Conscious Life presents
TRAUMA
SUPER CONFERENCE

Overcoming evolution in trauma healing

Guest: Dr Ronald Siegel

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello, and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Ronald Siegel, an assistant professor of psychology, part time at Harvard Medical School. He's the author of several books, including *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary: Finding Happiness Right Where You Are*, and *The Mindfulness Solution: Everyday Practices for Everyday Problems*.

He's a long time student of mindfulness meditation, teaches internationally about the application of mindfulness practice in psychotherapy and other fields, and maintains a private clinical practice in Lincoln, Massachusetts. Dr Ronald Siegel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Thanks so much for inviting me.

Meagen Gibson

So one of my favorite things about talking with you is how well you explain the process of evolution and how our brains have evolved to predispose us to things like trauma. So I'd love it if you would start there.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah. There are so many aspects of our brains that were adaptive for survival and adaptive for reproducing and passing our genes on to our kids and even for taking care of our kids, which predispose us toward a lot of psychological suffering, including toward trauma. And if it's not too complicated of a map, there are actually four, I think, predispositions of our brain that get us into trouble vis a vis trauma.

The first one is very, very basic. It's something that we share with all other animals, we even share with bacteria. It's the tendency to recoil from that which might be dangerous or painful, and to move toward that which is pleasurable. And we see this, obviously, throughout the animal kingdom, where all organisms, if something is sharp or hot or in some way painful, they will withdraw from it.

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And the way this shows up for us is, while this makes perfect sense evolutionarily in order to keep our bodies intact and be healthy in the world, when it comes to emotional experience, it's not always so wise. And what happens is our minds automatically, when we have a painful emotional experience, recoil from it and withdraw from it.

And we do that to such a degree, and we have this interesting capacity to be able to actually block it out of awareness. And you can see also how this would be very adaptive in terms of our evolutionary history. Let's say you had experienced something really horrible with a lion in the past out there on the African savanna, and you're in a new situation that requires you to think quickly, you don't want to be thinking about the lion. You want to be thinking about what you have to do now.

The same way, for example, a first responder, now, they're not thinking about all the scary things and the hurt things that have happened. They're focusing on, how do I save this person? But in the process of pushing it out of awareness, we create a situation in which a lot of our thoughts and feelings are pushed out of awareness. And it's particularly the painful ones. So that's the first mechanism.

And we'll talk about the way in which by splitting off experiences that are painful, we actually predispose us toward all sorts of post-traumatic difficulties because these memories, they don't just disappear. As one of my patients put it so eloquently, when we bury feelings, we bury them alive and they come back and they want to re-express themselves. And then we're always stressed out trying to maintain this, trying to keep them out of awareness. So that's one mechanism.

Another thing that we evolved for is to be able to think. You know, again, going back to the African savanna, we weren't very fast, we weren't very tall, we weren't very strong compared to the other animals. If we came face to face with a lion, our recourses were kind of limited. What, we're going to like, grit our teeth and show our claws? But that wouldn't work very well, right?

So what could we do? Well, we had a few resources. One of them was we were social creatures, so we could cooperate with others. And that's super helpful. We had a prehensile thumb so that we could grab things and make and use tools. That was super helpful. We had this fight or flight system that allowed us to activate ourselves quickly. But the real ace in the hole we had, I mean, our real strength that set us aside from the other animals was this ability to think.

But our thinking process is not just some neutral computer. It's subject to what cognitive scientists call the negativity bias, or what my friend Rick Hanson uses the metaphor he says, our brains are like velcro for bad experiences and teflon for good ones. Bad experiences happen and they stick. Good ones happen, they slide right off the pan.

And there's a good reason for this because when we're out there on the Savanna, we could have made one of two types of errors and they actually correspond to type one and type two errors in modern scientific research. A type one error is a false positive. Type two is a false negative. To illustrate this, a type one error would be to be looking at a beige or yellow shape behind some bushes and think, oh, my God, it's a lion, when it's really just a beige rock.

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And a type two error would be to look at the same thing and say it's probably just a beige rock, when it's really a lion. And you could imagine we could make countless of these type one errors and still live to tell and survive and pass on our DNA to our kids. But one type two error, that's the end of our DNA line. So maybe in ancient times there were these happy hominids holding hands and telling stories about luscious pieces of fruit and wonderful sexual encounters and gorgeous sunny days.

