

[Transcript] Huberman Lab / Guest Series | Dr. Paul Conti: Tools and Protocols for Mental Health

Welcome to the Huberman Lab Guest Series, where I and an expert guest discuss science and science-based tools for everyday life.

I'm Andrew Huberman, and I'm a professor of neurobiology and ophthalmology at Stanford School of Medicine.

Today marks the fourth episode in our four episode series with Dr. Paul Conti about mental health.

Today's episode deals with the topic of self-care.

We hear the phrase self-care a lot nowadays, but rarely, if ever, is self-care precisely defined.

For instance, is self-care about pampering oneself?

Is it about self-acceptance?

Is self-care about just making sure we get enough sleep and enough exercise and have healthy relationships?

Well, it turns out that, yes, indeed, adequate self-care is about all of those things, but true self-care.

The topic of today's episode is about far more as it relates to our mental health.

True self-care is also about constructing a life narrative in which we frame our past, our present, and future in a way that allows us to see what's gone wrong, what's gone right, and the best path to navigate forward.

So in many ways, true self-care is really about fostering a sense of self-awareness and doing so within the context of a framework that is known to work.

And today, Dr. Paul Conti shares with us exactly how to do that.

He also touches on some of the things that, if not properly understood and processed, can inhibit our ability to take excellent care of ourselves, including how to properly process traumatic experiences, something that he is expert in, among many other topics as well.

He also touches on some of the things that can potentially serve as barriers to excellent self-care, including traumatic experiences, and explains how to frame those traumatic experiences so that we can best move forward.

He also shares with us various practices that include therapy, but also practices that we can carry out on our own, such as specific forms of meditation, journaling, and other ways of examining the self and fostering better self-care toward our mental health.

As I mentioned before, this is the fourth episode in our four-episode series all about mental health.

I realize that perhaps not everyone has had the opportunity yet to listen to the previous three episodes in this series.

If you haven't, it certainly won't prevent you from gleaning important information and protocols from today's episode.

But I do encourage you, at some point, to try and listen to all four episodes in this series because at some level, they are interwoven at the level of concepts and of practices.

I'd also like to highlight that Dr. Paul Conti has generously provided some simple diagrams that can help you navigate today's material and the material in the other episodes.

They are available as zero-cost PDFs by simply going to the show note captions where you can view them or download them.

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Before we begin, I'd like to emphasize that this podcast is separate from my teaching and research roles at Stanford.

It is, however, part of my desire and effort to bring zero-cost to consumer information about science and science-related tools to the general public.

In keeping with that theme, I'd like to thank the sponsors of today's podcast.

Our first sponsor is BetterHelp.

BetterHelp offers professional therapy with a licensed therapist carried out all online.

I've been doing therapy for more than 30 years.

While I confess that initially, I was forced to do that therapy as a condition for being let back into high school, over time, I learned that therapy is a tremendously valuable practice.

In fact, I consider doing regular weekly therapy as just as important as doing regular physical exercise in order to improve one's health.

The beauty of BetterHelp is that it makes it extremely easy to find a therapist that's excellent for you.

We can define an excellent therapist as somebody who is going to give you a lot of support but in an objective way, as well as somebody with whom you can have excellent rapport and that can help you arrive at positively transformative insights that you wouldn't have otherwise had. And with BetterHelp, they make it convenient so that it's matched to your schedule and the other aspects of your life.

If you'd like to try BetterHelp, go to [betterhelp.com slash huberman](https://betterhelp.com/slash/huberman) to get 10% off your first month.

Again, that's [betterhelp, H-E-L-P dot com slash huberman](https://betterhelp.com/slash/huberman).

Today's episode is also brought to us by Waking Up.

Waking Up is a meditation app that offers dozens of guided meditation sessions, mindfulness trainings, yoga-needra sessions, and more.

By now, there's an abundance of data showing that even short daily meditations can greatly improve our mood, reduce anxiety, improve our ability to focus, and can improve our memory.

And while there are many different forms of meditation, most people find it difficult to find and stick to a meditation practice in a way that is most beneficial for them.

The Waking Up app makes it extremely easy to learn how to meditate and to carry out your daily meditation practice in a way that's going to be most effective and efficient for you.

It includes a variety of different types of meditations of different duration, as well as things like yoga-needra, which place the brain and body into a sort of pseudo-sleep that allows you to emerge feeling incredibly mentally refreshed.

In fact, the science around yoga-needra is really impressive, showing that after a yoga-needra session, levels of dopamine in certain areas of the brain are enhanced by up to 60%, which places the brain and body into a state of enhanced readiness for mental work and for physical work.

Another thing I really like about the Waking Up app is that it provides a 30-day introduction course.

So for those of you that have not meditated before or are getting back to a meditation practice, that's fantastic.

Or if you're somebody who's already a skilled and regular meditator, Waking Up has more

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advanced meditations and yoga-needra sessions for you as well.

If you'd like to try the Waking Up app, you can go to wakingup.com slash huberman and access a free 30-day trial.

Again, that's wakingup.com slash huberman.

And now for my discussion about mental health with Dr. Paul Conti.

Dr. Conti, welcome back.

Thank you.

Pleasure to be here.

For this series, we've been focusing on mental health and really defining what mental health is and a roadmap to achieve mental health.

And in episode one, you laid out for us a map, essentially, of the things that any and all of us can look at pretty much at any time with essentially any degree of resources to try and get a better understanding of ourselves and how well or not well we happen to be moving toward or creating true mental health for ourselves.

In addition to that, you spelled out for us what true mental health really is.

And just to recap a little bit of that, it really boils down to these verb states, action states of agency and gratitude.

And then in episode two, you covered some of the common challenges that you've observed in life and in your clinical practice.

And we addressed some of the ways that people can overcome those challenges by going to the map, opening the so-called cupboards, as we're referring to them, and asking specific sorts of questions.

And then in episode three, we talked about how looking at the map and exploring the map and those cupboards in particular can help people in relational aspects of life, romantic relationship, work relationships, family relationships, and the relationship to self.

Yes.

Very important.

Very important.

The foundation of all relationships outside of ourselves.

And I'm so glad that you highlighted the relationship to self because today's episode, we will, of course, return to the map.

And I should mention that if people have not seen episodes one, two, or three, that's okay.

The next one will be entirely accessible to them.

But I do recommend that at some point, they especially listen to episode one and hopefully episodes two and three as well.

But today's discussion is really about the aspects of ourselves that exist in all people and the action steps, the paths of inquiry that are available to all people that can allow anyone and everyone to improve their mental health, to move toward these ideals of agency and gratitude on a regular basis.

And as you pointed out, it is a process.

It's not that we arrive at agency and gratitude.

And just to reiterate, agency and gratitude are verb states.

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They involve ways of being in the world.

Their active process is like life is an active process.

There's not an endpoint we're trying to reach.

We're trying to live.

And in thinking about today's discussion, it occurred to both of us, really, that today's discussion is really about self-care.

Self-care as a concept, I think for many people, evokes notions of like, okay, you're going to take a vacation or you're going to kick your feet up or get a massage, you know, things of that sort.

And certainly it can involve those sorts of things.

But just as if we were having a discussion about physical health and we were going to talk about ways to take care of the physical body to enhance health span and lifespan.

Today's discussion is really about how to take care of the internal landscape, the mind, which also qualifies very strongly as self-care.

So if you would, could you tell us how you think about self-care, you know, regardless of whether or not you have a patient who's dealing with severe mental illness or somebody who's just, you know, hitting the same speed bumps of life over and over again or anything in between, you know, what sorts of self-care practices and mindsets do you suggest people take on for themselves?

And for that matter, how do you think about self-care?

Well, I think we start with factors that are really just baseline factors that have to be in place in order to achieve good things upon them.

So the basics of, you know, we have to be eating well enough to feel okay and hopefully eating really well.

We have to stay hydrated.

We have to get sleep.

We have to move the body.

These are basics, but basics a lot of people are not attending to.

Similarly, we have to be in a situation that isn't making fear and misery all the time.

So an example of an abusive relationship, right?

A person has to be, has to navigate out of that before they can really start taking care of themselves in the way that builds goodness, right?

So we look for the basic factors that we need to take care of in order to then look at the factors that become particular to each of us.

And what we're really looking for is self-understanding, right?

How much can we understand about ourselves?

Be knowledgeable about what's going on inside of us, why it's going on, also, and very importantly, being aware that we don't know everything that goes on inside of us and being curious about that and looking at how we're engaging with the world around us.

Do we feel happy?

Do we not feel happy?

How do we define what happy means?

How are we engaging with the world?

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Because as you were saying, the agency and gratitude are verb states.

So how are we living life?

How are we engaging with the world?

Do we feel like life is a sequence of things I have to do, you know, for example, right?

Or are we doing things we really, really don't want to do, right?

Do we have to do those things?

How could life be different, right?

We start looking at ourselves to assess how we're engaging with ourselves, the people, the world around us in a way that is either generative or not generative.

If we're in that state of agency and gratitude, then we are going to have periods of time where we feel peaceful, right?

We feel a sense of contentment or we feel delighted.

So is any of that in my life, right?

If not, why?

Can I start thinking about that?

Sometimes the answer is quite clear, like, oh, there's this thing I love and I'm not doing that, right?

And I can't do it.

And then you revisit, like, is it true that you can't do it?

I mean, a lot of times it is not true.

And if it is true, how does the person come to terms with that, process that, perhaps grieve, right?

So say if it's a loss of a person, right?

That can keep people, you know, in terrible misery over years and years.

So there may be things we have to understand, we have to process so that we can get ourselves to that place of knowing ourselves pretty well and engaging in the world in ways that we have a pretty good understanding of and that are adaptive.

And then we look to say, OK, now how do I make that better?

Because now we're thinking about preventive medicine, right?

We want our bodies to be healthy because, of course, we want to be healthy today, right?

But we also don't know what will happen in the future, right?

Will there be an injury or an illness?

I mean, eventually, like, you know, we all have an injury or an illness in some way or another.

So we're preparing for the predictable challenges that will come our way in the future.

And we're well-served by doing this about our mental health, too, right?

There will be challenges that come our way.

There will be losses and stressors and things that make us feel bad or feel scared.

These things will happen to us.

So the healthier we are, the better today is and the better we set ourselves up to either make tomorrow even better today or if tomorrow gives me a challenge I don't have today, I can meet that challenge and get back to a better place.

So if I understand correctly, it sounds like one of the cornerstones of self-care for sake

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of mental health involves asking really good questions about oneself.

Yes.

Yes.

I don't think I've ever heard it defined that way before.

Yes.

You know, it's in such stark contrast to the other forms of self-care, which I certainly subscribe to as well, like making sure one gets enough rest and, you know, avoids toxic people to the extent one can, et cetera, or toxic environments and so on.

Right.

You mentioned ask questions of the self, but the logical next question to that is, well, what questions do I ask myself?

Sometimes we know, we have an idea, right?

Sometimes we don't.

And this is where the construction of a life narrative, like, let me think about my life.

Let me potentially talk about my life with a trusted other person.

Let me potentially write down a narrative about my life and we can learn so much from doing that.

And then there's a person who thinks back and starts to tell a story of themselves.

And let's say, just as an example, you know, that story is going pretty well and the person is feeling pretty good about themselves and then, say, something happens and it starts to change.

Well, then this thing happened.

And then, you know, I started kind of spending time with different people or I started dating different people or I took a different kind of job and it can engender the reflection of like, oh, things really kind of changed then because the emotion systems within us don't care about the clock or the calendar.

The emotions often of negative experiences can back map into our lives and someone who can tell you, I was miserable ever since I was a child can then write out a life narrative that describes a very happy childhood until something happened or something changed at a certain point, which could be something dramatic or it might be increasing pressures of school or increasing social pressures or how things changed at puberty.

And if we have an understanding of that, we may know the right questions.

Like, for example, let's say afterwards the person finds that they're drinking more.

An example would a common example, instead of taking that for granted, oh, that's what I do, right?

Or yeah, I can't cope any better, right?

The negative things people will say to themselves, the narrative can often point out, I can cope better, I did cope better, I did feel differently about myself.

So the life narrative can really help us establish the roadmap, right?

And part of what the life narrative does is it guides us to the places to ask the questions.

If you would be so kind as to tell us a little bit more about how one would do this on their own.

So as this involves journaling things out, I confess I have a file on my computer that

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has a bunch of other files that starts with age zero to five.

And then I have some notes in there.

It's not an autobiography far from it.

It's just highlights of events that I remember, six to 10 and so on and places I lived.

And I use it just to kind of orient myself in time.

Yes.

I actually don't know what the purpose and utility of it is or why I initially started doing this, but it's an important file to me.

And when I return to it, I often remember additional key events.

So it's constantly growing.

I mean, these files are getting quite large.

Again, with no specific purpose of writing this out at any point, but just to orient.

Right.

You can't not learn about yourself from doing that, right?

It exposes truths of self.

It makes you ponder about things.

It draws your attention to ways in which you've changed, whether you think those ways are good or bad, right?

It draws your attention to change.

It draws your attention to the impact of external events.

And as you said, it sort of, it grounds you.

It provides a way of localizing oneself in time.

Like I am here now, wait, how did I get here, right?

And then the thoughts and ideas of how we got here very much help us because often we don't do that.

You know, we're sort of rushing headlong forward because in many ways our society is prompting us.

We live in a very fast moving society.

We want information and gratification and often we don't even want it very fast, but it's coming at us very fast anyway.

And to stop and reflect makes a very, very big difference even to think at times beyond our generations, right?

And to the best of my knowledge, the vast majority of people on one side of my family, everyone was a shepherd for like every generation until like two ago, right?

And thinking about that of like, huh, that's interesting, right?

It makes me in many ways grateful, so grateful for the opportunity I've had.

But I also think like, well, they lived in close knit communities then, and what was that like?

And, you know, we begin to see ourselves in a broader way, both in our own history and then projecting forward, which, which sometimes is about children and nurturing children, but it can certainly be about other things.

It can be about friendship, it can be about work.

So we start to see ourselves in ways that are interesting, that are through the lens

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of truth and that speak to our place in the world around us.

And I think this engenders both agency and gratitude, right?

