

ALEX HOWARD

6 Patterns That Hold You Back & Prevent Healing

Jason Prall:

Hello, and welcome to Awaken the Healer Within. I'm your host Jason Prall, and with me right now I have Alex Howard. He is the founder and chairman of The Optimum Health Clinic, one of the world's leading integrative medicine clinics specializing in fatigue with a team of 25 full-time practitioners supporting thousands of patients in 50 plus countries. The OHC team has pioneered working with patients remotely since 2004. Alex has published academic research and publications such as the British Medical Journal Open and Psychology & Health, and is the creator of therapeutic coaching methodology. And since March 2020, he has been documenting his therapeutic work with real life patients via his In Therapy With Alex Howard YouTube series. In the last few years, Alex has created some of the largest online conferences in health and mind body markets, including the Fatigue Super Conference, and the Trauma and Mind Body Super Conference, which collectively have been attended by over 350,000 people. Alex, thanks for joining me.

Alex Howard:

It's a pleasure to be here, Jason. Thank you.

Jason Prall:

So, we have a lot of discussions you and I on trauma. We've interviewed each other and I think we both share a passion for this space. And I think part of it is because it has affected us both so deeply in our own lives, personally. We've recognized how important it is in our own lives. I've told you my story a little bit, but I didn't have a tremendously trauma filled childhood, so to speak. I wasn't aware of these things until I got to a certain point in my adulthood and recognized, oh, man, there's all these little things that were seemingly so insignificant. But they made such an impact on my belief system, on my thoughts, on my emotional state, and ultimately, my physiology. So, that's really what I want to talk to you about today because I know you're an expert in this topic in the work you do with your clinic and personally, and in your own life. And that's really where I want to start in your own life. How did you really land on this idea that trauma, and again, I'm speaking of this big, huge category here, not these incidents that we typically think of as trauma, but all these little aspects are so impactful on our health?

Alex Howard:

Yeah. Well, thank you, Jason. I, like a lot of people didn't realize I had trauma, and so my life was in a sense being governed by the symptoms of unprocessed trauma. And I came at it, I think, in a slightly odd way because I had chronic fatigue syndrome in my late teens and early 20s. I'd been on a big, physical, emotional, psychological healing journey with that. I was very proud of the way that I'd been able to overcome that and recover, and I'd set myself up in my early 20s working as a therapist, and I'd studied psychology at university. Psychology was my first true love. I loved the work I was doing.

Alex Howard:

In the end, I found myself in my mid-20s, on one hand, very successful. I was living in a beautiful penthouse apartment in London. I had a clinic in London's Harley Street, and I had the life on the outside looked perfect. And yeah, I was having debilitating panic attacks. I was chronic anxiety. I was having these endless relationship disasters. It was outwardly very, very embarrassing, because I wasn't able to live the life on the inside that I was helping others do. And that I knew that was possible.

Alex Howard:

I reached a point where what became clear was, ultimately, I was fundamentally disconnected from my emotions, and particularly disconnected from some of the traumas that happened in childhood. As you said in your intro, often I think we don't realize those impacts. A lot of us, the traumas have not been those more classical PTSD traumas of being physically or sexually abused, or growing up in a war zone where it's just very obviously that that's traumatic. Obviously, I knew that I'd grown up without a father. My mother had left my father soon after I was born, and I knew that she divorced him on grounds of emotional cruelty. And so, I knew a little bit of the story. But I'd always grown up with this sense of you can't miss what you haven't had, and having... I think often this is true of us as children that we adapt to the world that we're in and we assume that that world is normal.

Jason Prall:

Totally.

Alex Howard:

So there I was in my mid-20s in this very, very painful place personally, and I was on a retreat where a lot of what the work was about was going into our emotional pain and going into our, in a sense the emotions and the history we've repressed, and we've not found. And it was utterly agonizing because what I found was in a sense, at this point, I had felt like I had two choices. I had the choice of continuing on the path that I was on, which was this constant state of anxiety, and panic attacks, and the wellbeing of a pretty intolerable pace, or to go into these emotions that I was terrified by that I literally felt like as I got closer to them, I felt like I was dying. I mean, that was the felt sense, one of annihilation, and that I was just going to disappear down this emotional void, and never come out of it.

Alex Howard:

Without going into what was quite long story, really, what helped me move through this place was really desperation, a little bit of grace, and a lot of skill from a practitioner that was involved in running this retreat. I found myself on the last morning of this retreat having just gone through this hellish frustration of being able to fully embody in that moment all of the emotions that I felt that they're not in my mind, or in my logical self, but in my body that was held around this being abandoned. And initially, there was this intense... I mean, literally I wanted to... If my father had been in the room, I wanted to murder him, and I wanted to inflict all the pain on him that I was feeling in my body. I was screaming, I was shaking. I mean, it was just this kind of murderous hatred.

Jason Prall:

So, I'm going to stop you right there because I think what I want to point to here is this idea that that emotion, it's not like that just came out of nowhere in that one experience, right? Where did that come from? Because it seems like it was probably inside you the entire time.

