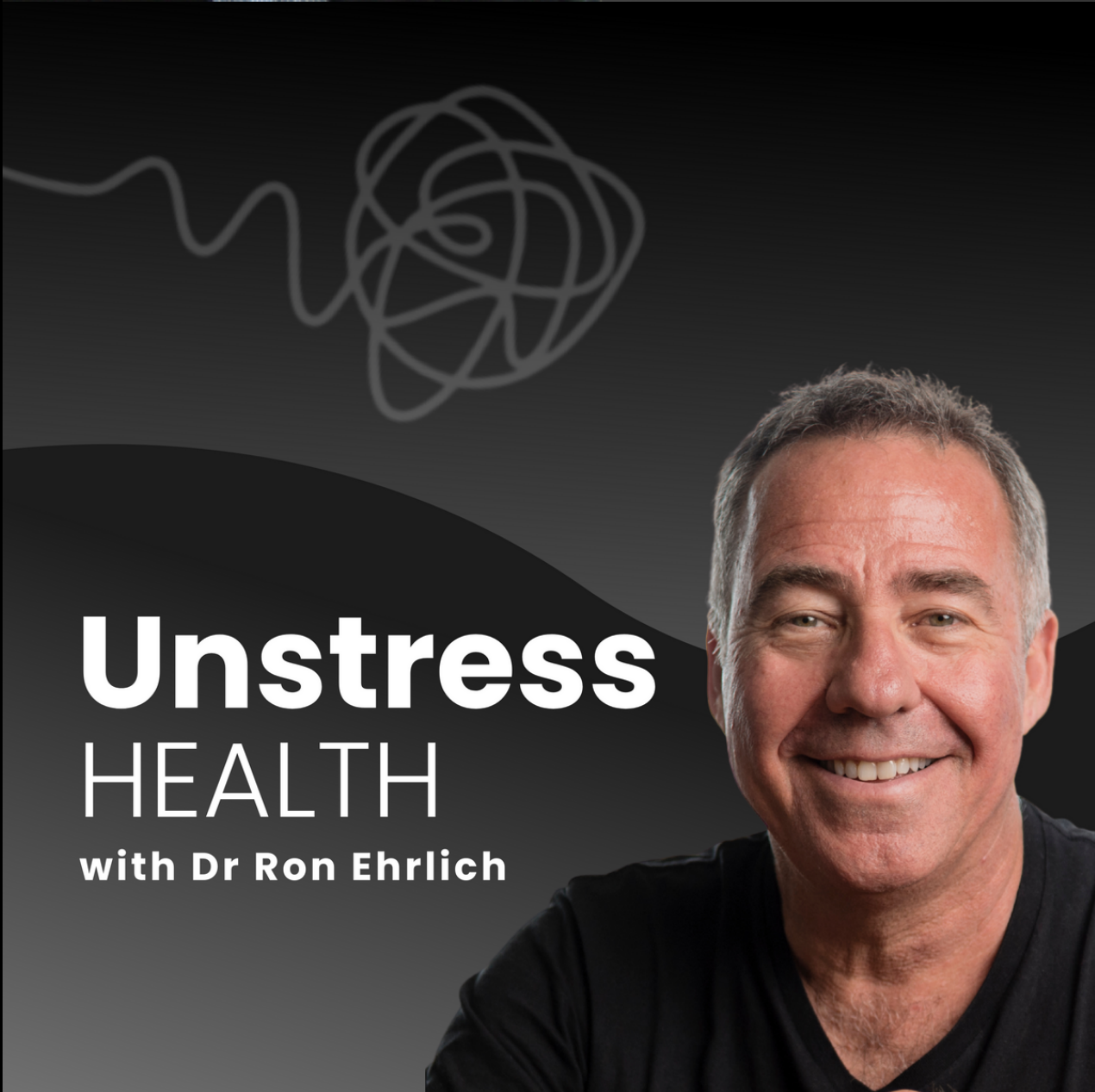




UNLOCKING THE POWER OF COMPASSION

Prof Paul Gilbert



Unstress HEALTH

with Dr Ron Ehrlich



Podcast Transcript

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:00] Hello and welcome to Unstress. My name is Dr Ron Ehrlich. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which I'm recording this podcast. The Gadigal people of the Eora Nation and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging. I do that out of respect for the fact that they have been here for 65,000 years. In comparison, we've been here for 250. So it's a little bit too early to call as to who will be the most successful but certainly we have much to learn from our indigenous First Nations people about connection and respect for country and people and how interconnected those two are.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:00:44] Well, today we explore the subject of compassion, and we do that with an internationally recognised clinical psychologist, researcher, and author, [Professor Paul Gilbert](#). Now, Paul is the founder of the [Compassion Focussed Therapy](#) for mood and anxiety disorders, where shame and self-criticism present major difficulties. This is very much about not just compassion for others, but a compassion for ourselves. He's a professor of clinical psychology at the University of Derby in England and created the [Compassionate Mind Foundation](#). We will have links to those with that website in our show notes. Now, Paul has published over 20 books and 300 academic papers, and book chapters. He is the bestselling author of [Overcoming Depression](#) and a wonderful book that I just completed [The Compassionate Mind](#). I hope you enjoyed this conversation I had with Professor Paul Gilbert. Welcome to the show, Paul.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:01:48] Thank you very much for inviting me, Ron. Pleasure to be with you.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:01:51] Paul you have written so much on compassion and actually in mental health, in general, but how did your interest in this particular aspect of psychology, compassion? When did that start? How did that start? I know we're going back a while...

