

Matt (host): Welcome back to Nimble Youth, the podcast where we explore the emotional lives of children and teens and help parents and caregivers better understand how to support them. I'm your host, Matt Buttermann. Today's episode is about something both deeply personal and deeply universal. This idea that what we carry as parents doesn't start with us. Our reactions, our triggers, our fears, even the ways we connect or struggle to connect with our children, they often have roots that go back generations.

But here's the hopeful part, those patterns can change. And today's guest is someone who helps families do exactly that. My guest is Jessica Sweeney, a therapist based here in our home base of Winston Salem, North Carolina. She is the founder of Sun Glo Counseling. Jessica specializes in trauma informed care, including EMDR, which we'll get into shortly, and works with individuals and families to heal from past experiences and build stronger, more connected relationships.

Jessica, welcome to Nimble Youth.

Jessica Sweeney: Thank you for having me. Happy to be here.

Matt (host): Absolutely. So let's start with a big concept that I think is often misunderstood and that's trauma because when people hear that word, they often think of dramatic extreme experiences. But in your work, trauma can be much more subtle and can often be, you know, so common that we often miss it. So how do you define trauma, especially in the context of parenting and family life?

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. So I like to replace the word trauma with distress, right? And so if we were to go into different definitions of trauma, there's big T trauma, little t trauma, big T is the big event, little t are the more subtle nuances that happen over time that often get overlooked. But I like to codify it as distress because our nervous system doesn't quite know the difference between different levels of distress, right? It just experiences distress.

So it's more encompassing to the more nuanced that happens, right? And that things are bothersome, things happen, but when you're in a level of distress, it totally dysregulates your nervous system. Throws that Yeah.

Matt (host): So is it fair to say that trauma's sort of less about what happened, but how we react to it, how we process it, right?

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. How your body codifies it and what blueprint it brings to the situation, right? Because if you have a blueprint that's more saturated in distress and dysregulation, how you experience the trauma is gonna be very different than someone that comes in with a much more resourced neutral or positive nervous system.

Matt (host): Right, right. So you do a lot of work and I suppose anyone who's in the behavioral healthcare space does a lot of work around intergenerational trauma and that's the idea that

emotional patterns and wounds can be passed down through families through generations. How does that happen? What are the mechanics kind of behind that?

Jessica Sweeney: So we all are born as parents, whatever that initial experience is, it's oftentimes described as a light switch, right? You are the person you are before and then you're the person that you were after. And we have this blueprint that gets activated that some of us are aware of, sometimes it's conscious, sometimes it's unconscious, right? And when it comes to intergenerational work, right, I'm sure that we all remember the times where, you know, when I'm a parent, I'm not going to do this, or, My parent did this and I really want to make sure and do the same. And then you're in the throes of it, and there's just a lot of instinctual responsivity, right?

And for some that's reactive, but for others it's responsive or a combination of both. When pain is not worked through, it gets passed down. So much like we're aware of what could be helpful, the instinctual things that your nervous system just starts to do can be expressed in intergenerational trauma and then compounded when you are a parent interacting with a kiddo that you have no idea would be activating you and is.

Matt (host): Right, right. And so are there some ways that parents might recognize some of these patterns in themselves? Are sort of outward signs that are easily recognizable or is that something that usually comes out your work in therapy?

Jessica Sweeney: I think it's a little bit of all the above, The ouchy moments are the ones because we as our ability to learn is mostly negatively biased, right? Like we as people find ourselves to be much more aware of what we did wrong or where we struggled or those cringe moments. I like to describe like the-

Matt (host): Right, right.

Jessica Sweeney: Parents where you look back and you're like, Man, I really missed the mark on that. Let's see if I can get it next time. Right. And so oftentimes those are the moments we pay attention to and that we hone in on where like, Oh, I really overreacted or maybe I was more punitive or my kid was so dysregulated and I am overwhelmed. I got overwhelmed and there was no connection until later and I just felt bad about it.

So more often than not, those are the patterns that we start to find. And then once you're in therapy, which is shining a light on everything, there's a much greater system at play that we need to learn about.

Matt (host): Right and the hopeful thing is that these patterns can change and that's where you come in.

Jessica Sweeney: Yes, yes and that's where EMDR has such power.

