



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Using the Change Triangle to understand emotions

Guest: Hilary Jacobs Hendel

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm delighted to be speaking with Hilary Jacobs Hendel, the author of the international award-winning book *It's Not Always Depression: Working The Change Triangle To Listen To The Body, Discover Core Emotions, And Connect With Your Authentic Self*.

She's a certified psychoanalyst and accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy, or AEDP, psychotherapist and supervisor. Hilary Jacobs Hendel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Delighted to be here with you, Meagen.

Meagen Gibson

So, Hilary, I want to start by asking how you got so interested in emotions.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Well, it's an interesting story because we don't really get exposed to much emotions education, nor do people generally like to talk about emotions unless they're actively seeking to feel better. The short version is that I went back to school at age 39 to become a psychotherapist, something that I, really, in my heart had always been so interested in from the time I was a teenager, but I didn't have the courage to do it until I had some life experience under my belt.

And when I went back for my masters, I knew that after that, I would become a psychoanalyst, because that was sort of the crème de la crème of how to be well trained, classically trained, in New York City where I grew up. And my dad was a psychiatrist. And we were always talking about psychoanalytic thought and how great that was. And then on the way to psychoanalytic training, a friend of mine had recommended that I listen to this woman named Diana Fosha who was a psychologist who was talking about emotions.

And this friend of mine was smart and wise, and I took her advice and I thought, oh, emotions. That's interesting. I haven't had much specific education on emotions. And I went to a conference that she was speaking at in New York City, where I live, and one of four speakers, and the

conference was on emotions and trauma and attachment, none of these things I had had a lot of exposure to in my self help reading as a teenager and my schooling as a social worker and even in psychoanalytic training, because at that time, those were not considered analytic. Now they are. Attachment theory and so forth.

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So I went to this conference and I distinctly remember that Diana Fosha did the first talk and started talking about emotions, and that emotions were responsible for us feeling anxious and depressed when we buried them. And she put up the triangle that, you know, we've talked about many times that I am so passionate about sharing with the general public that explained how when you bury emotions, you develop symptoms and how they were calling, in AEDP, this type of therapy, they were defining trauma in this way of having overwhelming emotions that we can't cope with and are too alone with.

And therefore, the only alternative is for our great minds to be able to figure out how to push them down and block them. And that was my introduction. I left this conference so excited for many, many reasons, all having to do with that I learned something about emotions that was immediately really transformational for me. I understood and the triangle organized my whole mind and body in a different way.

And I wanted to continue to study AEDP and to learn from Diana Fosha, which is exactly what I spent the next 20 years doing. AEDP. And then midway in my journey, my pet peeve that I had no emotions education and that none of us getting any emotions education turned into a moral outrage. And that's when I started writing about emotions and creating resources for the public. The idea is like a grassroots movement, because the type of therapy, even AEDP, was considered a type of trauma therapy.

It was sort of relegated to the side because still people thought of trauma as things that war veterans go through or catastrophic events. Now that's totally changed. And we understand that trauma is, most of the trauma we all experience, and we all experience trauma, is relegated to this invisible kind of status where it hasn't even been named as trauma. But that's changing. So that's the re-definition is that in order to heal trauma, we have to be able to tune into our emotions, which I'm sure we're going to be talking about for the rest of this.

So that was the introduction to emotions and it changed my life in that moment in so many ways that I couldn't ever foresee and changed my mental health. That's why I'm so delighted that you want me to keep talking about them.

Meagen Gibson

You were saying it changed your mental health, and so I don't want to bypass that statement at all. Could you say just a little bit more about how it had that kind of an impact on you?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes, absolutely. And I know people listening will be able to relate to this. I had been anxious a large part of my life, and I think that's human. We all suffer from anxiety. And later in my twenties and thirties, I had been through two major depressive episodes and for both anxiety and depression

before I learned what I learned in my training in AEDP and my exposure, I thought that the anxiety and depression were really the end of a story.

[00:06:07]

Meaning that I had to figure out how to treat my anxiety, whether it was being aware of it and taking deep breaths which, of course, is a good thing to do, or treating the depression with medication, which I did and which I think is a good thing to do when you can't get out of bed. What I learned after I had had these, well, I was still anxious for most of my life, but what I eventually learned is that the symptoms of anxiety and depression are in fact symptoms that have a deeper root and a deeper meaning.