But they weren't our ancestors. Why? Because statistically, they died before they got to reproduce. Our ancestors were the ones walking around saying, oh, my God, that could be a lion, another poisonous snake, oh, one of those plants with the thorns. That was horrible last time. Our ancestors, because it was good for survival, are the ones who had these brains in which bad things stick.

So, when we've had a traumatic experience, even though there's this tendency to push it out of awareness, it also sticks around because this negativity bias was so helpful for survival.

So, the third thing that we evolved for. We evolved to believe that the world is stable and that things are relatively permanent. Now, why is that useful? Well, you know, if you were wandering around the savanna and you discovered, hey, there's this fruit tree over there at the base of that mountain. Well, remembering that and thinking of that as stable and expecting the fruit tree to be there in the future was going to be helpful, because you'd be able to find the fruit tree.

Or even just getting the idea that that person over there is cooperative and okay. That person over there, watch out for them. We look for patterns, and pattern recognition involves imagining things will be stable. Well, that's very useful in a lot of situations, but it becomes very problematic when dealing with emotions, because when we start to get really sad or really scared or even really angry, we imagine that this is the state forever.

We become afraid of our fear, become afraid of our sadness, afraid of our anger, because we think it's going to stick. We don't realize the reality, which is, gosh, consciousness is material. It's always changing, right? Different things are happening each moment. And one of my fun exercises is, what was your worry three worries ago? And it's hard to remember it, but in the moment, it felt like, this is going to be it forever, right?

And gosh, when I get sad, I get afraid of sadness because, oh, no, I'm going to always be upset. I'm not always going to be upset. So that dovetails with this tendency to push the painful things out of awareness. We push them out of awareness because we fear that they're going to be permanent.

And the fourth thing, the fourth propensity, and it's sort of arbitrary picking four, but I think these are the greatest hits. The fourth one is our preoccupation with ourselves and with what other people think about us. Out there on the African savanna, there was a lot of concern with being dominant. And, you know, you see this pattern where there's often a dominant male surrounded by literally a harem of reproductively promising females.

And then over in the next field, there would be a group of, often a little bit younger, males doing the species specific equivalent of playing basketball, you know, trying to develop the skills to become dominant. Now, why does dominance matter so much? Well, the dominant ones and the

dominant males, and the females that had kids with the dominant males, they had better luck at passing on their DNA because they had access to more resources and were able to protect the kids.

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So, there's a lot of concern for this. And that all sounds very primitive. And yes, we see it play out in human affairs in which world leaders, historically male, world leaders have had literal harems and that kind of thing. And we see people with their trophy wives. I mean, there are current examples. But the way this plays out much more broadly for all of us, and isn't just a guy thing, is fluctuating self esteem.

We are very concerned with how we're doing. How do I feel about myself right now? Am I doing a good job presenting these ideas? Is Meagen smiling and thinking, no pressure...

Meagen Gibson

I'm always smiling...

Dr Ronald Siegel

Which is actually lovely and very encouraging, but sort of looking for feedback, am I doing okay? Or just, you know, going through the world, should I have said that? Or do I look okay? Am I being a nice person? Am I a good enough friend? I mean, there are hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of ways in which we're always evaluating ourselves and judging ourselves and thinking we're either good or bad.

And so this kind of self esteem preoccupation and preoccupation with self judgment plays a huge role in our suffering. And the way it relates to trauma is that almost everybody who's been through trauma feels some shame around it. Either they feel shame around post-traumatic symptoms, like, I don't know, I freeze in these situations. I go blank. I don't feel like I'm able to connect to people. I feel dead inside. I'm just naming some of the possibilities.

So people feel ashamed about having post-traumatic symptoms, or often people are ashamed of having been through the trauma. Certainly people who have been sexually mistreated and the traumas in that area almost always feel like something's wrong with them because this happened. People who are suffering from what we now call moral injury, like the people in combat who under the circumstances do something, and in retrospect, it's like, oh, my God, you know, an innocent person was killed or injured and they feel terrible about themselves.

So this self judgment, including harsh self judgment, gets much, much worse when people have been through trauma. And yet this self judgment is part of this whole self esteem regulation which really comes from comparing ourselves to others and thinking, am I okay? Am I good enough?

And in fact, in the intro you mentioned one of my books, which is very recent, which is *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary*, which is really about gosh, can we do anything about that? Can we do anything about this constant self evaluation and self judgment? And can we land in a place where instead we feel connected to one another and safe? It's not all about being good or bad, better or worse and all of that stuff. So those are four. These are very natural things.

I guess I'll throw in a fifth...

[00:13:04] Meagen Gibson

Bonus content. Let's go.

