



Conscious Life presents

How to Use Mental Rehearsal for Trauma Healing

Guest - John Assaraf

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome everyone to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with John Assaraf. And we're going to be talking about the power of visualization and mental rehearsal to support healing.

To give you a little bit of John's background, John Assaraf is a world renowned mindset and small business growth expert who has appeared numerous times on Larry King Live, Anderson Cooper, The Ellen DeGeneres show, and many more.

He has built five multi-million dollar companies, written two New York Times best-selling books, and appeared in 14 movies, including the blockbuster hit, The Secret and Quest for Success with Richard Branson and the Dalai Lama. He is passionate in helping people tap into their brain's superpower so they can shatter limitations and achieve their life's biggest goals and dreams.

John founded myneurogym.com which is revolutionizing mindset coaching and mental fitness training, and his powerful Innercise app helps people rewire their brain for unstoppable success. So John, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me.

John Assaraf

Thank you Alex, it's great to be with you and this wonderful audience.

Alex Howard

So one of the things that I'm excited to get into in today's conversation is the power and the capacity that we have for using our mind to impact our physical and emotional healing. And maybe we could start off with a little bit of your journey to discovering the power of your own mind in your own life, and then we'll take a deeper dive.

[00:01:50] John Assaraf

Sure. The place that I really got fascinated with brain healing, trauma, illness, disease.... Which is dis-ease, actually happened almost 40 years ago. I was diagnosed with severe ulcerative colitis, which is ulcers in your colon, and it makes your colon swell up. And unfortunately you don't have bowel control at all.

So if you've got to go to the bathroom, it's like you run to the bathroom. And if you make it, you make it. And probably nine times out of ten you don't and you end up literally shitting in your pants. And so I was like, what is causing this? I was in my 20s and I heard some doctors on television talking about something called psychoneuroimmunology.

It was a big word. It still is a big word. And it was the mind-body connection. And they said that if you keep thinking about the illness that you have, the trauma that you have, you keep reactivating those neural networks or patterns of electrical activity, and the neurochemicals which reinforce and recreate the same problem over and over again.

And they said, if you start using different language patterns, if you start regulating your own emotions and you start to see yourself... Like visualization, healing, then your body actually goes into that modality of electrical activity and neurochemicals.

So at that time, to put into perspective, I was taking 25 pills a day to reduce inflammation in the morning and at night. And this is a little embarrassing, but I was doing a cortisone enema by myself on the floor morning and night. Once a month I would go to the hospital for them to insert a probe into me to see how bad or good my colon was doing.

And at the time I had about 40in of my colon infected with this ulcerative colitis and that's 100cm, or whatever the case is. And the doctors wanted me to continue on all of the protocols they had. But I saw this thing on TV that says, "Hey, create an affirmation. Start to emotionalize you being healthier. Start to visualize."

So I created this affirmation. I still have it written down in the book right over here. It says, "My body and all its organs were created by the infinite intelligence in my subconscious mind. It created all my muscles, tissues, bones and organs. Powerful is the creative intelligence within me. I am now perfectly healthy."

And I repeated that and visualized it and emotionalized it. And after being on pills and potions and probes for a year and a half, within five weeks all my symptoms were gone. That was literally, 38 years ago.

Alex Howard

Wow.

John Assaraf

And so I got fascinated with what actually happened when I started to speak differently to myself? What started to happen when I started to emotionalize, control my emotions and energy? And what

started to happen when I actually saw myself being healthy? Instead of focusing on this trauma or disease that I was experiencing.

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And so for 40 plus years, I have been a brain researcher and neuroscience researcher to understand the mechanics of what happened. And that's where my story began with understanding a little bit about the human brain and what's going on inside there.

Alex Howard

I think one of the challenges around mental rehearsal visualization is that when we have become so consumed by suffering and by the struggle and the difficulty of where we are, it can feel very difficult to see it differently. I'm impacted by the sharing of your story.

We're not talking about having a bit of a sore tummy here. We're talking about real significant physical symptoms. So walk us through the journey that one goes on from that level of felt experience to starting to see it a different way.

John Assaraf

Sure. So first and foremost, let's not minimize trauma. Mental, physical, financial, emotional. It is real. And we have a memory of the trauma. We have a memory of whatever it is that happened, whether it's being raped, whether it is health trauma, whether it's cancer, whether it's a perpetrator, whether it's being assaulted. The memory is real.

So let's make sure we understand that. Now, what happens is there's two specific parts of the brain that we're dealing with. One is called the amygdala. It's the emotional control center of the brain, and the other is the limbic system, the emotional part of the brain.

