

## ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - DEBBIE HAMPTON (Katie Elliott & Debbie Hampton)

Eleven years ago, Debbie Hampton suffered a brain injury that left her unable to speak. On today's show she chats with me about her extraordinary recovery, as well as 'The Best Brain Possible', the website she founded to share information about mental health and how to rewire your brain.

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Hello Debbie.

Hey Katie.

Thank you so much for joining me. Where are you today?

I'm in the United States on the very east coast in the state of North Carolina in what's called the Piedmont Triad in between the mountains on the west side and the beach on the east.

That sounds fantastic. You're my very first guest from North Carolina. Can you tell me a bit about what you do and why?

Well, let's see. I've spent the last decade recovering from a brain injury inflicted on myself. I tried to commit suicide because of depression and anxiety and following the attempt I was in a coma for a week and when I woke up I didn't know that I had children, I didn't know that I had gotten divorced, I couldn't speak, my hands constantly shook and so it was a good three to four years of doing nothing but dedicating myself daily to recovering physically, mentally, and emotionally from the brain injury and the depression. And in healing my brain, I healed my depression and also changed my life. I changed the way I think, the way I approach life, everything and I realised that I have the power to, not change my external circumstances - we all have only so much influence over that - but we all have 100% influence over how we frame what happens within our own heads. And that, for me, made a tremendous difference. Let's see, I'm 11 years post brain injury and I have a job now part-time, but my passion is spreading the message of mental health and brain health and I've also written two books and I have a website where I inform, educate and inspire people to live brain-healthy lives.

That is amazing. Let me just pick up on something, you said after your brain injury you couldn't speak. How did you go from that to where we are today and you are so articulately expressing what you do? How did you teach yourself how to speak again?

Well thanks, but you'll find that I have little tics here and there. I mean I have aphasia where I can't think of words and I've learned ways to work around things. When I woke up from my coma I could only make sounds and it was really disturbing to me, the things that came out of my mouth - mangled sounds and mutilated words, and it didn't match at all what I heard in my head. My brain had to rewire itself and the first year out, I mean it was really rough and then every year it got progressively better, but my brain didn't just naturally heal. It did somewhat, but it plateaued at about a year and that's when I've got busy and said, "Ok, let's go the rest of the way". I did things like neurofeedback, hyperbaric oxygen, acupuncture, I exercised every day for years, I went to a voice coach, I did music therapy, I mean it didn't just naturally get better and my brain didn't just naturally heal. But whether it's an injury or depression or anxiety or whatever, there are ways that you can put your brain to work for you. And most of us don't know that. And our brains work against us. I know mine sure did. Used to - not anymore.

So let me pick up on that - when you had the brain injury, you couldn't speak, there were lots of abilities that you'd taken for granted beforehand that you no longer had. And then during that process of recovery you learned about neuroplasticity, you learned about your brain's ability to be rewired when given the correct stimulus and support. At what point did you realise that that could actually have an impact on your mental health as well as more physical symptoms like the loss of speech?

Well, I would say the impact was more mental than physical and I have a really interesting story about how I realised that. About six months post-brain injury, my older brother, he planned a trip to Hawaii with me. And I think he pretty much just did that because he knew I needed something to look forward to. I was still severely brain injured. My ex-husband sued me for custody of my kids and moved out of state. So I needed a lot to look forward to. I need to something to be happy. And me and my brother travelled to Hawaii and on one of the very first days there we went snorkelling and I was a good swimmer. I mean I was a lifeguard all through high school and college and I swam competitively. But after the brain injury, my coordination was not nearly as good. It was an effort just to get the hang of breathing out of the tube. So we went to a little bay in Hawaii to do some snorkelling. And we were content at first to just snorkel around the little bay. But I went out to the mouth of the bay where it opens into the ocean and the current here was a lot stronger and because it was Hawaii, there were lava rocks jutting up from the bottom and I accidentally kicked one of those rocks with my fin and my fin fell off. And without my fin, I was not nearly as strong a swimmer and it was life or death. I was panicking and I was gulping water and I made it over to one of these rocks and climbed up on it. But because it was coral, it was cutting my hands and my feet, cause they're sharp. So I saw a sailboat in the middle of the bay. It

was the only other sign of life in this whole bay. It was just a little serene looking sailboat bobbing there. And so I decided to swim out to the sailboat. That seemed like a better option than clinging to the rocks. And so I managed to grab the side of the sailboat and squeak out, "Help!", and this scruffy looking man came up on deck and looked like, "Am I really seeing that?" But he put a canoe in the water and rowed me ashore to my brother and we finished off the trip and it wasn't until I got home that it occurred to me - six months earlier, I had tried to commit suicide. So here I was, faced with a life or death situation, drowning. Why didn't I just slip under the water and finish what I started six months earlier? And it occurred to me that I didn't want to die. That what was convincing me that life was bad and that I wanted to die was my head, my mind, my thoughts. But my instinct and my innate nature was to survive, and from that point on I decided I did want to live and I started acting like it and learning everything I could about rehabilitating my brain physically and rehabilitating my mind mentally. And I took my brain from that plateau to the next level, which probably was two more years on to where it fully healed. I mean, I think anybody meeting me today would say, "You had a brain injury?" But if you spent a good amount of time with me, you would think, "Something's not quite right with her." But I'm okay with that.

