



## Conscious Life presents

### How To Decode Your Trauma

**Alex Howard**

*Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.*

#### **[00:00:09] Alex Howard**

Hi, I'm Alex Howard, and welcome to this session on how to decode your trauma. But also welcome to the Trauma Super Conference. I'm sitting here today with two hats on. One hat of the founder and CEO of Conscious Life and co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. And really in this session I want to give you some building blocks and some foundational understandings to really help you get the most out of this conference. And then my second hat is as the founder of the Optimum Health Clinic and creator of Therapeutic Coaching, and as someone who has spent a lot of time researching and developing and teaching ideas around trauma.

And my hope is that the framework that I'm going to share in this session is going to help you have more context and understanding of your own experience, but also provide some map through the different interviews and discussions as part of this Trauma Super Conference. Now, I should say that the ideas in this video we're going to go into in more detail on the other side of the conference. One of your registration gifts for the Trauma Super Conference is my five day video series which is called Decode Your Trauma.

And in that video series you'll do around 20 to 30 minutes a day for five days with a series of downloadable handouts which will bring to life, little exercises to bring to life, the ideas in the series. And so the purpose of today's session is to give you a little bit of a high-level overview, to give you some foundations and definitions to help map through the conference and then we're going to do a deeper dive into this framework on the other side of the conference.

Now to give you a little bit of background on me. My passion and my journey with trauma and with self development was catalyzed by suffering from a complex chronic illness in my teenage years. I spent seven years suffering from ME/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. The first couple of years were really waiting for doctors and experts to find answers, which didn't happen. And then five years of a very intense healing journey. On the other side of this, I set up the clinic that I'd longed to exist in the years that I had been ill. That was, and that is, the Optimum Health Clinic.

The Optimum Health Clinic has now been going for 20 years and it's one of the world's leading integrative medicine clinics, specializing in trauma, fatigue, anxiety, sleep and so on. On the other side of setting up the Optimum Health Clinic, I developed the framework of Therapeutic Coaching.

**[00:03:07]**

I'm going to actually tell you a little bit about some of my personal journey that led into that in a moment. And then in more recent years, through Conscious Life, we've been running some of the world's largest online conferences on areas such as trauma, fatigue, anxiety, sleep, relationships and so on.

And so I am enormously passionate about the idea that however much we suffer, however difficult life may have been, it is absolutely possible to find pathways to change and transform. One of the things I love about these conferences is you get to hear from so many different experts, different maps and pathways towards healing, to really listen to your own inner guidance of what resonates with you.

Now, one of the things that people sometimes say is that it's a lot of content to be able to get through in seven days. So I always like to be super transparent about how our business model works. We're really passionate about making these ideas as available as we can to as many people as possible. And so for the seven days of the event, each day's content is free to watch for 24 hours in your time zone.

But if you want to have ongoing access to the conference and also to have access to our library, I think, of now 8, 9 conferences, along with all of our online courses, workshops, we have a huge library of content, then for a relatively small fee, you can purchase an annual membership. And that supports us in producing these events, in running our online platform and making these ideas available. And so the event's free for seven days, but you can have this ongoing lifetime access, as I say, it really supports the work that we do, but allows you to dip in and dip out as you wish to as you go through. And you'll see details on the site about how to buy annual membership if you would like to do that.

So coming into this session, I have a question. What is trauma? I've asked this question to almost everyone that I've interviewed on trauma. This is our fourth Trauma Super Conference, so we've now done hundreds of interviews to world leading experts on trauma. And I've asked this question so many times. When it came to writing my most recent book, *It's Not Your Fault, Why Childhood Trauma Shapes You And How To Break Free*, I felt some pressure to answer this question as clearly and as well as I could, and that became the framework that I'm going to share with you in today's session.

Part of my journey to really understanding trauma was my own journey of my own trauma. I mentioned that I had a physical health journey in my mid teens to my early 20s. In my mid 20s, though, having set up the Optimum Health Clinic, I found myself in a very difficult place personally. On the outside, I had this successful clinic and my career was doing well. But on the inside, things felt very different. I was suffering from severe anxiety, debilitating panic attacks. I couldn't have an intimate relationship longer than a few months.

