



Healing trauma: remembering to forget

Guest: Dr Claudelle Glasgow (Dr g)

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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'm very, very pleased to be joined by Dr g. Welcome.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Thank you so much.

Jaia Bristow

Thanks for joining us.

So, Dr g, aka Claudelle R. Glasgow is a multipotentialite serving as writer, storyteller, public speaker, spiritual psychologist, educator of many crafts and chaplain doula by the guidance of spirit. As a nonbinary queer first generation being from Afro Caribbean roots, liberatory views and dismantling constructs naturally flows throughout Doc's lineage as well as the work.

So, Doc, we're talking about remembering today. Can you start off by telling us a little bit about what that means exactly in a trauma context?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Of course. First, I'd like to say that we can't talk about remembering without talking about forgetting. So just to be non dualistic, we will be speaking about both. And it's important to remember, too, that remembering is under the umbrella of memory in general. So we'll be talking about memory, naturally.

I want to make a note that our Western world is so invested in remembering, the prospect of forgetting ignites a lot of anxiety in people, especially when they hit a certain age. Everybody is preoccupied with forgetting, as if that is something to be ashamed of, that is something that's wrong. But that's actually how we were built. It's a part of this model of our human beings that we also forget. And that forgetting is actually quite useful in the process of healing, which I'll talk about later.

But first, let's talk about memory and let's talk about trauma. Before we can talk about memory we need to understand that there are three stages of memory, and I'll just cover these things very briefly so we can all be on the same page. We have to encode memory. We have to get the information in.

We have to store it or save it like we do in documents on our computer, and then we have to be able to retrieve it whenever we need it.

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So memory always has those three stages. And there can be different types of memory that we're trying to store or hold within our beings. Some are explicit or declarative. It's about what to do, so all the facts, like $1 + 1 = 2$, are very semantic memories. And then there's episodic or more autobiographical information. Information that is about events that are noteworthy and meaningful about your life. So that's one type of thing that we might want to accumulate in our memory stores.

The other is implicit, that's less conscious. And I find that we're really, in this day and age, really talking more and more about the workings of this and how to heal this space and make this implicit space or this less conscious space more a part of our awareness. People call it shadow work, people call it all sorts of things these days but we're all talking about either emotional memory, like something that ignites our feelings, or procedural or even somatic memory, like how we know to do what we do, like ride a bike. If you remembered how to ride a bike, you could not do it for 20 years and you can hop back on and do it.

Jaia Bristow

Muscle memory is part of this second type of memory then?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

100%. So you may hear me say, procedural, somatic or muscle, all being synonymous with this area of memory.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

So when we talk about trauma specifically, in some ways trauma is a disorder of remembering too much. So when we are remembering and storing information, our ability to store things is heightened and enhanced when they are emotionally connected, and they are meaningful. And what is more meaningful than knowing if something is a threat to us? Which is the ground of trauma.

So we are in a situation that is triggering, as we often use this word, or a source of threat to our survival, and we're like, 'man, I gotta remember that'. It's a good motivation to encode, to take the information in. So we take a certain amount of information in, our hippocampus saves it, and then it stores it, and we keep often rehearsing it because as human beings, as a part of our species, we really want to remember and not have to do any kind of negotiation or treat this as a new situation when that threat reappears again.

So it makes us a very efficient system. It's almost like saving a document in a folder. You don't have to go through your whole computer to find that one document, it's there. Sometimes, too, though we keep rehearsing the negative event. And because we keep rehearsing the negative event, that's all that we're remembering. There may have been other things in the environment that were noteworthy, maybe even supportive, that we didn't have access to, but because of the hyper focused nature and

the specificity of what we choose to code and take out of a threatening situation, that other information is lost.

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So I'll pause there for a moment, but that's what happens with those who have a diagnosis of PTSD, is that they're only remembering in excess this particular situation.

Jaia Bristow

I've heard the expression before, especially around trauma work, that no situation is a new situation. And that's kind of what you're speaking to, that memory. And it might not be conscious memory but there is this and it's the repeating of patterns that we're doing throughout our whole, especially our whole adult life, because a lot of those patterns come from early childhood. And so what would you say are the costs and the benefits to remembering?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

So remembering helps us, again I think the last note I mentioned was being an efficient system. We encode a pattern in a retrieval pathway, when they say neurons are fired together, wired together, our cells, which are the storehouses of these memories, are like, yes, I remember you. So I feel this way and then I run, I feel this way, and then I run. I'm going to make that a well concrete, well paved road.

