



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

How meditation can support trauma healing

Guest: Dr Rick Hanson

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I am super excited to be talking with Rick Hanson. Rick Hanson is really one of the leading experts on bridging the gap between meditation and contemplative practices with science and the research behind it, but also therapeutic work.

And he is a real treasure trove of knowledge and information. And in this interview, we're going to be exploring the power of meditation and mindfulness for trauma healing, but particularly through the lens of the challenges and struggles that people can have.

So if you're someone that finds meditation practice difficult or has had difficult things arising, but you also realize the potential value of meditation for your healing path, I think you're going to find this interview incredibly helpful.

To give you some of Rick's background, Rick Hanson, PhD, is a psychologist, Senior Fellow at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, and New York Times bestselling author. His six books have been published in 31 languages and include *Neurodharma*, *Resilient*, *Hardwiring Happiness*, *Just One Thing*, *Buddha's Brain*, and *Mother Nurture*, with over a million copies in English alone. His free newsletters have 250,000 subscribers and his online programs have scholarships available for those with financial needs.

He's lectured at NASA, Google, Oxford, and Harvard and taught in meditation centers worldwide. An expert in positive neuroplasticity, his work has been featured on CBS, NPR, the BBC, and other major media. He began meditating in 1974 and is the founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom.

So Rick, welcome. I'm so pleased to have you here with us.

Dr Rick Hanson

Well, thank you, Alex, and greetings to everyone. And it's a very heart-touching topic, isn't it? Trauma, suffering, pain, challenge. It opens the heart, opens the mind just to engage it. So I really want to express my own respect and invitation to the people who are part of this as well.

[00:02:37] Alex Howard

Yes, thank you. Let's start by just exploring a little bit around how meditation can be of help and support on a trauma healing journey.

Dr Rick Hanson

There are many kinds of meditation, and people use that word differently, you know, while playing video games. I'm meditating, man, I'm meditating. I don't know so much. So, taking that into account, if we think of meditation, let's say, in its simplest form, as remaining present while the stream of consciousness rolls along, just at a minimum, and potentially remaining present while resting attention, in particular on something that's helpful, which could be the simple sensations of breathing or walking. Or it could be something helpful like an awareness of what we're grateful for, or an awareness of connection with others.

All of which are quite helpful. So that's, let's say, the simple form of meditation and why that would be helpful for people who are dealing with traumatic experiences, including the impact of many micro traumas that add up to become a macro trauma for real. Just being able to stabilize that place while everything's streaming along is immensely helpful in dealing with trauma material. Because then you're not so invaded by it, or hijacked by it, or swept along. Just that.

Second, as we kind of stabilize, there's an inherently bodily process of calming and stabilizing. The heart rate slows, the breathing slows, typically, naturally. That, too, is extremely helpful.

And then the third benefit of meditation is that you're training your attention to rest on something. And it's critically important to be able to place our attention, plop where we want it to be, and to be able to disengage it from, for example, invasive, disruptive, traumatic material that's pulling us away.

Attention is a little bit like a combination spotlight and vacuum cleaner. I think I'm my vacuum cleaner, right? The light illuminates where it's going. And then, frankly, neurologically even, what we are resting our attention on becomes a part of us.

And so if we are able to rest our attention on the good stuff and Hoover it up into ourselves, calming, feeling strong, feeling okay, feeling connected, that's good. And getting more control so we're not drawing into ourselves, oh, a preoccupation with or an invasion by resentment or self-criticism or painful, disruptive material. I'll just pause right there and see what you think about all that, Alex.

Alex Howard

Yeah, well, I think that's a very helpful way of framing it. I think, of course, one of the gifts of meditation is it brings us closer to, as you say, our immediate experience. But one of the challenges of meditation is it brings us closer to our immediate experience.

And for some folks, where part of their trauma response has been for their system to speed up and to disconnect and to move away from their immediate experience, as they start to come closer to themselves, that can be quite tricky sometimes.