Matt (host): Yeah. That leads right next to my next question. And, so let's talk about EMDR. It's one of the primary tools that you use in your practice and EMDR again stands for eye movement desensitization and Reprocessing, and so for many of our listeners it might be a new concept, but give us the lowdown on EMDR and how it works.

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah, so central, central, I'll try to keep the psychobabble to a minimum, right? So that we can keep it to very simple deliverables. EMDR is complimenting what your body already knows how to do, right? And our bodies are wired to heal. And that is really the hope in so much of the recognition of what we're talking about today and these stickier subjects that are just rooted in a lot of shame and embarrassment, right?

Is that we're all humans doing our best and that our body knows what to do. We just need to put ourselves in an environment to help facilitate it happening, right? And so, that's called the adaptive information processing system, right? Which is central to EMDR. When we look at this from a trauma informed lens, right, the intensity of what you're experiencing is your body's way of saying, there's stuff happening and I'm jammed.

I need help getting through this. And so EMDR comes on as a support to help reorganize what's happening and again, let your body do what it needs to do, right? So metaphorically, this is like taking a paper shredder that's jammed because you're trying to put 50 pages in it, taking the pages out, evaluating them and doing one page at a time.

Matt (host): So it's kind of like, you know, instead of keeping the drama around a traumatic situation or something that's happened to you, kind of, it removes that and allows your brain to, in essence, best it objectively, right? It takes away all the fear and all the other emotions that can surround an experience in the past. Is that a fair way to put it?

Jessica Sweeney: Sure. You get to witness what's happening, right, versus controlling what's happening. The goal is that you're removing that emotional charge. I like to describe it as taking the fuel out of the fuel tanks. You take the fuel out of the fuel tanks so that they're just tanks.

They're just things that happened. They're moments in time. They don't have the same intensity and distress associated Yeah. With

Matt (host): So I suppose we'll get into how it it's helpful with, with this kind of intergenerational trauma, but I suppose it, is it helpful for things like people who have had just very PTSD, things like that, perhaps, perhaps phobias as well? And have you found a lot of efficacy with those, those conditions?

Jessica Sweeney: Yes. So this theoretical orientation came out during a time where talk therapy was struggling. And so we were getting creative about ways that we can help people get better because talking them out was just re exposing them to their distress and they were getting worse. So research has now shown many decades later that it's about again that distress, that experience of distress. And that happens when you're anxious, that happens when you're

panicked, that happens when you're locked in an obsessive thought that's intrusive and bothersome.

Or when you're feeling deeply depressed and you can't just get up and do the thing. EMDR has shown robust benefits across all of these symptoms and areas.

Matt (host): Right. Yeah. So on this podcast, you know, we're concerned, I guess, primarily with about therapy for young people, children and young adults, but in your practice and in many others, parents bring their own histories into the relationship. And so how can EMDR in particular help parents become of themselves more present and regulated with their, with their.

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. I see how it helps you bring your back to yourself. Right? So you're able to get underneath these blocks that are happening behaviorally or emotionally or cognitively. Right?

So these are the I'm a bad mom or No matter what I feel like, I get overwhelmed, I'm yelling, or, I don't know why I do that. Right? Like, it helps get underneath these patterns so that you can clear out, like I said, the fuel tanks, and really find yourself again. Right. It's really hard to make a conscious decision when your full brain is not on board.

And when your target, when you're in your trigger, you lose so much access to making rational, balanced decisions that are calm, right? It's very hard to stay regulated during those moments. So I see where it really shines in that way. And extinguishing your fire versus your fire catching on with your kiddos fire, right? Right.

And then it becoming this huge bonfire.

Matt (host): Exactly. Yeah, yeah. It, removes the fuel as you say. So, area that you focus on is parenting from, what you call an attachment lens And that phrase, I know it gets used a lot, but I think many people aren't entirely sure what attachment refers to. And so what does it mean to parent from an attachment based perspective?

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah, we're focusing on teaching kids what to learn or expect from relationships. So they are learning how to have a relationship with themselves and then how to have a relationship with the world as it relates to how they're connecting with you, right? So the primary tenants of a secure attachment or a safe attachment are feeling safe, feeling seen, feeling supported. As a parent that looks like rather than focusing on being right, focusing on being present and leaning in, listening. Yeah.

