



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Antidotes for trauma in girls

Guest: Donna Jackson Nakazawa

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm thrilled to be speaking with Donna Jackson Nakazawa, an award-winning science journalist, author of six books, and an internationally recognized speaker whose work explores the intersection of neuroscience, immunology, and human emotion.

Her newest book, *Girls On The Brink: Helping Our Daughters Thrive In An Era of Increased Anxiety, Depression, And Social Media*, looks at today's growing female adolescent mental health crisis, examines how trauma affects the female brain and body in uniquely powerful ways, and offers new hope for helping girls flourish even in the face of adversity.

She's also the creator and founder of the trauma healing program, "Your Healing Narrative: Write-to-Heal With Neural Re-Narrating", an online narrative writing course for practitioners, educators, and individuals. Thank you so much for joining me today, Donna.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Pleasure to be back with you, Meagen, as always.

Meagen Gibson

So I'm going to be honest with you, and I think I wrote to you while I was reading your book, I found your book super validating and also infuriating because your book outlines that mental health in girls today is pretty stark, according to the research, and the gap between the mental health of girls and boys is widening. So can you walk us through some of the recent findings and set the landscape for us for this conversation?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yeah, sure. So I think you'd have to be living under a rock to not have seen a lot of the recent studies and news articles about the mental health of girls. This was well in place before the pandemic. Some people think it's a pandemic related problem, and indeed, the pandemic definitely threw gasoline on an already brewing fire. But in the past 10 to 15 years, we've seen that rates of depression, anxiety, and self harm among girls has skyrocketed.

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At the same time, the gap between the mental health of girls and boys after puberty, that gap has always been there, where girls have suffered from more depression, anxiety, boys have suffered from more behavioral and attention issues, but that gap is getting wider and wider. So we're seeing, for instance, in 2019, one third of girls by age 17 were reporting a period of depression six weeks or longer. We're talking symptoms of major depression, not by diagnosis.

When public health researchers are looking at these questions, they don't just go by diagnosis, right? Because then we might think, well, maybe girls are just more willing to talk about their feelings or more willing to say they're sad or articulate it better. No, they look at lived experience. They looked at, are you able to get out of bed? Have you lost interest in activities for the last six months or more? Has this disrupted family life? What are the emotions that mark this period of time?

And a third of girls by age 17 were saying that they had six weeks or more, marked by a period of hopelessness, worthlessness, guilt, and despair, and shame. So we've seen tons of other studies. I could name 200 of them right now after reporting in the book. But by 2021, the CDC reported that the rate of girls who were attempting suicide had risen 51%, compared to 4% among boys. We could go on, but when you see this, you want to know what's behind it.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And childhood stress, we know, is one of the contributors to psychiatric disorders. And one of the things that was so stark about the book was not only all of this research, and I love that you put in the context of how this information was gathered, because if it's just based on diagnosis, not every girl in society has access to diagnosis.

They don't have the support or the health care in some countries that we can be getting diagnoses and that's how we can get this kind of statistical information. And so the fact that you want to make sure everybody's clear how this was reported and gathered, it actually matters quite a bit.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

And it also matters when we're looking at sex differences, because we know boys are suffering too. Let me just say that before people come at us, I'm the mother of a daughter, and I'm the mother of a son, and all of our kids are facing a lot of different toxic factors in the world around them. And I speak to that in the book. But what's happening to girls, as you know, having read the book, is a compilation of a lot of unique factors, and so we have to be willing to talk about that if we're going to help really figure out what's behind this trend and really ground ourselves in what we can do about it.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So I know that you write that it was only in 2016 that scientists started looking at how stress affects the female brain specifically, and that before that, researchers worked only with male research models when looking at how the brain processes stress. And I know when I read that, I was like, wait, what?

[00:05:35] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

I think most people would actually be shocked to find that out. So why did it take so long to include women and girls, for that matter, in research? And why do these new factors matter in terms of what's happening with girls?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Well, it is shocking, but not surprising. So, for instance, I shared with you something personal before we got on. I recently had heart surgery. I've had a few. Well, we all know it was only a few years ago that researchers actually looked at, well, what do heart problems look like in females? It had never been studied. It's like dummies in fake car crashes are six with two men sitting there.

So much of research has been based on this male research model, and in neuroscience, it is no different. So when I talk about this research I'm talking about, not epidemiology, where you look at maybe a group of 15 year old girls and a group of 15 year old boys and you begin to ask them questions about their experience. I'm talking about research that came way before that in the lab, preclinical research, animal studies were only using male research models.

And the researchers I talked to about this told me that this was because researchers wanted to keep those pesky hormones out of it because it would mess up the clarity of their findings. Well, this turns out to have a huge impact on our understanding of stress across female health and development especially as estrogen comes in at puberty.

So why does this matter so much? Well, for those of you who like to get a little geeky and deep in the weeds, stick with me, I will simplify it. But it is a little complicated and yet so powerful once we get it. And it is this fact. Estrogen is a superpower hormone. Make no mistake about it. It is the reason why across evolutionary time, women who are traditionally or, generally speaking, in smaller bodies, have smaller organs to make room for a uterus to carry a whole other human life. Nine months.

And yet we stay awake just as many hours a day. We run just as fast. Most women are up at like 11, 12 o'clock still doing laundry while their husbands are asleep. We do more on less and that is thanks to estrogen. Evolutionarily speaking, estrogen is also a big immune booster. So it adds an extra layer of protection which helps protect women, who are essential to the human race, carrying another life, providing that warmth, that breast milk, keeping young children alive and safe.

And I'm talking across time, right? That is essential for our gene pools to carry on. That said, that evolutionary boost in the face of too much stress, too many, what scientists call, environmental insults which include social, emotional stressors, aspects of your environment that are taxing to your immune system in any which way, physical or mental, then it flips to an evolutionary disadvantage.

