



Conscious Life presents

Healing Trauma Through Deep Rest

Guest: James Reeves

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[00:00:09.870] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am very pleased to be welcoming James Reeves. Welcome, James.

James Reeves

Hi, Jaï. It's lovely to be here. Thanks for having me.

Jaï Bristow

James is the author of *The Book of Rest*, and the founder of Deep Rest, an online coaching, mentoring and support platform. Considering this is the Trauma Conference, and you are all about rest, and deep rest, do you want to tell us a bit about how they're connected?

James Reeves

Sure, my journey into teaching the practice of deep rest, which some of you may know as yoga Nidra, it's also being referred to as non-sleep deep rest through the science community now. These practices, my influence and the person that taught me many moons ago, was a part yogic scholar, we could say, and part psychologist.

The way that I love to explore these practices, and what I've found to be profoundly healing and transformative, for thousands of people that have come through the different programs that I've offered over the years, is really looking at how the rest state, how learning essentially to calm down, settle down, get steady, reset our nervous system into that equipoise or homeostasis.

Rather than from being triggered and alert, which is really someone that has trauma going on, that may be either triggered into trauma, or has a consistent low level of vigilance and hyper-arousal in their body. How by being able to rest, it provides a forum for them being able to meet what's difficult, to meet the disturbance. And what's typical in yoga world and to be playful Jai, why not? We just want to feel better.

[00:02:15] James Reeves

It's like, "Oh, I just want to lay down, and I want to feel relaxed. I've been a bit stressed," or "I've been a bit moody or reactive the last day or the last few hours, I'm just going to lay down and rest." We take a rest and we feel better. But in many ways, I think if we're talking about the relationship between rest and trauma, how when we feel better is actually a window of opportunity for us to go, "Well, now I feel okay, maybe I could meet what's difficult."

Then there's a whole load of ways that we can talk about, and we could say a whole protocol, for how we then do that. We can harness that rest state of feeling okay, safe within ourselves, self-regulated, to be able to start to incrementally, slowly, with great care, respect and love, meet the trauma, meet what's difficult. To me, rest is one of the most amazingly powerful tools for working with trauma.

Jai Bristow

I love that. I really love that idea that when you rest, you allow the spaciousness, the resources, and the capacity to then meet the difficulties of the trauma. I'm curious, because you say you take a rest and then you feel better, which is a lovely sentence, but in this day and age, it can be really hard to just take a rest.

I know for myself, often if I'm amped up taking a rest means minging out in front of Netflix, and then I don't necessarily feel better. Or taking a rest means scrolling on my phone, and getting in an Insta loop, and then I don't necessarily feel better. Or taking a rest is going for a walk because I think it will rest my mind, but then I have physical ailments, and before I know, I come back and I'm exhausted from the walk. Then I have loads of things to do.

How do we take rest? What is it to actually take a rest? Because often for people who are traumatized, just stopping and being still can be really activating, because it actually, whilst it does create space to be with the trauma, it also creates space for all the traumas, and all the triggers to come up to the surface, and that can be really intense and difficult for people.

James Reeves

Yeah, sure. The reason that I said "yay" was your honesty about the Netflix thing. You and two-thirds of the Western world plugging into any form of escapism that gets us close to rest. In *The Book of Rest*, that I wrote in 2019, that point is articulated a lot, that getting close to rest town isn't actually rest in and of itself. We can talk a little bit about how we do that.

But the other point you make, I want to proceed talking about how we rest, which is the resistance to it. I was talking with another Restorative yoga teacher, someone called Lizzie Lasater, which some of your listeners may know of, the daughter of Judith Lasater. She was sharing with me some of what she considers to be the blockages to people stopping, for Restorative yoga practice.

We hashed out some of these ideas together, and I came up with the name Roadblocks to Rest. So for most of us, we're going to fall into one of these four categories, which is, I don't have any time, and actually, the truth of that statement is, I'm not prioritizing rest. Because we all have the same amount of time in a day. I'm sure if you are doing some of that scrolling then, come on everyone

let's admit it, most of you are to a lesser or greater degree. And if you're not, well done, that's great. I'm glad you got a handle on that.

