Conscious Life presents

Stress, Trauma and Chronic Health Conditions

Guest - Ben Ahrens

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[00:00:02] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today, I'm speaking with Ben Ahrens, a chronic illness recovery expert, TEDx speaker, neuroplasticity coach, and CEO of Re-origin, a science-based neuroplasticity training program and community for anxiety, depression, and chronic illness recovery. Ben Ahrens, thank you so much for joining us today.

Ben Ahrens

Thank you so much for having me. Looking forward to our chat today.

Meagen Gibson

I want to start by asking you, what is the link between stress, trauma, and chronic health issues?

Ben Ahrens

Great question. Yeah. So normally, especially in this day and age when we think of stress, we think of chronic stress. We think of something that is debilitating us. A downward pressure that can slow us down.

In actuality, one of the incredible things about the brain... We've all probably heard this term neuroplasticity, which basically means the brain's ability to adapt, is that... Sometimes when we're feeling stuck, when we're feeling overwhelmed or stressed out, the reality is that the brain is always changing. It just depends which direction it's changing into.

What oftentimes we don't think of when we think of the brain, is that the brain is... Particularly a part of the brain called the limbic system, is like an interpreter. There's this lens of perception that exists that interprets things.

We'll use that vague term, we'll come back to it. But things from the outside world. Stress, we can say, or stressors. It ultimately determines whether these things are safe or unsafe.

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Based on that determination, it will prompt a certain... Either survival response or a performance-based response. The more of these survival types of responses we experience, that's when we start to feel stress and life starts to really weigh us down.

Just relating it back to trauma, and we'll get into all of this as well... When we've accumulated bits of traumas over the course of a lifetime. These can be large events, or these can be small things that have just built up over time...

The brain can tend to err further on the side of caution, and to prompt that or default to that survival response more often of the time, even more often than may actually be appropriate. That's when we find ourselves feeling stuck in this chronic state of overwhelm, fight or flight, or just stuck in hypervigilance.

Meagen Gibson

What's fascinating to me as you're talking, I'm thinking about the subjectivity of how our limbic system judges the threat of the things, as you called it, or information that's coming in.

Just this morning, I was having a conversation with my partner about something that was really agitating for him that I wouldn't, in my personal life, find agitating or activating at all.

It's so subjective what one person's nervous system and system will encounter as information threat versus information joy, information humor, information alert. What do we know about what causes that subjectivity in our system?

Ben Ahrens

Yeah. On the acute sense, we know that these responses are very state-dependent, and we all know that.

If we've had a poor night's sleep or several poor nights' sleeps and we're in a low state, we just have a more trigger-happy nervous system. We have that higher propensity to have these types of knee-jerk reactions, but that alone doesn't necessarily cause the knee-jerk reaction.

You gave a perfect example because you mentioned that your husband was triggered by something that you might not be, or I'm sure there might be things vice versa, and we all experience these.

While our current state is a contributing factor, what really are the underlying causes is our brain's propensity to learn from the past and protect us in the future. If you think of the brain's first order of business, it's really survival. It wants to do everything possible to keep us alive.

The second order of business right after survival is efficiency. It always wants to learn what it deems as unsafe, or maybe requires a little bit more vigilance or attention, so that it doesn't have to keep relearning these things in the future.

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Imagine if every time you had to relearn not to touch a hot stove or step away from moving traffic, there wouldn't really be much room left in the brain for other things.

As we alluded to, when there's a high, what's called allostatic load or a high buildup of even small cumulative stressors over time, the brain can start misclassifying what we call benign stimuli or things that aren't necessarily dangerous as things that actually warrant a certain survival response.

Meagen Gibson

If I understand allostatic load correctly, and please correct me if I get this wrong. But from what I understand about it, it's like the stresses that you encounter in your life, you have a conditional response to that.

If there's horrible traffic or I had a friend who was actually caught in a wildfire once. But if you experience the stress of that and it helps you navigate that system.

But then afterwards, that stress doesn't leave your nervous system, that allostatic response that you used in a conditional scenario now becomes your normal baseline from which you're working.

Then all of those experiences continue to reinform and move the baseline of what your actual homeostasis is, which is causing this overload. Am I anywhere close to the ballpark?