And there's actually two other ones. The cerebellum which is the long-term memory, part of the brain. So when we're talking about memories, what happens for most people is they relive the experience and the trauma by thinking about it or feeling it. And in feeling it, they think about it. And then in thinking about it, they feel it.

And what they don't know is that they keep reactivating the same circuits. And any time we reactivate, we reinforce. So every pattern that is left unchecked reinforces itself. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Not because people want that, it's because that's just the normal state of behavior. And our brain is wired to repeat patterns.

It's doing that to conserve energy. But it's doing that more to keep us safe from that thing happening again, or that thing affecting my life even worse.

But what we don't realize is by thinking and feeling the trauma, we are reinforcing the trauma. So here is the one thing that is some new recent research is we never, ever have the same memory two times.

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Let me explain. Let's say you had something traumatic happen in your life whenever it was. The fact that you might think about it and feel it today, adds your environment from right this second to that emotion and to that pattern.

So it's never the same pattern. The colors are almost never the same. The intensity is almost never the same. But if we think about it and we exacerbate it even more, we reinforce it even more.

Now there's some research on something called Timeline Therapy, which goes like this. What happens with a lot of people is when they experience trauma from the past or the present, and they add energy to it...

"Oh my God, I can't believe that happened." Or "Oh my God, he did this or she did this, or this is happening."

That self-talk adds this disempowering power to that scenario. Now what we also know that happens is we've activated, probably unknowingly, the stress circuit because trauma equals stress.

And when we have stress we have cortisol that's released in the bloodstream. Cortisol is that high intensity, a neurochemical that causes us to hyper-focus. And what happens is if we're hyper-focused with this energy within us, around the trauma, we actually solidify the trauma even more.

But here's what Timeline Therapy can do is, what if we deliberately deactivated the stress circuit first? What does that mean? Well, with six very, very short, deep breaths in through your nose. And then breathe out through your mouth.

First, we deactivate what's known as the sympathetic nervous system, which is what is activated when we're rethinking, emotionalizing, reliving the trauma. But if we go to the parasympathetic nervous system first, and we activate what's called the calm to respond circuit...

Now in a calm state, if I could, let's say, see the trauma. If I can experience the trauma but lower the intensity of the trauma. Whether it was an event, a perpetrator or whatever it is. A loss, whatever it is.

If we can do that in a calm state, now what we're teaching our brain is to react automatically differently. And if we practice reacting automatically differently, it's repetition of a new pattern that overrides the old pattern. So that's part one is, we don't have to revisualize, reemotionalize the exact same pattern.

We can do it in a calm state. But then, what if you could change some of the images that you're seeing? What if... I'll give you an example. Let's say you drew a cartoon or a clown into the picture of the trauma.

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All of a sudden you have this memory, these neural circuits that are activating. And what if you took a clown and put the clown with a smiling face into that experience. Now, if you recall, I said we never have the same memory twice.

Now, if I all of a sudden put a clown into that experience and the clown is smiling. Now, what is my brain thinking about this experience? I can make the image brighter or dimmer. I can expand it or contract it. I can change the meaning of it by asking myself a question.

As a result of that experience, is there anything positive that came out of it? Did I become more resilient? Did I become more aware? Did I become more caring, more kind, more empathetic? Was there anything positive that came out of that horrific, traumatic experience?

And here's what I've found with most people. Most people who come up with 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 reasons or things that were positive as a result. I changed my diet, I found a better partner, I was more careful with the next transaction.

Whatever it is. When we counterbalance the negative from the trauma with some positive, all of a sudden we change the weighted average of the emotions.

So we have the power to do that. But what happens for most people, Alex, is they keep rethinking, reemotionalizing, reliving the trauma, not realizing that I am perpetrating... I am perpetuating, excuse me... More of what I actually don't want. So that's called the pattern interruption.

Alex Howard

Got it, got it. And of course, one of the challenges as well is that, it's sometimes hard for folks to see how they're perpetuating their experience, because that's just how it's always been. Right?

The capacity to self-reflect on one's own story or one's beliefs or one's patterns of thinking. It's like I remember many years ago starting out my own clinical career, and people would come in so dysregulated that I feel dysregulated being around them.

But then you talk about that and they be like, "Oh, that makes total sense. But it's not true for me. I'm fine." Because they got so used to living in this wired state. So what helps people to cultivate that capacity, to step back and to see those patterns that are running?

