



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Infusing joy in trauma healing

Guest: Dr Ava Pommerenk

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

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

Today I'm pleased to be speaking with Dr Ava Pommerenk, an empowerment, relationship, and sexuality coach and therapist. She shares today based on direct experience around healing her own trauma, having gone through her own deeper healing and spiritual growth journey. She combines what she's learned through experience with her training and education in transpersonal psychology and attachment psychology and trauma, to share a unique perspective on trauma and emotional regulation, cultivating joy and a felt sense of safety.

Dr Ava Pommerenk, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

You're welcome. It's my pleasure.

Meagen Gibson

So our conference has more than 70 experts that we're interviewing and everyone has their own unique answer. So I always love to open up with what is trauma to you?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Trauma is incredibly complicated because when people talk about it, they're talking about all types of things. To me, in the context of this interview, I'm talking about acute stress responses which are what we commonly call fight, flight, freeze and fawn responses. But trauma in general is a perceived experience. It could be an actual traumatic event.

Trauma is also a complex set of emotions, sensations, reflexes, responses, that happen unconsciously, at least partly unconsciously, as a way we relate to ourselves and the environment. So trauma is all sorts of things. Speaking about acute stress responses, these are responses that are encoded in the way we experience ourselves as humans relating to the world.

So fight, for instance, can be the fight response, or the flight response, these can be something like setting a boundary, or fighting, or fleeing for flight. And they can be, all the responses can be,

for instance, adaptive or maladaptive. So an adaptive response in the fight response, for instance, would be setting a boundary or being courageous whereas a maladaptive response would be becoming demanding, criticizing somebody, or being abusive.

[00:02:51]

So, based on a number of factors, we learn to either have these adaptive responses to situations which could be traumatic or not, partly perceived trauma versus completely a traumatic situation like, for instance, war, being in combat, which is usually traumatic to almost anyone. Or a situation where maybe we're biased in the direction of perceiving there's a threat when maybe there isn't.

But an important element to remember here in this conversation about what trauma is is that all animals experience trauma. Humans are animals and we are all built in such a way where we're meant to respond to our environment with these responses because trauma and overwhelming stressful events that we can't process, that's trauma, happens to us. And it's built into our brain and body to respond to it.

So the reason why they call them acute stress responses is because stress is normal. And acute stress is moments where we have pretty strong or focused or extreme stress to something that's happening in our environment or partly something that's been triggered through memory, and we react for preserving connection, preserving our chance at safety, preserving our chance at survival.

And they're finding just in the past five to ten years, there's been a ton of research on the ecology of fear, which has literally found that all animals have systems in their bodies and their brains, which is both, I just say the whole body, the brain and the body, all animals have it built within them to respond to terror and joy.

And this piece I'm bringing up here is really important because we all have a tendency to feel shame around trauma and have a tendency to feel very weak when we're overtaken by these automatic responses, truly, and we think, oh, something's wrong with me. Why can't I just control my emotions? Or it's hopeless for me, I'll never be able to get better when actually, PTSD, for instance, is really just an overactive system responding to perceived threat.

And if we can learn to be really conscious and aware of how trauma manifests in our experience, how trauma responses manifest in our experience, and learn how to mitigate them, then we can actually experience feeling better and building resilience, building a capacity to heal. That's it. So let's overcome the shame around the fact that we all have trauma. All of us do.

Even people who claim they have the most perfect childhood, they have it built within them, just like you and I do, to have acute stress responses. And they absolutely have them. And they come up. They may have more adaptive ways of engaging in a fight response, but they absolutely do have acute stress responses. And get them in certain contexts, and they will have maladaptive responses too, but...

Meagen Gibson

I was just going to say it's really good that you brought it to a point that I was hoping you would get to. I love the context of adaptive versus maladaptive responses. I didn't have that wording and I did

an interview earlier this week and I was just talking about responses, stress responses, that have a diminishing return. But maladaptive is a better word, right?

[00:07:07]

And what's interesting about what you said and what you brought it to just there is that, depending on the context, depending on your gender, depending on a lot of things, your responses might be taken or perceived as maladaptive versus adaptive, right? So if you're a cisgendered male in a corporate environment and you scream at people, that might be seen as leadership, even though it's probably a maladaptive stress response.

And things like in parenting or different situations, especially, I'm talking mostly about fight responses now, in stress responses, these kind of big reactions or people who scream at their kids or people that physically abuse their kids or something, it's tricky, because when you're analyzing your own behavior and you're getting curious about your own behavior, I've often heard people come back at parenting coaches and things and say, well, if it works, why is it bad?

If I scream at my kid, they stop what they're doing. Or if I smack my kid, they don't do that again. And for the record, I don't hit my kids or scream at them. I'm not condoning anyone should. I'm just looking at it as acute stress responses and your pre-programmed behavior. This is how you were raised, you're raising your kids some other way, or this is how I was mentored from my leadership example when I started at my corporate job. This is what leadership looked like. And these stress responses aren't very adaptive and aren't very conducive to anyone around you, their mental health, emotional wellness, physical wellness.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. I mean, it's interesting because we need to take this broader perspective on the fact that we all exist individually in these systems where we're all functioning with these internal systems that respond to traumatic situations or put our own layering or experience onto the world. And when you get groups of people together with these trauma responses running, we create culture.

