so that you can communicate responsibly.

Deirdre Fay

And we all know we'd love to do that. That would be ideal if I could do that. But what tends to happen is we can't, especially in the beginning as we're learning. So one of the key attachment needs we all have is how do we deal with conflict and repair that conflict? When do we know when I say 'no, I can't do something?'; when do I know I need this even more? And how do I learn that the relationship gets stronger if we work through the connection?

Now, it could be that as you work through the conflict, you say this is not a person I want to be with anymore. This is not right for me. This is not going to help me in any way. And so then the question is, can I strengthen that relationship with myself? And that I'm bumping up against conflict, but this is not right for me, whatever is going on here, so I'm going to come back inside myself and figure out a new way of being.

[00:14:30] Meagen Gibson

So we've talked a little bit about attachment, kind of around attachment, but I would love if we talked about it and unpacked it just a little bit more because I know that when trauma is involved, shame is involved, and shame has such a role in attachment and how we develop our attachment pattern. So I'd love it if you talked about that just a little bit more.

Deirdre Fay

It's interesting because I'm just creating a course exactly on that about dissolving the shame that's in there. So, attachment happens early on. And the research around attachment is very much about these early years and how something happens that gets us activated or imprints on us. And we have different ways of interacting with that. So if somebody is kind and soothing and quieting to us, we know what that's like. Our system knows how good that is. If we're in a lot of conflict and distress, we're going to have different ways of interacting with it. And some people are going to tighten up and freeze inside and withdraw away and say, it's not safe. Some people are going to be like, I'll do anything, I'll make it better.

And it's not conscious. These are all these unconscious patterns that are going on that have us claim. The research around it is really solid about how to help people shift around it. And what's hard is there's an idea in attachment theory called representation. It's not the actual experience of what's going on. It's how I represent it to myself.

So what I like to do is think about, it's like a contact lens that I put on, and I'm wearing all the time, and I forget I have it on. But if that contact lens is blurry, that's how I see the world. That's how I experience the world. So what would it be like to take that out or practice a different way?

In my trainings, I do a lot with what I call the attachment in here, literally having people draw and write, this is the mirror of life in which I see myself. I see myself as no good, something's wrong with me. Whatever the beliefs are, what would it be like to let go of that mirror and actually look into a different mirror, a different window of the world, what comes back to us? And inevitably, people will say, "Well, I can't imagine that." Right? Because we're swimming in the model of the world. John Bowlby, the grandfather of attachment theory, called it the "internal working model." And that is the template that we lived in.

If I try to think about something different, what would that be? It's like, I don't know how to do this. I literally don't know. And we have to then train our body, mind and heart to attune to this experience versus the old experience. And that is hard work, but it can be done. And we do it in simple, step by step ways that actually let the body adjust.

Meagen Gibson

Say a little bit more about that, because that's the piece that I want to know about the most. I'm noticing, as you're describing that, I'm like, this is all a thinking process, thinking process. And then you say, here's how we help the body adjust. Say more.

Deirdre Fay

Let's take something broad like all of us want to love and be loved. I think that's probably the most specific we can get. All right. So love is a concept. It's a thought. What is love in here? What are my internal signals of love? And what are the external signals of love that come in.

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For some people, if they've been imprinted with a lot of conflict in their family, they're going to have conflict as a signal of love. They're going to be in a very aroused state, and somehow it's going to feel familiar and at home, and like that's love.

How do you then train your body to say, okay, I want more quiet. Maybe I don't need to be hyper aroused all the time. What would that be like? What would it be like to be soothed and calmed in my body? What would it be like to do that? Okay. What is soothing to me? What is soothing? I don't know what soothing is. Okay, look out into your world. What's soothing out there? Okay. I see somebody petting their cat. What happens in my body when I see somebody pet their cat? I take a little bit deeper breath. Oh, so that's what happens. What if you do that for 17 more seconds? Because we know that neurons start changing and jumping in a new direction, 17 seconds at a time. Okay. I could do this for 17 seconds. All right. Okay. You take that little building block, you put it with another one, another one, and you start changing that way. But it's that granular.

Meagen Gibson

Oh really. Go ahead.

Deirdre Fay

I was on a conference yesterday, and I was doing something about touch, or it was something about touch. And somebody said, Well, what if somebody has a traumatic experience around physical touch? And then how do you deal with that? I said, but that is a concept that physical touch is wrong. What do we know physiologically? The body loves to be touched. Not too much, not too little. But we love it. And it changes our physiology.

So somewhere in there, the concept of physical touch is hard, bad, no good, something. How do we change that? Well, I've worked with this with many people. It's like you take that idea, and so you start challenging it. And then you challenge it against what happens in your body.

So one of my clients, years ago, when Obama was President, had this idea, a concept that men are perpetrators because that was her history. So we started looking at it. And she loved Obama. So one day I said to her, "So do you think when Obama is with his girls, he is perpetrating?" And it's just stopped her in her tracks. She said, "No, I don't think so." How do you know that? What signals are going on out there? What signals do you see Obama with his girls that says to you, this is not that. And it's a deconstruction of it. But that's deconstructing the internal working model that we have.

