



Dr. David Hanscom

Challenging Pain – From Fear to Fascination

An interview with Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni
on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

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Tom Masters: Hello everybody, and welcome to another episode of Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscomb. I'm your host Tom Masters, and our guest today is Miriam Gauci Bon Giovanni. She's a trauma-informed pain coach and mind body practitioner. She made a remarkable recovery from a range of chronic symptoms by tapping into her mind body connection.

Today she educates individuals on how to overcome a myriad of chronic symptoms by working with emotional release mindset shifts and neuroplasticity. She's the author of The Pain Secret, unlocking the Mind Body Connection to Overcome Chronic Pain and Symptoms.

David Hanscom: Welcome. Thank you, Tom. I would like to welcome Miriam Gauci, Bon Giovanni today.

She works, she lives in a small island of Malta, and she's a certified body mind body practitioner in trauma-informed coach specialized in chronic pain recovery, and so what makes her story compelling in her treatment approach is that she's been through this herself. And she's helped many people since then.

She just recently wrote a book that we'll discuss on the show also. So Marion, welcome to the show. Nice to meet you.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Thank you so much for having me, Dr. Hanscomb, and to,

David Hanscom: so anyway so I'm just curious, Malta's not something we think about very much. Can you just tell me about Malta, where you live and where it is and I was interested in your language difference.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Sure. Malta is a small island. It's an independent country. The island is found it's located right below the island of Sicily, so right below Italy in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. It's a crowded place. There's a lot of people here, a lot of traffic, but we also have beaches, we also have cliffs, which is nice.

In fact, I like to climb here. I'm a rock climber as well. Okay. In my free time. That's part of my journey as well, part of my recovery story. So yeah. Great. Some of my US clients don't know about Malta, so I always have to explain where it is and that we're like an independent country on its own. We speak our own language, which is Maltese.

It's a mix of Arabic and it has words from Italian, from English. It's quite a mixed language. Very interesting.

David Hanscom: I don't know a lot about history. I'm assuming of embarrassed. How little do I know? But I did catch that Sicily, Southern Italy and probably Malta had a rough time over the centuries 'cause it was right in the middle of Africa and Europe and a lot of crusaders and all sorts of stuff came through that area.

So the history of the places is probably fairly interesting.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Oh yes. The history dates back to prehistoric times as well. We have these ancient temples that are actually older than the pyramids. So it's like dates back to the stone age. As well. And then over the years we had lots of occupations.

We were occupied by the Arabs, then by the the Knights of St. John also came to Mota. Then we were also occupied by the British during World War ii. So yeah, quite a rich. Interesting.

David Hanscom: What's relevant to our topic today? Will, we talked about trauma a little bit also, is that I'm assuming there's quite a bit of generational trauma in Malta.

Historic trauma.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. I could see it in my grandparents for sure. They were always scared that another war was coming, know they needed starve to death in Malta during World War ii. Yeah.

David Hanscom: Okay. I know you had your own pain journey. Can you tell us a bit about your own pain journey, how this all started for you?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Sure. Yeah, basically one day, as I already mentioned, I'm a rock climber. I was climbing a really tough route. I was getting really frustrated. I wasn't making much progress at the time, and suddenly I felt a pull, a sharp pull, like in my shoulder. It was very painful and I stopped and I thought, okay, I just need to rest maybe a week or two, but the pain persisted this time. And a friend of mine sent me to a physical therapist. It was like the first time I'd been to a physical therapist in my life. And at first I found it really interesting. I did the exercises very digi diligently, but unfortunately I also got very focused on it as I was doing those exercises.

And then I would notice, sometimes I would feel it get better and then suddenly it would just get worse again. And I started to get really worried. I. Because climbing was one of the best things in my life. It still is actually now today. So yeah, that's how it started. After that, I got depressed.

I developed sciatica pain. I was told that I needed the shoulder surgery as well. I was actually, I'm sorry.

David Hanscom: You had the surgery or did not have the surgery?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I did not have the surgery. Okay.

David Hanscom: So

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I was diagnosed with what is called a haggie lesion. You might know what it is.

David Hanscom: A what?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: HAGL lesion.