And you look at the situation of imbalance of power with what you're referring to. With imbalances of power, with people with trauma responses, the way you're going to relate to your own power is going to be maladaptive. And the way a culture learns to relate to those who are disempowered in these dynamics, it's going to be just woven into the nature of how we view responses from those in power versus those who are not.

And it's even interesting, this makes me think of some research that I was looking at around the ecology of fear where they were tracking the hares, like rabbits, in the wild and looking at trauma they experience from predation and looking at their trauma responses not just in the moment, like some theorists talk about how, like Peter Levine talks about animals in the wild when they run away from a predator, will shake and go through this whole process in their body to really run through the course of completing a trauma response.

But actually, they were looking at, generationally, in these hares, the influence that heavy predation in certain years had on the population and on their behaviors and what was passed down to different generations. And they found that in years of heavy predation, the population suffered from trauma and their focus was turned toward coping with the trauma and resulted in

disrupted feeding behaviors as well as disrupted reproduction. And their young wasn't as healthy either.

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So you look at this and for me, I looked at that and I was like, well...

Meagen Gibson

It's not a human flaw to hold on to traumatic experiences then, huh?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. Well, it's interesting. I was also looking at humans and human systems, and you've got these traumatic environments that we're constantly responding to, these environments that are filled with such extreme stress and exploitation and oppression and pressure. And you look at the fact that in a lot of these cultures where there's just a traumatic environment, the birth rate is going down, health is going down. The capacity for humans to function in an adaptive way is decreasing. I've got a lot to say about that but I can't get into this whole area in this interview.

But it's interesting to look at how we all respond to trauma and we're all together responding to trauma as well as creating environments where trauma gets re-triggered as well as identities based on these systems of trauma get so concretely established within us. And I'm going to get into a little bit around identity with trauma later but this is quite a topic.

Meagen Gibson

Yes, well, don't stop there. Keep going. It's really interesting to me because I actually had a conversation with another contributor as well just a few days ago about the levels of development in trauma, diagnosis, and healing and that journey and what labels and identity have to do with that. And the ways that we can either get stuck or create our own cultures of protection around our identities and things. So I don't know if that's where you're going with it, but have at it.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Well, I think it'll come through in other questions and I want to make sure that I'm not jumping around because this is a topic that I could easily just talk nonstop about for hours. And I do want to be focused but I think I'll answer more the question of what trauma is through these other questions too but, generally, a huge stress response, that's what we're talking about in the context of this interview. And how to really hone in on what your nervous system is doing that is altering your way of experiencing the world as well as making it challenging for you to function in the way you'd like.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, why don't you give me some common examples of trauma responses that are embodied in our daily lived experience.

[00:14:29] Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah, so I am in the school where I believe that at the core of all mental illness is trauma. Not necessarily interpersonal trauma, but different trauma from different contexts. So, granted this is different from how other people may view it. So common examples of trauma responses embodied in daily life for people, I see people with chronic anxiety and chronic stress. They are like, oh, I'm just so stressed, I'm so anxious.

When you look at that at a core level, that's an issue with nervous system regulation around trauma responses. Usually somebody who's really anxious has a combination of fight, flight, freeze and fawn going on in their life. And they feel stuck in these maladaptive responses and just generating more and more fear, more and more terror, more panic. That's a really common one, the way it's embodied.

So that can be, you look at the way anxiety affects people and the behaviors they have, so procrastination, perfectionism is even in there, having difficulty making decisions, being very indecisive, having this chronic sense of being strongly disconnected to yourself. So I'm actually heading more into the depression territory now. I think depression, often what people are calling depression, is a complex series of trauma responses as well.

For instance, you're feeling chronically disconnected from yourself and numb, and you're feeling anhedonia like you're, well it's a kind of interesting way to say it, not having emotion, not being aware of having emotion, this numbness can be connected to feeling a complete lack of agency, feeling incredibly dissociated from yourself. At times, feeling very strong flight responses, but feeling like there's nothing you can do about it.

And depression is, again, more of a way these trauma responses over time, with that being kind of like your chronic state, get incorporated into a way of existing and a way of viewing the self and a way of viewing the world, which I'll get into a little bit more later.

Even looking at attachment. If you're the type of person that has a really hard time receiving love, and you might not even consistently feel love for the person you're with, and it's really hard to be close to somebody... Trauma. That's trauma responses, right, where you're getting overwhelmed by the connection because maybe you have trauma related to attachment with your early childhood caregivers.

And then it becomes very difficult to not register that as a threat to safety or a threat to connection or a threat to survival somehow, by letting that person in. So you have to be extremely independent. You even think about the world in a way where you're extremely independent and you don't need other people. So, again, these are ways that trauma influences perspective and identity, and we'll get into that more later.

But basically all those things, I look at all the common maladies of humans, usually have to do with trauma. And of course, when you come in with PTSD, that's an obvious one that has to do with trauma. But I think a lot of people don't even realize common experiences of PTSD that they're having are trauma. Like intrusive thoughts, you hear that and you're like, oh yeah, okay, intrusive thoughts. If somebody comes back from combat, they're thinking about, they're getting flashes of memory around something really... I'm not even going to say a description, because that's kind of horrifying, but things that happened to them in combat.

