



Conscious Life presents

Discerning Feelings, Thoughts and Emotions

Guest: Britt Frank

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview, I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Britt Frank, a trauma specialist who's a Somatic Experiencing practitioner, and is trained in Internal Family Systems level three. She's an award-winning instructor at the University of Kansas and has taught classes on ethics, addiction, and social work practice. Her first book, *The Science of Stuck*, is out now. Thank you so much for joining me, Britt.

Britt Frank

Hi, thanks so much for having me. It's good to be back.

Meagen Gibson

I have talked with Britt several times, check out Trauma Super Conferences 2 and 3 for sure, and I think we probably also talked in Anxiety. That sounds about right.

Today I want to talk to you about emotions, versus feelings, versus thoughts, and how they get stuck in our system, and why that impacts our parts, and our capacity to handle stress and hardship.

Britt Frank

Oh, easy question, right? Let's unpack the whole thing. Well, the good news is it's a really complicated question, but it does have a simple, not easy, but simple answer. The simple answer is we, most people, many people, me included, have been taught incorrectly what a thought is, versus a feeling, versus an emotion.

When we mix all of those up, and those are used interchangeably, I just really feel like you're not listening to me, I'm so mad because you don't listen to me. And when we mix up thoughts, feelings, and emotions, that very quickly ramps up whatever defensive physiology is already engaged. If you're already in fight or flight, mixing up thoughts, feelings and emotions is going to ramp it up.

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If you're already in freeze, mixing up is going to overwhelm your system and put you deeper into that freeze state. This isn't just me being a nerd who likes words and who's like, no, you need to use your words properly. It actually has a significant impact on our physiology, and on our ability to manage our reactivity when we can accurately identify the difference.

Now, the bad news is it's a pain to do, it's super annoying and frustrating. I just did this yesterday with a client, and he was getting so annoyed. He's like, this is dumb, why do we have to do this, takes forever, it takes so long, this is dumb. I'm like, yes, it's very annoying, but your way isn't working, the way that we learned isn't working. If your way works, have at it, you do you, mix them all up, but it doesn't work.

That's my very long runway to why this matters. When you know the difference, you can slow down your physiology, you can manage your activity, and your life works better. Okay, does that make sense?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I was going to say, and you named it, which is it helps us, even though we're both talking very rapidly, it helps you slow down. That's step one, we got to slow down a bit. Also I just wanted to reflect that not only are you doing it to yourself when you mix all these things up, but you're doing it to the person you're speaking with, or emoting to, or projecting your thoughts at as well. They're also having reactivity around it if you're mixing those things up, I assume.

Britt Frank

Exactly, because you're not being clear with your messaging, or with your ask, so they're going to be unclear. And lack of clarity and communication is also going to ramp up whatever defensive physiology is already there. Yes, this is annoying, and it's just not a quote normal way of thinking and speaking, but again, the normal way doesn't work. So it's time for a new normal.

With that said, thoughts versus feelings, versus emotions. So feelings, we call them feelings because we actually feel them physically. All a feeling is at its core is a body sensation, hot, cold, buzzy, tingly, numb, tense, whatever. If I ask you, how are you feeling? And you say, I'm feeling happy, it's actually not a feeling, that's not a feeling, that's an emotion. We'll get to that in a second.

But if you're talking about your feelings, and I lived in my head for so long, the first time a therapist, a trauma therapist asked me, what are you feeling? I'm like, I don't understand this question, I'm feeling angry, what are you asking me? She's like, yeah, but where do you feel that in your body? I'm like, I'm going to smack you because I don't live here, I don't feel anything in my body except the urge to punch you right now. A feeling is a body sensation, nothing more.

The absence of any body sensations is also a thing, if you're fully in shutdown and you don't feel anything, then that's numbness, or that's disconnection. We want to be able to identify our body sensations first. Just doing that alone, if you do nothing else, is going to slow down your nervous system's reactivity. It's really useful to know feelings are physical, they're physiological, they are body sensations.

[00:05:03]

Thoughts, that's the story, like when people are talking about challenge your story and don't assume that the story you're telling yourself is this, or your little story maker in your head. Those are thoughts. If I'm feeling a tight stomach and my fists are all clenched and my jaw is tight, those are just body sensations. If the thought I'm thinking in that moment is this person is trying to harm me, that's the thought, that's the story. The resulting emotion will be anger.

