



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Breathwork for trauma healing

Guest: Michael Stone

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

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

Today, I'm pleased to be speaking with Michael Stone. Michael attended his first breathwork session in 2005 and was blown away by the power of the breath. It had such a life-changing experience for him that he decided to focus his life around breath in support of world healing. In 2018, he launched Neurodynamic Breathwork Online in order to achieve his vision of allowing anyone in the world that wants to experience the benefits of expanded states of awareness to be able to do so safely from the comfort of their own home.

In the last three years, he's facilitated over 800 sessions of Neurodynamic Breathwork Online with participants from over 120 countries. Michael will be giving us a ten minute experiential taster session at the end of our interview. So make sure you stick around to the end so you don't miss the reward that comes from breathwork.

Michael Stone, thank you so much for joining me today.

Michael Stone

Thank you for having me on the summit.

Meagen Gibson

So, Michael, you talk a lot about the difference between a traumatic event and trauma. So could you expand on that a little bit?

Michael Stone

Yes, there are many people who have very difficult experiences in their life as they're growing up, but the same experience which could be defined as a traumatic event in one person, they'll be able to work with it and handle it and process it through, but to another person, it will be beyond their capability to handle, and it will cause trauma.

And something that will stay with them as they go on in their life, unless they actually do some work later on in their life to work with it and deal with it. And there's no judgment about that. It's

like some people at various points in their life have more resources based on their genetics, their background, or whatever, and some people don't have as many resources at that time.

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So it's really not about the event itself. It's about your ability to actually process the event and process the emotions around the event when it happens.

Meagen Gibson

And it's such an important point, too, right, because people experiencing trauma judge themselves for having traumatic effects after something happens that didn't impact anybody else. And then sometimes their friends and family can have judgments towards them about how much they've been impacted by trauma.

And another one of our interviewees that I've had on the Trauma Super Conference whose name just totally escaped me, oh, Darryl Tonemah, Dr Darryl Tonemah, talks about how his entire family was in a tornado. His wife's experience and his kid's experience was totally different from his, and he was able to see all this kind of play out in action. So I really like that you named that and that there isn't any judgment toward any one person's experience of a traumatic event.

The way that your body and your mind are going to process that isn't cognitively up to you. You don't get to decide a lot of time.

Michael Stone

Exactly. Yes.

Meagen Gibson

So given that there's no moral imperative around whether you have trauma or not, it's not necessarily your fault, I know that your research shows that neurodynamic breathwork has helped a really large percentage of those dealing with trauma. So can you tell me more about the research and people's experiences?

Michael Stone

Yes. I specifically designed neurodynamic breathwork to allow people to really dive into and work with some of the most common issues that face the world right now, like anxiety and depression, trauma. And I used my science background. I was originally in engineering and science and have done some research in neuroscience to structure the workshop and use underlying principles that will allow people to get the most benefit as possible if they have these particular kinds of issues.

And after I launched neurodynamic breathwork, since I'm in the kind of science world, I don't just go based on anecdotes, so to speak, where one person says, oh, this was amazing, or something like that. It only works for me if I actually get enough people to respond to surveys or whatever, so I have a statistically significant sample to really see what's really happening. And then if I saw it wasn't happening the way I wanted to, I would have adjusted it and made it different.

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But when I finally did launch it, after a lot of testing and a lot of work with people in breathwork and in test sessions, when I ultimately, a couple of years down the road, did a survey of over hundreds of irregular breathers, what I found was that of people that had these, especially these, three major issues, I'm starting with trauma, 84% of people got actually some or major relief from trauma if they came in with trauma issues.

And when I looked at anxiety, 89%. And depression, 67%. And those numbers totally blew my mind because with medications, to get a medication approved, if you even get an increase or an improvement in 10 or 15% of people, they think that's really good. So, clearly all the work and energy that I put into the research provided the result that I was looking for.

Meagen Gibson

That's got to be really validating after how much work you put into developing the program.