John Assaraf

Sure. So one of the things that as you were talking, I was reminded of is what happens is the trauma and the story becomes our identity. And we have to maintain our identity in order for us to feel sane.

So here's my story. Here's the reason my story is real. Now I just need to reinforce what this reality is. Well, we are shaping our reality every day with our language, with what we say. We're shaping our reality and reinforcing it with how we feel. We're shaping it with what we do.

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And here's my question for everybody. Can you not change your identity? Listen, I used to be an alcoholic. I drank for 20 years. Every single night. Every night I drank. And then 18 years ago, I said, "Oh, my God, I just keep reinforcing this pattern. What story would I need to tell myself not to be an alcoholic anymore?"

So I wrote a whole new story, and I started off saying, "I'm so happy and grateful for the fact that I used to be an alcoholic. I am now sober. I love it. I don't need to have alcohol to make me feel good. I don't have to have that as a solution to some of my challenges from before. And I feel amazing now."

Now I started with a story. I read that story three, four times a day. I recorded that new story. Listened to it three, four times a day. I would read it, listen to it every single day. I stopped drinking for 18 months.

No problem. Then I drank for 18 months. I had one drink and started doing it for 18 months. And now it's been 15 years since I've not had a drink. I did the exact same thing with my sugar addiction. I changed the story.

I asked myself, what would I need to believe in order to make the story real? I wrote down new beliefs and I reinforced the new story, the new beliefs, and I backed it up with behavior. And was it difficult for the first 100 days? Yes, really, really, really hard.

But I was committed to the new story. I was committed to becoming a better, more improved version of me. And so I created the story, reinforced it. And then the story has built me. It's no different than habits, right? We're not our beliefs. We're not our habits. We're not our emotions. We have them.

And so here's the real question for everybody. Can I let go of my story and the identity and the reasons why I keep going with them to protect my identity? Maybe to keep myself safe?

There's something called the law of secondary gain that's always worth talking about as it relates to the trauma. And the law of secondary gain says this, "When I stick to my story, when I stick to my trauma, when I stick to this identity, I'm actually getting rewarded for staying safe in that."

Even though I don't want it. I feel safe in here because what if the alternative is worse? What if I can't handle not having this story? This trauma as an excuse, a crutch?

A reason why I'm not this or I'm not that. What would... Oh my God, then what would that mean about me? So our brain is thinking about what if I can't handle it? What if it's worse? What if, negative?

And for anybody who's watching right now, you probably see that I have Frankie's monster or Einstein over here. Yeah, Frankie's monster over there. And that's to remind me that I have these two parts of my brain.

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The Einstein part of my brain that says, "You can do this. You deserve better. Here's how you can do it. Here's why. Here's how I would feel better."

But then I've got Frankie's monster over there going, "Yeah, but what if? What if you fail? What if it gets worse? What if it happens again? What if you lose? What if you're embarrassed? Ashamed? Ridiculed? Judged?"

So we've got these two polarities always happening in our brain. And here's the trick for everybody. There's nothing wrong with your brain working that way. Now here's where you either are empowered or disempowered. Which will you choose to focus on?

Alex Howard

Good question. That's a good question. Now I have a thought here as well.

John Assaraf

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Which is where's the balancing act between visualization and writing that new story, and the action that's required to follow through? So sometimes the risk can be that people can use visualization almost like a band-aid to feel better about things.

"Oh, it's all going to be wonderful." But their actual behavior doesn't really change. So can you speak to the importance of aligning the story, the beliefs. But also with the actions and behavior that are going to help bring that to fruition?

John Assaraf

Yeah. So I call it the triad of success. And the triad of success is to give me the right language patterns for what I want. Okay, so I always like to create a new story around making something that may not be true right now, a fact.

So I always start off... "I'm so happy and grateful for the new fact that..." And I write a new story. "I am now healed. The trauma has gone." Whatever it is.

Then I go to the feeling. "And as a result, it is making me feel blank, blank and blank. Good, confident, certain, empowered, etc."

And "Three small action steps I'm going to take right now, or one small action step I'm going to take right now is this."

So we want to have the thought, the words. We want to have emotions, right? The energy in motion. And then we want to always back up what we just said and felt with a small little behavior to reinforce it.

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Why? Well, because now I'm following through with what I said. And here's the most important part. Do not focus on the complexity or intensity of a behavior. Focus on simplicity first.

Why? Well, because we want to reduce the cognitive load of. Now I'm acting even a little bit in resonance, in harmony, in flow, in consistency with what I just said and felt.