And when that meaning and root being the core emotions that are being triggered underneath by life events were addressed, that these symptoms would certainly ease up and quite possibly go away. In my case, I have not had another major depression since I've been identifying my emotions, validating my emotions and using the various techniques that I teach others, moving them up and out through my body, making the proper use of emotions.

In our society, we think it's normal and we've learned to bury them and deny them and avoid them and detach from them. And that is not how emotions were meant when they evolved over hundreds of thousands of years, that they evolved to help us survive and to give us information and data about how the environment is affecting us. And when we learn about them, it's a game changer because we don't have to be afraid of them anymore.

It's still that they can hurt and they can be excruciatingly painful. Like when we experience sadness over losses, important losses for us, be that as it may, working with them not only is healthier, but we end up feeling much better and more confident and ultimately growing our sense of calm as we go through life. So to me, it's a huge key to being human is understanding emotions and learning how to work with them. And it's completely different than how most of us are still raised and still think that emotions are something to sort of get around.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Temporary inconveniences for everyone around us. Right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

I've been seeing a lot of stuff on social media lately about how people are saying, you know, I would appreciate less calculus and more emotions education. And I know that that's probably something you might agree with.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Oh, my God, it's playing my song. Exactly. Because emotions affect us every minute of every day. Maybe not every minute of every day, but certainly on a daily basis, things happen and our brain and body desire to have emotions triggered. And if you don't know what's going on, it's much

scarier. So you're adding the discomfort of the emotion and then on top of it, you're putting like, what's happening to me? And how much can I possibly stand? And am I going to go crazy? And why do I feel so anxious? And where does this end?

[00:09:13]

To I know exactly what's happening to me, I know that it makes sense, that it's natural and that here are some steps that I can do to make things a little better, to work with emotions and to heal trauma. Makes sense. Doesn't take one talk like this or one therapy session. It's a process. But even the engaging in the process, once you see the triangle, which explains how to move from traumatic disconnected states and anxiety and depression, which are symptoms of trauma, how you get down back to the body and emotions and then how you move through those to create a regulated nervous system at the sort of bedrock here, which is what we're trying to do.

And a regulated nervous system is where we feel our best. And you feel like, this is me, and I can go out into the world, and even though things are scary, I can still do it, and I can portray who I am in the world. And my relationships improve because I'm now tuning into what's really going on for people, and I can have meaningful discussions about it. But it's a 180 from what we do now, which is we avoid tension, we avoid what's happening in the room. We avoid relationships, emotions, and traumatic experiences.

And most people don't even realize they've been through trauma. It's sort of news to them, especially childhood trauma, but we avoid talking about anxiety and talking about depression like there's something wrong with us when it's totally normal and human to go through.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. I remember when I first learned about this type of trauma that we're talking about and came to terms with my own was right around 2016 through 2018. And you would not have wanted to meet me at a cocktail party during those years because all I wanted to talk about was trauma. And not necessarily mine, but just like, trauma in general. I'm like, oh, my God, did you... Trying to educate. Nobody wanted to talk to me.

But then the pandemic hit and now everyone wants to talk to me about trauma. I'm the most popular person at any cocktail party. They're like, what do you do for a living? And I'm like, well, I interview experts about trauma. And they're like, wow! People are, more or less, more willing to acknowledge trauma, talk about their emotions, acknowledge anxiety and depression and the things that are universally difficult for people.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes, things have changed a lot. So you were ahead of your time. And I still think that the book that is really an easy read for people that say they don't read anymore or listen to is still somewhat ahead of its time because otherwise it would have sold millions of copies. Everybody on the planet needs a basic emotions education, but most people don't realize it yet, and they're scared of even the word emotion or they judge it.

[00:12:17] Meagen Gibson

I'm glad you brought that up. Yeah. Because that actually is one of the questions that I had for you, which is, I imagine myself, you know, from 2016, listening to this, and knowing the state that I was in, and I'm sure that you can relate to this, tell me if you can't, but where you're at the beginning of your education about trauma, anxiety, depression, perhaps trying to take agency back toward coping with those things and learning about them and trying to find a different way or a better way than you have in the past.

