

**Unlocking the Body’s Healing Mechanisms**

An interview with Brenda Stockdale

on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

Podcast Date: January 13, 2025

© 2025, David Hanscom, M.D. All rights reserved.

IMPORTANT DISCLAIMER: THIS DOCUMENT DOES NOT PROVIDE MEDICAL ADVICE

Information, including but not limited to, text, graphics, images and other material contained in this document, is for informational purposes only. The purpose of this document is to promote broad consumer understanding and knowledge of various health topics. The information in this document is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, opinion, diagnosis or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health care provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical condition or treatment and before undertaking a new health care regimen, and never disregard professional medical advice or delay in seeking it because of something you have read in this document. You should also ask your physician or other healthcare provider to assist you in interpreting any information in this document or in applying the information to your individual case. This document does not recommend or endorse any specific tests, physicians, products, procedures, opinions or other information that may be mentioned herein. Reliance on any information appearing in this document is solely at your own risk.

.

**David Hanscom:** Today, I'd like to welcome Brenda Stockdale to our podcast. I met her, how did I meet you? I think it was through Facebook, right, Brenda? And so I started talking to her and realized that she has a lot going on. So I invited her to be on the podcast and she's the Director of Behavioral Medicine at a regional and nationally recognized cancer center.

She's a Dr. Stockdale synthesizes relevant research into clinical practice through the design and implementation of evidence-based research. biobehavioral programming. As a result of this rigor, her work is nationally recognized and endorsed by leading specialists in multiple disciplines. For two decades, her programs have been implemented in major cancer centers and other healthcare organizations.

In addition to her private practice, she is a consultant for corporate and healthcare organizations and developed a health psychology program for primary care settings, specializing in preventative medicine. autoimmunity and stress related conditions. She is the author of You Can Beat the Odds, Surprising Factors Behind Chronic Illness and Cancer.

So, Brenda, welcome to the podcast. And what also intrigued me is that she used to work with Bernie Siegel, who's a nationally known expert. in lots of different areas. He figured this out way before the rest of us did and got beat up pretty badly for it back then. I've gotten to know Bernie personally.

We've been to, I've been to his house a couple of times, talked to him once in a while. He's lectured on our study group and Tom actually works for Bernie also. So we all know Bernie Siegel. That's our common thread today. So Bernie's a great guy. And what makes it a little bit unusual is that he's a surgeon.

And surgeons don't do this. And so he did this way before other people did it. And, but he also, the part that intrigued me, that I haven't had time getting out of Bernie, and I think Brenda can give us some insights, he formed this exceptional cancer survivors group that Brenda was involved with. And I'd like to, first of all, get her background today about how she came to her perspective, but also tease out the factors that allow people to beat really incredible odds against cancer.

So, anyway, Brenda, welcome. And so let's work, well, I guess not backwards, but forwards, is that when did you work with

**Brenda Stockdale:** Bernie Siegel? This was in the way back in the 90s.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** And I had been with Getting Well, which was a hospital based psychoneuroimmunology program in Orlando and had moved to Connecticut.

Okay. And that's when I started working up there with ECAP.

**David Hanscom:** Okay. And you worked with, and ECAP stands for what?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Exceptional Cancer Patients.

**David Hanscom:** Okay. So you work directly with that program?

**Brenda Stockdale:** I work directly with that program. And while I was there, designed a program for the Helen and Harry Gray Cancer Center.

They were looking for a program that really pulled together current research into a format that patients could actually use to improve outcome. And that was with the president of the American Cancer Society and the director. of the Cancer Center, Dr. Andrew Selner. And that was the program that we did, I did for them.

And then I moved to Atlanta and began doing that here. And then we did some long distance programs with ECAP where people came from all over the world for intensive week long experiences.

**David Hanscom:** So, before I jump into this, which I find extremely fascinating, what's your background and how you came to some of the things that you understand now?

Because you're a clinical psychologist, correct?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Really, it's health psychology. Yeah, health psychology. Okay.

**David Hanscom:** And so you have a clinical practice also?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes.

**David Hanscom:** And did you work with the cancer patients directly or more or less program development? What was your role there?

