



Conscious Life presents

# TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

## Navigating high sensitivity in the workplace

**Guest: Melody Wilding**

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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 speaking with Melody Wilding, best-selling author of *Trust Yourself: Stop Overthinking And Channel Your Emotions For Success At Work*. Named one of Business Insider's most innovative coaches for her groundbreaking work on sensitive strivers, her clients include CEOs, C-level executives, and managers at top five Fortune 500 companies such as Google, Amazon, J.P. Morgan, and more.

Melody has been featured in The New York Times and the Wall Street Journal and is a contributor to the Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, Psychology Today, and Forbes. Melody is a licensed social worker with a masters from Columbia University and a professor of human behavior at Hunter College in New York City. Melody, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Melody Wilding**

I am so excited and honored to be here. Thank you for having me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. So I think one of the things that we don't talk about enough, and the main reason why I wanted to have you with us today, is because one of the side effects of trauma sometimes is not, people have this image of people that have a trauma history as being holed up in their houses and unable to function and things like that. But I know from personal experience that highly sensitive people can be extraordinarily successful in the workplace. And so I want to start by asking you, what exactly is high sensitivity?

### **Melody Wilding**

Yes, high sensitivity itself is a personality trait. It's a quality, just like someone may be introverted or more extroverted, you can be higher on the sensitivity scale or lower on the sensitivity scale. So what it really means is that you have a more finely tuned nervous system. So your nervous system, your body, is more responsive to the environment around you.

**[00:02:00]**

And what research has found over the last 30, 40 years that it has been conducted on this trait is that it means we're able to send subtleties in the environment, spot details that other people may miss, and that we process everything, our own thoughts and emotions, much more deeply, as well as being more attuned to the emotions of other people around us.

**Meagen Gibson**

I definitely want to talk about, because so many of those things, as I'm listening, I'm just noticing those all sound like incredible strengths to me, but they can also be a hindrance in the workplace as well. So how does high sensitivity show up in our careers and affect our behaviors in the workplace specifically related to trauma and anxiety?

**Melody Wilding**

Well, it can absolutely be a strength, as you were saying before. I think now more than ever, we need people who are sensitive, who are emotionally intelligent, empathetic. We need those folks in leadership positions. But anything taken to an extreme can become a hindrance. And most of us are not even aware that we're highly sensitive. I didn't find out there was a term for it until I was an adult.

And so we don't learn the tools of how to manage ourselves and how to really bring out the best in our qualities. So even our strengths can have a shadow side if they're not channeled correctly. So high sensitivity in particular, I was talking about the depth of processing. So we think more deeply, we're noticing more details. We're taking in more information from the environment around us.

But that can lead to overthinking things. That can lead to seeing all sides of the situation, so much so that you fall into analysis paralysis, for example. Or that you are so self aware that you become self conscious of your behavior and maybe even insecure because you have been told your whole life to stop being so sensitive.

So you start to deny that part of yourself. And we can become more overstimulated more quickly. We're picking up on other people's energy around us. So if you're in a highly stressful environment, in a toxic environment with a lot of negativity, you're like a sponge for that if you're not well boundaried.

**Meagen Gibson**

And have some rituals in place to take care of yourself after all that overload, right?

**Melody Wilding**

Yes, exactly.

**Meagen Gibson**

And not a lot of people have the luxury in the workplace of being able to take a break. I think about first responders, somebody who's sensitive that's in a work environment where they're unable to

set a lot of boundaries, there are not a lot of things within their control and that can be incredibly intense.

### **[00:04:44] Melody Wilding**

It can be tough. One in five people is highly sensitive. So we're about 20, 30% of the population. But the world is not made for, or by us, for the most part. So it's made for the other 80% of people.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And the other thing I was thinking while you were talking about it is also maybe a low tolerance for people who don't recognize patterns as quickly as highly sensitive people do because they're taking in all of that information. Have you found that to be true?

### **Melody Wilding**

Yes. As sensitive people we have very high intuition. It's almost like our sixth sense because we are taking in so much more. We have such a well of wisdom and knowledge and data, to pull from that informs our decisions. And so, just as you were saying, sensitive people are often the canary in the coal mine. So I hear from folks all the time that I'm the one on my team who will point out a risk I see down the road, or why I don't think something will work. And often they can become branded as the person who's the naysayer or who's being difficult as a result of that.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And then sometimes that pattern recognition is so frustrating because it almost feels like a clairvoyance. You're like, how can you not see how this is all going to fall apart and become a disaster? And other people might not value that and they also just don't see it. They're like, I don't see the problem. I haven't noticed that pattern. And you're like, how could you not?