Alex Howard:

I think, this is a really important point. I was saying to you before we started recording that, for me, there isn't really a difference between states of high anxiety and nervous system over activation and emotional disconnection because what we tend to do is to escape the emotions in our body. When we're young, those emotions are too much. We don't know how to be with them and process them. So we disconnect. And one of the ways we do that is we go into our mind. Our mind becomes a place of somewhat safety. In a sense, we try to think our way to the feeling of safety that we don't have. And so, the mind speeds up, and then we just... It becomes our natural home, we get used to that.

Alex Howard:

Just before I complete the story, what became clear to me was that the panic attacks and the anxiety was this massive over activation of my mind and my nervous system. And as I was starting to slow that down, then as you say, I'm starting to connect to these emotions that have been there for years. And they're there and they're held in a cellular way in our body. There's also I think, it's important to say that my perspective up until this point was as I started to feel these emotions, this letting go of control, and this feeling of annihilation and terror. But actually, there's also enormous wisdom in our emotional body. And so, what starts as this murderous hate and rage then turns to this feeling of desperate longing and sadness. And what I realized was the hate and the rage was in a sense a defense against the hopelessness of the desperation and the longing and the sadness.

Jason Prall:

So you actually have these emotions that are layered. You've got this overarching emotion of anger, frustration, rage, etc. And then as you penetrate through that, and in order to penetrate through that, you've got to feel it. You've got to connect with it. And then you revealed, oh, wow, there's hopelessness, and sadness, and disappointment, and all these different things underneath that. And that's the one that is so vulnerable, that is so innocent, and that is so worth protecting. It's a really, really... I mean, I can just feel it right now. It's a tender one. And so, we need to build up these defenses of other emotions to help protect that, right?

Alex Howard:

That's exactly right, and a much more difficult to feel because in the hatred and the rage there is an illusion of control and power. And then in the sadness and the longing, it's that desperately vulnerable place because in that moment the recognition was I long for my father. I want my father, and in that very small place I longed for this thing that I want more than anything in the world that I can't have. And that's an incredibly painful place. And yet, in the feeling of that place, and this is something that's very difficult to explain in a logical way, and there'll people that are watching this, listening to this, and it sounds like from the way that you're articulating your responses, you've had some of this experience. That what we experience, in a sense, the closer we get to the depth of our experience and our truth, as painful as it might be, there is also something incredibly beautiful and healing that happens. And in the surrender to the longing, the desperation, that the layer beneath that was one of love, and one of connection, and a love for myself, a love for my father, but also a love beyond the sense of the individual.

Alex Howard:

With that came a level of resolution, but also a fundamental shift in my attitude towards my feelings and emotions because I don't want to paint the picture that you have one emotional experience and your life gets fixed and transformed. But what did happen in that experience is it changed my reference point. So,

whereas before I had this, I'm screwed if I do it, I'm screwed if I don't. I don't want to continue the way, but I'm terrified to go into my emotions. To this new reference point that actually, it might be a painful few minutes or a few hours. But if I move through my emotions, there is something that can hold me. There is something that sustains and supports me.

Alex Howard:

And so, for the next six months or so, I was... And this may disappoint some people because they're hoping they're going to have this wonderful bliss state. I was basically just really angry every single day for about six months. At the time I would go to the gym, and I would have these really intense gym workouts. I just was trying to move the energy of this rage. And I ended up several times having emergency osteopath appointments or having pulled muscles. Just the intensity of trying to move the energy. And then after about six months, I then went through a period of almost roughly another six months of just this desperate longing sadness.

Alex Howard:

I moved from these big gym workouts to doing a lot of yoga. I would just cry in Shavasana, which was embarrassing, in packed yoga classes in London, and try to pretend that I'm not influenced with tears and Shavasana at the end, but it was like, in a sense, the microcosm of that initial experience then there was this sort of macro version through my life. On the other side of that, I should say, and through that period, I stopped having the panic attacks. The anxiety massively calm. It's interesting for me watching some of the videos I made in those days because I was always really wired on camera. There's this point where I've just suddenly, I'm rooted. And it's like something in my body fundamentally shifted.

Alex Howard:

Also, I mentioned I was having disastrous relationships. I was able to really work through a lot of that. So many things, and I met my wife, and we've since been married 10 years had three kids. A lot of things transformed, but ultimately, the turning point was this recognition that if we disconnect from our emotions, and we live from our mind, firstly, there's a lot of things that go with that from anxiety. We can also have anxiety induced depression, or the numbness that comes with that, physical health conditions that come from that. But also, we're living half a life because the true joy, the gifts, the juice in life comes from being connected to our whole self.

Jason Prall:

Yeah, I totally agree. I've said it in a few of the other interviews that when you go through these emotional and you process and you metabolize these things at some point, for me, there's a joy in it. It's like I know what's at the end of the rainbow. It's this pot of gold. And so, it's like I start to enjoy the process of feeling these feelings, which before were scary and hard, and I wanted to avoid, and there's still some avoidance. Also, I'd be fully integrated, and everything would be good. But there's more of a joy as it's happening because I know that I've had enough of those experiences that I realized that what we label as bad and ugly and horrible is just a projection. It's a misperception that it's all the good stuff. All the pain and the suffering and the anger and the frustration and the sadness is actually the juicy stuff in life. It's the same love. It's the same goodness.