And as much as things looked great on the outside, I was in a very difficult place. And I found myself on a residential retreat where we were really exploring our history around our emotions. And I found myself, you know in life, you get to those sort of turning points. You're like, I can keep going this way or I can make a choice to do things differently. And I found myself at one of those turning points. But in a way, what made it possible to do something different was the thought of continuing felt almost unbearable.

**[00:07:25]**

And although doing something different, like going closer to my feelings and emotions seemed almost unbearable, it was better than the alternative. What I started to realize was that the constant anxiety and panic was my nervous system and my emotional body's way of escaping all of these feelings and emotions that I hadn't felt. I started to realize that in my childhood, there were two major events that had shaped me and shaped my life.

One was that my father had left soon after I was born. And I think often when we think about trauma, we think about the things that happened to us. We don't always think about the things that didn't happen that should have happened, like an absent parent, that lack of holding, guidance, support, and so on. So there was the impact of my father leaving and then not being seen again until many years later, and I'll come back to that later in this session.

And the impact of growing up with a sister that had very complex mental health issues, that was unpredictable, was at times violent, was very unstable or self harming and suicide attempts and this very tumultuous family environment, not just with what was happening for her, but all the impacts that had on other people. So I'd learnt some very fundamental lessons about my feelings and emotions. I'd learnt that when people feel, when people express their emotions, other people get hurt. And in my childhood, that was often me that got hurt.

So here I am on this residential retreat, and I'm working with one of the facilitators, being encouraged to go closer to feeling my feelings and emotions. And I'm in terror. I'm in terror because I've learnt to build up these walls of defense. One of the things that I came to realize years later is that the walls that we build to keep us safe in childhood become the walls of the prison that trap us in adulthood. And so I was trying to get through these walls but it was terrifying.

As I got closer to my feelings, I started to feel the most unbearable hatred, rage and anger. And I realized quite quickly it was to do with my father. I'd never seen a picture of my father. I didn't know what he looked like, but I could feel this sense of hatred and the rage of abandonment. After feeling this hatred, this rage and the screaming and the sort of releasing of that energy, I then felt this very deep sense of sadness, like this almost unbearable grief, like my heart was breaking.

And the desperate longing for my father that I couldn't have. On the other side of feeling this intense grief and loss, I felt something else. I felt this deep sense of peace and of love. It's like underneath the hatred and the rage and the sadness and the longing was what I was really longing for. And this taught me something very important. As children, we are dependent upon our caregivers to meet our needs for us. And when they don't, those needs are unmet.

But as adults, we can meet our needs for ourselves, and what we need is within us. Almost overnight, the panic and the anxiety attack stopped. But it wasn't like a hollywood... If personal therapy was like a Hollywood movie, it would have been happily ever after. I spent the next six months feeling raging, ragefully angry, and sort of hateful. Not acting it out, I hope, with other people, but just feeling that within myself. I used to go to the gym and sort of lift weights just as a way of trying to get the frustration out. And I injured myself a few times doing that. Wasn't very skillful.

After six months of hatred and rage, I felt six months of just sort of devastated sadness and longing. A lot of crying. Went from weights to doing yoga and lying in Shavasana at the end of yoga classes, and just sort of being there and just crying, just being sad. On the other side of that,

though, I found myself in a very different place emotionally in my life. It's almost like if we go through our lives with a big black sack of all of the emotions and feelings that we haven't processed and we process that, we become a lot lighter.

**[00:12:23]**

Around this time I met my wife, and having not managed a relationship for years longer than a few months, we've now been together for 13 or 14 years and have three daughters now together, and really the realizations at this time were, prior to this, my specialism had been a more solution based coaching methodology. I mean, my professional way of working. That really has a place. Breaking habits. Unhelpful thoughts. Having a more proactive focus towards our future.

But we really also have to work with the impacts of the past. And that really became the birth of Therapeutic Coaching, a psychotherapeutic approach integrated with a solution based coaching methodology. And over the years, as I reflected on this question around trauma, it became clear to me that trauma is not just what happens. Trauma is what we learn, and what our nervous system in particular learns from what happens. So to go back to answering this question of what is trauma?