But to people who have been busy just managing symptoms and haven't quite gotten to the core causes yet, causes a lot of avoidance, as you said. Avoidance of what might trigger them, avoidance of their feelings. So for those people who are afraid to get curious and afraid of the process, what would you want them to know about it?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

What I would want them to know is that that is totally natural. And I felt the same way. And I never really considered myself a teacher. I can imagine being a teacher in elementary school would be too hard. But now I have come to think of myself as an emotions educator. And as an educator, I think if you just learn a little bit, if you can digest just learning what is a core emotion, for example, this is something that Charles Darwin wrote about in the turn of the century. This is nothing new.

Understand why we have an emotion and how something happens in the environment, for example. And let's say that something in the environment is, let's say, Meagen, you just said, Hilary, you're not that great. I don't even know why I'm interviewing you today. You can imagine that that would evoke emotions in my brain. So I would be hearing you say, oh, Hilary, you're not so great. And it would probably evoke a combination of sadness. Anger. Why did you have me here today if you don't like me?

Sadness. She doesn't like me. Shame. Because it would be humiliating. And all of those emotions that got triggered in the limbic system in the brain, it's in the middle part of the brain here, that's not under conscious control. That's why we can't control emotions, which is news to most people. After it affects me here, it's going to activate my body for action. So a core emotion like anger is going to activate all the organs in my body to ready it for a fight, for example.

And if I was frightened of you, my fear would activate all the organs in my body to run away. That's exactly the purpose of core emotions, is to make us move in these ways that are maximally adaptive. So my suggestion would be just learn about core emotions. See what you connect with, see what you don't connect with, and then take it from there. See if you want to learn a little bit more.

As I was thinking about, how do I educate the public of emotions? Will anybody even care? It was initially in writing these little bits that are very relatable. And here's an exercise, what's the difference between a thought and an emotion? Have you ever thought about that? And here's a little exercise to give you an experience of a thought and of an emotion. That was one of the first blog posts I wrote.

And then I even say, if this interests you, learn a little bit more. If it doesn't, it's not your time. So that's the idea. And to be kind to yourself. If you're not ready to learn about emotions, there's a reason. There's sort of a wisdom that maybe it's too much for you right now. It's just too scary.

Maybe you think it's boring, but I would call that a defense on the Change Triangle, a protective way to stay away from something that would cause some discomfort and anxiety.

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But eventually I think everybody will be getting emotions education in their formal schooling starting in elementary school and really teaching the Change Triangle which I think maybe after I'm gone or hopefully before, will be like a household tool. I see it that way. It's not anything for people that I, you know, I didn't invent that, I just adapted it from the scientific literature.

So I think that's how it will go, that it will be slow because for hundreds and hundreds of years we were fed the lie about picking yourself up by your bootstraps and everybody's independent. And I say it's a lie because we're interdependent, we are independent and we also need connection to thrive and we need connection to our bodies and our emotions to thrive and survive in life and to not have symptoms of what we're seeing everywhere which are symptoms of trauma.

The main ones being anxiety, depression, addiction, bullying, aggression, those types of things. It makes sense that there's symptoms because when emotions want to come up and be validated, we push them down with other types of inhibitory emotions. And then we move over to defenses of which aggression and depression and all the symptoms, practically, in the DSM-IV, not all, but certainly the ones that have to do with blocked and buried emotions like personality disorders, you can really find roots and healing in making space for emotions. It's both simple and hard.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly, right. Both simple and hard. Sounds simple when you're just thinking about it but when you're actually doing it and trying to feel the things and to go through the process, it feels a lot harder than it should be, doesn't it, at first.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

it does. And that's the main thing. You can't think your way through an emotion. You have to experience it. So the Change Triangle is just a simple upside down triangle. That's another thing I suggest. Just look at this Change Triangle. You don't have to work it yet. You don't have to do anything with it. Just see if it makes sense because it applies to all humans.

But when you then, as I teach in the classes and one on one therapy and in coaching, ask when someone says, oh, I feel sad and then you say can we stay connected while you turn in towards the feeling of sadness in your body to notice, how do you know you're sad? What do you feel? That leap of faith to come out of the head and to sense, oh, I have a heaviness in my chest. I feel some pressure behind my eyes that tells me I want to cry. And then to be asked to stay with that, to let the sadness come up and out through tears or just a wave.

