



Using the change triangle for emotional education

Guest: Hilary Jacobs Hendel

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with Hilary Jacobs Hendel, a trauma psychotherapist, educator and author of the award winning book, *It's Not Always Depression: Working The Change Triangle to Listen to the Body, Discover Core Emotions, and Connect to Your Authentic Self*.

She's a certified psychoanalyst, an AEDP psychotherapist and supervisor. She's published articles in *The New York Times*, *Oprah*, *Time*, and her blog is read worldwide. She was also the mental health consultant for the AMC television series *Mad Men*.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Thank you for having me, Meagen. I'm so delighted to be here to talk about my favorite subject, emotions.

Meagen Gibson

And we all have them. So before we get into your work specifically, I would love it if you set the context for us in how you define trauma in your work.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes. So this is derived from this type of therapy called Accelerated Experiential Dynamic Psychotherapy, which I gravitated to after studying other methods because of the foundation in both the hard science, what they know of about how emotions work in the mind and body, and what trauma is and how people attach and connect to each other.

And so the definition that Diana Fosha, who developed this method and that I have really used, has really transformed treatments that have not worked for other modalities, is this idea that trauma is what happens, symptoms of trauma happen when we have events in our lives that cause overwhelming emotional experiences. And along with that, we are too alone in those moments. In other words, we can move through emotions in most cases with the right support, someone who makes space for us to have emotions, someone who knows what to do in terms of being with us and just creates an opening for us to be. But because most people don't understand what emotions are

and they're frightened of them, they get shut down and avoided or asked to pull ourselves up and get over it.

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And so concisely, again, we're talking about trauma as the experience of being overwhelmed by emotions in the face of unwanted, too much aloneness. That combination is a perfect storm for creating symptoms that we're going to be talking about, that the triangle helps us understand.

Meagen Gibson

So thank you for setting me up perfectly. So within that context in your book, *It's Not Always Depression*, which I have told you I think should also have a version that's called *It's Not Always Anxiety*, and *It's Not Always Stick Your Emotion in there* or *Stick Your obstacle in there*. And it works for that, for sure. But in *It's Not Always Depression* you've got this model called The Change Triangle, and I would love it if you told us about The Change Triangle and its applications for trauma and emotions.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah. So that's funny about the title of the book because it's hard to understand what the book is really about from the title. Random House took the title from the article in the *New York Times* that went viral and because of Google and words like that, that title stuck. But when people say, well, if it's not always depression, what is it? My answer is, it's life. That to be human and to live a life is to suffer and to experience emotions. We're at the mercy of what happens in the environment.

So in the context of trauma, when adverse events happen, wounds happen, conflicts happen, horrible things happen to us through no fault of our own, it's going to evoke these evolutionary survival emotions that are hardwired in the brain that we cannot control. We can't decide not to feel sad, we can't decide not to feel angry. Those things are going to be triggered, they trigger in the middle of the brain. I can kind of use this.

The five senses are really about picking up the environment. So we see something dangerous, we witness something dangerous, we experience something dangerous and it triggers an emotion in the middle of the brain. And then that triggers the brain stem and this nerve called the vagus nerve goes into the body. Because the purpose, the reason we have these things called core emotions is to ready our body for movement, movements like running or movements like fighting or movements like being interested in approaching something. And it's only after we have an emotion that we can, with the top part of our brain, perceive ourselves and say, oh, I'm angry or I'm sad or I'm frightened.

So I always think a picture is worth 1000 words. The Change Triangle is really about what happens after these emotions are triggered out of conscious control. And I tell people who listen to me if you take one thing away from this conference today, this talk, it's not to judge your emotions because you can't control them, so it doesn't make any sense to judge them. We do have a choice about how we handle emotions once we are aware that we are having them.

And so the Change Triangle is an upside down triangle that's diagramming what happens when we have emotions, and we bury them, when we block and bury emotions, as we're all taught to do in our society. We can block and bury emotions with holding our breath and with muscular tension and distraction, all sorts of ways where we push them back into the body, basically.