If I'm aware of like, huh, what have I done?

What have I accomplished?

When haven't I accomplished things?

How might that be different?

And, and a sense of gratitude for being here and having opportunity and even be able to think about this, you know, my guess is when you read through those files, that at some point you have sort of a sense of Marvel while like, whoa, that's me, right?

Whether it's a good memory or it's a difficult memory, no, it's all part of you that leads you through to today and you do have a better sense of self through that.

One of the feelings I most often come away from those excursions into those files with is one of gratitude because so much of what's in those files are recollections of others that I really appreciate.

Some are still alive.

Some aren't.

And what that's meant to me and how that carries me forward.

So, yeah, so that's what I do.

I'm sure there are a near infinite number of ways that people could do this, but what are a few that you've seen work really well that people can do on their own or perhaps with a clinician as well?

In fact, that raises the question, should people share this sort of practice and the contents of that practice with with a trusted clinician?

Right.

Right.

People with another person always should be a trusted other, right?

And we can kind of take stock of that, you know, of people having an idea of who may be safe, right?

Often people, so there's no one I could share something with, but really that often comes through a lens of fear, you know, of exposure of self, of rejection, of vulnerability, which often is warranted, but sometimes it's not.

Sometimes it really are.

In fact, often there are safe people, right?

So, the act of doing something other than just thinking about something brings, as you well know, it brings parts of our brain online that then are thinking in a different way.

So for example, they may bring error correction mechanisms online.

So if I'm thinking over and over again that I've never been good enough to do anything, you know, that can be just automatic inside of me, but if I start to write or to talk or even to formulate words, to talk to myself or to put words in my mind as if I were talking, now we come at it in a different way.

And we can sort of ferret out the truth within us, which might be, you know, it's not true that I've never been able to do things or achieve things and people often bring that online by doing something other than the same thought process that's gone often over and

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it's nonproductive and it brings down mood and it raises anxiety and it also builds a sense of futility.

I mean, I cannot tell you how often I've heard a person say, like, no good will come of this or like, okay, try it, we'll try it, but I know I can't be helped.

I've been thinking about this for 10 years or 20 years, but what they've been doing is the same thing.

They've been ruminating on it for 10 years.

They start talking about it and people will say, oh my goodness, like I've achieved more in two hours than I did in years, but that's because you're doing something different in the two hours.

So I think that's very important, especially because we can't say, okay, go look in your unconscious mind and see what you find there.

So then we need ways of accessing the unconscious mind and the communication either with self in writing with others can be very, very helpful in doing that.

I also am a firm believer that knowledge is power.

Many times I will feel like I have a sense of really having helped someone and the other person may have that sense that we can see the change and all that I've done is in part knowledge, right?

We all know different things.

So often it's the case that I happen to have learned things that are different from what that other person learns and then I'm communicating to them things that I have learned so they know them too and then they feel tremendously better, right?

Because if we put inside of ourselves the tools of understanding our unconscious minds and sometimes our conscious minds too will work on them, will make use of them.

So if you talk to a person, for example, about how trauma can impact us and how we can shove it underneath the surface and how it can spin off shame, then that person may take that knowledge away and come back with real understanding.

And the fact that we can do this on our own, right?

We can do this through good resources.

We can do this by taking information into ourselves that can be very, very helpful and it doesn't require because the first place to start are with things we can do that don't require professional help, right?

And sometimes we may come at problems that do tell us that we should get professional help, right?

So if we're having thoughts of self-harm, thoughts of not wanting to be alive, thoughts of real despair, thoughts of real hopelessness, that's telling us, okay, let's get some help. There's a role and a place for professional help.

But people come to professional help in other ways too, such as, for example, reflecting on the self and to real example, a person thinking, you know, it really became kind of different when, you know, when things started changing, like after college and then I thought like, oh, I've kind of gotten to this place and I've got a good job and like things really should get better, but like they kind of haven't, right?

And that was really a branch point that person may have never really thought about that,

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or they may have thought about it 10,000 times, it then shoved it underneath from consciousness to unconsciousness because it's a scary vulnerability inducing thing.

It seems scary.

Like how could it be that I achieved things and didn't get healthier?

Now we're afraid of that, right?

And letting that come to the surface being able to say, oh, like that's true.

Like I don't have to be afraid to shine light on that.

And a lot of times that alone, sometimes a person will solve their own problems.

They think about it, they come in, they have all the answers, they thank me, I did nothing but listen, but the listening part is important.

It allowed them to come in and say what they needed to say.

And other times then it's not, it can be that, but it's not always that.

Other times it informs us about what to work on clinically and it might not be something that's dire, right?

It might just be like, I want to understand this.

I want to be happier.

I want to be healthier.

But towards these good things, when people talk about that, they're always, if you really distill them, what are they talking about?

A sense of peace, a sense of contentment coming at the world through agency and gratitude.

And we can do that through self-inquiry, including through therapy.

It doesn't have to just be for situations where, oh, there's a significant clinical problem.

Is it the case that when somebody journals a bit of their life narrative or thinks about some great or sadly traumatic events that perhaps happened to them at whatever stage of life, that there's something accomplished in that action or in that therapy session if they're doing it with a clinician, but that when they go to sleep that night and perhaps in their waking states as well, that the unconscious is working some of that through such that revelations come to mind later, insights come to mind.

I'm certainly familiar with the fact that there are certain times of day and evening where my brain is in a bit of a liminal state.

It feels like somewhere between sleep and awake.

And I just have learned that provided I block against outside sensory input as much as I can, in particular social media and the news, that I'll just be doing the dishes or preparing coffee or something and something will come to mind seemingly out of nowhere.

It's not always a great insight.

In fact, it's rarely a great insight, but it always takes me a bit by surprise, sometimes a little bit of delight, sometimes a little bit of shock like, wow, like where did that come from?

Because it came from your unconscious mind, right?

It was invisible to you.

Then it got thrown up and you're, whoa, and you realize it while in the midst of doing something relatively mundane, right?

Because during the day, you're engaging, your brain is highly engaged, which is great, but

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it doesn't leave a lot of room for the unconscious mind to do its millions and millions of things a second that can help you figure things out, which is the same reason it's uncanny.

Any psychiatrist will tell you this, that people, a person will come in and say, it's strange, you know, all of a sudden when, when I can finally relax, like that's when I have a panic attack, right?

Or they don't know, like then I can finally relax and I go, ah, then my heart's beating fast and I'm sweating, right?

Because that's when the panic attacks come.

If the person is laboring under something that is causing them this constant distress, when you stop focusing outward and you sort of settle into an inward state, then the things that are underneath the surface are going to come to the surface.

And if there's something really bothering you that your brain is very upset about or very afraid of, what does it throw up to the surface?

A panic attack, right?

But if you're in a good place, you're taking care of yourself, you're in a generative stage, you're in a safe environment, then when you, you stop putting all the attention outward.

So we imagine then salience changes and instead of a lot of the salience being outward, it starts to be inward and you're just sort of meditative, you're washing the dishes, right?

And there's room then for your unconscious mind to throw something important to the surface. It's the exact opposite of how people can't remember something if they're trying to think of it.

I mean, we all go through this.

Remember that person's name or that restaurant or whatever it is, try to keep thinking about it and see if you figure it out, right?

The answer is not in your conscious mind.

So if you keep bringing your conscious mind to bear, you just generate frustration, right?

But then when you stop thinking about it, the answer is there inside of you, oh, I remember now, right?

So that's how if we, if we have the conscious mind engage in something, it's not going to figure out, right?

Then it doesn't figure the thing out, right?

And that works for our problems too.

That's why a person can say, I thought about that for 10 years.

Well, you ruminated about it for 10 years.

It just ran over and over and over in the conscious mind and how ironic, right?

It prevents understanding.

So it's very clear to me that asking certain kinds of questions about oneself and one's self-narrative, you know, life history essentially can be very beneficial in the moment or moments of doing that practice, as well as the subconscious or I guess the appropriate way to refer to it as the unconscious, right?

Okay.

So for those out there who like me sometimes say subconscious, it's unconscious.

The unconscious can throw things up to the surface that can be real insights, can give

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us not just panic attacks, which I think most people would like to shy away from, but as you point out, there's information in the fact that the panic attack is occurring under conditions of rest.

If you stir up the pot of the unconscious and you put some new information in, it can do new things.

It can figure new things out, which is why the process of self-reflection, for example, and often the process of therapy is not always, and in fact, often is not a pleasant process, right?

But then we take away from that hard work renewed insights.

So someone, this happens all the time, who knows, they know that a certain trauma is inside of them and has been affecting them, whether it's for days or weeks or years.

They know it.

They don't know what to do about it.

They have a conflict about it, so they keep trying to shove it under the surface.

They finally accept for whatever reason to talk about it.

And what often happens then is, let's say doing three or four successive weeks of hourly therapy.

That person is crying and that person is upset or that person is angry.

I mean, it doesn't always happen this way, but it does a fair amount of the time as they get better and better, right?

Because they're discharging some of the energy, right?

Maybe they're crying and they're sad because they're grieving something they haven't grieved before, right?

Because they've just been angry, right?

Or they've just been ashamed.

A classic example is the death.

I mean, how many times do people think, well, that can't be still affecting me?

It was X number of years ago, but they've never actually grieved because they carry in them.

Oh, it was my fault, right?

And how many times do we hear that?

I should have said something different before.

I should have gone, you know, we then back map something that makes us feel bad.

And then from the guilt and shame comes the inability to process grief.

So if the person then deals with, right, I feel so bad about this.

In fact, I feel so ashamed of it.

And I feel like it's my fault and say, okay, well, let's talk about that, right?

After my brother's death by suicide, I felt responsible.

I was not involved in any way in mental health.

I had a business career at the time and I finally went and saw someone.

I wasn't acculturated that getting therapy was something one did, but I realized, hey, I'm not okay, right?

So I didn't know how, right?

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I just knew the manifestation of it, which was misery and risk and, you know, I could just tell, like, I know what it feels like to not feel like this and this is not okay. So then I, you know, I call the insurance number, eventually I go in and see a therapist. And, you know, she did, I'm sure she was a very good therapist, but she didn't in the sense need to be in the sense that sometimes we don't need to use all the things we know, we can do just something basic with someone. And that's all she did with me. I mean, she got me talking about it. And then I talked about how ashamed I was because it was my fault. And then really, and then she challenged me about that. And then, you know, in a nice way, but then it became clear that I was so utterly shocked by it, right? Far from it being foreseeable to me, right? That the problem that I was having now was the shock of it and the sense of shame and guilt that it raised in me and then me shoving it under the surface, not knowing what to do with it. I'm making all sorts of misery in me and I can't actually grieve, right? So at some point during those sessions, now I'm sad and I'm crying, right? And I know what she was thinking, right? She's good. Okay. This is like, this, thank goodness, this is a bit of a sparse of getting better. She might have felt a sense of relief because she could say, hey, I mean, he's coming out of risk. He's able to feel sad and he's able to grieve. He hasn't been doing this before, you know? So it's that, it's that work, if we put into it, that makes a difference just as when physical health, I mean, if I want to be stronger or I want to be more robust, like I have to go to the gym and work or I have to do something that's hard work and then I get the benefit of it. And the same is true whether we're reflecting on our life narrative and it brings, you know, some difficult emotions to us or whether we're talking with someone or whether we're doing it in therapy, but that's how that process of inquiry leads us, you know, to take some of the Gordian knots in us, so to speak, and to cut them instead of trying to figure out, like, how am I going to feel okay about myself even though I'm responsible for my brother's death because I should have foreseen it. I mean, that doesn't work, right? You have to say, I see what that thing is and that has to go away, right? And then therapy can lead us to the point where, oh, it wasn't my fault then, oh my goodness, I'm sad. I'd like to take a brief break and acknowledge one of our sponsors, AG1. AG1 is a vitamin mineral probiotic drink that meets all of your foundational nutrition needs.

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I can see how self-inquiry is really powerful.

I've certainly experienced that in my own life and it's an ongoing process, right?

This is not something that one does and then stops, ideally you do it forever, just like physical fitness.

And at the same time, I know that a number of people perhaps are wary of self-inquiry, especially because of the pain points it can bring about and make conscious and that we have to really sit with and most people would like to avoid discomfort.

I'm sure there are also people who are doing quite well in life and therefore think, oh, pattern of self-inquiry, all it could do, it sounds like it's more harm, like why would I want to do that?

But I think we both agree that there's nothing but good and progress and more agency and gratitude to be had by going through patterns of self-inquiry.

I think that really highlights something very important, which is that self-inquiry isn't always the right answer.

And I think just because things are going well, that doesn't mean self-inquiry isn't the right thing to do.

Self-inquiry is always the right thing to do if we want to understand ourselves better unless we're in a place where it can bring real risk to us.

So when I was trying to think about myself, inquire, why was I so miserable, what's going on in me, I reached a point where I realized I'm not getting myself anywhere and I'm getting worse and this is not good for me because what does this self-inquiry lead me to more guilt and shame?

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So then at some point I sort of pulled the ripcord, I can't do this on my own anymore. And that's very, very important to anyone who's listening.

If you feel like, look, I don't think I'm in a safe or a stable place and thoughts of self-harm, thoughts of hopelessness, then it probably is not or let's err on the side of being cautious.

It is not a good idea then to engage in self-inquiry.

First go see someone clinically and I know that can be hard to do in this day and age but if we really advocate for ourselves, we really push.

We do whatever we can do to try and get in front of someone who can kind of help us understand what we may need and maybe that person helps us with the process of self-inquiry.

Maybe that person reassures us.

Maybe that person then tells us that we really do need more care, more help and then it leads to us getting that so that we can come back to the good place of being well enough for the self-inquiry.

I'm grateful you shared your path to working with a clinician and the fact that just focusing on something on your own wasn't really working and there was a, it sounds like a requirement for a clinician to help guide you through that.

It relates directly to what I'm most curious about at this moment which is in the map that you established for us in episode one and that is carried through all these episodes and by the way, if people are not familiar with the map, we will cover it in top contour and a little bit more depth in a moment here.

One of the key things or cupboards as we're referring to them to look in in order to exert self-care and improve one's mental health is this notion of self-awareness of really understanding that there's an I, a me and exploring what that's really about in the moment but also historically through narrative, etc.