And that is why we begin to see that women are more likely to suffer from autoimmune disease at several times the rate of men. Now, on an upside, it's why women have a more robust response to vaccines. We produce more antibodies after a vaccine. Flip side, it's why women have more long

COVID. So estrogen is so much more than this hormone that we think of that brings in the thrum of sexual excitement across adolescence or is involved with mood switches.

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It is a master regulator for the entire body, for your brain to wire and fire up across puberty in healthy ways. It helps feed your neurons and brings growth factors and helps neural synapses to connect and boom. And it is, in a healthy environment for girls, it is the source of the reason why the female adolescent brain is a freaking superpower. It's spidey sense, the connections between the left and right hemisphere are just bar none on this planet.

But in unhealthy or overly stressful environments, which I argue our kids are living in, and especially girls, it can flip to an evolutionary disadvantage where it amps up the stress response, which amps up the immune system in ways that play out in both physical and mental health concerns.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastically said. And I love that you contextualized, I wanted to skip over, I was not thinking of all the ways in which estrogen makes us superhuman and gives us super human brains, so I'm so glad that you made sure to emphasize all of that.

And I was reminded, as you were talking about things that naturally occur in our system, like cortisol, cortisol is necessary, it goes up in the morning to wake you up. Cortisol is not a problem. We've associated it as a problem because in stress, extra cortisol is made and then you can't come out of a stress response. And so there's a law of diminishing returns with too much cortisol.

And so estrogen, same thing. It's this superhuman hormone that we've got that only females have. And yet under social stressors, environmental stressors, family stressors, it becomes this diminishing factor that puts us more at risk for autoimmune diseases and stress related diseases, heart disease, mental health disorders. It runs the gamut, doesn't it?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Right. That's exactly right. So I think of estrogen as an amplifier, so that amplification is really, really great in a great environment, but it becomes negative in a negative environment. So it's really a question of what is this environment that we're raising girls in? Now, add in, Meagen, that on top of all this, puberty is happening for girls. Many years earlier, in 1800 it was 16. 1500, 15. Today it's 11.

And this is really a problem because it used to be that we had this period of those in-between years, as I call them in the books, where girls had a chance. And certainly when I was growing up, and I'm older than you, but maybe when you were growing up too, this period of development that we're really this bridge between childhood and adolescence. And it was really crucial because during those in between years, the brain had a chance to figure out, who am I?

It's classic Erickson, right? Who am I in the world? What makes me unique and passionate and what do I care about? How can I make a difference while still fitting in? It's that time to lie in the grass and stare up at the stars and talk with your friends about nothing at all.

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And we've replaced that time where kids are together and figuring out like, oh, my friend said this. Is that hurtful? If it is, how do I respond? Is this something that should really worry me? Tomorrow, will it brush over? How do I think about this? And if I'm really worried about a situation, how do I discern whether it's dangerous or not dangerous? Do I ask an adult for help? How do I do that? How do I even articulate it when I feel overwhelmed? All that is happening in those in between years to build this scaffolding up for how do I manage this world I'm going into?

When puberty comes in, before adolescence, and when we have also ripped away those middle years and filled them instead with all of this competitive, hierarchical, extrinsic reward oriented busyness, and by that I mean higher and earlier benchmarks for academics, on the sports field, being in the car to go to a club team event at 04:00 AM every Saturday on top of school and activities, getting into the gifted and talented, getting into the right magnet schools, getting into Harvard, whatever it is for any particular family on any given day.

Everything is coming earlier, faster, not to mention the world at large is heating up, literally. Climate change, school shootings, political discord. Everything is coming at kids earlier, faster, harder, more competitively, with a hierarchical set of benchmarks and evaluations. Nothing more so than social media, which they are on 24/7.

You put all of that, early puberty, the world as it is, coming in earlier, social media, the messages kids get, before adolescence, where the brain is wiring and firing up to handle all of that stuff that the adult will have to deal with, and we have a big problem. The brain isn't wired and fired up yet to handle stress, and it's being remodeled as estrogen comes in based on one question, how safe do I think I am in this world?

And if the answer is not so safe, which is what our girls are experiencing, the brain fires and wires up based on that intel, not unlike a computer chess game, looking at all the past moves on the board and figuring out where it has to go next for this move to survive. When all the moves, or many of the moves, send the signal that this has not been safe, the brain wires and fires up for flight, fight, freeze. And that, on brain scans, looks like depression and anxiety.

Meagen Gibson

You said a lot. There are lots of things I want to come back to.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

I warned you guys. It's going to be deep...

Meagen Gibson

It's only hard because there's things I'm like, wait, I want to go back to that. I want to go back to that. All of the factors that you just named happen for both boys and girls, except for the puberty thing, it's happening much earlier for girls...

[00:17:13] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Well, the estrogen coming in at puberty with the added layers of toxicity on social media and in our society in general, which is, yeah, you got it.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And one of the things I think people overlook is, my child in middle school does not have a smartphone for this exact reason, partially. It's hard, right? I feel like I'm the last of a small group of people, but I just know too much.

But a lot of the factors that you talked about have been true for a while. However, we didn't give our children an information forcing tool to have it. When I was a kid, probably when you were a kid, our parents told us don't sit too close to the TV, you'll hurt your eyes. And now we've given them a screen to put right in front of their faces. From the time they knew they had thumbs, they could hold a screen.

They're getting an information flux of news, social media pressures. And I just had an incident with one of my kids where a child at school took a video of him, put it in one of those AI generators to manipulate his likeness and make him say things that he didn't say. So little pressures like that that they're trying to figure out and trying to navigate.

And so the pressure cooker that that creates, even if all you have is a stable home life that has stable finances and stable health, even if all your protective factors are in place, this is still a really high risk situation for developing mental health issues and autoimmune disorders. I mean, that's what we're looking at here, right?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yes. One of the things I say in the book after talking to so many pediatricians, neuroscientists, public health experts and following girls themselves for two years, is that I learned over and over again talking to girls, talking to their families, talking to pediatricians, talking to scientists, that even a really well loved child's sense of well being and self and their sense of who they are and who they could be in this life will diminish over time, no matter what we're saying and doing at home.