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And then we move up the triangle into anxiety and these inhibitory emotions on the top right. And because those emotions and the core emotions mixed together feel so awful in the body, we move over to the top left. So we may have an emotion like anger and because we're taught that anger is not okay, it's not nice and we're scared, we don't know what to do with anger, we'll bury it, and then we become anxious, which is a signal that there's this pressure coming up to express our emotions. And then we develop defenses, which in AEDP therapy, and in the context of the triangle, defenses are not bad things. In fact, they're superpowers. They're these incredibly creative ways that the mind and body can figure out how to avoid pain and going crazy.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so glad that you said that because I do feel like, and I always get to a point when I'm learning this stuff, when I get to a point of just deep appreciation and awe at our body and our nervous systems' ability to come up with these solutions to discomfort, or even stronger than that, anguish and just the really painful emotions that just being a human being inflicts upon us, and in our relationships and in the world. And so our bodies are brilliant at coming up with ways to suppress, for our survival, these things.

But at the same time if we're constantly suppressing and not actually tapping into what's going on, then it creates all of this anxiety or depression. That's how it looks on the outside then.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. And so these defenses, like addictions or you've got defenses, the ways that we protect ourselves from emotions, from very in the minute ones and minor ones, like at the end of a long day of absorbing a lot of emotions I'm going to want to watch something fun on TV. That's a defense, but it's a choice of a defense. It's really these habitual, constantly bearing emotions that are caused by traumatic events that will lead to the symptoms that people come into therapy with. Like depression, like chronic anxiety and social anxiety, like some of the personality changes that happen where you're just completely rigid or obsessive or perfectionistic, and you really can't break that cycle. It's because it's helping you in some way.

And so it's really that when we are traumatized, by definition, we're having big emotions or conflicting emotions. Many emotions we can have at the same time most people don't realize that are opposite in nature, like being sad and happy or loving your child and really hating them in a moment, being so enraged because they're causing you to worry so much.

So in traumatic events, emotions happen and if we don't have ways to deal with them, we move up the triangle to these symptoms / defenses. And to feel better, to recover, we have to work our way back down to the original emotions. Because when we are taught about emotions and how to safely experience them, either on our own through self help, as I've written about in the book, or to take these concepts to a therapist who may not know about them yet because it's cutting edge on the way to really see how we conceptualize that, we can actually heal the mind by fostering conditions that create positive brain change, called neuroplasticity in the science, that we can create situations like not being alone and teaching someone how to experience internally and move through the emotions.

And when you do that we get to this place on the bottom of the Change Triangle called, the open hearted state of the authentic self, which is a nod to returning to that calm, confident, maybe we've

never felt confident, but the capacity is in there, connected, compassionate way that when we are in our best self, that we are best equipped to thrive and meet the challenges of life that keep coming at us more and more, of course as we get older and begin to age.

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So we need skills to not only understand emotions but to move through them and to understand how trauma healing works in this way from an emotional standpoint. And it's really all about the body, like I mentioned before. These emotions happen in the body and the body is the archive of the memories of our traumas that we may not really remember. They're just encoded in the body with our symptoms now, and the ways that we behave that might be self destructive in certain ways. Like going after the same abusive person because we grew up in a chaotic, abusive household, type of thing.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm so glad that you touched on the core emotions as well, because one of the things, I have your book right next to me, and one of the things that I noted on the inside cover that was so pivotal to me when I was reading it was that these core emotions of curious and calm and connected and compassionate and confident, if you think about it, you can't access any of those things when you're in defensive mode. It's completely inaccessible to you.

And I know I feel like my best self when I am calm and curious and confident and connected. And it doesn't mean that the emotion or the difficulty of a conflict does not still affect me. I think we've done a disservice in self help if we give this image of, once we learn everything and once we practice everything, nothing ever bothers us. It's just like water off a duck's back. And you will still experience conflict. You will still experience heartbreak. You will still experience sadness and all of the emotions of being a human, but it doesn't disrupt your nervous system anymore. It doesn't hijack the way that you are, based on your past traumas, when you encounter difficulty.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

That is so beautifully stated. Absolutely. So now I might be aware of my emerging inclination to go into a defensive state, but the idea is with practice over a lifetime. It's not black or white. It's not like all or nothing. We work the Change Triangle again and again throughout the day, and I personally can't imagine my life without it, which is why I started to write about it for the public because I really saw these concepts, the emotions, education, 101, the basic emotion education helps us be less frightened of emotions. They become less mysterious and so we're more willing to dive into them a little bit. And then good things happen from there.