That's extraordinary. That's really extraordinary. So something I've observed as someone who's had long-term mental health problems of my own in the past - what I think is really interesting and really kind of sensitive when one talks about mental health is the fact that when you are in a really bad place, when you are extremely depressed or anxious, when people tell you things that you can do and say, "This can help you to get better", it can be very, very easy to hear those things as criticisms or judgements and for them to feel actually very disheartening. I don't know if you've had that experience where you feel that you therefore should be getting better and if you're not, it's just another stick to beat yourself with. Do you know what I'm talking about?

I do. It's been a long time since I personally have been depressed, but I do remember that. But I would say the very first thing is a person that's depressed has to make the decision, "Am I going to help myself or am I going to hurt myself?" That is the first thing they have to do. And that does not require getting out of bed. And all they have to do after they make the decision to help themselves is work with their mind. And by that I mean, don't believe what you think. Your thoughts are not you. They're randomly generated by your subconscious and they're primarily made up of your wounds, your fears and trauma. Your brain holds on to things that are "bad". Like Velcro. Dr Siegel, he says, your brain is like Velcro for bad and Teflon for good, meaning that it's our innate instinct to hold on to something that causes fear or panic. Because think about it - your brain's number one priority is always your survival. And our ancestors were gonna survive by remembering where they almost got eaten. They didn't survive by remembering a

nice napping spot. So your brain automatically holds on to and repeats nonstop your fears, your anxieties, your regrets, your pain. That's its innate instinct, but you have the power - all of us do - to stop that loop, interrupt that pattern and insert some conscious thinking and say, "Okay, I want to help myself. Is that true? Am I helping myself by going over and over and over this hurtful experience? How can I reframe that to be kinder to myself and to extend some compassion or forgiveness to myself?" Yeah, trying to commit suicide was probably the stupidest thing I've ever done. I totally screwed up my kids' lives. I screwed up my life and if I felt things were bad before, oh my God, I mean I made them so much harder, but rather than torturing myself with regret about doing that, what I learned to do was to extend compassion to myself. Yeah, it was stupid, but I was doing the best I could with who I was at the time and basically we all are in any given moment. And if the best you can do is lay in bed and challenge your thoughts, maybe if you're telling yourself everything is hopeless, challenge that thought. "Is everything really hopeless? What evidence do you have of that? What's something you could say to yourself that makes you feel a little bit better?" And I'm not talking about just 'think positive' because like a lot of people, I think that probably doesn't help. Like you said, I mean it kind of just makes people feel worse. But maybe you could think of something a little bit better than everything is hopeless. Maybe everything isn't hopeless. Maybe things could turn out okay. How is that gonna make you feel as opposed to saying everything is horrible?

But unfortunately, one of the things that happens when we get into those very difficult psychological states is that we tend to believe that what's going on in our heads is somehow true. Don't we? We can get very attached to the thoughts and very clear that our interpretation of things is simply how they are. I know that that was true for me, that I would have fought to defend my beliefs even if it was absolutely in my interest for them to be wrong. Which is a bizarre thing, isn't it? You want so much to be right, that things are as you think they are, that you will defend that belief even if that makes the world an intolerable place to be.

Right.

Like you, I found that gentleness, that compassion, that kindness towards self, for me, that was right at the heart of everything. So it was fantastic for me to learn about neuroplasticity. It was fantastic to start exercising regularly and practicing mindfulness and all of those things. But actually I don't think any one of those things would have helped if I hadn't started being nicer to myself. And I know that that's the thing that pretty much everyone I've ever spoken to who struggling with mental health problems finds difficult: being nice to themselves. Have you got any advice or experience around how to start being kinder on the inside? Cause very often we're good at being kind to people on the outside, but we don't know how to do it internally.

I have this theory and I haven't found the science to prove it yet, but I will one day. But I have this theory that our mental health is a reflection of our relationship with ourselves and everything else stems from that. Like you just said, if we improve the relationship that we have with ourselves, then it helps depression. It helps anxiety, it helps you not have those unkind thoughts. Establish rituals, habits, of forgiveness meditations, of exercising so many times per week, of establishing a gratitude journal. Like I said, our brains are so good at noticing the bad. We don't have to make the effort to do that. Our brain automatically does that. So we have to make the effort to notice the good, whether it's the sun shining or a cat purring in my lab or a really good song playing on the iPod. Little things like that are just as valid and they change your brain chemicals, just like marinating in bad thoughts and panic changes your brain chemicals. It's a feedback loop. Your brain does what it knows and if it's in the habit of stress, fear, anxiety, depression, it's going to generate more of that. So you have to intentionally make the decision to help yourself and maybe start out small. I mean don't say, "I'm going to go to the gym everyday for an hour". Start small with, "I'm going to wake up and mentally just make a list of three things I'm thankful for". And then maybe another small thing, drink a glass of water or spend five minutes meditating. Start out small and little wins increase your dopamine and they increase your motivation to continue and then you expand it. Maybe expand something you're already doing or add something new, but celebrate your accomplishments along the way. And then every night, notice what you did good that day. We are so good at picking out what we did bad or what we didn't do or what we could have done better. How much effort do we ever spend thinking, "Well, I did go to the gym, I showed up for work, I wrote that blog, I took a walk"? I mean it seems kind of silly, but making these intentional shifts in your mind builds positive momentum and it's a way to start extending that compassion to yourself and being kinder and gentler with yourself.