[00:05:56] James Reeves

But there will be other parts of your day that may be not as important as you taking a break for yourself. When we don't prioritize rest, maybe we don't understand its efficacy, and its importance. When we take a rest break in the middle of the day, we're going to have heightened and elevated mood, we're going to have decreased reactivity, and that's particularly in relationship to trauma.

We're going to have a greater capacity for focus, greater self-regulation, and we're essentially going to be a more productive, kinder, pleasant individual to spend time around. We're going to be a much better caregiver for our kids, et cetera.

So actually saying, "I don't have time for rest" is saying, "I'm not prioritizing this." When we understand what it is, we get another piece, which is guilt. Sometimes people feel like, "Oh, taking rest is self-indulgent. I shouldn't be doing this. The other people in my life are more important." And it's just that classic thing of I'm going to put my oxygen mask on last, and actually only when I realize that I can't breathe, and I'm in panic, am I remembering to put this oxygen mask on.

If we realize from that list of benefits that I got, and they're not exhaustive, there's more if I had my crib sheet with me, that taking a break can be such a great improvement in our resources, and our capacity as a human being.

We can switch from guilt, which is a collapsed what I would call a quote-unquote negative emotion, and we can flip to its opposite, which is something that's used in yoga Nidra a lot, which is potency and responsibility. I go from guilt and shame, and I'm not worth this into ah, I realize when I take responsibility for myself, and see how powerful and potent this practice is, I'm serving everybody else.

Then the other two things. One, let's just be playful about it briefly, FOMO, fear of missing out, "What doing nothing? But everyone else looks like they're having an amazing time. I just checked in on Instagram, and I got to keep up." Which I flip into the joy of missing out. I love saying no, I love a quiet night in, but not everyone's on that page. So, again, that plays back into those priorities, and how important this might be for you.

The last and the biggest one is actually, it's really scary to meet yourself. When I say that, and there's an "hummm" from you, I think we can all recognize either we've been on that journey ourselves, and we can say that with a degree of compassion and empathy.

Or we can hear it and have a mix of responses, which might be, "No, that's not me." Or, "Yeah, actually, it is really scary to meet my trauma. What do you mean? Turn around and face what I've been running from all of my life. What do you mean? Feel my anxiety. What do you mean? Stay in that hyper-vigilant state, and notice it and befriend it, and get to know it, and climb down from it? No, thank you. I just want to rest and feel nice."

[00:09:19] James Reeves

I think all of that resistance happens for so many of us. Then add in the addictive capacity of scrolling, and how easy it is to watch Netflix and have a glass of wine. Then it's fairly straightforward, most of us know what rest would really look like, we were doing it before the digital revolution.

You drove past a bus stop 25 years ago, and people would just be staring out into space, someone might be reading the newspaper. Now there's ten people there at the bus stop, all like this. No one's taking space, no one's having those breaks, because of the addictiveness of tech. And also because life has got so fast-paced and frenetic, we've lost our capacity to stop.

I know there's a lot of shares in there, but then how do we rest? Well, we're talking about constructive rest, which is where we might follow a protocol such as deep rest or yoga Nidra. We take a tour through body sensations. We tether our attention to the breath, subtle sensation. We meet emotion, and we explore opposites. This protocol, this guided rest system with myself, and a gazillion other people out there that are offering this stuff, helps us go from that near rest state, like, I've got my feet up, and I'm somewhat recovered into a deep rest state, which allows us then to really heal out of our trauma.

I think we need some structure. These days, I don't tend to practice those formal steps and stages of deep rest. I've done it so much that I know how to enter into that state, and I know the protocol inside out. I can take my own personal tour of the body without having to listen to guidance. But initially, we need to maybe listen to something audio-wise so that we learn how to enter into that rest state.

Jaï Bristow

I love that. I love how you've described all the roadblocks to rest before talking about how to rest. I think it's so important how you talk about needing a protocol at first. And like with any practice, once you've practiced it enough, and it's integrated enough, then you no longer need to follow the protocol. Then you can take time, where you know how to get into that state of deep rest without needing guidance, or listening to it.