Dr Ronald Siegel

I mentioned it in passing, this fight or flight response, right, that we evolved for the body to get aroused, sympathetic nervous system arousal where the heart races and our respiration picks up and we're getting ready to fight or flee, right? To respond to some kind of danger. Super important for survival.

Yet when we've been traumatized, this fight or flight response is constantly getting rekindled, reactivated by the memories of the bad thing that happened that's been pushed out of awareness or that we're trying to keep out of awareness. So that's the fifth one. So, I'm sorry, we didn't evolve to be happy and we didn't actually evolve to handle bad things happening very well. We evolved for survival and passing on our DNA. And that's why we have to kind of work on it when we've been traumatized. So, long exposition, but I think hopefully a useful context.

Meagen Gibson

Extremely useful context. And as you were talking about the last one, I was like, we evolved not to be happy. I love it when you say that. I just have to repeat it. We didn't evolve to be happy, because to me it feels so validating. I mean, so many people, I think more people than ever, are just struggling with the fact that they're not happy all the time and judging themselves for it.

And after the last three years, especially globally, you know, the things that we've kind of been through and experienced together, it's no wonder some of us are struggling to be happier than others. And I have the visual of all that dirty velcro, if you will.

Dr Ronald Siegel

And the self judgment around the happiness, it's so interesting how that's reinforced by our cultures that, this is not going to be a polemic against free market societies because the alternatives have their problems too, but one of the psychological side effects of a free market economy is we're always selling stuff to one another. And the way we sell it is by saying, buy this and you'll be happy.

So you're looking at the Pepsi commercial and they're the people, you know, looking beautiful, playing volleyball out on the beach, being really happy, drinking Pepsi. And when I don't feel this inside, it's like, oh, it's my mistake, I bought Coke. I mean, that's actually the implicit message here. But we absorb this and we see all these messages of other people who seem to be doing great and oh, my God, social media.

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say. We used to only get it from advertising. Now we get it from social media.

[00:15:48] Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah, curated feeds on Instagram and TikTok and Facebook and you know, not that many people post and they say, woke up this morning, had the runs again because I'm really anxious, I'm afraid my boss is going to give me a bad review, and my girlfriend or boyfriend's going to leave me. It's like, no, here I am doing fantastic things at this fantastic party, having fantastic times, and you're not invited.

Oh, my gosh. The opportunities for self judgment about the fact that life is difficult and thinking that it's just because I'm a failure that I'm having difficulty rather than, no, this is universally human, and we're all in this together.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I want to touch on that a little bit more in a second, but I also wanted to go back to something you said before in these five things that you listed. And if anybody sees me looking down it's because I'm taking notes. I'm not texting or checking Instagram, but I always take notes around talks.

But some of these things also evolved, the things that we judge as being like a preoccupation with ourselves that we judge as being not superfluous, if you will. It was actually until, like, 50 years ago, especially if you were a woman, necessary to survival, social acceptance, and having other people judge you as part of the group. I mean, until very recent history was a necessity of survival, right?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Absolutely. And even things that we think of as ridiculously superficial, like being physically attractive, well, there was a correlation between that and whether your genes were going to get passed down. By the way, it's really important, I think, when we talk about evolutionary psychology and the ways in which the brain evolved, this is not advocating that we act in accordance with predispositions.

Because the brain also evolved, for example, to be very attracted to fat and sugar. You know, almost every culture has its equivalent of donuts. Because way back on the savanna, calories were the name of the game, and fat and sugar meant you were going to have calories and you could have energy to power through the next day. Nowadays, if we basically focus on donuts as our main nutrient, it doesn't work out so well.

So in the same way that being very concerned with what other people think about me and how am I doing and how I compare to others, yes, that once had important evolutionary value, and it's natural that our brains do that. It's not like we want to double down on that. We may want to find more sustainable pathways to wellbeing and be really compassionate with ourselves when we find ourselves getting hooked on these things.

My daughter happens to be a dermatologist, and so the interface between dermatology and psychology is something that we talk about. And it's so interesting. It's like, when does it make sense to try to, I mean, if somebody's like badly disfigured from some dermatological disorder, I think everybody would get on board with, you want to try to fix that if you can, you know, cause, gosh, you know, people are going to react to you and all this.

