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236 — The Body Keeps the Score with Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

Amy Morin:

Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four (soon to be five) books on mental strength. Every Monday, I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. The fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys! Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week. Now let's dive into today's episode!

Today, I'm talking to Dr. Bessel van der Kolk. He spent his career studying trauma and how to reduce the impact that traumatic experiences have on people. He's the author of the wildly popular book The Body Keeps the Score. It's based on the idea that a lot of physical sensations and even health issues stem from traumatic experiences.

Research shows about 70% of us will go through a traumatic incident at least once in our lives. According to Dr. van der Kolk, those traumatic experiences leave a lasting imprint on our bodies, and we might be affected in some surprising ways. People who have endured trauma often experience a variety of physical and mental health symptoms. In his book, he shares how research shows that trauma literally reshapes the brain and the body. As a result, many people who have been through traumatic experiences struggle to enjoy pleasure, have a hard time with self-control, engagement,
and trust. Fortunately, there are some strategies that can help. Some of the things he talks about today are why some traditional treatment methods don't help people heal from PTSD, the types of treatments that can help, and the strategies for finding help when you need it.

Make sure to stick around until the end of the episode for The Therapist's Take! It's the part of the show where I'll share how you can apply Dr. van der Kolk's strategies to your own life. So here's Dr. Bessel van der Kolk on how the body keeps the score and what you can do about it.

Amy Morin:
Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast!

Bessel van der Kolk:
Good to be here. Thank you.

Amy Morin:
Absolutely. I'd seen your book on the New York Times bestseller list for a very, very, very long time.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. I think I've [inaudible 00:02:22] permanent spot, yeah.

Amy Morin:
Right. I bet you've been there for a hundred years at this point, it looks like.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah.

Amy Morin:
Congratulations on writing such a-
Bessel van der Kolk:
Thank you.

Amy Morin:
... successful book. It didn't just hit the bestseller list, but it stayed there and then I think you made a comeback when your paperback came out during the pandemic, right?

Bessel van der Kolk:
It has been so steadily there pretty much steadily since we published it, yeah.

Amy Morin:
Wonderful. I hadn't read it yet, but last year, I was talking to Dr. Judson Brewer on our podcast. We were talking about unwinding anxiety. One of the things we were talking about is how sometimes our body responds to things that trigger our anxiety years later. I told this story about how as a kid, I hated school. So Sunday nights, the TV show The Simpsons was on and the theme song would come on and it would trigger to me it was almost time to go to bed and then it was going to be Monday morning and it was school. So to this day, I still get a stomach flip-flop when that TV show comes on. Even though it's been a really long time since I've had to go to school, but when I was in the third grade, I would throw up before school. I hated it that much. So to me, that same song still triggers that memory for me, but it wasn't necessarily...

Nothing horrible happened at school. The building didn't catch on fire and I had a near-death experience, but I hated it. I hated everything about school. I tell the story on the podcast and then all of our listeners start emailing me and said, "Amy, you need to read The Body Keeps the Score," and they were absolutely right. Don't get me wrong, I'm a therapist. I've done a cognitive behavioral therapy with plenty of people who have trauma over the years.

Bessel van der Kolk:
But it doesn't work.

Amy Morin:
However, I've learned so much from your book about why it did not work with a lot of clients. Can you talk a little bit about why it is that our body does keep the score and how that works?

Bessel van der Kolk:
Because that's who we are. We are bodies and we have brains to keep our bodies alive. I just came back from the Serengeti for two weeks and saw all these animals all around me and they were just like us, and that's who we are. We just do the stuff that animals do to take care of themselves, and then we have this little mind on top of it all that cannot possibly contain all the complexities of our bodies. Cognition. Any [inaudible 00:04:52] who believes that reason makes a difference has not lived in America in the last few years. The notion he can talk people into being reasonable is so crazy. That's not who we are.

Amy Morin:
Right.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. The question is, how can we recognize our patterns and how can we change our patterns? Not through understanding. Knowing why you're screwed up doesn't make you less screwed up. Now you know why you're screwed up and that's good to know, but then, the job starts off doing things differently and maybe taking a different road to school or taking a course in some other place sometime, so you can weaken those emotional connections.