[00:06:02]

I'm curious as to if that's something that, I'm sure it is something that you see in folks, and what helps people make sense of that, but also then to navigate that?

Dr Rick Hanson

You've nailed it. It's incredibly important. Both and, right? What's the sweet spot where we're able to be with our experiences without being flooded by them? And also the sweet spot in which we can let go. And third, let in, grow more of the good.

That framework right there I find very helpful to let be, let go, let in. The three major ways to engage your mind productively. In order to let be, though, in order to be able to open the trap door to what's down there in the basement. Very often, first you have to resource yourself. First, you have to let in, you have to grow strengths of various kinds that can enable you then to have increasing capacity to tolerate what you're being with, without being flooded or hijacked by it.

So that's kind of a frame here, and you're exactly right about that issue, and that's why it's so important, very often. Start by resourcing yourself before you engage in mindfulness practice in general, or start to get in touch with yourself because what you're in touch with may be, from the beginning, very painful. So you first need to resource yourself.

Do that first and then over time, and this is standard in the trauma territory. People like Peter Levine talk about pendulating. You swing into the material, you swing back, you touch it. And I would not describe myself as having been traumatized, while still having had a lot of suffering in my childhood, and over my lifetime of practice I have been emptying my bucket of tears, one spoonful at a time.

Alex Howard

Empty your tears, one spoonful at a time. That's beautiful.

Dr Rick Hanson

Yeah. David Treleaven, you know, excellent trauma-informed mindfulness practice. It's really important we start first of all, do no harm, including to ourselves. And first of all, we build strengths and capacity, frame. Then we increasingly can channel our history in ways that releases the charge on it, gradually over time.

We will not forget what happened. If we think about it specifically, it, of course, will still get us, but we won't be invaded by it. We won't be preoccupied by it, or occupied by it. And that's the possibility over time.

Alex Howard

Yes. I'd like to explore that resourcing piece a little bit more, because I think sometimes the chicken and egg situation of meditation can be that one of the most effective ways to resource is to be able to find that place of quiet and safety. But then one needs the resources to find that place of quiet and safety. So I'm curious as to what you see as that resourcing and what helps people to do that?

[00:09:07] Dr Rick Hanson

Yeah. So I come at this as, you know, as a combination clinical psychologist, neurologically-informed person and longtime contemplative practice person and a lot of background there. So the three of them kind of together. And I think it's really helpful to appreciate that we're freaked out, little furry, scared, vulnerable animals and not very furry, frank, as animals go, as mammals go. I couldn't grow a beard if I tried.

But anyway and so we're naturally scared and rattled and vulnerable and frail. We need each other. We're social mammals, we're social primates. And trauma very often happens in a field of relationship. Often it's someone who did it to you, and while others didn't help you, often.

So I think it's helpful to start with very simple, undeniable, primal experiences of comfort and soothing. Everyone has access to something that they find comforting. A silly example. I'm wearing a flannel shirt. I find it a little comforting. It's green. I like green. I'm kind of an outdoor guy. I like green. It's comforting. Touching your lips is inherently comforting because we're sucking newborns. Whatever it is, being out in nature is comforting. Just simple. I would start there. Simple experiences of reassurance.

It's really helpful to, for example, given the trauma is so much about, understandable, it's about fear and being helpless, entrapped, defeated and mistreated in some way. It's really helpful to look around for what is factually reassuring in the present, not to lower your guard. Many people who are traumatized are anxious about not being anxious, in effect, out of the fear that they'll lower their guard.

Paradoxically, another thing that's a resource is an experience of your own moxie, your own endurance. You live through it. You're still here, ain't dead yet, you got knocked down, but you're still up, you're still cooking. Really important.