And so the benefit of that is that when we have to retrieve it, it can be through a number of cues. But for us, especially in context and also emotional and even somatic, even how our bodies might feel a certain way. Those are cues, remember like, hey, remember that pathway, and we just go down. It's almost no thinking required. And so that's really helpful in a situation where it's dangerous or you don't have a lot of time or you also have to learn new skills. You can rely on that information being well embedded.

So remembering is helpful for our survival and it's helpful for us to be efficient beings that continually expand to take on more information.

Jaia Bristow

Of course, because it's not, like you say, if we didn't have that, then we'd constantly have to be relearning the same things. And you talked about riding a bike earlier, but imagine if we had to learn how to feed ourselves or all these basic things. So it makes sense that there are definitely some really beneficial elements to remembering like you've talked about.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

And it also helps with our sense of identity. We often talk about this sense of I, like, who am I? So we create a sense of consistency or cohesion in our worlds and our relationships. So I don't have to, I met you already, I know who you are. I don't have to re-meet you over and over again. I can just remember we had a great conversation before we began to chat and we're talking about our lives and we've situated. So I have that as a basis to know you're a safe person. I can be relaxed. I don't have to renegotiate that. I know who I am. I have these things that I do and these ways in which they engage in the world and I can trust that to be true, I don't have to renegotiate that. So that creates a sense of one less thing to negotiate and offers a lot of ground instability. Those are some of the benefits of remembering.

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The cost of remembering is, like I said, everything flows on the spectrum, and I think we're becoming more sophisticated in our ability to tolerate that things do roll on a spectrum. The tilt of the far end of remembering too much, as I spoke about, where, again, one's present experience is always framed by the past. So if we remember too much in spaces of trauma, then we're never really living in the present life. We're not taking in new information and new situations or allowing our bodies to respond differently to a new situation.

So really, this is like constant pain. This is where suffering lands, so there can be suffering. And we see these, whether people are aware of their forgetting or not, people who have trauma tend to be aware oftentimes of their forgetting to some degree, or that there's something awry. But in the cases of autism or Alzheimer's disease, people may reach a point where they're not really aware of the fact that they're remembering too much. And that can be another way in which life can be a little bit narrowed in a different way.

Jaia Bristow

So that's the cost of remembering too much, but can we also talk briefly about not remembering enough? Because you talk, for example, about Alzheimer's, and that's often about forgetting. So maybe we can just say a few words about that.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

So if we're not remembering enough then we're never creating a space that you are able to take in new information. You're always repeatedly trying to learn what's in front of you. This is the most extreme of being in the present moment. Some people find it quite liberating, and I'll speak a little bit more to that. But you're constantly trying to figure out your world each time. And again, depending on your ability to be aware of that, that can cause a lot of pain knowing that I have to renegotiate the situation and I don't know what to do, I have to re-learn this again and again and again.

Jaia Bristow

That makes sense. And so what is it that inspired you to focus on this theme of remembering in trauma work?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Actually, in part, it's been a long standing curiosity to me. I didn't know what the word was, but it was really compelling to me to watch adults, I grew up with a lot of adults as an only child, and watch adults say one thing and do something different. It would be like moments later and I would say, 'how did you forget what you just intended to do?'. That seemed so bizarre, even if it was painful.

Then later on in life my mom actually was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer's, so I actually got to see the progression of what she remembered in periods of lucidity and when she didn't, and that many were state dependent and really helped. So if I sang an instruction to her, which I still am learning the neurobiology of, then she would be able to follow through without a glitch. But if I just stated it, she couldn't. And I was like, that is absolutely fascinating. What is going on in the mind that it's allowing that? And because my mom was always singing and because the accent from Trinidad is quite lyrical, that connoted something else that felt very... And it went to a different neural pathway that was actually stronger for her, and she was able to be more cohesive.

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I'm always working along with dismantling binary. So there's a lot of talk right now in the world that we're in around remembering our traumas, remembering the historical harms that had been done to one another, that we carry those things forward. So I'm quite compelled. On the one hand, yes, we do have to remember these things, but we also have to not be so paralyzed by them, that it is not opening the door for us to offer new opportunities to engage with this material. We do have to forget or create space as well. So in negotiating and thinking about collective healing, this has been really helpful to me to think about.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And it's fascinating, that thing about the singing and your mother being able to remember that way. And I hope we have time to talk a bit more later about the neuro pathways because that sounds really fascinating. But for now, I'm interested in finding out how remembering connects with collective healing?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

And I was starting to speak about that at this moment. We're in a particular, and I think it's safe to say, globally a space of environmental decline, viral illnesses and social tensions of racism, fear, detainment, and just working with systematic impressions and really a surfacing of truth that is putting many people in a position of being forced to remember, because we're constantly being reintroduced to that matter, that we may have been harmful to one another, and that has an impact.