Amy Morin:
Why do you think it's taken this long for us to realize the mind-body connection? Clearly in America, we're very slow to adopt this idea.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Darwin knew it and [inaudible 00:05:58] knew it. Shakespeare knew it. Just because you didn't catch up to it doesn't mean that people... American psychology is really weird.
They really haven't understood yet anything about the brain and how the brain works. You keep thinking, oh, if you understand things, everything would be different, and that's not how it is.

Amy Morin:
Right. A lot of my training as a cognitive behavioral therapist was about you just talk about the traumatic things you've been through enough, then somehow, you'll feel better. It's-

Bessel van der Kolk:
That's Freudian. That's what Freud said back. They hate Freud, but that's what Freud said. If you can just talk about everything, you'll get better. Proved out not to be the case.

Amy Morin:
Right, that a lot of people talk about their traumatic experiences and they experience such stress in talking about it that you get the statistics, in fact, on how many people end up dropping out of treatment sometimes when it's talk therapy because they just can't tolerate sitting there talking about their trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk:
And why should they?

Amy Morin:
Exactly. That's a great question, yeah.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Misery over and over again. That's not the idea.

Amy Morin:
How many of us do you think are walking around with this issue of just being hyper-aroused all the time because of some kind of trauma that we haven't addressed and that our nervous system remembers it?

Bessel van der Kolk:

Probably most people have these conditioned emotional responses. It comes out in thinking every relationship, individual relationship people have with somebody is...

That's what made COVID so hard is that we all have our idiosyncrasies of having intense emotional reactions to the opening theme to Simpsons. How stupid is that, but you do.

Amy Morin:

Right.

Bessel van der Kolk:

So the reality is that if I live with you, I should not be playing The Simpsons while you're around.

Amy Morin:

Good. If you could tell that to my family members, because I have a nephew that learned about this, so he likes to play it as a joke. Let's see what happens to Aunt Amy when we play this.

Bessel van der Kolk:

People have [inaudible 00:08:14]. That's part of us as well, yeah.

Amy Morin:

Then I think so many people too, they walk around like that and the symptoms come out in different ways. Sometimes people are irritable. They're angry. Sometimes people struggle with social situations. Sometimes people act out. They get reckless. How do people finally come to that conclusion of, yeah, maybe it is trauma, because I think so many people don't recognize it.
Bessel van der Kolk:
Well, usually it comes in behaviors. One thing about being 20 years old is that you do all that stuff and your relationships aren't working out. Then by the time you're 30, you go like, I wonder why my relationship, it wasn't really just because I hang out with a bunch of [inaudible 00:08:56]. Maybe there was something about me that also didn't make it work. Usually, people get into treatment because things have gotten pretty bad. I think you need to be in pretty bad shape before you're willing to plug the money down and start looking at yourself. People don't do it well. Everything is just fine. It's just going to therapy is generally a desperate move like I cannot stand going on with my life anymore. Then you start talking about what everybody else is doing. At some point, you start, if you have a good therapist, understanding about, so what are you doing about your reactions and what are your associations to The Simpsons and how can you take care of that little kid who was frightened to go to school?

Amy Morin:
Right. In your book, you described lots of different ways of working through trauma. Some are things like yoga, which we've known for a long time, yoga's helpful, but you really get into the nitty gritty of why it's so helpful and that if somebody's experienced trauma, sometimes going to yoga reduces a lot of the symptoms that maybe we wouldn't even recognize it would reduce. What's the magic of yoga that makes it so helpful?

Bessel van der Kolk:
Magic of your relationship to your body. The body does keep the scarring. Your body gives you these reactions. When you are traumatized, you try not to feel those things. You say, "All right, don't be stupid. I'm going to go to school and I'm going to sit through this TV program," and so people then suppresses and you learn not to feel those sensations. That's also very much at a basis of people getting hooked on drugs and substances because they cannot stand the way their body feels. That is how people get into drugs and then excessive alcohol, basically. At some point, you need to come to terms with your body and get to feel your body. Yoga can also really be quite stressful
for people. It can bring up a lot of feelings, a lot of emotions, a lot of resistances. For me, Stephen Cope's book, Yoga and the Quest for the True Self, really opened up my heart and my mind and my brain to, oh, you learn to really inhabit the body that you live in and come to peace with it.

