



Conscious Life presents

Applied Polyvagal Theory for Trauma Healing

Guest: Dr Arielle Schwartz

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Arielle Schwartz. We're talking about Applied Polyvagal Theory in trauma, and in yoga work, and bringing yoga into psychotherapeutic work.

To give a little bit of Arielle's background. Dr Arielle Schwartz is a clinical psychologist, internationally sought-out teacher, and leading voice in the healing of PTSD and complex trauma. She's the author of seven books, including *The Complex PTSD Workbook*, *The Post-Traumatic Growth Guidebook*, and her latest, *Applied Polyvagal Theory in Yoga*.

As the founder of the Center for Resilience Informed Therapy, she is dedicated to offering informational, mental health and wellness updates through her writing, public speaking, social media presence and blog. She believes that the journey of trauma recovery is an awakening of the spiritual heart. So, Arielle, firstly, welcome and thank you for joining me again.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

Thank you, Alex. It's always a pleasure to be with you.

Alex Howard

We always seem to have fun, we always seem to go down a few little rabbit holes along the way. I'm looking forward to seeing where we go. I'm excited, firstly, for your new book, which I was privileged to have an early peek of. Should we start with a bit of a description of what Applied Polyvagal Theory is?

Dr Arielle Schwartz

If we look at what Polyvagal Theory is, it's a theory that's looking at the relationship between the vagus nerve and our nervous system states. We have typically, when we think of the autonomic nervous system, we think of the balance between our sympathetic system and our parasympathetic system.

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When Steve Porges developed the Polyvagal Theory, he was trying to understand a paradox that shows up with the parasympathetic system. Which is that sometimes it takes us into rest and digest, but other times that same parasympathetic system can take us into more of a collapse, or a faint response.

As a result of studying that, he identified that there's two different vagal circuits that have a different evolutionary origin. One that's much more primitive, and that takes us into more of that defensive, protective stance, one that brings us into hiding, or camouflaging, in order to not be found or discovered.

And we also know that the fight-flight system, which is the sympathetic system, is another defensive response, and that the upper vagal pathway, that the more recently evolved vagal pathway, is one of social engagement. It recognizes that connection is a biological imperative.

That's the Polyvagal Theory, is really understanding these various vagal circuits, polyvagal, multiple vagal circuits. The Applied Polyvagal Theory model is then what happened when clinicians got hold of this. It started to help us all make sense of what we were seeing in the therapy room. When clients who were not only reporting defensive states of irritability, or anger, or hyperarousal states, panic, anxiety, but also going into these states of withdrawal, depression, collapse, fatigue.

When we started to hear about Polyvagal Theory, there was this deep understanding that that's what we're seeing, let's study this further. I remember I first met Dr Porges back in 2010 or so, and it was such a key moment of understanding myself and my clients.

One more thing that I'll say about it is that it also illuminates that the sympathetic nervous system isn't all bad. I think so often we think about the sympathetic nervous system as that fight-flight system. But what it also illuminates is that when we blend that upper vagal pathway, that sense of safety and connection with the sympathetic system, then we can actually mobilize for the purpose of health, and joy, and excitement. We can dance, we can play. Now we are no longer stuck in this dichotomous nervous system, where one side of it is the cause of all of our problems, and the other is the cause of all good. It actually is a much more nuanced depth of understanding.

Alex Howard

It's interesting you describe that experience of the epiphany almost, oh, my God this makes sense, because that was my experience, it's a lot of people's experience. I think it also helps us to recognize that these symptoms and experiences, that otherwise can seem as something that's broken, or something that's wrong, that there's such wisdom, and such intelligence that's within that. In a way, it's a big reframe of the symptoms that we're trying to fix, as it were, or get rid of.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

I love that you said that, I think there is something about Polyvagal Theory for me that engenders deep compassion. I'm just saying this for our listeners sake, I have a cold today, which for me, it also helps me be less afraid of physical symptoms. There's a certain deeper trust that I have, that sure I can get a cold, or I can have certain nervous system states, and I can ride them through.