Also in this map is a cupboard that relates to salience.

What's most obvious or what do we default to both internally in terms of what sorts of thoughts we default to and externally?

What are we focusing on in the outside world and I think I and perhaps many other people out there are wondering how to resolve any conflict between a practice that is aimed at increasing self-awareness and perhaps even drawing to mind early traumas or challenges or recent traumas or challenges and salience.

In other words, if I were to take some moments or even an hour once a week and sit there and really think about the sorts of things that I don't want to think about that have been gnawing at me below the surface for a very long time, the stuff that I gained some proficiency at pushing down beneath the surface.

I think one fear that I have and so I have to assume other people have it as well is that if I were to bring that to mind that it would overtake a lot of my waking hours.

It's like I don't want to think about this thing or those things and so now what salience is something negative and when I'm focused on something negative then I'm not able to be as generative as I would like, move my life, move forward toward my life goals.

Now I could even have the realization, the cognitive understanding that okay that's but that's necessary.

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This is like getting a wound fixed or dealing with a chronic injury like sooner or later you got to deal with it otherwise you're not going to be at your best but that conflict between gaining more self-awareness and also the understanding that what is most salient to us is kind of defines the quality of our daily life.

That conflict or friction seems like an important thing for us to drill into a little bit. Absolutely and I would say this, if you think there's something that you can't bring up into consciousness because it's going to take over your mind or as people often say I'm going to curl up in a fetal position, I'm going to cry and never stop, that is exactly the thing you must look at because salience presents itself in a whole array of ways. So if there's something inside of you that's strong enough that it's throwing itself up to the surface like hey, maybe you want to think about me, right?

So your unconscious mind throwing it up to the surface, that is active in you and often, although a lot of it happens in the unconscious mind, it happens also in the conscious mind and if the person then stops and thinks, how much might that thing that you are not thinking about be impacting you?

How might it be salient in other ways?

Sometimes a person will realize like, yeah, that's on my mind.

People say, oh, that's on my mind all the time.

It's kind of on the back burner but always there and he says, on the back burner, that's like having a voice in the background telling you something very negative or very distressing and it's just one example where oftentimes there's a realization that that thing is actually quite salient.

Sometimes there isn't a realization until later.

Oh, the salience of that is that that's why I don't let myself get ahead, right?

It can come out later because we don't know how much of it is unconscious, how much of it is conscious but under the right circumstances, if things are safe, as we said, if there's not something going on that presents risk and warrants clinical care, if there's something inside of you and you think I can't let that to the surface, then what that is telling you is I must let that to the surface.

Now, again, we want to do it in judicious ways and do it in ways that are safe but that's the message.

I think it's especially important that you mentioned that if something is gnawing at our conscious mind every once in a while, then it absolutely has to be operating below the level of our conscious awareness.

Maybe running amok all the time.

So if ever there was a cause for exploring something like that, that's it, right?

Because we can't be aware of the ways that's damaging to us or limiting us.

Again, somebody listening to this could be doing quite well, I think I'm doing great.

Why would I want to do any of this?

Well, perhaps they could be doing that much better.

Self-awareness and addressing one's personal narrative and a sense of eye is what we called covered one under the function of self.

Now for those that listened to episodes one, two or three, they'll be familiar with what

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I'm talking about when I say a covered one function of self.

But just for sake of getting everybody on the same page as we move forward here, maybe we could just return to the map of mental health for a moment.

We've talked about agency and gratitude as verb states.

And you also described in previous episodes this key, really essential concept of this generative drive.

So if you could just take a few minutes for us and really explain what agency and gratitude are, how one goes about building those up and expressing those, and what the generative drive is.

And then we'll return to the 10 cupboards of inquiry under the structure of self and function of self, which really represent the pillars and all the stuff that geysers up into these simple but extremely powerful concepts and ways of being which are agency and gratitude.

Yes.

Yes.

So I really liked when you brought the image of a geyser to mind, because if we think about the structure of self, which is one pillar and the function of self, which is another pillar, underneath those pillars, there are the 10 cupboards we've been talking about. And they represent the areas of inquiry for us because they're the aspects of the structure and function of self.

So that's where the answers are, right?

The answers are in those pillars.

The answers are in those 10 cupboards.

So if we're doing that, we're looking there, we're honoring what we find there, we're becoming healthier than that geyser, right?

I imagine it coming out of the space in between the pillars, right?

And what it is lifting up is, first, empowerment and humility.

But empowerment and humility are qualities, and the way we're using them, their qualities are potential.

So I have empowerment as opposed to being disempowered, right?

So I have humility instead of, for example, a reactive grandiosity or even a reactive self-oppression, right?

So I have these qualities of empowerment and humility, and then they become enacted, right?

They become expressed by us.

And I imagine riding on the top is the agency and the gratitude is at the top of the geyser and it's moving, right?

Their verbs.

We navigate life as life moves forward, right?

I will often think like being on like the luge, right?

And you see in the Olympics where the bridge is going down the twisting path and it's like, that's us moving through life, right?

And we all have different pathways, but they can interconnect and they can cross.

But that's what's happening.

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Living is an active thing, right?

So agency and gratitude are active things.

Why?

Because they're the ultimate expression of all underneath of it, of them.

That's where it goes.

If the pillars are in the right place, the geyser can function.

The empowerment and humility are with us.

So we're engaging with ourselves, with others, with the world through a lens of clarity and through a lens of knowing we can make the world a better place and knowing our role in it.

That's very, very active.

And then it brings to us the peace, the contentment, the delight that weaves in and out as you describe that you will feel the peace, the contentment, the delight when you're doing the solo podcasts, right?

But you're doing something very, very active, right?

It's not a passive endeavor, right, during which you feel all those things, but that makes sense, right?

Peace doesn't mean nothingness, right?

Now it can.

Someone who's looking out the window at the garden they planted can feel that too.

But there's life going on in them also, right?

They're contemplating the garden.

They know that they made the garden.

So these are all active processes because life is an active process.

And then we end up in this place of looking inside of us.

These drives within us are both deterministic and determined, right?

So think about how active a process that is where we have a natural bias one way or another because of our genetics, just like someone has a natural aptitude to be taller and someone shorter or to be more or less athletic, right?

We have potential within us when the genetics come together, right?

And that may determine some sort of set of parameters.

So maybe someone who doesn't have the blessings of being so athletic, perhaps myself, right?

I'm not going to be the world's greatest athlete, right?

But if I work hard, like I could be a lot more athletic and have been at times, right?

And if I don't, I could be a lot less athletic, right?

So there are potentials within us that get sort of genetically determined but have a wide array of variants around them.

And then our choices determine where we are in that variance.

If I don't take care of myself, I will be on the very low end of the athletic spectrum, right?

If I do and I cultivate myself, you know, I can be on a higher end for me, right?

But still, that's a lot better than the lower end.

There's a very big difference.

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The same is true in our drives.

So the more we're taking care of ourselves, we're reinforcing the primacy of the generative drive, and then the aggression, assertion, proactive, right?

That drive in us is realized as best we're going to realize it, and not everyone's is going to be off the chart, right?

And that's okay, right?

But that drive is in a place that lets that person take care of themselves, you know, have a job they enjoy and can do well at, and make their home life better, whatever it is that we can do, like we're more assertive, we're more engaged, and then that's bringing us more pleasure.

So the pleasure drive, again, it's not a hedonistic drive, it's drive for things we enjoy, like we enjoy safety, we enjoy absence of pain, but we also enjoy friends and romance and sex and food, like these are things that bring us gratification, and we can have that in a healthy place too.

So there's not too much and not too little of the aggression, assertion, proactive drive, not too much, not too little of the pleasure drive, and then we're in a place where we can meet where those drives are at.

So if the pleasure drive is in a certain place in us, we can meet that, right?

And maybe we foster it moving a little higher up, because we're doing good things and we're taking care of ourselves.

So if our romance is in a better place, then we can take more pleasure in our romance.

If our physical fitness is in a better place, we can enjoy that more, we can do more things.

So we are helping those drives to be in the optimal place to subserve the generative drive, which we are trying to optimize and maximize, and that puts us in the best place to have the things under those pillars in those cupboards in a good place.

And then on top of that geyser is the empowerment and the humility, and then that gets enacted as agency and gratitude, and we have more of the goodness of peace and contentment and delight, and that reinforces the generative drive.

So that's what's going on, and it has never failed me yet to read or listen to someone communicating happiness, either what they think it is, how they found it, what they're striving for, what they think it philosophically is.

It's all that, and it's not as simple as a word, because it's complex, we're complex, but the beauty of it all is the complexity is within us, but it's not out of our reach to understand ourselves better and help ourselves, and if we do that as we move further up the hierarchy, it gets simpler.

Approaching the world through agency and gratitude as verbs, it's pretty straightforward.

That's why that's the best metric for romantic compatibility, right?

It's not this person plays a musical instrument and that person's a mathematician, so they're not compatible.

No more than one plays the trumpet, one plays the clarinet, and we assume they are compatible.

Where are those drives at?

Are people healthy?

In a healthy place, we can then take the best care of ourselves, engage with others in a

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healthy way, understand who's a healthy other to engage with, get ourselves out of unhealthy situations, and then we're building health within ourselves and around ourselves, and that's how at the different levels of emergence, things get better.

If I make myself healthier and you make yourself healthier, we will be healthier as a group of two.

That's always how that is, and if we're healthier as a group of two, we can be healthier as parts of larger groups, right?

If the groups aren't healthy, we're pushing towards greater health, right?

We're engendering health, and that's how we see health grow until it can be manifest even on a cultural level, where we're taking better care of ourselves, we're less punitive, we're less rushing forward as a society and trampling the vulnerable, right?

We realize, oh, I could be the vulnerable, right?

I care about other people even if I don't know them because I can understand and empathize with what it feels like to be vulnerable, and furthermore, I could be among the vulnerable. So we behave differently as a culture, and that's what we're searching for on an individual level all the way up to a cultural level.

I have several questions, but first I want to just highlight what you said about relational structure relationships, and the fact that as was explored in episode three, and you made so clear, and it just makes so much sense, most of what people explore for when looking for a romantic partner or determining whether or not their existing romantic relationship could be better or not is focused on the wrong things, right?

These very kind of superficial notions of what people enjoy and even level of education, some of which can really matter, but that's not the critical issue at hand, and that the maps that the two individuals have and the extent to which they are expressing their generative drive and agency and gratitude is far, far more important.

And so for those that haven't heard episode three and are interested in relationships, not just romantic relationships, but relationships of all kinds, work, family, relationship to all friendship, I highly, highly recommend listening to that conversation because it's truly spectacular in terms of its actionable takeaways in by actual, well, I mean actions of course, behaviors and also modes of thinking that can really serve people.

I also just want to make one clarification that I believe that when you said hierarchy, when you said move up the hierarchy, you were referring to the hierarchy within the map that's been laid out here, right?

As opposed to I don't want people to get mistakenly distracted by the possibility that we're talking about some sort of like external social hierarchy.

So I just want to clarify that.

And that's actually a perfect jumping off place for going into the map with a little bit more depth and detail and exploring these cupboards that reside at the lower levels of the map and that are quite complex.

Okay.

So for those of you listening who have not yet gone and access to the PDF that we put in the show note captions, you can do that at any point.

But what we're talking about is a bunch of things down at the bottom under these two

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pillars structure of self and function of self, these cupboards, excuse me, that are extremely valuable for any and all of us to look in and explore and ask specific questions because it's what resides within those cupboards that combine in a sort of recipe and then geyser up into whether or not and how much empowerment, humility, agency, gratitude, peace, contentment, delight and generative drive.

We are able to exert and experience for ourselves in life.

So imagine in your minds, if you will, and here I'm borrowing directly from a picture model that Dr. Conti provided before the filming of this series, which is in iceberg where below the surface of the water resides a bunch of stuff and then a little bit is above the water and maybe you'll help us revisit that model now for a few moments.

But if you take nothing away at this moment, please understand that there's a lot of complex stuff going on underneath the surface of the brain and mind.

But a key feature of this map is that while it is very, very complex underneath, what emerges from that complexity gets simpler and simpler, especially as we move towards places of better health and more effectiveness in life.

So if you would, could you describe the map in a bit more detail, especially what's down there in these pillars, the complex stuff and the stuff that we should be looking at.

And then we'll touch on some of those cupboards that we all have and the sorts of questions that we should all be asking in the context of some common challenges, but also some very common and very effective paths to doing and feeling better.

Yes.

Yes.

Now the unconscious mind is the place to start because that's the deepest level of the structure of self.

So imagine sitting on top of a biological supercomputer the size of a house, right?

That's what's going on inside of us, right?

The unconscious mind is that biological supercomputer and if we're interested in ourselves, right, we become very, very curious about what is going on in it.

And that's where even though it's not directly accessible to us, it can be accessible through other ways such as we talked about reflection or therapy, of course there are other ways too, but it is accessible to us and we want to know what is in it because what it is in it has such a strong effect on what's going on in our conscious mind, right?

That's the person on top of the biological supercomputer the size of a house or the image we've been using is the top of the iceberg that's coming out of the water.

So we can look at that either way, but what is in it has of course a huge effect on the part that we're aware of, our conscious mind.

And I think the best analogy here, and it's actually I think quite an analogy that parallels very well is to an abscess in the field of physical medicine.

So an abscess is an area of walled-off infection, right?

So imagine that there's some infection, for example, it's often in the abdomen, there's some infection and that infection could be really dangerous, right?

If that infection spread, boy, it could go to the blood, the person could die from that, right?

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Everybody does a really good job of walling off that infection, right?

And that's a good thing, right?

Because if the infection weren't walled off, it poses huge risk.

But the walled-off infection does not represent a condition of health.

So someone who has an abscess in them and doesn't know it, this happens frequently in medicine, you will see people coming to emergency rooms and you know, they have a low-grade fever and they've had a low-grade fever for a while and they just don't feel good and they have low energy and they're not sleeping well and they find themselves sweating a lot.

There are pervasive experiences going on that are really detracting from life, like not feeling great all the time, even though the person doesn't feel really sick.

That's sometimes why it takes a while for the person to come to medical attention.

