

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson



Full Episode Transcript

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Jody Moore

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418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

I'm Jody Moore and this is *Better Than Happy*, episode 418, Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson.

This is *Better Than Happy*, the podcast where we study what the healthiest, most successful people in today's world think, feel and do. And we leverage this knowledge to create our best lives. Are you ready, little bird? Let's fly.

Hello everybody, welcome to *Better Than Happy*. Today I have a really amazing guest that I've been wanting to get on this podcast, actually for a long time, her name is Leah Davidson. She's going to give you her more detailed credentials, but I just want to give you some backstory that I first met Leah through coaching. She's a fellow coach like myself, and she came into my business mastermind group last year.

And ever since meeting her, I've been obsessed with what she knows about the nervous system and how she teaches it with regards to how to regulate your nervous system. And how well it complements what we do as coaches, what I do as a coach and she does as a coach. And how without it, there's sort of a big gap. I wasn't able to put my finger on the gap before. But now that I've learned what I've learned from Leah, it really helps answer some of the questions that a lot of you have in terms of if I know this is a thought, why can't I stop thinking it?

Or why is it so challenging? Why does it feel like I feel my emotions before I'm aware of my thoughts? I don't even know that I have thoughts. I'm just feeling emotions, that's what it feels like sometimes. So those and many other questions are going to be answered today when you learn from Leah. So what else do I want to say about her besides she's just a brilliant, amazing, lovely, generous human being?

I've also been going through a course from her this year on better understanding how to regulate the nervous system, both for myself and for my clients. So I said, "Leah, please come and share some of that here on the podcast." So without further ado, here's my conversation with Leah Davidson.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

Jody: Alright, everybody, Leah is one of the most brilliant, amazing people I've had the honor of meeting. And I'll let you formally introduce yourself, Leah, but I just want to say that she is speaking at Mastermind at the Life Coach School this year. Are we allowed to say it? I think we are.

Leah: I don't know. I'm worried that they're going to be like, "No", after they see my outline.

Jody: No. You're in. I'm just going to take all the credit for introducing her to the folks that plan mastermind, because everyone's going to love so much what you're going to say. But we're going to give everybody some of your wisdom and brilliance here today on the podcast. So thanks for joining me, Leah, tell us about you.

Leah: I'm so excited to be here. So obviously I'm a life coach and my big focus is on stress and nervous system resilience. And I have also been a speech pathologist for 24, almost 25 years. I didn't even like saying that because it makes me feel so old, but that's what it is.

Jody: So you were 12 when you started?

Leah: That's right, I was. And actually, that wasn't even my first career. So I won't even get into that. And when people hear speech pathology or speech therapy, they're sort of like, "What does that have to do with life coaching?" And essentially, I was working and have been working with traumatic brain injuries. So I have taken such a deep dive in the area of something called cognitive communication and neuroplasticity, nervous system and executive function skills, helping people with brain injuries to recover.

So it was a very natural progression that I fell into life coaching. I came across your podcast at one point, but previous to that I was already a life coach and I was using some of the tools with my clients because I saw, I'm trying to teach some cognitive strategies and mindset has a huge piece. And then eventually I realized the nervous system has a huge piece as

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

well. So that is a little bit about my background and I'm from Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Have you ever had a Canadian guest?

Jody: I think you might be my first.

Leah: Yay, I was going to say for sure an Eastern Canadian guest.

Jody: No, I've had Bev Aron on.

Leah: And Bev, oh, my gosh, Bev is in Toronto and her background is a speech pathologist as well.

Jody: I don't know if I realized that.

Leah: Yeah. She actually, the woman that I have worked the past 20 years with is also a South African speech pathologist and she and Bev know each other. So it's such a small world.

Jody: Such a small world.

Leah: The speech pathology world is a tiny world.

Jody: Okay. So you also have, is it a certification in nervous system, what is it called?

Leah: I do. It's called the Advanced Training in Nervous System Resilience. We are almost three-quarters the way through the first cohort and I am loving it.

Jody: And I'm in that class, for the record. I'm learning all those things from Leah. That's why I was like, "You've got to come on my podcast and share some of this, it's so good."

Leah: That's right. It's really to help introduce coaches to the world of nervous system because in my opinion, it's sort of a foundational tool that a lot of us we have a nervous system. We don't know how to use our nervous system and we don't know how to coach with the nervous. So that's why I created the advanced training.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

Jody: I love it. Okay, and so for everybody listening, whether you're a coach or not, she's going to teach us about the nervous system. Obviously, if you're a coach that helps you in your coaching, but as a human being this is really, really helpful to understand about yourself and about your loved ones to just better understand what's going on. So will you explain first of all what is a nervous system and why do we need to be aware of it.

Leah Absolutely. So the nervous system, you can think of it as it is just your brain, your spinal cord and a whole bunch of nerve fibers that travel through your body. And what we refer to when we're talking about nervous system here is in the autonomic nervous system. And it is the way that the brain and the body communicate with each other. And our autonomic nervous system is constantly working behind the scenes. It's looking out for our survival and it is regulating our heartbeat, our digestion. It's regulating everything that we do. So that, in essence, is your nervous system.