So the other day my husband was driving me nuts. And after years of practicing this I don't go into saying something mean or critical or devaluing like I might have when I was younger. You're so this or you always do that. I can, in a mindfulness stance, be aware of my impulse to say that and have the space to be like, okay, I'm just angry. Let me use some of the tools and techniques that I teach and use as a therapist to process my anger so that I can be a little more conscious of my desired goal, which is not to have a terrible rupture with my husband, but to help him maybe change a little bit and let him know that, wow, that really stung, and that was a little bit shaming that I felt when you said that. And maybe you could point it out to me in this way next time. Is that something you're willing to do? Or maybe I'll use my anger more directly, and I'll be with my anger, stuff it into my backbone and say, hey, don't talk to me that way and set a limit and a boundary.

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And then there's more and more tools and techniques to deliver this information in ways that it can be heard. Because if we just shout, if we're just aggressive, this works both ways, people shut down. They go into their own fight or flight, and they go into themselves and they tune out. And the goal is to be heard unless you don't care about someone, and then you can never see them again.

Meagen Gibson

And I want to piece apart, I have an example that I'm going to give to you in just a second, but I also want a piece apart, so there's the defense corner, and then there's what that looks like and how it can manifest of anxiety and depression. But really, underneath that, you do a really good job of naming, and you actually touched on it just a second ago, of what that actually feels like, anxiety or depression. So it's more like shame or, oh, gosh, I can't remember.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

The inhibitory emotions.

Meagen Gibson

Guilt. Yes. Like shame and guilt, those feelings.

So for instance, I have a small anecdote and then I have something else to share, which is how I came to you because I wanted you to speak at the conference because your book actually helped me through a situation that I'll share in just a second.

But just from this morning when you mentioned your husband, so my husband, our children just started school recently. And for the last 10 days my husband's had a head cold. So he's slept in every single morning for the last 10 days which is not typical. And then this morning I had in my mind that he was going to get up and help me. And so I was super angry and resentful. And I literally used the Change Triangle this morning, I was like, how do I really feel? And I was like, I'm jealous. I'm jealous that he just takes what he needs to get well or to feel well. He's just going to sleep in. And so instead of attacking him I was able to say, you know what? I'm really jealous. You do a really good job of taking care of yourself. And also I need a little bit more support in the morning. So how can we both get what we need?

But there were years ago where I would have all morning been resentful and angry and in need of rescue because I was so put upon. It's not a recipe for connectedness. It's not a recipe for being on the same team. Just being able to work it really quickly this morning helped me really actually tune into what was going on.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

That is exquisite work.

Meagen Gibson

Yes.

[00:16:51] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Imagine if everyone had the skills and the tools and the knowledge to be able to do that before picking a fight, starting a fight and escalating fight. Because it can really go off the rails depending on that one moment where you just decide to use some tools and try to, at least try to be constructive. It takes two, but we can do our best and set those up.

Meagen Gibson

Okay, I have one more example. So this is the example, so I've had your book for a couple of years now, and I watched this progression happen. Because it takes time, it takes practice to work it and figure it out. I mean, you can apply it immediately, but for me it took a little bit of time for the change to occur.

And so this is an innocuous example, but I have a neurodivergent child and noticed over several years that every time I had a parent teacher conference, or every time I got a call from the teacher of this child, which was often, that I would cry. I would break down into tears at every school conference and at every call from the teacher.

And I was like, after a couple of years of this, I was like, this is not a workable situation. There's something here I need to uncover. And so I actually used the Change Triangle to analyze. Because my tears and my disproportionate emotional state indicated to me that I was not in the present, that this was not appropriate. Not once did any of the teachers call me and scream at me about what a horrible child my child was. They would just call me to explain the situation or here's the behavioral pattern I'm noticing or here's a learning challenge or present a situation.

And if I were in my authentic self I would be calm and curious. What does my child's behavior communicate? How can we work this situation? How can we problem solve together? But I was not in access to that at all. So what would end up happening is the school teacher would end up calming and counseling me, which is completely not what any of us needed, especially my child.

So, I was able to work through that, seeing that I was having very much an anxiety and shame response. I had some shame around my child is an example of my parenting or a reflection of my parenting or an extension of myself, which is old model stuff from when I was a child. I had a chronically ill parent when I was a child. So there's also a lot of reactivity around my parent teacher conferences and how those were handled and how people reacted, how parents reacted when I was a kid. So I was able to analyze all of that and put some practices into place to calm my nervous system, to take myself through a pattern of questions of how to resettle my nervous system when I get these calls, because I still get them.