Emotions are the body sensations plus the stories that we attach. Now you could take that same series of body cues like tight stomach, clenched jaw, sweaty palms, tight fists, the same feelings. If my story is I'm about to do a circus performance, then the emotion will be fear and excitement. And so the body sensations are in fact neutral until we attach meaning to them.

Sometimes our stories are inaccurate and there's an entire field of cognitive therapy that's based on challenging your story. But sometimes the stories aren't changeable, like if someone is abusing you, it's not like you're making that story up, that is, in fact, what's happening.

But we want to separate that. Feelings are body sensations. Thoughts are stories. Emotions are the result of attaching a story to a body sensation. Why does that matter? If I tell you, I feel like you're not listening to me. It's like the feeling is again, tight jaw, clenched fist, tight stomach. That's the feeling. The story I'm telling myself is that you're not listening to me. And the emotion is anger. But we need to tease that out in order to slow it down enough. But no one wants to do that because it's hard. It's a practice, it's a muscle.

Meagen Gibson

It is 100% and one that we don't get an education on early enough, or often enough, but that we're really capable of learning.

Britt Frank

Super capable. Algebra, I'm sure there's a use for that in the world, I'm not knocking that. But the difference between a feeling, a thought, and an emotion promotes so much emotional intelligence, and relational fluency that it's tragic that it's so simple that none of us actually learned it. I've done all-day workshops with very intelligent, high-functioning adult people who spend all day trying to tease out the difference between the three. But it matters.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, and there's so many. Think about feelings and how many overlapping Venn diagrams there are about particular feelings. I can feel sick to my stomach if I'm scared, or I'm in love, or I'm about to ride a motorcycle. There are places in my body where I can feel similar sensations with very different both stimulus and meaning that I might assign to that.

Britt Frank

Exactly. And when you're talking about trauma healing, all of that trauma stuff happens in the body. Most people are very quick to identify their thoughts, you didn't do this, or if you just did this

I would, or if that hadn't happened, I'm not good enough. All of these thoughts, most people can quickly name.

[00:08:18]

The emotions of anger and fear most people can also quickly grab. But the feelings is the piece that often gets lost. Because we're not taught how to live in biological organisms. We live in these big things with bones, and tissues, and cells, and organs, and they're busy all day. It helps if we know how to drive them.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, and we're taught, first in school, we're taught to ignore our sensations so that we can be compliant to learning environments. We're taught from a very young age to ignore a lot of our body sensations, and thoughts that are counter to what we're supposed to be doing right?

Britt Frank

Like going to the bathroom, the earliest... You have to raise your hand to go to the bathroom, and the teacher might say, no. I know I'm not the only adult person that will ignore bathroom cues because I'm just going to send one more email, and then I'll go to the bathroom, I'm just going to send one more email, and now I'm going to make another phone call. We have been trained from very early on to ignore our body sensations, very much to our detriment.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. In a lot of circles, again, as kids, the way that we show or accept affection, all of our boundary issues, and the sensations and feelings that come up around those things that we're actively taught in a lot of families to ignore.

Britt Frank

Yay, family of origin trauma.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I think also societally and culturally, I think we haven't in the past done a fantastic stellar job of teaching our little people about feelings, thoughts, and emotions. So all the work that you and I are doing is toward that end.

Britt Frank

When I hear a younger person accurately identify a body sensation, a little kid saying, my tummy is rumbling, I'm hungry. I'm like, oh, my God, that is so intelligent. That little person has accurately identified a body cue and attached a meaning to it, and then identified the need and then asked for, like, whoa, that took me six years of therapy to be able to do.

[00:10:23] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah. And just to be able to even say, I'm imagining myself now, an adult conversation, and I'm talking to someone and I have an experience. We could call it triggered if you want, but someone says something and I have feelings, thoughts, and emotions about it. Being able to name all three, even if it sounds pedantic at first, to be able to say, like, gosh, my body just got really hot, and I'm noticing that the story I'm making up right now is that you don't value my time when you show up late, and that makes me feel hurt. Even if it sounds weird, and like you're oversharing or something like that, I think in the right context, if you've got mutual respect with the person, it is going to grow respect, trust, and safety.