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:02:09] Well, I always have an interested in Buddhist psychology. So that was since I was a teenager and part of that was because at university it was the days of the Beatles and the Maharishi and all that and all the nice women used to go to the meditation courses so I followed that. So I had an interest in that but I was a psychotherapy specialist. Specialising in complex depressions, I did my Ph.D. in Edinburgh, and one of the therapies that were developing during the 70s and 80s was called Cognitive Therapy. Now in Cognitive Therapy what happens is you help people identify a set of thoughts, the ways of thinking that are associated with the condition that they have. So, for example, people who have anxiety issues tend to generate anxiety thoughts and ruminate on them, like, you know, "I'm going to get ill or need to die or something." And people with depression tend to generate negative ideas about the world, the future, and the self, you know, "it's all hopeless and I'm no good." So what you do is you help people stand back from that and come up with some alternatives so they begin to break out of the loop between the thinking and the feeling they keep feeling because they kind of spiral each other downwards so that can work pretty good for some people. So... But for some of the clients I was seeing, they would struggle with some of that cognitive stuff and I had a lady who I... who'd been adopted and yet had a very difficult background and had these very strong beliefs that she shouldn't have been born. Although she had a good relationship with the children and her husband, she'd made a number of suicide attempts. Anyhow, so we were able to do the stand back. Let's look at how your life has gone and the successes you've made and she could do all that. But she said, "Yeah, but, you know, I understand that's the case, but I still don't feel any better."

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:04:04] So one day I asked her, "How do you hear these thoughts in your mind then? I mean, when you realise that you've got a good relationship with your husband, you've been a terrific mother and so on. How do you hear them?" She says, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well, speak them out as you hear them." And she said, "Okay, come on, you're doing Cognitive Therapy and you've got a husband who cares about you. You've got three lovely children. Look at the evidence!" Well, I could have folded up my chair, you know.

So what... I then began to explore with my client is not just what they were thinking, but how they were thinking, and found that actually, even when they were trying to be helpful, the emotional tone was incredibly hostile or contentious or just cold, you know? So the obvious thing was to warm it up. So the first thing was, okay, we can take those basic ideas, but actually imagine a part of you that was very compassionate, that wanted to be helpful to you, that wanted to be kind to you, supportive of you, and just create that tone. And she said, "Absolutely not. I'm not. What are you talking about? Why would I want to do that? You know, that's just fluffy. That's soft, you know?" That's in our training we've actually got her talking about this therapy from 25 years ago. So that was the second shock. The first shock, the hostility when people try to be helpful to themselves is almost self-hating contempt. The second thing is that clients often didn't want to do it. And the third thing, which I probably should have been aware of, was that when they did start to do it, we ran into all kinds of problems.

Now, to understand this, it is important to note that every motivational system carries its own trauma. So, for example, if you like going on holidays, right? You're an explorer, you love holidays you look forward to. But then one year you get very badly beaten up and put in hospital the next year that you see an advert for a holiday, particularly to that place, perhaps you won't have a positive experience, you'll have a negative one that will trigger your trauma. So for people who've got very traumatic early histories, the care system, when you begin to stimulate that sense of caring and, you know, kindness is actually what you're stimulating, the first throes of it, as it were, tend to be trauma. So they start to begin to experience compassion, but then it links them into this deep sense of loneliness and anger ability. So what we discovered then was that we have to really work on often quite a lot of grief and unprocessed rage in the care system before they could even start to think about how they could generate compassion. So that's how we came to compassion, because therapy was just realising that many of our clients, particularly those in trauma, they just cannot do it because the care system, that part of that motivational system is got so much trauma in it that until you actually, as it were, detoxify that system, they can't allow themselves to feel it because it takes them into so much emotional pain. So that's what CFT it is about really.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:07:04] I mean, we've done many a topic... We've done many podcasts on trauma and depression, and we've been exploring recently, actually psychedelics as a way of breaking that cycle, which just people kind of... It's interesting how you talk about the self-talk that goes on, which I think we all hear in our own heads. This is why this is just so important, why I mean, this sounds so obvious, but why is being compassionate to ourselves and to others so important?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:07:37] Well, a great question because there are a number of reasons. One, obviously psychological, but another one is physiological. Now, we know that what you think about and what you imagine has a big impact on your brain. So, for example, supposing that you are very hungry and you see this wonderful meal when you go out for a wonderful meal, that would stimulate your stomach acids and so on but also if you haven't got money, so you just fantasise this meal. Now, if you're a meat eater, it could be a steak. If you're a vegetarian, it could be a then a stuffed pepper or something that will stimulate the hypothalamus, which will get just love. Again, if you see something very sexy on the television or whatever. This will stimulate your pituitary, which will release hormones into your body, and then you get the arousal and so forth. But equally, you could just lay a bed and fantasise. So we know then that the images and the ways in which we think can have very powerful impacts on how our body works. And those are just very simple examples. Most people understand that in sexual fantasies can produce pretty major changes in the body that's why you want them to do it. But the same basic principle is that if you are critical to yourself and hostile to yourself, you will be driving your stress system, your stress system that eventually you will get exhausted and depressed. On the other hand, if you practice compassion, what you're doing is you're driving very different brain systems and very different systems in your body, and over time, as you drive those systems with compassion, that sense of kindness and helpfulness, that has a very positive effect on a whole range of systems in your body, from your immune system to cardiovascular system and it has a very powerful effect on your emotional systems. You will start to feel lighter in yourself, you start to feel happier in yourself. So how we drive the brain, whether we drive it through criticism, the fear here and anger in themselves or whether we drive it through compassion is really very, very important.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:09:34] You talked about the threats. Well, hang on. Before I want to... Actually talked about the threat system, I don't want to get on to that. It's actually how I heard about you. I was doing an integrated breathing therapy course and your name came up about this whole threaten, soothe action, and soothe. I want to get on to that. But is compassion... Still, sticking with compassion for a moment? Is it uniquely mammalian? Is it? Does it cut across the entire where are we in the evolutionary scale of things? Is compassion uniquely mammalian?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:10:04] Well, it's a wonderful question. Now, caring behaviour at the evolution of caring behaviour is a little bit complicated because there are lots of different strands to it. So one strand is rescuing behaviour. Now, what if... It turns out that there are species of ants that will actually rescue each other if they get their legs broken, that they were carrying them back to the nest where they get licked and looked after, and so on. So rescuing behaviour is very, very interesting and we know that there are some individuals who are very attracted to rescuing behaviour, you know, in the rescue services, firefighters and so forth, but they might not make the most compassionate parents or friends. Right, so rescue behaviour is a particular kind of compassion where you put yourself at risk to save others and of course, that's the Christian story and so on and so on. So that's a very interesting form of compassion. Then another form of compassion is compassion, which came when we became hunter-gatherers, and that's linked to the more caring I am in my community, the more my community accepts me, and so on. But the one you're interested in and the big one is the mammalian caring. Although birds also care for their young, of course. But so what happened here was a lot of species such as turtles and fish and so forth, they don't have any caring behaviour. They just create thousands of eggs or hundreds of eggs and leave it. And is often... They then leave them to it, you know, they don't take them out for Sunday lunch, anything like that whereas when it came to mammals live birth was a change from egg laying, and that also required the parent to start to provision the infant to provide them with food, warmth, comfort, and protection. So that then meant that those brains of the mammals or, you know, the warm-blooded, started to have to pay attention to the needs and the suffering of another, in this case, the infant.

