



## Conscious Life presents

### How Your Life Lens and Self-Esteem Impact Healing

Guest: Dr David Hanscom

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#### **[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with David Hanscom. His orthopedic spine surgery practice focused on patients with failed back surgeries. He quit his practice in Seattle, Washington to present his insights into solving chronic pain, which evolved from his own battle with it.

His book, *Back in Control*, is associated with an action plan called the DOC Journey, which guides patients in solving mental and physical pain. His latest book is *Do You Really Need Spine Surgery? Take Control With a Surgeon's Advice* and is intended for healthcare providers and patients alike to make an informed decision about undergoing spinal surgery. Dr. David Hanscom, thank you so much for being with us today.

#### **Dr David Hanscom**

Thank you.

#### **Meagen Gibson**

David, I'd love it if you could start by explaining how your view of trauma differs from so many people.

#### **Dr David Hanscom**

What I'd like to do is start with just the neuroplasticity of the brain. I heavily recommend this book called *Livewired*. I have it right here. It's written by Dr. David Eagleman out of Stanford, and it basically is how the brain works, how it's programmed. It's really an incredibly entertaining book because the neuroplasticity of the brain is stunning. It is stunning.

The bottom line of what he presents, and I read this again last night, is the brain is like Switzerland. You can plug any receptor into it, whether it's vision or touch or taste or smell or sound and the brain will interpret the signals in a way to help any living organism navigate life. For instance, moles have 24 receptors on their nose that allows them to dig underground. Bats use sound.

**[00:01:49]**

With humans, you could take a person who goes blind, put a camera on the forehead, and connect them to sensors on the back, and the brain will interpret those sensations and actually create sight. So after he came out with this book, it became really clear to me that it's like 80 billion honeybees climbing all over each other for space and time, going for every millisecond to make things work to help us survive.

If you think of it from an evolutionary standpoint, it has to be that way. Every creature in their specific environment has to survive. So the human brain, obviously the same thing, but half the brain is what's called glial cells which are inflammatory cells. When you're under stress, your body's immune system fires up. Your metabolism changes to consumption instead of storing, your neurotransmitters change to excitatory instead of calming, and your brain becomes a furnace. It's fired up.

We talked about this last time, what we call repetitive, unpleasant thoughts. When your brain is fired up like a furnace, you fire off these thoughts like crazy. But then the thoughts themselves are a threat to the brain, emotional pain and physical pain are processed in similar circuits. So the brain fires off the thoughts. The thoughts fire up the brain.

You have a very bi-directional process that's very uniquely human. Humans have sensory input that other mammals don't have. So we have thoughts. Chimpanzees and that group of animals, apes, are 99 percent the same DNA as humans. The only difference is the size of the neocortex of the brain, where we have complex language, where they have simple language, and so we can do abstract thinking where they cannot do abstract thinking.

So then we have a thing called ego, where again, if emotional pain is processed the same way as physical pain, then we have to put on an impenetrable set of armor. I call it self-esteem or facade or ego, whatever you want to call it, because we don't want to be hurt. We work really hard and become successful, accomplished, smart, whatever you want to call it, to put on this facade that appears to be bulletproof to the world.

It takes a lot of energy, but that's not who you are. You get connected to the facade, and so it's your self-esteem compared to my self-esteem. So reality is, humans are a bunch of zombies running around this planet with self-esteem versus self-esteem, whereas chimpanzees could just take care of the day, deal with food, deal with nurturing, et cetera.

We have all these complex things that are in our head. The problem with self-esteem is that David Eagleman also points out that humans are uniquely dependent on their parents for physical survival, probably until age eight or ten, until we can survive on our own. Then language takes about 20 to 25 years.

We are completely programmed by our life, what our parents think, siblings, peers, classmates, society. We are completely programmed by what everybody thinks we should be. What they've shown out in New England is that these concepts have become embedded in our brain the same way as any concrete object, so they become our life lens.

**[00:05:08]**

The problem is, once you get a life lens that's set in place somewhere, maybe age eight to ten years old, I don't know really when, that becomes your new filter for processing the rest of your life. So the market term is a word called reactants. If the data around you agrees with your viewpoint, of course it's reinforced. If the data around you disagrees with your viewpoint, guess what? People reject it.

It turns out rejecting the data is actually more reinforcing than accepting the data. So in your lifetime, it gets more and more embedded. Then you develop a concept called mental rigidity, which crosses every mental health diagnosis. Every one of them has mental rigidity.