And so the feeling of determination or loyalty is another thing to be aware of, including, as I was saying, a sense of the safety of the room around you. It's still working, basically all right, right now. It wasn't all right in the past, may not be all right in the future. In the present, are you basically all right, right now? Are you breathing? Yes. Is your heart beating? Yes. Is awareness ongoing? Yes. Is a shark chewing on your leg? No. Is it great? No. Would you like it to be better? Yes. Are you basically all right, right now? In a very primal sense? Yeah.

So anyway, these are examples that are very immediate and preparatory and also ongoing. I use them. I've been doing this stuff for a long time. I think reassurance is vast. Reassurance and relief and comfort and soothing are underrated. But that would be a place where I would establish people first.

Alex Howard

Yes. And also strikes me, Rick, as you're speaking, that some of that is much easier when we're in some sort of relationship with another, be that a teacher or a therapist or a kind of loving friend or partner. What often, I think, happens when there's been a lot of trauma in different ways and as you mentioned at the start, there might be lots of micro traumas that have built up, is that one's relationship with oneself often starts to get altered.

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And often what happens is that it's almost like we meet ourselves in the same way that we were met, which was part of what set things up. And so there's often a harshness and a coldness that when we start to quiet, is often the way that we try to quiet.

So I'm curious as to your thoughts around what we can do, what one can do when they're starting to become close to themselves in that relationship with oneself that helps that process that you're describing.

Dr Rick Hanson

It's really, again, really deep. So if I could just sort of do the headline kind of what I said, which is take in the good that's real, along the way, in little things. You're walking, still walking, still breathing. I just drank some coffee. Love my coffee. Coffee works. Right?

And then also the good that's real with other people while reminding yourself, this is very important, that you can recognize reassurance and you can recognize relationship that's authentically good enough in the present without getting fooled again, without getting betrayed, without being seduced or losing vigilance about what's important.

You can still be alert and you can still look at the other person like, I'm being with you, Alex. You're being with me. I'm tracking and I'm seeing who you are in a simple sense, right? Vice versa. And that's reassuring. But yeah, if you suddenly turned into some weird seductive monster, I would notice it. So I can trust that I could notice it. Not that you would ever be that. And in that context then, enable myself to be open and present and relational with you. So it's very important to be able to do both. It's very, very important.

So with other people then, we're taking in the good, we're experiencing today. Maybe what was missing when we were young or didn't happen. We're experiencing ordinary neighborliness, ordinary simple friendliness, simple camaraderie, simple decency from other people, simple respect from other people. Well, when it's there, let it, notice it, feel it, internalize it. And many people with a trauma history, that's very helpful to them. Notice the good that is real. Feel the good that is real. Take in the good that is real.

Mostly one spoonful at a time or one synapse at a time, one breath at a time. Incredibly important. And that also starts to shift your relationship internally so that over time, if you think of the structure of the psyche, the common simple structure is sort of beleaguered self, inner attacker, inner nurturer.

Problem is there's been an internalization of attackers which are huge, self-criticism, self-loathing, feeling broken, feeling destroyed, damaged goods, bad in your core. And the inner nurturer is not strong enough, it's too weak. One thing people could do is they could start pushing back against the inner attacker. But that's often really hard, partly because they're identified with the inner attacker.

So getting some distance there right off the top is helpful, including through meditation, because you increasingly get some space around your stuff in your mind. It's there, but there's more space, there are more shock absorbers between you and it. There's less identification with it.

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There's more disidentification normally, but especially growing inner nurturers, the caring committee, because that's where there's a lot of opportunity. One internalization at a time with other people in very ordinary ways that are on the zero to ten intensity scale. They're ones and twos and threes. But it's the joking around, the dude at the coffee shop or some person at your work who appreciates you. There's a sense of teamwork or you feel a common cause with other people.

Like in this Super Conference. It's a fantastic conference. Think of all the other people, seen and unseen, who are with you in this journey. You don't know them, they don't know you and yet there's a sense of alliance there. Take it in, take it in, take it in. That builds up your inner nurturer, which then can stand up against that inner attacker increasingly.