So what's going on is better than not being walled off but it is not synonymous with health.

So what happens in physical medicine?

Abscess is identified and then someone goes in, a surgeon goes in and drains it.

And then the person is better, right?

Think about that process, like surgery, surgery is not a fun thing, right?

There's anesthesia, there's recovery, right?

Surgery is great when it cures the problem, right?

So it's not that, oh, the physician in the emergency room or the family practice doc identifies that there's an abscess, refer to the surgeon, everything is great and happy and they're better.

No, they have to go have a surgery and that's not an easy thing, right?

But if they go and do that on the other side, the infection actually is gone.

So they do not have the symptoms that was constantly spinning off inside of them and they also don't have the risk that maybe that infection gets out of the abscess and their life is then at risk.

So the parallel is looking into the unconscious mind to what is inside of us that may be acting like that abscess.

Even though this is an analogy, it is not theoretical, like this happens all the time.

And the abscess inside that person emotionally may be the bullying that went on right around the time of puberty, right?

It may be that awful boss who was just so mean and like took that good job away from me, right?

It might be that.

It might be, you know, that assault that I don't want to think about that's really still with me.

It might be that death I still feel guilty about.

I don't know what it is, right?

But if there's an abscess in there, we want to understand it and then fix it, cure it, right?

And that's what the therapy process can do.

And that's why at times of therapy is unpleasant, you know, the crying and the anger, you know, that's the parallel of going through the surgery, right?

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But on the other side, we've dissipated the energy inside of it.

Like we've taken care of it.

And that's why it is so important to go into the unconscious mind if there are things that are really troubling us, or if we don't know what's going on to cast a net of inquiry that may lead us there because trauma is so common and we shove trauma underneath the surface because of the guilt and shame that it generates.

And then it stays in us like an abscess and spins off symptoms.

They could be symptoms of diffidence.

They could be symptoms of overusing a substance.

They could be symptoms of avoiding good things in our life.

But they're pervasive symptoms that are really harmful to us that we can understand and fix.

In addition to quality therapy, what are some other ways to access the unconscious?

Earlier we were talking about journaling and spelling out one's life narrative in written or in spoken form, either alone or with a trusted other.

Let's assume that somebody either can't afford or is just not at the place where they're willing to do therapy yet.

But they fully adopt this abscess model or this abscess analogy that you described, which I think is an exceptional one because, A, you have 20-plus years of clinical experience knowing this exists, but also I think we all at some level understand that there's stuff happening within us that we can't explain.

And I as a neuroscientist can absolutely say that most of the neural machinery in your head and the parts of it that are in your body, we don't have access to it.

We love to think that we do, but we don't.

It's just clicking away under there.

So let's say somebody wants to make some progress, improve their level of mental health, obtain more agency and gratitude, improve all aspects of their life and the generative drive.

What are some ways that they can start to tap into the unconscious?

And my guess is if it's not in therapy, it's going to be by looking at some in some of these other covers as you're describing them.

Right.

Yes.

Develop and embrace curiosity about yourself.

And if you can, go for that curiosity being dispassionate, right?

In the sense that, you know, you talk about these files you have with your, with memories and events from your past, like that's so good, right?

Because you're exploring your life, right?

So someone who wants to understand themselves better, do that for yourself.

Go look at pictures, talk to people you knew at different stages of life, reflect upon how you behaved at different stages of life, what you felt inside, anchor yourself to memories and then extrapolate from there, become curious about yourself.

And if you can be dispassionate, this idea that sometimes gets called an observing ego, right?

There are other words to put to it, but it's, it's not ego in a negative sense, right?

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Here it means the ability to stand outside of oneself and go, huh, right?

And to really think about oneself without the negative emotion, we're often able to either see the trauma, for example, or see the change, like, huh, why did I go from feeling really good about myself?

And I felt like I could do anything and then just a couple of years later, man, I look at me on Mopey in the pictures and, you know, and then think, yeah, I was drinking more, I stopped taking care of myself, like that's a pretty big change, right?

And then so, and so now like we're calling attention, what's that change?

And a lot of times the person knew it, you know, like, oh, I got rejected.

I had that terrible breakup, right?

And like, they all, they knew it was a terrible breakup, but they keep shoving it under the surface.

Maybe they didn't know it was a terrible breakup.

Maybe they can't figure out what it is, like, that's okay, right?

Even if they recognize, look, there was a change, then that will put the lie to what, in this example, is likely going on.

So that person likely frames themselves in a way that is very negative and always was true.

Right?

So, so I can never achieve anything.

I never feel good.

No one likes me and can't find a partner.

Whatever it is we say to ourselves, the person thinks it's always been that way, right?

Because the negative emotion is so strong and that part of our brain doesn't care about the clock and the calendar.

And then the person goes back and thinks it was not always that way, right?

And it comes to this a lot in therapy, it doesn't have to be, as you said, in therapy.

But no, you know, I was a go getter, right?

I'm thinking of the person who said I was a go getter and I went out there and did things which put the lie to her saying that she was lazy and capable, all those things that were not true, but she accepted as truth, right?

So she needed, from that mathematical perspective, like to go back and question the givens, right?

From our perspective, we're saying, go look in the unconscious mind, go look in that part of the pillar of the structure of self.

Go look there.

That's the deepest part, the most complicated part, but it doesn't mean we can't understand it.

If we start to gain understanding, then we can think more about the conscious mind.

Like what, wait a second, what am I thinking about?

What do I think about that, right?

Have I really thought about this or is it just running over and over in my head?

What would I like to do about it?

Maybe I'd like to learn more.

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Maybe I want to go get a book that I think could help me listen to another podcast that could help me talk to a friend.

Like maybe I want to do those things.

So now the flow between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind, right, becomes much more robust and that lets us look further, right?

To look at the next level up, the defense mechanisms that grow up out of the unconscious mind and we can have some understanding of them even though they're unconscious, right?

So the idea of when something shifted in me, how did my way of engaging with the world kind of change?

Like I was perseverant and I would take some of that energy in me that wasn't so good and remember I could put it into like exercising and taking care of myself and then that sort of shifted and I became sarcastic and cynical and I started avoiding those of my friends who are really taking care of themselves and doing well because that made me feel worse about myself.

So that's a dialogue that is reflective of defense mechanisms.

Now the person isn't going to necessarily say, oh, I used a lot of sublimation which is good.

And then I started using reaction formation and avoidance just as an example, right?

But they're going to understand that in words that they can, whatever words they put to it, they understand that there was a change.

They can start putting, they put words to that.

They can understand that process of change.

It's not opaque.

There's shining light on it and now they can gain a better understanding of it and they can change it.

Even that realization that I was much more functional.

Things were different.

I mean, that can be a treasure trove of very relevant, very important and very positive information to bring to the current situation.

I think we often romance the idea of the person who can just live life forward, who doesn't look back, who just doesn't really explore their past is just action oriented because after all, when we wake up in the morning, all we can control is our actions going forward.

We can't re-script the actions of past hours or others.

That is such a good point of what happens when we're just looking forward, right?

We become like a sprinter who comes out of the blocks too fast, right?

So if you think about the beginning of a 100 meter dash, right?

They're the best sprinters in the world, say, right?

And there they are in the blocks.

And if they come out of those blocks in the right way, they will gain momentum, they will keep their form and they will run as fast as they can.

But if they do not pay attention to what is behind them, the blocks that are supporting their body, right?

The whole bigger picture here of the limitations within the body, right?

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They have to know what those limitations are.

They have to understand themselves.

That's how they avoid coming out of the blocks so fast and then sprawling headlong onto the track.

And we see that happen too.

So if we're just looking forward and thought and idea, that's how to live life.

We will be tripping forward and ultimately will be like that sprinter no matter how great a sprinter.

If you come out of the blocks too fast, you're going to trip forward.

Yes.

I know I said this in a different form a few minutes ago, but I think a lot of people are afraid of self-inquiry because they just don't want the thing that they discover, which resides in their unconscious, the abscess, if you will, or the damaging thought or thing that happened, which they are aware of, but are pushing down to take over their daily life in a way that doesn't allow them to be at least as functional as they are in the moment.

If you go visit the person who had the abscess cured by the surgeon on post-op day one, that person will be less functional, right?

They'll be in a hospital bed, right?

They won't be able to get up out of the bed.

They won't be able to exercise.

They're going to feel, they're going to feel their best, right?

That's okay, right?

It is okay that we at times can become intermittently, say, less functional, right?

In the sense that we're more upset, that I'm spending more time crying, right?

That's okay because that's part of the energy, the effort, the choice that gets us to a better place.

Okay.

So it's clear to me why exploring the unconscious mind can be and really is immensely valuable.

It's just, I'm convinced.

And I can't imagine anyone out there who would disagree with the idea that getting better mentally, being able to function better in the world as a consequence, is not a terrific use of one's time.

Even if it, you know, at the surface seems to take us off course a bit in the moment or even a few days.

And I think it's also worth highlighting that it's not the case that if we do an exploration of the unconscious mind or look in any of these cupboards for that matter, that our entire day is going to be overtaken by it or all of our sleep is going to disappear.

I mean, we're not talking about a process in which everything is devoted to exploring these cupboards.

I mean, there are instances, of course, where someone hits a crisis and they simply can't function.

But in that case, the thing they absolutely need to do is to look in these cupboards.

What are some ways that we can explore this other cupboard under the pillar of structure

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of self, which is the cupboard of the conscious mind.

So we can also approach this through the curiosity of self.

We do a lot of things automatically that we can stop and think about like, why do I do that thing?

And it's amazing what that can provide.

So for example, I'm working with a person who has been going to work for a long, long, long, long, long time, didn't need to go to work a long time ago.

And there's so many other things this person wants to do with their life.

They're curious about things.

They want to spend more time with older people in their family.

But they had to stop and think, why am I going to work?

Now, he's fortunate enough that he doesn't have to.

He also earned.

He started working.

He's diligent.

He's fortunate.

But he hadn't thought about it.

He's been going to work automatically for a long time.

And it was the thinking about it that made him realize why I do that automatically.

Now why?

Because it's rooted in unconscious things, but that he's now bringing to the conscious mind, right?

Because I value hard work and I value diligence, right?

But him stop working doesn't mean that he's not, you know, he's not innately hardworking your diligence.

He showed that for years and years and years.

And he can show it in other ways, like by, you know, how he wants to be attentive to older people who need help.

Like there's a lot he can do, but he had to go back and look and then of course there's a reason why he didn't realize it, right?

And even though it's not even a bad reason, but clearly there was an overvalue of hardworking, diligent, and he didn't realize, oh, like I've done that, right?

Like I've done enough that I've convinced myself, like I know I'm hardworking.

I know I'm diligent.

So I don't have to sort of serve that internal master anymore and then I can step away.

And now his whole life has changed, but how the change come about by asking what one might think is such a simple question to make no sense, like why do I go to work each day?

Why have I been going?

He's off on the road to change.

So that's, it's one aspect of how we can explore the conscious mind.

It often leads us back to the unconscious mind, right?

But it's awareness of our conscious choices, right?

We can also then use tactics.

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So for example, cognitive behavioral tactics, like thought redirection.

Like if I'm aware that here's a thought that comes into my mind a lot and I start learning ways I can redirect away from it instead of thinking about it a hundred times, right?

And if I learn how to do that, there's less sort of negative emotion that comes from thinking about it.

And, and like I can start to feel better, right?

The basic premise of it, but these are techniques that can really help us and they involve understanding

and guiding the conscious mind.

I'm smiling because I'm recalling an experience I had.

I have a female friend who, a very impressive person really as overcoming is a recovered alcoholic for many years and takes, at least by my read, great care of herself and the other people around her and has a spectacular sense of humor and a bunch of other things.

But it's probably five, six years ago that we were in conversation about something I don't recall, what?

And out of apparently nowhere, she said, I hate being busy.

And it's just stopped me in my tracks because I'm somebody who keeps very, very busy.

My schedule is extremely full with things that I really enjoy.

Some things I don't enjoy or enjoy less, but fortunately at this point in my life, mostly things that I enjoy.

At the time, I was very, very busy with many things, including many things I didn't enjoy.

And her statement just halted me.

And I realized, maybe I don't have to be busy, like this whole notion of doing a bunch of things I don't want to do.

Like sure, we have to make our way in the world and make a living and take care of ourselves and others.

But I realized that there was a lot of extra stuff that I was doing.

Right.

Because I think what she meant and what you were reflecting on was, I hate being automatically busy.

It's not good to be automatically busy.

And then it makes you think about, wait, how am I busy in ways that are good for me and how am I busy in ways that are not?

Am I just taking up time to avoid something you start really thinking about it?

Yes.

And the conversation stays with me to this day because up until then, I never really thought about the possibility that some or a lot of the things I was doing were truly a waste of my time.

Mostly because I could be putting that energy into generative things, right?

Generative drives.

Bring me agency, gratitude, peace, contentment, delight, these sorts of things.

What I'm giving as an example, I realize is quite different than sitting down in a chair and asking oneself questions about oneself and one's schedule and what one's doing.

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But same endpoint and I bring it up because I think it was the fact that it stopped me in my tracks, but also the fact that I can't seem to forget it.

That means that it must have had significance and I would say has had significance. Because I think most people are familiar with seeing these news articles that come out. Woman or man, 104 reflects on what really mattered in life and it's almost always the same things.

It's like close relationships.

No one on their deathbed says, I wish I spent more time at work.

I might be one exception, I actually really enjoy my work.

So whenever I see that one, I always think, no, my life without my life's work, it would have been a diminished life for me.

I think there are others out there as well, but I think it's very hard for us to place ourselves into the future of a person on our deathbed looking back and then make really good decisions now.

I think there are ways to do that, but it seems that it's far more powerful to just think about what am I doing now and come to some realizations about what is really a value now and what is of less value or no value now and then make adjustments now.

You have no other option if you're going to make change.

Think about what a complicated and ultimately meaningless exercise it is to try and project ahead into a future when one is on one's deathbed and is like, what is that like?

We can't imagine that and we don't know who's there.

Whatever that situation may be for any of us, it's not going to be what we imagine.