We can talk about later how to break that up, but they've done this on MRI scans just a recent paper a few months ago showing that mental rigidity is a transdiagnostic diagnosis or characteristic, and it is the interaction of the brain with each other. With mental rigidity, these complex interactions get broken.

Let's go back to trauma. I want to go back to artificial intelligence, and I'm just learning about this. I am not a computer expert, but I'm being mentored by a gentleman who's one of the planet's experts on artificial intelligence. He pointed out that artificial intelligence is only good as the database you load into it.

For instance, we hear about chess masters being beaten by artificial intelligence. Well, you have to load in the right data. In other words, if you just put in the rules of chess into artificial intelligence, nothing happens. It can't beat anything. Or if you put in the rules of chess with my chess skills, you actually create a database that's flawed, and you take the rules, you take my strategies and database, and you play worse. You can't get better with a flawed database.

The two parts of the database for AI, and also with the human brain, is the quality of data you put into the database and the processing system or your life lens. If you take a chess master and teach the AI how to play chess with the rules, eventually AI can continue to learn and eventually beat the chess master.

If you put my rules of chess into the database, or my approaches to chess into the database, nothing works. The human brain is the same thing. You have the database that's being downloaded every second into your life, and you have the processing system. So who of us has a really good database put into our system?

**Meagen Gibson**

That's for sure.

**Dr David Hanscom**

It's really probably pretty flawed. Our parents do the best they can do, even with nurturing parents. We're trained by our parents, their parents, their parents. You get flawed databases being put into your brain, because remember, the human organism is supposed to only survive. The human organism is not supposed to thrive. The idea of thriving, the neocortex of the brain is less than 100,000 years old.

**[00:08:10]**

Humans do not know how to negotiate human consciousness. We have the same effect on our body as a physical threat. The problem with mental threats, with physical threats, you have an automatic withdrawal response to pain. You pull your hand back from a hot stove, you look carefully before crossing the street. It's an automatic protective response that keeps you in a range of behaviors that are safe.

That's how organisms evolved, because the organisms that kept engaged in dangerous behavior just didn't survive. It's called the nociceptive system. We have protective pain that's a gift. So people that are born with out pain fibers don't survive more than ten or 15 years because they can't protect themselves. Emotional pain.

Let me just define something first. Remember we've talked about the dynamic healing model, where you have your input or your stresses or circumstances. You have your nervous system, which could be calm or hyperactive or hyperreactive. The way the body works is that you have all these sensors throughout your body. Your brain is collecting data from every one of them, every millisecond. So you have your circumstances, you have your nervous system. Then your output is the physiology, it's either safe or in threat.

When you're in threat, you're inflamed, you're consuming fuel, you're excitatory, your body's stress chemicals are getting your heart racing, et cetera, and you feel anxious. Anxiety is just a sensation generated by your threat physiology or fight or flight response. That response is one million times stronger than your conscious brain, a million to one.

We have these uncomfortable sensations that are a gift, by the way. They keep us alive. Then we're using this thing called self-esteem to make ourselves feel better about an intentionally unpleasant survival response. We spend all this time in life trying to outrun our minds, trying to outrun the survival response, but you can't because if you didn't have it, you wouldn't be alive.

The solution actually lies in developing what I call a working relationship with it. But remember, going back to the bigger problem are these repetitive, unpleasant thoughts that I call RUTs is that when you have a fired up nervous system and you don't know how to calm it down, you have no chance in dealing with these thoughts.

We use self-esteem, cognitive reframing, all sorts of things, sort of make yourself feel better about yourself. It's a complete mismatch. Plus, you're fighting it. You have to learn to live and work with anxiety and anger. They're never supposed to be pleasant. It's a survival sensation. Any species of creatures that didn't pay attention to the sensations didn't survive.

We're basically survival of the most anxious as well as the most fit. Going back to, again, trauma. Everybody has trauma in their lives. Birth is a trauma. If you have a stressed mother in the womb, the baby's receiving signals, all sorts of things. It's trauma all the time. Some of the traumas are dramatic. I'm not against understanding that severe trauma is a problem. But again, anytime you're anxious or frustrated, your trauma response has been kicked up.

**[00:11:21]**

You don't solve trauma by analyzing what's been done to you. Can't do it. You're just rearranging the deck. You can't control the survival response and you can't do it.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Dr David Hanscom**

What you can do, which I think is exciting, again, taking advantage of the neuroplasticity of the brain, which changes by the second, is that you start loading in better data and then you start processing it in a functional, efficient, effective way. From this moment on, anybody who is listening can actually decide what they want to look like, what they want their lives to look like. But there's a huge emphasis, myself included. I spent 13 years in psychotherapy, and trust me, I'm not against psychotherapy, but your attention is on the problem, not the solution.