[00:19:02]

And it's like, actually, PTSD intrusive thoughts can be sitting there and you're doing okay, and you're like, I'm having a good day, and then all of a sudden you're thinking about and obsessing about all the ways you screwed up in that conversation with that person yesterday.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so glad that you named that, because I think that's a common misconception about intrusive thoughts related to PTSD is that it's a replaying of events that were the onset of the trauma, when really it could be completely unrelated to what the onset of the trauma was. It could be completely intrusive thoughts about anything else.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah, because you look at the way trauma is, and I'm not going to break down all the different systems in trauma because I don't even know if I have a working memory of going down the whole list of how complicated it is, but you look at, particularly, the hippocampus and the amygdala with trauma. The hippocampus being the part of the brain that takes in memory and sends it, files it, in other parts of the brain.

And then you look at the amygdala, when it receives memory, it's like implicit emotional memory. And this part of your brain holds that implicit memory and goes, okay, these are all the things that are threatening and unsafe. If there's anything over time though, the thing with trauma is over time, it becomes generalized, becomes globalized. So it might have been an original event that's very specific like my mom used to criticize me in this context, and she did it again and again and again. And that was very traumatizing for me as a child.

But in the future it might be, oh, that one little bit of those memories contained the context of being in the car with a significant other where there might be a little negative. That literally is the generalization. It's not just your mom anymore being critical about this specific thing. It's all of the other factors that were involved in that memory being encoded with that emotional memory.

So it gets triggered and all this series of responses happen and we end up, again, having those intrusive thoughts, obsessing over what we said the other day. And we can't quite pin it down, like, why am I so upset about this? And then if we pay attention, we notice this whole firing of responses inside of the body. We maybe even feel this emotion that feels intolerable to deal with.

And guess what? We reach for our phone and we get on social media. I'm laughing because I do it too. We get on the phone, we do the scrolling, or we get on Netflix, and we just kind of turn the brain off and seek for something that will distract and make us feel better. Because in that moment, we don't know how to feel better, right? But we often don't realize, oh, okay, this could be PTSD from this trauma over here.

So there's so many ways, daily, I believe, that we're all having these trauma responses. And for many of us, our default might actually be a set of trauma responses to the point where we don't even know what it's like to walk around with a regulated nervous system, with a nervous system that isn't a perceiving threat. So we just take for granted, oh, this is just what's normal.

[00:22:43] Meagen Gibson

Yeah. You always hear people, when they get a glimpse of normalcy for whatever reason, maybe it's psychedelic assisted therapy, or maybe it's just therapy, or maybe it's removal from a situation. You take a vacation or something and you're like, oh, gosh, you always hear about people being like, is this what normal people feel like?

And that always breaks my heart. And it gets particularly tricky in relationships as well, especially intimate relationships, because your partner doesn't necessarily have your entire history. And if you don't have a deep self awareness and aren't constantly kind of cultivating curiosity around how you feel and what the history is that might be informing that, then it's really confusing to your partner, who is like, I don't understand how what I just said upset you. And you're like, I don't understand either. Two confused people getting hurt for unintentional reasons.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Well, actually, that brings to mind a thing that I like to tell people to watch for if they want to start paying attention to how they embody trauma responses daily, is to look at where you're being compulsive. Where are you being compulsive or even impulsive, there's some gray area around what that is. Where you're being impulsive, compulsive or obsessive. And I like to say, look where you're being compulsive.

Because I like to go with the emotional sensate experience of compulsion where you feel compelled to do something, almost taken over by the need to do something or experience something. And that's what I mean when I said we have this strong experience, and then we reach for the phone and we scroll. Try stopping yourself from reaching for the phone. The feeling you get when you're sitting there going... Not going to reach for the phone. That's compulsion.

That feeling usually guides you to a trauma response underneath. If you can learn to work with the compulsion and work with the trauma responses that are there, the compulsion goes away. The need to do something in a maladaptive way goes away. And, you know, I think we look at compulsive behaviors, and we go, oh, just obsessive compulsive disorder. No. We're all compulsive.

And, especially, you look at addiction. That's compulsion right there. You look at disordered eating, body dysmorphia types thinking, relating to the self, that's compulsive. You even look at the way that even looking at codependency, patterns around attachment where we're codependent, that's compulsive patterning right there. We feel we must do this, and it's sort of automatic, the ways we engage in this caretaking behavior.

I mean, I could go on and on about showing how there's compulsion in everything, but if you want to pay attention to how it's coming up for you, notice where you're being compulsive. That tells you a lot about what your trauma was about, and it tells you what's actually happening in your body when trauma is triggered.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I can totally see that. I think that's something that every single person could enact from this interview.

[00:26:19] Dr Ava Pommerenk

Exactly. That's my hope. Pay attention to your compulsions.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. However innocent or harmless they may feel, right?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah, precisely.