Ben Ahrens

Exactly right. And twice you used the term "baseline" to indicate that we have certain setpoints. We might have certain ways of responding that can shift depending on this, what's called allostatic load. This is a term that's, I think, coming more and more into the lexicon.

But the really important thing to note, and what we're alluding to is that stress in and of itself is not necessarily harmful or threatening. It is that lens of perception, that nervous system and limbic system that interprets things from the environment based on what they are.

But also based on our past experiences of how we felt when we encountered them before, and then combined with how much other stuff we may be carrying around with us, it will default to those survival responses. I think the best way to think about something like an allostatic load is to give a really broad picture of it.

You can think that as humans, we basically have three states of being, or three modes of responding. You can think of when stress comes into the picture. One of them, what we think of as an ideal or neutral baseline, would be homeostasis.

That's the scenario where a stressful event occurs, and we get a phone call that sets us off or gives us some bad piece of information. But then once the news has passed or once the issue has gone, we return back to baseline. That's homeostasis.

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Allostasis occurs when, it's like that fight or flight response has no shutoff valve. Once it starts and kicks into gear, not only do we not necessarily return to homeostasis, now the brain is on high alert. So like a hammer looking for nails, it will seek and find other things to start reacting to in the same way. So that allostasis can actually build on itself.

Now, I mentioned a third modus operandum here, and that third one is what's known as resilience. It is possible to experience stress and respond with performance-based outputs in such a way where it actually strengthens us as a result of encountering the stress-inducing experience.

There are some ways to transition that, but I'll leave it there for now. And then we can get into shifting that lens of perspective. But we can think of allostasis as when the stress response has no shutoff.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm glad you paused there. I mean, you could have gone on, and we would have all been on the edge of our chairs. But I'm glad you paused so I can ask more questions.

This allostasis and inability to return to homeostasis and let go of the stress response after we've experienced something. When we do this over and over again, how is this impacting chronic conditions? What are the effects of a constant up-leveling of stress and the stress perception that we have? How is this impacting our health and the conditions that we are experiencing?

Ben Ahrens

Yeah. Well, I mentioned in the beginning that nothing is static. Even if we feel stuck, everything is in a flow, everything is changing. What really matters is what direction things are changing into. Regeneration or degeneration. Whether it's further senses of ease or further levels of disease.

When we're in allostasis, you can think of it almost as like... Imagine if you take a person with poor posture and poor movement patterns, and you have them in the gym doing squats, and you start loading more weight onto the bar without correcting those dysfunctions.

What's going to happen over time is the posture is going to worsen further and further. The movement patterns are probably not going to get better either. Over time, you're just asking for injury.

If, however, you were able to help that person to do some corrective exercises, to shift their posture, improve their movement patterns, and then you start stacking weight onto the bar, that same weight is now going to lead to a strengthening response.

But your question was really about allostasis, and that what can happen is essentially... It's not a huge surprise or it's intuitive. But when the brain and body are in that constant state of fight or flight, it's a very energetically expensive state. Metabolically expensive state for the brain and body to be in.

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We know that the brain consumes about 20% of the resources in terms of blood, oxygen, and nutrients. But we also know that the brain is uniquely situated as the chief organizer of all other bodily cells and systems.

When the brain is on high alert and vigilant, that will prompt other systems in the body, like the adrenals, to continuously run. It may inhibit digestion. It just leads to this cascade effect that back in the '70s, when they studied this, they called it PNI, or psychoneuroimmunology. How stress and brain states impact the immune system.

Then in the '80s, about a decade later, they looked at it again and they said, "You know what? Actually, it's not PNI, it's PNEI. That's psychoneuroendocrine immunology." Then they added the gastrointestinal system to it. If they kept going, you could imagine what would happen.

But essentially, the brain really, or this... What's become a common term or concept, dysregulation in the nervous system can really impact every single part of the body.

The main takeaway here is that when the brain and body are in this hypervigilant state, resources are allocated away from processes that lead to health and maintenance, and wound healing and so forth. Those resources are diverted and applied toward things that are really meant to counter the immediate threat.