The problem with a trauma story is it becomes a big anchor. I just can process this story, my life's going to be better. Well, again, there's quadrillions of data points. If you take every millisecond of your life to this very moment, there's many different triggers in life. Again, we stay safe by analyzing our environment by the millisecond, and we take action to stay safe. But again, with our thoughts, we have physical protection from pain called the nociceptive system. We have no protection from our thoughts.

The thoughts come at us, we get a survival reaction. We do two things. We either suppress them, which actually fires up the physiology even more. You try not to think about something or think about it more. There's a whole bunch of mental mechanics that we don't have time to talk about today. But the mental mechanics of human consciousness is when you try to not think about something, think about it more, but even more perverse when you try to think about something positive, your unconscious brain starts monitoring you, and you think about it less.

Suppression doesn't work at all. Trying to do positive thinking doesn't work either. Then we get busy to distract ourselves. So what happens? The data shows that living life in the hedonistic lifestyle puts your inflammatory markers straight up. Repression, suppression, distraction, positive thinking absolutely doesn't work. Okay, so we have a problem.

**Meagen Gibson**

So what does work, David?

**Dr David Hanscom**

Well, it took me a long time to figure this out. I had extreme problems with intrusive thoughts. I have been doing some research on this. I'm writing a new book on this. It's called *Rising Above RUTs (Repetitive, Unpleasant Thoughts): The Curse of Consciousness*. That may not be the final title, but that's the general gist of it, is that there's four phases to healing, and they're not very hard.

**[00:14:08]**

I don't have those thoughts anymore. They just aren't there. I don't even have the occasional, I'll say occasional, but rarely do I have thoughts that are crazy compared to what I had before I got sick. I've helped a lot of people out of this hole. I can't tell you how many. Most of them, by the way, have been professionals. They're particularly prone to this. People that are well-intentioned, high-performing people are actually much more prone to these thoughts than you can imagine.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Well-educated, many degrees.

### **Dr David Hanscom**

Because what happens for a lot of us, we're trying to outrun our past. I had a traumatic past. I can tell you a hundred trauma stories. It doesn't matter which one they were. I analyzed them for 13 solid years, once or twice a week, and I just thought if I really, quote, process my trauma, that I would heal. The problem is, from a neuroplasticity standpoint, which I did not know the word back then, I'm actually putting my attention on the problem.

What you're essentially doing, there's two parts to healing. One of them is you learn to develop a working relationship with your survival patterns. They're there, they're not going away. They're supposed to be unpleasant, they're doing their job, they are a gift. We would not be here without these unpleasant survival reactions that we call anxiety and anger. But your brain's on fire. Half your brain is the immune system.

You have a fired up brain firing off these thoughts and again, suppressing them makes them even worse. We spend a lifetime trying to do the conscious versus unconscious brain. We try to achieve self-esteem, which again is a million to one ratio and it's a judgment pattern.

Self-esteem itself is a cognitive distortion of labeling. I'm good enough, not good enough, should or should not think. Cognitive self-esteem is a cognitive distortion and it doesn't work. This pursuit of self-esteem to make yourself feel better about these survival reactions, if you identify with these survival reactions, you have shame, guilt, disgust. All these unpleasant emotions come on board and they're just thoughts, they're what you have. They're not who you are.

The first step is understanding the physiology of these survival reactions and simply separating you from these reactions and look at them as just doing their job. You just depersonalize that whole process. You can't fix it or solve it. And then the healing actually occurs as you move into joy. Two parts of healing are learning how to lower your threat physiology, simply a learned skill set.

The emphasis is on how do you process adversity efficiently and quickly and lots of ways to do that. Then the real healing occurs as you nurture spiritual journey, good food, good wine, good friends, nurturing joy, just little steps at a time. That's where the healing occurs because you're moving away from the circuits.

It's like learning a new language. You're not going to learn French by trying not to speak English or fix your English. The survival language is your survival reactions. The life that you want to live is an

enjoyable life. I have a little saying that I've made up called to have a good life, you have to live a good life. It takes practice. We don't practice a good life by trying to fix the old life.

**[00:17:18]**

Or another website post I wrote recently was *Quit Fighting Darkness, Just Turn on The Light*. But you have to actually understand that turning on the light is about connecting to who you are, your own capacity to heal. When people go through my process that I call the DOC Journey, Direct Your Own Care Journey, it's not about generating belief in David Hanscom or my process or some book or process because if you keep pursuing different self-help processes, you're actually reinforcing threat physiology.

