



Healing Begins When Pain Stops Being the Enemy

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.

Welcome.

David Hanscom: Welcome back Miriam Bon Giovanni. I think I pronounced that fairly closely. Good. Very good. And she's from the small island of Malta, which I hadn't known about until just about a year ago, it's off of Sicily, and she was born and raised there. It's a small island with its own language and she she's here today to tell about her story about chronic pain and how she approaches helping other people.

So Miriam, welcome back. She's a mind-body coach and deals with trauma. And so welcome back.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Hi. Thank you for having me, both of you.

David Hanscom: So, we talked about your story a little bit in the first podcast and the shoulder injury and how you came out of it. And what I'd like to talk about on this podcast is, how you approach patients? What's your initial starting point? What direction do you take 'em? What's your general philosophy? And we both talked about that. Everybody's very individual. But I'm curious about the initial approach, how that works. What do you think you do in general that helps people get better and go to the specifics in a few minutes?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Alright good question. Basically, my clients are usually people who have heard about the mind body connection and they suspect that they have, their symptoms are a mind body problem. So, the first thing we do is we make a case for the fact that their symptoms might be a mind body problem because that helps boost their confidence that they can treat their symptoms in this way.

So that's one of them. But usually then I, we just have a look at their life, what's troubling them, what kind of conflicts they're facing, what's on their minds besides just the worry of the symptoms. Because the problem is I get a lot of people who are super concerned about their symptoms, right?

Because they're in pain and they're, they're living a limited life. So they tend to talk a lot about how their symptoms are ruining their life. But I always try to get the conversation a little bit away from that 'cause it's never a good idea to make symptoms into the enemy. That's something I explain immediately.

Symptoms are never the enemy. They are a messenger. They're trying to tell you something. So I ask them if there's, if your symptoms were screaming something at you at the top of their voice, what

would they be telling you? Sometimes an answer comes up right away. Sometimes they have to journal about it, but I try to get their attention away from the severity of the symptoms into emotional problems.

What's bothering them? What's making them frustrated? What's making them feel dissatisfied, neglected. So initially we basically take an emotional approach.

David Hanscom: I know, I like that. I think you might know about what we call the dynamic healing model that you have your stresses or challenges.

You have your nervous system, it takes in the sensory input, then your body's chemistry. It's either fight or flight or safety. And so that's where you have, none of this stuff is psychological, by the way. It's all physiological. When you're under chronic stress, your whole body reacts and you get all sorts of physical symptoms because.

When your body chemistry changes, it creates symptoms. Like you said, I like your approach where, what are these signals trying to tell you? And it tells you that you're feeling threat and then the response is physical. 'cause you're having real symptoms and you had shoulder pain. That's quite severe.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes.

David Hanscom: And.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I don't patie up performance pain, nerve pain. One Doctor Diagnos diagnosed me with fibromyalgia, actually.

David Hanscom: But luckily, yeah, and why I quit my surgical practice is that the medical world, I'll use the word, has programmed the patients into thinking that everything has a structural component.

And it's rarely a structural component for chronic symptoms because structures are just there. They're not actively, a bone spurs not actively pinching a nerve. The nerve is sensitized and responding. So structure actually is rarely the cause of symptoms. It's your body's chemistry in this whole fight or flight response and it changes the brain.

You have neuroplastic pain, so when you, so I like the, that's an interesting way. I've never really thought about it. So when I. You ask that question, what's the response you get from patients? Because they're gonna instantly think if you say the pain's in my head, and that's a big one to get past.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. In fact, one of the things I like to explain a lot is that the pain is always physical as well. Maybe it's not structural, but it has a physical manifestation, right?

So, I just like to get to give a simple example. Let's say you are really nervous and your heart rate increases, right? So, the nervousness is coming like from your emotional state.

You're nervous. But the heart rate increase can be measured on a heart rate monitor. It's a real physical symptom, right?