**Brenda Stockdale:** At Getting Well, I was clinical assistant.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** And then when I came to ECAP I was designing this particular program and also doing group work. Okay. With, with, with folks and yeah.

**David Hanscom:** Can you explain to everybody what ECAP, so who are these people? I mean, who, who, who belongs to ECAP? You have to have a, it's not an open membership. You have to have some characteristics to actually be there.

So it's exceptional cancer patients, correct?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes. That has

**David Hanscom:** very advanced cancer that have survived. And again, what we're all dying to hear is what are some of the characteristics that allowed them to survive? These are stage four cancers too, right?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Well, not everyone. No. So, you know, folks would have a cancer diagnosis, but it did not have to be advanced.

I think that those are some of the most extraordinary experiences that, that we read about, of course, and love medicine and miracles and peace, love, and healing, but stages too. And so when we look, Today we have an advantage of, of seeing how incredible Bernie's work really was because we can look through the lens of research.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** And you, you know, have talked about the Rahean Holmes stress index and decades after that, a psychologist by the name of Suzanne Cabasa became really curious about individuals who, despite high numbers on that scale, did not become ill. And this is post I think post ECAP perhaps, or after, after Love, Medicine, and Miracles had been written.

And so she looked at these into this, you know, group of folks to see if there was something different. And she found out that they did have several traits, and she dubbed these the three C's for control, commitment, and challenge. And what she found was that Despite what was happening around them, these individuals had a high sense of self mastery.

So the sense of control wasn't trying to control the environment. That would be my high stress response, right? Trying to control the environment. But it

**David Hanscom:** was a

**Brenda Stockdale:** sense of self mastery.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** What meant? While we all know that altruism is immuno enhancing, in her way of thinking and interviewing these folks, it was a high degree of commitment to the self.

And then finally, we have challenge, which was the ability to see the current crisis as a turning point rather than an end point. And if I look at some, of course there's other factors we could look at with what Bernie was able to accomplish, he was inspiring these three Cs. Now for a while, researchers believed that we either came by these traits innately, we naturally possessed these traits, or we didn't.

But then in the 90s, it was found that we could adopt these traits. And we could get the same immunoprotective benefits. As someone who came by these traits more naturally so we, Let me

**David Hanscom:** stop you just for a second. So just to be clear, when you say immunology, so let's talk about what we call threat physiology or stress physiology.

So you're in fight or flight, your neurotransmitters go from calming to excitatory, your neuroconduction doubles, your brain cell becomes inflamed, your stress hormones are on full gear, your cortisol is pulling fuel out of the cells, and your cytokines, these little molecules that communicate cell to cell go from anti inflammatory to inflammatory.

So your whole body is under a stress threat state.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes.

**David Hanscom:** Correct. So what you're saying that the people that had, let me just rephrase this for a second. I think you'll agree with me. So we, we know that the first one controls self mastery out of the laboratory. in the lab they've shown that a sense of control actually decreases inflammatory cytokines directly.

That's one of them. And then the commitment to self is a big one because the tipping point in chronic pain, which is one of many chronic diseases, they all come from the same source, is anger. The tipping point is always anger. So if you're committed to yourself, taking full responsibility instead of blaming others, that's a huge tipping point.

Then the final thing with challenge, I think the healing occurs with creativity. So you're challenging yourself to look outwards, not, again, the blame factor comes into play. So the real healing occurs with creativity. And so, These people that survived somehow had innately figured this out, and then the research is pulled from what you observed, I'm guessing, and you're saying that you actually can attain these characteristics?

**Brenda Stockdale:** And, you know, just to go back a bit, I'm, it could be, and of course this is hypothesizing, that Bernie's inspirational directives Some of those principles that he would teach in this, these groups when he first founded that that he outlines in Love, Medicine, and Miracles, it seems to me, That they encourage those three C's among other things.

So I didn't quite, I

**David Hanscom:** didn't quite follow. So what did Bernie teach exactly?

**Brenda Stockdale:** So I think that, well, with some of his tea, like when he, in meeting with individuals, one of the things he would do, and I think if anyone has been to one of his groups or in an auditorium to hear him speak or listen to his audios, he would have a profound, his words.

were so moving that people would have tears to that had their eyes closed, but there'd be tears running down their faces just from his imagery that he would ask people to relax. And we can talk a little bit about the science behind imagery, but imagery in part as just one of the tools, I think of it as a tool.