I'm going to fight the darkness. I'm going to be better. I'm going to solve this thing. What my friend pointed out two weeks ago is that if you're really pursuing all these self-help projects which are fine at a level, I'm all for other support. In other words, the doctrine is just a framework that gets you to the basics of science. If you find a given process helpful, great.

The problem is whatever process it is they keep looking at is the definitive final solution. The definitive final solution is not believing me or my process or anything. It's about connecting to your own capacity to heal, period. As far as healing repetitive, unpleasant thoughts, which is a specific part of this, there's four parts is that you have your thoughts, you have the nervous system that's fired up, you have neuroplasticity and you have ego.

The metaphor I use is that of a popcorn machine, the kernels of corn represent your thoughts. A lot of them are normal, a lot are unpleasant. The first step is thought diversion where these kernels of corn don't hit the cooker. The cooker is your brain. So what happens? There's three ways of diverting thoughts.

One of them is mindfulness. You simply put your brain in a different sensation. Another one is cognitive reframing, which is part of cognitive behavioral therapy. You simply look at these thoughts as cognitive distortions. The beauty of recognizing cognitive distortions, there's nothing to do because they're not real in the first place. Then the third part, which, you know, I talk about over and over again, is expressive writing.

The top psychologists in the 1990s figured this out. You can't control your thoughts. You have no control of your thoughts. Zero. Unfortunately, the self-help books on repetitive thoughts really go after cognitive manipulations. You can't do it. You can reframe your thoughts, but you can't control them. And so what the expressive writing does is simply separates you from the thoughts. The thoughts are here and you're here.

The first step, I call it thought diversion is mindfulness, cognitive reframing and expressive writing. The second part is turning down the heat of your nervous system. The thoughts fire up the nervous system. The nervous system fires up the thoughts. Diverting the thoughts turned out the nervous system a little bit, but there's an infinite number of other things that make us angry.

You have to learn how to process your life in general so you're not always riled up and fired up. Again, it's a learned skill. That's in the DOC Journey. I call it anger processing. Forgiveness is one part of that.

**[00:20:28]**

But the way you do that is that there's diet, exercise and sleep which increase the resilience of the nervous system. There's also simple things like what are you inputting into the nervous system. One of the difficult conversations, I had a huge conversation yesterday with somebody who is really suffering with these thoughts. He belongs to pain support groups. He's talking about his pain. He's immersed in trying to solve his pain and of course, he's reinforcing it.

One of the worst prognostic factors, by the way, for solving chronic pain is belonging to a pain support group. One of the cardinal rules besides expressive writing is never discussing your pain, medical care, complaining, gossiping, giving unasked for advice, or being critical. Quit watching violent TV. Limit your time watching the news. Look at your input. What are you doing to deal with the physiology?

Because remember anxiety is a physiological state. Anger is a more intense physiological state. If you want to remain angry and fired up, your brain's on fire. So you have to turn down the heat. Again, there's a bunch of other ways of doing that, and that's in the DOC Journey.

Again, first step, divert the thought. Number two, turn down the heat. When the kernels of corn hit the pot, they're not going to pop because the container is the obsessive thought pattern to the popcorn. What happens is that you get to actually move away. You actually get to empty the popcorn out of the container and create space in your brain. And so what happens as you learn how to turn down the heat and divert the thoughts, the real healing occurs as you move into creativity.

You're building a brain and you can start right now. Just choose what you want to put in your brain and you can't do anything to fix the past. Can't do it. But as you just start learning how to calm your nervous system so you can't control your thoughts, but you can regulate your physiology. You start turning down the physiology, the thoughts start dropping down. Less thoughts, less inflammation. Less inflammation. Lots of other things happen.

You go into what's called an anabolic state where actually you're building up reserves. This is what is so profound about the whole healing process. It's your body healing. When people heal it's the most profound thing you can imagine because you're going from sustained threat physiology to safety. Your body is regenerating new neurons, new supplies of fuel in the tissues. It's stunning what happens to people when they heal.

And then the final part, and this is a whole different topic, is you start dissolving your ego. You start recognizing that, okay, once you understand the survival reactions, you don't need ego or self-esteem to feel better because you get to be who you are, which means you get to allow yourself to feel bad, but you also can choose happy. You have to allow the unpleasant sensations. You just have to feel. One of my friends coined the saying, you have to feel to heal.

One of the hesitations people have is they don't like to feel badly, so they don't. Learning to tolerate feeling badly is a learned skill set. It's not mind over matter. It's not mashing your way through it. Again, the four steps of dealing with these RUTs is basically number one, the biggest



focus is turning down the heat. Again, thought diversion, turning down the heat, creativity, moving away from the circuits.