Britt Frank

Absolutely. And from a neurobiological point of view, sharing like that isn't actually an overshare. You're sharing from your emotional boundaries. You're not charging into someone else's. If I was the person that you said that to, I would be so much more able to not go into brain reactivity.

I would be able to stay in my logical brain, I'd be able to receive that, and then I would probably go, oh, wow, you're right, I totally did that, you must have felt really frustrated. But if you came at me with, you're not listening to me, you don't care about my time. My physiology is going to take over and then that will create a further rupture in the relationship. So again, this work is not just about being nerdy about language. There are real life, relational, emotional, psychological, and biological ramifications of knowing how to do this.

Meagen Gibson

I also just want to say too, that you're doing the other person that you're in relationship with a favor. Last night, just last night, my husband was a little grumpy. And I come by my anxious personality honestly, and I always orient to fixing other people and overcompensating. I'm working on it. But it was so funny because I was able to name, hey, your reaction just then made me feel really disconnected, and I'm curious about what's going on.

And he just looked at me, and he was like, quit trying to fix my state, I'm grumpy, it has nothing to do with you. And I was just set free to be literally just as joyful as I had been five minutes before and completely, totally content, and not get absorbed into whatever independent thing that was going on with him that had nothing to do with me.

Britt Frank

That's beautiful, what is a beautiful boundary. Now I was on the receiving end of it. I was a little grumpy, and I was coming at my husband not from my most embodied. I'm going to share this because... Sidebar, you don't ever reach a place of healing where you don't get triggered, and where you don't say or do stupid things. So I'm coming in hot. And he was very calm and kind and he's like, yeah, this isn't working for me. So I'm going to go and maybe we will try this again in a little bit.

I'm like, oh, yeah, that's actually the right move. That's the healthy in service of the relationship move. And oops, I call this the who has the mic exercise. Am I speaking on behalf of my parts? Like my angry parts, my people pleaser parts, my perfection, whatever. They need to be sitting over there on the sidelines. I need the microphone to speak on their behalf. But if I pass the mic over to

that crew, and they can just say whatever they want, that's where most of the relational conflict we see comes from. Is people's parts, their feelings, thoughts, and emotions all grabbing mics and running amok versus a centered, grounded self, speaking on behalf of the system.

[00:14:01] Meagen Gibson

And being able to hear and interpret. We're all getting all the chatter regardless. It's just a matter of some of us slow down and then do the interpretation outward, and some of us don't have a slowdown yet, we're not self-aware enough to know that that's not all our adult self talking yet.

Britt Frank

It's so true. And being able to identify the me versus the parts of me that have all of these stories, which is IFS therapy. Internal Family Systems is so helpful. That's why I like the integration of somatic work, the body-based feeling state work with the parts work. Because there's a part of me who is feeling this feeling, and attaching this narrative, and creating this emotion. But as my self, capital S self, I can challenge that. I can hold space for that and know just because a part of me is saying that doesn't mean it's true.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, I also want to slow down a second because we're going fast. And just talk about the fact that being able to discern the differences between feelings, thoughts, and emotions, and we've referenced the nervous system as well. But we haven't explicitly talked about, that we're not trying to discern them so that we can talk ourselves out of them or their intensity.

Rather, what I hear you saying is we want to know them, be able to identify them, feel them, so that we can tell when we need space to calm down, or burn out our anger, or get energized, or get back into a regulated state before we take that outward to our relationships, or work, or the people that we love.

Britt Frank

I love that, and I love the circle back, because yes. Slowing down and being able to identify the difference between thoughts, feelings, and emotions for yourself is a crucial pre-game before you take it into the world, into another relationship. Because if you don't know the difference between your own thoughts, feelings and emotions, there's no way, it's unlikely that the person in front of you is going to be able to do that work for you. They're likely going to get defensive and just be like, I don't understand what's happening right now, everything was fine, and now you're coming at me in a very muddled, non-clear way. And then we're off to the races.

So doing that work, and it doesn't take long after you get used to it. Initially, it's like I would sit there with the three columns, emotions, thoughts, feelings. And I would be like, this is the thing that happened, what's my emotion? Oh, no, that's not an emotion, that's a feeling. Crap, this is so annoying. Okay, what's my thought? What's the body sensation? I got to tune into my body to figure out what that even is. What's the story?