So they were evolving systems in the brain that would allow them to be attentive to those things. And over many, many millions of years, those capacities to be attentive to the needs and the suffering distress of another has become very, very major in the mammalian line. And so most mammals now spend quite a lot of time caring for their offspring because they're designed to do it. And those same mechanisms actually to do with oxytocin, the stuff that's that, those are the mechanisms we use when we are caring of other people too.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: *[00:12:31]* Hmm. It's interesting when you talk about self-talk, what goes on in our. Heads and you realise that imprinting is so early on in our lives. Like if we are cared for, particularly in the first, I think the Jesuits say show me the, let's say the child at seven and I'll show you the man. That self-talk is very much... Must be imprinted in very early stages, which is kind of frightening as a parent, isn't it? To think what's possible to go wrong. What could possibly go wrong with parenthood?

Prof Paul Gilbert: *[00:13:03]* Yes, that's right. That's right. But I mean, most parents are pretty good. I mean, but the problem is that some parents are not and they're pretty hostile to the children, so forth. So I think generally because parents is always worried. Or am I okay as a parent, I think if you just care for your child and you pay attention, you try to be empathic and understand your child and take an interest in them. Obviously, all of those basic things, I think it tends to work out...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: *[00:13:30]* I know you got... You mentioned and long fascination... You were into Buddhism. And I know from your book you're into Jung and archetypes and all this and you talk about evolutionary psychology. I wondered if you could just tell us what is evolutionary psychology?

Prof Paul Gilbert: *[00:13:46]* Well, evolutionary psychology is a way of understanding how we are, the way we are. And that's because our brain and all living things really has to. So to sit to major problems around the problem of survival and of looking at it. So that means you have to be able to identify risks to in your environment and be able to take, you know, defend yourself against them.

But you also need to be able to go out and get resources to find enough food and so forth. So, you know, brains evolve because they solve challenges to survive and in reproduction. And that's the same for us as well and so we have a whole range of motivational systems which are basically designed for those two things. Right? And so evolutionary psychology helps us to understand how why the brain is the way it is now. This is very important in Compassion Focussed Therapy, because we highlight the fact that none of us chose to be here. I mean, no alum or... Chose to be what it was and relevant chose to be involved. No human to human, no male or female. And so we didn't choose our ethnicity, we didn't choose to up two arms and two legs. We didn't choose to have a body where you put food in one end and let it out the other. We didn't choose to have a body that's very vulnerable to things like viruses. So much of what we are, we are a DNA-created mechanism, basically. Right? But what it also means is, you know, our brains are full of all of these things that evolution plumbed into us, some of which are really pretty harmful now.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:15:14] So, you know, many of the emotions that people have when they have mental health to look at is such as depression, anxiety, paranoia. They don't want them, they don't choose them. I mean, nobody goes on a training course, you know, "my life is so easy, I think I'm going to change, have panic attacks and today I need to have a suicidal depression." Now that doesn't happen. Right? What happens is these brain states take us over because of the way that we're biologically designed and they're pretty bad stuff. And we can also do very bad things to other people as well. So we have to understand then that we have a brain that is evolved with these potentials for all kinds of reasons but actually left to their own devices, they can be incredibly harmful and hence the importance of therapy and hence the importance in Buddhist traditions of training your mind, getting to understand your mind, becoming mindful because, through no fault of your own, that's very, very important. You have a brain that can be quite tricky to deal with, but that's not your fault that's just bad design.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:16:19] Mm-mmm I'm too often intrigued by how we have evolved and we've evolved over millions, if not last hundreds of thousands of years in these small hunter-gatherer groups, which was very