Another way to do it is by what we call the ideal parent protocol. We do this in the *Attachment Disturbances in Adults* that I co-wrote with my colleagues and my mentor, Dan Brown. It's looking at imagining something, an ideal parent.

And you're like, well, I can't imagine an ideal parent. I had such a crummy parent. How could I? But we can. Why do we protest against them? Why are we upset about something? It's because somewhere inside of us says it shouldn't be like this. If it was supposed to be like this, we'd be like, okay, that's the way it is. But if it's not, we're like, I want something different. But we've never named it for ourselves. We've never allowed ourselves to have it named. We've never felt like we deserved it. And so we forget or we disown or we dismiss that need. But that's always in there.

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And this is one of the things I find so intrinsically aligned with attachment theory and the spiritual traditions. Something inside, there's a deep wisdom that runs inside of us. We have to be able to access that. We have to step outside the constructs of what we already know so that we can access what could be there and let that flow and move through us, and guide us from within.

Meagen Gibson

So much what you just said...

Deirdre Fay

That's a long way around to say a few things.

Meagen Gibson

No, that was a wonderful answer and addressed exactly what I was trying to get at so that people understand what that looks like and feels like. And it really relates to what you said earlier about, and I can't remember exactly the way you phrased it, but allowing for the waves of discomfort to come through and allowing that experience when you're exploring.

Because I imagine something like physical touch, to go back to that, if you were just able to question the lens that you see the world through, that all touch is bad, that just the exploration of, let's see if that's actually true, let's question that assumption, and let's actually explore what kind of touch might be okay, and then past that, what kind of touch would be enjoyable, I can imagine that that's going to be a physically very difficult exploration, even though you're thinking about it, your body is going to have a reaction to we're questioning the system of safety that you've put in place for us. Right. And now you want me to disarm that safety system and get curious about what would actually be okay.

And so being able to ride those waves of discomfort out in the effort of exploration and in the effort of trying to change the lens or clean the lens off a little bit, seems like those are the moments that you build on one at a time, right?

Deirdre Fay

Yes, you build on one at a time. It takes practice. And it takes being really granular. And one of the things I'm really trying to combat in our world is this idea of how hard things are, how hard trauma healing is, how hard it is to change. Yes, that's true when we're like me and we want to get from A to Z in six months, and it's like, okay, so let's focus on this moment, and how do we break this moment down into smaller and smaller granular bits so that the next moment is easier. Slower is faster.

So the more we go into a smaller state, and say, okay, what is happening right here, right now, instead of this global conceptual thing, I can begin to put the pieces together in a different way. It's like we're going to a psychological smorgasbord, and we're saying, I want a little of this and a little of that and put it together. That's right for me right now. And the body then starts saying, yeah, I like that.

And we align with what's accurate. That's not the right word. It's aligned for us. It's coherent for us. That's what's right for us. It might not be right for somebody else, but it's right for us. And one of the key things I think that happens to anyone who has had trauma or neglect or a complicated life, is there's some place where we unhook from our own inner knowing, our own inner wisdom. And we

start grabbing on to models of who we should be outside. When we start addressing that and say, okay, I'm not going to go there. What do I need right now? What do I want? And how do I be in relationship from that place? We actually have a doorway to find our way back home to ourselves.

[00:26:37] Meagen Gibson

I love what you just said. All right, so we've talked a little bit about the lens, and let me know if this is something that you've already talked about. But I know you mentioned the four different healing perspectives. So I'd love it if you said a little bit more about that.

Deirdre Fay

Oh, sure. So you know how I talked about the rise, crest and fall of life. Everything goes up, moves out and completes itself. Well, when we're in a trauma vortex, it doesn't rise, crest and fall. It actually goes descent. We feel like we get stuck. And then maybe hopefully a little window opens. So I started looking at that whole process. How do we descend down and descend into our stuff with consciousness and awareness?

It's like, oh, here I go again. What are the thoughts? What are the feelings? What are the body sensations? How do I externalize it outside of my system so I can begin to make choices? Do I want to be thinking that to myself? Do I want to be so critical of myself? And what we end up saying is it's so hard to change. It's true, and that bottoms us out into this pit, this place of despair, and we get stuck there, and we roll in it, and none of us want to, but it's what kind of happens. We get stuck in that place.

But something in there begins to say, ahhh, there's a way out. And we don't pay attention as much to what that little moment might be. And when we do, we say, okay, so what is happening that opens the door? What pulls us out? Whereas when we're descending, we're pushing against, I don't like this, I don't want this. We do that. There's something that happens when we're in the pit, and we begin to see there's something up there. It might be an internal awakening. It might be something that goes on outside that we attach to, that we begin to pull our way out.