I found myself when I was writing *It's Not Your Fault*, coming up with this framework of recognizing that, really, there's four stages to trauma. I'm going to talk you through them briefly now, and then we'll go into them in a little bit more detail. So the first is the events, the things that happen. But we typically think about the events of trauma, of being like adverse childhood experiences, like obvious things like physical abuse, sexual abuse, parents incarcerated, or so on. Of course those events are traumatic, but sometimes the events that most shape us are much more subtle and we'll come back to that in a few moments.

So there's the events. But it's not just the events, because two people can experience the same event and not necessarily both have the same trauma. The context within which the events happen is also really important. We all have three core emotional needs. When those needs are met, we have a certain resilience in the world. When they're not, we don't. We'll come back in a minute to what those core emotional needs are.

When the events happen and our core emotional needs are not met, there tends to be a shift in the homeostasis of our nervous system. Homeostasis means the balance that's there and the balance tips. It shifts. We become normalized to being in a state of dysregulation. There are then there are outcomes in our lives. So many of the things that we suffer with; anxiety, depression, low self esteem, relationship issues, chronic health issues, are, at least in part, outcomes of this process.

Now, typically, just like physical health, doctors, just like going to your physician, will focus often on treating the symptoms of physical imbalances. The same thing happens with mental health. We have anxiety, we take beta blockers, we have depression, we take antidepressants. Now, it's not to say these things don't have a place, they do have a place, but we really need to understand what are the origins behind these outcomes, behind these symptoms? And that is what I find this framework is very helpful in helping us do.

So let's go through each of these stages in a little bit more detail. So the events of trauma, as I mentioned, there can be these adverse childhood experiences, these things which are clearly, obviously traumatic events. That's overt trauma. We also have what I call covert traumas. Sometimes you'll hear this referred to as big T and small t traumas. I'm not a huge fan of that language because it infers that covert traumas are small.

**[00:16:37]**

And they sometimes shape us more than overt traumas. A classic example of a covert trauma; you get super enthusiastic one day in class, and you put your hand up and you try to answer a question and you get it wrong. And then everyone laughs. And not like in a playful laughing with us. Like, it feels shameful, like we're being laughed at by the class and by the teacher. We come home and we feel sad.

And what we really long for, what we really want from our parents, is to be held and to be loved and be told that we're okay, that we're loved as we are. What we get is they're super busy and that they reward us for not feeling. They encourage us to be a big boy or big girl. They put us to bed that night and they say, well done for not making a fuss about it. And we learn that our feelings and our emotions are not important. In fact, we're not important. That we shouldn't feel what we feel.

It doesn't mean our parents didn't love us. They may have loved us dearly. They just weren't skillful in how they... They may have not felt resourceful to be able to help us in that moment. Another example, let's say growing up and let's say in our life, we have ADHD or ADHD tendencies. We struggle to focus and our brain goes super fast. And in childhood, we grew up in a neurotypical household. And what we learned was that we were weird, that we were unlike other people, that if we could just be more like our siblings, we would be more loved, we'd be more accepted.

Or let's say that we grew up in an environment which prized intellect over feelings, and we were an emotional being that was always being forced to be more intellectual. There's many examples of covert trauma. Often the challenge is we're so normalized to these experiences, we don't even see them for what they are. Part of the work of breaking free is to really name what's happening and what's going on.

Events of trauma can be one off single events. They can also be multiple things that happen multiple times over many years. They can happen in childhood, they can happen in adulthood. But remember, the events are important to understand, but they're not the most important thing.

So let's talk about the context within which these events happen. As I said, two people can experience the same events, but have different outcomes. Our emotional resilience, how we respond to the events of trauma, is determined by our three core emotional needs being met. These three core emotional needs are the need for safety. This is where, as a small child, our nervous system learns to coregulate with the nervous systems of those around us.

Taking my example, we're distressed. We come home from school and we're cuddled, and we're held by a calm, relaxed caregiver, which teaches our nervous system that we're safe. In adulthood, if we've had that in childhood, we learn how to self regulate. If we don't, this is why practices such as meditation, yoga, breathwork, Tai Chi, Qigong are all great ways of learning how to bring safety, how to self regulate our own nervous system. The second core emotional need is the need for love.