And it's full of opportunity to internalize and grow those inner nurturing, inner soothing, inner comforting, inner encouraging, inner guiding. Your inner nurturer can guide you, it can say, no, don't self-medicate with that fourth glass of wine. You know, two is enough. And maybe you ought to start with one. Stop with one, rather. Start and stop anyway.

Alex Howard

It always starts with one.

Dr Rick Hanson

You know, the inner nurturer can guide you, but it's not based on attacking you, right? Okay, I'll stop there.

Alex Howard

Rick, what comes to mind as you're speaking is that our trauma, of course, happens with other people. And part of what I think you're speaking to is our healing also happens with other people.

Dr Rick Hanson

It can. I mean, some trauma is an event like a car accident or an explosion in Iraq or something like that, but yeah, exactly. But I think it's important to say, I think some people overemphasize the necessity of healing trauma in relationship.

Alex Howard

That's exactly the point I wanted to speak to, actually. Thank you. Because that can be tricky for a lot of people, right? Because if that has been the source of the suffering and the pain, often there's a lot of defensiveness and there's a lot of walls and there's a lot of projections, a lot of things that get in the way of really then opening up again.

And at its core, my sense is that that's ultimately a decision that one makes that I'm not going to let the past continue to define my present and future. But that takes courage, doesn't it? It's a difficult thing to do for people when the place that they recognize part of their healing is going to happen, is in relationship which has been the source of the suffering.

[00:19:05] Dr Rick Hanson

You nailed it. So what to do? Based on a lot of history as a therapist and personal journey, there's this saying in, I think, Tibet, 'gradual cultivation, sudden awakening'. 'Gradual cultivation, sudden awakening'. So both are true.

There's a place for breakthroughs, for shifts and psychedelic-assisted therapy, for example, is that kind of often there's a breakthrough there, but it's on the basis of gradual cultivation before it's done well, and after. And gradual cultivation is under our control. The proverb, 'think not lightly of good, saying, it will not come to me. Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise the wise one, filling it little by little, looks for the good'.

And in much the same way, we can empty the bucket a spoonful at a time. We can fill the good bucket one drop at a time. So that's a progressive process.

In that context then, if you think about it, for a lot of people, a lot of their trauma healing does not involve other people. It involves nature.

It involves, potentially, a relationship with spaciousness and broadly. And also it involves the object world, including around agency. Think of the nature of trauma as helplessness, or a core feature, helplessness in the face of attack or disaster or loss, right?

And therefore reclaiming agency is important. Well, one of the best ways to reclaim agency is to make some cookies or make a meal, is to go in your tool shed and bang on some nails and make something happen. Or like I do often, like go rock climbing, go out in nature, go into the wild and feel that potency. You have not lost it as a large land mammal, you have not lost your potency.

That doesn't require other people. And I think sometimes people who are, by their nature, highly extroverted and social, they turn their own personal nature into a generalized rule for everybody.

And I think there's diversity, there's neurological diversity, and there's acquired diversity as well of temperament. And if you're more of an introverted person, your path may well be much more kind of on your own in the world where you reclaim your sense of capability and intactness, that doesn't necessitate other people.

Other people. It will be critically important to have a great therapist or a band of comrades in your journey. That's critically important. I'm kind of both. But I think it's important to not underestimate what is available to us already that's not dependent on other people.

And then last, if you'll bear with me a little bit more, with regard to other people, we are both receivers and transmitters of the heart. To receive from others can be really tricky for all the reasons you said.

And factually, there may not be that many other great people in our life these days, for all kinds of reasons. But what is always under our control is our transmission of kindness, decency, justice, compassion, even love, friendliness, just fellow humor, dark humor. Like, man, yeah, our boss is insane. Yeah. Whack. Well, here we are. You can communicate that. You can express that.