That's really at the very foundation of who you are. There's also the book that we are almost finished with right now. It's called Come to Your Senses. It's about your sensory experience of yourself, basically.

Amy Morin:
Great idea. Because I think if you took my example, all right, The Simpsons makes my stomach do a flip-flop. My heart races. My eyes start to water. I can shut that off because I don't have to watch that show. But for somebody who experiences trauma and you feel like that when you're in the grocery store or when you're out doing something, it's fairly miserable, so I get it why people would reach for these unhealthy coping strategies because you feel like you're desperate to make it stop. It feels terrible.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. I wouldn't even use the word unhealthy there. Everybody's doing it.

Amy Morin:
Right.

Bessel van der Kolk:
The CBT thing, oh, that's bad. I said, "Oh, you'd smoke dope after we go to the store. Oh, that's interesting." What's that about, huh?

Amy Morin:
Yeah. Speaking of drugs and alcohol, you talk a little bit about prescribed medication. There is not one single medication that treats symptoms of PTSD, but sometimes medication can be helpful.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. I used to be this first chief resident of Psychopharmacology at Harvard at some point, but my interest in the drug trade has vanished. I think psychiatry became a very sad profession when it became a bunch of drug pushers, because drugs generally are not all that helpful. Well, I'm not against it. I still have a prescription blank in my office, but that's not the answer. It's really about becoming aware of yourself and learning to live in the body that you live in.

Amy Morin:
And you talked a little bit about psychedelics though. What do you think about psychedelics in the treatment?

Bessel van der Kolk:
On the lab, I does psychedelic therapy. It's my main scientific interest these days, is to see what MDMA can do, well, ketamine groups also. I think that psychedelics are very promising, very troublesome because I think capitalism is going to take over and make it all about profits and make money instead of really focusing on how it can change people's minds, but psychedelics have enormous potential if you don't mess it up.

Amy Morin:
Interesting, okay. One of the things I was really surprised in your book is you talk about theater as a way to help people move through trauma. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. Again, for me, that's not surprising. People have always dealt with theater to experience what it is like to be somebody else, to have an alternative experience. Theater does many things, but for one thing, you get to play a role and embody a role that's different from who you are. I think your Simpson example is a great example because it's nice and neutral. So you come into the theater group and you get assigned the role of somebody who is not afraid of The Simpsons. And you say, "That's not me. I'm really terrified of The Simpsons, but when I put on the costume and I wear a hat and
I put a sword in my hand, I play somebody who's not afraid of Simpsons. Oh, that's what it feels like to be somebody other than my usual self."

So actually in some ways, theater does what psychedelics also do. We are all trapped in a very narrow reality that we live in. We're all very, very limited people. Then when you take psychedelic, you see that the world is much larger than who you are, which can be a very liberating and can be a very terrifying experience, of course. In the theater also, you get to embody what it feels to be somebody else. Not only that, but you become a part of a group of people who count on each other, who need each other, so it's highly interactive. Trauma is always, not always, always, maybe almost always about being isolated, being godforsaken, being disconnected from people around you, your fear of going to school, but your very lonely experience, not like, oh, all the kids in my neighborhood were afraid to go to school. No. It's just me and I messed up. There's something wrong with me. So then in the theater, you all work on these things. You get to really feel your humanity with the other people in your group.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. I can't tell you how many people we've had who are actors on our show, and they've said something like that. When I get to play somebody else, I get to forget about certain things. It empowers me to feel differently.

Bessel van der Kolk:

[inaudible 00:16:22] forgetting, it's really embodying different realities. For example, in our program that I'm very connected with, people learn sword fighting. People learn how to slap each other and it looks like it's real slap like, "Wow, I can really look very aggressive, very powerful because on stage, I can do these techniques that make me feel like I'm a very powerful person.