It's the same with many other practices that get talked about on this conference and others, but initially, because we've all been programmed to just have very whirring brains and to be doing, doing. Even though we're named human beings, most of us are human doings, it can be really difficult to get into that.

I really value that there are people like you, and many others, who offer the guidance and the protocols to go into the state of deep rest. Now, I'm curious because you spoke about near rest, and then you spoke about deep rest, but you also talked about how deep rest isn't sleep. Could you say more about the differentiation between the two?

James Reeves

Yeah, sure. Well, one lends itself to the other. If we've learnt to sleep well, then we're probably going to be able to rest better. And if we're resting really well, it will likely lend itself to our sleep,

depending on what time of the day you do choose to rest. And then for some people, when they practice yoga Nidra, or deep rest, they just fall asleep because they're knackered.

[00:13:02] James Reeves

And out of the tradition, depending on the teachers and teachings you go to, some practices of yoga nidra will even have a message like, "do not sleep, sleep is dirty, don't do that." My take on it is a bit more human, which is when we need to sleep, we sleep. And getting close to that rest state can then take us over the edge. And sleep is really important for us. Taking a ten-minute nap in the middle of the day, or catching up on your sleep, as long as it's not too close to bedtime, can be really constructive, and really help us refresh, be refreshed in the ways I mentioned earlier.

But yoga Nidra itself, the idea of it is that we're entering into a betwixt state, we're somewhere between sleep and awake. The way I like to talk about this, if we think of the story of Alice in Wonderland, that's really a description of the hypnagogic state. We can have these, what are called hypnagogic elucidations, we may get waking dreams, rabbits with pocket watches, and girls that get big and small and swim in a river of their own tears. It's weird stuff, it's the stuff of dreams.

But when we start to go very close to the edge of sleep and into this hypnagogic state, we can have these momentary waking dreams. That's a byproduct of being in that state. Our brain changes from being predominantly producing beta waves cognition, figuring things out, to-do lists, into that more watching sunset state of the brain. It just happens very naturally. What we're really trying to do is learn to surf on the edge of that state for longer and longer periods of time.

If we're very sleep-deprived, we'll be there for 2 minutes, then we're gone, we're asleep. Sorry if that worried you that I'd just gone into a narcoleptic moment of actually falling asleep. I'm still here, I'm okay. So we may get really close to it, we may find ourselves drifting in and out. "I've heard some of the instruction, I'm trying to bring my attention through my body, but I'm not quite following, I keep drifting in and out." That's a good yoga Nidra state, you're not doing anything wrong by that.

But ideally we're staying close to this in-between state, which becomes very transformative. Our brain is producing now predominance of these alpha waves. So slowing down of our thinking, analytical mind, and we're close to the dream state, as I suggested earlier.

Now our unconscious, which tends to be the place that we put all of our trauma, is then readily and easily accessible, which can be wonderful and problematic, depending on your orientation, and where you are in your journey.

If we can firstly, I consider there to be three phases of this surfing that in between state. The first phase is well-being, I started talking about this right back at the beginning. Where we are sensing into our body, being with the sensations of our breath, and subtle sensations in the body. As a way to get more and more out of our heads and embodied.

To be able to get very used to, over maybe hundreds of times, becoming sensitive to sensation. We can really now feel our hands, we can feel inside the mouth, we can feel the chest, the belly, the pelvis. And these sensations in our body are the home ground of those emotional repressions that will be in our unconscious. When they reveal themselves, they're going to be part sensation.

[00:16:53] James Reeves

We're wiring ourselves up to then be able to get very close to our feelings and our emotions, but we're not quite doing that yet. We're feeling this sense of well-being, and ease, and okayness. Learning it over time, so that we go from, to be playful, from "ooh to ahhh". We can get into this relaxed state. When we know that we can proficiently do that, like the first stage of riding a bike, you wouldn't do tricks before you can just ride up and down without falling off.