supportive. We each knew our place in it and we each had to cooperate and look after each other. And now we find ourselves in a totally different situation. I know you talk about new brain and old brain. I wondered if you might just talk to us a little bit about the difference.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:16:47] Well, that's terrific. Yeah, I said, basically, we think I mean, bonobos as a species of chimpanzees are interesting. They're slightly different so put them to one side. But basically, we think what happened was that for most primates, it's a male-dominated environment, or at least it's a threat-dominated environment. So individuals get to where they getting in terms of their access to resources through basically threatening others. And this is important because dominance, admission, and particularly submissive behaviour is one of the most important defences in a group. If animals don't submit and they basically get injured and sometimes even killed. So submissive behaviour is very, very important. However, what happened at some point was that the subordinates thought, "Oh, that said, enough of this being dominated by these aggressive males." So they started to gang up, they formed alliances and said there's some evidence that they... It was a gradual shifting towards individuals, forming alliances against dominant, aggressive males. And then they would then excuse me, stop sharing resources. And over a period of probably about 2 million years, that process of sharing and caring became so successful that it actually became one of the drivers of the human brain. And now we have raised that love sharing and caring. You know, you look at the Internet is full of people wanting to teach you how to make fairy cakes or fix your car. I mean, people love sharing and caring. They love doing things together. So we have a brain that's very rich. Excuse me... Like that. And that's come because we gradually moved away from the control and hold the dominant attack.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:18:26] The problem with it is, however, is that with the advent of agriculture, these groups which work very well with sharing and caring because everybody would know everybody and so on. So they became bigger and the return of the aggressive, dominant male. And if you look at the history of the empires, the Vikings, the Romans, the Assyrians, all of them, they had its ires were horrible.

They're all basically aggressive, male-dominant, who then use aggression, torture, violence to maintain their position. And they use a small group of like if Putin today they got a small group of people around them who are the henchmen who maintain order through threat violence. And unfortunately, we've still got quite a lot of these characters in the world today. We haven't really worked out how do we control them now that we're these mega groups rather than small groups. Small groups, You can control them quite easily. But in mega groups, it's much, much more difficult to control these aggressive males than they do horrendous damage. So the great question and, of course, you know, United Nations and so on, but it's not strong enough at the moment.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:19:35] So do you think our psychological heyday was in the hunter-gatherer tribes that had worked out caring and sharing was good? I think there was even an idea that if the best hunter didn't show respect to the rest of the group, he was ostracised and that wasn't a particularly positive place to be. Do you think we were in our heyday in that psychologically, in sharing, and in that hunter-gatherer group?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:20:01] Yes, very much so. From a psychological point of view. I mean, this is a bit of it is you know, there's a lot of individuals who believe that we were much happier. There's also quite some very interesting stuff coming through now, playfulness you know, when hunter-gatherer societies were wild, these individuals are very playful. They want to spend time together out, campfires are always laughing, even though their lives are quite difficult and they are. So the point about it is, is that we have a brain that's really designed for small group. You knew the people that you were living with from the day you were born to the day you die about us, of how we now actually stimulate that brain in these mega competitive groups. Because basically capitalism is driven high levels of competitive behaviour, which is not... I mean, it's not good for us and say we live in a world now of people who, you know, the haves, the have-nots are the have-lots. So we got some very, very serious problems with social hierarchy, social justice, and abuse, and so on and so on. But the point about it is I think we're gradually waking up to the fact that we must try to create cultures and politics that is based on caring, sharing, rather than controlling and holding

and just letting everybody compete and then clean up the blood on the carpet, as it were. So I think we are gradually recognising that we have this and this. Now, the interesting point you made, you also made this point about psychedelics. Now psychedelics are incredibly interesting because one of the experiences when it goes around, they don't always go right, but one of the experience it gives you is a sense of self-transcendence and the sense of connectedness and belonging that seems to be quite profoundly when people experience it. It has a profound impact on people's well-being and mental hope when they feel completely accepted, loved, and so on and so on. The sense of emerging and losing one sense of oneself self-transcendence that is very, very powerful. So we're beginning to realise that there are certain brain states which are associated with this sense of ultimate connectedness, a sense of being loved, and so forth, which is really the higher levels of our consciousness if you like. So the higher levels of our consciousness are not just fighting, dispatching each other and trying to get one up on everybody. The higher levels of our consciousness in the sense of deep interconnectedness.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:22:31] Yes. Look, it's interesting to hear you say that because it's one of the reasons why I think we have so much to learn from indigenous cultures in our... In my own podcast, in the last 18 months or two years, I've made a point of acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land and it's not just out of respect for 65,000 plus years of history, but it's their connection with their... Respect and connection that they show for the land and for people. And this same thing that we find in psychedelics, you know, this connection with everything but heavy... And I wish I must say that the last... You say we're learning about the importance of it. I think the last two years have created those that are learning that those that are benefiting from an alternate. One of the things about it is the modern life is these... The focus on the individual you know, the individual has really become the focus of everything, and with social media reinforcing that. How do you think the individual, this focus on the individual, how has that affected our ability to express compassion?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:23:41] It's a brilliant question. Look, I think the individual is at one level, the concept of the individual and taking individual responsibility is great.