So it doesn't matter how small the action is. Here's what is critical. And everybody, write this down. Consistency compounds. So if I consistently say and feel and do the wrong things, or the disempowering things, it exacerbates.

If I consistently say and feel and do the right things, no matter how small, I now am building a habit of thoughts, emotions and behaviors of a new identity, a new story, a new belief, a new behavior. And so who am I now if I do that for 30 days? What kind of self-confidence? Self-trust? Self-worth? Self-esteem? Self-confidence, am I activating?

And so I always focus on reducing whatever it is that I need to do to change to the doable. Ridiculously small things compound over time. And earlier you asked a question about visualization. And so visualization is simply a simulation in the brain.

And when I simulate something that I'm imagining, the exact same neurons, brain cells and circuits are turning on as if I'm doing it. So if I visualize walking or visualize eating healthy, my brain doesn't know the difference. The part of the brain that's responsible for visualization, the occipital lobe.

It doesn't know the difference between if I'm actually doing it, or if it's something I'm imagining. So when I visualize, I'm simulating. Right? When I'm affirming a new story, I'm planting a firm plant into the mind. A positive, empowering language pattern.

Now some people say, "But it's not true." I said, "I understand that, but repetition reinforces patterns. Patterns that are reinforced become automatic."

And think about this. Were you born with any beliefs? No. Were you born with any habits? No. Were you born with an identity? No. Were you born with a self-image? No. Were you born with any fears? No.

Your brain created these patterns that got reinforced. And for the most part, it's not your fault. You were a child that didn't have the ability to say, "I like this. I don't. I know this. I don't. This is true. This is real. This isn't."

And so most adults have been reinforcing their childhood patterns for 30, 40, 50, 60 years, 70 years. And so here's what we know about the brain and neuroplasticity.

We can deliberately create and reinforce any new pattern. And this \$100 billion brain of ours will then automate. It's called automaticity. It'll automate any process we create. Whether it's real or not, whether we believe it or not, whether it's factual or not.

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So why not create a new story? Create new language patterns, activate certain emotions, and then follow through with small behaviors to create an empowering, constructive new pattern that removes you from the trauma of a past circumstance that may just be a habitual pattern that you are reinforcing unknowingly.

Alex Howard

Well, what's the potential? And I'm particularly thinking of the potential in the context of one that has trauma. And sometimes what I think about it is, one goes from the denial or the lack of awareness that there's trauma, to then having awareness there's trauma.

And it's almost like that's a breakthrough at that point because one recognizes they need to do some healing work. The problem can be that that awareness now becomes the new identity. So it now becomes a story of, "Well, actually, I can't do that because I have trauma and I can't become that person because I have trauma."

So it kind of goes from becoming a breakthrough to becoming a trap. When one starts to...

John Assaraf

Yes. Yeah.

Alex Howard

When one starts to recognize the potential for change and one starts to commit to a new way of wiring their brain and their nervous system... You described your story, which is very inspiring in terms of your own physical healing process. But what's the potential that people really have to heal and to transform?

John Assaraf

Unlimited. I mean, it's really unlimited. The one thing that's really critical is we do something called rationalize our trauma or our story. And I want people to understand that when we do that, it's normal.

But what happens is, we're telling ourselves rational lies. It makes sense. "I can't because story story, story, story story." And say, okay, that seems real and I get that.

But then what if we just flipped the script for just a moment and said, "I understand that. But if I was committed to change, what would that look like? What would my self-talk need to be like? What would I need to feel like? What would I do, if I could?"

I know that this seems real right now, and I can't because... Are there any examples of anybody who's overcome this? Is there anybody on the internet that has overcome this very similar situation? And how did he... How did she do it? Let me look for alternative evidence, because my evidence is rational.

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"I can't because it has happened to me. It's happened to me. I'm in pain. She did this to me. He did this to me. I went..." Whatever the trauma is, the story seems real. And it is because that is the perspective, the lens by which we are focusing our attention units.

But what if we just suspended that just long enough? And we said, "If I had to shift? If I had to change, could I, if I had to? Well, I don't know. I don't know if I had to, could I? Well, I guess if I had to, I could."

Great. Then what would have to happen if I had to, in order for me to actually make a shift? What would I need to focus on? What would I need to say? What would I need to let go of? What would I need to start? What would I need to stop if I had to? I'm not saying I have to. But if I had to, could I?

And what happens? Just in changing the questions, we start to change the focus. And we change the focus. We actually change neurochemistry and emotions.

And I often say, if somebody asked you to climb up to a ten-story building and walk across a plank to another ten-story building 30 or 40m away. Would you do it? Most say, "No way. Are you crazy? I'd probably fall and die."