And it's the same for neuroplastic symptoms, basically. They're just physical manifestations, but the root cause is emotional, right?

David Hanscom: And I define emotions as the state of your body's chemistry.

Now, if you feel fight or flight, that's what you feel. Thoughts or input, emotions are what you feel. So that means your body chemistry has changed. For example, I, at one point, my 17 different symptoms has skin rashes. That's the mast cells being activated and causing skin rashes. And so the physical changes are real.

So the problem that we both discussed before this podcast was that if people engage and they stick with it, at some point they consistently heal. Is that a fair statement? So the question I have is that initial engagement. If you're a patient that really isn't believing this. Do you have any approaches or I have to let it go if I can't really convince somebody who thinks it's structural, then it's, other than structural.

I've learned. The harder I argue the worse it gets, but, so I like what you said about the pain's a signal, which it's telling you. Have you found that helpful or what are some of the ways you do to help people understand that this really is a physiological mind body neuroplastic problem?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. First of all, we look at certain examples from their own life. Maybe some of them notice that the pain got worse after a stressful period or the pain changes and, so we look at the manifestation that it doesn't make sense from a structural perspective. So we make a case for that.

But I know that doesn't always work. There's always doubt, right? So I always say, allow the possibility that this could work for you. Just keep an open mind and follow the process with curiosity. 'cause whatever you're gonna be doing, the emotional release, it's still good for you, right?

Even if you have no symptoms, it's good to be in tune with your emotions, to validate your emotions, right? To engage in stuff that bring you relaxation, right? So not, and then see what happens. And I always explain that pain free or symptom-free, it's a side effect. It's never the direct effect.

You cannot force it. It's a side effect to your nervous system, relaxing. To you letting go of the fear and of the resistance.

Because the problem is resistance. We resist our symptoms. We really don't want them. And so we try to fix them. We vilify them, we make them into the monster.

David Hanscom: So, what are some of these specific, I know you have a quite a tool bag of things that you offer people.

What's some of the general starting places you start? You education's a big deal. Yes. They may not believe you initially, but still educate 'em as to the nature of the problem is always the first step in any domain, but especially in your own body. So, education's big, but what are some of the things that you work on next as far as moving them along?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yeah, so one of them is expressive writing or journaling. So I get them to write down their, what they're feeling, what's on their mind in an in as unfiltered way as possible without sugarcoating anything. Just write down what they need to say. Just give their inner self a voice. So, I usually recommend that about three times a week, especially in the beginning, to see what comes out, because usually.

People find out that they're angry about something. So yeah. And there's research backing this up, right? That it works. The other thing, however, that I work on simultaneously is how they react to the symptoms themselves, their relationship with the symptoms. So I get them aware of. How they might be moving with tension, how they might be treating their body as if they have a structural problem and I get them to drop those habits as much as possible.

Just to give you a simple example, if they have shoulder pain and they tend to massage the area a lot, I tell them like, listen try not to massage it all the time. Try not to put heat or ice on it all the time because that's sending the message to your brain that you have a problem.

And what we want is we want to make this into a much smaller issue in your brain, right? I tell them at the moment, it's a huge monster. We want to make it into a little issue in your brain, into a smaller problem, and you can do this by the way you behave in your day-to-day life. You have to res to, to go about your life almost mimicking someone who doesn't have your issue.

For example, if you have back pain and your husband doesn't have back pain, I tell them like, can you try to maybe sit down or stand up as much as possible as your husband would without overthinking the move?

And even

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: the morning, can you try to walk a little bit more naturally? I know that sometimes the pain gets in the way, but I noticed that if we don't buy into it, if we just keep on, doing things gradually, but naturally it tends to go away.

It tends to work pretty well.

David Hanscom: Yeah, no, that's a brilliant approach because you said something that I use in my practice, but you said it in a different way, is that the more attention you pay to any given injured body, part or symptom, your brain takes more and more of your neurological attention. Then you quit thinking about other things that are more enjoyable and creative.