And it gives us an opportunity to be much more aware of ourselves and so forth. Everything, though, comes down to motivation. And the point is, if you are motivated, if you're individuality is motivated because you are competing and you worried about, you know, your place and being shamed or being rejected and so forth, individual... Individualism then is not good at all. But if on the other hand, you are taking responsibility and you realise that you as an individual can have a massive impact on the lives of other people for the better, you can be very, very helpful and you can have that sense of wanting to contribute. Individualism can be helpful, can be useful, so you don't sort of hide your responsibilities in the crowd. "Well, look, I'm not an individual, you know, I'll let everybody else sort out their problems. I'm just back here." No, individuality means you step forward. "No, I want to be the one that actually, you know, comes up with a new treatment of cancer. Whatever it is, I want to be the one that does this." So individuality can be useful, but it really does depend upon the motive. That's always been the key issue in the Buddhist position and to some degree in the Buddhist position individuality is quite important too, because it is your responsibility to train your minds that other people do. So, it really all comes down to how we see what it means to be an individual, whether we see ourselves as separate and therefore better and therefore contemptuous of other people. And that's been part of the problem with the West, not only with how we've treated indigenous people in terms of exploiting them. It's seen as just another resource, but also our contempt. Contempt is a serious problem in capitalism. But if you then see individualism in terms of responsibility taking, I think it's it's an interesting one.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:25:42] Hmm. You've spoken about the threat system, and I wondered if we could just explore that because I... Well, could you explain it to us? Because there is a process, hopefully, which results in a resolution and a soothing that I think we can talk about. Can we talk a little about the threat system and how our modern world is contributing to some of those threats?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:26:05] Yeah, yeah, yeah. So all living things have three basic life tasks, right?

So all living things and this includes the bacteria in your guts, plants, or they have to be able to identify threats to the domain of existence. The league... Trees will turn the leaves off if there's a shortage of water and so on. So, and so species that move or species that can move. They're going to run into threats as they move around in their environment system, moving around in their environment. They have to be able to identify, you know, predator or whatever. So they have to have a system that is sensitive to... Can pick up threats and when they pick up threats, they have to have a system that actually will do something about it. So there's no good means picking up a threat "Oh, look, it's a lion. Okay. What do I do now, then? So I feed it my sandwiches. So probably, No, that's no good." And so you need to have a system that actually prepares you to take actions. So we know then that there are three types of emotion that are linked to the threat system. One is anger, of course, that you attack or threatens you or whatever it is. The other one is anxiety, which means that you either become submissive or you run away or whatever the appropriate action is and the other one is disgust. So if you've taken in something toxic, you need to vomit it out. Or if you smell something that sounds poisonous, then don't eat it. Or if it tastes like that, taste horrible, spit it out. So those are your three basic threat emotions there are others, of course, but anxiety, anger, and disgust. Those are you're big three and those get triggered by stimuli that indicate those domains of threat. So if you if you're focusing the threat that you really would find difficulty in dealing with, then you try and get away from it. If, on the other hand, you can deal with it, you engage with it, and sometimes it is a threat that you can... Aggression may advantage you, can you reduce that.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: *[00:28:03]* And when you and ultimately you are moving towards some sort of resolution where you can now return to calm.

Prof Paul Gilbert: *[00:28:11]* Yes, that's right. So then you have got two types of positive emotions. So the other thing is you can't just be responding to threats all the time. You've got to go out and find something to eat and find shelter and find mates to breed with.

So we call these your drive emotions and emotions that actually make you explore the environments and gives you positive feelings when you succeed. You know, when you find enough food or you find a mate or something good happens to you. Those are positive emotions and those emotions are linked to things like dopamine. So for example, if you win the lottery, I don't know what your lotteries are, but if you win the lottery and you're now with, I don't know, 50 million AUD isn't it? You probably going to have a bit of a dopamine blast. You're probably actually be hypomanic for a while. You know, you try to sleep the night you become a multi-millionaire. I think you would struggle. Why? Because your biological system is designed that when you have an inflow of resources to give you a positive emotion because now you're going to want to use those resources and so on. So people understand then that positive emotions generate these excitement states, this pleasure stage, and if somebody you love agrees to marry you or you land this amazing job always wanted or whatever. So those are your positive emotions and we have small doses of them. You know, like when you go out with your friends and you do something enjoyable, go to a party. Then there's this other sets of emotions, and these are emotions that are linked not to achieving or doing or writing or running away, whatever. These are emotions that are associated with contentment. You're not wanting to make any more money, you've got what you want, you're happy in your relationships. And so now you can just enjoy what we call being... We call it rest and digest. You can just rest and digest, you're not struggling to do anything, you're not trying to achieve anything, you're not running away from lions. You can just be rest and digest and that system is linked to what we call the parasympathetic system. And that does have a settling is... Settling on the self. And that's also the system which is stimulated when we get signals of helpfulness or we get signals of helpfulness like we're loved and cared for. We also have the settling the in the body and in the mind. So those are three basic emotion systems and threat. One is very important and then the one for doing things, achieving things, and then the one for settling. There's your three emotions systems...