Jason Prall:

I say that because it takes, you have to have the experience in order to truly understand what that means. And it sounds really weird. And if you had said it to me a few years ago, I would have just looked at you like you're crazy. But there's some joy in the processing of these things. And what I love too, is that it's permanent. It's like once you process that, it's not like it's going to come back. There may still be more layers and pieces, but that thing that you just processed, is actually firmly processed, right?

Alex Howard:

Yeah, and I think really one of my teachers once one spoke a lot about the importance of love of truth, and that the healing power, and the deep satisfaction in truth, even when it's uncomfortable truth, or it's painful truth. Another way of looking at it, there's a muscle memory. It's like when one learns to play tennis, for example, and someone hits a tennis ball hard and fast, you brace and your body goes into a shock because there's something coming really fast that can hurt you. And then what you're doing is you're gradually training your body to respond in an almost unconscious way. If you look at professional tennis, you can't cognitively process what happens in the speed that it happens.

Alex Howard:

The same is true emotionally, that initially we feel something that feels scary. And our instinct is to get away from that. And we become very conditioned, and we have different patterns and strategies we use to move away. But over time, what we're doing is we're training in a sense, the muscle memory that all I feel something, I need to move towards it, or I feel afraid, I need to drop in and surrender to that not try and think. Because one of the patterns when we disconnect is we're constantly trying to think our way to a feeling of safety. Because a lot of this disconnect is we don't feel safe enough to feel the emotions that are there.

Alex Howard:

The problem is that when we try to think our way to a feeling of safety, we get further from what we need. I talk about a loop that we go in that we feel unsafe. So, our mind speeds up to try and find safety. But in the speeding up, we become more disconnected from our body. So then we speed up even further. The feeling of safety that we need doesn't exist. There's no way you can get it in a cognitive way. The feeling is a feeling in our body. And we need to be dropped in and rooted enough to feel that feeling, to feel that ground. And then the system starts to calm and starts to settle.

Alex Howard:

Again, that's a muscle memory that we train ourselves. But when we notice that some of them, perhaps the symptoms, we experience, the anxiety symptoms, or depression symptoms, or perhaps fatigue symptoms, that part of what may be going on is a disconnect. And that's actually an invitation to drop more deeply back into ourself. But if we're not working with the emotions, as we drop into ourselves, we start feeling all the stuff that we're trying to get away from. So we bounce back out again. And that's why there's emotional processing and connection is so important.

Jason Prall:

Yeah, and I think you hit something that's really important, which is that as we're trying to figure ourselves out, a lot of times we don't know what there is to process. In other words, it's like a big dark hole. And so, we don't know these pieces, right? We think we know I have this trauma, or I don't, or there's these little things here. And then what I've discovered in my own path and working with others is

that things come out of nowhere, and you didn't realize, oh, that thing three that I don't even remember turns out that was there, or all this emotion that you don't even know where it comes from is there.

Jason Prall:

I think what I want to point to is the reference points that we have to draw upon, which are the places that were out of harmony in life. If we've got money issues, or we've got this relationship issues with friends or family or children in some way. Or we keep getting stuck in the same patterns. And then also in physical symptoms of disease. You mentioned a few of them, but they even go deeper into the more physical aspects like skin issues that show up and hormonal imbalances, and you name it. And so, I want to... Those are the invitations, those are the hints that there's something there that's in our mental emotional belief systems parts that have an opportunity to be worked. So, you do a lot of work with the Optimal Health Clinic. How does some of this manifest and some of the people that you see beyond the classic anxiety, depression, and chronic fatigue?

Alex Howard:

Yeah, so I think what I would say is that a lot of the conditions that we work with, so we work a lot with what we call fatigue related conditions, that would be chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, ME, Lyme disease, there's a whole group of conditions. And these are complex conditions that never have one answer. And so, I'm going to speak to what I would call a piece of the jigsaw, which for some people is the most important piece of the jigsaw. For other people it's a piece of the jigsaw. But when the body goes into what we call a maladaptive stress response, it fundamentally changes the way that our biochemistry is running. And why do we go to maladaptive stress response?

Alex Howard:

Well, partly because of the traumas from the past, the things that we haven't processed like I gave the example of being abandoned by a parent and how the whole system gets, in a sense goes into self-protection as to escape those feelings and emotions. But also suffering with them being diagnosed with what would be classified, I would argue incorrectly, but classified as a medically unexplained illness because traditional mainstream medicine doesn't have an explanation for it. That in of itself is highly anxiety inducing to not know what's wrong with you, why it's wrong with you, should you rest? Should you push through? Will you ever get better? Should you do this treatment? Should you do that treatment?