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That it doesn't have to mean that something really bad is happening, that actually, once we get to know our own nervous system, and the states of our nervous system, we can work with ourselves, and our symptoms in a way that is both engendering compassion for ourselves, but also a sense of empowerment. I don't have to stay in that shutdown, there are things that I can do inside of an experience of immobilization that are actually deeply kind.

May I share just a little personal story around that? I don't have one today, gratefully, but I've been prone to migraines on and off for the past ten or twelve years. They've primarily been hormonal, and that when I initially started having them, I felt so helpless and I felt so taken down by those states.

I think what Polyvagal Theory helped me do in relationship to migraineal states is to actually really turn toward them with great kindness. For example, when I have that experience I cocoon myself, I let somebody know, so I have a little social engagement. I either let my husband know or some dear friends know that I'm going into my cocoon so that they're, in a sense, holding space for me.

I allow that to be a deep, regenerative space, and that I really trust that I'll come out renewed on the other side. Thankfully, I'm able to really sleep deeply through those states. I use them as a call to rest, rather than somehow feeling betrayed by my body, or punished by the experience. That they've actually allowed me to really trust the whole journey, and that there's something deeply wise happening in those moments.

Alex Howard

That's beautiful, I mean, it's not beautiful having a migraine, but it's beautiful the way that you talk about it. Arielle, in your work, you talk about the intersection between science, soma, and the soul. Can you speak to that piece?

Dr Arielle Schwartz

In the new book that's coming out, which is called the *Applied Polyvagal Theory in Yoga*, this will come out in March of 2024. This book was really looking at the intersection between Polyvagal Theory, science. And the embodiment, the soma, the experience for me, as being a body centered psychotherapist, or a Somatic Therapist. And the soul, the yoga piece, the deeper, wisest connection to our Self, with a capital S.

That quality of bringing together science, soma, and soul, for me is what I refer to as embodied spirituality. So often when we look at the topic of spirituality out in the world, it's as if it's something out there that we have to reach for, or that we have to somehow attain, that it's something beyond us, or outside of us. And that this whole model is recognizing that spirituality actually lives in here. It is the embodied experience of yourself.

It's about navigating through the barriers that we often have between our mind and that felt sense of self, and softening some of those defensive states. Which is what I think Applied Polyvagal Theory helps us do. Helps us turn toward the urge to defend, and look at that with deep curiosity, so that we can open into the wisdom that lives in every nervous system state.

[00:09:30] Alex Howard

One of the things that I found very frustrating when I was studying psychology as an undergrad was, because at the time I was at the beginnings of my own spiritual path as well, the reducing everything down to personality, and to learnt behavior, and so on. The failure to answer the question of, who is the being that's experiencing all of this?

It's interesting in the context, what we're talking about here, because we're talking about the nervous system. But then there's someone, something, we can get into tricky territory of words, but there is an experiencer of that. I'd love you to open that piece up a bit more.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

What you're speaking to is the phenomenological experience of the observer, of the self. That when I have an opportunity to study my experience now, who's the one that's studying? Who's the one that's the witness of? Who is the self?

I think that the extraction of that deeper question from the science of psychology, or even the medicalization of psychology, was really a tragedy. That when we recenter the wisest person in the room, is the client who is in the journey of getting to know themselves. Then, I the therapist don't have to be the expert with these scientific tools that somehow is going to reveal to them some path towards health.

Actually that path towards health already lives inside of that individual. That when we're working together, and this is why I really view that every therapeutic relationship is housed inside of, for me, a yogic perspective. Now that doesn't mean that we're doing some specific shape in the room. That's not really what the yoga is, the yoga is living inside of nonviolence. It's living inside of self study. It's living inside of these core principles that allow us to trust the unfolding wisdom that comes from the individual.

That we can actually locate that question quite beautifully inside of the therapeutic relationship. That together we get to study experience, and I too will grow and learn about myself, as I sit with another person in the room. So they're here to learn of themselves, and I'm here to learn of myself, and we also will teach each other through what shows up between us in the space.