And so we're harm reverse beings, so there's been a lot of avoidance or trying to forget that truth, that impact. And that needs some resolution. That needs some resolution. So we, as a human collective, can remember from a safe space, a space where we're not threatened by or viewing or perceiving the unveiling of harms as being a threat to our being, if we can find a way to create a safer environment, then our nervous system actually quiets down and creates some space.

And it's like, okay, I don't have to use that well paved neural pathway of defensive response between fight, flight or freeze in order to work with this information that's coming towards me. I can be a little bit more flexible and open because it's safe to do that. And it'll be uncomfortable but that allows the opportunity for a different way of engaging with the material, both from all perspectives.

And I think that's the thing that sometimes we feel that this work of healing collective trauma, collective healing is only for the "victim", but it does offer liberation for all beings because we are all able to engage in the material in a different way. So how lovely to have some pliability in our neural networks to say, hey, over there, look, I could actually sit with this, I can laugh, I can play, I can cry along with you because I'm realizing that I too have felt similarly.

I feel like that emergent way of being allows for... The possibilities are endless about what the healing looks like, I can never predict that. But the opportunity to not be in a defensive response is there in that space.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And there's so much in what you've just said. I lead workshops on power, privilege, and prejudice so I work a lot with these themes. And I think it's really hard remembering harm that's been done to us, but it's so much harder remembering and acknowledging the harm we've done to others.

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And I know that for me, in my own personal trauma journey and stuff, some of the most painful, shameful, guilt ridden experiences are not the times that bad things have happened to me, but the times I've done, I've harmed others. So I really appreciate you bringing that piece in because I think it's so important.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

And I also want to mention that I'm noticing a synchrony, I'm sure I'm not the only one, in what we're opening up to therapeutically to assist that. If not, I say speed it up because we're in the Western world, we're always trying to speed things up. But when I think about the resurgence of psychedelic therapies or MDMA assisted therapies, I'm seeing a pattern where we are trying to offer medicine that, of course, has been indigenously used for thousands of years, but we're trying to use this medicine in an effort to create a safe environment. Something that we have struggled to do well with one another so that this can happen, this work, this healing can happen in a different way that our innate ability to work things out is present, we're more supported. So I'm definitely seeing a conscious opening to offer these modalities that may increase our ability to remember in a safe space.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And we've got quite a few interviews talking about exactly that on this conference and looking at different modalities. How about you? How do you bring this process of remembering into your work?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Thank you for asking. Well, the majority of the people that I work with are BIPOC or QTBIPOC, so queer and trans Black, Indigenous people of color. And working with the intersections the globe majority has been really life giving, both mirror my life so it's mutual healing in so many ways.

And a lot of the work that I do with the people that come to me is somatic based or body based, because I recognize that we have such a conscious awareness now of mental illness or any kind of struggle in a very cognitive way, and that will bring us to a certain point of healing and also opening of different neuronal pathways for learning.

But to actually have this in our beings, that change can be a part of how we move in our bodies and orchestrate from that bottom up perspective, is really how I center the work. So helping people become aware of, in a safe container, what are the emotional and body responses to any given situation. And really titrating that, moving that process slowly for people so that they can be given a little bit of a stressor, suss it out, work through it, see what information it has to give, move in the ways that feel nurturing, and then that memory has been encoded differently.

So we bring up a little bit of something that's painful and then we introduce something new, which is the process of safety, which is a process of social engagement with me, which is a process of creativity by default because they're not in a defensive response, and I always say magic happens then. And then that is a new memory. So when they recall, even that little segment of their traumatic history or their stressful situation, they remember it differently. It's a little bit of a write over, it's like resaving a file. Like, I'm going to save this file, 'liberation'.

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And we do that segment by segment with something that they're working with. And sometimes I don't even make it through the narrative, oftentimes I don't make it through the narrative of the whole situation. Sometimes it happens within the first few moments of a situation. And when that gets reworked, the whole process shifts for them. And their ability when met with that stressful event again shifts because they remember the safety, they remember the space for creativity, they remember the social connection with someone who's really holding their highest self for them.