David Hanscom: I just, that might be a labral tear in the, you haven't heard that term a labral tear? Yes. It's in the

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: shoulder somewhere. And they told me that the only way I could repair it was through surgery, but ahead of the surgery, I was so scared. And the interesting thing is my surgeon also told me that he could repair the damage, but he couldn't guarantee that I would be pain free.

That really freaked me out. I was like, what? If the pain is coming from the damage, then why can't he guarantee that I'd be pain free after I.

So that got me thinking. I was very scared of the surgery and that's when suddenly one fine day, I woke up with sciatic pain and leg pains all over in my performance, in my cough, and this was actually much more excruciating than the original shoulder pain.

So I thought okay, this is more of a problem. I can't even walk now. I can barely walk, so let me just cancel the surgery and focus on getting better in my legs first. 'cause I thought that I had overdone it. I had gone cycling and I blamed it on that.

David Hanscom: So how old were you after that?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Sorry.

David Hanscom: How old were you at the time when this happened?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I was just 28. 28 days old. 28, okay.

David Hanscom: And how long were you, and before that you did not have much pain, you were pretty active in doing your thing?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes, I was. I was always, I always had some anxiety traits, like all my life since I was six years old. And to be honest, when I was around seven, I used to have these stomach aches and my parents took me to the doctor and he actually told them, listen, this is psychosomatic what she has.

But yeah, so that was really interesting. But they didn't do anything about it, that they just stopped worrying because they said okay, nothing serious, and eventually the stomach pains just went away.

David Hanscom: And what about teen years? Were any anxiety, other symptoms, headaches, any other types of symptoms in your teens?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Not really, no, not too much. Just low level anxiety. I was always a catastrophic thinker, a warrior, some panic attacks here and there, especially in my late teens, early twenties. But nothing that was chronically persistent really until I injured my shoulder.

David Hanscom: And then how long had you been in pain before the surgeon recommended surgery.

How long had you had the pain?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: About five months.

David Hanscom: Five months. Okay. And then you moved forward and I think what the audience is most interested in, including myself, is that you're now pain free. You have no limitations. You do what you want to do, and we'll talk about the details of that in the second podcast, but I'm curious what happened that caused you to change your thinking about your symptoms and what.

Process did you discover to help you come out of it? Because, you were in my historic world, I was a surgeon. I would've offered surgery and done what we need to do. What I didn't know. We talk about this later, where the data sets you operate in the presence of untreated chronic pain.

You can make the pain worse 40 to 60% of the time. And so for instance, if you have chronic headaches and you do a hernia repair, you can induce hernia pain, chronic hernia pain at the hernia site with the fact that you just had chronic headaches. So inducing chronic pain or making it worse is actually a complication of surgery in the presence of untreated chronic pain.

Yeah, so fortunately he did not have surgery and my practice was seeing people that had chronic pain untreated had. Surgeries, blaming structure like your shoulder re surgeon. Talked about? Yeah. Portion. You did not do that. So what happened next? What was the key or the next step that allowed you to think, to start thinking differently about this?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yeah. All went downhill. I got pains in my legs and my arms. I also got nerve pain, which was really interesting, or at that time it was really scary, honestly. I also had a neurologist tell me that I should just give up on sports just from a physical test in the hands. I was just lucky to be honest.

I frantically googled my symptoms one fine day, like all my symptoms. I just Googled them and I came across the TMS Wiki online. And I learned about Dr. Sarno and I saw this like structured program. Some things resonated with me and I thought let me just try it because I've tried everything, I could and nothing's working.

This looks different, so maybe, so I just kept an open mind and then the subject really started to interest me, and I think that's what really helped me. So I shifted from fear to fascination to curiosity and subject. I was like, wow. And I could see so many people had healed and I thought they can't all be lying, right?

So basically, I just did the work. I did a lot of journaling. I realized that I was very angry about a couple of things that had happened in the years before. Gradually I started to see an improvement and I changed the way that I saw my symptoms totally. I would notice like my initial reactions, like my fear or my disappointment, and I would go wait, like how interesting that this is, that I'm reacting with fear?

What if I uncouple that fear and just look at the sensation? At the same time, also, my psychotherapist had recommended she recommended mindfulness meditation to me. Which also helped with the process because it helped me get observant of my symptoms and non-judgmental. In fact, I use this a lot also in my work, to try to get people to be non-judgmental, as non-judgmental as possible about their symptoms, not to vilify them basically.