What's happening?

Matt (host): Connected and not being this sort of authority figure from above, Making connections with your child.

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. And being here now.

Matt (host): Right. Yeah, for sure. So, one of the most reassuring ideas in attachment theory is that connection isn't about, it's not about getting it right all the time, but it's about repairing the places where, you know, the relationship is injured, where it's falling apart. So, let's talk about the importance of repair in parent child relationships.

Jessica Sweeney: Let's also, there is no such thing as a perfect parent.

Matt (host): Right.

Jessica Sweeney: Also established in social media and the access to so many people parenting and learning what is right and what is wrong also sets parents up for failure. Right, And that parenting is so messy. There's so much learning all the time in my home. One of the phrases that my partner and I use and we use with our kiddos is that we're all learning all the time. And we're all we're we're all doing our best, no matter what the circumstances at play.

And one of the mentors that I look to with a lot of the parenting work that I do to help give language and give understanding is Doctor. Becky Kennedy with Good Inside. I'm sure she's very buzzy, so I'm sure the name is common enough. If it's not, I recommend looking into her. And she talks candidly about the importance of recovery.

One of the pieces that I appreciate about how she speaks on and educates on recovery is that it's never too late and that your attention to connection is central. Right? So as uncomfortable and as hard as repair may be, it's less about doing it right and more about showing both to yourself and to the kiddo or whatever the rupture, whomever you're having the rupture with is that you matter. I love you no matter what you do or what is happening. Let's work on this together.

And taking ownership for being a human being who's learning.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. It's an important message because every parent makes mistakes. Certainly I've made my fair share of mistakes, but what happens, what matters is what comes after that, right? What happens next?

Jessica Sweeney: Right. You're supposed to make mistakes. Right. Like learning, being a parent is not Instagramable.

Matt (host): Yep. If

Jessica Sweeney: it's messy and it's intense and it's boring and it's very loving and not liking, right? Like it's all of the things. By showing kiddos that you can have a hard time and that you can be uncomfortable and that you can be sturdy and steady, the learning that comes from just

experiencing that and then learning that that is what it's like to have a healthy relationship, that cascades into so many other positive connections and understandings.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. So many parents have moments where their reaction feels bigger than the situation warrants. And so a child's behavior can trigger something that's deep inside us, generationally instilled in us. So what's happening when as parents we might overreact to something?

Jessica Sweeney: That is your nervous system telling you that this is not just a situation, that there is historical stuff happening that is beyond what's in front of you. So, and that that can be exasperated by burnout and overwhelm and being a parent is just overwhelming. The nature of the role is overwhelming. Right? So recognition that it's older than your kiddo and that for right now, don't need to light the match and then light the fire to the gas tank.

Right. You can just refocus on the present, right. Can be very valuable. However, with trauma reactivity, sometimes you don't get that choice. Sometimes the gas, it's ignited before you even know it.

And again, that's where EMDR can really shine because as much as you may understand and know that there's an irrationality here or that this is an overreaction or you want to believe you're doing your best, no matter how much you believe it, it doesn't feel true. This is where your nervous system is locked. It's where the paper shredder is jammed. Right? And so that naming and understanding can be helpful, but there's more too.

Yeah.

Matt (host): Yeah, for sure. So let's talk a little bit about regulation and co regulation. So we talk a lot on this podcast about emotional regulation, but for children that often starts with what's often called co regulation. So explain for us what regulation and co regulation are and how they, how they look like in everyday parenting.

Jessica Sweeney: Sure. I like to use metaphors a lot to explain things that are abstract. So I explain co regulation as you being the thermostat. And when you are setting your temperature, setting your temperature at a temperature that you can maintain, regardless of the temperatures that are happening around you, You are making sure that your batteries are working and that you got your HVAC ran and done and all the things, so things are running smoothly so that you can be aware of the temperature that you're running and be aware that temperatures are going to change around you. And that when temperatures are changing around you, you're able to hold steady and securely so that they can join your temperature versus you matching them.

It's the interaction of staying out of the way so that you can focus on maintaining connection. You're not fixing the moment, you're holding the moment and prioritizing connection with a sense of calm, direct presence that's sturdy.