Meagen Gibson

So how does trauma influence your perception of yourself or reception of yourself and others?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

So I talked before about how trauma influences perception and identity. So when we're having a trauma response, instead of our perceptual capacity, so our vision, our capacity to use our senses, instead of it being really open and expansive and available to everything in the environment and very present, we become really myopic. There's this way that we hone in on threat, or something that could be a perceived threat.

And the world becomes a lot more black and white. We see ourselves in that way. It becomes more about survival and ensuring connection continues, or safety continues, or we can get to it again, versus taking in the totality of what's here. Again, this is a normal experience, all animals are programmed to be this way, so it's nothing to be ashamed of, but it's something to be aware of. I like to call it the distortion field. And I think I may have even mentioned that. I don't know, I maybe mentioned that in the last time we did an interview.

But I like to call it the distortion field because a lot of us don't realize that our capacity to perceive as well as receive information gets completely distorted instead of it being like, for instance, right outside my window here, I've got these bars on the windows. They're pretty, but there's still bars there.

If I had some trauma around being enclosed in a space behind bars, I would read these bars on the windows very, very different and probably have a very different experience of existing in this place I am in right now than I do now, which is these are actually bright blue bars on the windows, and they're actually kind of pretty. And they don't bother me. I'm like, oh, they're keeping me safe and protected. That's why they're there.

But your ability to perceive is so different based on the experiences you've had. So we go out in the world and we're walking around with this distortion field. And for instance, somebody on the street says, hi. And that's not very common in US culture to have somebody on the street randomly say hi to you. But again, if you're in a really stressed out place, and even if you're in a culture where it could be normal in some contexts for people to say hi to you, you might immediately go, what does this person want from me?

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What are they wanting to take from me? Do I have my keys in my hand to be ready to get them, as a woman, right? That's the constant scanning for threat, rather than going, oh, maybe I just seem radiant today, and this person happens to walk by me all the time and I've just never noticed them because maybe I've been too stressed out and not paying attention to the world and they're just saying hi because they're having a good day.

But you go into your romantic relationships and you've got this distortion field going, and your partner, you come home and your partner gives you a hug. Your partner wants to interact with you and because your trauma is engaged, you may perceive that as like, they just want to bother me. They just want to take something from me. They're so needy. They just want all this attention. And you're kind of cold.

You may also feel a sense of inadequacy, which is something some people may not be aware of, that inadequacy or shame is under that. But it's this sense of, I can't give you what you need. I can't be close to you. I'm not somebody who likes to be touched. I'm not somebody who likes to be surprised. Maybe they surprised you with a hug. That's the distortion field. That's this smaller capacity to perceive and receive.

If we're in a more regulated state and we come home and our partner is like, hi, and gives us a hug and wants to sit down and talk with us, we have this mental flexibility and this emotional flexibility to be able to let go of control and rigidity. We're not scanning for threat. We're going like, oh, hey, we're open, we're engaged. There's a response, like a reciprocal response, when they're warm, I'm warm. We're both warm together.

There's a way of truly engaging in the present moment with each other, rather than being in defense mode, which is really not in the present moment. It's being in a structured way of engaging rather than an improvisational, open, fluid way of engaging. I feel like I could go on and on about this. Is that making sense?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And you gave a lot of really good examples, too, about the contextual perception of what can be going on and what's interfering in that field, or narrowing it, for that matter...

Dr Ava Pommerenk

I'm sorry.

Meagen Gibson

No, go ahead.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

So, for instance, if you spend your whole life in this, here, then that means your perception of who you are, who others are, how the world is, the way things work, what's possible, everything gets

influenced by this, rather than this. That's the trippy thing about trauma, is if that's what's running you, it becomes you. That limited way, that distorted way is your reality.

[00:32:59]

And that's part of what explains why there's people on this planet that are really distorted, really disconnected from a sense of reality, because their main mode of existing is trauma. Being in this heightened state of trauma all the time. So their sense of self hasn't been formed properly. Their sense of existing in the world is very distorted. Their whole way of engaging with the world is around ensuring survival and safety, which might mean asserting power over others and domination over others. It isn't even about relating to human anymore.

But we are all on that spectrum about distortion and how much we hang out here and how it influences who we feel ourselves to be, if we develop a self at all, how we view the world and what's possible.

Meagen Gibson

And the aperture of that perspective can shift slightly depending on the context.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Totally. Yeah. I mean, if you're living, again, like what I said earlier, if you're living in an environment that has a lot of predation, like there's a predatory environment, you're deeply exploited and oppressed, obviously, your perception of who you are, how you are, what's possible, what's going on, is very heavily influenced by trauma because it would have to be in order to survive.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. All right, so not terribly much we can do about the soup we're in, we're all swimming in, the culture, but as individuals, we change it together through healing our own individual trauma. But what does it actually look like to heal one's trauma? What does it look like to have healed trauma?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

So I've spent a lot of time trying to figure this out. I have a lot of trauma from my childhood. And it feels important to say that here because part of my whole journey has been getting very honest with myself about what actual healing from trauma is like. Not my thoughts that I'm healing but like, what does it actually feel like and look like? Because I've also spent a lot of time kind of circling on certain things.