If the world is continually sending them these toxic gendered messages, and so that's the quandary. Which doesn't mean we don't start with what's happening at home and how triggered we are by family stress and we'll get into all of that, it's crucial to start there, but the point here is that as these psychological factors mount exponentially in a way we've never seen before, all the things we've talked about, we have to mount the strategies in kind of a new approach and a new way of being when we think about how we are going to help our kids develop this interior sense of emotional well being.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I want to talk about the problems for just a little bit longer, but we do have a ton of solutions, there's hopeful parts coming. We just want to make sure we lay the groundwork and that people are hearing how serious things are, because I think it's really important for people to understand that.

[00:20:50] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

And I think the science grounds us. It's like, okay, I'm going to do this. I know that I need to be thinking about these things, and I've started to think about them. But, hey, there are 15 strategies in this book. That sounds like a lot, although I make them very simple and start where you are and begin right here and take your time, but it grounds us. It makes us get up in the morning and go, I'm doing this. That's what the science tells us. We need to be doing this, and we need to start right now.

Meagen Gibson

And the fact that it's science, it's also not personal, it's not about you as a parent, it's you as a parent against the social systems and the world dynamics and everything. That's not about you. It's about every parent having to do this with their children now. We're in a new world. Nobody, except for you, has written a book on how to do this.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

I still wish I had written it when my kids were seven and nine or ten and thirteen. And we didn't have the science yet. It wasn't out there yet. So I try to give myself a break from I wish, I wish, I wish, I wish. That said, it really isn't too late. Wherever you start, I just want parents to know that it's never too late. These strategies can make a shift wherever you are.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So one of the things that might be hard to hear is that you write that parents are often a little overconfident in their ability to see their child is struggling. So can you tell us more about that?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yeah. So 90% of parents say that they would know if their child were having mental health issues. But half of parents also say that they can't tell the difference between what would be a mental health issue versus just the normal ups and downs. And it's like, maybe you have one teenager, maybe you have two. You're not an expert.

We try to make parents feel like it's all on them, and they've got to be the expert and everything, especially moms, moms ruminant all the time about their kids and take on so much shame and blame. And the last thing I want to do is add to that. It's normal not to really know because how many teenagers have you had in your lifetime? So at the same time, some of the stats are scary. And again, I don't say these to scare people, but half of parents are unaware after their child has tried to commit suicide.

That tells us that when we look at everything our kids are facing in this ramped up, toxic environment in which they're coming of age, and everything that we talked about in terms of the brain kind of going through these things before it's wired and fired up to handle distress and know what's serious, what's not, how do I ask for help, how do I tell my mom what I'm feeling, what am I feeling, that tells us that kids are going through an awful lot that they aren't yet able to articulate to us at a very vulnerable window of development.

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And so that's, of course, why I've broken down so many strategies in the book to sort of get in on that time of development in a very different way than what we traditionally think of. So that's not to scare people. It's just to say that this is tough. We're in it together.

There are, just as we've had new science on what's happening in particularly the female brain and I don't say that as if we haven't been studying the male brain, we have, we've been studying it for decades, all the books on stress across health and development are based on those models, we're adding in now what we know about sex differences and how the female brain might be affected in unique ways across puberty and adolescents.

Meagen Gibson

And I love what you said about we've only been teenagers, most of us with teenagers, we've been teenagers and that's our frame of reference. And lots of things have happened in a different era. We live in a different world, different context. But not only that, if you're lucky enough to have more than one kid, your kids are probably not the same. It's not like you get to try on the exact same person again. You've got a totally different human.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

I hear at parenting events and at lectures that I give, so many parents go, well, I have one who tells me everything and one who never tells me anything. And there are ways to work with both. So our kids aren't like us and they aren't like each other, and we have to learn as we go. And it's okay to learn as you go. It's okay. You aren't supposed to know it all.

Regardless of all the tips on Instagram and all the pressure on moms to have kids who are on all the right teams at the right schools with the right friends going to the right colleges, it actually is not on you. That is not how we evolved across evolutionary time. There is a lot you can do, but there should never be that sense of, I'm messing up. Shame on me. I really want to take that out of the conversation.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you. And one of the things I want to just state briefly and then go to something else is that there's also evidence in the book that even if you fulfill all of those things for your children, they're in all the activities, they're in the right schools and they're getting the right grades and they're getting the right lessons, that can actually add, all of that opportunity and support and expectation, can add to mental health stress.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Right. Because it's an extrinsic reward. You're raising kids to think, okay, well, everything that makes them unique or special or that you value about them and the light you see in them is really just currency to get these extrinsic rewards. None of that is intrinsic. None of it has to do with a felt sense of worthiness or belonging. We want to be sending kids the message your job isn't to go to Harvard or be on the club team or get the Cum Laude award. It's to grow up to be a good person.

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And our light, our concern, or our focus as a family is really your emotional well being, your emotional and physical well being and how well you make connections with other people and what kind of relationships you have in the world. And that you know we see that light in you and that you belong. You matter in this world. And they can't get any of that, even if they do get the silver cup at the award ceremony, that is not how they get it.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And home is the place where you get that intrinsic... Like the world might reward you for all the things, the performance of perfectionism, but it won't intrinsically make you feel great about who you are and your value as a human being.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Exactly. It comes from knowing that there are people who have your back, that they see what makes you unique and special, regardless of what accolades you get from the world around you. And there's so many ways to scaffold that in.

Meagen Gibson

One of the things that you said in the book is that it takes hundreds of times of being safely soothed by a parent or for a child to learn how to soothe their own nervous system. And one of the things that occurs to me, as we're talking at a trauma conference, is that being a good, present, connected parent requires you to look at your own hurt and trauma and emotional maturity. You can't be that for your child until you've been able to do it for yourself.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

That is exactly where this 15-step program begins. It's looking at your own reactivity in parenting life. And let's just be clear, there is no perfect parent out there. I have never been lecturing at a conference and asked an audience, hey, if you've never lost it with your kids, raise your hand. I have never seen a hand. So I've been doing this a while now. We are not perfect.