So I do that with a lot of humor, too, because it's culturally part of how we move through things. And humor also brings in another state situation that can be supportive and grounding.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love everything you've shared, and I love that you bring in humor as well. Because I think sometimes when we're talking about trauma, about systemic oppression, about all this stuff, it can get very intense and very serious. And whilst these are serious issues, we need to bring in joy, we need to bring in laughter, we need to bring in humor. They're such an important part of feeling, because if not, why are we doing this, to some degree?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Exactly. And we really need the breath of our human experience to heal. We create these artificial hierarchies about which emotion is needed or which skill set is needed, it's all needed in order to transform. So, yeah, I'm probably the most playful and silly person and much to the chagrin of people who are like, 'I'm trying to be serious'. I'm like, so am I but I need to engage a different part of my brain.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I love that concept of rewriting a memory or resaving a file. Because that's the thing with memory, is it's not constant. Me and a friend can talk about the exact same event where we were both there, and remember it completely differently. And memory is not just subjective, it's also, to each individual it can change. And you can implant memories as well. If you start telling a story often enough you start believing it's true, and then you have dreams, and are they memories? Are they not?

And I think it's great to use the fact that memory is so unreliable in some ways for positive change, and to rewire traumatic experiences in a much more positive way. So that's fantastic. And is there anything biologically that can inhibit this process of remembering?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Well, if we don't get the information in, then we're not going to be able to remember it. So I think what often happens is that we have very state dependent situations that may change, that inhibit our ability to take in information.

So, for example, we don't get enough sleep. If we're tired, and this goes into a little bit about what we can do in our daily life to help with fostering remembering, but also to foster the space that it's a part of our physiology to forget. But sleep, I know we talk about these things. Some of these will seem so basic, but it's in part because they're not. They're simple. They're simply complex. And simple can understand complexity, complexity can't necessarily understand simplicity. So we don't even understand the powers of sleep but what we do know is that it's kind of like recycling. It recycles what

we need, it prunes back the landscape of what we do need so that we're able to have space to take in new information the next day.

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So if we're not getting sufficient sleep, I don't know about you, but I think the older I get one day is enough to knock me over. If we're not getting 7 to 9 hours of sleep then we don't have the energy to create more memories the next day. So there is an interruption. And we've got the debris and muck of previous days that we still have to whittle through, that's still there. So that's important.

If we're stressed, we've learned now more so that stress causes inflammation and inflammation is a threat to the body. And so a threat to the body means that we're not actually engaging with information. We're not picking up on cues in a broad sense to help us encode and rehearse the information. I'm going to remember this conversation because of what the day looked like, because I'm sitting in this room in this chair and I have my tea, and those things will remember our conversation more. If I'm feeling threatened all I'm going to be able to see is your face and that's it. And these other cues are not going to be a resource to me to remember later on.

And all of that, just even those two things are going to affect our health. They're going to affect our ability to elicit the growth hormones, to nurture the blood vessels that allow the cells to be maintained as storage units to hold things that are coming in. So just the little things, seemingly little, are going to be enough to inhibit how we take information in and therefore save it and therefore retrieve it.

Jaia Bristow

You were talking a bit about biology then, and earlier we talked a bit about the neuro pathways. Is there anything else in terms of biology, psychology, social landscapes, cyber landscapes that impact this remembering?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

I'll speak to social landscapes because that's probably what I can do in brevity at this moment. But social landscapes, we are in a cyber age, we are in an age where, I mean it's all a dream. We have concurrent realities that are occurring, it's always occurred, but now we can actually see that it is by this device, the world that's going on out there and all the beings who are living in that world.

And so with that much inundation, with that much opportunity for distraction, we're actually not properly attending to information that we're trying to encode, that we're trying to take in.

Everyone talks about multitasking as if we can do that, we really can't. We can't attend to more than one thing well. And so we're actually not then completely taking in information well, we're not remembering things well, from that standpoint, we're constantly distracting ourselves and therefore interrupting the storage of information into the hippocampus, our ultimate save button of things. We're not even, because of this disembodied state that we're often in when we're engaged in a significant amount of technology, then we're not using our emotional cues, which are enhancers for a memory to turn on and say, I'm really going to remember this because it made me feel like this. I don't know how I'm feeling.

And the studies are coming out now that people are often feeling depressed the more that they're engaged in, especially social media, in an absorbent way. So now we're reliant on a depressed state,

state dependent, in order to remember things, but what are we really remembering? We're remembering distractions and fragmented images and the fragmented words. And so that is going to impact how the information comes in. And we're probably not going to remember a terrible much.