### **Melody Wilding**

Yeah. And that's why I think it's so important that we, as sensitive people, learn to re-strengthen, trust that intuition again, because for so many of us, we've tamped that voice down over time. We've looked at external cues and external sources to say we're okay or what direction we should go. But that intuition is tremendously powerful.

But we do need to back it up with data, whether that's anecdotal from your experience, here's what's happened to me before when we took this direction, it's from outside your industry, it's another stakeholder's opinion, what have you. But it is important that we back that up with data, so that other people can see the value of what we're sharing.

### **Meagen Gibson**

That's an excellent point. You made two great points there that when our intuition and sensitivity in gathering our own data and pattern of behaviors isn't valued or isn't reflected or isn't, I can't think of the word right now, but validated, perhaps, then I'm sure that that can bleed into this overthinking that you're thinking about, where you don't trust your own intuition that has become so valuable to you and is your own personal superpower. If nobody else is valuing it or validating it, it really causes you to question your own intuition.

### **[00:07:33] Melody Wilding**

100%. I also see a lot of outsourcing our decision making, and I know I have fallen into this trap a lot in my life where if we don't trust ourselves, then we look to other people. Whenever we have to make a decision, you may ask everyone else in your life, your spouse, your friends, the Uber driver, to say, well, what do you think I should do? Please tell me what you think I should do, rather than really practicing that discernment of what do I want and how do I go from there?

### **Meagen Gibson**

That can't be understated. And I know people like this and have fallen into this myself, exactly as you said, where the data gathering can get extraordinarily... I've got pivot tables about a table, literally, that I'm going to buy or something, and then I still can't make a choice. And that analysis paralysis that you mentioned earlier, but in having experienced that on the other side, where somebody's coming to me for advice and the decision seems very obvious, and I'm like, you already know what to do, it's very clear from all the information you've gathered that you know what to do.

And so there's that deeply, more deeply, underlying thing of trying to figure out how you feel and what you really want to do. Even though the decision might be obvious, it's almost a sign that you don't want to accept what it is you want to do.

### **Melody Wilding**

Well, I think, and this is common for sensitive people who their whole time, their whole lives, have had those small traumas of stop being the way you are, stop taking things so personally, that you do learn to tamp down that intuition, to avoid it. And so what I find very helpful, I always love practical, actionable exercises and tools, and a very simple one for getting back in touch with that intuition is, let's say you have a decision you need to make.

Flip a coin. Let's say heads is yes, I do this. Tails is, no, I don't do this. Flip a coin, see what you get. How do you feel about that decision? Are you relieved if you get a yes? Are you bummed if you get a yes? That can tell you a lot about what you really want. And I think that's a very simple practice just to start getting back in the groove of listening to yourself and discerning what you actually want.

### **Meagen Gibson**

That's great. Good exercise for kids too. We all have an inner child, but I can just imagine that with my kid, if he's like, oh, I don't care, and I flip a coin, he very much cares then, if I take the decision out of his hand, he will definitely have an opinion. So your reaction will tell you a lot, won't it?

### **Melody Wilding**

Absolutely.

## **[00:10:10] Meagen Gibson**

So in an ideal world, obviously, highly sensitive people will be extraordinarily valued and respected in their workplaces for those sensitivities. But that doesn't tend to be the case. As you said, the world is not built for oversensitive, or for sensitive people, I should say. So how do you recover from a toxic workplace?

## **Melody Wilding**

And this is so common, I think, as sensitive people, in some ways, whether it's conscious or subconscious, we're attracted to difficult situations. I was just talking to a friend who relates to being sensitive, and she was saying, I just took a job because I felt like I could change everything. And I saw the potential. And when she got in, she realized quickly why everyone was leaving, why no one else had wanted to take on that mantle.

And it was because it was a very toxic work environment. So I think more than other people, we are disproportionately attracted to, and because of the way we're wired, then affected by, negatively, those types of circumstances. So this is all the more important if you are someone who is highly sensitive and has been in a toxic workplace.

I think the first step is getting closure, because that overthinking, specifically rumination, why didn't I do something? I should have spoken up earlier. Why did I stay there so long? Why did I let them treat me that way? You replay situations over and over again in your head, and it's like you are reliving that pain every single time.

And for so many people, it then recreates, they recreate many of the same patterns in their current workplace. You may live in fear. Let's say you had a boss who was not kind to you, who constantly criticized you, you may be fearful of creating a relationship with your new boss because you don't want the same thing to happen. So I better not get close, or I better not show any of my vulnerabilities. So finding closure with that experience is first and foremost.