But one of the very first things we have to do if we're really taking this on and trying to change the emotional climate in which our children come of age during the times of overwhelm in which we are very deeply dug in as a society, is to look at what makes us react in family life. Now, you know, and I know, because we've both done a lot around trauma, two thirds of us have grown up with some significant trauma in our childhood or adolescence, and that wires the brain up to be a little more reactive when things bring up those very old and deep feelings.

And, you know, I teach a narrative writing course about this, and we have lots of students who take it to try to figure out, okay, well, where am I? What are those hot moments for me in family life? And how do I begin to spot them quickly, know them and ground myself and come back in differently? That's work that all parents need to do. There might be, again, a parent out there who doesn't need to do this, but in my experience, we're all coming with something from our own experiences that keep us from getting into that state that you were asking me about, which I call, and researchers call, parent child attunement.

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And what does that mean? Well, the way I describe it and I'm a writer is, hey, okay, what's happening around us right now might be big, this might be big, but every cell in me right now is grounded and aware and attuned to be there for every cell in you. Kids have a crazy, spidey sense. They know when we are in that state and when we're not in that state and getting there, there are dozens of tips to do that.

So you can do it very quickly. Yeah, the work begins with you. But it's crucial because when our children are able to bring us their distress or their questions or their concerns or their fears and not meet our distress but meet, another great word for this is, biosynchrony. Hey, I'm coming to this place with you of calm, which we can see actually brings down a child's amygdala activity, that alert center in the brain.

We can see a child's brain calm and shift into a greater sense of awareness of their feelings, their needs, and how to voice them. When we go there first, we literally regulate our children's brains for them. So you've got to figure out what's keeping you from doing that and how to do it for you. Because when we offer that biosynchrony, they can unload, unpack, their distress in a place that feels so safe it undoes the stickiness of the negative thing that's happening.

We have that power. It is our superpower as a human race and as parents. It does take work, but it is, when we achieve it, like a relationship gold moment. It is like winning the lottery of the parent child connection.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well said. It's my dream that every parenting book and parenting app, instead of telling you what size fruit your baby is and what to expect when you're expecting, that it's instead, like, let's unpack your trauma and deal with it before this person gets here.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

I see a lot of new parents or pregnant women or new dads to be or grandparents taking my trauma healing narrative writing course for that reason, just to get it there in a place where instead of it being, it doesn't mean that it's never going to be there, that's not the promise, the promise is instead of it being yay big and bigger than the room you're standing in with your child, it's literally something that you can see, hold in the palm of your hand and blow away and come back to being right there with them. It is doable. I see people do it all the time.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And that feeling of safety, you talked about sometimes we're focused on my child is having this experience, but what also helps wire children's brains is when they see their parents struggling with something that doesn't have anything to do with them, but they see their parents struggling and that creates a feeling of unsafety for them, to be able to say, to hear their parents say, you're absolutely right. I am struggling and I am overwhelmed. I am the adult. I am a parent. I have tons of resources. I have some big feelings right now.

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And to say it's going to be okay, it's going to take me a little bit of time. I promise by tomorrow morning this will feel a little better, or by tomorrow night, things might feel back to normal. But give me some time. I'm going to figure this out.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Absolutely. 100%. I know as a parent myself, I used to make the mistake, no, I'm fine. Everything is fine. And I've had a lot of major health problems. I'm fine, but I'm going in because I have this rare, neurological autoimmune disease and I'm slowly getting paralyzed by it but it's fine. That's how a lot of us were raised. And to be able to switch that around, you modeled it perfectly. I couldn't say it any better than you just said.

This is happening. Yeah. These are some big feelings. They're grown up feelings. I have the tools. I know how to manage them. And normalizing that it's okay to have big feelings and it's normal also to want to have the tools and the resources to deal with it. That's what it takes, including normalizing going to therapy. Hey, I'm seeing my therapist in the morning. Going to get a tune up. That's going to help me a lot because sometimes life just does feel really overwhelming.

Sometimes really hard things happen. But we are here for each other and we can talk about it. You can ask me anything and I will give you all the best answers that I have. But we're coming together as a family to get through it and we're not going to brush this under the rug. That doesn't mean you tell your child I'm scared I'm going to die, in my example.

You're giving bite-sized bits of information. I think it was the writer Anne Lamott, who of course we all love, wrote, I want to be that parent who sits on the curb when the house is burning down in front of me, including everything I ever loved, and puts my arm around my children and says, it's okay. We want to be there.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly. This is fine.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

This is fine. It's not, it's fine. But like you said, this is hard, but we'll be okay because we're here, we're together, we'll be okay.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Not denying and I think there's such a gray area of negotiation because we don't want to completely dismiss and gaslight our kids, that oh no everything's fine, but we also don't want to give them adult subjects and adult contexts that they can't handle and that aren't any of their business for that matter. They don't need all the details.

They just need to know your instincts are not wrong. This is hard and this is difficult, but it's also temporary. I have lots of tools. I can describe them to you and I can describe the support and I can describe how confident I am in my medical team or whatever the situation might be.

[00:37:28] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Beautiful. That's exactly right. And that we see and validate the emotions that they're having in that moment. And their emotions are real. That they are real. So many girls I talked to talked about how it was so hard to get their families to see what they were going through as real. So that is the sentiment that we want to offer with everything that you said, I can't say it any more beautifully than you did.

Meagen Gibson

You gotta stop complimenting me. I'm going to get a big head. So moving on, I've been talking about this at length because you said something about when your daughter comes to you, because we're focusing on girls, adolescents in general, but very much girls, make it a good experience for her.