It's scary at first, but when you find someone safe to do the work with, or you just feel bolstered enough in life that you can go through some exercises and experiment, it's such a radical game changer because all of a sudden we don't have to run away from our experiences, our internal experiences. We can be curious and build compassion towards ourselves, and then you can change the brain. That's why it's the Change Triangle. It's really the way to change the traumatic reactions that we have.

[00:19:56] Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And you said a couple of things that I want to come back to because they're so important, but when you were talking about the limbic system, and correct me if I'm wrong, but that's part of the autonomic nervous system, right? Like you said, out of your control. So I think people misunderstand often that the initial emotional response is what we're talking about, not your emotional state, as it is all the time, is not out of your control, but the initial input and then the feedback as to how you feel is out of your control. That's just like your nervous system responding to stimulus and response.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. Right. So you can't work on yourself so that when a wild dog is about to attack you, you don't feel fear. Some people are born with much less emotion... The waves are shorter. There was that movie about, did you see the movie about the guy that climbed in Yosemite Park...

Meagen Gibson

Free solo?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah! They studied his brain and he didn't really have much fear. That makes sense, but most of us have fear. You cannot condition that out. But what you can control is once you have the emotion, your reaction to the emotion. And so many of us have anxiety. We're not aware. And what it does is it speeds us up and we start controlling everything around us and making our relationships and our family miserable.

Or we withdraw, or we have some response to the emotion other than, or the anxiety, knowing that it's happening and saying, okay, I know something just happened. I sense my anxiety. Let me work with my anxiety. Name the underlying emotions, process the underlying emotions, and then think through, how do I want to get my needs met? How do I want to connect and share this with someone?

Or maybe I don't. And I just realize I just needed to process that emotion and there's nothing more to be done. Or I've made a connection with my past trauma. And I know I need to see a therapist or a counselor to work on that, to decrease my trigger. Does that all make sense?

Meagen Gibson

Yes, it's making complete and total sense to me. And I'm imagining if somebody is listening, they're thinking, that sounds like an awful lot of stuff to do. But what I want to reassure people is that the process actually doesn't take a whole lot of time. At first you're just noticing stimulus and response. You're noticing my partner was talking to me and I interpreted their facial expression as aggression or disappointment. And just to be able to say I've interpreted that, now I feel I feel sad, I feel disconnected, I feel guilty, I feel shame, I feel whatever it is and it could be many things.

And to know all that's happening doesn't mean that you have to respond in the moment with I saw you make a face and I don't know what it means and this reminds me of my dad. If you have the time, by all means you can, but just the accountability part, the personal responsibility part of

naming, identifying and becoming more familiar with your reactions to the stimulus around you is kind of what I think is like the base level usefulness of the Change Triangle and all the work that you've done.

[00:23:26] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes, I do think that is hard to do. I mean, that first bit, to slow down and remember to check in. It's so much easier for us to see other people, to judge other people, to blame other people. And we certainly don't want to judge or blame ourselves. And in relationships it's not that useful either. But the ability to just look inside with some curiosity and compassion and to remember to do that.

I suggest people put in their calendars when they're just beginning to want to be mindful and to work with emotions, just a calendar reminder. Remember just to stop for a minute, just scan your body and just notice what's happening inside your body. And just that practice builds on itself. But I think ultimately just what you described as, certainly that was where I wanted to go, having been divorced and getting remarried, I didn't want to make those same mistakes. And I knew in my heart that it had to do with those moments.

Recognizing, like you said, it's just such a great example, some tone or some expression and not being too quick to react. We can validate the reaction, we can notice it, we don't have to push it away. And just is there a little space to say, you know what, like you said, you sound angry, is that what you're experiencing? Because we can't always read correctly. And to question intent in relationships when you're having a fight, did you mean to hurt my feelings? And just hearing you don't know, can really, okay, but my feelings are hurt. What's happening?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Goes a long way, doesn't it?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

It goes such a long way. Personal accountability. Oh, yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And because you can't be responsible for anybody else's emotions or behavior, all that you have at the end of the day is your own. So you're not going to be able to self awareness someone else out of their behaviors or emotions. You can't say I noticed that you... And just make it all externalized because the world will not bend to your comfort, unfortunately.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Right. And hopefully it's nice to seek out a partner that's interested in self awareness and growth and development.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And I just want to validate people too. Something that you said earlier just about you can't determine who's going to be more susceptible or sensitive to traumatic experiences and developing trauma. You could have quintuplets who are all born on the same day and raised in the

same house, and they could all experience the same thing and all have completely different responses to it. Some of them might develop trauma and some might not. So it's not a personal failure for your nervous system to assign meaning to a situation.