So you're right, this pain becomes a monster and the actual whatever started, it doesn't change, but the amount of neurological activity paid to it grows dramatically. And it says, occupying your entire existence. One of my fellows said one day was interesting because this is way before I knew about chronic pain work that you do surgery to get rid of somebody's sciatica, but they still have back pain.

And my fellow made one point that. The pain they have left is now a hundred percent of their pain. And so your brain takes and focuses on a different body part that's still, pain is just as bad as the sciatica, which was the worst pain. But you're right. Where you place your consciousness is where it grows or doesn't grow.

So I, that's really brilliant. So what are some of the next steps after that? I think that's really interesting.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: So what are the next steps? So basically, yes, I get them to think of all the things that, they're doing differently because of the pain, all the things they're avoiding all the things they're dreading, and I get them to choose the easiest one.

And they have to do it or do a version of it. I don't send them running a marathon or anything like that, but I get them aware of how they walk and they're there today. Can they walk a little bit more? Can they start taking the trash out? Maybe doing some more chores around the house and not making the goal to be pain-free.

But the goal is just to do it anyway. And to do it with this more lighthearted attitude. So the goal is always to shift from fear to curiosity, almost to amusement. If you can be amused at your symptom, I can guarantee it'll go away, quite fast. But I know it's very difficult to do that. So it's very important also to, to engage in other things that can come nervous system.

Do enjoyable things, go outdoors. I know I have a lot of clients who spend all their time indoors. That never helps to start reengaging.

David Hanscom: And also, I'm sure you see the same thing, is that the amount of disability they come into you with is profound, but the healing is even more profound.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes.

David Hanscom: It's pretty inspiring.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes, it is. And I'm always amazed every time, because sometimes, you might get someone who's in a, in pretty bad shape and sometimes I myself would feel like, oh my, who am I to tell this person that? He can just resume more activity eventually if they persist at it and they do get better and it doesn't matter the severity of the symptoms.

It matters how you change. You shift this reaction, this response to it, and not to just to the symptoms, but your response to life in general. The problems you face in your personal life. How can you maybe

change that your own relationships? How can you reduce the pressure in your life in general to prevent symptoms from flaring up and warning you that, that you've got too much on your plate.

So it's tricky because there are so many aspects to it, right? It's not just, it's not just the way you think about your body, it's also the kind of pressures you have in life, the kind of emotions you have repressed. So you do have to look at different angles, and certain angles will apply to some certain people more than to others.

So you really have to adjust according to the person, right?

David Hanscom: So, you mentioned that you use emotional awareness training.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. So basically, in session we just have a look at what might be brewing inside, right? What kind of pressure this person might have, what kind of relationship issues.

I think relationships are a huge factor for a lot of people with chronic pain. And it doesn't have to be like, negative relationships. It could be loving relationships, but it's the kind of attitudes we bring in. The people pleasing, the fear of conflict. That maybe the other partner wouldn't even be aware of how much fear certain, his partner would be having.

So I made them aware of these traits. So that's the, I always say there are two components, right? There's the emotional component. Have a look at your personal life, at your values. Are you meeting your needs? Are you living in alignment with your values? And then there's the other component, which is your relationship with your body.

Are you embodying the belief that you are, okay. Are you sending positive messages to your brain? Are you interrupting the fear-based messages as much as you can? I know that certain fear responses are automatic, but sometimes we can notice them. We can start by noticing them, and this is where, for example, mindfulness and pain reprocessing can be really helpful to get us to notice symptoms, to be less judgmental.

To get us to yeah, to respond differently with, to symptoms. Because if we respond to symptoms as if they're not a huge problem with amusement, even then the brain will be like, Hey, this is not working. This isn't a real problem, so why keep firing the alarm?

David Hanscom: Yeah. No, that's really really excellent.