Alex Howard

One of the great blessings of being a clinician, certainly in my experience, has been that the times in my working day that I'm the most present, are the times that I sit with my clients, because that's the call, to show up and to be present in that place. I think sometimes we really fail to recognize how far away from ourselves we are, because we normalize to the habits, and the patterns, and so on. That feels like a good bridge to, no pun intended, towards therapeutic yoga because that's one of the ways that can help us land, and help us move closer.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

When we move toward the self, we can do so through many different avenues. What I love about yoga, if we think about the eight limbs of the yogic tree, those limbs include asana, which is what we often think of as a yoga practice, the physical postures. But the limbs also include meditation, and pranayama, breath awareness.

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It includes, and this perhaps is my favorite element of that yogic tree, it includes the paying attention to where you devote your attention. Because very often our attention gets called to a whole variety of places in our lives, and we just allow it to follow whatever that calling is, whether that's scrolling social media on your phone, or going down a rabbit trail on YouTube or Google.

We can all get caught in those, letting our attention be called out of us. But when our attention gets called out of us for too long, it's depleting. It's actually your prana, your life force energy, that's getting pulled outward. Yoga teaches us how to be mindful about the utilization, the conscious utilization of our life force energy, and that we can call that prana back in, and therefore it's available to you, and it fosters your well being.

So it doesn't mean that you have to close your eyes in order to call it back in, although that can help, that can be a step toward knowing even where my attention has gone. But many of us know if you've ever tried to meditate, you close your eyes and your mind can still be reaching in 15 different places.

A trauma informed approach, for example, to meditation or to yoga, gives us certain anchors to attach your attention to. You can anchor your attention into an intention, that my intention is to be present, for example. Or you can anchor your attention to a mantra, that is somehow calling you back to the present moment. You can anchor your attention to your breath, you can anchor your attention to a mudra, and that all of these become ways that we can now notice when we've wandered from those anchors.

And then we don't have to shame ourselves, there's nothing wrong, our mind will wander, but then we can go, oh, where did my mind go? And now I have something to notice that my mind went somewhere else, and I have a way to call it back. When I bring my attention back, then what does that feel like? How does that nourish the self?

Alex Howard

One of the things that often comes up when we're in a dysregulated state, we're normalized to being in a state of activation, and we're guided towards bringing our attention down, back, however we want to describe it, become more embodied let's say. That what we can initially experience is almost a strengthening of that defensive structure. There can be a sense of fear that can come in, a sense of resistance, a sense of terror sometimes can come in. I'm curious as to what you find helps navigate the beginnings of that shift in direction.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

Beautiful question, I would say that what we learn to do is actually turn towards what is. That when we find a defensive state in ourselves, the first thing that we feel like we need to do, is somehow get rid of it. But if we think of a defensive state parallel to parts work. Then any state that we're in has its own voice, and message, and information for the system.

The more that we go toward that as a way to make it wrong, or get rid of it, guess what's going to happen? It's going to get louder. It's going to say, wait a second, you haven't heard the message

yet. And so what we can do instead, is actually go toward that defensive state with kindness, with compassion.

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I think compassion is probably one of the biggest bridges between that self awareness, and something that we experience in ourselves that's uncomfortable, or unwanted in some way. And that we can actually meet the experience, we can even contract around it a little bit. We can devote our attention to that experience, and get to know it, converse with it. What do you hear? What do you want me to know? And that as we go toward even an experience of contraction, or an experience of fear, that something new inevitably will evolve.

Alex Howard

Of course, part of that is being able to be with what feels uncomfortable. It's interesting that, it seems to be that for some people, what happens is like a pushing into that, like they're applying the trauma defense of trying to control, by trying to control that experience. And then for other people, it's a trying to move away from it. What helps that compassion and that softening in to that place?

Dr Arielle Schwartz

I think that when we're building tolerance for distress, which is really what's at the bottom of your question here, we can do so initially by building our resources. Building enough of a ground of safety. That safety might be through the therapeutic relationship, the container of the us.