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If it's like a few wrinkles, should you be working with it psychologically rather than working with it dermatologically? So there's a sort of tension there. And she was pointing out in the conversation, she said, you also have a man's perspective. And we could put this in the evolutionary context, that evolutionarily, there was more pressure on females around this stuff in many ways. So it's all complicated.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And still is. I mean, I used to be a television news journalist, and you got to believe there was a giant double standard. It was funny. A man could wear the same exact suit on set every single day, and no one would notice. If a woman came in a ponytail one day to work on set, everybody was writing to the station. How dare she? I mean, there's definitely success and capitalism and the world that we live in. It all plays in...

Dr Ronald Siegel

And it tends to reinforce these things that we already have predispositions toward, which unfortunately amplifies our suffering.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I think what you're saying really is that it's not that our evolutionary leanings excuse us not becoming self aware of these tendencies that were built for our protection and survival, it doesn't absolve us of responsibility.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah. And the more aware of it we can be, I think the more we have a chance to make conscious decisions. The same way, the more aware, okay, to make a conscious decision about that donut, also to make a conscious decision of do I want to be climbing the ladder, stepping on my friends along the way, or do I want to ease up on this? Or do I want to, when I'm with my friend, be showing off my accomplishments, or do I want to be sharing my vulnerabilities and finding a way to connect? We don't have to go with these instincts. And being aware of them is actually more helpful for choosing.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So speaking of awareness, let's kind of shift into this area of expertise of yours also around mindfulness and compassion practices and how they are antidotes to these developmental tendencies resulting from evolution.

Dr Ronald Siegel

So we can actually go through all five of them. So the first one is this tendency to avoid pain shows up in emotional or experiential avoidance, and we see it all over. It's everything from wanting to have a drink after coming home after a day of work and feeling like this and wanting to relax. But we want to avoid this and change it into something more pleasant and done in moderation, no harm, no foul. But if you compulsively need to use substances to regulate your system, well, that can become problematic as we know.

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Or, you know, when it comes to things like anxiety, you know if I got nervous before public speaking or flying in airplanes but did that anyway, I don't have an anxiety disorder. I'm just a kind of nervous guy. Actually, I'm kind of a nervous guy, so I know what that's like. But if I avoid doing those things in order to avoid feeling the pain of anxiety, well, then I have a problem.

So this tendency to avoid things is problematic. And what's happening in trauma, of course, is that the brain, the mind, is automatically avoiding things. It's actually blocking things out of awareness so we don't even sometimes remember the memory. Or if we do, we have a way of tensing up to turn away from it all the time.

Well, one of the first things we're doing in mindfulness practices is, a brief definition is, mindfulness is being aware of present experience with loving acceptance. And that means that we're not turning away, we're deliberately practicing being with an opening too. So when an image comes, when we're doing some, let's say we're doing mindfulness practice, some form of meditation to develop mindfulness, when the upsetting image comes to mind, instead of turning on the radio, going to the fridge, looking at our phone, we actually sit there, breathe and let the image come and go.

So instead of experiential avoidance, which again is this very basic tendency to just get rid of pain, we learn to have experiential approach, to turn toward that which is perhaps uncomfortable at the moment and to trust that by turning toward it and opening toward it, it will transform by itself or we will become sufficiently...

Meagen Gibson

Capable?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Capable and conversant with it, that we're okay. And sometimes it's something like, you know, a wave of sadness or a wave of fear or a wave of anger that comes up. Instead of how do I get this to go away, how do I distract myself, how do I undo it? We turn toward it. So that's the first antidote, the first way in which mindfulness practices work.

So the second issue, this negativity bias in our thinking, is that we tend to think the worst and imagine the worst, and remember the worst. Well, one of the things we're doing in mindfulness practice is we always start with a sensory object, whether it's paying attention to the breath or sounds or the visual field or if we're doing walking meditation, we pay attention to the sensations of the feet touching the ground and leaving the ground.

And of course, thoughts arise, as they naturally do because that was so useful for our survival. Our brains secrete thought all the time, right? But instead of following each narrative stream as we normally would, we sort of gently and lovingly bring the attention back to the sensory object. And by doing that over and over, we actually start to see thoughts as thoughts.

Psychologists call this metacognitive awareness, the awareness that a thought is a thought, rather than a reality. Because most of the time when we're walking around during the day, if I have a thought of, oh, God, you know, let's say it's a negative thought, you know, I'm really a failure. I

haven't accomplished much in life, or people don't really like me very much. Or let's say it's a negative thought.