And so many people, especially if your kid comes to you with something really difficult, suicidal ideation and self harm, or ideas about themselves that, because they are the light of your heart, are so foreign to you that they would ever think or feel about themselves, that you immediately want to disagree and fix it. And so if they come to you with really big, hard, complex things, it's okay to struggle and to react.

And then talk us through how to be that safe harbor and how to ask for space if you need it if, you know, you feel yourself kind of overreacting and you're not able to be present, how do we come back to it? Talk us through that.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yeah. So very interesting study I reported on in the book out of Hopkins, researcher Christina Bethel, who heads up the child and adolescent health measurement tool for the CDC, has found that when she looks at childhood and teen flourishing, that children and teens are twelve times more likely to thrive across adolescence when their families could answer yes to one question out of all the questions she asked.

Can this child turn to you to talk about difficult things, no matter how hard? Now that sets the stage, but as you said, it is a super tall order, right? Again, there is no shame or blame here. This is hard to do, especially given the fact that across childhood, it is our job to be the detective and the fixer. If your child comes running off the playground and there's blood coming down their knee, first you have to figure out, well, is there gravel in there?

Is there glass? And then you have to fix it. You have to get out the Bactine and wash it and put on bandaids or maybe call the doctor and take them to the ER for stitches. You are the detective. You are the fixer. But as kids get older, we have to really back away from that role and open the space. When you think about all the science we shared at the top, how the brain needs to get some scaffolding for distress, for discernment between what is safe and what is not safe.

And there are a whole bunch of scripts and ways we can do that. Let's add in that, as you said, we first have to take whatever our stuff is, our distress, our oh my God, the other kid got the prize or oh my God, they didn't invite you to the sleepover, or what do you mean some guys texted that picture to you, and we have to have those tools to take our distress and set it aside by grounding

it, acknowledging it, bringing up our quick tools, whatever your quick two are, and then know how to do this through language and expression.

[00:41:18]

Now, my friend Michelle Icard, who writes about teenagers, has a great phrase she uses called, you want to have Botox brow where there's just nothing going on here. I think it's such a great tip. I love sharing that because kids and teens read our faces as much more distressed than they actually are. I don't know about you, but I know my kids growing up, were like, you look so upset. And I'd be like, I'm not upset...

Meagen Gibson

It's just my face!

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

It's okay. But they know the difference. They've been reading, as I write in the book, they've been reading our faces since the first day of life. They know our face better than we do. And so taking that completely neutral face and then using words and gestures to build in that space, you can walk up to the problem. You can say, wow, I really need a minute to digest this. Can you tell me more?

You can use buffers. There are hundreds of buffer statements. This sounds really frustrating. This sounds really hard. Anyone in your shoes would find this hard to make sense of. I am listening. If your kid is used to you being the fixer and the detective and wants that, and they're like, what do I do? What do I say in my text? I promise I'm going to tell you what I think. I really will.

First, I really want to hear more about what you think, because what you're feeling and thinking right now is so much more important than what I think and feel. This is happening to you. All of this establishes that sense of parent child connection, belonging, attunement that we've been talking about, and it wires and fires up the brain.

You might just say, let's just sit here for a while. We might not be able to fix this right this minute, but let's just sit here with what's happening, and whenever you're ready to talk about it. Another trick I have in the book is using, as you know I love narrative writing tricks and tools, say, hey, this is hard to talk about. I don't have all the answers. Even though I want to help you, let's work on this together.

And it feels to me right now like you have a lot of really big emotions that you're having trouble articulating. That's okay. That happens to me too. Do you want to, and then invite them to set a timer for ten minutes, write out expressive writing. You never pick this pencil up from the page. I've seen kids break through three sheets of paper while they're doing this. Write about all the negative feelings you're having toward everyone and everything around you, even if they're toward me.

It's okay. It's natural. We need to get these things out of us so that we can think straight. And set that timer for ten minutes. But there's one rule, sweetheart. You may not write a single negative thing about yourself or what you did. There is no guilt or shame here. What we're trying to do and what this does is, especially in girls, the left Amygdala gets very highly perfused in distress, and that is what we associate with locked rumination.

[00:44:38]

And locked rumination is a precursor to depression and anxiety, and we want to break that. And sometimes, because kids are going through puberty earlier, more is coming at them earlier, the brain isn't wired and fired up for this kind of distress and unsafety, they are having trouble just getting their thoughts and words out, especially verbally, and we're waiting for that. We're the parents. We're like, dish, baby, tell me. Go ahead, let it out. I want to know what's happening.

But they might not be able to do that. And so let them write it out. And here's what's key. Afterwards, tell them, well tell them beforehand, but afterwards, they are to rip that paper up into 30 little billion pieces. You are not allowed to try to put them back together or try to fish them out of the garbage can. No, this is a privacy thing.

And then ask them for ten minutes to write about, well, when you face stuff like this in the past, what have you done? What succeeded for you? If you could just verbalize a few words of what would be helpful, what would they be? How can you make meaning out of this? Maybe you're someone who, when these kinds of hard things happen, you begin to see that you can make other friendships.

Or maybe you see that you're someone with great boundaries. Look at how you said no, or didn't respond. So we're trying to set up different ways, coming at different learners, coming at the brain, verbally, emotionally, through writing and all kinds of other exercises to set them up for those moments of connection with themselves and with you.

Meagen Gibson

That's wonderful. And I was thinking about this consultant role that you move into when they're in middle school, and every child is going to be different as far as when that happens. But I know my kids, when they were in elementary school, they would come to me with something big. Somebody didn't invite them to pick them on a team for kickball or something that was earth shattering, right?

And I would always say the same thing because I'm not a therapist, but I have a lot of therapy and I talk to a lot of therapists. So I would always say the same thing, and I'd be like, well, how did that make you feel? And I knew it was time for me to switch into this consultant middle age, not middle aged me, middle grade age consultancy role, when my oldest was like, oh, here comes the therapist language. And I was like, oh, he's onto the game.