The process, if I hear you correctly, in the big picture, is calming the, if you said you ever use one word the end of the day with reassurance, calming down your emotions.

David Hanscom: Being curious, even playful with it. If I hear the general theme of what you do is basically helping people calm down.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I like to call it attitude. It's a change in attitude, right?

Towards symptoms and towards also life in general. At the end of the day. Not to run away from your emotions, but to be able to validate them, right? And with your symptoms, not to make them into this huge problem, but to change your attitude.

And I like to give this analogy, imagine that you have a kid and it's having a tantrum. You're not really scared of the kid. You don't get super angry because you get super angry. The kid is gonna cry even louder, right? So, it's the kind of attitude you'd have with that kid that you have to bring towards your symptoms a bit more lighthearted, a bit more calming, telling it that it's okay, it's gonna be fine and you don't need to, make a tantrum and life's gonna go on whatever.

But even the tone of voice, it's lighthearted.

David Hanscom: Which, that's a great analogy because when you are frustrated and your kid's acting out and you, your frustration comes back out, why you stimulate their brain to even be more frustrated? So then we all have our self critical voice that fires things up even more and

Dr. Sarno called it rage. When you feel trapped by your pain and trapped by life, why you just. Really get upset and that makes things worse. And also, pain is a problem, but it's that fear of the pain that actually fires things up in a big way, or being angry or res, resentful that you're in pain is what really fires things up.

So, learning to be with it, use it, be curious about it. I like your language about, it's a signal, it's a message to you about something, whatever it is. And yeah, no I think your approach is really wonderful. So do you have any sort of final concepts to talk to us about that? We'll refer back to your website again about how to access your services.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: You mean like a final concept for people to keep in mind?

David Hanscom: Just in general, if I'm gonna go see Miriam, what do what do I expect? What's my, because we, you and I both know the focus, so everybody comes to. I think us because they want to get rid of their pain.

And inadvertently, you're inadvertently, you're focusing on the pain more.

So that's a big paradigm shift right there of actually just focusing on your life and calming and let the pain do what it's gonna do. So that's a big switch for people. So when they come to you, I'm assuming the expectations is I wanna be out of pain. And how do you deal with that?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes. So yeah, I always give as much as little airtime as possible to people to complain about their symptoms.

So

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: I'll hear you. We will make a case for the symptoms being mindbody or you will already have been diagnosed. By a neuroplastic pain doctor. And after that we will look at the message behind the symptoms. So, what are the symptoms trying to tell you? We're trying to change the way you view them.

Not the enemy, but actually a messenger. I like to say if there is an alarm ringing in the house, you don't get angry at the alarm, right? To get angry at whoever starts the fire. So it's the same thing with the symptoms and yeah, expect to, to, expect anything. It could be about anything. But most of the time the sessions are not about the pain.

It's about how you're going to live your life basically, right?

David Hanscom: Pain's unpleasant, but your response to the pain is what makes the bigger difference and that's what fires up your whole body. I'm excited to meet you and get your message out to the world. We yeah so she, you wrote a book called The Pain Secret, which basically presents these principles of how you help people heal.

Yes. And your website is

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Pain Outside the Box.com.

David Hanscom: Okay. And you do all, and the book is also on Amazon?

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: It's available on Amazon also as an ebook right now.

David Hanscom: Okay. And obviously you have people from. Malta, you're in the middle of the ocean, so I'm assuming you have people from all over the world.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Yes, for sure.

Yeah.

David Hanscom: Okay. Thank you very much and I am excited that you're doing this and best of luck going forward.

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

David Hanscom: You're welcome. Thanks for being on the show.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni: Bye. Bye.

Miriam Gauci Bongiovanni - Healing Begins When Pain Stops Being the Enemy

Tom Masters: I'd like to thank our guest today, Miriam Gauci Bon Giovanni, for being on the show and explaining how she helps patients to change their attitude toward pain and encourages them to challenge their expectation of pain so they can begin to heal.

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.