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:30:38] But it seems that we are confronted by threats either real or perceived all the time in our modern world. I mean, that threat system and the soothing I would say that is offered to us is sometimes referred to as retail therapy, which may not be the most

satisfying of, you know, I don't know how long the oxytocin or the endorphins last with retail therapy, but what do you what's... when you've perceived what's gone on globally in the last two or three years, you know, with the threat of the pandemic and the anxiety and in fact, the epidemic of anxiety and depression that's gone on, how do you see that resolving? I mean, do we all need a lot of Compassion Focussed Therapy?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:31:31] Is that... It does as therapy perhaps, but certainly a way of coming back together again.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:31:37] Hmm.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:31:39] I think the point that you make is a really excellent one, and that is we realise just how important connected social relationships are to us. So the pandemic hit us, and you're quite right, there's been an increase in depression anxiety in two ways. One, it made the world very... A frightening place because you could get ill and the people you love could get ill. So there was the fear of the actual virus itself, but it was also then the experience of the loneliness and the being stuck in homes and loneliness was one of the problems. But also for some families it increased excuse me, conflict. And unfortunately, we also know that abuse is done this... We also know that forms of abuse increased during the panic, at the pandemic as well. So there's a lot of reasons that are driven that depression and anxiety. So what we need to do to come back and also people some people have lost their jobs, you know, fragile businesses went out of business. And there's a lot of suffering out there in all kinds of ways. So what we need to do is there's no one simple solution, but how to begin to work as communities. Now there's a person that you probably know called Julian Abel who's written a wonderful book called The Compassion Project, and he was a... It was a position and he realised that what we needed to do is to mobilise communities. So he worked with GP's and other groups to start mobilising communities. So communities could actually be mutually self-helpful. And what they found was that you know, admissions to accident and emergency went down, admissions to GP visits went down and people were using their community resources through libraries and all kinds of places to form connections with each other and support each other.

So we do have one or two templates out there about how we can do this, but it is actually bringing communities together. It's in our social relationships that we're going to heal some of the terrible things that happened through the pandemic.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:33:42] It has been an opportunity for global reflection, hasn't it? On what is important. And unfortunately, I think inequality or inequity has increased during this period, but it's highlighted the importance of connection again. You mentioned Compassion Focussed Therapy as an approach which is different from CBT and acceptance and commitment. Tell us a little bit about Compassion Focussed Therapy when you're using that therapeutically with the client, with you... You mentioned you first in the opening, the person who had this, you know, terrible self-talk didn't want to do anything and etc... How does Compassion Focussed Therapy work?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:34:27] Well, it's a great question. There's been a lot of progress in the therapies over the last 30 or 40 years. One of the problems with it is they've all kind of split up Cognitive Therapy now from the, say, the sixties. It's now split up into, as you say... You've got DVT, IC, ACT, the KGB. I think all of these different therapies and all of them have got some fantastic wisdoms and truths to them. But in Compassion Focussed Therapy, I've always been an evolutionist. I mean, my first book, my ebook was called From Depression to Brain State Theory. So basically brain state theories, which tries to understand how different processes affect the patterning of your brain. That's why we're very interested in psychedelics. We're doing some studies in Argentina, actually on psychedelics about Cognitive Therapy was what I was trained in, what I did. And it's a fantastic therapy, except for the fact that if you don't check on the motivation and the emotion behind the cognitive changes, people can get stuck in just trying to convince themselves and so on and so on.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:35:31] Now, good Cognitive Therapies really are sort of on the compassion spectrum anyway, but what we say is that we call it Compassion Focussed Therapy, not compassion therapy. We don't call it compassionate focus. I think some of the interventions recommended by DVT and the ACT community and so on but ensure that the experience of the client is...

The orientation of the client is with compassion so what that means is that we also then train our clients with using various breathing techniques to get the vagus nerve going and body techniques, imagery techniques. So, for example, we would do things like inviting clients to imagine somebody who they could create is a very compassionate other talking to them. Why do we do that? We do that partly because we know that our brain responds very much to imagined interactions. So if you think of your sexual fantasies, you'll be interacting with another in some way. But also when we do compassion work, if you imagine having a dialogue with somebody who's been very compassionate to you, that's slightly different than just trying to imagine yourself being compassionate. So we have a whole range of techniques which take some of the interventions from these other therapies like Cognitive Therapy in most effective therapy, so forth. But we contextualise them in this compassion motivational system where we stimulate the brain to switch into that compassion system. And then when you do those techniques, they tend to be more effective.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:37:08] Hmm. I mean, this is how you mentioned the breathing techniques and switching on the Parasympathetic Nervous System, which is precisely how your name came up in when I was doing the integrative breathing therapy course. I remember when someone many, many years ago when I became interested in this, telling me that you could switch on the parasympathetic nervous system in a minute or two by, you know, controlling the breath. I thought, "Wow, what a tool that is for us all to have and use." What is some... You mentioned, I know in your book to talk about some exercises and broadly speaking, I guess there are two targets, ourselves and others in exercising compassion. What are some things you might say to our listener who may not be going into therapy or focus... Compassion Focussed Therapy, but was wanting to engage more in this? What would be some hints or suggestions or exercises that you think they could do?