There's a quality when we're being held by that compassionate gaze and presence of another person, that, in a sense, you're sharing your window of tolerance, your tolerance for my distress with me. And so, in a sense, I'm able to turn towards more than perhaps I could do on my own. But ultimately, we want to have enough of that ground of safety, and a ground of connection, which is also what Polyvagal Theory teaches us about. That that upper pathway of the vagus nerve is all about present sense of safety and connection.

So we can strengthen that in ourselves, perhaps, before we go toward the distress. One way to think about this is that we get a nice foothold in that ventral vagal resource of connection. I think ventral vagal energy is very similar to self, with a capital s, as Dick Schwartz speaks about it in IFS. It's about compassion, and clarity, and curiosity, and all of those c's of the self, that we get that nice, firm foothold in that.

So that we can turn toward even 5% of our distress, and not feel like we end up completely thrown in the deep end of the pool, without our swimmies, and our noodles, and all the things that help us navigate that. We can pendulate toward the distress at a pace that we can tolerate.

A lot of the same tools that I use as a trauma informed therapist are brought into the therapeutic yoga approach, where you can pendulate, even in the yoga practice, towards 5% of that distress, and then come back to that ground of the safety of the rectangle of your yoga mat. The orienting to the cues of safety in your space. The orienting to the cues of connection with another person, whether that's one on one therapeutically, or in a class with a teacher.

[00:21:20] Alex Howard

One of my teachers, Sandra Maitri, once said to me, said to the group, but said it to me, because it was a thing that I needed to hear. Said that 90% of our suffering is not what happens, it's the way that we defend against what happens. And that's really what you're speaking to, like the defensive structures and stuff that come in. And it took me years, literally years of continued suffering to really understand what she meant.

And when I got it, it's like the inner orientation shifted. It was like when something hurts, move towards, not away, because it hurts less to move towards. And as you were talking, I was just thinking, is there any way we can shortcut that lesson for people? Because it's such a fundamental piece of this, that the real suffering we experience is all the things that we do to try to move away, and escape, and defend, and lock up, and so on. And that's really where we're the architects of our own misery, in a way.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

Yeah, I hear you so well and relate. I think that we all have our journey of resisting the lesson in some way or another. But the question of, is there a way to shortcut that? Is there a way to actually recognize that I don't have to defend against life? That I can allow what is around me, in a sense, to move through me without feeling threatened by it.

I believe that we cultivate that, trust, maybe is a key word there, when we feel that we have a way to call ourselves back home. That when we trust that there is something deeply essential and true inside of here, that I can always come back to. And that doesn't mean that that's a fixed self. That actually who I am in here is an ever-changing, responsive self. It's responding to the world and the environment, but that there's a deep trust within that, that I have that capacity, and that I don't have to cling to even the idea of who I am, that I can allow something new to evolve.

I often think of this idea of a fixed state of consciousness. I am who I am. And that change mindset, or that flow mindset, the one that allows us to be open to becoming something new. We can call it the ego, you can call it a lot of different things, that clings somehow to this idea that, I am some fixed, discrete self. And that everything out there is either to support the idea of who I am, or somehow I have to defend against something that would challenge the idea of who I am. I really believe that ultimately, when we can soften that within ourselves, we are also able just to be in a deeper connection to what is right here. That who you are.

What I love about my interviews with you, Alex, is that I always feel evolved as a result. We come in, we have some general idea of what we might talk about, and it goes to something new and unexpected. And that's what I hope for all of us here listening, is that somehow, even in bearing witness to this conversation, that you can notice your own clinging to that fixed idea of, this is who I am, and I have to defend it. And what happens if I just practice a little bit of the letting go of that, the trusting that I'm actually here to evolve?

Alex Howard

I think one of the pieces that also helps that, is when we have some felt senses of that place, of home, that you spoke to a few minutes ago. That once we've had those, experienced that place, it's almost like we have a map, or a signpost of where we're trying to get back to. If I map it a little bit to some of my own journey, up until that point there was a freneticism, and a frustration, and a

fear of where... And then somehow we get to that place, and even if it's not long lasting initially, there's a sense of, oh, that's where I'm trying to get to.