We did have a nice year off of homeschooling when COVID hit so I didn't get any parent teacher calls during COVID. But I was also having to do all of the home school teaching, which is a whole other thing. So that's my small anecdote of how I worked it, of how I took this very disproportionate emotional response in this situation and was able to use your model to analyze what was really going on underneath, what was my actual core emotion and how I could get around that and give myself some tools so that I can remain calm and connected and curious during those interactions.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah, that's wonderful. And that's exactly the way that I would advise to be able to name the inhibitory emotions. If there's a big crying response and it's not clear, when I have a big response and I

can't decipher right away the emotions, I literally go through the list. Am I sad? Am I angry? Am I afraid? Am I disgusted? Am I excited? Sometimes it's a positive emotion. Am I guilty? Am I feeling ashamed? And then from the shame, guilt and anxiety is on that top right inhibitory pole because all those three, anxiety, shame and guilt, have a way of pushing down core experiences.

[00:21:21]

And the shame, as you pointed out, comes from, we're not born feeling ashamed about these things. We learn them in our families of origin and in our societies. It's like my dear old mom who I love who's 81 is suffering from an illness. And she said, I feel so ashamed to be sick, and I was like, it broke my heart. I understand because I think we all, if we're not up to snuff. But what a horrible legacy to look forward to when we're growing old, that we have to feel ashamed. And there's no reason for it. We can feel proud that we have risen, taken a hardship and made the best of it. There's so many other ways to feel, but the shame is really learned in a context.

And the way we get underneath the shame, because on that triangle it's telling us to get, shame is something I really like to help people with because it's just a ruiner. It really hurts, it's the worst feeling. And a disconnect of relationships is, boy, if I didn't go into shame, if I felt confident and I got that call from the teacher, how might I be feeling to get to those core emotions outward? Maybe a little bit scared of what I'm going to hear, or maybe a little bit sad that this is what happened to my child and to myself, or maybe angry if I anticipate in my mind that there's going to be some criticism.

Meagen Gibson

Or all of those at the same time.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

And that's what creates a huge...

Meagen Gibson

And that's why the overwhelm happens when all of those things are true at the same time. Exactly what you just named. I feel guilty because I feel like I haven't done enough as a mother. I feel shame because he's a reflection of my parenting. I feel sad for him because he's also obviously struggling. I feel guilty for the teacher's inhibited classroom experience and her interrupted teaching experience. All of those things are happening at the same time simultaneously.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. You've really got this stuff down.

To identify the emotions, what I help people do is to try to visualize them in the body but separate. So we have to imagine we are very big to hold all of that and to imagine the sadness and the guilt and the fear and the anger all separate because we have to work with those core emotions one at a time to move them through us, because they all have different programs with different adaptive actions. And if we don't work with them one at a time they all clash together and that's what makes us feel worse. It's not that any of these emotions are easier, but when we get to those core emotions and move through them we feel better. So it's like, what a relief. There is some prescription that's holistic. It's not popping as an annex, which I'm not against.

[00:24:29] Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, and there's a place for that.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Absolutely. I prescribe, I send my patients to psychiatrists when they need a little buffering so that we can do the work, because if you can't function that's no good.

But it's so fantastic to be able to name the emotions and then work with them one at a time when you're ready. It doesn't have to be in that moment. You can just give yourself compassion and when you have some space and time go back and know that this is what has to be tended to.

Meagen Gibson

And how does an understanding of each of these emotions help with trauma healing specifically? We've talked around it, but I want to talk specifically to it.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah. And again, if we're talking about there's these one time catastrophic traumas, like being a victim of a crime or even these sequential, being sexually abused as a child, whatever it is. And then there's these seemingly, I really like to talk about those big traumas, but I also like to talk about what I come to describe is the invisible traumas of our society where they're not really recognized as trauma. But like emotional neglect, like if you don't have a parent that can look into your eyes and attune to what you're feeling and at least have a nod, I see that you're really upset. Some parents are just woo woo, they're just in la la land, and it's not their fault. They either had trauma or they didn't have any training or education in how emotions work.

So whatever the trauma is, by definition it's going to evoke an emotion because if we're calm there's no trauma. So what the Change Triangle is good for is working with the emotions that trauma evokes, the traumatic event evokes. And they always evoke emotions.