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:38:06] Well, the first one is exactly what you say, breathing. Now if they go on to the internet... That goes the internet searches and look for vagal breathing or parasympathetic breathing or whatever they'll find lots of different exercises.

Now, most of these exercises are really orientated to breathe with your diaphragm. So breathe down in the diaphragm so the upper chest shouldn't move when you're breathing. Okay, so all the breath is down and you can imagine your breath going right down to the base of your spine. So the idea is to bring your breath into your body and when you're doing the breathing, make sure your shoulders are up and back because this opens the chest. You can't do it like this. When you're anxious, when you're out of your computer, you tend to curl in your body. That's a threat posture okay? So we deliberately have to pay attention to posture. So posture and breathing is important. Breathing in through the nose, out through the nose. And most... The one we teach is a very basic 5 seconds in hold for 2, 5 seconds out, hold for 2. And you're interested in three things, really the depth of the breath. So really imagining the breath, really feeling that diaphragm, doing the work, because that's where you get your parasympathetic... The rate of the breath, which is about four breaths per minute if you do this well and the rhythm of the breath, which is actually has to be in smoothly and out smoothly. So it's very important, smoothly out, smoothly in. So those are the three things.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:39:30] Now, if you go on the Internet, you'll find lots of variations on that. Some people do 4 and 6 or 4 and 8, 4 seconds in, 8 seconds out, the out-breath is the one that stimulates the parasympathetic so that... All those breathing things are really quite good. And the more you practice and... It's like every day going to the gym, then the better you will get at it. And the... You can really work on your vagus nerve. The person to also lookup is a guy called Stephen Porges... And again he's got a quite a lot out there and he's one of the specialists in how to stimulate the vagus nerve. So there's all of that stuff then the next stuff. So that's using your body to support your mind. Also, be careful of your diet because we now know that there are some diets, which for some people are what we call inflammatory. Eating very high levels of processed foods, high sugars, high carbohydrates. Just try and move towards a more Mediterranean diet that will help your gut. The gut is related to your vagus, so do that. You can check that out.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:40:30] Then when it comes to imagery practice two things. Well, maybe not two things... Practice doing what we call metta, which is just maybe sitting quietly and just

imagining that you would like to see people free of suffering. Right, just imagine. Wouldn't that be great? Just imagining sending out this desire for other people to be free of suffering. Now, the point about this is, don't get caught up in the "Oh, it's so sad, the world is so sad... I just want the world to be..." That isn't going to help. What you want to do is, wouldn't it be great? Focus on a joyful thing. Focus on the fact of what we are doing, thinking about, you know, there's so many people in the world that actually develop the vaccine for us is amazing. There are people that actually volunteered to take it they didn't know whether they were going to get COVID. They didn't know if they would die if they got COVID, but nonetheless, they volunteered. So it's very easy for us to focus on the horrors in the world, and there's quite a few of those. But practice metta. Practice focusing on the desire for others to be free of suffering. Practice remembering there are many people in the world who are working for others to be free of suffering feel you want to be part of that. So that's compassion out very, very important.

Then compassion in, you practice, imagining a compassionate other. So you create your compassionate other and just imagine them being with you and they would never criticise you. They will always support you and help you because they know you didn't choose to have the brain you got they know this brain is chaotic and a mess most of the time, so they will help you. So practising generating a compassionate dialogue in your head. And then the third thing is focusing on you. So think about your key qualities of compassion. What are your key qualities of compassion? If you were the most compassionate person you could be, what would you most like to be good at? So then people say, Well, I'd like to be more patient or I'd like to be more friendly, or I'd like to be able to control my emotions better. And you say, Great, choose one of them. And for a week, every morning, wake up and think, "How am I going to practice this today? Okay, I want to be a little bit more patient. Okay. How am I going to practice this today?"

What have I got coming up today that I can be I'm not going to be very patient. Okay, so how can I practice patience today? Oh, I want to be very friendly. I want to practice being more friendly. Okay, So what it means is that when you're walking down the road, you practice smiling at people and seeing whether you can elicit them to smile back at you, and so on and so on.

You practice friendliness, you practice being friendly. Okay, So break your compassionate skills down into the areas where you really want to improve. Now, this is no different to going to the gym, right? You go to the gym, you say, "Okay, I'm going to work on my biceps because I'm a bit weak in the upper chest I'm going on a tractor or I'm going to work on my legs or I'm going to work on my cardiovascular system." So compassion works well when you start really focusing on practising specific things. And the other thing is practice playfulness is really, really important because one of the problems is you get caught up and then you get very tired at night and then come back open a bottle of wine why still... Try and practice playfulness, try and if you can be with people that are pleasurable to be with if you can do that, but also practice for yourself, doing things just for the joy of doing them. And that's one of the things that capitalist societies is rather driven out. You know, we're supposed to be achieving and doing and achieving and doing the achieving and doing the people that actually feel guilty at enjoying themselves. But it's actually quite an important thing to be able to do to learn how to play. Play is very important for our minds, particularly play when we play with other people, we have a sense of connectedness through play.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:44:23] Oh wow, Paul. That's just so much for us to go away and think about. I love all of that and I'm going to go and practice all of it. The breathing is music to my ears because it's all... What we talk about. There's so much in your books and so much that you go through and talk about. I just wanted to finish up now and ask you this last question, taking a step back from your role as a psychologist and an author and a lecturer and a teacher, because we're all on a health journey in this modern world, what do you think the biggest challenge is for us as individuals on that journey?