And not to say there's anything wrong with circling. I think a major element of healing and growth involves doing a lot of circling. But to be very aware of when I've had the thought that I've healed from something without fully healing it in an embodied way, that piece is so important here. So for me, in my own experience and what I see with my clients and with the people around me, to heal from trauma involves learning how to embody a sense of safety.

And that doesn't mean safety even when you're about to be attacked. What that means is a baseline level of safety where we're in a regulated, open state, a perceptive and receptive state, so we can actually perceive real threats and not be reacting to things that aren't threats anymore.

And, for instance, trauma is something that's in relationship, happens in relationship. So healing happens in relationship, too.

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And you can notice when you're healing in relationship through an embodied experience of somebody doing something, saying something you don't like, or you disagree with it, or they maybe hurt your feelings a little bit. And when you can notice, you might even have an anger response or a disagreement response, and you can appropriately set a boundary with them if needed. Or express your deferring opinion or experience, and then not have it turn into this attack on this person.

I think a lot of us don't realize that if we're embodying a state of nervous system regulation, being regulated, being in a state of safety, we can relate to the world much better than if we're always in threat. So on a very simple level, the experience of healing trauma is developing, working through memories, working through not just conscious memory, but implicit memory as it shows up in the body. Learning how to identify these body reactions that come with trauma responses and learning how to see it in your behaviors and your perceptions, and also your lack of capacity to receive.

Noticing all those things and then doing different things to intervene in the moment, like having enough wherewithal to have the mindfulness and the capacity to be present with what's happening. And learning how to build a tolerance or a capacity to be with it and work through it. Also, it involves learning to make decisions in life, creating circumstances in life, that promote that healing, that promote that connection with yourself and promote that sense of safety.

So that's, again, using your trauma responses in an adaptive way because this world involves lots of traumatic things and when you can start to understand, oh, I don't need to keep exposing myself to this thing. I mean, providing you're someone who has a choice, and that's quite a privilege these days. But when you see you have a choice, somehow, to actually go you know what, I'm worthy of something better, I'm leaving. And then you leave and you do something different.

That's the flight response, and the fight response, in a really adaptive way. So that embodies knowing and the experience of my peace is valuable to me. I'm valuable. Why would I put up with this? It's very simple, in a way. I mean it's very complicated, but it's also very simple on an experiential level.

Meagen Gibson

Well, and I think what you're saying, correct me if I'm wrong, is that when you start learning the tools and getting curious and listening to yourself that the response becomes very simple and not so reactionary. You're not lashing out at people or situations. I was having this memory of one of the decisions I made early in my career. I was a news journalist and I used to have to work a lot of overnights. And so I would go to work at 10:00 P.M. I would leave at like 08:00 A.M.

And it was killing me, honestly. My health tanked. My anxiety went through the roof and all of these things came up as a result of that stress, acute circumstances of that particular job, right? I think of emergency workers and things like that, who work shift work and if you were like I know that this is not good for my health. If I go from a trauma response, I just walk in one day and I'm like, I quit. Just set the whole building on fire.

[00:41:00]

That's a trauma response, perhaps. Whereas an informed curiosity is like, wow, this is really having a detrimental effect on my health and my ability to have capacity for everyday life. So I'm going to choose to make a different choice if it's available to me, if I have the resources.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Exactly. I think there's a piece here that I forgot to mention that I think is really important. We haven't talked about the vagus nerve, and I'm imagining you've had other people talk about it in your interviews because it's such a big part of the whole nervous system and trauma, regulating trauma.

So, naturally, there are some folks who have greater capacity using their vagus nerve. The vagus nerve is part of your autonomic system. It's automatic, right? It controls a lot of things that we don't have to think about to exist within, like it controls... You're not sitting here going, okay... But it also has to do with regulating mood and regulating a lot of the different systems in the body that impact mood and perception, too.

So we talk about, for instance, emergency workers. And by the logic I was using earlier, it would stand to reason that nobody would want to be an emergency worker. Everybody would be like, I'm worth more than this, I'm not doing this. But it's also important to understand that people have, they call it vagus nerve tone. They have better vagus nerve tone. Granted, there might be people who are, legitimately, I think a lot of people in helping professions in crisis, it's more compartmentalization, suppression and association that's happening.

But there's also people who legitimately are doing all the self care, actually really grounded, and open and well in themselves. And it's partly because of proper vagus nerve tone, which helps them have a resilience toward situations that are stressful and helps them bounce back faster and maybe not encode different experiences into the amygdala as trauma. Instead, it goes into the hippocampus.

And their hippocampus has, I think they call it, neurogenesis. Their hippocampus has more capacity to work and function properly, has larger volume, sends memories to places in a more nuanced way rather than it being like, oh yeah, another trauma. Bad. Bad. Bad.

So there's all these ways that, and we'll get into this later about the vagus nerve tone, but there's all these ways that people in highly stressful situations can learn, maybe through their upbringing they learned it, or their temperament, there's all these factors, the culture they're in, all these things that help with their vagus nerve, actually helping them stay calm and regulate after being exposed to really stressful experiences.

Whereas they may not need to go into work and go, I quit. But it's really dependent on the person too, which gets a lot more complicated. But I feel that's important to express here too, because I have great appreciation for crisis workers and I don't want all of them to quit and leave us all in situations where we can't get help.