### **[00:23:56]**

Then the final thing is you can't dissolve your ego. You have to allow it to dissolve. Life gets to be pretty darn free when your ego disappears. Of course, mine hasn't disappeared completely, but I can tell you I don't have these thoughts anymore, and I was just totally tortured with them. Again, there's a lot of details associated with the thoughts.

There's a huge amount of literature on the mental mechanics of the brain and why these occur. Just a function of human consciousness has nothing to do with who you are as a person. But again, the first step before you do any of those four steps is de-identifying your personality with these survival reactions. Anyway, we covered a lot of ground.

### **Meagen Gibson**

We did. You're doing great, though. I'm so glad that obviously you mentioned creativity, joy, imagination, because in my experience and from a lot of the people that I talk to, that's the first thing that goes. It's the thing that brings you the most life satisfaction.

Yet when you are in some sort of a triggered response or nervous system overwhelm, or when the heat's up, like you said, we're in stress or whatever it is, that's the first thing to go. Because as you mentioned, we didn't evolve to be happy. We evolved to survive. We're going to drop all the things that make us happy in order to keep up the survival parts.

### **Dr David Hanscom**

What happens? You process your threat physiology and then happiness emerges. Again, going back to the cognitive part, if you try to become happy, the research shows you actually end up sad. You just have to learn how to negotiate adversity, nurture joy. It happens multiple times a day. Every day.

People monitor their pain, they monitor their happiness, which again, everything's going the wrong direction. You just get to learn to navigate life today. Right now. We all intellectually know all we have is today, but our brain doesn't do that.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. It's so funny, I was actually thinking about you this morning. I knew I was going to interview you, but I thought of you today because it was like two things collided. We've done a Sleep Super Conference also, and I struggled to sleep last night for no reason. I just accepted it. I was laying in bed, I was like, well, I guess we're not sleeping much tonight.

But I had your voice in my head because I've heard you say so many times, don't complain about it. The sleep experts all say the same thing as well because you had mentioned the three components. It's sleep well, move your body, exercise, eat good food. We're not going to knock it out of the park, home run on all three all the time.

**[00:26:32] Dr David Hanscom**

You just brought up a huge point. Okay, when your stresses are high, you're going to go into fight or flight or if your nervous system is under resources, like today, you're going to be more triggery than normal. That's just life.

**Meagen Gibson**

Exactly.

**Dr David Hanscom**

One of my people talk about just surfing the waves and so you just get to navigate life more effectively. It's not about solving anything. Did we talk about the metaphor of the Major League baseball player? Have I discussed this with you?

**Meagen Gibson**

I don't think so, no, go ahead.

**Dr David Hanscom**

What happened about three years ago, I just quit talking about people's past period. We just forbid it. It takes you the wrong direction. The metaphor that came up about a year ago, is that really what we're trying to do is that you're trying to maximize time and safety and minimize time and threat. That's it. They're both going to be there every day, all day long. And so it's like becoming a Major League baseball player.

Life is the pitcher, every imaginable pitch you can imagine, they're not designed for you to hit the pitch, they're designed for you to miss the pitch. You're the hitter. What you're doing, you're learning skills to get on base safely. You develop a good eye so you can walk, you can get more base hits. Maybe the shortstop makes an error. There's a bunch of ways of getting on base, but it's also a learned skill. Really the skill is learning to be safe, but even the best baseball players make it out at least half the time.

Batting averages are 250 to 300, but still with walks and like that, the on base percent is about 500 percent. Same thing with life. You're going to, quote, fail half the time. It's not failure, just means your stresses are high, you're under resources, or maybe you just screwed up. One of the biggest factors we do keep teaching is that positive thinking doesn't work, but a positive vision is much different.

The keyword is being kind to yourself, keeping a positive outlook, moving forward. Also, I use the metaphor of football, of a running back in football who's going to drive towards a goal line with two or three tacklers on his back. He's not going to stop just because there's tacklers.

Another friend of mine really changed my life a bit when he said never waste a crisis. He doesn't look at stress as obstacles. They're just challenges to be negotiated. You can just train your brain

to go any way you want. That's the beauty of neuroplasticity. Starting today, right now, you want to become aware of the past, with the only question is what can I learn and what tools can I use to move forward?