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Can we say a little bit about what that place feels like? Because I think it helps to have a sense of. Because I think many people have had those, even if it's been passing, they've had those experiences. But I think it helps to anchor it in a little bit more when it's like, that's what that place feels like.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

That's a beautiful question. I've been thinking lately about some of the places that I find it most easily. I'll say that, and then I'll say what it feels like for me, and it may feel different for you, or for anyone else, but for me, for example, when I walk in nature. When I'm stepping onto the trail and I really trust the trails that I walk on, I've yet to see a bear on them, so I'll just say that.

I'm walking in nature, and the sun is filtering through the trees, and I hear the crunch of the leaves beneath my feet, and the sound of the birds, or a squirrel, and the feeling of the air on my skin. That as I'm walking in that place, I'm not resisting the elements around me. Sure, if there's a thunderstorm, or hail, I'll put on my gear. But for the most part, when it's that beautiful day, and I'm walking out in nature, I will allow the experience to move through me, and to feel so completely at ease in that place that I have forgotten to think about who I am. It's just the experience of the moment.

And for me, stepping onto the yoga mat affords something very similar. And it's why, for me, the yoga practice is much more listening to sensations and allowing them to be the teacher and the guide, rather than a prescribed set of postures. Because it's a conversation with the embodied felt sense that allows something to unfold.

If I were to approach your question just a slightly more scientifically for a moment, if we hold science, and soma, and soul in this conversation. I think that the science of this is about coherence, and that coherency is actually measurable to some degree. It's also the same factor that we use to measure the tone of the vagus nerve, or vagal tone, and that's heart rate variability.

When we look at the autonomic nervous system, and that transition between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic, what coherency looks like is the ability to move quite flexibly between sympathetic and parasympathetic states in a rhythmic and smooth manner.

The best way to facilitate that high heart rate variability is through the breath. Every inhalation keys up just a little bit of our sympathetic system, and every exhalation just a little bit of the parasympathetic, and that when we breathe rhythmically, we are fostering that coherent state in the nervous system. Even just three to five minutes of resonance frequency breathing, which simply means you breathe in for a count of five, you breathe out for a count of five. If you do that on a regular basis, you're actually building into your nervous system what we call integrity.

There's beautiful research that shows that when we're in a high heart rate variability state, that our immune system works better, and that we have greater regulation of our emotions, and we're able to feel more connected to other people. For me, the fact that heart sits at the center of heart rate variability and coherency, to me, the last part that I'd say in response to your question is, that it's a

feeling of being connected right here. Moving out of trying to control or manage life from up here, and shifting into a heart-centered way of being in the world.

[00:30:41] Alex Howard

There's something in that, of this place of letting life flow and move, as opposed to feeling like we have to be in control, or we have to direct, or we have to be ahead of what's happening. As you spoke to, and I was thinking about it after you mentioned it, yoga is one of the ways that we learn that. It's like there's the doing the posture, and then being done by the posture, for not quite the right words.

But the sense of actively showing up, but there being a surrender in that activity. Maybe you can speak a little bit to the gifts that therapeutic yoga bring into the psychotherapy world. Because one of the challenges of just working with in a psychotherapeutic way is it can end up actually quite disembodied, because of the level of talking and thinking that isn't always grounded and landed.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

Yeah, that's so well said. I think that one of the ways that this combined element of bringing the therapeutic yoga into the psychotherapeutic relationship. And again, it doesn't mean that we're always doing a posture in the room, in fact, very rarely are we doing that.

But what I will say is that it's taught me a lot about how we're using our time, what are we focusing on together? And that if during the therapeutic exchange, all we're focusing on is narrative story, or what is wrong, and in a sense the reinforcing negative beliefs about that narrative, then that's what the lens of the microscope is focused on, that's more of what we see.

If we shift that lens into a perspective that you are already whole, that there is nothing here that's broken, there's nothing here that we need to fix. That we're actually going to broaden that lens into attending to that deeper wisdom that is right here within you. How do we tap into that together? And when I'm coming from that place in myself, when I'm residing in that deep trust, or in that flow state, or coherent state, then there is something that is so easeful about the hour, it goes by so fast.