And it's very particular, depending on what you read, there's Peter Levine, for example, who writes about somatic experiencing and gives an example of watching animals in the wilderness and if you see an animal be traumatized, let's say some other animal takes a bite out of it but it's not a deathly bite, the animal will not only have to heal but will do a trembling, will have to tremble. And that is positive, theorized that that's the movement of that fearful energy that's going through the body.

And what you find in trauma treatment in my patients, that when we stay with fear, we bring up an event in a safe way, meaning 1ft grounded in the present, firmly. The connection to me in the present, firmly, as we look at this other event and all techniques and tricks to make it far away. Like looking at it as though it's happening on a little black and white grainy TV or in a timeline idea that this happened long ago, so that there's dual attention. And if we can activate a little bit as we talk about the event, if we do. And in trauma treatment you do not have to go back and relive the trauma. But you can bring up the emotion that's in the body, mindfully.

Let's take fear. What are you feeling in your body? I feel fear, the patient might say. And my next word would be, how do you know you're feeling fear? What's the sensation that's happening for you now? I feel a vibration or a trembling in my arms. Okay. Would it be okay if we just gently stayed with that

sensation as you stay with me, as we feel our feet on the ground, and just follow that sensation and let the vibration just happen. Just notice it. Let your arm do what it needs to do and just stay with it.

[00:28:15]

And this may not happen in one session, but often it can. If someone has the ability to notice the sensation and they take the courage and the comfort from my being there. Because I know what to do when things go south, which they don't if you do it in this way, you will watch the sensation together. Okay. Now it's moving towards my fingers. Now it's starting to get a little worse and like a wave, because all these core emotions are wave-like. What's happening now? Now it's actually quieting. Great. Can we stay with it a little bit longer? And we're breathing. Okay. It's quiet now. It's calmed. The wave is over. And then we do another round. And what's that like in your body now? What's happening right now? Now there's some sadness.

And now we switch. What inside your body lets you know you're feeling sad? I feel something around my eyes. Can we just stay with it together? Then crying happens, that comes out. Then maybe there's some anger and we get that out through fantasy or staying with the somatic experience. And then at the end we're always going to find those gold feelings of calm, of gratitude, peace. And that's where we drop into that authentic self state with all those C's of more confidence and pride that someone has been able to do this, to face their feelings and move through them. And it's a beautiful thing to behold.

It's healing. It's literally changing the brain for good. It's not a one time thing. The problem with conventional therapy is you talk but if we're not engaging the body it's like Groundhog day each time. You feel better from talking but we haven't actually transformed or changed the brain in a way that it's better ongoing. And that's what we really want to do, is get rid of these triggers so that overall calmness, no one spends all their time in the open hearted state, that's just a constant, but we can spend more and more and more time in the open hearted state.

And I know that to be factual because it's my experience but also I see it every day. It's just phenomenology, meaning it's what... The Change Triangle applies to everybody because emotions work pretty much the same way in all human beings. It may be slightly different if someone is on the autism scale, or if someone is not neurotypical, but for the most part people are all unique, but the way emotions work is pretty predictable. And I find that comforting and actually very hopeful.

And I do believe that emotion education, if taught to everybody in high school, would actually diminish the amount of trauma and symptoms of trauma in the world. Because people growing up to be parents would understand how emotions work and they wouldn't unwittingly create more, the suppression of emotions and wouldn't do things that cause, like chronically yelling at somebody is a form of emotional abuse, it causes trauma. It puts us in a constant state of fight and flight. And there's no doubt that parenting is the hardest, most frustrating job in the world. It's the hardest thing I've ever done.

But still, we have to know that if we're going to choose to have a certain behavior towards our kid, it's going to have ramifications. We all get traumatized from our childhoods. I treat everyone as though they suffered trauma because just from being human and surviving in today's modern times we have to adapt in ways, and most kids at some point do exhibit symptoms, and most adults do.

[00:32:00] Meagen Gibson

Especially in particular situations. It's not that we walk around exhibiting trauma symptoms all the time but when put in particular situations. And I love that you brought up attachment styles, and I've said this before, I feel like the mistake that we've all made is that we just parent in the opposite way that we were parented. If we didn't like our parenting we just do the opposite, which doesn't really take into account the different styles.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

It doesn't take into account the styles. And it doesn't take into account that each person that's born is completely unique. And if you're not watching and one step behind really watching, you won't know what things to nurture and what things to curb. And so you really have to have some knowledge there.