### **[00:29:07]**

But I do want to finish off with the AI metaphor again. The AI database is dependent on the data loaded into it and the rules. The human database is pretty flawed for most of us, especially those with a traumatic past. Forget about one trauma or even two or three traumas, just a difficult past. But even the best past is not perfect. The human database is pretty flawed for everybody, and some much worse than others.

And then the processing system, we're trying to deal with these survival reactions with cognitive processes, and it's exactly the wrong thing to do. Once you understand that you don't have to take these survival reactions personally, just learn how to regulate your physiology and learn how to move forward, you now have a different database being loaded in.

From this point on, you're processing the data differently, and you can build any computer you want. Your brain is completely neuroplastic. It doesn't matter what's happened in the past. And then your brain not only forms new neurons, it grows, it changes structure. You're really rebuilding your brain.

### **Meagen Gibson**

It's interesting because I'm thinking about all the things that you've said and following this example. If you imagine trying to build an AI database and you're at the beginning of your pain journey and you spend all the time complaining, you're inputting into the AI database, this is how I feel and this is how much pain I'm in.

Here's what I learned from the pain forums today, instead of here's what I did to journal my thoughts, here's how I supported my body, and I saw a woodpecker. All of this imaginative other outside of that lens, how much more dynamic and full picture that database might be beyond just what's hard.

### **Dr David Hanscom**

Well, also remember, when you're teaching this computer to play chess from a master, it takes data input, it takes learning the tools, et cetera. Initially you might call it work, but maintaining this database isn't work. It becomes automatic. It's way easier than fighting off anxiety and frustration. It's not like you're having to do something every day.

In fact, there's a certain tipping point with almost everybody. First of all, the tipping point is always around anger. It's always been that way. I now get it. When you're angry, your brain is inflamed. I didn't know that five years ago. Learning how to process anger is always the tipping point of healing, period, because you can't nurture joy if you're angry. Can't do it.

Again, the two skill sets, processing stress physiology and then nurturing joy are two distinctly separate databases. Once it becomes habituated, I get triggered five or ten times every day, but I

don't stay there as long. That being said, I can still stay there for a week. For me personally, is that I'm human, even though I teach this stuff doesn't mean - again, we have no control over anxiety and anger at all.

### **[00:32:01]**

We have less control over our thoughts. When we're triggered, we're triggered, but we do have a choice of how to regulate your chemistry once you're triggered. That's the key issue. How long do you want to stay triggered?

### **Meagen Gibson**

Well, and going to what you said earlier too about self-esteem, it feels like when you're at the beginning of a journey and this goes for anything, whether it be pain or whatever, your self-esteem is built around the recognition and validation of your story and your pain. And then your expectation is that the world not damage that self-esteem at all.

You want the world to do the work to protect you and that's all just a function of your ego and it's a stage in all of this. But if you're looking at your self-esteem and danger and triggering and all of it, it's all just a function of you trying to maintain that self-esteem and feel safe.

### **Dr David Hanscom**

What I was seeing that there's always a tipping point where anger is number one. But the second tipping point, say, look, stop. Quit reading my stuff, quit reading books, read a novel, actually get out with people again because the healing occurs from moving forward. I've probably read at least 200 self-help books and it becomes very counterproductive. Same thing with workshops and seminars. At a certain point, take the tools you have and just put them into play.

When you have people that slide back into the hole, it's always because they're not using the tools that they were taught. I had a conversation yesterday with somebody who's back in the hole having doing fine, and sure enough, he's in the victim mode feeling sorry for himself. He wasn't writing, wasn't relaxing, wasn't sleeping.

I call it the victim package. When you go in the victim role, you quit doing the things you need to do to come out of the hole. I'm a total expert on the victim package.

### **Meagen Gibson**

As you said, under stress or when the heat gets turned up, we all have a tendency to go back into victim mode or forget what works for us, or forget how to use our tools. We suffer illness, injury or setbacks or things. This is human nature. We do it. That's why the self-help industry is still surviving. But how do you recalibrate when you recognize that's what's going on?

### **Dr David Hanscom**

I will say that these repetitive, unpleasant thoughts are considered untreatable by the mental health world. I beg to differ. I had extreme intrusive thought patterns. They're gone. I've helped lots

of people out of this hole. I just had a medical professional who came to me about four months ago and very high up in the whole mind body world. I started working with him, and within three months, his intrusive thought patterns were gone.

**[00:34:39]**

He'd probably read 200 books on these intrusive thought patterns, but they're based mostly on cognitive manipulations and fixing. Again, the key issue, and it's been really helpful for me to hear his story because, first of all, I was shocked. He went from extreme intrusive thought patterns to minimal within three months. I didn't think that was possible, but he had a lot of background, and so he learned the idea of calming the physiology really quickly.