Alex Howard:

So, what often happens in response to even if there's not trauma, which often there is as well, the body goes into what we classify as a maladaptive stress response. And this, in a sense, it's a healthy response to responding to danger, but it becomes maladaptive. It becomes a pattern that one gets stuck in. This has real impacts beyond... I think people are probably familiar with the research that's often talked about around students at exam time and students under stress exam time, they've shown that it affects their natural killer cell activity and their best parts of the immune function. There's also a lot of research showing the impact of stress on digestion and on healing and many things.

Alex Howard:

But I think some of the most interesting research over recent years is the research by Dr. Robert Naviaux looking at what's called cell danger response. To put it in simple terms, our mitochondria are in a sense, the energy power stations in our body. It's like how our body on a cellular level is metabolizing and

making energy. And people are generally familiar with the mitochondria from that perspective, but the mitochondria actually have two functions. They have their energy production function. But they also have a second function, which is danger signaling. When the body is under threat, when there's some danger, it's the job of the mitochondria to spread that message through the body. Partly because it's such an efficient and powerful system in the body. It's a really effective way of spreading that. When we're under stress, our mitochondria will de-prioritize energy production to free up resource for danger signaling. So, the more we get normalized, and habituated to being in a maladaptive stress response, one of the prices of that is a diminishing in our energy production.

Jason Prall:

And this doesn't have to result in the classic chronic fatigue. This can result in a baseline state that if we've had it for so long, we don't even really remember what good energy is. And a lot of times we just I'm getting older or you just don't know. And then as you get this corrected, you free up so much resource.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, absolutely. I think Dr. Naviaux is doing fascinating research in a lot of different areas. We could map this over to some of the learning issues that kids can have over to obviously things like anxiety, things like depression. I often think that, again, depression like fatigue is a complex area that has different jigsaw pieces to the picture. I think I always like to caveat things that when I make over simplistic points, I'm not trying to make complex things overly simplistic, but one of the things I observe a lot with depression is that there's what I call an anxiety induced depression that one's got so used to being in a revved up nervous system, they go into a shutdown.

Alex Howard:

Another way of looking at it people that are familiar with Dr. Steven Porges' work around Polyvagal Theory that we can go from what he would call a safe and social like what I would call being in a calm healing state into a fight or flight state. But actually, a higher state of stress is a freeze state or a shutdown state. So sometimes we're so amped up in our nervous system, that we go numb, and we might say, I feel just drained, I feel depressed. It's not actually an absence of a spark and energy. It's so much the system shut itself down. And so, strangely, what you can find is in situations like that is you start working to reset and calm the nervous system, that actually, not only are you calming some of the anxiety, but also that the energy system is turning back on again.

Jason Prall:

Yeah, and I love the way you tied that because we're talking about this anxiety induced depression, which we can cognitively understand. But then we have Polyvagal Theory that you just explained, which essentially maps that same idea. And then Robert Naviaux's work with mitochondria maps that same thing. We have this sort of shutdown happening at the cellular level. And so, this is what I love about Dr. Naviaux's work and mitochondria is that we're going beyond the systems and we're getting down into the cells, and there's so much happening there. So, it all seems to marry up that this idea of anxiety induced depression is a very real thing.

Jason Prall:

And so, as we talk about these multitude of diseases and symptoms and conditions that that may crop up, how do we get out of them? You mentioned before that there's that there's a few different ways that

these might show up, a few different patterns for everyone. So, I think you mentioned one of them. I'm curious how many others do you notice of these patterns, so we can help identify, maybe if I'm running some of these patterns that would point to this idea that there's some stuff there that I have the opportunity to work?

Alex Howard:

Yeah, so working with conditions like anxiety, depression, or chronic fatigue, these are all big areas. But to zoom in on this piece a little bit more, this piece around emotional disconnection. And in a sense, to calm the nervous system, we have to come into the body, and we have to feel the emotions that we're not feeling. Put it another way to switch off the maladaptive stress response, we have to start to slow the system down. When we slow down, we start to feel. So, I talk about six different emotional styles of disconnection. And in a sense, these are different ways that we can learn and become habituated to not feel our feelings.

Jason Prall:

So, you're talking about this disconnection is actually from ourselves, from our feeling body, from our emotional state, that maybe harbor some of these things that are tough.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, that's right. And also to remember that there is enormous also wisdom, and in a sense our connection to joy and the world is through being connected. This is not just about getting out of negative states. It's also the gateway into our ultimate potential as a human being.

Jason Prall:

All the things that we're wanting, right?

Alex Howard:

All the good stuff.

Jason Prall:

all the things that we envision both individually and in our community, and then for the world. Like we talked about world peace in this idea. Well, that starts with me. So, I think what you're pointing to is so important that in order to really get where we ultimately want individually, it's through this process.

Alex Howard:

Yeah. Another way of looking at it is that our suffering, or our emotional pain is the portal, it is the gateway to our true nature, to our authentic self, to the enormous potential and beauty that lives within all of us. And so, these different patterns, the first one is avoidance and distraction. It's that we use whatever we can to avoid feeling what we're feeling. And this could be as simple as always having the TV on in the background, or always being in one's phone, but always having stuff that distracts us that keeps our nervous system. It's a chicken and egg because sometimes we're over activated, so then we start looking for that stuff. But also, when we look for that stuff, it activates us.