Matt (host): Gotcha. So, for parents listening, they might recognize patterns that they don't want to pass on. They don't want to keep regenerating this generational pattern of behavior. If it's things like anxiety or emotional distance or reactivity, what's the first step for them to begin to break that cycle?

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. There's a lot of hope in this question and awareness that you're listening to this podcast. You're probably listening to other podcasts. You're probably reading books. You're probably aware that you want to work on yourself.

You want to work on these relationships and that you're learning. So leaning in with a sense of grace and positivity that regardless of the outcome, there's already a lot working. And in lieu of knowing what to do, you're trying and that it's okay that awareness is on board. Even if you don't know what to do, you're already ahead of the game.

Matt (host): Right. Exactly.

Jessica Sweeney: And giving yourself that sense of grace and support. Otherwise, take a breath. You're not supposed to know what to do. It's okay if you don't know what to do. Take a breath and ask yourself, what do I need in to connect right now?

And sometimes it's starting with connection to yourself. Sometimes it's really dysregulated. They're at 85 degrees. My batteries aren't working. I'm at 90.

I need to just go for a walk quietly with my kiddo. Other times it's, I need to hold their hand. Right. A lot of these solutions are learned by practice and by being uncomfortable. For the time being recognizing you're already ahead of the game and giving yourself kudos, taking a breath before anything else and focusing on the connection and that your kids don't care about things being right.

They just want you.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. So sometimes, in any kind of interpersonal relationship, you can feel discouraged. You've, you've, you've made too many mistakes along the way and the relationship is, you know, forever sullied, almost beyond repair. If you're in, you know, if you're in a marriage or something, there are things to do, but sometimes that results in a breaking of the relationship.

Obviously, don't want to do that with your children. It happens unfortunately, but you want to keep that relationship very strong with your children. But parents may feel, you know, I've made too many mistakes along the way. There are ways to come back from that. Is that fair to say?

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah. And every relationship is different. To reiterate what I just shared, they just want you. Yeah. They don't want, you know, those seeking perfection that can cause other problems too.

Matt (host): Right.

Jessica Sweeney: Right. Because we don't live life in a cube of perfection, right? Fundamentally reminding yourself that you finding yourself helps you be yourself with them. And that being a parent is a very selfless endeavor that is overwhelming with which there is no handbook. There are lots of parenting books out there, but there is no fundamental handbook.

Matt (host): Right.

Jessica Sweeney: And that learning about yourself and being vulnerable and challenging and addressing and overcoming the things that are interfering with your ability to feel enough as you are will help you and that it's never too late. It's never too late. Time passes, circumstances happen and the want and the love for connection. That pilot light never goes out.

Matt (host): Yeah. Yeah. It's it's certainly a a, you know, a theme that we've we've echoed a lot on this podcast before you can help your child. Sometimes you have to explore what's going on within yourself, right? As a parent.

Yeah. So as we wrap up our conversation, I keep coming back to this idea and it's that we don't get to choose what we inherit, but we do get to choose what we what we then pass on. So, whether it's through things like EMDR, through reflection and counseling, through small moments of connection, is not about becoming a perfect parent, but it's becoming a more aware one, a more, you know, aware of what's happening basically around you. So before we close, is there one sort of final takeaway, you'd like to leave with our listeners?

Jessica Sweeney: That connection is key. If you don't know what to do, take a breath. It's okay. You're not supposed to know what to do. Stop that your kids just want you.

Matt (host): Right. Yeah. Presence is everything.

Jessica Sweeney: Yeah.

Matt (host): Yeah. For sure. My guest today has been Jessica Sweeney. She's a therapist and founder of Sunlow Counseling right here in Winston Salem. She specializes in trauma informed care, EMDR, and attachment based therapy.

You can learn more about Jessica and her work at Unglow Counseling. We'll have the link to that in our show notes. And we'll also link to the author in the book you referenced earlier as well. So if today's conversation resonated with you, please do share this episode with a friend. And don't forget to rate and review Nimble Youth on Apple Podcasts and Spotify, because your support helps us continue these important conversations around youth mental health and family connection.

Until next time, remember, healing doesn't just change you. It changes the generations that come after you. I'm Matt Buttermann. This is Nimble Youth. We'll see you next time.