He may not think of it as a tool. I don't want to speak for him, but he used this very organically, very Jungian. Kind of perspective, but helping people really look inside and tease out some of these things. So if I've been someone, let's just say, for example, that doesn't want to get a second opinion because I don't want to offend my doctor.

**David Hanscom:** That's a con that is very common.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yeah. So perhaps I'm listening to Bernie and I start to have more of a commitment to myself, right? Or perhaps I'm listening to Bernie and he's leading me through an imagery and I start to through that relaxation response, right? I'm able to reframe organically. So a challenge.

And think of it from a higher vantage point. So I'm re prioritizing my life, but yet Bernie's just maybe told some stories, led me through an imagery, showed me what might be possible. And now I can see that maybe a little differently. And so, so these are just a couple of little windows that I might see through the lens of research, looking at how Bernie might.

Have leveraged some of what we know today for these profound outcomes.

**David Hanscom:** Well, we know the, you know, I, as you know, I have this paradigm of healing, recursive connection confidence and creativity, sort of the same three C's and you start connecting to what is in connecting to yourself is a huge deal. And, you know, the ultimate thing is that It's a human nature and particularly in today's society is to blame.

We don't take responsibility for ourselves and where I call it the eye of the storm is that healing occurs. If you look at the hurricane, is that the wind represents your thoughts, represents your circumstances, most of which we can't control. So we tend to get swept into the wind and what you're trying to do is pull yourself into the center regardless of the circumstances.

I call it the eye of the storm. Are we saying the same thing? Yeah. Yeah.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes, so we could have some folks who might be more naturally that way.

**David Hanscom:** Right.

**Brenda Stockdale:** And then we have folks who, who are learning, it would be more like myself who are learning to experience life through this through this different approach.

But then the orientation or the rubric over the whole piece the way I hear it again, I keep saying that because I'm not speaking for Bernie, but would be through the lens of our own mortality. Because when Bernie first sent that invitation out to, to come to listen, to meet at the Yale auditorium, they had, social workers, nurses, everyone, all these letters had gone out inviting everyone to learn maybe some tips and tools, how to live better, maybe longer, right?

Right. And we had this handful of people, I think 13 individuals or something showed up. So Bobby, Bernie's wife called them exceptional, not because they lived, but because they showed up. And I think that's one of Bernie's principles here is that I know he wrote in the forward to my book. He says, you can do all these things and you're still not going to live forever.

So yes, focusing. So I think when we think of passive volition,

**David Hanscom:** I'm sorry.

**Brenda Stockdale:** The concept of passive volition. So when we think of

**David Hanscom:** volition,

**Brenda Stockdale:** right. So it's an intention, right? So if I'm going through your program, obviously I'd love to have. Less pain, right? That would be magnificent. But if that is my sole objective, I'm going to be measuring everything against that and increasing stress.

**David Hanscom:** Exactly.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Okay. So, but passive volition, I might have this intention. Hey, I want to lighten up my pain, but my thrust here, my focus is on living better than through passive volition. I'm more likely to achieve that outcome. So. We're living better, even if we didn't live longer, I think would be Bernie's idea is it's not because you're doing these things that you're going to live forever, but if by accepting your own mortality, you might live with more passion, more gusto, more individuality, you might get that second or third opinion, and then by chance you might live longer.

Right.

**David Hanscom:** Well, I have a little bit more of a crude way of saying this, so I apologize for this in advance. But the question, the point is anytime you're anxious, frustrated, or angry, something in the present reminded you of something in the past that was dangerous or perceived as dangerous. So if you're anxious or frustrated, you're not even here, you're there.

**Brenda Stockdale:** So

**David Hanscom:** the question is, and then of course we know anxiety and angers, you know, break your body down. That's threat physiology. And so the question is, how many How many years do you want to live where you're awake, actually here or aware? So to me, I don't know what the term is. I'm coming up, maybe you can help me with the term for this, but how many years do you want to actually be alive?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Right.