Amy Morin:

Would we get the same benefits if it were something with virtual realities and avatars and video games sort of a thing?

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah. I'm a little worried about all that. Because I told you, I just came back from Serengeti and I got to see all these animals again and they live in troops. We'd live in troops also as human beings. For this to become more and more disembodied and more and more screen-like, I think it's probably not good for ourselves. So I'm very worried about people getting the same dopamine kick out of virtual reality, but we do not know how it is to have a very complex relationship of going out for dinner together or cooking together or raising babies together and all sort of stuff, which is really, it's a personal process. I think we are in the stage right now where we can get almost all the rewards of being with real people in a virtual way, but I think it's going to be very damaging for our relationship with each other.

Amy Morin:
Mm-hmm, okay.

Bessel van der Kolk:
I'm worried about it, actually.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. I share the same concern because we know social support is a huge factor in-

Bessel van der Kolk:
Yeah, social support. We are mammals. Mammals live in groups. That's what they have brains for. It's not social support. It's like, I need to cook at some point. I need to go and get groceries. I need to go shovel snow. We need to divvy up our tasks together. We are living in tribes, in groups, in configurations of us and other people. That's who we are.

Amy Morin:
You also talk about the importance sometimes of taking action. After a natural disaster, people are working on cleaning up and they're helping out each other, that that reduces the impact that the trauma might have on them?
Bessel van der Kolk:

Yeah. Again, we are bodies and our bodies are meant to take action. Again, virtual reality keeps your body out of the action. You can call up local store to make food for you, and you don't know how to make food anymore because your virtual reality takes care of that, but you lose that capacity to, I have created something very beautiful here by the meal that we are having, or next time, I'll do it a little bit better. We are experiential animals and we can either have virtual experiences or we can have real experiences.

Amy Morin:

Interesting.

Bessel van der Kolk:

Yeah.

Amy Morin:

You talk about other things too with the arts, like music or doing art therapy. Those things can help you less too?

Bessel van der Kolk:

Well, again, we are interactive creatures and we again, hang out with babies, hang out with animals. We're meant to interact with each other. When I say something and I see your face, your face moves in response to me. We have mirror neurons with which we respond to each other. The source of joy for human beings primarily is to do things together. Even you and I doing a podcast together is, in some ways, gratifying if we get along together. If you keep asking all the wrong question, I give all the wrong answers, then we say, "Boy, it really suck because we are out of sync with each other." So being in sync is what life is all about. Who should we take our cues from? From nursery school teachers. They still know that. You play with kids. You do things together. You interact. You build towers together with other people. That's who we are. America sure almost uniquely has evolved to believe that people are individuals, but anywhere else in
the world, people don't experience themselves primarily as individuals. Everybody else identifies themselves as part of a larger group, and that's our nature.

So everything that's really pleasurable, from playing volleyball to cooking together, to making love is all about getting in sync together and getting bodies that work together to make things happen. So you go to music therapy, yeah, that's how you're professionalizing. You get a license, but now who are we as human beings is we are mystical individuals.

Amy Morin:
That, I thought, was one of the most amazing parts of your book because you don't really tell people like, yeah, go sign up for art therapy, but you say, if you go do artistic things in groups of people and it's something that you enjoy, that can be quite healing. It doesn't have to be "therapy."

Bessel van der Kolk:
[inaudible 00:21:53] lives with a lot of painters and once a week, they all go and they paint together at the same spot and compares picture with each other. I happen not to be a painter, but they thought, boy, that's really cool to just sit there and go to a nice mountain and nice stream and do your stuff in connection with other people. That's the joy of living.

Amy Morin:
Right.

Bessel van der Kolk:
I wouldn't call it art therapy. I'd call it the joy of living.

Amy Morin:
Right. But so many people, I think, lose sight of that. We get so busy working, so busy doing all the things we feel like we have to do, that he'll feel guilty sometimes going to do those things that are the joy of living.
Bessel van der Kolk:
Well, it sounds like being in the yacht in Key West has helped you to overcome this.

Amy Morin:
One of the other things you talk about in your book that is really effective is EMDR. We just had the authors of the book, Every Memory Deserves Respect, where they talk about EMDR treatment.