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And love is love whether it flows out or in. And it heals us whether it's flowing out or flowing in, in all its forms. And we are not obstructed in the lovingness broadly, the kindness, the friendliness, the respect, the appreciation, et cetera, toward others, which makes us feel better along the way.

Alex Howard

Yes, I really appreciate you making that point around there are different paths for different people because I think one thing that is often common is that I talk to lots of excellent therapists and teachers and practitioners, but of course, by myself, not saying I'm excellent, but as a therapist I practiced myself.

But one sees through the lens that they see it. And it's kind of like that thing where you go to a butcher and you say, what should I have for dinner tonight?, and I don't know what you're going to have for dinner, but it's going to have meat in it.

And it's that kind of tendency to sort of recommend the thing that we specialize in. I really appreciate that point that there are different paths for different people. And I'd like to touch on something within that around that path may be different, but somehow, whatever that path is, I think there's something around the importance of practice and consistency within that.

So I'd like to open that up a little bit, be it a therapy path or a contemplative path or a path in nature, something around the importance of that showing up in consistency.

Dr Rick Hanson

I agree. And before I became a soft-hearted therapist, I was a hard headed business guy to some extent. And so I think about the relationship between input and output.

And frankly, how many minutes a day are you resting in what I call the green zone, in which you're still functioning? You might have some stress around the edges. There might be some anxiety around the edges, but in the core of your being, you feel basically okay. And there's a kind of resting in calm, strength, a sense of gratitude and a sense of warm heartedness.

Those three together, and neurologically, those relate to the three stage evolution of the brain, reptilian, mammalian, primate, human in terms of safety, satisfaction, connection, calm strength, gratitude, relatedness in terms of the brain. So that's kind of our sweet spot. How many seconds a day are you sort of rested in that sweet spot? And the more the better. There's a dosing effect. There's no way around it, right?

Like, I'm now starting to focus on weight training in my advanced age. I got away with a lot of stuff without weight training previously. How many pounds a day am I lifting? How many minutes am I spending on that? There's a relationship between effort in and results out.

And so it's not to be hard about it, but honestly, Alex, I live in the world of personal practice. If someone averages five minutes a day, actually for them, sweet, helpful relief out of the red zone into the green zone, out of the frying pan into the lawn chair, that would be great. Five minutes a day, right? Or 1 minute a day. So the consistency of it really helps. Resetting really helps.

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If you think of a spectrum like green, chartreuse, yellow, orange, red of experience, we're tough critters. We can spend a lot of time in the yellow zone.

But full red, starts, it's like a car. Sorry for my metaphors here. You're wearing through your brake pads. You know, you can stop, that's orange zone or yellow zone, but you start grinding through your brake pads, you're metal on metal, you start to destroy your brakes. It's not good.

So resetting out of the red zone multiple times a day, at least back to yellow, if not chartreuse and green. Chartreuse, halfway between green and yellow. I've learned a while ago, I guess.

And anyway, that's really important. And my wish for people is that they would take a minute a day at the most, and they would just commit, I'm going to spend a minute a day for me, or more. So fine. But a minute a day for me coming to rest, getting out of the war inside my head, getting out of the war outside my head, coming home, our resting state, that's the problem with trauma is that it creates a lot of chronic inner homelessness. We've lost touch with our home base.

Our resting state as animals is calm, contentment, and connection. Those three systems, neurologically-based. Dropping into your resting state, a minute or more a day, that would be the best thing in the world.

And then on top of that, you can add bells and whistles of different meditation techniques and paths. And for many people, they meditate in a religious framework. Fine. Bringing that in as well, if that's appropriate for you or stay totally secular. Fine. That's what I would really wish for people.

Alex Howard

As you were talking there, Rick, the other thing that came to my mind is that often when we're in a dysregulated state, which often is one of the consequences of trauma, is we normalize to that state.