Okay, I've got to switch roles. I've got to go into upper management now and be more of a consultant instead of telling him, I'm not his manager, I'm a consultant now. The other thing I did when my kids were in elementary school, as soon as they could hold a pencil or a crayon or whatever, I gave them a journal and said, this is your place to write anything you want. Because we have rules in our house. You can't curse, there's things. I was like, you can write all of the curse words.

You can draw anything you want, explore anything you want. And the only rule is I'm not allowed to look at it. This is where you get to say whatever you want. And then I said, if there's something you do want to share with me, just leave it on my bed with a post-it on the page, and I will look at that. We can either talk about it later or not.

[00:48:03] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Absolutely. My daughter and I used to have a journal. She would write a page, then I would write a page then she would write a page, then I would write a page. And I'll never forget once in high school, she was seeing a therapist and still does, and she said, oh, I'm at my therapist's office, but, and she was driving by then, I forgot my journal, and I really wanted to read something to her.

Can you please, or she wasn't at her therapist's, she was at school, I hate to ask you, could you possibly drop it off? Because I don't have time between X and Y. And I remember thinking, she trusts me to go find her journal and pick it up and drive it to meet her so she can take it, because that is the sacrosanct quality around personal writing that we want to have in our home.

My son is home visiting from grad school and my daughter is coming this weekend. I think we all have journals on our bedside stands, and I know nobody would pick up anybody else's because that is part of who we are as a family, where that kind of expressive writing is therapeutic for us and we respect the boundaries for others.

Meagen Gibson

And back to talking specifically about girls again, I know that you said that this negative self-talk and the rumination is actually, specifically, a much more increased problem for girls. And forgive me if I'm combining two things, but that default mode network is more wired around rumination for girls because of the estrogen. Did I get that right?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Well, it's conflating maybe a little too much, but it's okay. That's too much conflation. But in general terms, because of the estrogen ramped up response to danger, which was an evolutionary advantage, it kept tribes safe and little kids safe back across time a long time ago, and it still does. It amps up that fight, flight, freeze when there is too much danger in the environment. And that causes, yes, that amygdala fight, flight, freeze to get activated.

And the difference between boys and girls is that when girls are facing social emotional stressors, we see that perfusion in the left amygdala, which we associate with rumination. But in boys, we see more action, more outward action, more behavioral issues, and that also is a negative for society. We don't want to see that. So boys are somewhat more likely to lash out. Girls are more likely to lash in and get stuck there.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm glad we kind of...

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

This is a gross generalization, people.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Plenty of girls can physically lash out, and plenty of boys can be ruminators as well.

[00:51:16] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Absolutely. 100%. Boys can get very caught up in our era of toxic masculinity, thinking that they're not X enough or Y enough, and they can't be sensitive. So it goes both ways. This is a gross generalization.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I have two sons myself, and one of them is a ruminator, and one of them is action oriented. They could not be more different. So we embrace generalization so that we can talk about the conversation. And you kind of touched on this a little bit earlier, but you talk about this idea of wondering aloud together.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yes, I'm glad you picked up on that. So, really, we talked about how everything is ramping up, heating up socially, emotionally, politically, but we also see that so much of what is happening, especially for girls, is what happens when they start using social media. So it's that the fact that girls are more likely to be critiqued for their body, their hair, their appearance, their development.

As girls told me, it's really clear by middle school if you want to be popular at school or have social currency, that is going to happen on Instagram and TikTok. And if you have it there, that requires that you need to posture yourself and put yourself out there as if you are a grown sexual woman. And you are ten. So that blurred line between that objectification and that sexualization of the female form that blurs it between being a child and being an adult woman is rampant of course across social media.

We've seen all the research that the more clothes girls take off on TikTok, the more followers they get, the more their videos get higher in the algorithm. And we also know that on social media algorithms are ginned up so that when you feel that you don't compare or you feel fear, disgust, shame, or anger, those are the posts that get the most attention.

And we know that over time, seeing all of this, for kids, begins to, and I'm going to get to wondering, I promise, begins to turn off what we call the be careful filter. So images are much more powerful to the developing brain than words. You can show a video and it can just be these beautiful, lovely images, but you can be speaking negative words and the brain will really struggle to hold on to the negative words it saw because the images are much more powerful.

And when kids are on social media and girls in particular are seeing this negativity toward females, all the terrible things that happen to girls in the world, when they're getting critiques from girls and boys about their body, their development, when they're being encouraged to sexualize themselves at 10, 11 and 12, and all of that is getting attention, the be careful filter begins to turn off.

If kids see, oh well, this is being rewarded here, it got a lot of engagement. It tells them even though their brain at home sitting at the dinner table is going like, no, I would never do that, no, I'm not going to do that at the party this weekend, that filter is starting to turn off. And so we really want to get in there and we want to stop allowing this external game to gamify our children's brains.

[00:54:54]

We want to establish the authority for what is happening on social media? What is happening with this very toxic messaging and gendered messaging that they're getting? Instead of what is that telling them, well, what did they think about all of this? And take that essential leap so that the problem isn't oh, I don't measure up when I'm scrolling and staring and despairing, I'm not enough. No, the problem is out there. And we do that through a sense of wondering.

When kids are little, it's very simple. It's like I wonder what a bird feels like in the rain. Or instead of your kid coming home and saying, to be cliche, why is the sky blue, well, I wonder about that. What do you think about that? And invite what philosophers call lantern-like consciousness. As we get older, we are much more like flashlights. You and I are like, okay, let's get dressed, let's do this interview. That is our flashlight. That is it. We're shining it on A, then B, then C, then D.

Kids come of age with this lantern-like consciousness. It's more like this diffused light that takes in pretty much everything around them. And it's full of wonder. And we kind of take that away from them. But if we begin to build that in, or even if we have it, if we start and we apply that to social media, in particular, as one of the ways to do this, we apply that lantern-like questioning where we then begin to hear our kids say things like I wonder what her life is like when she's not taking photos of herself on Instagram. I wonder how she makes money.