Meagen Gibson

I think that this is something that we don't talk about enough. I've personally experienced this, but nobody prepared me for it. It was a surprise to me. I thought I was the first person this had ever happened for. But I went through a trauma healing journey, and it's very slow at first, and then it felt like everything all at once.

The thing that was so shocking and surprising to me was how much energy I reclaimed. I was like, holy cow, there's a lot of energy that was being misappropriated or diverted to things that weren't actually helping my life in any way other than to keep me alive and keep me in perception super safe.

I'd just like to highlight that part because I think energy is the thing that a lot of people are in desire of more of, and they're doing everything they can. They're exercising, they're eating as well as they can. They're trying everything. They've got gratitude journals.

I'm reading from my diary from 10 years ago, but we're doing everything that we're told to do, and we're still just totally depleted because nobody's pointed us in that direction of stress and healing and nervous system regulation and all the ways in which we're being drained.

I just appreciate you naming that. In talking about our brains and our perception of danger and how we get focused in the wrong directions, we learn that over time, our brain is like, "Okay, we're going to be super hyper-focused on keeping you safe, and we're going to do it in a way that's efficient."

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It goes to show that if you can do that, you can unlearn it, I assume, right? If your brain is that powerful to keep you alive and keep you safe. We can train it how to do it maybe more appropriately. Is that right?

Ben Ahrens

Yeah. It's really counterintuitive at first because we are really good at doing stuff. Meaning we're really good, and our system is really good at activating. We are less familiar with deactivating, powering down, because it entails the absence of doing something.

And so, fortunately, however, this is a skill, and it's something that can be practiced very deliberately. And when we go about practicing it... And I can share some simple techniques people can start doing right away, that too can become a persistent state. The no-go response or the deactivation response, the parasympathetic response.

And the great thing is the more we practice this, the more the body gets the message that it's actually okay to let go of that vigilant look out position and to be at ease a little bit, and to actually, even then...

Go a step further and to still engage, or stay engaged or connected, with the very things that are challenging us. The conversations, the emails, the work, whatever they might be, while still maintaining a sense of ease in our bodies.

As we do that, an amazing thing happens, which is efficiency, and as you pointed out so well, is liberation of energy. Energy that was always there. We always had that energy. We didn't even realize it was just being used to white-knuckle our way through life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah. That's my exact experience. You talk about this deactivating response, and I always think about relationships. Tell me if you've ever had this experience, but you're in a relationship and there's some discomfort, there's some friction.

So you decide that you're going to change your behavior in a way. You change your behavior, you try it once, and it doesn't have the impact that you wanted and you don't get the feedback that you were intending to get. You're like, "Well, I did this thing once, and it didn't fix my entire relationship."

I always think about that in our relationships to ourselves, because whenever we try to intervene or start a practice or change behaviors or do things like you're talking about. Especially when we're trying to deactivate, there's discomfort, and change doesn't necessarily happen right away.

You want to give effort and get a response. You want to get equal change back from however much energy it took to initiate that change that you're trying to make.

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What do you tell people about when they start practicing this? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What can they expect and what might the journey back to themselves in this presence and ability to re-regulate look like?

Ben Ahrens

It's an up and down journey. It's definitely not linear. In some instances, it can take a little bit more energy in the beginning just to learn how to make this shift and to tune in with a lot of attention onto sensations and things that are actually uncomfortable.

I think the first thing to note, and really what I always tell people and where we start, is the basic mechanics or understanding of the brain's role in vigilance, in conditions. And really understanding that it is a protective response, knowing that the brain didn't suddenly turn on you and go rogue. It's actually very much still working in your favor.

To your point of starting to cultivate or develop a relationship with your body and your nervous system, I think that really starts with opening up to your brain. Starting to develop a relationship there and letting yourself off the hook. Letting your brain off the hook, and realizing that it's okay.

However you're feeling in the moment, however you've been feeling or responding or reacting in the past, it's okay. And it came out of a good place. It came out of a place of self-preservation and protection.

So there's something very powerful and positive there. Once we do that, now we open the door. Now we start to be able to take a step and start to observe our responses with a little bit less judgment toward them.