Doing that work will put you back in the driver's seat. Whatever needs to happen, and again, you're right, this is not an attempt at regulation, but it does have the unintended effect of regulating you. You're not forcing breath on your body, you're not trying to come down, you're not trying to down

regulate. You're just taking a second to figure out what's going on. That's going to take you from a ten to a seven right there. And then once you're at that seven, then you can decide, do I need a conversation? Do I need to process this with a friend? Do I need a coping skill? What needs to happen here? But you can't do any of that stuff without doing this first.

[00:17:16] Meagen Gibson

I think the cost and the misunderstanding of not doing this work is that we get to the same result unfortunately, if we don't do the work, by having an outburst, or by sobbing in a meeting, or we have these big emotional outbursts, this off-gassing to regulate our nervous system, and be seen and heard by ourselves. But it's not a choice, it's a reactivity.

Britt Frank

Yes, because these body cues left unattended long enough will ramp up in their severity and intensity. You don't go from zero to sobbing in a meeting. And I've sobbed in meetings, I've done that, so no shame if you're listening, totally have done that more than once.

If we start practicing building the muscle, at its core what we're talking about is mindfulness, but with some directivity. It's not just paying attention to what's happening, we want to tease out the difference between the three. If you start practicing paying attention, if you can attend to those body cues when they're at a level two, you won't end up at a level nine.

There's a lot of runway between start and finish, the outburst, the screaming, the crying, the meltdown, whatever the thing is. If you start paying attention early enough, you're going to find a lot more choice power, because as the body sensations escalate, we gradually lose our choice power.

And once our nervous system decides we're in danger, which we don't get to consciously choose, then our choice power goes out the window. So doing this work helps keep us oriented in choice. What do I need to do? What do I want to do? Versus reactivity, like you said.

Meagen Gibson

I love that. I'm going to call it escalation, but that makes me think of a big reaction, whereas escalation to me also can look like over parasympathetic, where it's complete shutdown, so that word doesn't work. But where you're ignoring your sensations, and your thoughts, and your feelings, and not giving them room, not noticing those cues.

I can think of so many examples from my life where I was not noticing cues. Like when my kids were little, I would not notice my cues when I was getting frustrated with them. Once I started putting physical cues together, I would purse my lips before I would talk to them, you don't want to see that face on me, no one does. And I started noting, oh, wow, before I'm about to speak from my most resentful self, I purse my lips. That's a sign maybe not to speak and go take five minutes in the pantry by myself with deep breathing.

Or the discomfort that I felt. I remember this specific meeting where I used to do a lot of rescuing in my previous job, where there would be a problem and I would immediately raise my hand to rescue and fix. There was a meeting where that situation was presented, no one looked at me, no

one asked me, no one even inferred it should be me. It was so uncomfortable not to fix the situation, and to just sit in everyone's discomfort that something was wrong.

[00:20:19] Britt Frank

If you had this little tool... If I had this little tool, instead of reacting with the impulse to fix you're too busy going, what are my body sensations? And what are my emotions? And what's the story? And then what's my choice? Really, what's my choice? Is the next move after you tease out all of these things. Living in reactivity, which I did for decades, doesn't tend to create an awesome life. Living in response capacity versus reactivity is what we want, and this is one of the main tools to get that job done.

Meagen Gibson

Because in my experience anyway, once we start to slow down, once we start to identify these things, then that's when the deeper stuff starts to bubble up. We're not just dealing with the acute situation, we're dealing with oh...

Britt Frank

I can share, this is a triggering story, so trigger warning. I took a dance class with my husband a few weeks ago, and I don't know why, it was a salsa class, and I don't know why, in my head it didn't occur to me that we would have to switch partners, it didn't occur to me. And so we get to the place and they had the lights out and club lights on, and there was no AC. So everyone was hot, sweaty, and smelly.

I am now dancing with all of these different men, being passed around, literally around, they passed the women around a circle. And I was not noticing that my body was getting more and more activated because it was calling back to a sexual trauma. And no one in real time was being inappropriate, or unkind, or weird. My nervous system was just amping up, and I was ignoring it because I'm like, no, I'm in the class and everything is fine, and nothing is wrong. That ended with me driving in my car just hysterical because I ignored, ignored, ignored.