And what you're describing, of course, gives us a taste of something different. It actually takes us out of that place we've normalized, which then allows us to realize perhaps the impacts of that, but also the possibility of something different.

Dr Rick Hanson

Very beautiful. Exactly right. Even just the window into that is really helpful. And then neurologically, we haven't talked much in that framework, which is fine, but literally, neurologically, states become traits for better or worse, and it's a cautionary tale.

And we have a brain that's designed to acquire negative traits from negative states. That's its negativity bias, makes it like Velcro for bad experiences but Teflon for good ones.

And so it's very important to disengage. It's important to step out of being hijacked or identified with the trauma material to be able to witness it mindfully with spaciousness, with a sense of a shock absorber. That move right there where you get off the screen of the movie to be watching it 20 rows back with popcorn going, wow, that's horrible. But you're watching it, rather than being sucked into it. That's really, really important.

[00:29:28]

So that's the way to deal with negative so-called states. And then also, especially not as a so-called spiritual bypass, not out of avoidance. Really important, not out of avoidance, but building up resources inside to clock as much time as you can coming home, which is good news.

Your natural home base, this calm, contentment and connection in a larger context of true nature, fundamental true nature, spaciousness, wakefulness, benevolence and wisdom has to come home. That's the key. Come home.

Alex Howard

Yes. And of course, part of what helps us do that is cultivating a state of inner trust, right? Which again is another consequence of trauma, is often we lose, or at least we lose connection with that sense of trust.

And I'm curious as to what you find helps people reclaim, or is it recontact, that place of trust that allows them to really fully land in themselves.

Dr Rick Hanson

Yeah, that's very beautiful. The good news is that our underlying, literally, biological nature is as I've said, if you think of it, I had a teacher for a while. He titled one of his books, *The Eating Gorilla Comes in Peace*.

Alex Howard

That's a great title.

Dr Rick Hanson

When people feel in the moment, actually, objectively, safe enough, satisfied enough, and connected enough. These three major needs we have, then they normally, the body, the biology normally defaults to its resting state of the green zone, in which there's coping, there's functioning maybe around the edges, there's pain in the body or worry about your kid. I can understand both of those directly myself. But in their core, you're basically, okay, that's our home. So that's really good news.

And one of the things that promotes trust in ourselves is direct experience. If we observe, oh, I'm going to take one full breath, which, by the way, for many people who have been traumatized, the breath itself is traumatizing to focus on. So don't do that if that's the case.

But that said, if you just go, oh, one breath, and then let's say I deliberately exhale for some length, there's naturally a calming because literally your heart rate slows as you exhale, right? As I drink a little water when I'm thirsty, what happens when I really notice that a need is being met in the moment? Oh, there is a calming. There is a calming.

[00:32:14]

Similarly, when I'm with someone who's a kind person, I can see your kindness, Alex, right? I can feel it. When you're with someone who's basically kind, you could take it in. Then increasingly, you trust yourself. You trust yourself. And because you realize, oh, my home base is good, it's natural.

The problem is I've been driven from my home by the attack of the trauma, which has left its impact inside of my body ever since. And I just need to come home. That's the key. And stay home and clock more time home, which will increasingly draw you home. States become traits.

The more time we spend home, we build up the trait of home, which then fosters more states of home. States are experiences, feelings, sensations, thoughts, attitudes, motivation, et cetera. As we build up traits of home that fosters states of home, which reinforce the trait of home in a wonderful positive upward spiral.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I was just thinking, really, it's the exact same process in reverse of what happens with microtrauma, right?

It's that kind of gradual rebuilding. And sometimes I think people can come to their healing journey, and it seems like an impossible mountain to climb. And really the point that you're making is they don't need to climb a mountain. They need to take those initial steps and follow that path.