Bessel van der Kolk:
[inaudible 00:22:51].

Amy Morin:
I was thrilled to be able to introduce that to our audience because I think a lot of people haven't heard about it, but you've found that it's quite effective for people overcoming trauma.

Bessel van der Kolk:
For me, EMDR was really my opening into the world of therapy. I already had written three books about trauma. I was a famous person in the area of trauma. I didn't have a clue how to treat it, and EMDR was really the first thing that opened up my mind. It's a very silly treatment. I imagine that Debbie wasn't disparaging of it herself. She's a less irreverent person than I am, but it's a very crazy treatment and it's worked, and so that really opened up my mind. So craziest things may work. Then the whole world goes back to what you do in cognitive behavioral treatment to understand, envision yourself out of things like, no, that's not how we work, but EMDR. I did this first and only NIMH-funded study on EMDR and it turned out to be an extraordinarily effective treatment. That's actually quite a long time ago when we did that study. It's sad to me that EMDR has not gotten more of a traction because it's really a spectacularly useful treatment.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. We've seen it takes a long time to adopt things, to accept them, to make them more widely acceptable or accessible for people, so many things, I think, that were slow
to adopt. As you say, things that look maybe a little wacky on the outside are actually quite more effective than the things that-

Bessel van der Kolk:
As things come and go, for example, hypnosis has always been the best treatment for PTSD until 1990 when suddenly, it became an evil treatment and people stop doing it. That's very sad because there are very good treatments that are there and are available, and they get ignored. It's very important, and that's part of why I wrote my book, is to really, it is very much a caveat enter book. Be careful with the prevailing cultural paradigms right now because these are the fundamental things that you need. Depending on your insurance company and your American Psychological Association, they go tell you what to do, but don't believe what authorities tell you what to do. You need to really figure it out for yourself.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. What are your thoughts on mindfulness and meditation?

Bessel van der Kolk:
Well, mindfulness, you cannot have a mind without being mindful, like, duh. So oh, big deal. Mindfulness, yeah. Actually, people have done mindfulness since time immemorial, but suddenly somebody says, "Oh, I have invented mindfulness."

Amy Morin:
Right. Because now it's kind of a buzzword for workplaces and people that are doing sales work and that sort of a thing. I hear people say that like, "Oh, this new thing" as if it is new.

Bessel van der Kolk:
It's not a new [inaudible 00:26:00].

Amy Morin:
Right.
Bessel van der Kolk:

People have always gone inside and always meditated and always prayed and always
gone to monasteries and always gone on long walks. People need to have time to be
with themselves and by themselves to really explore who this creature I is.

Amy Morin:

Then another thing you talked about in your book is neurofeedback. Can you explain a
little bit about what that is and how that works?

Bessel van der Kolk:

Well, I'm saddest about neurofeedback because it's such an effective treatment and it
should be in every school, in every place in America because neurofeedback is a way in
which you put electrodes on people's skulls. You can project people's brainwaves on a
screen, and then you can play computer games with your own brainwaves to rewire
your brain to make certain connections and waveforms that helps you to be calm and
focused. It's really a beautiful way of training the brain. I've done a fair amount of
research in it. I actively train people these days, but it is not getting this traction I wish it
would, actually.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. Okay. You make it clear too though that there's not just one way for somebody to
heal. So if somebody says, "Gosh, I'm struggling with something. Where do I start or
what do I try first?" what would you recommend to them?

Bessel van der Kolk:

I would go to your best put together friend to say, "What has helped you?"

Amy Morin:

Oh, great idea. Okay.
See, it's always what's available. My book writes about many different treatment techniques. I've done this work for about 50 years. Those are the treatments that I've had access to and have been able to study. It doesn't mean that those are the only treatments or the best treatments. That's something that one guy has been able to accumulate over time. But in some ways, everybody who I know who has been traumatized too, who has found their way out have discovered a number of different things that they found was helpful for them. Oftentimes, EMDR happens to be a useful part of it. Working with your body almost invariably is an important part of it. Oftentimes, body work for many people is an important part of it.