This is not being loved for what we do, being loved for what we achieve. It's being loved for where we are. Again, going back to my example, this child is being loved for being strong and tough and not feeling. There's love that's there, but they learn that they're not loved as they are. Being loved where we are is being allowed to have our feelings and our emotions and really being held in that

place. In adulthood, that looks like really allowing our experience. It looks like being authentic, because being who we are is enough, not needing to be something else.

**[00:20:56]**

The third core emotional need is the need for boundaries, the ability to say yes and no to ourselves but also other people. Saying yes and no to ourselves can be stopping and starting the things which are healthy and unhealthy. And so we want to stop an old habit, but commit to a new practice, and we can do that and see it through.

We have a whole generation of kids right now which are often growing up in environments that are not boundaried enough because their own parents grew up in overly rigid boundaries. The pendulum swings, and there's too much freedom and space. And then that doesn't give us the container and the safety. It doesn't give us something to push against, which is where we actually develop our qualities of inner strength and capacity.

And so if these needs are met, we can handle most of what life throws at us as adults. We are no longer, this is kind of the blessing and curse of growing up, we are no longer dependent upon others. We can learn how to cultivate these resources and capacities inside of us. This is one of the real amazing things about doing healing work.

We can learn how to meet our needs for safety, for love, and for boundaries. In fact, within this conference, there are so many conversations around these different areas. Conversations around nervous system regulation and building a state of safety. The conversations around boundaries, how to set healthy boundaries, how to stand up for ourselves and how to be strong with ourselves when we need to, how to cultivate self esteem, inner love, a sense of holding and support, and so on. And so, so much of the healing of our trauma comes down to learning how to meet these needs.

So, coming back to our model, there's the events, there's the context within which the events happen, there's then a shift in our nervous system, a shift in our homeostasis. Homeostasis means same, stable, consistent. Our blood pressure, our blood sugar, our hormones, our circadian rhythms, they all have their balances to them. Same is true with our nervous system.

But when we become overloaded by the events and our core emotional needs not being met, our nervous system shifts and we go into what I call a maladaptive stress response. Our system speeds up to keep us safe. For many years, my work with complex chronic illnesses has been focused around one of the key ideas being for our body to heal, we have to be in a healing state. When all of our resources are going into fueling a maladaptive stress response, those resources are not there for physical healing.

The same thing is true with our emotional healing. To be able to really feel the feelings and the emotions that we've built a wall around, we have to be in a calm, safe place internally for that stuff to be able to be processed and to be able to be felt. And so we can't truly heal our trauma from a place of dysregulation. That's why effective intervention needs careful sequencing. We need to resource, we need to calm, we need to ground the system before we go to those places where we've got things to be healed.

It's like effective physical intervention, using Therapeutic Nutrition in the other department, in the Optimum Health Clinic, we don't go to detox protocols until we have enough resilience and

strength in the system first. So a maladaptive stress response is a chronic state of sympathetic nervous system activation when in a safe environment. If you are being chased down the street by a physical attacker, you want to be in a stress response.

### **[00:25:17]**

The point of a maladaptive stress response is the threat and the danger is not there, but our nervous system is responding as though it is. It's an important distinction to make between acute stress and chronic stress. Acute stress. You and I are walking down the street in London. We don't see the electric, we don't hear the electric red London bus coming towards us, because it's electric, it's quiet. We see it at the last minute. We leap out of the way onto the pavement or onto the sidewalk.

We have a big hit of adrenaline and cortisol, which helps us survive that immediate threat. That's a healthy, appropriate stress response. It's the same thing that would have happened thousands of years ago. You and I are hunting for a woolly mammoth, and the saber tooth tiger chases us. We need that hit of adrenaline. We're either going to fight against the threat, don't fight the bus, you won't win. We're going to flight, run away, or we're going to freeze and hope we can stay safe.

A maladaptive stress response is when acute stressors become chronic, we become normalized. The homeostasis shifts. And so what was the balance shifts to a dysregulated place and it becomes chronic. In that state, there are all kinds of impacts, we'll come to it in a moment, but it's also critical to say that in that state, we can't then heal the impacts of the past. We have to calm and reset the system to be able to do that.