Jason Prall:

I want to point to that idea to you because I ran a lot of the "healthy patterns," so I would in order to avoid feeling I would go exercise, I would go get work done. So, it doesn't have to be these what we would call negative aspects or actions. They can look like very, very healthy and good actions, too, right?

Alex Howard:

Yeah, and actually you're speaking to the second of the categories, which is state changing that we use exercise as a way of doing it. In a more negative way, drugs or alcohol, sex. A lot of the personal development industry celebrates the idea of learning how to manipulate and change your state, which I think it has a place and I want to be overly simplistic. It doesn't make that always wrong, it does have a place. And if that is the way that we are dealing with our emotions, that we feel sadness, or hurt, or anger, and we just try and flip it to a positive, we're disconnected. We're not in touch with the truth of how we feel.

Alex Howard:

A third example of these patterns is analysis that we use rationalization and overthinking as a way to disconnect from how we feel. And I think what's particularly interesting about this one is that someone can sound like they're emotionally connected and talk about their feelings by giving a really clear analysis. But it's like... I see you're smiling.

Jason Prall:

I'm laughing this whole time because what you're describing is my predominant pattern as I was raised in my adulthood, I was able to analyze... I mean, this is one of my natural gifts. And so, I want to maybe bring here this idea that we have a natural essence, a constitution, and we maybe dip into some of these strategies as young ones because we're inherently good at them. And this was one of my inherently good gifts is to analyze things, understand them, sort of systems thinking, engineer kind of mind. And so, that's how I really relied on this strategy to get through some of these and to avoid some of these feelings that were there for me. And so, it's interesting that as I even work some of these things that are in my system, that one still tries to come on and understand, which I want to thank, and I honor that piece of me, that part of me because it's brilliant gift just like all of them are.

Jason Prall:

And so, I just want to point this idea that that actually what I find is that sometimes it can still be there. But now I can bring them along for the ride, so to speak. So, it's like, I can bring this little buddy along and say, "Hey, come with me. We're going to feel this thing even though it's tough, and it's scary." And then, so he comes along for the ride to help see what's there. So, it's interesting, and I'm using these funny terms, but that's how I think about it. And so, it's instead of avoiding and jumping into and totally getting immersed with this identity, so to speak, or this pattern. It's like I can create separation from it, and bring that part of me along. But yeah, I just laugh because this is like, this is totally me.

Alex Howard:

It's funny, as I was figuring out some of this framework, it's quite excruciating sometimes because it's like, it just really speaks to things that we all do. I'm really glad, Jason, you made that point because it isn't the... Particularly, some of the other ones we're going to come to in a minute. It's not that these are inherently wrong. It's that if they become default ways of functioning in the world we become out of balance. So, for example, with state changing, sometimes the most healthy thing that one can do is to

have a couple of glasses of wine and numb out and just flop on the sofa and just change state. Sometimes, the best act of self-care is to watch a load of Netflix until one o'clock in the morning and completely avoid and distract what you're feeling. But actually, it's what you need.

Alex Howard:

The problem is if you're doing the glass of wine becomes a bottle of wine, and you're doing Netflix every evening, and it becomes a way of avoiding and state changing what's going on in your life, then you have a problem. So, this is not about naming and shaming these patterns. It's about bringing awareness because one of the ways that I think about it is if you can see it, you don't have to be it. The more awareness we have of the patterns we use, the awareness gives us choice. And that choice allows us to start to cultivate, and to shape better ways of responding. Just also to finish that, we've got avoidance and distraction. We've got state changing, we've got analysis.

Alex Howard:

Another one is blaming others. The, I am feeling this feeling because of what you did. I feel angry because you disappointed me. So, in a sense, it's a way of we're feeling our emotions, but we're not owning our emotions. It's a reactivity because it's someone else's fault, which again, avoids us fully surrendering to and owning and processing because it's not our emotion. This is not our fault. It's not our lived experience. And the fifth emotional style is being an empath. This is where we feel everyone else's feelings and emotions and often for empaths they struggle to know how they truly feel because they're so overly connected and unboundaried around whatever everyone else is feeling. And often each of these have different origins in childhood, but often empaths, it can be a survival strategy around, for example, unpredictable parents, that to feel safe I need to be merged enough with your feeling state to be able to anticipate what's going to happen.

Alex Howard:

And then the final, the sixth emotional style, and it's not a perfect list, and there's always different variants, and other examples, but the sixth one is somatizing. This is where we experience, for example, our emotional pain as physical pain. So someone might say, "I don't know what I'm feeling," but they constantly suffer from migraines and headaches or they constantly have IBS pains. The unprocessed unmetabolized emotions are expressing themselves in physical symptoms.

Jason Prall:

I see this a lot with joint pains back pains. You find a lot in those type of things too.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, there's a number of people I think done really interesting work in recent years around processing emotional pain to heal physical pain. An obvious example with John Sarno working with that.