That's what's missing in the mental health world is the physiology. I'm not saying everybody's missing it by any means. With trauma therapists, they teach people how to feel safe, but you got to remember that trying to always feel safe is a defensive posture. You got to be able to still negotiate life. It's not only about feeling safe. It's about learning how to process adversity.

Again, I do work with trauma therapists who are really good at this. It's an emerging field. So I don't want to be negative on the trauma world in general, but this trauma story that gets developed that I'm a trauma victim. I did that for 30 years. I had an abusive childhood. I felt free to tell my story to the world, whoever would listen. I was anchored by my trauma story so I know this routine extremely well, and it was a real jolt to me to quit talking about my pain.

Again, a conversation I had yesterday with somebody is, well, what do I talk about? Most people in pain probably spend 50 to 70 percent of their waking hours either searching the Internet, talking to friends or family about their troubles. When I say pain, remember, mental pain is more of a problem than physical pain. That's why no complaining, no gossiping, no criticism, no giving advice. That all reinforces the mental pain.

It's hard because these behavioral patterns are very embedded. Again, you're trying to create the brain that you want. The biggest obstacle I have seen in trauma therapy, if you want to call it that, is that people get addicted to the pain. They don't know what else to do. They have anxiety with success, and they go right back into the hole. The behavioral patterns win.

It's a willingness to engage or let go of their pain is actually what the biggest obstacle is to healing. Once people understand, become aware of the solution, and they're okay letting go, not saying they have to be thrilled about it, they heal very consistently. I don't know what percent of people can't let go of their pain, but it's the majority. It's been the biggest obstacle to healing I've ever seen.

I had no idea this was an obstacle 20 years ago when I started this project. That's by far and away the biggest obstacle is people aren't willing to let go of their pain. It's addicting. It's powerful. I'm addicted to it. I like it. When I realized I can never give it up, that I just had to negotiate with it and learn how to process it, then things changed dramatically.

**[00:37:32] Meagen Gibson**

Well, I think, too, and let me know if this has been true for you, that sometimes people don't realize that trying to fix their pain turns into just completely and totally avoiding any discomfort. As you were saying, learning how to be with discomfort, learning how to experience suffering.

Nobody's asking you to walk into a bonfire, but within reason. Not everything is going to be excruciatingly painful or extremely distressing, but we've flattened everything out. Anything that's uncomfortable must be avoided because that will immediately, as you said, trigger all thoughts of pain avoidance and pain stories.

**Dr David Hanscom**

I don't know how much time we have, but do we have a second to talk about the Ring of Fire?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, please.

**Dr David Hanscom**

You've seen that, correct?

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, I'm not sure what you're referring to. I think I know where you're going.

**Dr David Hanscom**

It's the ring of fire. You've seen my post on that, with the circle with the red ring in the middle?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah.

**Dr David Hanscom**

Okay, so what happened? I was listening to compassion based therapy put together by Paul Gilbert, and he had three triangles, red, green and blue, about the different stages of existence. Red is anxiety and anger. Green, of course, is safe and content, and blue is just living your life, accomplishments and whatever it is. My daughter looked at this graph, and she goes, this should be in a circle. We rearranged it where green is in the center, there's a ring in the middle that's red, they call it the Ring of Fire, and blue is on the outside reaching outward and living your life.

What happens is that it can be used as a tool of awareness because the colors represent your physiology. You're in the middle, safe and content. There's oxytocin, anti-inflammatory cytokines, common neurotransmitters, and you need to get there to regenerate and refuel for another day. The red ring is involved in every aspect of your life. Crossing the street, watching the food you eat, everything you do has some red in it.

**[00:39:37]**

If you're in the green and need to get into the blue to go back to work, you have to get dressed in the morning, negotiate your schedule, et cetera. There's always anxiety and anger involved in everything. So you have to cross this red ring no matter what you do. Crossing the red ring is just a learned skill set. Of course, the blue is life.

Once you're aware of what emotional, physiological state you're in, you can have a choice. They're all, okay, I'm in the red, I'm triggered. That's fine. How long do I want to stay here is the only question. I get trapped. There's many ways to get trapped. People get into the green and they want to stay there.

They quit taking risk and so they do avoidance behavior. Or I get trapped in the red because I didn't know what the red was. My whole life was the red. So then I went to the blue for 20 years, medical school and whatever, and I got trapped in the blue because I was outrunning the red. And so then when I ran out of steam and went back into the red, I was completely trapped in the red, but now I knew it. I didn't know what it was, but I was definitely trapped there.