Then the next phase is, how do I meet emotion? Which can work one of two ways. We may be lying there having a lovely time, and suddenly we get this wave of sadness come up, or anxiety, or anger, or whatever it may be. And that happens, that can happen in yoga Nidra. It's not always a pleasant ride. You may meet feelings and emotions, they may just surface as you get close to the unconscious.

I consider that to be, I'm borrowing this line from a teacher called Lauren Roche, who talks about how emotions are a little like a cat that wants to come in and sit on your lap. When you settle on the sofa, when we're at rest, our emotions may come and find us, or we can proactively engage with what we know has been circling around.

We all have trauma, we all had difficult moments in our childhood, we all had ways that our primary caregivers missed us in certain ways. Nobody had the perfect childhood.

Whether your trauma is complex, is compounded, whether you know all of its components and understand it well, whether it's a mystery to you, you realize that you've been freaking out, and you don't really know what it's all about. We can start to proactively engage by saying, "Okay, I feel calm and steady now. What's here, what wants to be met? What could come in and come and rest on my lap?"

Then there's a whole protocol for how we do that, how we regulate ourselves, and how we stay self-regulated, how we may need to do this with another person. Because I notice often with trauma, we need to co-regulate, we need to actually do that with someone that we trust. That could be just the sound of someone's voice guiding us, or it could actually be doing something live.

That's what I tend to do with people who have trauma. I'll actually work with them individually, and we'll meet it together in a form, or a technique that I call co-meditation.

There are lots of different ways that we can come to meet this emotional self as part of the rest experience. And begin to integrate those levels of trauma. The first stage is that restfulness, and we need to be there, then we may meet ourselves emotionally. Then the deeper question we might get into is, "What's behind that? What's consciousness? What's observing this? What has always remained okay, even when my mind and body are freaking out?" That's a juicy question, maybe that's a different conference, I'm not sure.

Jai Bristow

That's fantastic. What I really love in everything you're saying, is that it really feels like there's the element of surrender. I was talking to Zeeba Khan also, who's an Ayurvedic practitioner and works in different ways within a holistic approach to healing, about surrender.

[00:20:39] Jaï Bristow

It's like what you're saying, when you're talking about the differentiation between deep rest and sleep, it's not about resisting sleep, it's not about saying no. It's about reaching that deep state of relaxation and surrender where you're surfing, and you're coming in and out of sleep, or consciousness, or not sleep.

I know that state, both from doing Restorative yoga or yoga Nidra, when sometimes I do, there's been many times where I've been healing from severe chronic illnesses, where I just sleep for an hour and a half. But how wonderful to have that opportunity when clearly it's needed. My body, that's what it needed for its healing process, was just to sleep.

In the same way that when we were talking about the near rest, and deep rest, and all the blockages, to getting into a state of deep rest. Not waking up and feeling super guilty that we've slept, because that was clearly what our body needed. And we can do it again the next day, and maybe the next day we won't sleep as much, and we'll get more into that state of deep rest. It's that coming in and out, and that relaxing into the state rather than resisting it.

With the emotions it was similar, that sense of just allowing things to flow and not having an idea of, the sentence you used at the beginning, you have a rest and then you feel better thing. It's not that you have to feel good. Part of feeling better is allowing the uncomfortable feelings to emerge, and welcoming them, and letting them surf through you, and be felt and be processed in that same way.

I know from my own experience how often when I'm in that either actual dream state, or semi-conscious dream state, how I do end up just processing a lot of stuff, any worries and anxieties on my mind, will come out and play out in that. But then there is a part of me that when I come back into consciousness, I might feel slightly odd at first. A bit like when you come out of therapist, and you've been talking about all your traumas, but then there's been a release, and there's been a healing and a meeting of that.

I really appreciate what you were saying about not having the guidance and the support. Whether that's through listening and to a protocol, or whether it's live. It's not about trying to awaken the rushing emotions, and the difficult trauma, and just drowning in the difficulty, that there's actual safety, and support, and guidance in place.