We just make something up and we try and extrapolate our lives in a way that gets us to this place where we're on our deathbed and we're not unhappy.

Okay, it just brings us right back to the future because it's actually simple.

That is so complicated.

What are things going to be like on our deathbed?

What will happen between now and then?

All things I don't know.

It's impossibly complicated.

Then you take it back to the present.

What is it I'm choosing?

I am the I right now that is moving through time or is on the luge of life or whatever we want to say.

What am I choosing right now?

That's how we make our lives better and we're aware, of course.

I know there's a future.

I want to lead towards a better future.

I can't.

I don't have a crystal ball.

I can't envision what that's going to be, but I can do my best now to guide my life as best I can.

That's going to have to lead me to the best future, whatever all the variables are that

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I don't know yet.

The next cupboard under the pillar of structure of self is defense mechanisms.

I have several questions about defense mechanisms, but the first question is, can we be aware of our defense mechanisms and is there value in that?

If so, which defense mechanisms are accessible to us?

I guess the third question would be, how does one go about exploring defense mechanisms?

It's sort of fantastical imagery that there's this iceberg, part is underwater, part is above water, and then from the part that's underwater come these sort of branches.

The way I imagine it is there are branches of ice that can be clear and have light pass through them in a way that has high fidelity or they can be sort of twisted and unclear and they distort the light that passes through them.

They rise up from the unconscious mind, meaning defenses are unconscious, they're automatic, but they're not outside of our ability to go looking for them, they're in the unconscious mind.

So it's not that we can't understand them, it's that they're elusive and there has to be a process of inquiry, but we can learn about them just like we can learn about other things in the unconscious mind.

And here again, knowledge is power.

So I'm not going to learn anything new or I'm unlikely to learn anything new about my defense mechanisms if I don't think about them.

But if I start to think about them, then I can start to learn things and to draw conclusions.

How am I behaving now as opposed to before?

Do I notice that like I'm coping, we'll often think coping, but coping is conscious, but we can access that.

How am I coping?

What am I doing?

And what does it mean?

So for example, someone who after some difficult experience then starts avoiding, can be doing that without an awareness of it.

Avoidance is a defense.

So avoidance of situations or people or potential negative emotion.

So self-reflection can help us understand which defense mechanisms we're using and what may have changed in us.

So an example, an example I see all the time is someone who had as a primary defense mechanism sublimation before some difficult event, then sublimation is taking energy, taking say access aggression, turning it into something positive.

It's a good way of handling distress within us.

It's healthy.

And now after some change in their life, they find that say they're drinking more and they're relying more and more on alcohol.

And you might say, well, they're soothing with alcohol.

Yes, they're soothing with alcohol in one sense, but what else might that mean?

And oftentimes what you'll see is maybe the person is using alcohol because they're mad

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at someone.

They're punishing someone.

That someone is probably them.

They get to have the short-term soothing, but then to feel worse about themselves the next day.

And the alcohol is in part a search for soothing, but it's in part an acting out against the self, which is a different kind of defense mechanism that is not healthy.

So the process of reflection or of inquiry can help us understand the branches that are coming up from the iceberg, from the unconscious mind.

How are they in me?

Are they arranged in a way that's sort of elegant and they're clear and the light is passing through them?

Are there things that have become sort of twisted?

What exactly is that?

How do I go change that?

I don't want that branch that is sort of opaque and that the light can't get through or is distorted.

So I can go look at that because even though defense mechanisms are unconscious, if I'm working on myself, I can take away that so to speak, diseased branch or that branch that's not healthy and put in its place something healthier.

That's how we can change our defensive structure, those branches of our defense mechanisms because

even though they're unconscious, we can reflect on them, bring them to consciousness and then bring ourselves to bear to make ourselves healthier and it can indeed get healthier and as it gets healthier, it affects the next level around it, which is the person's character structure.

So remembering, we're using fantastical imagery because around the iceberg, below and above the water and the branches that come out of the part of the iceberg under the water and how they array themselves, we're imagining that there's a nest that's encompassing all of that, the unconscious mind, the conscious mind, the defense mechanisms and that nest is the character structure.

It's a way that we contain and define the self that rides on top of everything.

It is into that nest that the self settles and from which the self grows because the character structure is more than just the conscious mind, it's sort of the conscious mind in action, the defense mechanisms in action, all the things that are going on underneath the surface and the unconscious mind in action and then that's how we be, I think be as an active word, that's how we are or that's how we actively be in the world, how we're engaging with the world.

So you describe the character structure as the nest that is up above the surface of the water and that includes things like these unconscious defenses and all other aspects of what comes from below.

Then you also said that the self, our cells reside in that nest and I don't recall the exact wording but you said something to the extent of the self grows within that nest.

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As you said that, I immediately had the image in mind of a nest that is either incredibly nurturing and can really foster the self in its best ways and can give rise to empowerment, humility, agency, gratitude, peace, contentment, delight, generative drive, all these wonderful things.

I also imagined a nest that isn't as clean as it could be or that has some holes in it or that isn't stable in the wind and these sorts of things.

That sort of imagery that's coming to mind for me, is that a decent way to conceptualize this?

Yes, and I think it is a very important point.

The self nests in the character structure and from nesting in the character structure it grows.

We are the self that grows from within that nest and that tells us a couple of things.

One, I am something now.

Right now, the things I've done, the things I've thought, the things that have happened to me like there's a self now.

One might think then, what grows out of the nest is what I am now.

Hence, the concept of acceptance of self, that's what I am now.

But I am also responsible for tending what is growing.

I'm responsible for weeding it.

I'm responsible for planting healthy seeds in it.

I think that captures the truth of the acceptance of ourselves.

This is what I am now.

This is who I am now.

But isn't it beautiful that I can tend and nurture it?

We know as you'd commented, what happens if you don't tend it?

There's a lot of weeds, things aren't going well, things start to get unstable.

That's not good and we can go that way too.

That's where agency, gratitude, part of how it all cycles through because our unconscious mind is still working, like it's all still happening and that's how we tend that garden of the self, so to speak.

That's how we best tend it so that what grows up from it is a self that we recognize in the way that we want to recognize ourselves.

We see a self that we can feel proud of.

We see a self that we understand well enough to guide forward.

We see a self for which we have enough respect and humility within us to understand that we don't understand everything and it's from that self that we engage with the world.

I've heard many times before in the circles of psychology and self-help and elsewhere that we need to all learn to mother and father ourselves to some extent.

I'm not a developmental psychologist, but my understanding is that the unconscious mind, the conscious mind, our defense mechanisms, the character structure, all the stuff that makes up the nest, which the self resides and hopefully can grow at least at some stage of life, perhaps all stages of life, determined by genetics and by how we were raised, nature and nurture.

This phrase we have to learn to parent ourselves, it is thrown around a lot these days, certainly on social media but elsewhere too and oftentimes that brings to mind sort of stereotypes of mothering and fathering and these stereotypes break down quite a bit these days.

Things like we have to be nurturing to ourselves, self-respect, self-love, self-protection, healthy self-protection and these kinds of things.

All of that sounds fine and good but it's always seemed rather vague to me.

If I'm telling myself I'm okay or is that mothering and fathering myself, I don't know.

It doesn't seem as concrete as perhaps I would like and others would like because it's not spelling out to specific actionables.

What you're describing here makes so much more sense to me even though some of these concepts are a bit abstract because the idea of this nest in which the self resides and emerges from character structure, one can immediately see why it's so valuable and it's such a key component of mental health and self-care to tend to that nest.

Written into that is the fact that the nest is malleable, that we really can make changes.

We can create a better internal environment for ourselves by going through these cupboards.

You're pointing out another crucial factor here which is if I am the garden of self that grows up from all of it and I am responsible for tending the garden, I'm also responsible for tending to the whole structure and that's so important.

If I'm going to take care of myself in the ways that we've talked about, I'm going to tend not just to the garden that's growing out that I can see on the surface but I'm going to attend to all of me, to the entire structure of self.

An example here that I think can illustrate it pretty well is so imagine a person who's doing well, the part of the iceberg under the water is solid, the consciousness on top is solid, the defense mechanisms are clear, the nest is good, the garden of self is flourishing and then there's a significant trauma to that person.

There's a car accident, someone is hurt, there's a death of someone around them, they have a serious illness, they lose a job, it can even be they spent too much time contemplating and looking at news from murders around the world and all the awful things that we can spend too much time with, something traumatic then goes into the unconscious mind.

The trauma happens and what often happens, not always but what very often happens is the guilt and shame that are raised causes us to push the trauma underneath the surface.

Now that's in the unconscious mind and it's impacting it and that stability is threatened.

I mean it's all riding on top of this giant part of the iceberg that's underneath the surface of the water and okay we don't have to worry too much about it if things are going well but if it starts to get fragmented, it starts to shift, it threatens everything

that rides on top of it which is why taking care of ourselves means taking care of all elements of the structure of self. That all makes very clear why tending to the garden is so key and why we as individuals are really the people most fit to do this right.

Of course when one can that work should be done with somebody who's a really terrific clinician guide that process and where one can't work with a clinician one would hope that they would take a structured approach to this which is really what we're talking about here and in the other episodes. Keeping in mind that tending to the self means tending to the whole structure of self. If we keep that in mind we won't go wrong. We'll pay attention to the surface

but we'll pay attention to the things that are under the surface. We pay attention to the whole structure of self. We will shepherd ourselves forward as best we can. I'd love for you to tell us about the function of self. The second pillar that resides alongside structure of self and that serves to geysir up into how we show up in the world. Hopefully with empowerment, humility, agency, and gratitude but sometimes no and as we've established there is always tremendous value to exploring these cupboards. How does one go about exploring the different cupboards under the function of self and we should probably start that conversation by saying what are the cupboards under the function of self? I'll start off by saying all the cupboards under the function of self will reference the structure of self which makes sense. There's a structure and the function arises from the structure. It's good for us to have that in mind as we're thinking about the elements of the function of self. The deepest element, let's say, the bottom of the pillar is self-awareness, the sense of an I. On top of that, next up the pillar are defense mechanisms in action. Up from that is salience, what we're paying attention to inside and out. The next level above that is behavior and on top of that is our strivings. If we go back to the bottom layer, the deepest, most complicated layer, it's the sense of self-awareness, the sense of an I and there are a lot of ways that we can foster self-awareness. Like the unconscious mind in the structure, we can't just go there and fully understand what the I is, but we can do things that can really, really help us. So for me, thinking about what am I and how am I navigating the world and having in mind the structure of self. Like, wait, there's an unconscious mind working its way in me. There's my conscious mind. Even being aware of the first pillar can be part of fostering the self-awareness of the second pillar. Another way that can happen is self-reflection. For some people, it can happen in meditation, contemplation of the self. There are many ways that we can help ourselves understand that living is an active process, that idea of the luge of time and we're moving down it. It's an active process and that is the I that I'm guiding through that process. We can foster self-awareness in a number of ways, but what we're trying to do here, the same as with the bottom of the structure of self-pillar, the most complicated parts, there's a lot that's unconscious. There's a lot that's unknown to us. So what we're trying to do is know some of it and know more of it over time, bring some of those automatic or unconscious things to conscious awareness so that we can have a better understanding because if we have an understanding, we can utilize that to make everything better. I can see right off how this first cupboard of self-awareness and an exploration of the eye is so critical and realizing that we have a physical body, that we have agency in the world to do at least certain things. In an earlier episode, you mentioned a practice actually of looking in the mirror and focusing on this reality that we have a physical body, we reside in it, and then we have agency, we can do things in the world as a way to reinforce self-awareness. Such an interesting practice and one that I started on immediately after, well, that evening and the next morning after hearing it from you, some interesting things came to mind and I encourage people to try it. It's done eyes open for just for a few minutes or so, two, three minutes in my case. Some interesting understanding came about, especially when coupled with thinking about some of my life narrative and things that have happened. So I highly recommend people explore this practice you described. I'm also interested in the sorts of narratives that we have about ourselves. I think everyone has narratives about what they're good at, what they're less good at, what's happened to them,

why it's happened to them. Could you tell us what you think about exploring our narratives, not just exploring the fact that we have a physical body, but exploring our stories about ourselves? Well, self-awareness is just the awareness of an eye. So we can use our conscious mind to help that. So this aspect of function of self isn't about what the narrative means. That comes later. This is about the awareness of an eye. So when you were talking about the narrative, you said something along the lines of their stories and you're not thinking of like, oh, it's the same me in these stories. If you approach the narrative in a different way, the awareness is like, there's an eye. There's a me like, I'm the point of all these stories. That's why they're here. They're all in me in some way or another because I remember them and they're important enough that I wrote them down. If you look at it that way, we're just apprehending an eye like, huh, there's a me to whom all of this applies. That's how we can use the conscious mind and the narrative in order to foster self-awareness. It's not yet about meaning. It's about the awareness of an eye. So it's actually much simpler than I'm making it out to be at some level. At that level, yes. Got it. Yes. Okay. Well, then at some point we will return to this theme of narratives, narratives that serve us, perhaps narratives that don't serve us. Meanwhile, take us into that second bin under the function of self, the defense mechanisms in action. I find these infinitely fascinating. And I think many other people do too because sublimation, denial, these kinds of things, they really provide so much of what does and doesn't happen to each of us. And yeah, so if you could tell us how we can think about our defense mechanisms in action in a way that can improve our health. Yeah. Yeah. And of course, defense mechanisms are under the structure of mind. Defense mechanisms in action are under function of mind. They're unconscious processes that we can gain sometimes a very good understanding of by directing our conscious mind towards them. And this is a place where we can use narratives, right? We can use an understanding of self. So as an example, someone who's thinking about themselves and what they want to do for a living, if they want their job or where they want to live and, you know, who's thinking about self can realize, you know, he's going to feel good when I'm doing something for someone. When we hear this a lot, especially people who then direct themselves towards helping professions, like, what did I like about that job? It wasn't that it had a great salary. It wasn't that the hours were good. You know, I like that it was really helpful to people or, or, you know, there were people that were underneath of me in the hierarchy that I could really kind of nurture, right? And I think, right. And I love putting food out for the birds and the squirrels. Like, it can be a realization of self that guides us towards consciously apprehending and thinking about altruism as a defense mechanism, right? Because altruism is a defense. It's a healthy defense where if you can do something good, you do something good, make something good, that's the end point of it. Like, you don't need that to translate into something else. It's a defense mechanism. It's a good one. And you can certainly see how it fits with the good things we're trying to build on top of it. And sometimes through that process of reflection, the person becomes aware of that. They haven't chosen jobs by the obvious things that even they thought they chose jobs by. Where is the job? What does it pay? It wasn't that, that what they really valued and what they then started choosing upon might have been something that they weren't aware of until they think about it. And that leads them to the defense mechanism. The same way another example could be

rationalization,

right? Someone who thinks about their life and they think, you know, I always kind of tell myself something is better than it is, right? And then ultimately, I got disappointing myself, you know, like I tell myself, like you're doing really well at work and you know, I'm not really working hard enough. And then when I have that review, I feel lousy, you know, and that last person who broke up with me and said, you know, you just weren't being a reliable partner or, you know, that person was right, right? And that can lead to, oh, like, what's going on? I always think things are going pretty well when they're not. That's guiding us towards rationalization as a defense mechanism. And again, a person doesn't have to say, ah, I conclude I'm using rationalization as a defense mechanism, but there can be words put to that of seeing a pattern in the cell. When this is done as part of therapeutic inquiry, we're often looking to identify the defense mechanisms. And that can be great too, but it's not always needed, right? Defense mechanisms result in patterns, right? So if a person just sees the pattern, that can be enough to recognize the pattern and either say, follow the pattern of altruism as a defense mechanism, or how do we work against? How do I work against the pattern of rationalization

as a defense mechanism? Can we conclude that patterns that we don't like are the reflection of unhealthy defense mechanisms and that patterns that we like are the consequence of healthy defense

mechanism? Usually, yes. It's worth some thought and some reflection and putting together, like, what exactly are the pieces of that? But basically, the answer to that is yes.