Meagen Gibson

It's a ton of work. Just to validate anybody watching, it's a ton of work.

I have two very different children, and the older one is constantly frustrated at how we parent the younger one, and we have to constantly say, you're different people that's why we parent you differently. We have the same standards, we have the same rules, the same accountability, the same boundaries but the way that we're going to approach both of you is going to be different because you are different.

And then, I don't know if this is going to be helpful for people at home, but in the context of the beautiful example that you gave of touching on somebody's emotions and the way that that can be different, I'll give a small example.

I had to go to the dentist and I had to have a tooth work done. I had a really old filling from literally, like, 35 years ago that needed to be taken out and replaced. And when the doctor gave me Novacaine I had an epinephrine response. So I had a giant rush, heart beating and I thought I was having a panic attack, and I've never had a problem going to the dentist. Lots of people do, I'm not taking anything away from that. But I thought I was having a panic attack.

And so I was crying and my heart's beating, I'm sweating. And the doctor is freaking out. And he's like, do you want some gas? And he just puts the gas on me. So we go through it. It's fine. But now I'm in an altered state. So it's an experience. I came home that day, I'm exhausted that whole day, and now I'm questioning myself. I'm like, how much work have I really done if I'm having a panic attack in the dentist chair? I had no idea.

Anyway, the dentist's work was not sufficient. So then I had to go to a specialist for a root canal. I walk into the root canal, I say to the woman, to the wonderful nurse, I said, last time I had work on this tooth done I had a panic attack. And she said, you may have, but you may not have. When we give epinephrine to a certain small percentage of patients, it's like 9% or something, they have an epinephrine rush. And so what you're actually having is like a fight or flight response. She explained the whole thing to me, and she said, it's probably going to take about 9 minutes for your nervous system to calm down because that's how it's going to metabolize or whatever.

But she explained it to me. She said, can I put the chair back and can I give you a blanket while you wait this out? I have to tell you the way that my nervous system interpreted and processed that

experience was so different from the first experience. It was drastically different. I had knowledge, I had someone holding the container for me and setting the expectation for what would happen, everyone was very gentle. It was remarkable.

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And so that's not necessarily drawing on trauma experience but an example of two identical experiences and the way that they can be put in context differently depending on who you're dealing with. It's remarkable how it was stored in my body, how I processed it, how I was able to continue on with my day after that.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. That's such a beautiful example. You may remember from reading *It's Not Always Depression* that I was a dentist in my first career.

Meagen Gibson

That's right. Oh, yeah. Of course. I completely forgot that.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

It's the same area and that is, I mean, even the experience of having that kind of a reaction it's like a trauma. It's scary. So, what's wrong with me? That's what happens when they have a bad experience. But it's the symptoms and the aftermath and the way they respond that they also judge and the knowledge of someone explaining what is happening to you, it's curative in many ways. It makes all the difference.

Meagen Gibson

It really is.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

And that's how I felt when I first learned about emotions. I grew up with a psychiatrist father, but nobody really knew about emotions back then, or nobody talked about them. We talked about our feelings, but we didn't talk about them from physiology, what's happening in the body and that they're body based experiences. And once I learned that, once I saw that triangle for the very first time and learned it in the context of emotions and what's happening to me and that there's a physiological reason for my emotions, it's not because I'm bad or it's not because I'm emotional and all these heavy trips that our society lays on us, I was transformed. That's why I couldn't stop telling everyone, you got to see this thing, you gotta learn. And just wanting to share it because it was such a relief. And I figured I wasn't the only one that had misinformation about what it meant to have emotions.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And that was why I brought it up, because when you said teaching high school students about emotion, this is how we develop trauma, is when people don't have the knowledge themselves to be able to tell you and hold space for you and say, here's what's happening, here's some things that might help, this is totally normal, there's nothing wrong with you.

[00:38:02]

I have a small son, and I can't even remember the context of why this happened, but he was having an experience where he was scared to do something. I don't remember, and this was very recently so it's funny that I can't remember what the context was, but we were either giving him a shot or he was about to go on a roller coaster. It could have been either thing, it doesn't actually matter. But his leg started shaking uncontrollably. And so I, with a bright smile said, I see your leg is shaking. And he's like, yeah, it's really weird. I can't make it stop. I was like, would you like to know why your leg might be shaking? And we just ran through it.