So to come back to our model, there's the events, there's the context, there's the shift in the homeostasis of our nervous system. There's then the outcomes. The outcome of trauma is we normalize to a world which is not healthy and it's not optimum. We don't develop the three core emotional needs we need to heal. And so the outcomes can be things like anxiety.

We become normalized to it, like in the story I shared of my experience, we become dysregulated. Our system speeds up to not feel the feelings and emotions. One of the results of that can be we don't sleep because to be able to sleep, we have to feel safe. If we have that saber toothed tiger hunting us, it's not safe to switch off and to sleep. So we stay on edge much of the time. Impacts on our health. So many of the chronic health conditions people experience are, at least in part, shaped by a dysregulated nervous system, shaped by trauma.

Relationships. To have a connected, intimate relationship, we need to be able to let go of these walls of defense and authentically connect to someone. If we're defended and we're pushing people away, or we're clinging onto people to feel safe, it's very hard to have a nourishing, reciprocal, connected relationship. So much of what addictions are, is people self medicating with drugs, alcohol, food, sex. Not, of course, these things are always wrong, but how we're in relationship with them really matters. We're self medicating. This dysregulation in the nervous system, it's so intolerable to be so activated. We're actually trying to change that.

Depression is really a numbing and a freezing in our system. It's like it's too overwhelming. And so the system goes into shutdown. These are all outcomes of trauma. They are symptoms that being treated on their own will not ultimately heal what's going on. If we come back to our ECHO framework, rather than treating the outcomes of trauma, we need to calm the nervous system, to

reset the homeostasis. We need to learn to meet those three core emotional needs of safety, love and boundaries.

**[00:29:37]**

There's so many pathways to that within this conference. The events that happened are in the past. They live in the now because of what's happened in our nervous system and the outcomes from that. In fact, if we look back at this concept of ECHO, ECHO is not just an acronym, it's also a description of what happens. The events happen, but then they echo, they become bigger and louder through our lives.

And that's where learning to heal, learning to reset our nervous system, learning to meet our three core emotional needs, is so important. So what is possible with trauma healing? Because you could be watching this video and thinking, well, that's all well and good. You've just helped me map why I am where I am, but how do I get free from it? That's the beauty of this conference. You're going to hear from over 70 different world leading experts around different pathways, different strategies, different tools to healing.

We have world leading experts that you'll be very familiar with. We also work really hard to find people that you may not have heard of, but have really important teachings to share. And so each event, we make sure we bring in, we bring back the best, we bring back the best known, but we also bring in new voices. Now, I want to share a little bit more of my story to show how applying ideas and tools within what became the Therapeutic Coaching methodology, but also ideas you're learning about through this conference, how they can help heal us.

So I mentioned that one of my big traumas was my father leaving soon after I was born. When my wife was pregnant with our second daughter, I had this really strong feeling that I needed to meet my father. I wanted answers, but I also wanted to sit in the presence of the person that was responsible for half of me, half of my genetics, half of who I kind of came into the world as. And I think sometimes in life, when the timing is right for something, there's a flow to it.

When the timing isn't, we can try really hard, and things just don't really move. And I tried to find my father a few times prior and had got nowhere. And then, having made this clear decision very quickly, I tracked down where I believed my father to be. I decided that going there myself, out of nowhere, could be a big shot for both of us. And so I managed to get in contact with two of his old friends that also hadn't heard from him for decades.

And they went down on my behalf. And that evening, I get a phone call from my father. One of the first questions he asked me, he says, son, are you religious? I remember thinking, it's a bit like a dating profile. Am I christian? Am I buddhist? Am I atheist? My answer was, I was spiritual, but not religious. I have a deep sense of meaning and purpose and spirituality, but not from a particular religion. And he then explained to me that he was training to be a Christian priest, to be there with the dying.

And in that moment, so much of my kind of questions or my wanting answers dropped away, because I felt this connection and this empathy between us. A few days later, I drove down and I met my father in person. We had a very heartfelt talk. And one of the things he said to me in that talk was, he said, it's not your fault. And that became the title of my most recent book many years after that, almost ten years after that experience.