Dr Rick Hanson

Right. And that's correct. Exactly right. And to do so in the ways that are available right here, right now. Usually very simple and small and brief ways, which are doable. That's the thing, right? If you have to suddenly, how can I put it? Bad metaphor, but let's say you're in the desert, and it's a horrible desert, and somehow you've got to travel so far to safety. It's really helpful to realize in this moment, I can be in the meadow of safety, in the moment, because that's my nature. That's my deep nature. No woo-woo at all. This is hardcore biology, right?

There's a book by Robert Sapolsky about stress, a classic from 30 years ago, *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, and this is our nature to be home. It's just that we're a very smart animal who, particularly when traumatized, gets sucked into homelessness, the red zone, right?

That's really good news. It's really good news. Bit by bit. It's not airy-fairy. It's bit by bit, step by step, synapse by synapse. We can dwell. Where do you dwell? Where does your attention dwell? And that becomes what dwells within you. The more we dwell, one breath at a time, in a sense of safety, satisfaction and connection that's authentic in the present, you know, the more that becomes what dwells within us.

Alex Howard

It's one of the ways that we talk about trauma, in the context of this conference, is using this very broad definition of trauma. And it strikes me that part of the way that we're talking about meditation and mindfulness is also a very broad definition of meditation and mindfulness, that it's not just sitting down in a very specific form and practice.

[00:35:39]

We're talking about a way of relating to ourselves, of meeting our experience. For those that may find, for now at least, full meditation practice difficult, what are some of the other ways, and you've touched on some of them already as we've spoken, but what are some of the other ways that they can move towards themselves?

You talked about sort of touching the lip and sort of being in nature. I just like to really broaden this idea of meditation for those that struggle to have a start point.

Dr Rick Hanson

Okay, well, I think basic okayness is wildly underrated, right? So just the sense that's real and I want to be crystal clear, sometimes we're not basically okay, and sometimes the building is burning and we've got to go into the red zone to grab our kids and our car keys. I've had that experience, actually, and got out of the building. That's true.

But when there is basic okayness, like doing the dishes or walking to work or sitting in the bus. No one is attacking me now, I'm on the bus. It's basic okayness. Really noticing basic okayness, which because it's so pervasive the brain habituates to it and we tune it out. So that itself, meditate on basic okayness and dwell there and feel it and notice what it's like.

Can you let yourself stay with the sense of basic okayness? And you'll start to observe, I have these habits that impose upon me a sense of contraction and fear because I think I have to do that. But actually, really, now that I'm sitting on the bus, basically okay, I can deliberately relax one smidge at a time, one bit at a time, that contraction and anxiety, and notice that I'm still okay while being just a little less contracted and a little less anxious.

And then I build from there and gradually, frankly, push back the walls of my invisible cage, as I start finding that way in which I can be safe and capable in the world without also feeling really contracted, pressured, fearful, and upset. That's super. That's a meditation of sorts. And that's really, really fundamental.

More technically, for many people what they need to do technically is to increase the stimulation level while meditating, because otherwise they can't sustain it. And there are these little, I think of them as like an internal stimostat, stimulation stat, like a thermostat in your home, you know, the temperature, that's tracking stimulation.

And if people have been traumatized, understandably, their attention is kind of skittery and they're keyed up. So they need a certain amount of stimulation, like walking while meditating or meditating on something that's more heartfelt, like how they feel about their cat or how they felt about their cat when they were a kid. As long as that's not a trigger warning, et cetera.

So something more stimulating, maybe something more verbal, like just a simple, whatever's harmonious for you, maybe, given your culture and your history. Like a little thing. Mother Mary come to me or shalom or peace or may I be well, it's okay, right?

I did the firewalk once with Tony Robbins. You know, walking on fire. And I did it. I was for real. And I was chanting, 'cool moss, cool moss, cool moss'. Whatever your deal is.

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In other words, increase the stimulation value. Because just classic meditation of just being present, maybe while remaining aware of the body, it's pretty darn boring. It's already stimulating, so it's hard to stay with it. So help yourself out there.