[00:26:26] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Not at all. The way that I understand that is we're all a mix of genetics, the disposition that our genetics brings forth. All the rage now is to talk about highly sensitive people. And I would just say that everyone is on a spectrum and everything is somewhat normal. Because if you exist, you are part of the human spectrum, and then you place yourself I'm highly sensitive or I'm highly emotional or I'm not.

And then experience. We are wired in according to where we are and what's happening in our environment. So if we live in a chaotic environment and we're sensitive by nature, we're going to have a lot of emotions being triggered from the chaos because generally kids like things calm. They want calm, and they want to feel not alone. And so if there's a chaotic household where people aren't attuned to me as a kid and I am being bombarded by feelings, by being left alone or by the noise or by the chaos or by the other emotions that are contagious that I'm always picking up on, and it's exceeding my capacity, I'm getting more and more and more and more anxious, and no one's there to help me, that's what's ripe for trauma.

And in this case, what is the trauma? It's that I was a sensitive child in a chaotic environment with not enough people recognizing, seeing me and giving me support, which may just be picking me up and soothing me or saying, hey, buddy, how are you doing? Something like that. And another person may just thrive in chaos and not have the same kind of symptoms that they develop later in life.

How about I put up a screen share of the Change Triangle. Do I have the ability to do that? And for people listening out there, I recommend googling the Change Triangle. There's a one page description with an example of how, a typical example, on a regular day that I might work the Change Triangle. This is a tool. Also, I should let you all know who are watching, you can print out a copy of this on my website, in the toolbox section, and I recommend everybody having a copy taped to their refrigerator.

So not only is it a reminder to start to think about where you are in this triangle, which I will put in right now, but that the whole family has a language with which to begin to talk about emotions. Can you see that, Meagen?

Meagen Gibson

Yes.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Okay, so basically we have an upside down triangle that is a two dimensional representation of so much happening inside our mind and body. And the closest way we could sort of internalize this is if you imagine the triangle is superimposed on your body with the point, let's say, in your midsection, a little bit above your belly button, because emotions, core emotions, these things down here, live in the body. So we want to put the point in the body.

[00:29:41]

And then let's say it comes up and sits above our shoulders, between our shoulders and our head. Because when we get triggered and we block or bury or suppress or repress our emotions, it takes us out of our body. We tend to end up ruminating in our head and craving things and having all sorts of behavior stuff. So that's the triangle. And it basically diagrams that if you look at the point of this, we have these, every single one of us, men, women, every gender, every color skin, every person on Earth is born with these basic core emotions of fear, anger, sadness, joy, excitement, disgust, sexual excitement.

And we're born with them ready to do their thing. So when we come out as little babies and something in the environment or atmosphere makes us feel sad, like a loss, like our mother walks out of the room, we're going to feel sad, we're going to cry. Or if something dangerous is lurking, we will feel fear, or something is making us feel happy, like snuggles, we're going to feel happy. And you can think of this as individual software programs.

They come up when they get triggered. They kind of focus, they function like a wave. They come up. Similar to when you stub your toe and you know that you stub your toe and you're like, oh gosh, I stubbed my toe. And there's no pain at first because it has to travel to the brain and you're waiting. And then the pain starts to come, maybe after a minute, a second, 2 seconds, and then it gets worse and worse. And so you're riding the wave of your pain, of your stubbed toe, and you're wondering, how bad will this get?

It reaches its crescendo and then you're like, oh my God, it's starting to feel better. Better, better, better. And then you go back to baseline. Same thing with the core emotion. They come up like that. And our goal is to be able to learn tools and techniques and enough education so that we're not scared, so that we can ride the wave of emotion. Because when we do, we return back to this, what I call for the general public, the open hearted state of the authentic self.