In an earlier episode, you mentioned one defense mechanism in action that is often observed in people is acting out. This immediately sounds like an unhealthy defense mechanism. So to keep with this concept of the patterns are often more observable than are the underlying defense mechanisms. Would it be the case, for instance, that if somebody has a repeated set of failures, like that's a pattern, or is repeatedly in friction in a particular relationship in their life, like maybe even just with one person, like all other relationships are going great, but then they're in a lot of friction with this one other person. So there's a pattern from that pattern they could explore. What? I mean, is it important that they get to a verbal identification of the defense mechanism or what sorts of steps would one take going from a recognition of the pattern to understanding of the defense mechanism, perhaps in a way that moves them forward? The understanding of the defense mechanism can be very helpful, but isn't always needed. If you can recognize a maladaptive pattern like, oh, this is happening a lot and it's not good for me, you become able to change that pattern. So understanding the defense can be helpful. Again, the more understanding, the better, but it's not always necessary. Here, I think to understand the defense mechanism, we should first define acting out, because we think of acting out, just hearing the words as something that's volitionally done. But that's not what we're talking about. Defense mechanisms are unconscious. So there's an automaticity to the response that the person can see by reflection, because this isn't conscious choice to act out. That's something different. That's bad behavior. But what we're talking about here is the thing that's automatic and unconscious until we bring it into our conscious mind. And acting out isn't always dramatic either. So here's one example. So let's say in a relationship situation, you have one person who always does the dishes. Another person does

something different. That person does the dishes. And it's onerous. People have busy lives. It's onerous. They have to do a lot of dishes. And every time, things aren't going so well, there's a little bit of conflict between them. The other person makes twice as many dirty dishes. This is exactly the kind of thing that happens in relationship situations, where this little thing becomes a little crack in the door that opens more, and then there's a foot in the door. Now there's a big problem, because we act out in these ways that we're not aware of. So again, the person isn't deciding, I'm going to do that, so that that person has to do more work. But there's an automaticity to it. And upon reflection, sometimes a person could realize, I'm doing that. Or in a real example, a person who realizes, I just make much more difficulties around the house. I make a lot more difficulties for my partner. I'm like, whoa, this person doesn't want to be doing that. They love that person. They don't want to be doing that. But by realizing that when they can bring a process of change, of just being more self-aware and saying, look, I don't want to do that. I don't want that to be a defense anymore. If I have conscious awareness, now I can control it. And maybe that person is doing that other places. Maybe the person is, you know, it kind of goes that way at work too. I could contribute to a project and make something easier on a person. And I realize, I don't do that. If I'm feeling in some negative way, then we can go find, okay, what might the roots of that be? For example, did a parent role model that behavior? Right? Was that done to them? Where the parent was really good to them if they were behaving in the right way? And like, they make their breakfast, right? And if not, well, you know, you make it yourself. Or, oh, sorry, there's no milk. I mean, like, these things happen. And then the person gets in them some array of circumstances, feelings, responses, all the stuff that goes on in the unconscious mind that then throws up to the surface, this kind of acting out as a defense mechanism. So I think it's important to point out, and it's a good example, because it is unconscious. And a lot of times how we're doing it is not dramatic. What about salience? You know, this cupboard under the function of self, that I think we are all all too familiar with, you know, what we pay attention to internally and externally. I have a sort of bizarre meditative practice that I've talked about before on the podcast. I don't know why I came up with this, but it's more of a perceptual exercise that I do from time to time, where if I feel like I'm too in my head, I literally focus my visual attention outward. I try and place on a horizon or some object out there. And other times, if I'm sort of in the world too much and I want to get back into myself, I'll close my eyes and do a moment or two or more of more traditional, what traditional mean, what people think of as meditation, the practice involves setting aside a minute or two and deliberately stepping through closed eye meditation, like just it's not really meditation. Again, it's just recognize I'm a self like here contained within the skin of my body. Then I open my eyes, I look at my hand. This all sounds very silly as I describe it. And then I think about a bridge, like my perception can be split between my awareness of self internally and my hand. Then I look out some distance 10, 12 feet or so and do the same as a bridge to self awareness with external awareness. And I step out to the horizon and then I sometimes like to do the exercise of it goes with a popular meme. We're just like this like pale blue dot. I think about myself right here, but then the fact that I'm a planet that's like spinning in a space and then right back into myself. And then I go about my day. And I developed that a few years ago, more on the basis of what I know about visual perception and interception, our recognition

of inside versus extroception, just fancy language for recognition and perception of what's outside. But that's my practice of orienting myself in life. Because then I feel like I have a better buffers against what happens around me and how much I'm reacting or not reacting. That's my practice.

I have a feeling it touches into a few of these bins, but not, but it certainly doesn't get at it approaching a specific problem or thinking about where problems might exist beneath the surface that I'm not aware of, right? Because it's only one part of the equation. It's paying attention to saliency. What you're doing then, you're grounding yourself in order to change salience. And that is a strategy. You said, oh, maybe it's silly or this or that. No, it's an understood and known strategy. For example, variations of that are what people can do to prevent panic attacks, to change the salience. If the salience is I'm going inside of me and I'm feeling panicked and I just have a feeling of awfulness, you can change that salience by grounding yourself to the world around you. We tell people, place your hands on the table, look at the specifics of exactly what time it is, look at the shape of a doorknob, ground yourself so that you can change salience. Because now, as we move up the hierarchy of function of self, we're getting to using the conscious mind, right? Things that are salient to us can be external, they can be internal, and if they're internal, they can be conscious, and sometimes they're unconscious. So it's not all about the conscious mind, but we're bringing the conscious mind to bear here to think about salience, which combined with everything else can help us see what's under the surface. Most of the time, what we're doing is that act of self-observation, right? What is going on inside of me, which can be what am I thinking? This is how the person can realize over and over, oh my goodness, I'm saying to myself, X, and for the first time, they say out loud and realize the thing they've said to themselves 10,000 times, right? Or it can be a feeling state, right? Well, what's salient to me is a feeling state, say of vulnerability, and then everything seems threatening, right? So salience is a form of self-awareness that we could say is using the conscious mind now to tend to that garden of self, right? To look at that garden of self and say, what's really growing from it, right? Is it all things I like? It's going to be never all things we like, because it's a process, but am I happy with it? Am I not happy with it? Are there weeds that are coming up all over the place? That could be the intrusive thoughts, right? So we're using metaphors, but it's actually very, very concrete, right? The salience part is what is going on inside of me, and that's a very interesting inquiry and informative, right? It's interesting because it's informative. Do you think that's an inquiry that's best done in meditative like states, you know, or setting aside some deliberate time to think about, like, what am I thinking about? What am I paying attention to? How am I allocating my thoughts? Or my thoughts being allocated? I guess we have to respect the unconscious component here. Like, we're not, we don't just walk around saying, I'm placing my attentional spot like there, and then my thinking here, you know. We always want to be aware of what we, there are things we don't know. That's respectful. That's appropriate humility because it's true. So I'm assuming this ratchets directly into the cupboard of behavior. You know, what we're actually doing is that cupboard best explored by listing off, perhaps on paper in our minds, what we're doing each day? Is that one way to explore? Like, how am I spending my time? Again, not as an efficiency exercise, but as a way to start to explore the self and the mind for sake of building up to more agency and gratitude.

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Right, right. You know, the routes to most effective self-inquiry, right, to bringing the conscious mind to bear really differ widely by person. There's some people who they're so well served by doing that when they're meditating, right? There are other people who like they can really get at that when they're playing a sport, you know, it's going on inside of them along with the other things that they're doing. Some people find it in the shower or they find it when they wake up in the morning or they find it when they're with an animal they love or they might find it when they're reading a certain kind of material and then they read it and then they kind of the reading trails off and they're thinking they're a reverie sort of inside. So how we can engender the best use of our conscious minds is going to differ by person. But again, we can think about that. Like, what really works for me? Let me do more of that. Someone, you know, it's interesting, we see people sometimes, I see people a lot of the time where they're trying to meditate to understand themselves and it's like not working, right? And it's like, I must know how to meditate in order to understand myself. Well, it's not necessarily true. It might be I must go on more hikes in order to better understand myself because that's how it works for me. So that process of reflection can be very, very helpful to us because we're using our conscious mind to try and either look inward. What is sailing it to me, including understanding that I don't understand everything, but I can understand a lot of it and outward what behaviors am I engaging in? What are my behavior patterns, right? And to be reflective about that, to think about that can be immensely helpful to us. Like, how am I spending those hours of the day? What am I doing with my time? Am I wasting my time? Do I always get mad and say something mean to somebody? Why? Because I had a negative thought about something. Am I doing that? No, have I kind of changed since something unpleasant happened? And, you know, now I'm not so nice to someone in the household, right? Or am

I taking a lot better care of myself? You know, like since I started doing X, whatever X may be, learning more about myself, right? Doing more of the things I like, left that old job. It was so hard for me to leave. You know, I do actually get myself to the gym, right? So it's a reflection upon self because a lot of what we do, we do automatically, right? And that's very important, right? If, you know, the example that often is given is, okay, think about how you last brushed your teeth, right? And the answer, like a blank, right? Because you brush your teeth in an automatic way, right? Most of us don't remember that because we just skip right over it. So it makes sense. It lets us think while we're doing things. It lets a lot happen automatically in the physical world, right? Just as it happens inside of us automatically. But we can, they have sort of too much of a good thing where too much is happening automatically. And we want to stop and think. And it's remarkable

how sometimes when people stop and think, they might say like real examples, I don't want to be spending five nights a week at the bar and I'm spending five nights a week at the bar. Why? Because I go home a certain way from work and there's a bar along that way. And then I think, oh, I'll just stop in and maybe see a friend. And then I know that once I get in there, I'm going to have a drink and I know once I have a drink, I'm going to get three and I'm going to have three. And I see this pattern of behaviors and how like I don't decide, I'm going to go to that bar instead of going home to see my wife or my husband or my kids or whatever it may be. And I don't want to behave

that way, right? Because they are, that's a, it's a great example of how you can stop that from

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happening. But once it starts happening, the dominoes start falling. It's very, very hard. The people don't generally realize, oh my goodness, I'm in the bar and I've had one drink and now I'm going to have two more. That's not the time. But the understanding, the reflection upon behavior patterns can lead a person to stop those behaviors, to understand and recognize them, get their arms around them, shine the light of day on them, and then have greater agency, right? Greater gratitude. I'm grateful I can go home to my family and that's what I choose to do, right? And I can do that. I do not have to end up at that bar and I'm not going to end up at that bar. I'm going to drive a different way home. And if I can't get myself to do that, I'm going to have a friend in the car with me. And if I can't do that, I'll be in the back seat, right? But I'm not doing that thing I choose not to do. And you know, it's a more dramatic example, not an uncommon one, but we can apply that the whole way up the list from nuances of our behaviors down to more dramatic behaviors. I've heard you describe the unconscious mind and some of its other interconnected workings with the analogy of a, you know, a phantom in the driver's seat and we're in the back seat, sort of, you know, of course, all within one person, right? This idea that we're just being taken places that we don't want to go or that we know we shouldn't go or that we can't really figure out why we're going there. And we have some idea, but we're just not certain about what's going on, you know, it's not necessarily related to really destructive action either. I mean, it can be, but what you're describing sounds to me a lot like climbing out of the back seat and maybe sitting in the passenger seat and looking into the driver's seat and going, oh, there's something else going on here. Of course, all of this is one mind. And in doing that, taking some control of the vehicle. Right. It's about understanding what is that phantom? Where did it come from? That's how we get rid of it. So how do we get back in the driver's seat? We don't grab the phantom and throw it out the door or throw it in the back seat, right? It's ephemeral. We can't grab it, right? So how does it go away? It goes away through understanding. So very common example that the phantom in the driver's seat is trauma, that we have pushed in an unconscious place. And now that whole under the surface structure of the iceberg is fragmented and sort of roiling. And there's a big problem there. And if we go at that problem and whatever it's spinning off, right, that's the abscess, but it's a bad one. And it's spinning off a lot of problems. And that's why the phantom is in the driver's seat, because healthy things are not built on top of that fracturing and roiling part of the iceberg, right? We see that a lot. The phantom could also be something different. It could be one defense mechanism that's unhealthy that we are really over relying on. And then we can understand it through that lens. So there are just a few examples. But if we sort of wake up in the back seat of the car, so to speak, and the phantom is driving recklessly, then how we get the phantom out of the front seat is by understanding it. Then I always imagine, poof, it goes away because now it's not driving my life anymore, right? I'm driving my life. It's gone. The message that I'm hearing over and over again in my head is that no matter how well or how poorly any of our lives happen to be going, that by looking in these cupboards under structure of self and function of self, we can have so much more positive control. Yes. Yes. That's why ultimately what we're talking about is optimistic. We can't help ourselves if we don't honor truth, right? And the truth is that there are complex aspects of this. So okay, we want to go look at that and we

want to look at how things can go wrong. And that's all very, very important, but that's all wrapped in the best truth, which is that we can change it. We can make it better. That's why the self, the garden of self, is on top of the structure of self, right? And the top of the function of self are our strivings. That's what comes next after behaviors. I was like, what are my behaviors doing? What am I doing? What am I striving towards? What am I doing? Literally. Am I going to a job?