**David Hanscom:** Right.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes. And that means

**David Hanscom:** living with awareness. Yes. And the problem is when anchors are frustrated, you're not even here. You're disconnected. Right, and then that's a survival reaction, which is a million times stronger than your conscious brain. So this anxiety anger just overwhelms everything and you cannot construct the life that you want because you're too busy fighting off anxiety frustration Which is impossible.

It's a never ending story. It's a never ending process. So one of my quotes is, you know, quit fighting darkness. Just turn on the lights.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Love that quote of yours, by the way. So.

**David Hanscom:** I

**Brenda Stockdale:** love that. I've used that for myself. That is, and I love that.

**David Hanscom:** Well, I still use it myself too, because I mean, I spent my entire life fighting darkness.

You know, my story is not a great story. And so before we just finish this part of the podcast, to you personally, because obviously. I'm guessing you were raised in a similar environment as most of us with society being critical of us and can't be good enough and driven by accomplishments and whatever that means what we're programmed to do.

And I don't know your story in detail. We don't need to go into as much detail. I'm just curious. You have had I'm just curious how all these principles have applied to your personal life.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Okay. Well when I was really young, I was diagnosed with first multiple sclerosis then scleroderma, and then rheumatoid arthritis.

And then my father said, that's enough. There's, you know, three diseases like this. So we, I went to the Mayo Clinic and found out I didn't have any of those, but had systemic lupus.

**David Hanscom:** Oh, you did that

**Brenda Stockdale:** time. Yeah. And it just so happened that that's when psychoneuroimmunology really burst on the scene. So I was down at the library in the stacks back in the day before the internet you know, down in the stacks, just reading everything I could.

And a friend sent me Bernie's book.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** And I was just, I was just gobsmacked. I thought, wow, this holds so many, so many pieces for me. So I called ECAP and they said, you have the most comprehensive PNI program, secondary immunology program at a hospital in your backyard in Orlando, Florida.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** I didn't even know about it.

And that's where I became the clinical assistant there. And not only watched other people have. just remarkable recoveries and experiences, but began learning how to really be different in my body. I know that sounds kind of weird, but

**David Hanscom:** no, no, that's exactly the whole point.

**Brenda Stockdale:** I was, it was really challenging for me.

So when I met with my doctor at Mayo, I said, you know, Can you just give me three months without going on steroids or Plaquenil, et cetera to see what I can do with this. And he said, he was so lovely Scott Persil, and he said, sure. And I came back three months later and my labs had not improved. And I said, you don't know how stressful it is for me to learn to relax.

I am so stressed trying to learn to relax. It's dry. It was so difficult for me. And he said, okay, I'll give you three more months, but then that's it. You can't, you know, I'm not comfortable with anything beyond that.

**David Hanscom:** And how, how old were you at the time?

**Brenda Stockdale:** I was twenties in my twenties.

**David Hanscom:** And you had actually, so was your lupus active?

In other words, were you getting a

**Brenda Stockdale:** fever for five years and a chronic kidney infections and neurological issues. And I had. Been treating it cause I thought I had MS. So I had been riding trains around Europe and waiting on tables with triple shifts and skiing the Alps and all I had been doing everything with my body that I possibly could, you know, in terms of intensity,

**David Hanscom:** I

**Brenda Stockdale:** thought I can do everything else later if I, if I can't.

All these things. So I was really amazing that I was still, still alive after the way I treated my body. It was like an enemy. I felt, you know, my body's doing this to me, so I need to do everything I can. And so it was a radical shift for me to learn, to partner my body, to treat, to learn, to be my own best friend, to be compassionate.

And to see things very differently, but that process did have some positive effects because when I went back to Mayo, half my labs were normal. And then a few months later, when I went back for more work, he said, look, if everything is decent and good, you, I'm not going to call you. I'll just send my usual letter.

But over the PA system at the hospital, he, they called me to the phone at which made my heart race. But he told me, he said, I just have to tell you, you're in your first serological and clinical remission. And, and that was after seven years, I think

**David Hanscom:** so, and I'm sure you did that really physically active at the time, or which is, I guess my question is you, so you did learn to relax.