Mmm. I love all that and those are exactly the same things that I've been learning in my own way, experientially, over here across the Atlantic. I think it's interesting, we live in an age of to do lists.

Oh yes.

There's always this sense that we should be doing more. And you know, we never get to the bottom of the to do list. There's always something new. I think there's great value in having a 'done list'. I quite like having a 'done list'.

I like that!

You know you get to the end of the day and you just say, well, I did do this.

I like that!

I know in the early days of my recovery, there were days when if I made a sandwich and I ate it, that was pretty good going. These days, that seems almost incredible, but there were times when you know to get out of bed, make something to eat and manage to eat it was right there at the extent of my capability. But by actually noticing that that was an achievement and rewarding myself by noticing it, it made it a bit easier to do a little bit more the next day.

Exactly. Before the brain injury, I was such a perfectionist and I did so much, but I was so hard on myself. It was never enough. And after the brain injury, a good day was emptying the dishwasher or taking the dog for a walk. And in a way, the brain injury taught me to have compassion for myself and made me realise that all the stuff that I did before I totally took for granted and I didn't even appreciate how awesome I was. I mean, I was pretty awesome, but I never realised it and it never was enough. And the person then it wasn't enough for was me. Yeah.

Yeah. That seems to be a recurring theme when I talk to people who've been very hard on themselves or who really struggled, that theme of not feeling enough and being very perfectionistic and demanding and judgmental of oneself seems to come back over and over again, doesn't it?

Webster's Dictionary defines enough as 'an adequate amount to fit a need'. So what that means is enough is subjective. You and I get to decide what enough is for each one of us and it's our job to get rid of whoever's voice is in our head saying that we're not enough, and to substitute that compassion, that gentleness, that decision that I talked about to help ourselves. Substitute a kind voice that says, "Look what I did today. That is enough and you know what, it wasn't everything that I wanted to do, but it's okay. There's always tomorrow."

So in each conversation I have, I ask our guest for the day if they can suggest a *Little Challenge* and a *Little Challenge* is something that listeners could try at home. It's something that doesn't require any special equipment. It doesn't require any physical skill or ability. It doesn't cost anything, but it's something that if you do it regularly, you start to notice some kind of benefit in your life. And I'm wondering, maybe it's something you've touched on already, but what would your *Little Challenge* be?

My *Little Challenge* is one thing that I use almost every day and that I think helped me more than anything to develop that mindset shift that you and I talked about, and that is to come back into the present and notice the good that is in my life at that moment. For instance, when I'm freaking out, worried about finances or some crisis that just popped up, what helps me more than anything is to come back into the present and go, "Okay, notice my physical surroundings. What is good in my physical surroundings? I'm healthy. I've got a roof over my head. I'm warm. There's electricity". I mean, it may sound kind of silly, but what it does, it

actually, shifts the attention in your brain to your consciousness from your stress response, and it starts to challenge your habitual responses and your habitual ways of thinking and starts shifting those patterns.

So moving from a very reactive state?

Exactly.

When your amygdala is activated, when you're in your kind of 'fight, flight, freeze' mode, to actually becoming conscious of where you are. And then on top of that, it sounds like a kind of gratitude practice. So you are actually feeling grateful for some things immediately around you because it is so easy to get caught up in the head, isn't it? So easy to get caught up in the thinking about what might happen and then completely ignoring the reality of the here and now.

And it's a kind of physical grounding practice. Like you said, I'm impressed, you know, all the terminology. It's physically grounding yourself into present, calming your breath and noticing the good. And if you do that habitually over time, it will actually change your brain.

Indeed, indeed. Thank you, Debbie. So if listeners would like to find out more about what you do, how can they find you online?

Okay. I've got a website called [TheBestBrainPossible.com](http://TheBestBrainPossible.com) and it's got all kinds of information that we've talked about and more that will calm your brain and insert some conscious awareness into your life and change your brain patterns.

Fantastic. I'm so grateful to you for your time today. Thank you so much, Debbie. It's been an absolute pleasure to talk with you and hear a bit more about your story. Thank you for being so open and honest with me.

Well, thank you, Katie. I've really enjoyed it.