Jason Prall:

Yeah, he was the first one that I got introduced to and some of the stories of him looking at essentially two patients with the exact same issue. One was running marathons. The other one is laid up on his bed and he said, "What's going on?" The spine is the same here. Why is one person able to run marathons without pain and the other one can't even get out of bed? That's a really interesting thing. Because I think that's where he started. He started to notice and he got curious, which is a sign of a brilliant doctor

or any practitioner or scientists that what's going on here? So, please continue because it's really interesting.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, and in a sense, so we've got these six different emotional styles. We've got avoidance and distraction. We've got state changing. We've got analysis. We've got blaming others. We've got an empath, and we've got somatizing. And to preempt a question that people often ask yes, you can do all of them.

Jason Prall:

I was going to ask the same. I've have multiple, so yeah.

Alex Howard:

And we all have different predominant patterns. And sometimes at different chapters of our lives, different patterns might become more predominant. Sometimes under periods of... Often under periods of stress, we more default to these patterns as well as our survival strategies. And as we've been saying, the point is not that these are inherently wrong. The point is when these become unhealthily dependent upon, let's say, ways of functioning in the world. And to bring it back to what we've been talking about earlier. Fundamentally, if every time we feel something emotionally, we avoid and distract, or every time we feel something emotionally, we disconnect from our feeling because we're so connected with everyone else's feelings of being an empath. We're not metabolizing our emotions. We're not digesting and we're not in touch with.

Alex Howard:

When it comes to working with the traumas from the past, a phrase I heard years ago, which I found very helpful, and it's actually the title of a book I have coming out next year is that you can't heal what you don't feel. And if we don't feel the past and metabolize the past, just like I described at the beginning of the interview in my experience. It doesn't disappear. It's there in our body. We are carrying around those emotional loads and traumas. But I think even more importantly, than I think the impact of the past is not just the emotional load that we're carrying around. It's then these ways that we learn to live in the world. So, if for example, every time we feel something intense emotionally, we go into state changing, for example. It's going to make it really difficult to have healthy intimate relationship because healthy intimate relationship is being connected emotionally to that person. There are so many ways that not being healthily in touch emotionally shapes our life. That I think becomes the greatest trauma. It's the ways that we live now, not so much just the impact of the past.

Jason Prall:

Yeah. And I think just to stating, again, that not only are these patterns not bad, they are inherently necessary. We had to develop them as young beings because it was the way we were able to get through things. We didn't have our own nervous system, or perhaps a caregiver's nervous system to borrow in order to process these emotions. And then as we as we get older, in our six, and 10, and 12, and 15, and 20. This is where we actually the cognition starts to come on. And I think we have an opportunity as parents and caregivers and teachers, etc., to actually help people learn how to think about emotions, process, emotions, understand emotions, right. And most of us just weren't given that education cognitively. Because essentially, what we're doing now is giving it cognitively. And we're having as adults,

me, I had to learn all this stuff. What some of these emotions really feel like and how to process them. And so, I think there's an opportunity there to even bring on the cognition that so many of us missed.

Jason Prall:

And so, again, I want to bring this back to this idea that the traumas are one thing. We can think about past trauma, and so many people I know think back and they're like, I didn't really have much trauma. I had a pretty normal, regular life. And so, to some degree, it's almost not even worth trying to recall or pull up a trauma. It's better just to work with what's here now, and I think that's what you're pointing to is that this is the opportunity we all have each day to really feel what's here and to recognize that it doesn't necessarily matter how we think about the past. There's things here that we can work with, no matter what they are, even without understanding really where they came from, or what's going on.

Jason Prall:

I want to point to this idea, too, that I think for some of us, I was certainly this way. That I wasn't walking through my day thinking, oh, there's a feeling here. Let me go distract myself. It wasn't cognitive enough. It wasn't I didn't have the awareness to even recognize that I was distracting myself. So, I think one of the things that we can do, and I'm curious if you would agree with this is that we can actually look to these patterns and say, oh, okay, I run that pattern. Now that I know that I run that pattern. Whenever that pattern comes on, let me identify it and then try to see what I'm feeling because that's maybe a good place to start is work backwards.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, I'm a really strong advocate of the importance of moving beyond just having cognitive awareness. You can be aware that you do these patterns. I love making maps. Our whole therapeutic coaching methodology is deeply informed by these maps of understanding.

Jason Prall:

That's helpful.

Alex Howard:

... is one of those, yeah. But if we don't move beyond that we're just going to circles.

Jason Prall:

Totally.

Alex Howard:

There's a point that one has to. And of course different practices resonate for different people. I'm not entirely agnostic of what practices people use, but I'm also not deeply positioned in this is the way you need to do it. But I think we need practices that will slow things down. And there are different meditative practices, visualization prep book. First, we got to slow things down. We also need to learn to come more into our body, our physical body, and our emotional body. We need ways that cultivate certain capacities we need capacities of curiosity, you mentioned, I think it's a really important one. We need to capacities of acceptance, of compassion, capacities of courage.