[00:44:46] Meagen Gibson

You make an excellent point and it also helps take some of the... Because people have a lot of shame, they wouldn't say, like, I have low vagal tone, most people, but they have a felt sense of I'm oversensitive or I have greater empathy or it's harder for me to process things. But that's not something you can control, something you can strengthen, you can work on, things like that. You can improve it. But some people are in a lot of ways born in a way that's more resilient to begin with in that regard.

You couldn't put me in a nursery school. There are a lot of really loud people. That's not my jam, it would not be good for me. But there's other people, I'm like, how can you be in this room? And they're like, what? It's great. It's so much fun. And I'm like, you are built differently. And that's literally the point. You're built differently.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. Well, I mean, even looking at adaptive and maladaptive responses, it's interesting to think about this concept of empathy. And there's a lot of us who don't know the difference in our own experience between having a fawning response that's empathy versus having actual empathy. And fawning responses that are empathy, which is definitely maladaptive, is basically being willing to empathize with somebody who's harming you.

And make excuses for them and join their world and their reality, forsaking your own, in order to maintain connection and a sense of proximity to stay safe and for your survival. We learn this usually in childhood. And looking at how many of us who feel we have empathy are caught in these fawning response patterns that really stress us out and drain us.

But actually, if you're in a place of having vagus nerve tone and a really regulated nervous system, that's actually when you have the most genuine empathy, you're most open, you're capable, you have a sense of being able to connect to other people's experiences and really care about them. And you see a lot of mental health workers, as well as crisis workers, who hit a point of burnout where their empathy starts turning into more fawning type stuff. Or they just completely can't call on compassion or empathy at all.

Meagen Gibson

Right. Apathetic. Yeah.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Which is a signal they need to do some nervous system regulation and address some boundaries to feel better. But we are all built different with a different set point about having natural empathy versus also fawning empathy and trying to compare our own internal experience with somebody else where two people, you put them together, they may have completely different reference points for what empathy is, how they feel, how to track what they're experiencing.

So it's like, oh, that person is so empathetic. I wish I could be like them. It's like we don't actually know where that empathy is coming from and how it's making them feel or the destruction it's causing in their life, maybe. But yeah, no need to get into shame about it because we all engage in these trauma responses given in context, and some of us are lucky enough to have a more

regulated nervous system than others. But I'd say, frankly, in this day and age, most of us don't have a super regulated nervous system all the time.

[00:48:28] Meagen Gibson

Right. We're all going up and down that roller coaster on a scale.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

And that's also just kind of normal as a part of being an animal. And I think we forget that.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly. Responding appropriately to the environment. It's been a rough environment lately. I don't know if anybody's looked around.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And one little note that I'll say about my journey into piecing apart what was genuine empathy and what was codependency and fawning behavior for me was identifying if I had to make myself smaller to continue being empathetic toward or with someone. That was not genuine empathy. That was codependent, fawning, but if I can stay right sized, if you will, and feel like I'm in my own seat of myself and extend compassion and empathy, then that's genuine.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. There's this piece, yes, that piece around getting smaller, like there's an embodied experience most of us don't pay attention to when we're in a regulated state, we feel like we can actually take up space in our body, and exist there in a way that feels good. It feels right. There's a rightness about it. And when you get smaller, that's literally the experience of constriction, dissociation, all these processes happening. So this experience of expanding into your full self, being embodied there, that's such a great way to track empathy that I hadn't fully connected to.

But, actually, I was going to bring that piece up about that's a part of what it is to experience having trauma healed. You're more fully just in your body existing there like, this is right, and I feel good. And in that, you're more deeply present, you're more capable of joy, which is the whole topic of this interview. You're more capable of tuning into things that only fit in the present moment.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. All right, so we're there now. Let's get to the good stuff, because the whole point, I mean, for me personally, the whole point of trauma work, conferences, things like that, is so that people can get back to cultivating curiosity, and joy, and freedom of expression. And are not limited in the way... Because trauma will rob you of the energetic life that you need in order to infuse all of that into curiosity and joy and expression. So what is joy and how is it connected to healing?

[00:51:20] Dr Ava Pommerenk

I've also spent a ton of time exploring this because I have not been satisfied with explanations other people have given me around what joy is. My experience of what joy is, and what I like to tell people who ask me about this, is joy is something that is an experience that's inherently relational. So in the present moment, you need to be relating to the present moment, so that's you in the present moment.

You also need to be receiving and perceiving, experiencing, something, even internally experiencing something, to generate joy. And joy itself is like this embodied, open, expansive experience of pleasure and delight and wellbeing, and it's not happiness because happiness is like a passing mood that is sort of not related to anything. You can sort of say, oh, yeah, I'm happy because I've got this thing. And you can sort of ascribe happiness to it.

But joy is like this bubbling up of delight and pleasure that really comes from really being fully embodied in the present moment. And you can get little glimpses of it. If you're not someone who's that embodied, you can get glimpses of it, you get surprised, you get kind of surprised, by something making you feel joyful. But to really experience joy intentionally and to really live a life where that's what happens, you need to be present. You need to be more embodied. There's this expansiveness and capacity to really be present and relate in that moment that creates joy.