I'm noticing I don't feel really good after I spend time on social media. And then it extends into our toxic culture at large. I wonder why Henry sexted that picture to Mary? And when we do that, we take away all of our adult judgment, shame and our fixing and our detective selves and we allow their brain to build out while we do that very crucial thing I already mentioned, help them make that essential leap away from thinking that they are the problem.

They are not the problem. It's out here. It's society. And we can wonder about a society that has created these social media algorithms which girls want to be on, attend, to fit in in the cafeteria. We can wonder a lot about that. And it also takes away its power.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Removes the shame. And also I'm reminded of the time in my oldest son's late elementary school years, I would tell him you really need to start wearing deodorant and showering regularly, the life lessons that come with time.

I told him for a straight year, the woman that cut his hair before 6th grade started, she told him, the next day he wore deodorant and he hasn't stopped since. So it's the difference between you telling them something and them coming to the conclusion themselves, the way that they value it feels a little bit different.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Yeah. They have some ownership over it. And also, as you know, as kids are getting older, they place more value on what other adults and kids their age are thinking. They don't value us less. It's that they begin to be very hypervigilant around us for disagreement. They're watching our faces, as I already said. They're really hypersensitive to our evaluation and our judgment.

[00:58:45]

And everything we're doing in this 15-step program is to move away from that toward a different way of being with them through scripts and strategies and actions and steps, both at home and in the community, so that, yes, they're learning about themselves. Their discernment as to what they think and how they need to make decisions is supported by us, valued by us, seen by us, and they're developing it for themselves because one day they are going out there into the big bad world.

They're going to need a little wobble. If we get in there and we're making things happen in a way that their brain doesn't need to then figure out how to make them happen, then we're sending kids off where they're going to be very vulnerable to figuring that out the first day they get to college.

Meagen Gibson

And you spend a lot of time in the book talking about, and I can't remember the term that you use to describe these types of parents, but parents that have kind of overcompensated and overprotected, is that the word, overprotective parents?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Well, I call it the starling effect, where really it's feeling that you're protecting your kids by helping them get all these extrinsic accolades and awards because there is only one kid getting on the club soccer team or there is only one kid getting the math award or whatever. And you love your kids. You want them to succeed. But starlings are birds who will literally kick other eggs out of the nest to put their own in.

And what I argue in the book, it's one of the many arguments I have, is that kids told me they know that their parents are wonderful to their friends and that the parents get together and they have dinner and they go to all of the school parent events and so on and so forth. And there's sort of a community, but that there are so many starling parents who want their kids to be in the best nest, that they also know that the community at large doesn't really 100% have their back.

Parents are on the sidelines at the lacrosse game screaming for their child to get the goal. They do want their child to get the goal and not the other child because that is the step to the next thing. And when you add that across activities, academics, accolades and all the extrinsic rewards that are very, very common to our era in which we live, and also an extrinsic reward is having more followers on Instagram or getting more people to like your post or follow you.

So, yeah, it's a very important thing to remember that our kids have cottoned on to the fact that while we say we're all in this together and we're wonderful to their friends, their friend's parents are wonderful to them, they also know there aren't that many spots. And if it really comes down to it, I know that these other people in the community wouldn't have my back because they would want Suzy to have that spot.

And so we're trying to also, in this 15-point program, build connections with other really important adults who absolutely do have our girl's backs. I call them Avatars in the book, using that term in its old original Hindu sense. Avatar is not about what you see in the movies. That term refers to older, wiser beings who are here on this planet to help love and help young people come into their highest being.

[01:02:46]

And so we want to figure out who those individuals are in our daughter's world. Who are the women who are interested in the things they're interested in, who are really kick butt, who manifest all the values that we think matter in this world for women, for humans, and making sure that those are also in place? So, long answer to your short question.

Meagen Gibson

Not at all. And I can reflect on when I was younger, we feel like sometimes as a parent, we have to be everything to our kids. And the research shows we just need one trusted adult on our team, and it doesn't have to be our parent or our caregiver. It can be anybody. And when I was growing up, my parents did not go to college, and I had this weird dream that I wanted to be a meteorologist.

And I didn't know anyone who had been a meteorologist or had gone to college. And we met someone at a dinner party once and my parents, who have always been very proud of me and supportive, said, Meagen wants to be a meteorologist. And this one woman took an interest in me. And from that point forward, until I changed my major in college and was not a meteorologist anymore, she was still supportive.

She would send me a Scientific American with meteorology as the subject and carry that little lantern of mine and keep encouraging it all the way through...

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

So many girls told me stories that the person who saw them... I know for me, I was in 7th grade, and my father had died very suddenly after a medical error and my English teacher pressed a little key in my palm. She folded my fingers over it, and she said, that's the key to the teacher's library, sweetheart. You just go there anytime you want. And she'd done it because I'd stood up one day to give a book report and my formerly loquacious self, let us say, was not there. And no words could come out.

There were no words. It wasn't possible. And I spent my lunch hours up there ingesting Henry James and Virginia Woolf. And that seeing me, and she said ten words, and girls over and over and over have told me that their parents didn't have all the tricks. They didn't get it right, initially. It took time. And yet there was the neighbor who invited them to go bake bread on Fridays. You know, the neighbor's mom.

There was the grandmother who took them out every night and said, let's look at the moon, just the two of us. There was the teacher, the coach. And their stories are stories of being saved. And I can tell you, having interviewed maybe at this point, I don't know, tens of thousands of individuals over seven books that even many, many decades later, young people, and across any part of their lifespan, look back at being young, they remember. They remember, they remember.

It could have been a very short acquaintance. It could have been someone they only crossed paths with for a month or a day or a moment, but they remember because it does light that lantern that you can carry forward. And that is that sense of belonging and mattering that we want to make sure we establish in girl's lives through many different ways to do that when we look at our community at large.

[01:06:20]

Studies show that, actually, yes, one strong relationship with a parent or caregiver is the boon for life. There is nothing more protective, neuroprotective, than that. But we also see a lot of research now that shows a very protective factor is two non-parent adults who see you.