Whether that is writing a letter to your past self, reassuring yourself that everything works out okay, here's what we learned from this experience, that can be extremely healing. You may tear up some of the documents from that or delete a folder of items you have from there, find something that's going to bring you closure with that experience, removing it from your LinkedIn profile, but so that you can put it behind you and you feel like you can start anew.

## **Meagen Gibson**

It's so interesting what you said about sometimes these environments that we find ourselves in over and over again, and sometimes there's particular environments that feel a little bit chaotic or a little bit messy, that's familiar. That's where we developed our sensitivities in developing these coping mechanisms to survive these kinds of chaotic or turbulent or unpredictable environments.

And so that piece about writing yourself a letter and saying, I understand how we got in this situation. It's familiar. We thought we could do more. We think we have superpowers and just being really kind to yourself and then whatever ritual you need to go through to put that behind yourself and give yourself a little peace about it.

**[00:13:25] Melody Wilding**

Absolutely. The self compassion is so important because if you keep beating yourself up, you're never going to be able to move forward. So having that compassion and understanding for you were in this circumstance, yes, maybe it felt familiar, but this is not your fault that you were treated this way.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, exactly. We tend to over focus sometimes, some people, anyway, over focus on our own personal responsibility instead of also saying, that was an unfair work environment that I was not in control of, and it's not my fault that people mistreated me or didn't treat me with respect.

**Melody Wilding**

Yes.

**Meagen Gibson**

And the other aspect, a large majority of our audience, not all, but a large majority of our audience is female. And rumination happens to everybody. But I was actually just doing an interview with Donna Jackson Nakazawa, that I hope everybody checks out as well, about estrogen as a component physiologically in rumination.

And so I just wondered if you could talk about if you've seen in your clients if this is more of a tendency of female employees, if there's any difference in the way that we cope? I certainly don't want to be too gendered about it, but if there are broad stroke generalizations that you can make about sensitivity and gender?

**Melody Wilding**

Yes. What's interesting is that the research shows because sensitivity is a biological trait, it's quite equal between the genders. That said, we're socialized differently. So women in particular, as young girls we're encouraged to be good, to not disrupt the status quo, to be likable in order to be successful. And that carries over into our careers and our adult lives.

And so, yes, I see a lot of women ruminate about, oh, did that person take my comment the wrong way? Maybe they're mad at me now. We worry about the relational consequences of situations much more often. I also see women get a lot into what I call future tripping, which is worrying about the future. What if I don't want to take a risk, I don't want to humiliate myself or embarrass somebody else?

And so I think socialization plays a big role. You were also mentioning before that many of us grow up in environments where we have to be very vigilant of other people's behavior for whatever reason, or we are the one in our family unit who is responsible for keeping the peace and keeping everything copacetic. And that patterning can follow us into our adult years.

**[00:16:01] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And especially in the workplace. We don't like to think of our lives as our jobs, but so much of our happiness depends on, we live in a capitalistic society, we need money, we need a job, we need a career, it's part of our fulfillment. And so while the risks are not the same in our direct safety most of the time, in most work situations, our overall sense of safety and wellbeing is directly impacted by our ability to work and keep a job and be valued in our workplace.

**Melody Wilding**

Sure. And I think there's a very real sense of belonging that comes from work. You're a part of a group of people that's achieving a certain goal. We as sensitive folks also tend to be very motivated by making an impact, wanting to reach our potential, wanting to help other people. And so I am all for work being an important part of who you are and an important part of your identity. But what becomes risky is when it becomes the entirety of your identity.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right. So shifting gears just a little bit, it's all in the same realm. But Imposter Syndrome, so related to this, so what is it and how do you cope with it?

**Melody Wilding**

Imposter Syndrome is the phenomenon of feeling like a fake or a fraud despite your accomplishments. And so you feel like that at any moment, even though you're qualified, you may have positive performance reviews, feedback, that at any moment someone is going to say, we found out you have no idea what you're doing and you're done here.

And a hallmark of imposter Syndrome is an inability to internalize your accomplishments. So you may feel like, I'm a one hit wonder. I was successful this time, but next time that's not going to happen, where you're constantly waiting around for the other shoe to drop. So why does it happen? Well, there's many reasons. Again, there's conditioning. We may have grown up with a label of being the smart one or the good student, and we feel like we have to live up to those expectations.