Therapists and neuroscientists would call it a regulated state of the mind and body. And in this state, we return back to calm, right? If you're talking about the autonomic nervous system, we're not in fright or flight or freeze. We're in a calm, balanced homeostasis. And you know that you're in this open hearted state, this regulated state of the authentic self, because it's sort of marked by all these C words. Calm, curious, connected, compassionate, confident, creative, courageous and clear.

And we can look for these aspects of ourselves. When we feel all these things or even can connect to some of these things a little bit, it feels really good. And that's where we want to spend as much time as possible. Now, no one is in this state all the time. And it's not meant to be a goal. It's meant to bring awareness that we can move from the top of the triangle when we are in our defenses, which is anything that we do to avoid experiencing emotional discomfort, right?

And there's a whole host of defenses that I mentioned before, but even in the moment defenses, like, I don't know if you've been ever talking to someone and you can sort of know the tension is going to rise, or maybe you're not even aware that there's emotions happening, but somebody breaks eye contact, or they're like, whatever. Or they say there's a glass of wine around, or they're like, I'm going to play solitaire. So there's all these ways that we distract and regulate our emotions from this defensive part on the triangle.

[00:33:42]

And the other part of the top of the triangle, which are these things that are when we're not in connection with our emotions, are these inhibitory emotions, which we all know every human being experiences anxiety, shame and guilt. But it was so interesting to me that the purpose of these emotions, or maybe if we don't say the purpose, what they end up able to do, is to obscure our core emotional experience.

So if growing up, I learned that my parents really didn't respond favorably for me to feel joyous, which, believe it or not, happens if a child is exuberant and the parent says, what are you so happy about? At a vulnerable young age, it's going to create an experience of shame, which is another emotion I encourage everybody to learn and read about. I have some book recommendations on the toolbox of my website, but it's an insidious shame. It's everywhere.

And shame makes us fold in like a turtle going into a shell. And it's very lonely and it's a viscerally, excruciatingly painful experience. And that's why we bury it with defenses. We cover up that we are feeling chronically ashamed. So, for example, another defense would be bullying. Under every bully is some shame that they're covering up. And under the bully's shame are these emotions that when these things originally started to come up and the child was left alone and couldn't process it.

So this is the triangle and it's something that we can identify at any given moment of the day. I may be in a defensive state, I may be having anxiety, guilt or shame or I may be experiencing a core emotion and my goal is to allow that experience so that I end up feeling regulated and calm again, calm enough, and that's when I start to think about what do I need for myself? How do I use this emotion to help me or my relationships in the best way possible?

And so we keep working this triangle over time again and again and then the byproduct of that is spending more time in the open hearted state of the authentic self. And trauma basically happens when we are continually cut off from core emotions, we experience symptoms of trauma. And that can be anything from out of body experience, anything in the DSM that talks about flashbacks... Parts of our experience get kind of cordoned off and compartmentalized so you may just have the smell of something that will trigger the bad memory.

We sort of feel fragmented. And the goal is to find the emotions, it's the great connector, the glue, to be able to have an experience with a memory and an image and have it be coherent again and to process the emotions from that time so that we feel calmer and calmer and that there's this kind of sense of a narrative of this happened to me, kind of turning the trigger and the ghost into an ancestor.

We're not going to change the past but we can change, in trauma work, how we feel about the past. I'm triggered right now or the terrible thing that I went through but my body is calm or much calmer than it was when I used to remember that experience, smell that smell, hear that song, do this movement, that kind of thing.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I will say that this is one of the... The open hearted state, and the authentic self description, is one of the things that I return to again and again and again as my signal that I'm not using the Change Triangle and that I'm not connected to my emotions. Because anybody who's in

a state of depression, trauma response, or anxiety, knows that curiosity and compassion and creativity are, like, the first thing to go. They're just out, for me, anyway.

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And I find that that happens to a lot of people, right? And so just knowing that definition of what the open hearted, authentic self is, and then when I don't feel connected to that description, that's how I know I've got to work the Change Triangle.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Brilliant. And that is so brilliant, it's reminding me of a session I had today, because a lot of the defenses are so like we're fish in water, we don't even realize. I was talking today with someone about controlling. And how do you know the difference between being controlling, and controlling is a defense that many of us have, probably 50% of the population, particularly women, because you're used to kind of managing things with children and whatnot, so when does, we were asking the question, what's control versus what's just having an opinion on how to do things that's just your way, but doesn't mean that another person's way isn't equally right?