I hate. Am I doing things I don't want to do? Am I accepting treatment that I don't want to accept? Am I treating people in ways I don't want to accept? How can I strive for better and striving and hopefulness are so intertwined? So the pinnacle of the function pillar is striving. The pinnacle of the structure pillar is self. And we can see how the self, the strivings, right, what we're doing now is combining the pillars, where it comes together. And, you know, your imagery of like, that's where the geyser comes from. And we want that geyser to be healthy, right? It's a stream of clear, clean water that's coming out of it. That's where our empowerment is.

But empowerment is a condition of being, right? I am empowered. Empowerment rests within me. That's where humility comes into the picture. Humility also, something within me, right? I have humility. They're not verbs, but empowerment and humility then gain their expression at the top of that geyser when agency and gratitude, those verbs arise from empowerment and humility. What you've drawn for us is an incredibly compelling picture because the picture, the map, is really a roadmap. It's a path to ideals. And you've been talking about these ideals of agency and gratitude across this series. And they just encompass so much. And as you mentioned before, they are interconnected and they are verb states. And a critical component of the geysering up from the pillars toward agency and gratitude are these two components of empowerment and humility. Tell us a little bit more about empowerment and humility and how we should view empowerment and humility in the context of self-care.

Empowerment is a state that we can create for ourselves if we're taking care of the pillars, right? So we're looking in the cupboards. We're doing the things that make our map clear and clear, right? This idea that, oh, that seemed like a good path, but it gets clear and there's a swamp there, right? Or that didn't seem like a good path because it's circuitous. Oh, no, but there are good things along that path. So the map gets clearer as we tend to the cupboards

in the pillars and that empowers us, right? There's a state inside of us that is a state of potentials that are now skewed in a good way, right? That's what empowerment is. It's not something that happens. It's a state that we then bring to bear on what happens, right? The same is true of humility. Humility does not mean not acknowledging things that are good about you, right? And we often can very much mischaracterize humility. Like, is that person being weak? Is it false humility? Or people often who are conscientious don't want to acknowledge good things about them. Oh, no, no, I'm not that smart. Like, that's not humility, right? Humility is consistent with truth, right? So if you keep saying you're not that smart, but the world around you tells you that you're that smart, right? Then acknowledge that you're that smart, right? That's coming through the lens of truth, and we can go down to the pillars and the cupboards and say, okay, how does the person get to acknowledging that truth, right? So it's only by squaring away the things that humility isn't, right? It is not denigrating ourselves. And we see that in a lot of people, I'm humble. So, and then the person often tells you why they're accepting something

that's not good to accept, right? So humility is about acknowledging truthfully the characteristics that you have within yourself, good and bad. And here is where we can identify things that we're not so happy with, right? We have to have humility within us in order to make ourselves better, right? Just like I have to say, look, I'd like to be more fit if I'm going to then get myself in a more fit state, right? So saying, look, I can be, you know, I can be a little bit so snippy with people. If I'm irritated, or I can be a little bit condescending, or, you know, I can, I can be a little selfish at times, right? It's hard to admit these things to ourselves. But if we have the humility to, to acknowledge those things, right, then we also get to have that broader humility about just being a person like, wow, look how complicated this is to navigate life. I mean, these pillars are not simple. And when we go down to the real base elements of them, it can get very complicated. So then we have a compassion, right, for self and for others, you know, like sometimes I'll say to a person, I should be doing this, I should be doing that, they think they should be doing something perfectly. And I will say to them, it's amazing that, that we're moving forward, right? I mean, let's start with, with, wow, it's not easy to be human. It's not easy to navigate this world. And that kind of humility can then allow us to feel good about what we build on top of it, right? It's not easy to navigate this world. And humans are pretty vulnerable by and large, but I'm applying myself, right? And, and I'm proud that I'm applying myself or that I'm perseverant, but also I'd like to be a little more compassionate. Like, it's that sort of thing that combines with empowerment. So empowerment and humility are these potential states that then express themselves or become enacted. However, we wish to put that, but they change into the active verbs of agency and gratitude. And agency and gratitude are ways of being, right? They're verbs, they're active. So that's the point of it from the sense of how we are living, right? How we are being. That's why agency and gratitude is, in some sense, its own endpoint, right? But because there's a circular aspect of this, right? Our active being is not the endpoint. If we're being in a healthy way, then we get to experience things, right? Peace, contentment, delight. We experience them because we are healthy. So we get to be through the lens of agency and gratitude. We get to experience peace, contentment, and delight. And that makes a healthier us. The drives and their expression are in better bounds. The generative drive is fostered and strengthened and the drives underneath of it, the aggression, assertion, proactive, right? We're really using that in a good way and we're mining all of it within us. Like, I want to bring that to bear and I can bring more of it to bear, right? That's very, very good. And the pleasure drive is active in us. I'm enjoying the things I do. I feel good about the things I do. I'm making good choices. And that state of health, what it promotes, the pillars, the cupboards, to stay clean and clear and healthy, right? But life is life and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, the slings and arrows of life will continue to come at us and cause us to go back and look at the pillars and the cupboards. And even if they don't come at us, those things are never perfect, right? But that's not bad because by tending to them, where do we bring ourselves? We bring ourselves back to the active verbs of agency and gratitude, the active verbs of living. And here we are in this cycle that if we pay attention to it, we use it to understand ourselves. We use it to improve ourselves, can bring us to better lives. How do you think about a person, and I confess I've been this person, perhaps still am to some extent, who can really have a sense of agency and gratitude in certain domains, maybe even many domains of life. And yet, feels as if there are certain areas of life that are just so much more

challenging than others. By this stark contrast, this stuff works, can do that, but this stuff is just really, really hard. And maybe that continues long enough that it almost starts to feel like, or the person wonders whether or not maybe that part of life is inaccessible to me. It's just never going to be successful for me. How do you think about these carve outs of functionality and lack of functionality? That's probably not the right language, but I think this is important because it relates directly, I believe, to the kind of narratives that we tell ourselves. I mean, they are narratives, right? I think it's important to think about these because they are intermeshed with, and perhaps even the consequence of narratives that we have, stories about ourselves that we have internally. And again, I'll be the first to admit that I've felt this way for much of my life. Certain things I can do, other things far, far harder, and sometimes it felt outside the reach of possibility. I have a very concise answer to this one. In fact, it's nine words. Don't make yourself special in ways that hurt you. And we tend to do that as humans. I get to have A, B, and C, but I don't get to have D. I get to have professional success, and I'm in pretty good shape, and I have a lot of friends, but I don't get to have a relationship. I mean, over and over and over. Because the relationship part is so emotionally laden, it's the part that gets carved out, right? Falsely carved out the most, right? But it can happen in any arena of life where we make ourselves special in a way that really is black magic or is being cursed, right? You have the machinery, right? The ability, the function to go about pursuing the things you want and get them, right? That sounds like a pretty good paradigm, except about something really important to you, right? That can't be, right? It's we're applying the same machinery of self because we're talking about the things people want on a broad scale, right? Like, I would like professional success. I would like personal success. I would like to do well in my family unit and be a good family member. I would like romance, right? So we're talking about areas of self, right? And we will make ourselves special by carving out one and then applying black magic or some cursed state that then takes that away from us, and that creates tremendous consternation. That will throw all of those cupboards in those pyramids off balance because, like, we don't like that. Like, that seems mysterious and ominous. You know, what is there that you don't know that's about being cursed so you can't have something? And then that makes anger and frustration in us and more likely that will act out or will be frustrated and we start enjoying things less, right? Sometimes a person can wall something off like that and they can go forward with the rest of life. I mean, it affects them, but it's not obvious. It's not on their mind all the time, which is why the process of self-inquiry can reveal important things. Like, oh, like I pretend that I don't even care about professional success and it's the only, why do I do that? It's the only thing I'm not doing very well and because I think it's impossible for me. It's not something I get. Why? Because I got other things, so I don't get that. Okay, now we're really curious about that. And sometimes it causes very, very big problems where a person who, a person can build an external sense of self that sues some of their vulnerabilities so they can present in a certain way, but underneath of that, they're hiding the sadness or the pain of what is missing, but that is then sort of eating away at them and their feelings of self on the inside don't match what people see on the outside. We see a lot of this and the process of self-inquiry, of self-exploration, of curiosity about self can lead us to realize what we've carved out if we don't already realize it or it can help us to see that the carve out makes no sense, right? It's as if you said, well, you know, there are nine roads

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around my home and you know, they're all just regular old roads. I can drive on eight of them, but not the ninth. And so it doesn't make any sense if they're similar. It requires the same set of skills, right? If you know how to drive the car and the visual acuity, why wouldn't you be able to drive down the ninth? But even though that's a very mundane example, but it's that, that we apply to very important and emotionally charged aspects of our life. You know, I get to have physical fitness and friends and career success, but I don't get to have love. I mean, we hear people say this and that's a very powerful way of taking us away from what we want to achieve in life. It takes us away from the active agency and gratitude and all the good that comes of that. What you just said makes a lot of sense, especially the point that, you know, if we have nine roads around us and we can drive down eight of them, why not the ninth? Because it places us back into the verb tense and the action tense of like the car, like we're a vehicle, the I that we can take through the world, right? Sure, conditions matter. Maybe road number nine has boulders on it. But you know, it can't be that roads one through eight, we're all just smooth, super highways either, right? Those had challenges and we, I'm not going to use myself as a guy for whoever's doing this sort of exercise, had a mind that was able to work around those boulders, right? Of challenging people of, you know, limited finances of these are all things I've experienced, you know, and of course, people come into the world with different levels of challenge and privilege and accessibility, etc. We don't want to deny all of that. But but those other eight roads are rarely, if ever, perfectly smooth roads. That's why it's completely about the self, right? And it's the realization that if I brought myself to bear, and I got down the first eight, I can bring myself to bear and get down the ninth. And as you're pointing out, it's not like the first eight were easy, right? Maybe one of them was really pretty smooth, right? But there's going to be a couple of them in there that are have have raised really, you know, strong difficulties, things to surmount and to overcome. And it's from that place of understanding that we find within ourselves the courage, the strength to go down the ninth road, even if we see greater barriers, even if we're okay, I'm aware now. But I'm also aware that I avoided that ninth road for a reason, right? The boulders and the potholes, right? They're more severe on that road. In fact, I'm kind of worried that it's, that it's impassable. But I mean, it can't be impassable, right? If there's boulders there, I'll, you know, I'll go rent some excavating equipment or I'll fill in the potholes, right? And that's how we get ourselves to go forward and tend to acknowledge and validate. Like, I'm afraid of doing that. If I weren't afraid of doing it, I would have done it already, right? But I now realize, like, what the truth is and what I brought to bear in the first eight, and I'm going to bring myself to bear for the ninth. That's also when we recruit often resources around us. We might say, let me tell a couple good friends about this or a clergy member or a therapist or, you know, a trusted other. And let me explore this more in myself. And that's often how in making ourselves better, we engage more with the people around us. And then the support from someone else that may help a person do that, right, is support given back to the other person. And this is also how we build the beyond self is that the path to travel down the ninth road, so to speak, we don't have to travel alone, you know, much of the time, but that often almost always wasn't in the person's mind, right? They perceive, I mean, it's a, you know, three person job, you know, to go down and say, great, you have two friends.