Michael Stone

Yes. And some examples of, now I'll go more into anecdotes, but I'll give you some examples from my life and also from some of the participants that were in there in terms of trauma release, from my own life, when I was growing up, I had a science background. I was always very good at things that were left brain oriented, like school, business, making money, that kind of thing.

But I was very bad at things that were more heart oriented, things where I had to allow myself to be vulnerable and to be open, and I could never figure out why. And especially in romantic relationships, total disaster. It was like one failure after the next, and I just had no idea. I was really frustrated because I'm smart, I can figure this out, but I couldn't. It was just one after the other, and ultimately I came to a conclusion that, okay, I just haven't met the right person.

But I wasn't advanced enough in my own personal work at that time to see that the other person wasn't the common factor in the relationships. It was me. So clearly at a certain point, I thought it was my issue, not the other person's issue. But it took me a while to get there. And ultimately what it took me was going and doing a psychedelic journey with ayahuasca which totally blew my mind.

It was the first time that I'd ever really felt connected to the Universe, felt safe in the world. And I just go, holy cow, if I can have this kind of experience with a substance like that, the receptors must be there in my brain, I've got to find another way to be able to have these experiences without going to Peru and doing medicine journeys.

And that's what ultimately got me into breathwork. And I originally landed in Holotropic Breathwork, which was a scientifically developed type of breathwork by Dr Stan Grof, who used his experience with LSD psychotherapy to develop it. And ultimately I tried a few sessions and had very impressive results also and said, okay, this is for me. I'm in. And that's what kind of started me on my path of dedicating my life to breathwork.

And I ultimately, over the first few sessions, did figure out what the issue was with why I couldn't have successful relationships. And in one of the sessions I dove back into my past, which is one of the things that can happen in breathwork, and saw something that happened in my childhood that I had totally forgotten about.

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When I was a child growing up, I was maybe five or six years old, and both of my parents are Nazi Germany escapees, Jewish, and they had to run for their life when the Nazis took over. And this was after being really ensconced in German society for hundreds of years where my grandfather was a World War I hero. My great, great, great grandfather saved the city, paid Napoleon to go around it, and kill everybody and burn it down.

And then from almost one moment to the next, they had to run for their lives. And so when I heard these stories from my mother and my father when I was a child, they didn't tell me this, but the decision that I made unconsciously is that the world is an unsafe place. Because all their friends turned against them, it's like the whole world turned against them. If you can't trust your country, your society, your friends, how can you trust anybody?

And that unconscious decision was what kept coming up when I started to get deeper into relationships, where it would get to a point where I would start to feel more open and vulnerable and I would shut down. It's not safe. But again, this wasn't what I was thinking in my science, conscious mind. It was just happening and I couldn't figure out what was going on. So once I got to the bottom of that, I could start to work with it.

And those are the kinds of things that can happen in breathwork, where things are brought to consciousness and then you can start to work with them and work through them. It's not like a pill where you just take it and it happens in like 2 seconds, but then it opens it up for continued processing. And it took me quite a bit of time, but ultimately I was able to have amazing relationships after a while.

And there are many other things that happened after that. I've always been very reluctant to do anything having to do with art and I just didn't know why. But it just wasn't something that ever interested me. And in one of my sessions I went back to when I was a kid in grade school, and at that time I was pretty bad.

Meagen Gibson

As is every kid!

Michael Stone

But one of my teachers, who I really respected, told me, Michael, don't ever get into art, you're hopeless. And I'd totally forgotten about that. But in one of my sessions I went back to that. Oh my God, it's like this one teacher, this one sentence, has guided my life away from something that can be really pleasurable and enjoyable. And it totally released me from that prison that I was in around art.

And in Holotropic Breathwork, which I started in, one of the things you do is what they call mandala drawing, which is where you draw after the sessions. And so after that I was totally able to make these amazing mandalas where before I just couldn't get it out of me.

And another example is sports, where in grade school or junior high I was horrible at sports. I was just uncoordinated and no one wanted me on their team, so I was always the last to get picked.