Opening yourself up to the pleasure and the comfort of touch after you have been molested is a huge issue. You cannot reason yourself out it. You need to really work with your body, make yourself open to your body. It's always an exploration. There's a certain [inaudible 00:28:48] of treatment that I like a lot, but when you live in Kansas City, you may not have access to that. So it's been very much on what's around in your community and who are the people in your world who people trust and feel good about, and those are not people who were necessarily endorsed by the American Psychiatric or the American Psychological Association.

Amy Morin:

Yeah. I'm glad that you said all that because we don't all have access to the same treatment, the same services, and what works for somebody may not necessarily be the thing that works for everybody.

Bessel van der Kolk:

That's right. It takes a lot of courage actually, to go to treatment route, to say there is something that they need to work on. You always start with a sense of shame, how there's something wrong with me and I don't want anybody to know about it. So to actually open yourself up and be able to tell somebody what is bothering you is a major act of courage. It's also very important for the receiver, the therapist to be open. It is a sacramental work. If you start getting judgmental and telling people how can you be so screwed up to think that way, of course, it's a terrible thing to do. So finding somebody
who is wise is very important. Anybody who says, I have the best treatment there is, avoid those people.

Amy Morin:
Oh, interesting. Yeah. Okay. I love the idea of just asking somebody you know and somebody that you trust of what helped them and to say, "Can I try that service too?"
Dr. van der Kolk, thank you so much for sharing all of your wisdom with us today on The Verywell Mind Podcast.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Good luck to you.

Amy Morin:
Thank you so much. Have a great day.

Bessel van der Kolk:
Okay. Bye-bye.

Amy Morin:
Bye. Welcome to The Therapist’s Take! This is a part of the show where I'll break down Dr. van der Kolk's strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three strategies that I highly recommend.

**Number one: try yoga.** You've probably heard lots of people say that yoga's good for you. Maybe they were vague on the reason or they gave you some generic answer about how it's good for your mind and your body. I love that Dr. van der Kolk shares how yoga can specifically help people heal from trauma. His book goes into more detail about how yoga can help you heal and how it can release the trauma that's stored in your body. He acknowledges it can be hard, but he might also show you that it's worthwhile to try. I know a lot of people who say, "Yoga's not for me," because they've only tried it once or twice or maybe never at all. But practicing yoga on a regular basis gets easier, and it might also relieve symptoms of PTSD.
Number two: try EMDR. We've talked about EMDR on the show before. If you're interested in learning more about it, and you haven't yet listened to episode 224, check it out. Therapist Deborah Korn and Michael Baldwin, who's someone who benefited from EMDR, co-wrote a book about it. And they explain how it works on that episode. Essentially, it's a type of treatment that involves tapping or eye movement that changes the way that memories are stored in your brain. On the surface, it sounds a little too good to be true. But it actually works, and Dr. van der Kolk's research affirmed this. So if you're interested in working through trauma, and you're open to trying EMDR, look for a therapist who's trained in it.

And number three: ask someone else what helped them. I love that Dr. van der Kolk suggested to ask someone that you know what helped them deal with a traumatic experience. Sometimes the best ideas come from friends or family or people that we know who've been through something similar. Sometimes the things that help people are similar. At other times, they're somewhat outside the box. Whether you have a friend who said, "I started swimming at the Y every day and now I feel better," or you have a family member who says, "I got an app that taught me how to meditate," you might need to do a little trial and error to figure out what's going to work well for you. But the things that work for other people just might work for you too. So don't give up. Keep looking for things that might work for you. Anything from lifting weights to joining community theater might help. Those are three of Dr. van der Kolk's strategies that you might want to try in your own life... yoga, EMDR, and asking someone close to you what worked for them.

To learn more about Dr. van der Kolk's strategies, pick up a copy of his book, The Body Keeps the Score! It's filled with research, stories from his practice, and actionable tips. If you know someone who could benefit from hearing this message, share the show with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger!

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Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to The Verywell Mind Podcast! As always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who says the ticking clock from 60 Minutes has the same effect on him as The Simpson's theme song had on me), Nick Valentin.