Alex Howard:

There are lots of different ways to shape and to grow these capacities. But in a sense, I see those capacities as a little bit like you're going on an expedition to go on a journey. You decided you're going to go and get to Everest base camp, or you're going to climb Everest. Then you need food, you need water, you need shelter, you need a map. The resources that we need for the inner journey are things like acceptance, curiosity, courage. And if we go on this journey, without some of those qualities, we can gather them along the way. But we need to recognize that just like going back to using my story, as an example, that retreat that I was on where I was able to go to this place. What I had missed from the story was I was on the same retreat three years earlier. And when they set the exercise that's really starts to push us, I made a whole bunch of excuses in my head and got in my car and drove home. It didn't have some of the resources that I need.

Alex Howard:

I think sometimes that inner critic voice inside of our mind can have all kinds of narratives and stories and pressures and pushes, and we don't heal, at the same level that we got wounded. And if we got wounded by too much pressure, too much pushing, which is often the case that the environment we're in is too harsh. We don't then heal by being harsh with ourselves. We heal with being gentle and cultivating often what was absent at that time in the past. And so, I think-

Jason Prall:

Sorry, real quick, I'm going to interrupt you too, because I just don't want to lose this thread, which is that you mentioned climbing up Everest. A lot of times we need to practice, we need to train. And oftentimes you need a guide. And so, I think this speaks to that really important resource for many of us that if we didn't have that, another being there, when we're younger, oftentimes, that's exactly the medicine that we need. We can't just heal everything on our own. So I just want to bring that into the discussion too. Because I know that for you, that's super important. And that's, of course, what you guys do a lot is provide that for other people. Because for me, it's been essential to have another being. There's certain parts and pieces that I don't know that I could have healed myself. Maybe lifetimes and lifetimes of doing this stuff. But there's such important aspects of having another being there to help you process.

Alex Howard:

I think that's right. I'm mindful of time. I don't want to start a massive story that's going to take a long time. But I do just want to add something in that after I had that experience with processing my father about... Well, firstly, afterwards, I was like, "I need..." It felt like something was incomplete in my soul. And I was like, "I want to sit in the presence of my father. I don't have any massive aspirations for what's going to happen. I just need to have that experience." But I also had this strong sense of inner wisdom that it wasn't the right time. That I didn't have the stability in my own life, the holding and support that I needed. And every so often, I would check in, I'd be like, it doesn't feel right.

Alex Howard:

And then about five or so I guess it was years after that. I was married, we had our second daughter on the way and I just had this really strong sense that it was the right time. I had just the holding, the stability in my life that I needed. And I having tried to find my father a few times when in my early 20s and not be successful, almost out of nowhere I just wrote a few quick checks I managed to locate him and I have this initially very beautiful experience and then there's very traumatic experience. And to cut

a long story short, he then effectively tried to abandon me again. When I called him into the meat of... Initially, it was all lovely, wonderful. I was like, "Can we have a real conversation now?" And he freaked out and we didn't have a real conversation.

Alex Howard:

And yet what I realized was at that point I raised and I was angry, and I had to metabolize emotion. But I felt at peace. And what it showed me is the power of really working on our emotional history because I wasn't... Although it was incredibly traumatic on one hand, I wasn't traumatized the second time. And in fact, when he passed away last year, it was a real sign for me. It was almost like a graduation day of the years of self-development work that I could feel sad, and I could feel the emotions, but I didn't have the hate and the rage that had been there.

Alex Howard:

The reason why should I share the story. I don't normally share the stories publicly, but I shared it because I think that emotional intelligence and wisdom is really important about timing and going this feels true, it doesn't feel true now, or this does feel true now. And the more that we open to our emotional body, there are such intelligence in there. That in a sense, the anxiety and the panic in our mind is because we don't have our inner compass, and we're panicking because we're trying to find that safety. But the deeper we land and connect, there is so much intelligence there. But we have to learn to trust that guide.

Jason Prall:

Yeah, that's the gut feeling, the intuition that I think we're all talking about. And it really comes from this place of deeply connecting within ourselves, and integrating some of these pieces. And then what I love is that not only is that inner guidance system there to help coach you through the emotional stuff, but it's there to actually, it can show up for financial decisions. Do I take this job or that job? Do I move? If so, when? There's all these things where your intuition starts to come online, and can start to play a role in your life, and then you learn to trust it.

Jason Prall:

And then life just gets easier because you're actually going on what you're feeling. What's really here in the body. The mind doesn't have to try to take over, and calculate everything, which is futile at best when we've got so many of these things going on. The inner guidance system, the gut feeling, the intuition is so much more powerful. So, I love that you brought that in. Before we close, I would really love for you just to name some of the modalities or styles and therapeutics that people can use to if they want to start to work with some of this stuff.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, so I'm a really big fan of meditation practice, and particularly meditation practices, which are focused on a more embodied approach. So, you're really working with coming into the body more than transcendental practices, which I think can have their place. But I think sometimes we can be end up bypassing our emotions rather than really landing and connecting.