And usually when I was the last to get picked they would say, Michael, is it okay if you just don't play today? And so it's like I grew up with this thing around, I just couldn't get into sports.

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And ultimately I'd forgotten about that. And that was really affecting my health too. I wasn't doing anything with any type of physical exercise because it was this kind of resistance. And again, once that was brought up, I could start to work through it.

So all of these things where you develop these kinds of thinking patterns due to these, to me those were traumas, to other people they wouldn't have been. You can start to work with, through breathwork.

And just a couple of examples from other people that have been in my sessions. One man, his name was Brian Sharratt, I'll just say this in his own words so I don't have to paraphrase, "in my most recent session I was able to confront an incident of abuse from childhood that I'd been repressing. I was able to return mentally and emotionally to the place where it happened and radically transform my own interpretation of the experience. I remember that during the incident, at a point when I was in mortal danger, I was overcome with a feeling of utter calm combined with the certainty that I would be okay. At the time I understood how precious and meaningful this realization was. But in the days and weeks to come it was crowded out by feelings of intense shame and the urge to repress what had happened.

And during my most recent neurodynamic breathwork session, which is over 35 years later, I was able to reconnect with that sense of divine safety that I'd experienced and to recognize what a wonderful gift I'd been given. A very deep part of me was in contact with something divine that day and through neurodynamic breathwork I'm learning to revitalize and reinforce that connection. I feel excited, hopeful and genuinely optimistic in a way I haven't felt in many years."

And again, it didn't change the actual incident but it changed his perception of the incident and that's what opened up all these new possibilities in his life that just weren't available to him before. So it can be very powerful in really working with these childhood traumas that we have and being able to process through and kind of work beyond them.

Meagen Gibson

It's interesting because your breathwork story and then also Holotropic Breathwork both have that commonality of psychedelic experience kind of leading in and I know, and anybody who does psychedelic research if you want to write to me afterwards and correct me if I get this wrong, but my understanding is, I've interviewed several psychedelic researchers in clinical trials, my understanding is that why it's so powerful and useful is because it takes your amygdala, your fight or flight center of your brain, offline, disarms it and doesn't allow it to cause alarm while you're going back into these painful and traumatic memories and experiences.

And allows you to reprocess them and take a different perspective and examine them without that alert system going. And so I assume that there's something about breathwork that does that as well.

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So I would love it if you could tell me what you think the breathwork modality is so effective in that way and how it's kind of working side by side in the same way, I'm assuming, to be able to allow people to access these memories and also give them a sense of safety.

Michael Stone

Yes. There's actually three factors that really support breathwork to work. And the first one is physiological, which there's some of many of the similar things that happen in your brain as in psychedelics. And actually before we get into this, I just want to really reinforce that breathwork is not something new. It's not something that was developed in this postmodern, industrial society. It's been around for centuries.

And in ancient and prehistoric societies, breath was used as one of the principal tools for healing and self realization. It's even in the language. In Chinese Qi, it's the air that we breathe and also the energy of life. In Hebrew, Ruach is breath and creative spirit. In Latin, spiritus is breath and spirit. So this is not like a brand new development.

But what is new is being able to adapt it to modern life and to be able to create a structure around it where people can have these experiences within a reasonable amount of time and at a reasonable cost so they can actually get the full benefit of these states that we can access for breathwork. And so the physiological impact is that as you do this deeper breathing, in a connected, conscious way, that there's certain, very specific, impacts in your body.

Your blood gets more alkaline because what's happening is it's depleting the CO2 and when your body recreates and reproduces the CO2, the chemical reaction creates alkalinity in your blood. And what that does is it allows certain parts of your brain to have more activity and certain parts have less activity. And they can measure that through fMRI. So this is not just a guess. They actually see more activity here and less activity there.

And one of the areas of your brain that has less activity is a part that they call the Default Mode Network. And part of the Default Mode Network is the frontal cortex, which is responsible for the mental constructs of self and ego. And also the Default Mode Network is kind of like the conductor of the brain. It decides how much signal goes to certain areas and how much goes to other areas.