Meagen Gibson

Two non-parent adults. I want everybody to hear that because it doesn't matter who you are. You could be an aunt, you could be a family friend, you could be a teacher, you could just be somebody in the neighborhood. I'm blessed with lots of retirement age people on my Florida street. And all of these women are parents to my kids, extra eyes and hearts, and they love them like their own.

So it takes lots of different people with different interests to hold and to light all the little flames that your kids have. It could be sports and academics and interests of different kinds. I cannot be enthusiastic about every single article of manga that my kid is interested in. Somebody else carries that lantern for me.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

I understand. I remember the game of magic, honestly.

Meagen Gibson

There's one last thing I want to talk to you about, which is that I want to emphasize, because we've talked a lot about social media and social currency, and I find sometimes that a lot of parents, especially because we didn't grow up with social media and don't understand the pressure, how evolutionarily important social acceptance has always been since like the beginning of humans and family systems

And so if you could talk for just a minute about why social acceptance, belonging, is so crucially important. Because I think parents of my age and maybe older think middle school was awful for everyone and everybody wanted to belong and everybody felt that way. But it's different now, right?

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Well, I love that you asked that question. I'm going to take you way back in time again, across evolutionary time. And when we were hunter gatherers, there was nothing more important than social safety. And that is because coming across human evolution in tribes, it required a lot of close, very close, collaboration and cooperation. And the very first sign that you were being dissesed or dismissed or a simple eye roll, I don't know if hunter gatherers rolled their eyes, but let's say they did.

Meagen Gibson

My ancestors did, I'm sure. That's where I got it.

[01:09:03] Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Just being looked at funny. This was a sign that you might be moved slightly further away from the inside of the tribe. And what did that mean? If you were moved to the outskirts of the tribe, if people were laughing at you or dismissing you in some way, you were getting closer and closer to, and I will explain this, physical wounding. Why is that? Because at the outskirts of the tribe, you would be more likely to be the first people that a marauding tribe came across or a predator on the prowl.

You are also less likely to have the kind of nutrition that you need, like you're away from the fire or the spit on the fire with the meat. You might not be invited to go out and look for fruits and tubers, and therefore you would have less not just for you, but for your gene pool. Now, there's a misconception that we care about the human race going forward, actually, as organisms were much more selfish.

We care about our gene pool, our children, our progeny and those genes going on. And all of that was at physical risk with just a small moment of social dismissal. If you were fully ostracized, you were completely without food, shelter, or protection. And this, as I said, would mean you would be physically wounded, because being on your own outside of the tribe, being attacked by anything, bitten by anything, whacked by another tribe, the elements over time, rain, cold, this would lead to some kind of injury.

And our immune systems are so smart. This is why I write so much about the immune system, because it's almost like an emotional force in our bodies in and of itself. It determines so much in terms of our emotional well being. And our immune systems evolved so that at the very first sign of social sliding, our fight, flight, freeze ramps up. But it does something more.

Our levels of immune biomarkers that fight infection, which are positive at first, ramp up. So in the face of social emotional distress, whether it was in hunter gatherer times or it's your kid looking at their cell phone and getting 30 dislikes or negative comments about their face or their skin or their, you know, not having boobs yet, whatever it is, that loss of social currency causes inflammatory factors to rise in the body.

And when they stay elevated, that leads to shifts in the brain that, as we said, are associated with over pruning neural synapses in ways that look like depression and anxiety. So it is really, really important that when we think about social media as the new form of social currency and belonging, that, A), it is like a twinkie for the brain. First of all, you will not find a real connection there.

We have to make the real world connection in the real world, or as our kids call it in real life, IRL, more compelling than the connection they think they will find in the online world, where it is sure to be like empty calories. And we have to bear in mind that their time on these platforms amplifies a feeling of unsafety and danger and guilt and shame and anger.

And that when we do that over time, when we allow that over time, we are literally ramping up their levels of physical inflammation. It may not be that getting disliked or critiqued over your face or hair or appearance as a girl at 13 on social media is the same as being at risk of being physically harmed, but to the brain, it 100% feels as if it is.

[01:13:23] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. That's the most important point because I think that we, as adults, we're getting better at it, but I think most adults just don't understand the impact and don't understand how physiologically and biologically impactful this stuff is on their kids and it's not something that their kids can decide isn't going to impact them.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Absolutely. Right. It isn't just something, well, so what, everyone's doing it. We actually don't want that inside of them.

Meagen Gibson

At all. Yeah, exactly. Well, Donna, you've referred to the 15-point program. I want you to definitely tell us about that now and where people can find out more about you and your work.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Thank you. Well, first of all, the book, *Girls On The Brink*, has the 15-point program for the people who like to read, for the people who like to listen, it's certainly on audible. And we are very close to releasing part one of a 15-part program course for parents to take. It will be out early 2023. So there is just a little bit of time to wait because we're trying to make this so perfect. But I would say that one of the first steps is my Writing To Heal program, which is coming out in a new, updated iteration in a weekender course that parents can do in just half an hour a day over the weekend.

And just like getting in there and beginning by doing your own work and then the 15-part program in a four part course for parents to help them learn all these strategies. Because some of us are experiential, right? We want to go through the process and deepen it in an online teaching format. So there's so many different ways to get it. You can read it, you can take the courses, you can listen to it on audio.

[PACEs Connection](#), which is a big trauma group, which I'm sure you're aware of, has started a national book club you can get on. They have all kinds of information on how to start your own *Girls On The Brink* book club and get in conversation with your community.

All of that you can find at my website at donnajackonnakazawa.com, the courses, the books, you can go to the press page and see reviews, the books from New York Times and CNN and many other places and learn more there. And it's an easy name to Google. Just make sure you spell it Nakazawa and you'll be golden.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Donna Jackson Nakazawa, thank you so much for being with us today.

Donna Jackson Nakazawa

Pleasure.