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When thoughts like that happen, it's not like, oh, there's a negative thought arising. It's like reality. And we sing along with that reality. As we practice mindfulness, we start noticing, oh, there's a negative thought arising. And this helps a lot with the self judgment stuff, because it's the positive ones too. Hey, I'm the greatest psychologist since sliced bread. Oh, yeah, there's your inflated thought again. You know, we start to see all of these things as coming and going and not identify with them and believe in them so much.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you gave both the positive and the negative because they can both be very trapping, right?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Oh, totally, totally. We get totally trapped in wanting to have these positive fantasies or positive evaluations.

So the third one is this tendency to think of things as permanent. Philosophers call this reification, making solid that which is fluid. And there is nothing like mindfulness practice to show you that everything's fluid. Because what happens is when we're sitting and letting thoughts come and go and we're being with some sensory object of awareness, we notice, oh, my gosh, consciousness is a river.

It's this constant flow of experience. That thought of 3 seconds ago, gone, gone over the waterfall. You know, there's a river going. It's all going over a waterfall. You know, again, three worries ago, gone. We can hardly even get it, even though at the time it was super important. And, you know, sadness comes and goes, joy comes and goes, feelings of love come and go, feelings of fear come and go. It's all fluid.

So we start to actually see that and then we start to notice, oh, my gosh, all things in the world are impermanent. It's not just the flow of consciousness, but buildings come and go. People come and go. Civilizations come and go. I hate to say this, democracies come and go. I don't want to make this...

Meagen Gibson

Too existentialist about it. Yeah.

Dr Ronald Siegel

But it is profound. It's profound and it helps to free us in a more narrow, psychological way as well.

And then mindfulness can really help us with this self evaluation stuff. We can really start to use it, both to watch the self esteem roller coaster, to watch how in the course of an hour we can go from feeling good about ourselves to feeling bad about ourselves to feeling good about ourselves again.

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So we get to see the roller coaster and it helps us to, also, and this one's a little bit of a reach, but when we practice enough, we actually notice the interconnectedness of things. We actually get it that, oh, you know, I'm part of a larger ecosystem, and I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't have electricity, I wouldn't be able to survive if it weren't for all these other people who are doing all these things, doing their part in the society.

And it really does take a village to do anything. We're not these separated, independent organisms. We are very interdependent. And in fact, we're interdependent with all of life and everything on the planet and the planet is interdependent with other planets. We start to get this sense of connectedness that comes from this. And that is an enormously powerful antidote to the preoccupation with how I'm doing.

And all these things kind of reinforce one another and they fit in with one another. Like, when we get it that everything is impermanent, including the fact that we're not going to live forever, well, that's interesting. So all these things I'm worried about, like, what does everyone think about me? How successful am I at work? All this stuff it's like, yeah, it's important, but is it really? You know, there's a great little exercise, if I may put you slightly on the spot. Do you know who the King of England was in 1342?

Meagen Gibson

Was that George?

Dr Ronald Siegel

I'm not exactly sure myself, but in 1342, whenever I said, everybody in England knew, and he was a really big deal. So even if you're the King, it's like this isn't going to last either. So, you know, we start to get this kind of perspective, which helps us to relax around all the self esteem stuff. So actually, mindfulness practices are super helpful for all of this. And the compassion practices which go hand in hand with mindfulness practices are really, really helpful both for holding ourselves and hugging ourselves, because it is painful to be a human being.

And all of these propensities of the brain, not only did we not evolve to be happy, we actually evolved to feel a lot of pain. These things hurt. Every one of them hurts, right? And when we're hurting, there's nothing like a hug to be helpful. It doesn't make the thing all go away, but it transforms the experience when we feel held.

So both having compassion for others so that we can connect safely to others and can hold hands through this difficult life, and having compassion for ourselves so that instead of the harsh critical judgment, we're able to be loving toward ourselves with the difficulty loving toward ourselves as we let ourselves approach the traumatic memories. So compassion and mindfulness work hand in hand as antidotes to these propensities.

Meagen Gibson

And I'd love if you could talk for just a second about, you know, we talked about that looking away tendency, avoidance of pain, avoidance of discomfort. But some of those dissociative traits, in the way that we compartmentalize daily life, are useful for us through life.

[00:32:26]

None of us are toddlers usually walking around during the day, we can't all just stop and feel our feelings in every minute of every day situationally. So the sweet spot between being a functioning adult in society and also not completely turning away from everything that's difficult.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Super important question. I was once giving a talk to surgeons at Children's Hospital here in Boston. It's a major hospital. They get difficult cases, and they get cases where kids die, right? And I was basically talking about using mindfulness and compassion practices to be able to be present with patients who are really suffering, because it helps us to show up as clinicians and to be able to process the feelings that happen when things go wrong.