And I was like, how do you feel in your body? He's like, I'm scared. I was like, okay, so here's what your body does when it's scared. And here's why. And he was like, so if I want to get rid of this, could I run around the block really quick? And I said, yes, please do. And so he ran around the block and he came back and he said, my leg has stopped shaking. But just that simple thing where he was in a fear response, whether it was warranted or not, it could have been a fear response around a new food, or it doesn't have to be something that's actually threatening to your body or is going to hurt, it could just be something you're scared of.

Talking to a stranger could invoke that. Like if your parents said, I want you to look this person in the eye and shake their hand and that's an intimidating experience for you that could cause you to shake. And so just understanding that response, how to digest all of that, how to wait it out, how not to make judgments about yourself when it's happening, is all just so powerful to me.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. Or to be a parent that says, what's the matter with you? The way you handle it, I'm so moved. I mean, that is so skillful. And, yes, that's a great example. That's beautiful. That's why I really believe you can teach people therapeutic skills that they can bring home. I've always thought that was underutilized. And there's many types of therapy now with children where the parents come into the room and basically, the therapist is teaching the parent to be more therapeutic. We don't have to say teaching the parent to be a therapist, but just therapeutic.

So what a fantastic intervention. And that's an example. Sometimes people have restless legs, which could be anxiety. It could be that there's underlying emotions like sadness or other feelings pushing up. And in your case, in your son's case exactly right, that fear itself, in that example I just spoke about before, fear gets triggered in here, it affects his body. And fear gets you ready to run. And there was his leg, right there ready to run. And you just validated it and gave him permission. He came up with that idea, genius. Perfect.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I'm not trying to pat myself on the back. I make parenting mistakes all the time.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

I also teach people how to take compliments, which is not so easy for most people. Because that was skillful.

Meagen Gibson

I was proud of that moment. I hold those moments tight because it's not always perfect.

[00:41:10] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

I have to say, Meagen, if we were in a therapy session together, I'd slow you down and I'd say, well, can we get to know what pride feels like in your body? It will blow past compliments as fast as you can say any word.

And people who have experienced a lot of trauma who have been depressed for many years almost have to relearn how to feel big and expansive. It feels dangerous. So pride in itself, which is what we call an ADP, the healing effect. It's after you process an emotion or if you do something good in life there's often pride that comes up. And then we do the same thing. How do you know what pride feels like in your body? I know how it feels in mine, but what's it like for you? Inside it lets you know that you're feeling good about yourself right now. And then we slow down because it takes a long time for the body, for sensations to present, as opposed to the thoughts which come really fast. And you might say, oh, I feel a sort of energy coming up and out. And I'd say, great, can we stay with that? And just have you breathe and you'd probably do it for 2 seconds before you'd want to change the subject.

Meagen Gibson

I'm trying to change it now I'm listening.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Okay, so go ahead. So I'll take the focus off you.

Meagen Gibson

No, I was just naming it. My brain was working, like, how are you going to get past this?

It's a really good point that you make. Because no matter where you are on your healing journey or knowledge journey, regardless of why you're here and why you're watching this, it's a really good point. And something that I do battle with is feeling pride and not automatically hearing in my brain, arrogance. Like the work around that ego.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

I was looking at it today and knowing the difference between pride and the self that comes from the authentic core state versus arrogance, ego hubris that comes with the defensive state against shame. And how to work with the differences.

In a nutshell, if you are feeling good about yourself, but you're also hanging on to your empathy for the other, again, it goes back to what we were talking about before this session started, about the appropriateness of displaying emotions. The Change Triangle is all about an internal being with one's emotions without doing anything, without taking action. Organizing your mind, organizing your emotions, knowing what's happening. So that the very last step, once you're clear on what you're feeling and what the impulses are and what you want, is to think through using, the old noggin, of what we should actually do. Sometimes you may tell a friend that you're angry at them. Sometimes you may realize it's a trigger for an old thing with an old friend or your mother and you'll process it that way and you won't need to do anything out in the world. And so it's the same thing that we can learn to feel good within ourselves right now, like I can feel really good about myself, and I can still be very empathic.

[00:44:27]

You may not be feeling so good about yourself right now, so I'm not going to share some of my accomplishments right now. Or maybe you feel really good about something and I'm not feeling good and you share that with me, and I say as a friend, wow, I'm really happy for you, and I'm really jealous too. Because I just feel great to be able to do that both and to hold the conflicts and the multiple emotions coming up at the same time.