I say, "Great, let's give you a different scenario. You have to cross this plank across these ten-story buildings, because your child or your spouse is on the other side, and the building is burning. Will you go across to get them?"

And most people say, "Well, yeah, I mean. If my child was there or my mother or father or sister or brother were there, of course I'd go across."

Well, what changed? And the answer is your motivation. So either you're going to be motivated to stay the same, or you're going to find reasons that change is easier. Which are you going to focus on? How you can, and why you must and will? Or why can't you? What are you going to focus on?

Because whatever it is you focus on, is what expands and becomes your reality. So what do you want more of? Your current situation? Or are you going to be open-minded enough to say, "Well, if I was committed to a different reality, what would be the steps?" Just if I was committed. You don't even have to make a commitment. If I was committed, what would be the steps?

And just in that, we've already changed the pattern in the awareness that I do have choice. That's the only thing between us, and the pig and a horse. We have a choice, but most people don't recognize it. I keep choosing the same reality because it's familiar.

Alex Howard

So John, someone that's watching this, what's the first thing they can do after watching this conversation? So they want to practice visualization. They want to work using mental rehearsal. What's their first next step? I'm going to ask you in a minute, how they can find out more about you and your work and what...

[00:30:30] John Assaraf

Yeah.

Alex Howard

But practical pieces they can start with.

John Assaraf

Well, the first next step is, do I want to change my current circumstance if I could? Yes or no? It's like, first make a decision. Do I want to stay in my story? Or am I ready now to at least explore a different alternative? Am I sick and tired enough of this reality that I'm willing to explore a possible different reality? Yes or no?

And then the second question is this, am I interested or committed to finding a solution? Here's the difference. If I'm interested, I'm going to find stories, reasons, and excuses why I can't. But when I'm committed, I will find solutions. So which are you? Are you interested or are you committed?

If you're committed, then we say, "Okay, let's start with if you could create a new story, what would the new story be?" And here's a simple framework. Just start off saying, "You know what? Here's the old story, I got it. Let's set that aside."

"My new story. Alright, I'm just going to pretend right now. I'm just going to be like a Hollywood scriptwriter. All right, I'm going to write a new character. I'm going to say, I'm so happy and grateful that I'm feeling healthy. Happy. I've released my trauma."

"As a result of releasing my trauma of X, I now think and feel and can do this. I'm enjoying my life in these ways. These people are benefiting, blah blah blah."

So now I'm going to create this new story, a new character, a new identity. And then ask yourself this question. If somebody offered you to be an actor in a movie with your favorite actor or actress, and they gave you \$1 million to learn this new script, what would you do to practice the script?

You'd probably read it. You'd probably record it. You might film yourself doing it. You'd probably add enthusiasm to it. You'd probably practice, which would help create this new pattern, right? Practice makes permanent.

So once you have your story, why not read it three, four, five times a day? Why not record it on your mobile phone and listen to it? Why not behave a little bit each day in alignment with this new character and identity?

And give yourself 100 days. 100 days. Not one weekend, not one try. Imagine that this part of your brain is out of shape, and you're creating this new identity that's going to take you 100 days to create and reinforce this new identity, and to practice being the new role for five minutes a day, for 100 days.

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And if you did that, it would change your life. Would you do it? Now, if you're committed, the answer is, "Of course I would do it." If you're interested, you'll come up with reasons and stories and excuses why you won't.

Alex Howard

Awesome, I love it. John, people to find out more about you, your work, what you have to offer. Tell us where people can go and tell us some of what they can find.

John Assaraf

Great. So on Amazon you can find one of my New York Times best-selling books. A lot of what we're talking about right now is in the book, *Innercise: The New Science to Unlock Your Brain's Hidden Power*. If you want to set and achieve your goals, *Having It All*. All on Amazon, all over the world in 35 languages.

Number two is, I have a phenomenal app to get people to focus on their health and mental well-being and emotional well-being for health, wealth, relationships, career, businesses.

You just go to the App Store, Google or Apple and go to Innercise. I-N-N-E-R-C-I-S-E. And there's 600 innercises to help you train your brain to be more empowered, more self-confident, to feel unstoppable. And then I'm on Instagram, on Facebook, on LinkedIn, on YouTube and all the other social channels as well.

Alex Howard

Amazing, John. Thank you so much. I appreciate you.

John Assaraf

Thank you, Alex.

Alex Howard

I appreciate what you had to share. Thank you so much.

John Assaraf

Appreciate you, my friend.