When we see, you know, I mean, talk about painful experiences, kids suffering and kids who die. Oh, God, how do you process all that and not just basically block it out, develop PTSD and drink a lot. So, I was talking to the surgeons about this. And afterwards, the chief of surgery came up to me and said, you know, we spend years teaching our surgical residents how to not feel.

Because when there's a kid in the emergency room and something's happening in their heart, I want the cardiac surgeon to be thinking about hydraulics, thinking about mechanics, thinking about, you know, metabolism and thinking about physiology. Not thinking about the mother who's saying, don't let my baby die. And absolutely, it was speaking to your point, there are many, many moments in life, and not just if you're a trauma surgeon, but many moments where we really want to be using our executive functioning.

We really want to be thinking, what's needed here? What's the effective action? What's on my to-do list? All of that. I think the art is also allowing time when we're not under threat, when there isn't some goal that we have to accomplish right now to process how difficult life has been. And the problem is, so many of us push these things away for executive functioning in order to do things in the world and to be effective and, you know, good at our roles, whether that's being a parent or a teacher or a cardiac surgeon.

We push these things away, and then they're buried alive, and then they're always threatening to come back and come back into a consciousness, which is interesting. The reason why when we split things off with trauma, they don't just stay split off is because, you know, the heart and mind have a natural healing propensity. Interestingly, there's, you know, people are aware because it's gotten a lot of popular press, there's a lot of work being done in psychedelic assisted psychotherapy right now.

And it has many, many parallels with mindfulness assisted psychotherapy where it's doing the same kind of work at a somewhat different pace in a somewhat different structure. And one of the leaders in that field is a physician named Michael Mithoefer, who had been an emergency room doctor. And he said when people come into the emergency room and let's say they have a broken arm, I can't heal the arm. I can't knit the bones back together.

I can set the arm and cast it and create the conditions by which the body will naturally heal itself. That's what I can do. Well, that's what's happening in the psychological realm also. Mindfulness practices, compassion practices help to create these conditions. And then it's this natural healing propensity of the heart and the mind that takes over. And this natural healing propensity, interestingly, is the propensity to reintegrate everything that's been pushed out.

[00:36:43]

The reason we have nightmares, the reason we have flashbacks, is because the mind wants to heal itself. I know this sounds a little anthropomorphizing, as though the mind is thinking, but the brain evolved to heal itself in the same way that the bones of the arm evolved to heal themselves. And what healing looks like here is integration, is allowing these things back into awareness.

But the pacing becomes so critical and there are times during the day when, no, this isn't the time even to process the difficulty of the moment, notwithstanding the historical difficulty that this is reminding me of. So, you know, I'm feeling rejected here. You know, my heart is sinking, I'm feeling frightened, oh, but I got to do something, so I'm going to do this thing. So it's not the moment to process the emotions of the moment, nor the fact that, oh, gosh, this is resonating with the times I got rejected as a kid and the times that I felt excluded and not good enough for whatever reason, as a kid.

But if it's at all possible, we also need to carve out and create time in which we can allow this healing to happen. And mindfulness and compassion practices are one structure that we can use to facilitate it because we're providing antidotes to these predispositions where we're not going to get so caught in the thoughts. We're going to approach and allow the feelings to arise.

And I didn't touch on the fifth one, the fifth one meaning the fifth propensity of the mind here that gets us into trouble, mindfulness practices over time do tend to diminish this fight or flight response. Because instead of reacting like I've got to do something about it, by turning our attention toward whatever the threat is of the moment, whether it be a thought or a feeling or whatnot, we're not always in this threat response system because we get into fight or flight when the organism feels threatened.

And instead we're in a kind of open, receptive posture where even though the contents may be at times painful, we're not resisting them so much. So it also helps with the fight or flight system. I hope I'm not packing too much into a brief period of time, but these things all fit together as part of a picture.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I'm glad you brought the last part out because my next question was just going to be I'm so glad that you knitted psychedelic assisted therapy with mindfulness practices because what was occurring to me was that both are taking that fight or flight response part of the brain, the amygdala, offline and making it safe. Creating safety for the physiology that's out of your control.