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And just very briefly, our social landscape, again, I want to speak about the environmental landscape. I know it's something that we probably spend the least amount of energy addressing, but I'll be very brief in just saying that we are connected with nature. Every element that we have in our being is out there. When that is depleted, then we are depleted. If there isn't water, like Octavia Butler says, we're going to have a little bit of a problem.

And so we really do need to be mindful of the ways with which we are sourcing that and mining that nutrient from the land, because we're also mining and depleting that nutrient within ourselves.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And I'm so glad you brought that piece in because I think it's so important. And as you say, sometimes it can get overlooked. And we are part of nature and we need to be mindful of that.

And then there's a whole thing in what you're saying, which makes me think about the generations and the different generations and what they are exposed to or have an offer, and remembering how things were previously and we could go talk about that, I'm sure, for another hour, but sadly we don't have the time.

So what are some practices of remembering that can be done in daily life?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Well, I started off speaking to sleep again, and just destressing whatever that looks like for you, is being really helpful. Again, being mindful of the ways in which you're taking in, and we take in with all of our senses and all of our beings so just remembering that.

But learning new things. I think earlier I was speaking to the ways with which we can almost resave the document, so we can receive information by pairing them with things that are new. We could bring up things in safe and different environments and novel environments. But we're also creating new experiences that are meaningful, and the more likely we create meaningful experiences, no matter how small, I literally sometimes drive to another neighborhood of the city just because it's novel to me, and the things that are new we are more likely to talk about. And if we're more likely to talk about something, we're using our environmental cues to encode it so that we remember it more.

So there's that. And then movement, moving our bodies, however that feels will allow for growth hormones, for stress and maintenance of cells to be nurtured. But also it gets the agitation of stress and anxiety. It keeps the limbs and everything lubricated so there isn't stagnation of the movement of fluids and the expelling of toxins from the body.

Those seem really simple, but those are just some really practical things. And also I keep telling people our expectations really play heavily into how we move in the world. And so do whatever you choose to do, do them with the knowledge that we can do them 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. We're not looking for perfection. We're looking to be met and to hold some sense of compassion with

yourself as you practice. And also adjust the practice for you as you age, as your situation changes, but remember that those tenants are helpful.

[00:32:25] Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And I guess my last question is then, doing these practices, what is particularly beneficial about doing these practices and remembering? And does it in some way help prevent the trauma as well as healing trauma in all the ways we've spoken about?

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

Potentially. I'll name a few. With sleep you're allowing yourself to regenerate, you're allowing yourself to rest and detoxify. And so that can just offer the opportunity for inflammation in the body to just settle, and adding less stress to the system will help in not creating a stress system when you wake up. 100%.

When you learn new things you tend to pay attention to them a little bit more because they're shiny. It's like, oh my gosh, I wonder what this thing does, I wonder what that thing does. So we're igniting curiosity, and that's different from the trauma mind that can be very narrowed. We're actually expanding in those spaces to take in more environmental cues. We're more aware of our emotions because they might be new, because we've never been in this situation before. And all of those enhance encoding, which means we're more likely, our brain is more likely, and the hippocampus is more likely to hit that save and be like, yes, we're keeping that bit of information.

Then you go to bed, and that moves from short-term memory to long-term memory because you keep perseverating on it. You're like, oh man, that ice-cream was amazing, I'm getting that again tomorrow, and you're going into your dreams with that vibrating higher. And so the powers that be in sleep decide, hey, that's really electrified. We're going to clear the other stuff around it so that that can more easily be accessed the next day. So that helps.

And minimizing distraction, I know this is not commonly spoken about, but things that nurture you being present in the moment to moment. So oftentimes meditation is moment to moment, following your breath, breathwork, yoga, anything that involves being, and you can pair it like a ready paired exercise with that right there. But that brings you in the present. You can't not be in the present with those things, or you might slip, you might miss an Asana and have your leg around your neck. So it really helps you then hone in on your body and your sense perceptions and bring the present moment into service of repairing what's past.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And once again, we have quite a few speakers talking about breathwork, about meditation, about yoga so that's great. And I love what you're saying about how being in the present can help so much.

Dr g, thank you so much for your time today. This has been such a great conversation. It's really got me thinking about stuff, and I really appreciate it.

Dr Claudelle Glasgow

I appreciate you. Thank you for this space. Thank you.