Jason Prall:

I 100% agree with this, by the way, totally 100%.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, and then I'm also a really big fan of pattern. So, in the reset program, which is a 12-week online coaching program that I teach around resetting the nervous system. We have this strong emphasis around learning strategies and tools to break patterns of thinking, to identify them, to get to stop them, and to calm the systems. I find those cognitive tools also really important. But then I think we also, that's the next phase, we then go into other programs. I think also really important is we have to learn how to feel. And we have to learn how to open to our feelings, to metabolize. I talk about digesting emotions being a bit like digesting food. The first thing you do with food is you chew, and with emotions you need to talk about it, you need to journal about it, you need to chew on it. But then there's a point that we swallow, where we let go and-

Jason Prall:

We don't chew forever.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, exactly, exactly. And then the stomach starts to break something down. And that's that inner process of just sitting with something and perhaps being a bit stirred up. And we think we're just stirred up, but actually, something's happening. There's a breaking down and then food goes into the small intestine, and we're absorbing what's good. And even in the deepest, darkest traumas, there are lessons and insights and things that we can learn from that. And then we move into the large intestine, the colon, there's an expulsion of what we don't need. There's a letting go and releasing. And then on the other side, there's a sense that we've been nourished by something and we've also let something go. The same is true with processing emotion.

Alex Howard:

There are stages to that process and learning how to embrace and open to each of those stages, again, take some support. And I think having the right teachers you mentioned the right guides, I think is definitely part of that, but it's also learning. I talk about in chronic fatigue terms, you need to be captain of the ship of your own recovery. And I think the same is true of emotional healing. We need to become captain of the ship of our emotional healing that we're drawing in different people that can help with different chapters of the journey. And there are different teachers that resonate at different chapters of the journey. And learning to be our own champion and our own supporter, particularly for those of us that grew up in environments that weren't supportive, that's its own capacity that we get better at with practice.

Jason Prall:

I love that, and then what you're speaking to going back to what you said earlier, which is that it's taking up so much of our energy. And as we metabolize and digest these things, these emotions, I mean, this is what's your freeing up energy at the cellular level, so this is what I think is so hard to map out, but we do know it's true because of the connection of the nervous system to everything in the body, and even the connections beyond that. I mean, the connections are really hard to even map out, but we're talking about the liver and the kidneys and the spleen, and you name it. Every aspect, every cell of the body that is wrapped up in trying to protect ourselves with these patterns and these maladaptive ways of being are now finally digested, finally assimilated.

Jason Prall:

And now we have more capacity to function in a way that is harmonious. Both physically, mentally, emotionally. Wouldn't you agree, life just gets more easy. It gets more fun. It gets more interesting. And we learn from me, you mentioned earlier that not being kind to ourselves is one of these things. That's a big one for me. I've learned how to be so much more kind to myself, and I'm still working on that. But it's like if you have an inner critic, that sometimes you don't even recognize how powerful it is. It's running the show. It's like, "Oh, man, you're being so hard on yourself." And so as that releases, that let's go. There's just an ease, there's a grace, there's a magic that starts to show up.

Jason Prall:

I'm getting to more of the woo-woo parts of this, but it's like, the answers just start coming. Things start landing at your doorstep, they start showing up. And then not only that, you start learning how to make that happen. You start actually playing the game along with it. You co-create this new reality, and that's what gets so interesting. That's really why I put on this summit is because I want to invite people into this reality, that it's so real, that it can be yours. It's right there waiting for all of us. And it's a journey that I don't feel like it ends, I feel like it just gets better and better. And we keep doing more of this work and keep looking inward and keep figuring this stuff out. Keep metabolizing and processing and playing and getting curious, then it just starts getting more and more fun.

Alex Howard:

Yeah, and I think that's right. And I think also when it comes to our emotions, I think it was Ken Wilber that put it this way, I think it's a great quote that we feel more, but we hurt or we suffer less. And it's a strange thing that we're more in touch with our feelings. Things that we might have been disconnected from before, and we feel them deeply. But we don't suffer in the ways that we did in the past because there's also something that is deeply nourishing and healing about being in touch with truth and being in touch with the depths of our soul and who ultimately we are.

Jason Prall:

That's a perfect place to end it. Alex, tell people where they can find more of your work.

Alex Howard:

So, probably the easiest place is my website, alexhoward.com. And at alexhoward.com, you can find links off to The Optimum Health Clinic, which is the clinic I found specializing in fatigue to our therapeutic coaching, practitioner training these methodologies, and also to Conscious Life, which is the platform where we run the various online conferences. I'd also invite people to check out I have a YouTube channel where each week we release an episode of me working with patients. It's real filmed sessions of me doing my thing working with patients, and that's called In Therapy With Alex Howard, and we had just a few weeks ago an episode that I thought was actually a really good example of this of some really deep emotional processing. I think it's quite unusual to see what happens in a therapy session in that way in a shared experience on YouTube, so people can check out that as well.

Jason Prall:

Beautiful. I would also invite people to look out for Alex's conferences. He puts on amazing conferences. So, go sign up for his email list and he'll notify you of when those are, but they're amazing, and they dig into this stuff. Just like we had talked about today. So, beautiful conversation. Alex, thanks so much for coming on, and everybody we'll see you on the next one.