We can start to feel in our bodies when we hear something we didn't like, or we notice a sensation that we'd rather not be there. We can start to feel some resistance to it. People always ask, "What does resistance feel like?"

Oftentimes, it feels like subtle muscle tension. It might feel like holding our breath. It might feel more like just a mental, a thought that we... Wincing type of thought. We don't want this to be there.

But once we start to open up that dialog or kindle that relationship with the brain, we start to realize that it's actually... It's okay. And by letting go of judging our own responses and reactions, we allow them to be there, which, interestingly enough, oftentimes, that alone leads to their dissipation.

Maybe not their disappearance, but their dissipation. Meaning we might still have the reaction, but the effects of that response or reaction will likely dissipate in accordance with its natural half-life, which all feelings, good or bad, have. It goes back to that idea that everything is really transient.

Then the next step is to start to learn how to self-regulate or self-modulate. I always have people do this in a Re-origin program that teaches people how to really self-regulate, really for chronic conditions.

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First, we have people just do the mechanics of this. There are various techniques like deep breathing with longer exhales. One of my favorites is called progressive muscle relaxation. But basically just the process of tensing up your muscles when you notice that you have tension so that you can let go and work on that deactivation part of the equation.

There's a lot of little things that you can do. But we're just, again, reawakening now more the connection with the body. We started with what's known as the top-down, where we acknowledge intellectually that the discomfort we're feeling isn't necessarily dangerous.

Now we're going with what's called the bottom-up. We start with the body and use the body to send new information, essentially messages of relaxation, slowness, safety, back up to the brain.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I love that you acknowledge both because I think it's very individual. For me, it had to happen top-down. I had to understand what my brain was trying to do for me in order to even give my body access to my conscious experience. I think a lot of people find that to be true.

If I was going to allow my body to be uncomfortable and tolerate it and get to know it, I had to understand the intentions of my brain in this communication with my body. So thank you for mentioning that.

You talked about resilience earlier, and I want to touch on that for a minute. Because I think everybody in the social circles in the public, we talk about resilience a lot. And people tout it as this thing that everybody wants, but we don't actually know how we get it.

I would love it if you could talk a little bit more about that process. What does it look like? What components need to be present in your experience? What kind of community, what support might you need or want in order to gain this thing that we all want, which is resilience?

Ben Ahrens

Yeah, I'm glad you asked. I'll start by saying that resilience is not just charging forward. It's not just rallying up our energy and charging into battle. The type of resilience that I'm referring to is, as I mentioned with that weight lifting example...

It's a shift in the messaging between the brain and the body. A shift in the communication, where the brain and body now start to understand and settle into a new reality that discomfort does not equal danger.

It doesn't mean that we don't experience it. It just means that it no longer has the same capacity to stop us or to hinder us. Not because we're mounting so much energy to push through it, but because we're actually relaxing our way through it.

[00:24:01]

So yeah, in terms of cultivating resilience, there's a great book that's called... The title is *Run Towards the Danger* by Sarah Polley. It's interesting. It's much more autobiographical, and about a childhood actress from Canada that my sister and I used to watch on a TV show growing up.

Meagen Gibson

I'm a huge fan of Sarah Polley, so I'm glad that you mentioned that book.

Ben Ahrens

Yeah. But essentially, the book was catalyzed by her experience with post-concussion syndrome. She had an all too common experience, which is what happens, or what can happen, in things like post-concussion syndrome is the brain becomes hypersensitized to things in the environment, lights, loud noises, social events, things like that.

Heeding her doctor's advice or well-meaning advice, she slowly started to retreat from the things that were challenging her. They said, "Okay, if you're getting headaches, if you're getting migraines, well, best to avoid the loud noises. Turn down the lights, stay out of the social situations."

That can be helpful for a period of time. We all need time to retreat and to rest and recover. But what she found was that after four weeks, eight weeks, months, her life was shrinking until the point where she found her whole existence just taking place in a dark room.

Any interactions with these environmental stimuli seemed to only make her worse. She went to a lot of different doctors and essentially met with one who gave her this really counterintuitive piece of advice, which was to run toward the danger.