And one of the areas that it kind of keeps in line and suppresses, to a certain degree, or inhibits, is the emotional center of our brain, which is where these memories of trauma lay. And so when the Default Mode Network is kind of taken offline, it starts to allow these memories to kind of boil up to the surface where they're available for processing and healing, as that area now gets disinhibited once the Default Mode network is kind of offline. So that's kind of the physiological piece.

There's also a psychological piece. And one of the important aspects of neurodynamic breathwork is giving people the instruction to allow whatever wants to happen to happen, to really open up and really let things process through from your unconscious mind without judging, without expecting, just to really be in a place of letting go and surrender.

Normally, when we have uncomfortable things that come up for us, we suppress them back. Like anger, we suppress. Or when we have frustration, we don't really want to feel that, so we suppress it back. So our psyche is used to having us judge various experiences. And the ones we kind of

decide are good experiences, we let them process through. And the ones that are uncomfortable experiences, we push back into our body, which is actually very damaging to our health, ultimately, when all this stuff is stuck in our body and our body is trying to work through this constantly and keep the suppression going.

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But when we switch that around and basically tell our psyche and our body, please release, it's okay, I can handle this, please just let it come, your psyche listens to you. When you give it an instruction, it'll pay attention. That's why our self talk is so important. If we tell ourselves we can't do something, we won't be able to do it. In the same way I told myself I was bad at art for decades and I couldn't do art, but once I changed that story, all of a sudden my natural creativity started to flow out.

So the psychological impact of just telling yourself it's okay to release also adds to the impact of what's happening physiologically. And then there's also the music. Neurodynamic breathwork is done to music. It's a scientifically designed music set. And in general, we use 1 hour music sets. And they've done a lot of research on music and how it impacts these, what we call, expanded states of consciousness.

Most of the research has been done with psychedelics, but it's theorized that it's very similar with these breathwork expanded states since some of the stuff that goes on in the brain is similar. And the music basically enhances mental imagery. It allows people to let go more easily. It facilitates the release of intense emotionality, and it also contributes towards what we call peak experiences, where people can have these experiences of being dissolved into the universe and kind of have this oneness experience, these kind of mystical style experiences that people sometimes have.

So when you take the physiological, the psychological, and the music, it's just interwoven in this very beautiful way to create the breathwork experience.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. I want to keep going so we can get to the part where we actually show people what it's like and give them a taste. So I'm looking back at my notes, I want to make sure, I think you've gotten to almost everything. Yeah, actually we have. We've gotten to the place where we can do a little teaser.

Michael Stone

Just a couple more things I want to cover first.

Meagen Gibson

Yes.

Michael Stone

First of all, what happens during an actual session, I just want to kind of go through that so people get a sense of if they do ultimately want to try this, what they're getting themselves into.

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So it's a two hour experience. And it starts with an introductory talk and we want to make sure that people, when they go into the breathwork, that they're fully aware of everything that can possibly happen during the session. So they don't get into a place of fear or their ego mind comes in and wants them to pull back. Because many things can be quite intense during a session, like if fear comes up or if some of this childhood trauma comes up.

Or sometimes people get this kind of tension in their fingers called tetany. And when those things come up, if you're not prepared for it, it can really freak you out. But if you are prepared for it, okay, this is just another breathwork experience. It's normal. And people can just process right through. So we go through, in a very detailed way, everything that can happen.

We also talk about contraindications, things where it may not be safe to do this kind of breathwork, both psychological and physiological, because safety is our number one priority. We want to make sure that people can basically be in a breathwork session and be able to fully allow themselves to open up in a safe way.

And then, just give them some of the general principles that will allow them to dive as deeply as possible into the process. And then we have our 1 hour music set. And during the music set they get no facilitator guidance. This is all guided from what I call their inner guiding intelligence. And this is in the same way that your body knows how to heal itself when it gets cut or if you get sick, your psyche has this deeper level which always wants to move you towards wholeness, healing and health.