If I had paid attention to those body cues, I would notice, hey, my hands are shaking, my heart is pounding, I think I'm feeling the emotion of fear right now. What's the story causing? And I could do that very quickly if I bothered to do it, but I didn't.

Doing this work again has, and this is three weeks ago, this isn't like ten years ago, early in recovery. This is me as a trauma therapist now telling you three weeks ago I didn't do this because sometimes I don't, and then boom. So it has very immediate consequences to not doing it, but very immediate benefits to doing it, because I went back to that class the week after, that time I did pay attention and everything was fine, and I had a good time.

Meagen Gibson

I think it's such a validating thing that you just said, which was going to be one of my questions. Which is, what should our expectations be around our own healing, regarding what our control actually is over our psychology and our biology?

[00:23:03] Britt Frank

It's such a great question because ten years ago me would have been beating myself up. Why is this still a thing? This shouldn't still be a thing. That thing happened so many years ago, I'm a therapist, I know better. Why am I not over it? I know I'm not the only one who would go down that spiral. I don't go down that spiral anymore.

Which is why I was able to move through that very big trauma response fairly quickly, yeah, I'm dry heaving and ugly crying, but it was like seven minutes of that versus hours, and hours, and hours. And then the shame spiral, and then, now I need to do drugs to make the shame go away, and now I have a whole new thing that I have to deal with.

So the expectation is not symptom eradication, it's the ability to shift quicker between states. To me that's what mental health and trauma healing actually are, not the absence of... Trauma healing is not the absence of symptoms, it's the ability to shift between states while maintaining our sense of choice. But yeah, you're still going to get triggered no matter how much you heal. Sorry. Welcome to humaning. That's how brains brain.

Meagen Gibson

I just wanted to let that sit there for a second before I jumped back in. Because on the one hand, I can see how somebody watching, that's at the beginning of their trauma healing journey would be like, why bother if I'm just never going to not be triggered? And yet at the same time, as both you and I can attest, it's that instead of your entire nervous system, and being, and brain getting completely overtaken by our responses for hours, days, sometimes weeks, it's so much shorter. The window gets so much shorter.

And the validation that comes when you go through this process, and you tolerate discomfort, and have the safety, and autonomy, and agency, and strength, and tools, and process to work with it, and withstand it. The validation and the strength on the other side of that is really empowering.

Britt Frank

And so worth it, because when I was having my meltdown in my car, it wasn't that I didn't know what was happening to me, because that's terrifying, I've been where I don't know what's happening, I'm freaking out for no reason. What's my problem this time?

Even though I'm having that emotional reactivity, I'm still able to keep 1 foot in, I understand what this is, this is the feelings of that time, and these are the thoughts, and this is the story. So if you're at the beginning of your journey going, why bother? Because you get triggered a lot less. And the reactivity that happens when you do get triggered is a lot faster to move through. So it is worth it. It's just the expectation that we get to a place of utter healing, where we're in this bliss state, is just not how humans work. And that's okay.

Meagen Gibson

And you were generous to share an acute incidental trigger that you've experienced, and I want to validate, so thank you for that. I also want to validate just biology.

I think I've shared in a couple of interviews that I've recently had several experiences where I had major nervous system reactions that were tied in trauma but had nothing to do... I wasn't triggered directly by any sort of interaction. It was medical in nature. I had one where I was at a dentist, I got a shot of Novocaine and had a panic attack. That's actually a thing that no one told me about.

[00:26:22]

I wasn't like, oh, I have dental trauma, which some people do definitely have dental trauma, and have had incidences that the dentist will trigger, but I don't. I was very shocked, but once I understood it, I was like, okay, cool, I know this is going to be about nine minutes of feeling awful. I can do this, I'll rely on all the tools that I have, and breath work, et cetera.

And then I got a shot of Cortisol. I think I told you about that a couple of weeks ago, where I got a shot of cortisol on my feet for plantar fasciitis and felt like the bear from that terrible, terrible movie Cocaine Bear, that was just totally hopped up on cortisol for a couple of days, and wanted to tear through walls like the Kool Aid man. And that's not because I haven't done trauma healing, that's not because I was triggered, it was because I had Cortisol racing through my veins and I'm not in control of all of my biology.