One of the things that I love about the science of neuroplasticity, if I lean into that for a moment, is that if we think about, what is PTSD? It is a form of stress induced neuroplasticity. We are basically stuck in a cycle of re-experiencing the negative elements of the event, we're having flashbacks, we're in hyper-vigilance to the world. It gets generalized, the world doesn't feel safe, my body doesn't feel safe. And we're stuck in a cycle of these downward spiral of negative emotions, and thoughts, and felt sense.

In order to get out of that, we can't keep going down that same trail, we're going to get stuck there. We need to shift into the science of positive neuroplasticity, which means that we actually have to cultivate a new experience in the room, a positive experience. Whether that's finding for you your experience of what I described, walking on the trail in the woods.

What brings you to that state? When do you find that place you would call home, or ease? Tell me more about that, let that state grow, let's cultivate more of that. Let's actually shift the whole

conversation into times in which you feel grateful, or a depth of appreciation, or a depth of being held.

[00:35:01]

And if there aren't a whole lot of those out there for you in the world, let's cultivate that right here in the room, so that we can grow that state, and let that actually be wired into your nervous system here and now. So that there is a new contrast. And now I can sense when I've gone into that downward spiral. But I also know what it feels like to move into what we would call the upward spiral. And that I can actually trust in my ability to make that shift more readily.

Alex Howard

Are there some simple directions, or practices, that you can share that can help folks start that process? Obviously, to go deeper into this, your new book is a great way to give more substance. But what are some pieces people can start to play with, to help support that?

Dr Arielle Schwartz

I would say that one of the things that I love about working with the Applied Polyvagal Theory in yoga, is what we would call the vagal toning, or the vagus nerve stimulation practices. Because they are a very fast way to cultivate, in the here and now, a felt sense of greater ease and connection.

So these practices, there's many of them, I mean, I have in my course that I teach on this, about 30 of them, that are simple practices, some of them are breath based practices. Something as simple as what Jack Feldman calls the physiological sigh. It's a two-part inhale, nice long exhale, sigh it out, and you can do it with me for a moment, lovely. And just notice how two, or three, of those two-part inhale, long exhales, shift perhaps how you're feeling right now. It doesn't take much.

Another one is working with some of the places where the vagus nerve travels close to the surface of your skin. Those are around your ears, right in front and back of the ear, or the tragus, the little bit of cartilage in front of your ear, also between your eyebrows, across your cheekbones.

So that upper vagal pathway connects with the facial nerves. And actually, when we think about the social engagement system, it's what lights up the eyes. It allows us to hear the sound of the human voice. It allows our voice tone to communicate a quality of warmth, even when you have a cold. You can actually self-massage in these areas of your own face and neck.

You can breathe into your heart, literally. You can work with a practice of gratitude, keep a gratitude journal, look for things that you feel appreciation for, let other people know that you appreciate them. And the practice of self-compassion. Those are all relatively fast ways to create a shift in your sense of yourself in the moment.

Alex Howard

That's awesome. Arielle if people want to find out more about you and your work, there is your new book, which is out in March, so speak a bit more to that, but also your website, and programs, and stuff that people can find.

[00:38:36] Dr Arielle Schwartz

Absolutely. My new book is called *Applied Polyvagal Theory in Yoga*, and it's specifically about bringing the model into the psychotherapeutic relationship.

My website is drarielleschwartz.com. I have a YouTube channel which is also [Dr Arielle Schwartz](#). Pretty easy to find. You can find me on Facebook [Dr Arielle Schwartz](#). And [@arielleschwartzboulder](#) on Instagram. You'll see a lot of my nature photos there. And they are all great ways to find out about what I'm doing, what I'm up to, you can subscribe to my newsletter on my website, and you'll find out about the trainings that I offer.

Alex Howard

Arielle, thank you so much. I really appreciate you, and I appreciate your time.

Dr Arielle Schwartz

Thank you so much. Alex.