So those are the three ways, the descent, the despair, and then the opening to the new. But the fourth way is cultivating what we think in spirituality is a nondual consciousness, the capacity to be with myself and witness and observe what's going on while it's happening instead of getting trapped in it. That is incredibly difficult, as we all know. But it's also a native thing that every person has. We just, as a culture, don't have a large conversation about it.

There are ways where we know there's something happening between this and that in here. And what is that? When I pause, when I take an inhalation and a gentle pause before I take an exhalation, there's a pause. There's a pause between a word and the next word. What do I do at that moment? What do I do when I'm outside walking? What do I do when I'm playing with my dog or cat or petting my horse? What happens inside when I'm not overly hooked on the state?

And when we start encouraging people to have more and more of those moments, they begin to free themselves up. And they can begin to ask, who do I want to be, with what's going on? And some of that, I think, needs to develop a cosmology, a larger story for what's going on. So it's not like something bad happened to me, but that I'm in training. That's why I like the idea of healing as an Olympian endeavor. I'm in training to become the person who I've wanted to be in this lifetime. And that's a different perspective. It's that larger perspective than oh, God, something is really wrong with me, that happens as we descend into the poop land.

[00:30:46] Meagen Gibson

You know, it definitely is. I've experienced this as well. It is a training regiment, right? Just like you would pay attention to the food and the fuel that you put into your body, and you're going to pay attention to what you consume in your mind, and you're going to exercise your body. This is like your nervous system and psychological training regiment, and just that practice and continuing to come back to it.

And when we fall into those periods of despair, it can feel like we've made absolutely no progress at all, but just like in physical training... I actually have just been through this, I work out a ton, for all of the benefits that it brings us, mental, physical wellness. And I hurt my foot. I jammed my foot into the bedpost, I just took the pinkie and wrecked it, I didn't break it, but I have had to wear a walking cast for two weeks. And it can feel like all the work that you've done and all the progress you've made is going to be undone by an injury or a setback. But just like with our internal psychological, emotional lives, the work that we're doing counts and those setbacks and those doldrums and the despair that we feel is not a place of permanent status. We've got all the tools and we're going to make our way back out again.

Deirdre Fay

Right. But there's a powerful example of life coming in, triggering us. So the old adaptive behaviors of working out and managing our internal world no longer work. And then all that stuff starts bubbling up, and the question there is, how am I going to be with this? Because life is going to give us more and more crummy things along the way. I wish it weren't so, but it is so. And it's going to give us a lot of good things, too. But how am I going to be with that? I want to be with the good things open and receiving it and just drinking it in and adoring every moment of it. And I want to be with the crummy things in a way that opens my heart and offers more and more compassion to myself and to the rest of the world.

Meagen Gibson

I really like that phrase you are saying, how am I going to be with that, right? There's such an invitation and an opportunity to have that attitude and that perspective with both what you said, the good and the bad. And as anybody's experienced, too much good can also be disparity. You can be like, everything is going really well, I'm just overwhelmed, right? And that kind of a trauma response as well. And just being able to reset and have that perspective of, what's the opportunity here? And how do I want to be with this? Receiving both things equally, and knowing and being grounded in the fact that you're capable to receive in both of those situations and handle whatever it is that's coming at you.

Deirdre Fay

And that's that place that we work in my community about the difference between taking on the developmental task of becoming an adult. It's like, okay, I can deal with this. I don't like it, but I have the resources or I can find out where they are. I can practice reaching out and connecting to other people and learn those step by step ways, because one of the main attachment foundational needs that we all have is to be able to have good guidance and mentoring. And that means breaking apart a task into small bits so that I can take that journey and get there. And that's one of the ways we move around of what's so hard about life is that we look at, how do we make it so small and so granular, that as my Sufi teachers always said, I'm going to roll around it like water round boulders in the stream.

[00:34:40] Meagen Gibson

I love that. Yeah. And we don't think about those, or at least I don't, I shouldn't say we, I shouldn't blame everybody. I don't tend to think about that. If I'm trying to accomplish a goal at work, if I'm trying to address something in my family, I will take that granular approach. But when it comes to me and something that I'm struggling with, it's A to Z thinking. I need to be over here and have no idea how to get there. And it's the exact same kind of breaking down the problem into those granular bits, isn't it?

Deirdre Fay

Yes, it is. And learning how to do it.

Meagen Gibson

I think we have such high expectations of ourselves, higher than we do anybody else in our lives. We allow that kind of grace for anybody else, but when it comes to us, we're impatient and want instantaneous results.

Deirdre Fay

That's so beautiful what you just said. It's the grace. What would it be like to take that grace and receive it? To take it in and allow that to literally change and transform our inner world? Beautiful.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you so much for being with us today. If people want to learn more about you and your work, how can they do that?

Deirdre Fay

Well, we have a PDF of I think it's 40 pages. It's called, *The Safe Guide to Heal Trauma*. And it's really chock full of all kinds of ways and practices. And that's just a good handy piece that people have found, so that would probably be the best way. It's dfay.com/safeguide.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Send people there. Thank you again for being with me.

Deirdre Fay

Glad to be with you. I loved it.