Now, it's a little bit of an exaggeration... And I've actually made a video, a YouTube video on this, where I said if I had to title it, I would say *Walk Pragmatically Toward the Danger While at the Same Time Keeping Your Body in a State of Relaxation and Safety.*

But of course, that title would be way too long. But the idea is one of gradual exposure, or what's known as incremental training, whereby effectively, we identify the things that are challenging us. These can be situations, emotions, environmental factors.

We slowly, as we've first practiced this ability to self-regulate, we then slowly start to practice self-regulating in the presence of the very things that are challenging us. By doing that systematically, we start to retrain the brain and nervous system that those things are no longer dangerous.

They might still be undesired, they might still be unpleasant. But the brain slowly starts to get the message that they're not dangerous. And we can actually stay connected and stay in control while amid these challenging scenarios.

[00:27:03] Meagen Gibson

I love that example. Also, I want to point out that the perception of danger is subjective. It could be literally anything that your body is perceiving as dangerous or incredibly uncomfortable.

It doesn't have to be anything that's actually dangerous. If you were to tell somebody else, "This thing is scaring me, or I feel like my life is in danger because of a bird."

I literally just heard a bird outside. That's the first thing I pulled from. It could actually be dangerous. But it could also, not in other people's perception, be dangerous. This also has a lot to do with your actual subjective experience of what that danger is, too, right?

Ben Ahrens

Yeah, I'm really glad you brought that up because I think a lot of people have this question, especially the way we're talking about it. I'm definitely, I'll say, guilty of this, but we throw this word around "danger".

And then a lot of people will say, "Well, what are you talking about? Because I know that that's not dangerous. I don't feel like I'm in danger."

When we talk about it, it's not an intellectual understanding or thinking that we are actually in danger. Instead, we're talking about or referring to a very subtle body response to something.

An email comes in that's about your taxes or something. You haven't even opened it, but it's just... It creates a... Anything that creates a bit of a wince, that's what we're referring to.

We know that it's not harmful, dangerous. But it's something that the nervous system, for whatever reason, has determined is unpleasant, requires a little bit of excess tension. The key, and where the adjustment comes in, is that the reality is that it doesn't actually require excess tension.

In fact, we'll probably respond to the situation, whatever it might be better, more effectively without that unnecessary tension. And so part of this retraining process is reminding or retraining the system that discomfort does not equal danger or does not warrant vigilance.

Meagen Gibson

I like that. Does not warrant vigilance. You were talking about the email thing. I mean, maybe not everyone. But I certainly had a job in my career where just hearing an email notification would activate me in that way because of the environment that I was in.

Was that email going to hurt me? No. But it sure felt like it was going to. It sure felt like it had the potential to. The phrase that I was thinking while you were talking too, was reacting versus responding.

I think about the email notification and what I think is, "React. I need to react." My body's having a reaction, and then it wants to use that reaction to inform my response. When really that's not what response feels like, at least embodied for me.

[00:30:04]

Response is allowing myself to regulate and not actually react from that place. But wait and do something, whether it's the breathing or actions that you talked about earlier or progressive muscle relaxation. Doing some exercise to get myself re-regulated so that I then can respond from a place of non-reactivity.

Ben Ahrens

Easier said than done, right?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah.

Ben Ahrens

These reactions are subconscious and subcortical, meaning they take place in the amygdala and part of the limbic system. Simply because these brain regions are closer to the brain stem, their messages get there sooner than from the neocortex, which is the rational reasoning or thinking part of the brain.

The key is, or the challenge at first is noticing. It's learning to maintain a monitoring point of view. This is known as metacognition, and this is why practices like mindfulness can be very helpful, because we are not the reactions themselves.

We are, or can be, at least, an observer to the reactions. The more we disidentify from the reaction, from the anger, the reflex, and the more we rise up into that observer mode. In a sense, the less those reactions matter, the less reactive we become.

The initial reaction might be there, but we're observing it from above. Then as long as we stay in that neocortex, now we also have the ability to act downward on those other brain regions and do what you call respond. Which is essentially step with intention and do something consciously, like take a deep breath or tense up for just a second and then release and exhale.

Now we're actually doing what Viktor Frankl calls getting in that space between stimulus and response. There always is some space. It's just not a very big one, especially if we don't even notice it. We're like, "Oh, there it went."