That's super important because so many times people offer things that actually end up waking up the trauma, or triggering, or activating the trauma, but not necessarily supporting the trauma healing, and then people can get retraumatized. It's really important, that extra element that you were adding about that.

James Reeves

Can we just maybe circle back around and talk a little bit more about that? In the trauma world, there's the turn of phrase titration. Which for those listening, if you don't know, it means to essentially drip feed, or just slowly release. We can tritate water into a rodent's cage for them to slowly drink, rather than guzzle themselves. We can tritate, or slowly release, the experience of what's difficult for us.

[00:23:55] James Reeves

Another way to talk about this is neuroscientifically looking at two qualities. Firstly, habituation, which is where you walk into a room, incense is burning, you notice its smell. Science says maximum of 7 minutes, but probably within seconds, you normalize that smell and it becomes background information to your brain. Then new information is, new sensory information is coming in. That's habituation.

And then desensitization is like you run a really hot bath, and it's maybe a little bit too hot to get in all at once. You put your toes in and then you take them out, and then 10 seconds later, you dip your toes in for a little bit longer, and then you take them out, and then you get your foot in and then it comes out. And then slowly you get into the bath through this process of going in and out. That is really how we want to work with the depths of trauma.

That's why sometimes working with another person to help us co-regulate to them, because for me, I'm not really scared of anything inside myself anymore. I've done a lot of this work. I've gone really deep into being with a lot of my traumas, pains, discomforts, my stuff, my complexes. I have a deep fascination in Jung and that element of psychotherapy I've really been in.

I've worked enough with people to not be scared when they start to get triggered, or when they start to get scared of themselves. We co-regulate where one person is okay even when the other person starts to go, "Whoa, okay, this is scary." And our nervous systems actually pick up on that.

Sometimes we really do need someone to be with us, or we might need to do this in a group setting. I run a group every Tuesday night, and I have a collection of people that come together from all around the world. We all practice yoga Nidra together, and they've been doing that for a couple of years. There's that sense of community that builds and fosters a sense of safety. We need that regulation, either self-regulation or co-regulation.

We also need to understand the importance of not going straight into the most catastrophic traumatizing memory, and to slowly take our time. Saying that I've had plenty of people that have gone in deep, and by being held well, they were able to meet it. It can be very powerful for individuals. I don't think there's one set of rules that works for everybody.

My final piece on this, and this may fly against some of the other presenters in the conference, I don't know what the general view is out there. But my sense of it is there can be a lot of, "Oh, trauma, I don't want to go near that, that's too scary." But most of us have some trauma in us. And my take on it is if we can reframe from ooohh to ahh, to compassion, to curiosity, to holding, to interest, to seeing even these what seem like very broken parts of us, the traumatic memories, the difficult emotions. They just want to come home and be loved. Even if they're really big.

Sometimes my kids get really upset, my son fell off his bike the other day, and he really hurt himself. If I am freaking out, as well as he being in pain, it's not so great.

But if we can hold that, and touch even our greatest pains with love, tenderness, compassion, curiosity, knowing that they're just coming home to be healed. As I'm expressing that, you can probably hear it in my voice, I get very emotional at this, because it's the heart of the work.

[00:28:00] James Reeves

It's so beautiful to see people be able to meet what's difficult, because the rest of it, it's like the equivalent of a chocolate biscuit, and an extra half an hour in bed in the morning. It's lovely to get deep rest to restore our nervous system, but the real healing comes from really getting up close with what's difficult.

If you can find the right teacher, you can find the right environment, if you can find a way that you feel safe with yourself, and with another person, and with a protocol, then you've got something to really hold you. Which is the teachings, the teacher, and yourself, and your own experience. Those three, I think, together will support you through meeting even the deepest, most difficult trauma in your life.

Jaï Bristow

That's really beautiful. I'm curious that the Tuesday group that you mentioned, is that an online group?

James Reeves

Yeah, it's an online thing that I've been running through the end of the pandemic, and it's just kept going. You can register via the deep rest website, if I could say it, bad isn't it when you can't pronounce your own website?