Yeah, certainly where I've been able to travel down certain roads, the key features have been

a desire to go down that road, recognition of the landscape, but not trying to take on the whole thing all at once. And then finding really good people and, and frankly, really trying to avoid people that seemed, you know, poisonous to the journey, right, that we're going to, you know, throw a toxic things into the engine of my vehicle. And that's putting a lot on them. But, you know, it just felt as if going down those other roads was too valuable, an expedition, to spend time on, and with people that it wasn't helpful to spend time with. And at the same time, there have always been good people that have presented themselves with examples. I think, you know, this is where it comes to mind, you know, it's not always the case that, you know, you got a friend who's saying, you can do this, and here's why, or a therapist that says, you can do this, and here's why, but that there are examples in the world of like, well, this person did this. I think when we have challenges in a certain domain, you know, that ninth road, so to speak, I know for myself that I know I'm in a place of futility. When I start to reflexively orient towards others that have had a problem getting down that road, you know, like, oh, like I recognize this other person who's been good at roads one through eight, but not nine. And it occurred to me during the course of this series, really, that, you know, why not pick different examples? So if you're going on a journey, and it's a really important journey, and it's a difficult journey, but it can be awesome, bring good people, right? Have them on your journey, be on their journey. And then you think, well, why would a person not bring good people? If I were going on a journey, and it's going to be arduous, but wow, we could see amazing things along the way, I can bring a couple people with me. I don't want to choose a couple people who are lazy, you know, some who you say, you know, don't look at the world around them, and you know, some that won't be helpful to somebody else's needs, like, why would one choose that, right? It comes back to the self, right? If a person, now we're talking about any journey, right? Because it's the journey of life, right? If a person is choosing people, you wouldn't choose to be on the journey with you, it's because you don't think that you're worth better, right? And if you think that you're worth better, you won't choose the people. You'll say, I want other people like me, I'm going to be diligent, perceptive, collegial, cooperative, so I'm going to surround myself with people like that. And if we look beyond ourselves at groups of people and at culture, the healthier we are, the more we ally with healthy people, and the more healthy we are, because we're making ourselves healthy, we get healthier groups of people, the journey is better for all of us, and this is how we can make the whole culture better, right? Potentially, this is how we can make life on the planet better, but it has to start somewhere, so it has to start with the eye. I love, love, love the message that, you know, if you're heading off on a journey that's really meaningful to, you know, go with and make sure that you interact with good people. This is actually a place where, you know, a reference to social media and online communities is actually worthwhile and can be very beneficial. You know, I think it's easy for us to kind of roll our eyes at like self-help and things like that. On the other hand, there are communities online that I consider myself a part of, but which I and many other people derived a lot of strength, a lot of reassurance and confidence, right? You know, because a lot of people are isolated. They might have access to one or two people in their community that they really value, but those people are perhaps also busy with other people or I can remember being a student alone in my studio apartment as an undergraduate. I'm feeling very much against the grain of my local environment, you know, too much parting

for me at the time, meaning I wasn't parting and there was a lot of parting around me and had I been a better student in high school, I probably would have been able to health, healthily engage in that, but I just wasn't able. So feeling pre-isolated, but knowing I was on a path. So in that case, it was one professor, one graduate student and a hell of a lot of books and music that to me just carried me through. You know, nowadays I'm fortunate to have many more direct resources in my life of amazing people, but I just want to mention that because I think in this discussion around self-care and the various practices, I think there are sure to be people who are, you know, that kid, that woman, that man that's, you know, like alone in a room, thinking like, okay, but how, right? I see the grocer once a week and I see my neighbor and they don't even say hello, you know, and how to start to access some of these better connections. Right. Navigating the online world is navigating the world, right? It comes down to understanding and choice. So if we're understanding as best we can, we're making choice as best we can, then we'll find great things online. There are great things to find online. Same is true of life. If we're searching for something that, for example, allies us around hatred, around acting out, around things that make us unhappy, even around commiseration instead of thinking about how we can make things better, right? Then we bring ourselves in a different direction. That's life. If we understand and we choose as best we can, we will lead ourselves to better places. Such an important message and is a perfect segue into a question that I and I'm certain many, many other people have about anger and, you know, not just anger from interpersonal conflict, like somebody said something and it really upset me, but stuff that we see, stuff that we observe in the world. It could be acts against other people, words against other people or, you know, that we take reference to and I think many people feel yanked around by, you know, even dragged by something they see and they can't get it out of their head. Now, there could be all sorts of reasons related to each and all of us, why we can't get it out of our head, work that we need to do, et cetera. But according to the map of mental health that you've laid out for us, things that get in the way of that generative drive are really quite poisonous to our well-being and the well-being of the world because that generative drive is about learning creation and tends to be pro-social in so many ways. Tell us about anger and how from a frame of reference of trying to engage in self-care, we should think about our anger and work with our anger in ways that can perhaps even help us and not harm us. In order to really understand this, and I think this is so important, we have to define three words, right? And the word to start with is affect. So affect is aroused in us, right? Meaning we don't have control over it. So anger is an affect, it is aroused in us. The idea being that if a person is walking down the street and someone jumps in front of them and shoves them, anger is aroused in them. They don't choose to be angry. In fact, the body reacts and has all sorts of fight-or-flight responses before the person even realizes that they're angry. So we can't control what is aroused in us in the immediate term. We can in the longer term. If I have a short fuse and I get angry really easily, you know, I can't really control that in the next 10 minutes, right? Meaning the affect that's aroused in me. I can do different things with it, but I can't change what's created in me. But if I'm living a better life, taking better care of myself, the generative drive is better expressed, I have more pleasure in my life, then what happens is the mechanisms that arouse

so much anger start to arouse less anger. So by taking care of ourselves, we arouse less anger, but anger is aroused in us. The next word is feeling, right? And there are different definitions for these words, but the way we're defining them affect is aroused. Feeling is when we take that affect and we relate it to the self. It's the next thing that happens on the way up because the arousal of affect is very deep in the brain. As it comes up, the next thing it does is relate that affect to self. So this is where that the classic example of a person who spills something, they are angry. That thing is spilled. It raises anger in them. Then they become aware and they match the anger to self and say, what a dummy, right? What a jerk. I'll never do anything right. They say it inside, right? Because the anger gets enacted against the self. Now, what, how would we like that to go where the person's taking better care of themselves? So when they spill something, less anger is aroused. And by the time it gets to consciousness, there's less anger, so it's easier to manage. And there's a stronger sense of self, all the other aspects of the pillars and the covers are in a good place. Then the person is better able to manage what anger makes it, right? To feeling and then to say, you know, okay, everybody spills something now, then whatever, then to clean it up. And the person doesn't have to enact the anger towards themselves, right? So affect feeling and then emotion. So emotion is when we relate the affect and the feeling to others in the world around us. So for example, a person might spill something and then it arouses anger. And now they get to the feeling part, but they have a set of unhealthy defenses and they don't think they're responsible for things they're responsible for. So they just keep that load of anger, right? That affect upwards until they get to emotion. And then they decide that wasn't my fault, it was yours. And that's why maybe they kick the dog or they slap somebody or they say something mean like this happens. So if it happens a lot, like this is part and parcel of what's going on in us a lot about negative emotions. I mean, there can be dramatic examples, but they're smaller examples that are winding their way through our lives. And the better we take care of ourselves, the less aroused negative affect we have, and the better we cope with it when it gets to the level of the eye and when it gets to the level of the you, right? And if we think about prosocial collaborative behaviors versus the inaction of anger on a large scale, right? If by the time it gets to you, there's still a lot of anger there, it is very easy to then paint with a broad brush, right? Oh, the problems are that demographic, right? The problems are those people who aren't like me, right? That's where anger is at its most dangerous. So the idea of having the negative affect under control, having the understanding and the control mechanisms, right, keeps us from getting to that broader level, the level of you, and then working in ways that are not prosocial, but are anti-social. And this I think also relates to what we can find online, right? We can find online everything we can find in the world. So then we have a choice. Are we going to work on understanding what choices are we going to make about how we're engaging in the world? And if we're choosing the good things, we're taking better care of ourselves and we're better sort of citizens of our relationships, of our family units, and ultimately of our societies. I've observed anger directed my way, certainly. I'm far, far from perfect. I have thousands of flaws and I've directed anger towards others in ways that I wish I hadn't. A common observance I've had about myself and others is that when angry, a lot of valuable time is wasted. Instead of placing my efforts within the generative drive and creating things that I really value, the anger becomes an immense distraction.

And I've seen this a lot, not just on university campuses, but one place I have seen it is when I was a graduate student or postdoc, there would be some interaction either between them in the laboratory I was in, although rarely, but more often it was about some interaction between a student or postdoc and someone in the outside world. And so they'd come in and they'd be really upset about it. And there's a tendency to try and support one another, which I think is healthy. But then it was like this would just continue and continue and the person would be like sitting in their chair is really upsetting. And sometimes these were really upsetting occurrences that warranted taking some time and just really stopping. But often I felt like things just kept spiraling up and spiraling up and it's like halfway through the day. And again, I'm not immune from this, but but I observed it more than I felt it certainly. It's like, well, it's a lot of time wasted. Like they just days or perhaps even weeks and months and then there's the sleep loss that goes with anger. I think that's one of the things about social media and online communities that's new and unique is that it used to be when kids went home from school or we go home from work, you would something might have happened there, but you didn't have access to more incoming. You know, people weren't calling you on the phone telling you, you know, things that you don't like or talking about others in ways that you don't like. Whereas all you have to do now is pick up social media. And if you're not really deliberate in how you interact with social media and on the internet and which news articles you read and which ones you scroll past, I mean, that could be accessible at two in the morning when you're up about the thing that was angering you during the day. That is new, right? And and requires elevated levels of diligence. Right. High levels of anger bring volatility and confusion. Right. And that doesn't serve anyone or anything. Well, lower levels of anger can be healthy. Right. I'm angry at that and I and I want to try and make it right. Or I'm angry at that and I'm going to have my say and I'm going to have my vote in it or whatever it may be, lower levels of anger. Okay, they can inform us, they can guide our behaviors. But when we get to high levels of anger, its volatility and confusion, the person ceases to then be effective. And here's an example when you were telling me about how you feel when you're doing the solo podcast, right? And how your agency and your gratitude are like really in action and you're feeling, you know, you're feeling the peace and and you're delighted and you the generative drive is at the fore in you. Right. And then I said, what if we add a little bit of anger even, right, to kind of make you and then your response is like, oh, it would all come offline. Right. Because there you're doing something that calls for like you to really be at your best firing on all cylinders. So even a little bit of anger is too much. But it's a good example because it shows like you're able to do this thing that that is so good for you. You're living in the place. Like if you could have all of existence be like you feel then, right, you would love it. You could bring it to all the rest of your life. Like that's the nirvana where we're going for and you're actively living it. But we could throw it off and ruin it with even a little bit of anger. Right. So it's an example that kind of models for us how higher levels of anger cause problems and situations that are not so rarified as that high levels of anger. Make sure somebody blurting out, somebody attacking somebody, somebody saying something they shouldn't, somebody making a bad decision. You know, anger isn't good for us at high levels and we can decrease it by making ourselves healthier that then we make less of it and we control it better. And we keep ourselves at the low to moderate levels of anger, hopefully low.

Again, no anger is not good. High anger is not good. Let's try and live in the low range. Occasionally something is very distressing. We rise up to moderate. That's where we have anger in a healthy place. When we set out on this journey to explore what is mental health, I had no expectation that you would deliver to us this incredible map of how to explore our inner territory and that you would spell out such crisp and clear ideals of states and ways of being in things to access. Nor did I know anything about the generative drive and the other drives that reside within us. In thinking about self-care and in thinking about the sorts of things that people are challenged with often, I made out a little list, not just anger, but things like scared, embarrassed, grieving, dejected, tired, confused, stuck. And then I wrote infinite number of these. There have to be an infinite number of challenges that people face, an infinite number of circumstances, and perhaps even an infinite combination of those things that people face in circumstances that can make it all seem like a giant oppressive cloud within us and around us. And yet what you've provided is really a path of clarity because it's a path that certainly includes a lot of complexity down in those pillars at the bottom, the structure of self, function of self. But you've directed us toward looking into that complexity, looking into those cupboards as a way to arrive at answers that bring us toward more simplicity, empowerment, humility, agency, gratitude, peace, contentment, delight, and this incredibly attractive thing, the generative drive that is really accessible to any and all of us. It's there in every one of us. In providing this path of clarity, and again, I want to remind people that whether or not you feel you're doing well in life, maybe even in all domains of life, or whether or not you're experiencing challenge in any or perhaps even all domains of life, going into those cupboards is clearly of immense value. And you've so graciously spelled out how we can do that, regardless of resources, really. It sounds like all it requires is a desire to be better and feel better and do better, and a willingness to explore. Curiosity, right? If I had to summarize the whole thing in two words, I would say, be curious, because curious opens the door to all of it. Curiosity about self, curiosity about life leads to all the good things.

Well, what you've given us is of immense value. And it's something that I know that I and many, many other people are going to take on as a positive set of goals, not just for immense challenges, but really for always, for living forward and understanding the past. Never before have I been presented with something that felt like it had as much power and potency to do good as this. So that's great. I'm happy to hear that.

Well, it's absolutely true. And I really want to thank you on behalf of myself and everybody else for sharing with us your time, your intellect, your willingness to build this structure specifically for this series. And for lack of a better word, it's so generative.

And I'm sure that people will have tons of questions and tons of experiences of their own to share in terms of using this, and they can share that with us. And that's one of the wonderful things about podcasts is they can put those to the comments on YouTube or elsewhere. Really, the comments on YouTube would be the place to share those questions and comments and feedback. And perhaps going forward, we can explore the self, the psyche, relationships, and ways to improve all of that and our lives going forward.

Yes. Yes. This has been great. It's been invigorating and fun. And thank you so much.

Thank you for joining me for today's discussion all about true self-care with Dr. Paul Conti.

[Transcript] Huberman Lab / Guest Series | Dr. Paul Conti: Tools and Protocols for Mental Health

This marks the ending of the fourth episode in our four episode series all about mental health with Dr. Conti. You can access each of the episodes by going to hubermanlab.com where it's linked out to all formats. And regardless of whether or not you are now completed or you are still in the process of digesting the material from this series, I hope you found it to be as enriching and as useful in your life as I have. And on behalf of myself and Dr. Conti, I want to thank you again for your time and attention. If you're learning from and or enjoying this podcast, please subscribe to our YouTube channel. That's a terrific zero cost way to support us. In addition, please subscribe to the podcast on both Spotify and Apple. And on both Spotify and Apple, you can leave us up to a five star review. Please also check out the sponsors mentioned at the beginning and throughout today's episode. That's the best way to support this podcast. If you have questions for me or comments about the podcast or guess that you'd like me to consider hosting on the Huberman Lab podcast, please put those in the comment section on YouTube.

I do read all the comments. And if you're not already following me on social media, I am Huberman Lab on all platforms. So that's Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, threads and Facebook. And on all those platforms, I discuss science and science related tools, some of which overlap with the content of the Huberman Lab podcast, but much of which is distinct from the content of the Huberman Lab podcast. So again, it's Huberman Lab on all social media channels. Not on today's episode, but on many previous episodes of the Huberman Lab podcast, we discussed supplements. While supplements aren't necessary for everybody, many people derive tremendous benefit from them for things like enhancing sleep, for hormone support and for focus. If you'd like to see the supplements discussed on the Huberman Lab podcast, you can go to live momentous spelled OUS. So it's livemomentous.com slash Huberman. If you haven't already subscribed to our newsletter, it is a zero cost newsletter called the neural network newsletter. And in the neural network newsletter, you get free podcast summaries as well as toolkits. The toolkits are brief PDFs that list off the specific science-backed protocols for things like improving your sleep, improving focus, optimizing dopamine, deliberate cold exposure. We have a complete summary of our fitness series. Again, all available, completely zero cost. You simply go to hubermanlab.com, go to the menu, scroll down to newsletter and provide your email to sign up. We do not share your email with anybody. Thank you for joining me and Dr. Paul Conti for today's episode. And last but certainly not least, thank you for your interest in science.