Alex Howard

As a little aside, I did the same thing with Tony Robbins many years ago. It took me a while to realize the whole cool moss thing was just so I couldn't think, 'oh shit, my feet again'.

Dr Rick Hanson

I'll tell you a neurological hack that I've been using myself when I came across it, actually. It's pretty wild. It's a simple two-parter.

One part is awareness of things as a whole. So if you're aware of breathing, breathing while feeling your chest as a whole. As a whole, left and right, front and back, top and bottom, altogether. That neurologically, technically reduces activity in the midline of the cortex, which is very involved with not being in the present and with a strong sense of self, often negatively associated. And instead, when you have a sense of things as a whole, you go into your right hemisphere, right-handed people switched from any left-handed people.

That is gestalt processing, holistic processing, which quiets activity in the midline. And suddenly, people can just try it or be aware of the volume of your room as a whole or, kind of more broadly, a bird's-eye perspective on your life and reality as a whole in common humanity, as part of that.

It's a major theme in self-compassion. That itself is immediate, watch what happens within two, three, four breaths, 30 seconds, a minute certainly. You'll feel yourself calming down, being less rattled, being less fragmented, you'll feel more whole and big picture, that's a hack.

And another related hack is to raise your gaze to the horizon line or above. Because primarily in the wild, back in the Serengeti Plains or Jurassic Park, 100 million years or so ago, threats came really close, including ambush predators nearby. So when we look down and near ourselves, we become naturally more self-referential.

It's more of a sense of the beleaguered, isolated self under attack, undersupported. On the other hand, neurologically, when you shift your gaze out into the horizon, you naturally engage neural networks that are involved with taking in things as a whole and not taking them so personally and looking at things from a much wider perspective.

Here too, if you find yourself obsessing about something, look out a window. It's classic advice. We're now understanding, scientifically, why these classic methods work and why your grandmother's advice really worked. Honey, look at the clouds. Look at the clouds. Watch the clouds for a few minutes. You'll feel better sweetie, right?

Why, well, why do so many enlightenment experiences happen while people raise their gaze to the heavens, to the stars, to the bigger picture? Neurologically, that's one reason why.

So those are things people can do as well. If you're going to meditate while having a sense of things as a whole, or even looking out to a wider view.

[00:42:59] Alex Howard

I mean, that's one of the beauties of science, right? That it helps us understand things that we've known for thousands of years to be true. Rick I'm mindful of time, but people that want to find out more about you and your work, where's the best place to go and what's some of what they can find?

Dr Rick Hanson

Thank you. Simply my website, I think, is the best place. Rick Hanson, S-O-N, .Net. Rickhanson.net. You can just Google me too, it'll show up. And that website is full of tons of freely-offered resources. Quick little audios you can download or listen to, little videos, articles, resources from other people, ranging from things that are immediately accessible, including for children, on my website. Immediately accessible all the way to hardcore scientific stuff, kind of buried in a corner for those who have the acquired taste for that sort of thing. All the above.

Rickhanson.net, we also have a number of very well structured, well curated, well done online programs that range from very quick things, like I literally have a program called Just One Minute that's very short, different practices, all the way to a year-long program. And we always have scholarships for people with any kind of financial need. No one's turned away for lack of funds, which is really a fundamental value that we have.

Meanwhile, they're affordably priced for people who typically would purchase an online product. The last thing I'll say, I can't help but say it, is that our son, Forrest, and I have the [Being Well Podcast](#), which is now getting around 100,000 downloads a week.

It's really growing in scale and about half our weekly episodes involve some super duper cool guests. Others are just Forrest and I talking together about something significant, so people can also check out the [Being Well Podcast](#).

Alex Howard

Fantastic. Rick, it's been such a treat to have time together. I really appreciate it. Thank you.

Dr Rick Hanson

Ditto, Alex. And again, respect and good wishes for all the people participating in your wonderful conference.