You may be wired to be someone who's more vigilant of other people's behavior, and so you compare yourself to them and may never feel good enough. And the work environment can play a big role in this. If a work environment is highly competitive, if there is a lack of role models, people who look like you or have gone through the same experiences, it's very easy to feel isolated and like you're the only one and you don't know what you're doing.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. A whole list of ways we can fall into that aren't there?

**Melody Wilding**

Yes.

### **[00:18:45] Meagen Gibson**

I just want to reassure people that I've never found anybody at any level of accomplishment that didn't have a little aspect of that remaining, that you're never quite rid of it unfortunately.

### **Melody Wilding**

It's incredibly common. Up to 70% of people experience Imposter Syndrome at some point in their career. And over 50% of people say they experience it daily or weekly. And so when you are sitting around, you know, a conference room or you're in line at the grocery store, it's highly likely that most of the people there are experiencing the exact same feelings, but we don't talk about them.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I also find that there will be moments in your career where you're asked to inch just a little bit outside of your comfort zone, get a little bigger, show up a little bigger, or, more importantly, for lack of a better word. And those are the moments when that voice, that protective voice, comes up and starts to make you feel like an imposter. So there's like leveling up of that.

You've been in a position a while, you're like, okay, I deserve to be here. I'm doing a great job. I'm getting good feedback. And then you're asked to maybe take on a new position that's up or more responsibility, or you're going to be managing people you've never managed before, and that's when that voice will pop up again. And so it's a very understandable phenomenon for people.

### **Melody Wilding**

Yes. A new challenge, new pressure, then kicks off that very predictable cycle of you're not good enough. You can't do this. This is the moment everyone's going to find out you have no idea what you're doing. And people usually respond in one of two ways. They overcompensate. They fall into perfectionism. People pleasing, they try to overwork. They get more degrees.

Or procrastination. Avoidance. They avoid the opportunity. They lay low, they diminish themselves. They reject praise. And so I offer that because if you can identify which of these patterns you fall into the most, it's much easier then to change your behavior.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I'm so glad that you said that. I can think of moments in my own life where I've done both in different situations, depends on the situation and the opportunity. And I'm the CEO of Conscious Life and we joke that occasionally when I'm asked to do forward facing things on social media where I'm promoting, I say, oh, time to go cosplay as a CEO because it feels so foreign and so weird to me.

But naming it, just saying, okay, time to go act like an imposter, just totally deflates the whole thing and takes the pressure off of it and quiets that voice.

### **Melody Wilding**

That is such a great strategy. It's one I offer all the time, which is creating that psychological distance. Naming that inner critic voice, whether it's the gremlin, it's the little monster, it's the inner critic, mine is Bozo, give that inner voice, that mean inner voice a name because that creates



distance from it. It helps you see that this is separate from me. It gives you just a moment of pause not to autopilot, automatically buy into what it says and make a more intentional decision about, how do I want to move forward here?

**[00:22:05] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And disempowers it from being your identity to just being like this protective part of you that pops up every once in a while to make sure you're still paying attention.

**Melody Wilding**

Exactly. Yes.

**Meagen Gibson**

So what are some other strategies to set better boundaries at work if you're one of those people that's a perfectionist or you're going to overperform as one of your coping mechanisms for this kind of imposter syndrome and speak up for ourselves more?

**Melody Wilding**

Yes. So let's talk about boundaries for a second. And I think for everyone here, a very important exercise is learning to use our emotions as tools. Learning to use them to point us towards data about changes we need to make. And how this connects to boundaries is that if you feel the emotion of resentment, that's a very strong sign that a boundary needs to be set.

So let's say you committed to a project in January. Now it is June and you're still on this project and every time you get that notification about it, there's just that seething resentment that comes up. That's a good sign that you've overextended yourself. You don't feel recognized enough that you need to set some limits there. So I would encourage everyone to do a bit of an audit on your professional or your personal life and think about where is that emotion of resentment coming up and what does that mean about where I may need to set some boundaries?

**Meagen Gibson**

And the word that comes up to me is burn. The feeling.

**Melody Wilding**

When you start setting boundaries, people will react because you're changing the status quo of the relationship, especially if you were someone who was an appeaser, who was very flexible and very overly accommodating, people are not going to like that and they're going to try to push you back to your old baseline where you were before.

And so that's so important in those times to practice assertiveness, to reiterate your boundary just calmly to say, I'm not able to do that. Thank you for thinking of me. That's not something I'm able to do right now. Another one of my favorite techniques is the broken record, where if someone is really pushing you or if someone is talking over you in a conversation, you reassert that boundary in a repetitive way, just like a broken record, but you do it in a calm, level tone.