There's not much you can do about the fact that you've been activated by something. Your palms are sweating or your heart is racing, or you can't get a deep breath, or all the other things, I don't want to activate people while they're watching, but that you can physiologically feel that isn't in your conscious control. You can't tell your heart, I would like you to stop beating so fast right now. I've tried.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah. One of the discoveries with mindfulness practice is, oh, my God, I can't control my mind at all. The first thing people discover is that it's wild, it has a mind of its own, so to speak, and is very humbling initially when we take up these practices, but it's also very useful. And then, ironically,

when we stop trying to control it in that way, indeed, the amygdala quiets down because trying to control it is one of the factors that keeps us so aroused so often.

[00:40:33] Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. So I want to talk about the considerations that you take when teaching people mindfulness and compassion practices when you know that there's a trauma history.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah. Super important. Broadly speaking, mindfulness and compassion practices do two things at the same time. One is they actually increase our capacity to be with discomfort. This happens in part when you're simply sitting and meditating and physical discomfort comes up. One of the instructions that's usually given is instead of immediately scratching the itch or changing your posture to take care of the ache, what if you were to gently just turn your attention to the discomfort and use it as the sensory object of your awareness?

So instead of following the breath or listening to sounds, you actually pay attention to the itch or the ache as your focus. And what people often discover is, oh, it transforms. It doesn't stay permanently. It's impermanent, too, and it changes. And that becomes a really useful tool because we start to notice, oh, when sadness arises, or fear or anger, when these difficult emotions arise in the body, oh, I can turn my attention to that. I can be with that.

And doing that increases our capacity to be with it. The other thing that these practices do is because we're not distracting ourselves with our phone every couple of minutes, we're really just being with whatever's happening inside, it softens the repression barrier. It softens our tendency to block painful things out of awareness. So more painful things come into awareness. We face our demons here. They arise.

The challenge is that mindfulness and compassion practice don't necessarily do these two things at the same pace. So sometimes we start doing these practices and the demons start showing up before we've developed sufficient strength to be able to be okay with the demons. And then we feel overwhelmed. And if you don't mind my mentioning, you had said, we were talking just before the interview, and you said gosh, when I tried starting to meditate, it didn't go so well.

Meagen Gibson

You can out me. I hated meditation and I hated everybody that told me I should meditate. For 15 years.

Dr Ronald Siegel

And my guess would be that's because bits and pieces of the demons were showing up, creating an agitated state before there was the capacity to be able to be with those bits and pieces.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. What I always tell people is that it's like if you've ever tried to clean out the ignored section of your home, whether that's a garage or a closet or a basement or an attic or something, and you put your mind to it and you're like, first I gotta take everything out. And so you just make the mess way bigger.

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And now everything's everywhere, whereas it used to be packed away somewhere where you didn't have to deal with it. Now everything's everywhere. Now you've actually gotta organize, compartmentalize, decide what stays, what goes, how does it go back? That's the analogy I always use.

Dr Ronald Siegel

That's a great analogy.

Meagen Gibson

And so yeah, that sense of overwhelm that you named is something you have to deal with, right?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah. Interestingly, this is one of the things that happens with the psychedelic assisted psychotherapies that they open people up very, very rapidly. And at the moment they're mostly being done, where it's being done, there's a whole underground but people doing this above board with trained clinicians and the like, it's mostly in research studies and what happens is after a certain number of follow up sessions, the research study ends but exactly as you said, all these things are spread out and that's not so good.

That can be too much. And the exact same thing can happen with mindfulness practice where all this stuff comes up and it's like, what do I do with it? And it's not that it's a bad idea to be doing this, but pacing becomes very important. Well, interestingly, some mindfulness practices are more likely to build this capacity to be with the discomfort while others are going to do a little bit more of the uncovering.

And it doesn't always work 100% this way, but, in general, if I can invite our listeners to, viewers if you're not, listening while driving or something, you know, to close your eyes and just generate a little bit of sadness. Not the saddest thing ever, but just a little bit in the body. And put your hand over the part of your body where you feel that for a moment and just breathe with that for a moment.

And then a little bit of fear or anxiety, again, not the scariest thing, but just a little bit. Put your hand over that and breathe with that. And, okay, we can just do those two. And let's open our eyes again.

And I'm going to guess, because I've done this with groups, that very few people said, yeah, I mostly experience sadness in my left elbow or fear in the big toe of my right foot. It's all somewhere in here that we tend to experience emotions. So when we do a mindfulness practice, like what many people think of as the standard mindfulness practice of, oh, let's follow the sensations of the breath, well, the breath is here, right?