But the more we can get into that monitoring observer mode, even just as a practice. At least then it gives us the opportunity to intervene, and then we can practice with these chosen responses instead of default reactions.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm so glad that you said that, "easier said than done." I'm thinking about an example from a couple of years ago where I observed some criminal activity. It didn't impact me, but I reported it because it was the right thing to do and didn't activate me at all.

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I just called the authorities, I reported what I saw, I gave a report, done. The next day, I woke up completely activated in a trauma reactivation. Out of nowhere I had no... I was like, what is happening? And I was stupefied. I mean, I was rendered stupid.

And that's just what it felt like. I had no access to any of the 10 years of practice and knowledge that I had. I had no access to any of the things that I would normally... I couldn't think of what I should do. It was just gone. My brain was an empty mass of nothingness.

The only reason I'm telling this story is because, as you said, easier said than done. Because I knew everything, I knew enough to just be like, okay, I surrender. Apparently, today I need to be stupid. And I'm saying stupid. I hope nobody takes offense to that word, but that's just what it felt like.

I just allowed myself to just be a pile of non-productivity that day, and allow myself to feel a little bit paralyzed, and allow myself to be like, wow, that was really intense. What happened yesterday. That was a lot, even though you didn't register it then. Then it passed, and the next day, my brain came back online and I was okay.

Everything that I had forgotten was back in my brain. But it was just the most humbling experience to know... It's one thing when you don't know about a bunch of practices and don't have the cognitive understanding.

But then when you know it and you experience forgetting it, it's really humbling. You're like, wow, I had a lot more empathy and sympathy for people who go through these types of experiences and how important practice is and that self-compassion part of the practice as well.

Ben Ahrens

Oh, yeah. I mean, that sounds like a perfect example of "This too shall pass" on your way through it. Through a necessary situation where, yeah, sometimes in those acute settings, the clouds are there and they block out the sun. The sunlight of conscious awareness.

But you had something there, which was the understanding that that was happening. Because when that happens and we don't know what's happening, then we can really clamp down on it. That's when we can really get swept up in it and unwittingly perpetuate it, in a sense. By becoming anxious about being anxious, or anxious about being in that state.

Meagen Gibson

Which is like doing the reps with terrible form with too much weight. To go back to your example from the gym earlier, which... If you're ever in the gym and know you have bad posture, it's just a terrible experience.

I would love it if you could tell us a little bit more about Re-origin. And what you do and how people can find out more about you and your work?

[00:35:41] Ben Ahrens

Yeah, sure. Re-origin is a platform that does online education, coaching, and community-building for people with chronic conditions. Really interesting how a lot of these conditions from chronic fatigue syndrome, chronic pain, post-concussion syndrome, Lyme disease, long COVID. They all really share components of these trauma responses and trauma buildup.

And so what Re-origin does is it really helps people to understand the brain's role in the condition. And then gives them tools, practices, and protocols for starting to retrain those habituated responses so that the body can start to default more and more to that parasympathetic response.

Where, as we mentioned in the beginning, liberates a ton of energy, which is really necessary and helpful for the long term healing and recovery. This is still a very new area of research. This is what's called self-directed neuroplasticity, which is essentially your ability to guide or influence your brain's changes.

It just continues to show a lot of promise for a wide range of conditions. It's been incredibly exciting. We started Re-origin in the pandemic in 2020. We now have thousands of people on the platform from 50 different countries or more, and are using this for a wide range of different conditions.

It's been incredibly exciting and humbling to get to work with people through these conditions using these types of tools.

Meagen Gibson

I'm assuming from the comfort of their own homes, if necessary.

Ben Ahrens

Yes. Because a lot of these conditions are severe. These are the ones, the complex chronic ones that have, in some ways, fallen through the cracks of the medical mainstream.

Many people have been with them, or these conditions have been with them, for long periods of time, and they may even be housebound. That was my own condition. I was bed-bound with chronic Lyme for three or more years. It's very convenient. People can do this from their laptop, from an app, and join that way.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Ben Ahrens, thank you so much for being with us today.

Ben Ahrens

Thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed the conversation.