**Brenda Stockdale:** I did learn to relax. I cannot say I am. I, I work with people who are much better at this than I am. I work at this, you know, I am conscious of this. This is a pattern for me. So I am very aware of the need during the day to do diaphragmatic breathing. I went to Mayo Clinic. I learned to warm my hands with handheld temperature bulb.

Those with patients, you know, who are more like I am. Where that capillary flow is restricted due to not breathing diaphragmatically. So I, you know, I kind of started back there and then gradually worked on fine tuning my attitude with these practical skills and focusing less on the outcome and more on joy and acceptance.

And gratitude. So these were things that instead of chasing activities and sports and things like that, I was really more focused on creating an optimal environment for, for my, for my body that I had really pushed really hard.

**David Hanscom:** Okay. Well, I appreciate, I'm excited about your insights. On the second, second part of this episode, we'll talk more about what you just discussed in a little bit more detail on some of the ways you actually got relaxed, because I've said for a long time that the antithesis of pain is play, but you're not doing play to distract yourself because the data also shows out of UCLA that if you're living a hedonistic lifestyle.

To outrun your pain, essentially, is actually highly inflammatory. And so, it's, it's connecting with passion and purpose, just totally engaging with what you're in. And it's not always just this happy, happy type thing. It's just total engagement with what's right in front of you. And so, you know, it's sort of, and for me personally, gratitude's been a big one.

And just to remind myself, I'll refer to Tom here for a second. Surgeons don't think like this, including me, historically. I'm a surgeon. I fix things. I did high level surgery. So we look at these things like gratitude and play and, you know, relaxation is sort of, well, whatever. But see, unfortunately they put stress into a psychological bucket.

It's actually a physiological state.

**Brenda Stockdale:** For instance,

**David Hanscom:** breathwork stimulates the vagus nerve, which is, which is anti inflammatory. Vagus nerve, you know, calms down the cytokines. Calms down your physiology, regulates the whole body you know, the gratitude is huge because that is the input factor. If you're, I mean, for instance, FOMO, if you're missing out, in other words, being upset about what you don't have, actually directly fires up the pain circuits.

Directly. It's unbelievable. So what happens, we have a societal FOMO because there's so much opportunity and we actually directly are stimulating our pain circuits in the brain. It's unbelievable. So gratitude for me personally has been a big one. It's not been my historic norm, I got to tell you. And so no, your insights are really profound.

So just a punctuation point on what you're talking about. There's a huge sound basis in science about what's going on. This is not some type of, let's just, you know, distract this person and do this, this, and this. Your body knows how to heal. If you can stimulate the healing properties and everything you've talked about, in addition to other ones we'll mention, stimulate your body's own capacity to heal.

So Brenda I know you're private practice. Are you, how do we access your resources? What are something, I know you've written a book and I know you have a, you have a website.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yes. So how do we

**David Hanscom:** get ahold of you?

**Brenda Stockdale:** Through my website and my number and email, the HIPAA compliant email, my phone number is right there.

**David Hanscom:** Yeah, and what's your website?

**Brenda Stockdale:** It's my name, brendastockdale. com.

**David Hanscom:** Okay.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Yeah.

**David Hanscom:** And there's audios,

**Brenda Stockdale:** That people can download. These were audios that I used as I'm learning to relax. So there are things that were useful for me.

**David Hanscom:** Great. And

**Brenda Stockdale:** then you just

**David Hanscom:** wrote a book. What's the book? It's

**Brenda Stockdale:** You Can Beat the Odds, Surprising Factors Behind Chronic Illness and Cancer.

So it's the six week program that I designed for the Helen and Harry Great Cancer Center. And it, and there's hundreds of original research articles cited in the back resource guides for each section to take people to other authors. And video content, websites, that kind of thing.

**David Hanscom:** Okay. Well, great.

Well, Brenda, thank you for being on the podcast and you've actually raised more questions in my mind. I'm excited to talk about it in our second episode. So thank you very, very much for being on the podcast today.

**Brenda Stockdale:** Thank you so much for having me. Thank you.