Meagen Gibson

So beautiful. I had this memory of, as you were speaking, a time that I was trying to get my kids to daycare or something. They were little, where you can still kind of like make them go where you want to, but you don't because they want to do it themselves. Anyway, we were trying to get somewhere and, of course, there was a huge rainstorm. And so not only am I trying to get them somewhere, but it's also raining, so I'm trying to get them there dry.

And there was a worm on the ground. And the whole world had to stop for this worm. And I think about joy and both of them just being completely all about this worm. And I had to completely surrender. I was like, this is where we are now. We live with this worm. This worm is part of our family. I just had to. There was no choice.

Now, I didn't always do that, but the ability to take in the present, your surroundings, to see what's beautiful and to be grateful for what you have, things like that. And not miss it because you're so busy coping with a moment to moment stress and a lack of resource because it's all been spent defending yourself and keeping yourself safe.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Precisely. Children are really amazing creators of joy, like generators of joy. And, I mean, it can seem kind of annoying in the moment when you're like, I need to get from point A to point B. Oh, my gosh, this is going to screw up my whole day. But it's like they really do have it tapped into how to be really deeply present and experience this extreme pleasure and delight with the worm.

[00:55:05] Meagen Gibson

I think that's why every middle aged person starts to get interested in birds. A theory I just came up with. We all hit a certain age and we're just like, I now see birds, because you go through your whole life, you don't pay attention to birds. Then all of a sudden, you're a bird person. And I don't know how it happens, but a switch goes on and you're just like, I now take joy in birds and, guess what? They're in plentiful supply all the time.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

You know what? That's so true, because you don't ever see these bird watchers that are like 20. It's rare, anyway.

Meagen Gibson

No, not a lot of 20 year old bird watchers. Just not. But then something happens. I don't know. It's different for each person, but it's somewhere in middle age where all of a sudden, I'm literally charting migratory patterns of blue birds right now. I'm not happy to admit it, but it's true because it brings me joy. So how do we generate conditions where joy can occur for us and where it can help in daily life with healing our trauma?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Sorry, I'm still stuck on the bird. Okay, can you repeat the question? I'm sorry. In my own experience, I'm obsessed with parrots.

Meagen Gibson

You're like, how did she just call me out like that? How did she put me on blast? Meagen. Yeah, I'm sorry. I didn't know. I thought it was just me outing myself and all my weird bird stuff right now. Yeah, it's a shared experience, but I think we're accidentally answering the question with our giggling.

But it's more like, how do we generate conditions where joy can occur and where joy itself can be the daily conduit for healing trauma?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Okay, to state it very explicitly, we need to learn to regulate our nervous systems enough to be present and embodied. And we need to also be mindful of controlling whatever factors in life we can control that help us feel safe and regulated and well. So this becomes tricky, obviously, for people who don't have the privilege to be able to control many factors of their life.

But I also see I've also been connected to a lot of folks who live in poverty who still find ways to create the capacity to be very present and to find a sense of pleasure and delight in what's available. They can find joy. So not to say that we should disregard the oppression they're going through, clearly, but it's still possible. It's just a little harder to do when you have a lot more layers of things you can't control.

But I'd say for a lot of folks listening to this interview, you probably do have a lot in your control that maybe you're not fully acknowledging. So that would mean... The thing about scrolling has

come up a few times. That's such a common one. Being really mindful about the fact that when we go... I love streaming devices, I love social media, I try to take breaks because I notice my part of my body that starts to want to use it compulsively to bypass dealing with certain nervous system responses I need to address and to kind of check out because I'm stressed out and it's like a convenient way to do that.

[00:59:09]

But honestly, most of us don't realize that when we're streaming Netflix and we're watching these marathons or when we're on Instagram for hours scrolling, we're not just checking out and giving our brain a rest. We're putting ourselves into a state that's like a trance that is rather dissociative after a while. And when we go into this state, it's really hard to feel a sense of agency, deeper connection with the self and a capacity to be deeply present.

So it stands to reason that it's a really good idea to at least take breaks from these very immersive ways we literally step outside of our bodily experience and just become like eyes experiencing something. So that is a way to cultivate a nervous system experience that helps us actually be more available for the present moment and for cultivating joy and being available to the fact that joy is all around us. We can experience joy in a lot of ways.

Like in our conversation about birds, if I was preoccupied with what I was going to say next and feeling really anxious about that and keyed up, I would not have been able to take in what you're saying and be so tickled by it. I feel joy talking with you about birds, but I have to let go of control and truly engage in the conversation, even though I have a sense of what I'm saying in this interview and the things I have to talk about.

Again, I've done practices that help tone my vagus nerve, that help me feel more grounded and receptive and capable of being present where I can receive this. I can experience joy from the birds. It's with you in relationship where we can connect about that. Another way, then, leads me, segue into that, is developing connections with people that feel really safe, where you feel like you can just be your authentic self and you can talk about what's going on for you.