**[00:24:31]**

So you might say, I'm speaking, excuse me, I'm speaking, I'm speaking. And that can be really helpful for standing up to people who may be trying to escalate a situation and bully you into responding in a different way.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Great tactic. And unfortunately, I think most of us have found at this point that most human beings do need to be told more than once at something. Think about any child, you've got to tell them something more than one time. I mean, I can remember a couple of years ago, my kids finally saying, they're like ten, they were like, you don't have to tell us to wash our hands every time we leave the bathroom now. You can stop now. We get it.

But there can be a moment like setting boundaries can be so hard for some sensitive people that what we want to do is set it and forget it. But holding it, restating it, like you said, being so clear and confident, even though it won't feel like that, in the necessity of it for your own self, and so that you can release that resentment that you can maintain that calm when you've got to restate it, right?

### **Melody Wilding**

Yes. And I think it's important to remember that we teach people how to treat us many times. And if we are the ones who are backtracking on our boundaries who say, hey, I don't take calls after this certain time. But then you take calls or you answer emails after that certain time, you are sending a message to people that you don't take your boundaries seriously, so why should they?

So it's very important that we have that personal accountability. Because when you do, when you follow through on those little promises that you make to yourself, that's how self trust and how confidence is built. Because you know that when I say I'm going to do something, I follow through on that. I keep that promise to myself.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. And those things might not make sense to the people that you're working with. It might be something like, I do not work after 5 o'clock, or I will not take a call before eight AM. I run a global company. I have people that work in Malaysia and in New Zealand and there's people in time zones all over the world.

And one of the hardest things I had to do in the first year was set some really strict boundaries about what hours I was going to be answering things on Slack and taking meetings. Am I going to have meetings at five AM? No, I'm not. No one wants me making decisions at that hour, right? But those boundaries don't need to make sense to the people you're making them for, I guess is what I'm getting at.

I remember, Alex Howard will laugh if he ever sees this, my cohost, early in our work relationship, I had to set a boundary with him that I will not listen to voice memos, which might sound silly to other people, but I was just like, these are making me extraordinarily unhappy. I don't want to listen to them. I have to take notes. I have to repeat them. I just need you to type out what you're going to say.

**[00:27:39]**

And he took it on and he was like, okay, I can see you feel really strongly about that. I communicate with literally everyone else in my life with voice memos, nobody else has a problem, but okay. And then he would slip up once in a while and I'd be like, I'm sorry, I couldn't hear what you said. It was in a voice memo. So we do teach people how to treat us and they will take as much slack as we give them unfortunately.

### **Melody Wilding**

Yes. And I love that. It takes confidence to say, this is how we'd like to be communicated with. And I think that's just such a great takeaway for everyone that you may have people in your lives, that you have the opportunity to give them more instruction about if you have feedback, here's how I'll best receive it so that you, person, can get the best response from me and that we can be most effective together.

So there's something in it for them as well. And it suggests so much confidence and strength when you can put that out there and say, hey, here's how you get the best out of me, here's how I work, rather than sort of just sitting back and taking anything that comes your way.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, I love that you said that and phrased it like that. Here's how you can get the best out of me. Because then you're presenting it in a way that people can receive really generously. It's not, I'm having issues that I need you to solve for me. Here's how you're going to get the best results for me. And I love that and it reminds me of the context that people learn in different ways, they process in different ways.

We've got tons of neurodivergent people that we're more aware of now in the workplace. And I had a coworker once who could not take a lot of audio input at one time. And we were all the kind of people that all talk over each other and that worked fine for us. And he said something very similar. He was like, you're going to get the best out of me in these meetings, if everyone takes a turn speaking.

And we were like, fantastic, if that's how you're going to ingest information better and be a better contributing member of the team and be happy here, then please, let's take that on board.

### **Melody Wilding**

And as you were saying, it can be little things. Because sensitive people tend to be processors, just asking for questions in advance before you have a meeting so that you can come more prepared and feel a little more settled. Simple things like that. And the way we're talking about phrasing it, it doesn't make you seem needy or weak. It comes from that place of strength.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I love that attitude about it. How can we find out more about you and your work, Melody?

**[00:30:10] Melody Wilding**

You can find me at [melodywilding.com](https://melodywilding.com). All of my information is there. You can find my book, *Trust Yourself*, wherever books are sold. And if you would like a free copy of chapter one, you can head to [melodywilding.com/chapter](https://melodywilding.com/chapter).

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. I hope lots of people take advantage of that offer. Thanks so much for being with us today.

**Melody Wilding**

Thank you.