And we're just trying to loosen this defense of controlling. And the way that I would do it is exactly how you described, it's like when you're in that state, are you curious about how other people are perceiving you? Are you compassionate to how other people are perceiving you? Those are just two... The curiosity and the compassion is really huge for really reading if you're in those places. And it does a tremendous amount for relationships to kind of lean into those.

And if one wants to work on a controlling defense, which, again, these defenses are protective, we don't want to blame or be pejorative about defenses and goodness knows and analytic training and psychoanalysis, they were, they were judging people's defenses left and right. It just didn't feel right. Because we develop defenses as children and later on, for reasons, and in those moments that defenses were created, we needed them to survive.

So in AEDP, we like to think of them as absolutely brilliant. The problem is, as you get older, the benefits that our defenses cost us, cost us dearly in many ways. And so the goal is not to get rid of defenses. We just want to be able to use them flexibly. There are plenty of days that I have a tough day at work or a tough time with my kids, or some other tough time where I'm like, just give me a half an hour lying in bed playing solitaire on my phone.

And that's a defense. But I have the choice of using that defense, or I could work the Change Triangle, or I could feel courageous to talk about someone with it. So back to controlling, how do we loosen the stuckness and the grip of controlling? Well, like with any of these defenses or symptoms, they're the same thing, if we don't do that defense, what do we feel?

So if, as I was giving advice to someone today, if you feel like telling your spouse how to do something, don't, and notice what it feels like in your body not to say it, not to do it. You'll probably feel some pressure, you may feel some anxiety, you may feel enraged, but this is all the stuff we have to get to and validate and make space for. And again, whether you work at self help on your own or with a coach or with a therapist, a regular therapist or with a trauma therapist, that's just based on what a person needs, and there's various ways to do that.

[00:41:42]

And one of the nice things that the book does, this book that I wrote that really anyone 15 years or older will be able to understand, I wrote it so simply and without jargon, is there's stories of how you work the Change Triangle. Because we can't think our way through an emotion and you have to experience an emotion viscerally and healing happens through that process, how do you write that in a book? Well, you have to write stories.

And so I show step by step, if you're a fly on the wall in my office, how people and I move through defenses, through inhibitory emotions, through the core emotions, and then into that open hearted state in a session. And then once we're in that open hearted state, that's also not the end of the story. Then we milk those good feelings. That's the gold and spirals of like, what is it like to have been able to process an emotion and to feel calm now? What does that bring up for you?

And that's usually when pride in the self and gratitude and all these healing emotions come up. And then we work with those. What do those feel like in your body? And can you stay with those? And it's usually filled... That's where vitality when someone is depressed and you get to those emotional experiences, that's when the vitality snaps back. And it's not like you just vent and you go back to normal.

These are transformational experiences working with emotions. That's why I'm so excited about this type of work. It's how we transform, it's how we change. That's why it's called the Change Triangle.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well said. And one of the sentence gems that I developed when I was reading your book, before I could get, I needed a bridge between my stimulus and my exploration. And so I would say to myself, it makes sense that you feel. And I wouldn't even know what I felt yet, but when you said control, it reminded me of that because one of my big, like, I have a lot of control issues, right? Or at least I did, I'm working on them.

But control came up a lot. And I would say to myself, it makes a lot of sense that you want to control X, Y, Z because... And then I would state whatever it was I was in fear of or however I was feeling. But I needed a little bridge statement to validate whatever was coming up for me so that I could actually get to what was coming up for me.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Right. And that's the compassion, to validate is to be compassionate. It makes sense. As opposed to, what's wrong with you? And the way we relate to ourselves oftentimes, it was another session today, when we're working with a traumatic part of somebody who didn't trust anybody. And then I was asking that person how they felt about that part that wasn't trustworthy. And they were mad at that part for making it so hard on them.

And this person has children. And I said, well, what do you think about a parenting style where your child says, I don't trust anybody, and then you yell at them for being bad? Do you think that makes them more trustworthy or less trustworthy? And they knew it was less. That's oftentimes the hardest thing is if we were treated badly, we treat ourselves badly. And if we young parts that were

abused or neglected, even on the tiniest level, like emotional abuse, just being called stupid is emotional abuse, being called a name is abusive.