And they're not going to meet it with judgment. They're not going to project a bunch of stuff on you. They're not going to hit you where it hurts. They're not going to take advantage of you. And this is, I think, the reason why a lot of people choose to see therapists or coaches or other types of healers that they can talk to. Because these are folks who are likely, if they're working in a way that's not exploitative and very supportive, they're going to be a safe person you can talk to.

Where you can set, your nervous system can settle, and you can experience what it's like to be really present and enjoy how resourcing connection can actually be for your nervous system, and how joy can come up in conversations where you're connected with people. You can take delight. It's silly things that come up. There's a number of things. There's all sorts of practices you could do like meditations, different types of meditation.

Though I would caution you, if you're someone who has a lot of trauma, maybe don't rely just on meditation because it can also promote quite a lot of nervous system activation when you're sitting still and just trying to pay attention. You may need more support other than just meditation.

But there's types of meditation too that are very body based. Yoga can be a great one for people who have a lot of trauma because they're moving in a very focused way, paying attention to their

bodies and learning how to be deeply present in their bodies while using their breath. Which brings me to another one, pranayama breath practice, breathing where you're breathing out many more counts or more counts than you're breathing in. That literally tones your vagus nerve. That literally can help you with regulating your nervous system.

[01:03:21]

But in general, just monitoring your breathing, noticing your breathing, breathing belly breaths, that helps, learning how to be in your body in a way that feels safe and pleasurable to you can be another way to regulate your system. There's a lot of people out there, and it's controversial, that do, like these coaches that do pleasure practices as a part of people healing sexually.

And in my work with people, I do see the importance of sexual pleasure and even self pleasure as being a way that people can break out of being super dysregulated and trauma being their whole identity. So here we are, these pleasure practices. Sex can be something that is so deeply healing. Sex can be healing with yourself. Or pleasure practices, even just exploring erogenous zones.

These are things that help your nervous system. Of course, the caveat, in certain contexts, not like I'm going to go have sex with the first person I meet and they might be really exploitative and harmful to me, and this is regulating. That's not what I'm promoting. But there's so many ways to get into our body in the present moment that helps regulate the nervous system and helps us be more capable of going from this to this and having the vagus nerve work as it's intended, calming us, helping us feel more of a sense of peace and wholeness and being able to take up space.

And all of this leads to the capacity to feel joy and joyful experiences themselves. If you orient your life around joyful experiences and creating them or following what feels joyful for you, these present centered experiences, the more you have them, the more they open you to setting a default state that isn't trauma. It sets a default state of not joy necessarily, but a default state of being receptive to joy.

A default state of going, oh, I am somebody who has the capacity to experience pleasure and enjoyment, and I could have fun, I could have a choice about how I spend my life. Like, I might actually be kind of powerful, I can live a different life. So, you know, making decisions around the lifestyle that encourages you to feel that sense of empowerment is important too, because sometimes with regulating the nervous system and being able to access joy, it's the difference between going from a lack of agency, or powerlessness, to a feeling of agency.

And you look at this other way. This is dissociation over here, lack of agency, often dissociation. And then over here, this sense of agency. So, for instance, accomplishing certain goals, making them small, accomplishing them, starting to experience, oh, I can do this, I have confidence, I have a capacity. When we do this, it helps us start to shift into a state of feeling more of a sense of agency, which helps us feel more awake to the capacity to regulate and to have adaptive responses.

That helps us tap more into joy. And then the joy we experience feeds back into expanding more. I kind of went off with that a little bit, but there's all sorts of practices and seeing a therapist or a coach or a healer. Try to do multiple, why not, that's the best. Exercise can be great, though be mindful of how you're relating to the exercise. If you're pushing yourself too hard and it's more about compensating for a lack of self worth, then that's maybe not encouraging regulation.

[01:07:34]

But slower exercises to help you stay really embodied and help you enjoy feeling in your body can be really nice. That's why I suggest, also, put on some music, dance in your room, feel yourself dancing. Notice what it's like to sway, move your hips, move your body around. Notice how enjoyable that can feel. And you don't need to do it in front of the mirror, especially if you've got dysmorphia or trauma around your body.

But taking that back for yourself as being a pleasurable experience to exist in your body. Listening to music is great. And even just listening to music on its own, like listening to soft music, listen to music that really helps you feel connected to yourself and comforted. There's a lot of folks, and I don't want to knock people who listen to heavy metal or punk, that can be great, too, it can really activate an adaptive fight response, actually, in people who have that available to them.

It's really nice to feel that sense of power and that agency and the vibrance. And people with a lot of trauma, be mindful that that could be activating maladaptive responses and could be completely overwhelming for some folks. So, never discount the fact that if you need spa music, that might actually really help you. If your body feels good listening to spa music, listen to spa music. All day.

Meagen Gibson

Ava, thank you very much for being with us today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

You can go to my [website](#). You can go to my [Instagram](#). I'm kind of old for this. I really tried at TikTok, and I literally just erased what I made. I'm trying. Eventually, I will get on the TikTok train. I don't know, maybe it's left already for me, but [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#), you can find me. And my [website](#). And you're welcome to reach out, direct messaging me through either of those forms on my website. You can also send me a message too. But, yeah, I'm around. You can contact me at multiple places.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Dr Ava Pommerenk, thank you for being with us today.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

You're welcome. Thank you.