The key issue is the tools allow you to negotiate your entire circle of life on your terms. The Ring of Fire or the circle of life, we use that as an awareness tool. Right now, I'm talking to you, I'm enjoying it, I'm in the blue. I'm a bit fired up. I like the ideas. And then I've got this huge to do list. I'll be in the red for a little bit, try to figure out what to do next, maybe decide to take a break and go back into the green.

But it's negotiating the fluid negotiation between all the colors, all day, every day, all day long is how you start living your life. You get to negotiate the entire circle of life on your terms. The key is your terms. That starts with awareness. You can't change your physiology without knowing where you're at right this second.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Dr David Hanscom**

I'm going to do a little exercise with you just to finish off. We will finish it. Sit back in your chair, drop your shoulders, take a deep breath, let it out. How'd that feel?

**Meagen Gibson**

Good.

**Dr David Hanscom**

We call it active meditation. If I'm in the blue, a little bit of red, I can drop it into the green. It's about three to five seconds all day long. Just listen to a sound, taste your food, drop your shoulders. We

did it all day long in surgery just to keep ourselves connected to the next move with a dramatic decrease in complication rate and huge increase in our enjoyment of the procedure.

**[00:42:10]**

You just connect to the moment you're in and become aware of what it is. And then you can drop your shoulders and take a deep breath anytime you want. We call that active meditation. Again, just one of the tools to calm down that heated up nervous system.

**Meagen Gibson**

I love that, brings your mindfulness to what you're doing. I don't know what your experience is like doing interviews, but we talk about stress and lots of things are stressful. Even things you enjoy are stressful. When I play pickleball, it's stressful on my system. Even though I love it.

When I do an interview, it's stressful. It gets less and less stressful every time I do an interview, but I love doing these interviews, and yet my hips get tense. Like you said, you were like, sit back and take a breath, and I was like, oh, that felt really good.

**Dr David Hanscom**

Am I stressing you out right now?

**Meagen Gibson**

No, that's exactly my point, though. You aren't stressing me out. I just experience stress because this is somewhat of a performance, just like we do.

**Dr David Hanscom**

It's the thought. What if I fail? You catastrophize. Again, that's cognitive distortions. We all do this, but it has a real effect on your body's physiology.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, assigning meaning to it.

**Dr David Hanscom**

Humans give meanings. That's why well-intentioned people have more trouble with RUTs than people who don't care, because we give meaning to too many things. Anyways, so I have a lot of passion for this because as I talk to people I work with right now, especially teenagers and even kids as young as eight years old, these intrusive thought patterns are just torturing people. They're really upsetting people and they're very common.

Nobody wants to talk about them, and they're considered unsolvable by the mental health world. I'm here to tell you, they absolutely are solvable, and I'm living proof of that. I have all sorts of people you can talk to that have the same thing. Again, this whole thing about negotiating our consciousness and adjusting our physiology is just a learned skill set.



**[00:44:04]**

Again, going back to the Major League Baseball player, remember, you'll be Single-A, Double-A and Triple-A in major leagues. If you're in Single-A ball, or maybe you're in the farm system, maybe you're below Single-A ball, you'll learn the skills and get better as you go. Again, you're going to fail more at the bottom, but you still get to learn, and at the top you still get to fail, but you're just better at it and it's just a learned skill set.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. All right, David Hanscom, where can people find out more about you, the DOC Journey, RUTs and all of it?

**Dr David Hanscom**

The basic core website is called [BackInControl.com](http://BackInControl.com), and there's a resources page that links to an app that we have called the DOC Journey, Direct Your Own Care Journey, also a computer-based course called Direct Your Own Care Course. Then I do coaching twice a week on Tuesdays and Thursdays at noon for an hour. It's part of the whole process, whether they use the app or the course.

The course or the app is really critical because it takes you on a healing sequence. The coaching by itself is designed to support and answer questions, but not designed to teach. A lot of people already know a lot of the concepts on the course or the app, but it's like putting together a big jigsaw puzzle.

Bruce Lipton and I, by the way, put together a series of four videos on the whole process. We had a wonderful time doing that. That's also available on the [BackInControl.com](http://BackInControl.com) page. On Psychology Today, I have over 1.3 million views on anxiety, another name for pain. Again, has to do with trauma, et cetera, what we're talking about.

And then my new book is going to be basically on RUTs. So this has become a really big deal to me. The suffering people have is incredible, and it's so solvable.

**Meagen Gibson**

Thank you so much. Dr. David Hanscom.

**Dr David Hanscom**

All right. Thank you.