Britt Frank

It's so true. And with the shot, with the Novocaine shot and the Cortisol shot, that's a very clear, I have been injected with things that are going to make my nervous system amp up. But the environment is doing that all the time. Some people get panicked during a weather shift, some people get panicky when it's hot out, or when it's cold out. And there's so much that we can choose into, but there's also plenty that we don't have any say about.

It's like, don't fight your physiology because you'll lose. There's a great surf metaphor here. If you stand in a wave, in front of a wave that's about to break on your head, you can argue with it all day, but you're going to lose. And so when you get tossed, surfer people will teach you, don't fight it, you just have to let it do what it's going to do, and trust that the more you surrender to what's happening, the faster it'll be over. And that is a very good trauma healing metaphor.

Meagen Gibson

Surrender to the roll.

Britt Frank

Yeah. You're dinged. It doesn't mean you can't do anything about it if you're getting tossed by a wave. If you've done your breath exercises, you know you can have enough gas in your lungs to hold, but it doesn't mean you have no choices. It just means, why fight your physiology if you know you're going to lose? Invest that energy somewhere where you do have choice power.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And speaking of choice power, and just follow the surf menu or metaphor, and completely lose people that don't surf. But we also have to assess our own learning, integration, and healing. I don't surf well, so I'm not going to go to Teahupo'o and take a boat out and surf 100 foot waves. I have to know what's going to be appropriate for me to the best of my ability to assess that.

[00:29:03] Britt Frank

Which is always great in theory. I'm the same way, I've surfed twice, I'm not going out to wherever, I'm just going to be on that wave with those guys. But sometimes you can assess conditions and make a judgment, like holidays are a great example of this. The holidays are 100 foot waves. Part of the reason holidays are so difficult is because people don't realize they're walking in... The holidays is Mavericks or the 100 foot wave.

But sometimes you can assess the condition, sometimes the wave just comes out of nowhere and hits you. But it's less terrifying if you know that there are ways, and tools, and techniques with emotions, feelings, thoughts being one of them, that is a way to assess the environment. So you can make a decision, do I get in the water at all? Do I get in the water and paddle? Do I try to duck under these things? And so feeling more in control of what's happening in us allows us to feel less overwhelmed by the fact that we can't control the ocean, or our families, or life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And you've teamed me up to the next question perfectly, which is, how do we help the people around us understand that what we're doing, and the way that we're changing, and how we're healing, isn't a rejection of them, but an acceptance of us.

Britt Frank

Such a tough one. Because unfortunately, it is not an uncommon thing that as we heal, you're going to piss off people that were very used to the old unhealed version. If you're a people pleaser and you stop people pleasing, not everyone's going to celebrate your no. Which is a bummer, because then you'll immediately think, oh, my God, I have done something terribly wrong, and then you will revert back.

So how do we let the people in our lives know that this is not a rejection of them, but an embracing of us? You can try, but they're going to have their feelings, emotions, and stories all the same. And there's not a whole lot... You can communicate as skillfully as you're able, and as kindly as you can.

But if they don't want to embrace that, that's going to create a new set of choice points for you. Which is, now that I have this new relationship with this person who's frustrated and angry with me, what am I going to do? What are my choices now? What feels like it's in integrity with me to say yes to, but what feels like it's abandoning of me to say yes to, and that's really hard. And it happens, and it's sad, but it's also something to know that does happen.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And if you spent your entire life people pleasing, or in codependent behaviors and patterns, it can feel... And you can label it as like, oh, this is really selfish, or egoic, or self-centered, or indulgent, or narcissistic. And you will probably be attacked with those words as well, I can speak from experience. So how do we handle it when people are lobbing those sorts of insinuations at us just because we're trying to heal?

[00:32:03] Britt Frank

This goes back to the original exercise that we started with. I had to go through this recently with a family member. It's like, oh, the thing came lobbying my way. I had to say, okay, what are my body sensations? I feel like I'm going to be in trouble, that's the thought. The body sensations are tight chest, hard to breathe, shallow breathing, my hands are shaking. The emotion is fear, guilt, and shame. The story in my head was, I am what they say I am, that's the truth of who I am, I am a horrible, whatever person.