Yes, well, obviously, people are... I think people are looking for a new spiritual understanding about what's going on. I mean, you probably know what... Your listeners may not know, but last year, three scientists for physics won a Nobel Prize because they had come up with an experiment that tested Quantum Theory. Now, Quantum Mechanics is a very tricky thing to understand, but basically what it suggests is that what we think of as a material solid universe is not that it's really based on energy processes and therefore everything that we take to be

real-time and space and so forth may well actually be much more linked to the constructions of the brain than it actually is the reality out there. So there's a lot of interest now in terms of seeking a new spirituality about what does it mean to be human? What does it mean to have this life? What does it mean to be, a biologically find my consciousness in this biological body and all that stuff? So I think probably one of the things for the future is us looking or... Looking around for new values. We know that competitive values really impoverish us. I mean, okay, that has some advantages in competitive behaviour and it has some advantages if it's done right, and that's any area that you might be interested in, which I think has been I'm very interested is in cricket.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:46:29] Cricket has actually moved from being quite a hostile during the early 2000, you know, very competitive... And then cricket has started to meet each other, and the teams began to mingle with the IPL. But what's come now is that the ways in which that sport is played is much more friendly than it used to be. So coming around to realise that, you know, we can compete with other people but we can still be friendly, we can still have playfulness, you can still have joy in what we do, right? So we're beginning to recognise that whether it's at work or wherever it is, how do you bring joy into what you're doing? How do you bring joy into work? How do you bring a sense of support and this caring in what... Even if you're competing, you can still actually respect people, you can still treat them well. And I think that is a change that's gradually coming. We've seen it in business, was seen it in schools. Schools are now doing mindfulness training and compassion training about how do we respect each other in such a way that we don't cause them suffering. We are a solution to the suffering, not a cause of it. Whereas capitalism doesn't care, okay? I don't care if I cause you suffering as long as I get ahead. Yeah. I don't care if we burn all the coal in the world and destroy the world as long as I got a lot of money and I got a yacht in the Mediterranean, why should I worry? Right? So we're moving away from this... Capitalist callousness into much more understanding of how can we create a world where we support each other, care for each other. So I think that is coming and within all of that is a spiritual awakening, if you wish, because it may well be in just, you know, a bit of DNA and that's the end of it. That might be the case, but it may not be the case. There may be something a little bit more mysterious going on.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:48:24] Well, what a wonderful note to finish on and thank you so much for joining me today. I've just been so looking forward to speaking to you. I've loved the book, the book that I've been reading, and you've written so many more, which we will, of course, have links to. So thank you so much.

Prof Paul Gilbert: [00:48:39] My pleasure. Lovely conversation. Thank you, Ron.

Dr Ron Ehrlich: [00:48:42] Well, again, I just love talking to people like Paul. I was I really enjoyed the book, The Compassionate Mind. It's one of his earlier books, but one that I would highly recommend to you to a read. There is so many interesting points in it. I thought it was interesting to ask the question, Do you think psychologically we reached our best when we were in the hunter-gatherer mode and in that culture because we were in small groups, we were very connected with the Earth, we were very connected with our food, we were very connected with each other. And 150 is about, when you think about it, what we can cope with. And I... and it got me thinking about the threat system because this is how I got introduced to Paul's work when I was doing last year, a six-month integrative Breathing Therapy course with the wonderful Dr Rosalba Courtney and Rosalba introduced me to Paul's work and it was so interesting to hear Paul reference breathing as a way of engaging compassion for yourself and for others. And I think it's a powerful and wonderful tool. And it was such a holistic toolbox that he provided us with. But the whole concept of threat is such an interesting one for me because I've been interested in history. And whenever you read the history of humanity, you cannot help but notice that conflict, war, aggression, cruelty is such a feature of the human condition. And so this threat concept, this threat response, which essentially, just to remind you is the way where we are faced with the threat and there's an increase in cortisol levels, then there's an incentive or resource thinking or wanting, or pursuing, a consuming drive to do something that follows. And basically, that's what we're constantly being encouraged to do, actually to consume particularly, I think the threat idea is used on us all the time by being... As we're bombarded by constant news and threats, perceived threats, so we can act. And if we act, we can either fight or flight or deal with the problem.

We can consume things, I guess. And then a soothing phase follows and that consume... That soothing phase is what is involved hormonally as endorphins and oxytocin. And I just can't help but think that the threat system is one that is being used on us all the time in this consumer-driven society where we seem to be bombarded by threats all the time. Look, I think the idea of expressing compassion and gratitude for what we have and what we are feeling and what we are thinking, you know, being kind to ourselves and being kinder to others is such a profound tool to use. It fits into the toolbox of so many other things as I've often said, is the world we live in becomes more complicated. I believe many of the solutions to make life better are remarkably simple, cheap, accessible, sustainable, attainable and most importantly, effective. And I think a compassionate mind and all that Paul has spoken about today is a good example of that. We'll have links to his website. I hope this finds you well. Until next time. This is Dr Ron Ehrlich. Be well.

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