[00:45:22]

I can't think of any good reason to ever call anybody a name. And that we have to then relearn how to be kind to ourselves, kind of using how we're kind out in the world. Would you treat a friend that way? No, I'd never talk to a friend that way. Well, maybe we could take a little bit of that and apply it to yourself since you have to be your number one, or you don't have anything to give to anybody in your life. Whatever the reason, people glom onto different reasons.

That gives them the motivation to really try. And everybody deserves to be loved and everyone deserves to be validated, particularly emotional validation. It's just a small thing, I hear you, I understand, of course you're sad, goes such a long way as opposed to trying to fix, oh you shouldn't be sad. What's so sad about that? That just makes us feel alone.

So the undoing of aloneness in combination with working on emotions, and sometimes the undoing of aloneness really means a therapist who is well trained in attachment and emotions so that the person comes to trust them because they are alone in their family, like many people are. And there isn't anyone that understands this type of work.

But eventually it can become, you know, I think you can, when I work with couples, I show the triangle, and you can become... You don't have to call yourself each other's therapists. But after all, therapists are in the world because the people around us have let us down. So if we can and there are certain forms of therapy, child therapy, where you're actually not doing therapy on a child, which I don't believe in, you're bringing the parent in to teach the parent how to welcome and validate emotions. And that's really how it makes the most sense.

Meagen Gibson

The biggest impact. Right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah. In fact, I think it's so ridiculous that they're teaching kids mindfulness and emotions in elementary school and they're not making the parents read my book because I don't know of another practical book on emotions that's out there with a tool. And if the kid goes home to the same family and they haven't learned anything, they're just going to retraumatize the kids. So the parents, the teachers, school personnel, have to understand this stuff first. Everybody wants to fix somebody else first. Know what's going on so that you have empathy for other people.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Trying to teach children to have emotional maturity won't help if the adults around them don't also possess emotional intelligence and maturity.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Better said than I did. Excellent.

[00:48:09] Meagen Gibson

No, not at all.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

No, exactly. That's exactly right. That's just exactly right. I wish I had seen this Change Triangle before I had children. I wish I had seen it when I was in high school. It would have changed a lot of things, I believe, because I had no idea that under... I didn't have a concept that there was something underneath what I was experiencing. So I didn't know to even go look for it. I may not have been interested.

I may still want to punch someone in the nose if they told me to take a breath, but at least I would have something that I could call upon in times that I needed, where I was like, oh yeah, I saw that triangle. Maybe there's something more that meets the eye. And the arrows here, just for people to know, is that we can go up and down and around in moments and in times and over weeks and months. And so it's a very dynamic thing. But the goal is really, this thing, is to work from defenses down here. So it's a handy map.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I'm going to stop sharing really quickly. Or can you stop sharing?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah, I'm going to stop sharing.

Meagen Gibson

That way we can properly say goodbye. Hilary Jacobs Hendel, thank you for being with us today. If people want to hear more about you and your work and the Change Triangle, how can they do that?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Well, they can go to my website hilaryjacobshendel.com. Hilary has one L. You can just google the Change Triangle and you'll end up there, and there's tons of free resources. Then I also wrote a curriculum and we give classes, mostly my partner Heather is doing the classes now, and it's where we work the Change Triangle together. And my blog has articles that they're timeless because I'm writing about symptoms and how you recover.

And then, of course, I just recommend that people buy the book and listen to it or go to the library. I don't mean for you to buy it. I've already been paid for that. I really mean just to access the book, not to hawk my wares, because it's really accessible and there's exercises, and there's no downside to having the information. You never have to do anything with it. But a little knowledge is a lot of power.

And lastly, if people visit my website and they want to stay connected, you can give me your email address. And I don't abuse it. I don't spam. Once a month, I send out a newsletter, except when I

send out something from Conscious Life, because I do think that you guys do a good job of educating.

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And so that's it. So there's lots of ways. I also have a [YouTube channel](#) where there's actual experiential exercises and presentations that are more in depth. So I hope people come and check it out. And that's it. Do with it what you will.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you, Hilary.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Thank you, Meagen.