Once I was able to slow down enough to separate those three things out, then I could do some things like reality testing with trusted people in my life. Is the story I'm telling myself 100% true? Do I have any wiggle room? Am I just a narcissistic, sociopathic, horrible person? Blah, blah, blah. Then I can start to challenge that story. That's where slowing down your body by paying attention will then turn your logic brain on, which then cognitive based tools tend to work a lot better than trying initially, like oh, no, everything they say to me isn't true.

You're not going to logic your way out of that reactivity. But if you can separate out your feelings from your emotions, from your thoughts, then you've created enough neocortex activity to then successfully apply a logic intervention.

Meagen Gibson

That's such a great framing, too, because the logic in the model, it's like if we're in our brain is flipped, you know Dan Siegel's model of here's our brain, this is the prefrontal cortex where all that logic lives and you're making decisions. But if you're triggered, or out of nervous system response, and your amygdala, your little fight flight center, I'm doing a terrible job of illustrating.

Britt Frank

No, I love this, I do this with kids. So what are my thoughts? Okay, your brain has popped its top, great. What are my body sensations? Puts a little logic back online. What are the thoughts I'm telling myself? Puts a little... I can't do this, but you know what I'm saying? Each thing in this model helps bring your brain back online. And that's why we do it, that's why. What are my thoughts? What are my feelings? What are my emotions? That's why it's worthwhile to do it, because it does force you back into having your brain fully online.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Britt Frank

It doesn't force you back. It encourages you back, it encourages you gently back.

Meagen Gibson

I like that, encourages you, yes, we're not forcing anyone. I read somewhere recently that creativity and making art can significantly reduce your stress and decrease your cortisol. And as someone who is engaged in the creative arts, you guys might not know this about Britt, but she does acrobatics and is basically in Cirque du Soleil. So help us understand creativity as a mental health tool and technique.

[00:34:55] Britt Frank

I'm so not Cirque du Soleil, oh, my gosh. I'm 43, and I belong to a student troupe of amateur, very amateur aerialists and circus performers. But it's still really cool, and it's still really fun, and I can still do fun things.

When people think of the creative arts, they often associate the archetype of the stressed out, drug addicted artist, the writer who's drinking or whatever. Creativity and the arts are wonderful for mental health if that's not your livelihood. If you are in fact an artist, and you are dependent upon your art for your income, unfortunately, creativity ceases to be a very useful mental health. I mean, it still can be. But what I'm about to share assumes that there's no stakes. Like, if I audition for a circus show and I don't get in, I don't have to worry about what am I going to eat this month?

Assuming that you are not dependent upon your creativity for your livelihood, it's such a great way. Because if you think of somatic healing, any somatic body based practitioner will tell you it's not about your thoughts. It's about what can you touch? What can you taste? What can you feel? How are you moving? And when you're engaging in dance, or painting, or music, or any type of martial arts, you're moving your body.

When I do circus, often it's so hard, and so scary, and so nauseating because I'm spinning, that I don't actually ruminate on anything because I can't. I started doing the circus because it was the one place where I could turn my brain off. If I go on a long walk, I can ruminate like no one's business. Even if I'm jogging or on an elliptical, I'm in my head. But if I'm hanging upside down on a big metal hoop that's spinning, I'm not thinking, and it's fantastic.

If you can get into that flow state, and creativity is one of the fastest ways to get, and you don't have to be an artist to do it. That's the beauty of it. In fact, the less arty you are, the less pressure that you'll feel to make something good, and then the more benefit that creativity. Creativity is somatic which is why it's a wonderful mental health tool.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And you don't have to go join the circus. Imagination and art are available to you in hundreds of ways every single day. It might even look like just painting your wall. I painted a wall in my office pink the other day because it just felt like it would be good.

Britt Frank

I love that. Which counts. Cooking is creativity. Anything where you're doing something with your hands and making a thing, that's art. We don't have to get super high brow, it doesn't have to be a sculpture.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I can think of 100 different recommendations I've got right now, but I'll keep those to myself, that would be for another interview.

Britt Frank, tell us more about how we can find out about you, and your book, and all the ways that you're moving in the world right now.

[00:37:44] Britt Frank

Thank you. Well, occasionally I'm moving upside down, trying not to puke, which is so fun. And I get to wear sparkles while doing it. You can find the book *The Science of Stuck*, wherever you buy books, come find me on [Instagram at brittfrank](#), or my website, scienceofstuck.com.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you so much, Britt.

Britt Frank

Thank you.