It's just that we're very disconnected from that amazing interability by our ego mind which is constantly chit chatting and catastrophizing and throwing cortisol into our system. So in the breathwork, through breath and music, you quiet the ego mind and you get access to this amazing inner guiding intelligence.

And so many other breathworks, there is guidance to where this facilitator is telling the person to breathe deeper or access this or access that. But this breathwork is focused on self empowerment. We want people to not only have this experience during the breathwork, whatever they need to, but also to be able to as they go back into their life, if they do choose to make this into more of a practice like a yoga, we do five live sessions every week, to be able to access this inner guidance, their intuition, more easily in their life.

So they don't have to get stuck in this decision making process where they're trying to evaluate should I do this, should I not? And just get stuck and don't do anything where they can really just connect and intuitively know what they should do and which way to go.

So it's unguided. People are always just accessing and allowing whatever wants to happen to happen. The music follows the trajectory. It's not just this very gentle meditation music. It is scientifically designed to allow people to dive as deeply as possible into the process. And then at the end, there's a couple of integration tracks which support people to start to integrate the process.

And integration is an incredibly important piece in breathwork, especially for people who have trauma. And so at the end, that's when the integration starts. And so the first step is the last couple of tracks. And the next step is we have a sharing circle at the end, where people are

allowed to ask whatever questions they have, to make sure they're complete with their experience where we're available, and also just to really experience this open, very non-judgmental space from people from all around the world.

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We have people from 120 countries, tens of thousands of people on our platform now. And to have this experience, for many people, the first time in their life when they know they won't be judged, no matter what the experience is, where they know that no matter what they say, there will be this kind of level of support from the group, and they can be open and vulnerable without being in a place of fear, of someone telling them, this is stupid, this is dumb.

They just know that it's just this amazing, safe space for people to sometimes share things that they've held inside of them for decades. And so that's kind of the next step in the integration.

And then after that, we also have a whole post-session integration structure that people can access. If people need a private coaching session, if they're irregular breathers, they can do one for free. If people need to connect afterwards via Zoom, if they feel stuck or things are coming up afterwards, we do that. We have an integration email where people can email afterwards if they need support, if they need help.

We have integration classes, like EFT classes, that people can access for free. And also with people that come in with trauma, it's very important that they have a support structure in their life so that they can process what can be very intense experiences that come up in breathwork.

So we always, in the first talk, we say if you have really deep trauma, we want to make sure that you have some support in your life so that you can, after the session, along with working with us, whether it's a therapist or whether it's people in your life, you can talk to a support group or something, so that you can really continue the integration with the support structure in your own life.

And if people don't have any support in their life, it may not be the right modality for them, because integration is incredibly important when all of this stuff starts to bubble up, to be processed and to be worked with. So, again, we provide a very robust integration structure, but we also want to make sure that people have at least some structure in their own life to continue their work.

As a result of the way that we do it, what we find is that along with those initial results that I gave you, there's also ancillary results that people get from our breathwork because of the non-guided, self empowered structure that we have. For instance, 61% get more connection to their intuition. 75% feel like they have better access to their inner guidance in their everyday life.

More than half feel more self-trust. And self trust is really, really important and part of the reason why this really works well for trauma, because one of the side effects of trauma is that people many times lose trust in themselves because what happened was there was an incident that they couldn't handle. And so they developed this thinking pattern, I can't handle stuff that comes up in my life.

And it makes them kind of pull back from things whenever something gets really, you know, when fear comes up, instead of having the confidence to really move through stuff and manifest the life of their dreams. And when they start to regain and reconnect with this self trust, and also more

than half feel more present in their body, feel more calm, all these things start to come up through this fundamental principle to self empower people and allow them to really step into their own power.

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So all those things are really kind of why this works so well for trauma and for anxiety and stuff like that.