And yeah, that's it. I started to gradually reintroduce myself to everything, to all the stuff that should be normal and harmless, from cleaning after my dog to walking and eventually to rock climbing actually.

David Hanscom: So, you're back, rock climbing.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes.

David Hanscom: No symptoms.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: No. Actually, it's interesting.

The first time I went back, I felt a hint of the old shoulder pain that had already gone away, but it was before I even started. It was before I even touched the rock. And to me that was a hundred percent confirmation that it was my brain because I hadn't even started climbing and I felt the old shoulder pain.

So it just didn't make sense, from a structural perspective. And I thought Hey, I know what this is. I really like this phrase, by the way, as well. I recommend it to my client. It's like it gives me power. I know what this is.

David Hanscom: How long did it take for you once you started doing the work?

How long did it take your symptoms to resolve?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: About six weeks, to be honest, which was Oh, I know it's pretty quick. But I really dedicated myself that summer and I also complimented the work with a lot of relaxation. I used to go to the sea almost every day. I did a lot of stuff that just relaxed my nervous system basically.

And that doesn't mean that I never had symptoms after death. So my original symptoms, it took six weeks for me to recover, but after that I suffered from insomnia, anxiety, and I thought they were different to TMS. So they, it took longer.

David Hanscom: Okay. So how long overall do you think it took you in?

And so how long ago was that? How old Kash? How old? I'm not supposed to ask a woman her age. I'm just curious about the timeframe and I'll explain why that's important in a second. And how old are you now?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I am now 37.

David Hanscom: And you've been pain free for what, at least seven years,

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: so nine years from the original symptoms.

Okay. It's been almost nine years since I had my original symptoms. As I said, it doesn't mean that I never had any other symptoms in the meantime, but I tackled them as a mind body problem, with success,

David Hanscom: can you explain to the audience about neuroplastic pain? And the reason I wanna explain that, so a couple things, people.

One, an instant fix. And it doesn't happen that way. Your brain needs to be reprogrammed and you can't reprogram it in a day. And six weeks is not immediate, is quicker than some. And some people say, some people it's a year, everybody's different. Some people it's two weeks. And so the key message I keep giving to my patients is to, the key word is persistence.

And then the big, another big point you just made is that life keeps coming at us and pain-free forever. With no pain going forward, isn't life mean? You just have to learn how to live with the pain and not react to it. So it's what you react to that gets reinforced and by separating from it and just going on about your life, that's where the healing occurs.

So let's go back just for a second though. I'd like just a little bit more detail. The challenge I think that all of us face in this world of helping people with chronic illness is getting people to engage, yeah. 'cause we're so programmed to have a structural source of things. And the fact that a shoulder surgeon was blaming a labral tear for your pain is classic.

And it's also like pelvic pain, hysterectomies and fibroids. It's like meniscal tears for knee pain, that there's structures that are not normal. But they're not the court source of pain. Exactly. So we have an incredible need to blame symptoms on structural symptoms where it's really your brain simply short circuiting and so it not psychological, it's stress related, which fires up your body's stress physiology and you have symptoms, your brain, short circuits.

So a major factor in my practice, even before I knew about chronic pain. People come to me with degenerative disc disease and simply tell 'em this was a normal finding. A lot of people had their pain disappear. So it's the fear of the pain that actually makes the pain much worse. Exactly.

So going back in your situation, what allowed you to be, 'cause a lot of people are shut down the determine of surgery, the determine to be fixed.

What I'm curious about, what allowed you to be curious and open up to try something new because that's what people resist is trying something new or switching paradigms, and so I'm just curious what caused you to make that change?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I think, honestly I was so desperate that the approach sounded different.

It resonated with me because I knew that. Yeah I was largely an anxious person. But honestly I just wasn't ready to accept to that, that I would have to live with chronic pain. I just didn't want to accept that. So I thought I'm going to do my very best, and I notice a lot today.

It's some, there's more awareness. People begin to understand maybe that there's a link between trauma and their pain, between their anxiety and their pain. But they don't, as you said, they don't engage in a process, right? So it's not enough to just know that you have a mind body problem.