So if we're sensitizing ourselves to this part of the body, we're going to bump into our sadness and our fear. That's where it lives. And it's probably going to open the door to all sorts of memories. And we may not be ready for that right now. It's really important to respect that we may not be

ready for that right now. So instead we might decide, let's do walking meditation in nature. Let's go to a park or the woods, if you live in a more rural area.

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And go for a walk and just start paying attention to the sensation of the feet, touching the ground and lifting the ground, and once the mind settles a little bit, once you have a little bit of concentration on that, then expand it out to include the trees and the clouds and things. And let thoughts come and go, but keep bringing your attention back to the sensory reality of just walking in nature.

Sadness may come up, fear may come up. I'm not saying it's absolute this way, but you're likely to feel a little bit more like, I'm in a safe place. The universe is a safe place. The present moment is a safe place. I can take refuge in the present moment. And I can permit these things to come and go in a way in which if we're just inside it's more likely it may feel like too much.

So that's an example of the kinds of adjustments that we might want to make. In my book, *The Mindfulness Solution,* that you also mentioned, it really goes through a lot of different mindfulness practices and how you would adjust them and how you might choose them. It's always an experiment. Everybody's different. But at least what we've seen from other people's experience, how we might get into doing mindfulness practice in a way that feels safe if we have a lot of unresolved trauma.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And just in case it helps anybody else listening, what I was thinking while you were describing the two different types is that it's almost like if you've got some activation, if you've got some trauma history, traditional, like you're just going to sit and you're going to count your breath and allow thoughts to pass, feels like you're confronting yourself, like you're facing one another, but it's yourself you're facing. Whereas I go out and in nature, I take a walk, I'm walking alongside myself.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah, very nice.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, that's just how it felt for me. So in case it helps anyone else, I'm a person that walks a lot and has integrated that into my mindfulness practices. So I appreciate that as well. And I love anyone who can tell me that there's more than one way to arrive.

Dr Ronald Siegel

It's also really important to realize that there's a lot of times where the intensity of emotions that we're going through is so high that it's going to be really hard to do a certain kind of practice. This sometimes surprises people when I am out myself around this but if I'm in, like, a really bad emotional state, like, I don't know, something's happened and I've had an argument with somebody I care about or some mess at work or something, the big guns for me are, first go and do aerobic exercise for maybe half an hour or more to just release some of the growth.

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Then do some kind of yoga or stretching or something like that, where I'm letting it go. And then I can do some nice walking meditation, and maybe after that I could actually do sitting meditation and be with the breath. But it's a sequence because I'm not ready to just sit there still. I mean, maybe I could force myself, but it would be hard going. And it makes a lot more sense to find pathways toward wellbeing that are gradual and that are easier and where what we do fits the state that we're in at the moment.

Meagen Gibson

And it makes so much sense, because physiologically, chemically, all of the things that happen when you get activated are meant to be used and released. And if you have a confrontation with someone, if you have an argument with someone that you love or you have a situation at work that's difficult to deal with, and you've got all the physiological activity going on that would be associated with a threat, and then try to sit and breathe your way through it or just reason your way through it in your mind, it doesn't make any sense. You've still got all this useless stuff, useless for what you're trying to do. You've got to go get rid of it. You got to move it out.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Yeah, we have to respect our animal nature, really.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Well, Ron Siegel, how can people find out more about you and your work and your books?

Dr Ronald Siegel

Well, I have a website which is drronsiegel.com, and that's a portal to all sorts of free meditation practices that you're welcome to stream and listen to and use or download, plus information about the various books is all up there as well.

And again, *The Mindfulness Solution* book is more step by step instructions in developing a mindfulness practice and adapting it to different circumstances. And the other book that, I've been involved in a bunch of professional books too, but the other book for general audiences is *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary*, which is really the fruit of me realizing that there I was, already in my 60s, having been a meditator for decades and a psychologist for decades, and you'd think that out of this I would have developed something called a coherent, secure, stable sense of self, but, nope.

My feelings about myself are fluctuating, sometimes by the minute, sometimes by the hour, sometimes by the day or the week, but basically with good fortune or bad fortune, either feeling like, hey, you know, I'm pretty good, and other times feeling, oh, you know, I'm a terrible husband or a bad dad or not so great a psychologist. Or whatever it might be. And realizing, gosh, maybe it's not just me. Maybe this is a little bit more universal than that, and how can we find more reliable pathways toward wellbeing? So that book is really about that.

[00:52:39] Meagen Gibson

I love that. Thank you so much, Ron. I'm going to check that book out.

Dr Ronald Siegel

Thank you so much for having me.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks for being with us today.