Meagen Gibson

I think about people that struggle with fertility or something like that where their friends are having children and they're struggling to have their own. And both things are true.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. And that's so painful. Exactly. Those things that happen that make us compare ourselves to others and then really despair. And you don't want it to disconnect, so how do you stay in connection?

And in the book, I don't know whether you tried some of the exercises that were in the book.

Meagen Gibson

I did all the homework. And I really loved as well that it seems like it wouldn't be necessary, yet it is, that the appendixes list sensation words and they list emotion words. And because for so many of us doing the work, this happens to me all the time, where my therapist will ask me in our regular appointment, and how does that make you feel? I can talk circles around the issue or the problem or the thing that I want to talk about but when she actually asks me how I feel and where that is my body, sometimes I get homework. I come home and I'll have to actually take a few days to think about that. What was the actual emotion word that I was looking for? Past anxious or past shame or past guilt? What's the real feeling?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

You can download a copy of the Change Triangle and pop it right on your fridge and it'll narrow it down for you a little bit.

But exactly. And the reason it's so important to put words on our feelings, people still use words like navel gazing if you're looking inside. I mean, that has just got to go. That it's so important to have self awareness for so many reasons. But one of them is when we can put a word, language, which is a left brain process, on an experience, which is a right brain. Right brain processes are like dreams, they're feelings in our body, they're emotions, they're images that we're making based on the past and how the mind is formulating life, that when we can put language on experience the brain and body like that. It's like an integrated experience. It makes us feel aligned. It gets us closer to the open hearted state. So it's all about physiology and body and just how humans work, mammals and humans work, to a large extent.

So great. I'm so glad that you like the exercises.

I also started teaching a course called Emotions Education 101, which is trying to bring the book into a class online, and we do exercises and a little bit of left brain stuff, a little bit of right brain stuff. Because not everybody likes to read these days.

[00:47:55] Meagen Gibson

Or we like guided reading, accountability reading, if you will, which is what classes are great for.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

You show up for 8 classes, you learn all about the Change Triangle, and then you work it for the rest of your life.

And I joke, by the time I take my last breath, hopefully I'll live into my 80s, it'll be like, I've got it! We learn and we grow and we're at our wisest, hopefully right before it's the end.

But the process is so engaging and it's interesting to learn about ourselves, because for me, as you learn about yourself you also learn about other human beings, and it helps us get along. And maybe we could eradicate war if every man on Earth had a little emotion education 101.

Meagen Gibson

That's my incentive as well. It's not just selfish. It's also about my compassion and empathy in the world. Because I can want to treat or change my child's behavior until the end of my life, but every time I've started with me, and changed my behavior and my responsiveness, my child has changed without me having to ask or implement anything.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Absolutely. And I can't tell you how many parents come to me about their kid, and I'm like the best thing you could do for your kid is to work on yourself. And then also make the distinction between, you can validate a child's emotions and corral behavior properly. People conflate the two that if I validate the anger that I'm giving permission to be aggressive or destructive. I see that you're angry. Tell me what that person did to you. And let's take this doll over here and pretend it's your friend and punch it together and have fun.

Meagen Gibson

Have boundaries around safety, hold boundaries but have compassion.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

So learning about emotions is key. Every one of us needs it. We all have emotions. They're not under conscious control, so we better learn how to use them constructively.

Meagen Gibson

Hilary Jacobs Hendel, fantastic talk. Where can people find out more about you and about the class that you mentioned?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Well, I would love it. I have a [website](#) that's got tons of free resources. It's different from my psychotherapy website, and I want people to come and take what they want. I have about 60+ blog articles that never go out of date. They're timeless. I have videos on some of these ways of working

with emotions. You can find out about classes, and I hope people sign up for my newsletter. I only send something once a month with a new blog article and then news about different classes and when the next Emotions Education 101 class is.

[00:50:36]

And of course I hope everybody decides to read or listen to *It's Not Always Depression* because I wrote down everything that I wished I had learned when I was 18 that really would have helped me avoid some of the mistakes, including two depressions that I went through. I became wiser from them, but I never had another depression after understanding how emotions work and tending to myself and really taking care of myself like your husband.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly and if that's not an endorsement.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Rest when you're tired if you can.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. All right. Fantastic speaking with you today. Thanks so much.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Thanks, Meagen. Take Good care. Bye everybody out there.