You literally have to change your responses to the pain, your day-to-day habits, you have to cut down on avoidance, on the trepidation, on the overthinking. So I think this is what made the difference to me. I really, I talked to myself, I watched my habits, I noticed where I was moving and thinking in fear and I tried to shift every time out of those, those fear-based thoughts.

David Hanscom: What made your factor and you offer. So lemme just jump to the current moment, then we'll go into the details of what you do in the second podcast. But you wrote a book called The Pain Secret and that was just published. Is that correct?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes, I did. It's just been published last week.

David Hanscom: And your work is as a MINDBODY coach and trauma therapist.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: So, my work is as a mind body practitioner and pain coach

David Hanscom: Okay. And then do you work online?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Online? Yes. Most of the time, most of my clients are actually in the US or in the UK because I'm from a small island and yeah.

David Hanscom: And so you. It sounds like from your website, by the way, you, what, could you just let us know what your website is?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Sure. It's pain outside the box.com.

David Hanscom: Got it. Okay. And so you use techniques like what's called pain reprocessing, the, is that correct?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. However, I start people off with emotional expression actually. Okay. With techniques like expressive writing, journaling. Okay. Just because I think that we really need to validate all our emotions to prevent, that buildup of repressed emotions that tends to cause more pain and flare up.

And I also do a lot of work on day-to-day habits because I noticed that a lot of people have a conflict. They know they have a mind body problem, but they act and behave as if they have a structural problem.

David Hanscom: Right.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: So I really like to make people aware of, how they're moving how much tension they're carrying around, how much they're contradicting their belief in a mind body problem through their actions, right?

Because that's really common. I notice,

Once you embody this belief that there's nothing wrong structurally, then it gets way easier, right? Even the pain reprocessing gets way easier because you can get more curious and less fearful of your pain when you know that you don't have a structural problem.

David Hanscom: Thank you for sharing this. The reason why I grew up my medical practice, statistical practice was because of people like yourself. So, I was seen, so the other ha thing that happens when people get desperate, they actually double down on procedures. I. And so I had one, I've had several people with over 20 operations in 20 years, and none of 'em work.

They keep going and going with if there's any sort of hope at all, they go after another procedure. So you're extremely. And I don't know what the norm is. I think people tend to double down on procedures more than opening their minds up for curiosity. So that's my job. I think I know

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: then why I was different because I had a fear of, a fear of healthcare settings and a fear of getting operated on, right?

So, some people actually like the care and attention that they get through the medical avenue, right?

David Hanscom: For some people absolutely.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Almost, I'm sorry to say, it almost becomes an addiction. They go to the doctor, they get some reassurance, they get a shred of hope that maybe this procedure can work, or the other treatment can work.

So, it becomes almost addictive. For me it was different because I just re, I just really hated being, I, I even, I hated just going to the doctors by the time 'cause I was getting so many negative messages. And I was also scared of surgery. But I think that's what made me really commit to this approach.

David Hanscom: I'm excited you found it. And of course you, I'm guessing that what excites me is that people not only get rid of their pain, but their life starts expanding at a rate they never knew is possible. They just live a different life. You start process things differently and your life keeps expanding so people really thrive.

So, I think want my practice to manage chronic pain. I did it because I saw results like yours all the time. And so, watching people getting maimed by surgery, truly maimed by surgery

Compared to stories like yours I just couldn't do it anymore. So, I'm excited you found it. I'm really excited you're helping other people with your concepts.

And I do think the most effective one reason I've been quite effective is 'cause I went through the entire process myself, and so did you. So, you know where people are coming from. And so, it's, it is really effective to put this into practice. Your book is the Pain Secret, I'm assuming that can be found on Amazon, it's on Amazon now?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. Across all Amazon marketplaces.

David Hanscom: Okay. And it, I'm assuming it reflects your approach and your website is

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Pain Outside the box.com

David Hanscom: Pain outside the box.com. Okay. Miriam, thank you very much and I really appreciate your spending time with us.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Tom Masters: I'd like to thank our guest, Miriam Gauci, Bon Giovanni, for being on the show today and sharing her journey through chronic pain and how researching her symptoms helped her move from fear to fascination. I'm your host, Tom Masters, reminding you to be back next week for another episode of Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscomb. And in the meantime, be sure to visit the website at www.backincontrol.com.