People can come along and join in that experience because it's just... Here's my take on it, there's so much free content out there, you could plug into YouTube, you could find loads of non-sleep, deep rest things. That's what I did to begin with. I listened to a CD from my teacher for a long period of time, but I didn't really understand what was going on, and start to feel deep transformation until I actually spent time with that person in person.

To understand, for example, because we're talking about trauma, how there are elements of this, like doing what's in psychology called parts work. There will be maybe young parts of you that need to come forward. There's the traumatized part. There's your inner critic that's shouting from the sidelines, "Come on, you big softie. What's the matter with you?" You've got some inner power figure, or self-potency in there. There are all these parts that we need to get to know, and how we dialog with them.

You were talking about surrender, what I would call welcoming. That's a whole schema of, can you meet it in your body? If you feel that sensation in your heart, that you're weeping right now. If that were to walk through a door in your mind's eye, what's it saying to you? What does it want? What does it need? Why is it here?

And maybe you see that young part of yourself, or you see yourself frightened by the roadside right back in that traumatic memory. We need to learn how to meet these parts really skillfully, and hold them with great love and with kindness. We need to find out why they're here. What do they need to feel resolved?

Sometimes our emotions are just there to be expressed, we may just need to weep. Other times, we may have a guest, or a messenger, one of these parts of ourselves that ask the most left field

or unusual things of us for some kind of healing. They want you to have a conversation with somebody that you've been mentally going, "No, I never want to speak to that person ever again." And then this inner character says, "You need to speak to them. You need to find some resolution with them."

[00:31:29] James Reeves

Or love yourself, trust yourself. So many beautiful messages have come from people's unconscious, from them getting in touch with these inner characters over the years, and getting into that, and breaking through is a journey of really being able to trust.

Like I said, those three components of developing trust enough and then understanding, how do I really meet this within myself? As people can do that, just such transformation takes place. It's really beautiful to see. So, yeah, having some good guidance, I think, is key along the way.

Jaï Bristow

That's fantastic. I'm always a big fan of methods that bring together different wisdoms. I really hear that when you're talking about deep rest, it's bringing in the Eastern wisdom of yoga and yoga Nidra. But you're also talking about Western psychological tools, and trauma healing tools, whether it's internal parts, and all these other things.

I really love as well how you're talking about bringing together the mind and the body. We were talking earlier about how you're going from the oooooop to ahhh. That idea that when you're in this deep rest state, then your mind, you might be having these semi-awakened dreams that are processing anxiety or depression. Or not depression necessarily, but that are processing traumas, or things that are coming up for you, and tensions that might be arising in your body might be being processed in your dreams. And then vice versa.

It's like you might think of something, or some emotion might come up which might create a contraction, but if you're in that state of deep relaxation, deep rest, then as you relax around that contraction, that also liberates things. It's really that harmony and balance between these different methods and the mind and body, which is fantastic.

James Reeves

Yeah. There are so many different ways into meeting this stuff. For those few people, maybe many people who are listening, who feel like, that's great, but that's not me, I can't do that, that's too scary. That's too big for me. In my clinical experience over the last two decades, nothing's too big, nothing's too scary. May take some time to really get there, and you may have to go super slow along that journey that we've been talking about, but you can meet it, and you can resolve what seems insurmountable within yourself for sure.

Jaï Bristow

That's wonderful. Thank you so much for your time today James, how can people find out more about you and your work?

[00:34:13] James Reeves

Well, we mentioned it before, the Deep Rest website is probably the best place to get hold of me. It's something that I'm continuing to grow and expand in terms of content up there.

You can come along and attend some of the live events that I teach there. If you happen to live in England or Europe, you can come and train with me. You can learn about facilitating yoga Nidra, I run teacher trainings in both Europe and in the UK. You can also work with me one to one, that's the way that I most like to work with trauma. There are all those options, and you can find out about them through www.deeprest.com.

Jai Bristow

Fantastic, thank you so much.

James Reeves

Oh, thank you Jai, it's been absolutely lovely talking with you. Thank you.