**[00:33:34]**

And I think one of the things that we learn as children because we're egocentric and the world revolves around us, but also because it's easier to blame ourselves than it is to blame the people we're dependent upon, we often think that our traumas are our fault, and they're not. Over the coming weeks and months, we became very close, and it became a very precious relationship in my life. And I remember about six, eight, nine months into meeting my father, we were sitting having dinner at a steak restaurant in London.

And he was telling me that he dropped out of doing the training in the priesthood. And I was so disappointed. And I knew that part of the reason he dropped out was that he had a criminal record, and they were doing the checks on his ID to make sure he was safe to work with vulnerable people. And I don't think he wanted them to know that history. And it felt very important to me that this relationship would be based on truth. I'm someone that deeply believes in authenticity and in truthfulness. So I said what I thought.

I said, dad, it just sounds like the same thing you did to my sister and I all those years ago. Something's got difficult, something you care about got difficult and you're just going to walk away from it. And we were saying goodbye on the London Underground. A few hours later, he says to me, he says, son, thank you for dinner. Thank you for the conversation, which was almost as raw as the meat.

I didn't realize that that was his way of saying goodbye, because over the following weeks and months, he stopped responding, stopped replying to emails, stopped engaging. And I quickly realized that the same thing that had happened over 30 years ago was happening again. My core trauma of being abandoned by my father was happening again. Here's the point I want to make, though. The event was in many ways the same, but the experience was different.

I worked super hard to meet my core emotional needs, my boundaries. I was really careful who I talked about. I didn't want people saying I told you so, and particularly people in my closer family. I worked very hard to stay safe, practicing my meditation, yoga, working to regulate my nervous system, core need of love, allowing myself to have my feelings and my emotions, to rage, to scream, to let the emotion come out. And as much as it was deeply painful, I wasn't traumatized.

I found myself surprisingly quickly in a place of acceptance, a place of peace. Very clear boundaries, I wasn't going to let him be close to me again. He wasn't someone I realized I could trust to be emotionally close to. It was part of taking care of my needs. But I wasn't angry. And a number of years later, about three and a half years ago, I got a message from my half brother. One of the blessings of meeting my father was discovering I had a wider family. And he'd always send me messages like, yo, big bro, what's up?

And the message just says, call me. And I knew my father had died. And a few weeks later, we're sat there at the funeral. It's like Covid funeral. Everyone's in masks. And there weren't many people allowed. There are actually even less people than that were allowed. And really reflecting that it isn't the events, it's how we respond.

As children, we are dependent upon our caregivers. As adults, we can learn to meet our core emotional needs for ourselves, and that's often the difference of whether there's trauma or not. We can also choose what we make our trauma mean. When events happen to us, we are a victim, and it's true that we're a victim, but we don't have to remain a victim. I realize that the way that I show

up to my own children and to my wife and to the people that matter in my life is partly because of the pain of someone not doing that.

**[00:37:58]**

I'm not sitting here telling you that there's always a silver lining and just look for the positive. We've got to own the pain. We've got to feel it. You can't heal what you don't feel. We've got to move through it and we get to choose what things mean. And I wouldn't want to relive the experiences, certain experiences of my life, but I also recognize that I get to be here as the man that I am because of those experiences and what I choose to do with them.

And that for me is really the message and the invitation of this conference. You get to hear from so many amazing experts. I really want to encourage you to give yourself the gift of spending time with these amazing people and recognizing we all have trauma in different ways, but we absolutely can heal. And so to remind you, each day's interviews are free for that day of the conference.

As I mentioned earlier on, the way that our business model works is we really work so hard to produce the best events we can, make them freely available, but the way that we fund the costs of all of our team of editing and production and web development and promotion and so on, is we have an annual membership which doesn't just give you access to this event, but our whole library of events, 8 or 9 conferences at this point, online courses, workshops, teaching videos with me.

There's so many opportunities to go deep and to do the work of healing. We'd love to have you become part of our community. But most importantly, for now, I really hope you enjoy this conference. I hope this session has been helpful, and I look forward to talking with you in the many, many interviews we have coming up.