Meagen Gibson

I love all the container setting too, and just the contextualization. We're going to give people an idea of what a session might feel like, but all of that container setting and space holding and context that you would get in a real session that was the full experience is really important to tell people so they don't just think they're going to listen to some music for ten minutes.

Michael Stone

Yeah, exactly right.

Meagen Gibson

Get what you think they would get out of a real... These kinds of results come from that larger context and container, but we can give people a little idea today. And I know I always come away from these sessions, even though they're ten minutes long and we're in the middle of an interview, I always come away from them better. And I had to take a ten year old to the dentist this morning, so I've been looking forward to this all day, Michael.

Michael Stone

Okay, all right, so, yes, let me get the music set up and then we'll get going.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I'll let you take it from here.

Michael Stone

Okay, so, basically what we're going to do now is I'm going to just take a minute or two to explain the breathing technique that you're going to use. And to get you ready to have this mini experience. And, again, this is just a very small taster of what you would get in a regular experience and really just the goal of this is just to look at how do you feel right now in your body? How do you feel? Are you in your head, are you present? And just kind of look and see.

And then after just a few minutes of breathwork, just see, has anything shifted? And just to look, just even for six or seven or eight minutes of breath, has that made any difference just in your being, in your internal world? And obviously in an hour session you do a much deeper dive into all this stuff we were talking about. So this is kind of a taster session.

[00:30:23]

Okay, so at this point, this is going to be an eyes closed experience. And if you have an eye mask available you can do that, but it's fine just to also close your eyes. But you want to be in a space where it's not too bright in the room if possible. And you can do this either sitting up or laying down. Either one is fine. You want to be comfortable, be in a comfortable space. If you have tight clothing on, you might want to loosen it around your belly or your stomach or your chest so you can breathe freely.

And we're going to use a breathing technique where you're basically just going to take full, deep breaths, in and out through the mouth, versus nose, and breathe in a way where your breath is connected, where you're always breathing in or breathing out. And you can just breathe at a normal pace. It's totally fine. But just take full deep breaths in and out through the mouth and have connected breathing.

So at this point you want to close your eyes, bring your attention inside, just take one deep breath, letting go of what happened earlier today or what's going to happen later, bringing yourself into your inner world. And now, deepening the breath, starting to take full, deep breaths in and out of your mouth. Just at a normal rhythm, but with no gaps. Breathing fully and deeply, always breathing in or breathing out.

And as you breathe in, your belly should expand. As you breathe out, it goes back to normal. Full, deep breaths in and out through the mouth, but keeping your body relaxed. No tension in your shoulders, no tension anywhere. A full, deep, but enjoyable, breath. You want to stay with this breath during the first few minutes and as the music gets gentle at the end, if your body wants to, you can bring your breath down to a normal rhythm.

At the beginning you want to stay with this breath, putting all your focus on the breath. And also if your body wants to move a little bit, just let it move. If any sounds want to come out of your body, just let that happen. Just really surrender to the experience. With your focus on the breath and the music. So breathing fully and deeply, deeply and fully, fully and deeply. Now just find a rhythm that feels comfortable, that works for you. And in a moment, the music will begin. Have a wonderful journey.

And now, if you're still breathing more rapidly than normal, just bring your breath back to a normal rhythm. Sometimes it's nice to just stay in your own space just for a couple of minutes, even with your eyes closed, just to regroup and just really take a chance to be present with yourself and your body. We almost never do that. Noticing your breath going in and out of your lungs in a very gentle way, staying in that space until it feels right to gently open your eyes.

That was a small taster session, and for anybody who is interested in doing a full on 1 hour session, we offer a free session to everybody that's interested. You just have to go to our website, [breathwork online](#), click on [try a free breathwork session](#). And we'd love to have you give it a try. With anything that's experiential, as you know, you can talk about it for an hour or two, but ultimately, you have to experience it for yourself to see if it really resonates with you and, you know, works for you.

[00:42:03] Meagen Gibson

Michael, thank you so much for being with us today.

Michael Stone

Yeah. Thank you, Meagen.