Now, the autonomic nervous system, this part that we're going to be focusing on, it actually has a built in radar detector. And so it spends its day constantly scanning for safety, danger, safety, danger. That's all it's really doing because it's in charge of your survival. It needs to make sure you're going to be okay. So it's looking for specific cues. And it looks for the cues that are in your environment, so it's scanning for all the five senses. It looks for cues within you.

So for example, right now I'm on the podcast, my heart's beating a little bit and I'm feeling a little tight and feeling a bit nervous. So my nervous system senses okay, something's different, something's going on. And it looks for cues between people, so relationally. So I am looking at your face right now, is there some facial confirmation that we're on the same wavelength? Is there nodding? Sometimes just the paucity and the tone. So our nervous system is looking at all these cues. And it's doing that unconsciously.

It's not something you have to say, "Hey, pay attention to that." Although we can direct ourselves to pay attention to things. But generally speaking, it's doing it on a subconscious level and it's scanning that safety danger. And based on what it scans, it is going to assign us a certain state that

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

we're going to be living in for a period of time or we're going to be going to. There's a couple of things, though, about the nervous system that it's important to know about this radar.

And the first one is really it's not really accurate, and that's kind of unfortunate because it would be easier if every time it sensed danger, you knew it was danger. But you can think of it, it's like a smoke detector that you have in your house. And if you have a really sensitive smoke detector, sometimes there's smoke and everything goes off, the fire department arrives. They think it's a five alarm fire and you're like, "Oh, sorry, I just burned toast." That happens all the time to the nervous system because its job is not to decide whether safety or danger is actually accurate.

That's another part of the brain, that's your frontal lobe, your executive function, your CEO is in charge of that. Your nervous system's job is just safety, danger, safety, danger and so it misreads cues. The other thing that it does is it has no concept of time. So what's happening in the past versus the present, the nervous system doesn't care.

So this is what we see often when people suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder is they will all of a sudden be in present moment, completely safe. They'll hear a loud noise or they'll smell something or something will happen, and they will respond as if they were back in that moment of danger. So the nervous system it's so important when we're actually in danger, but when we're not in danger, sometimes what happens is we misread these cues and we get activated. We get assigned a certain state that is not the most helpful state for us.

Jody: I have so many questions because this is so fascinating to me. You mentioned that it has no sense of time. So this is why we have sometimes post-traumatic stress type situations. Is this also why I can lay in bed at night and start thinking about my kids and wondering about their future and feeling triggered, that's the same thing, yeah?

Leah: Absolutely, because your thoughts in that situation are considered dangerous because again, you're thinking these thoughts. Your nervous

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

system is just like she must be in danger. She's thinking these thoughts, we've got to protect her. And you can start getting activated because that's our first line of defense is we get activated when we start testing danger.

Jody: The other question I had is, I feel like years ago I read a book, so I'm probably going to get this wrong but it's talking about highly sensitive people, which I think at the time they claimed that a third of the population is considered highly sensitive. It's not an unusual thing by any means, but that highly sensitive people they attribute it to their nervous system being wired in such a way that they experience things more intensely.

So I notice with some of my more sensitive children, they're more easily afraid or anxious or whatever, and even things like they have to have tags cut out of their shirt, sensory issues, we're constantly talking about.

Leah: Yeah. Highly sensitive people, they do know that there is a genetic component that some kids and we naturally see that. Like you said, some kids are just you can tell they're born right away a little bit more highly sensitive. So that can be one reason that genetically there is. But sometimes highly sensitive has to do with what has happened to their nervous system throughout their life.

So, for example, our nervous system starts developing in utero. So we are forming our nervous system, we're feeding off of our mom. So if our mom has gone through, maybe she's going through a difficult pregnancy or maybe she's really stressed out, that gets imprinted on the baby. And then as the baby is an infant, goes into childhood, again, the nervous system is picking up on all sorts of cues, it's reading and it is learning what the nervous system is going to be.

So for some people it could be that their upbringing, lots of people have been born in different situations. We look at the ACE score, which is the Adverse Childhood Experiences, where people are subjected to maybe neglect or abuse or maybe poverty or maybe there's illness in the home or maybe parents who are anxious themselves. And that sort of gets passed

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

down that whole epigenetic thing. And that is also contributing to a highly sensitive nervous system.

So it's kind of a mix of the genetics and the environment but your nervous system is learning all the time. But the good thing is, it's learning all the time, which means that it can unlearn and it can relearn when things aren't sort of helpful and working in its favor. And that's why it's so important for us to be understanding, what is our nervous system sort of like at baseline? And where do we want it to be and how do we get there? That's why we want to learn about our nervous system.

Jody: Okay. So you talked about the nervous system assigning a state to us. Will you say more about the possible states?

Leah: Right. So as I said, it's safety, danger, safety, danger. If the nervous system senses safety and it needs cues of safety, it's actively looking for it. We go into basically, I call it the zone of resilience. You may hear it called as the window of tolerance. It's a safe state. There is a pretty famous neuroscience theory called the polyvagal theory, and they call it the safe and social state or the ventral vagal state, which has to do with the vagus nerve, which we can touch on in a second.

But this safe state is a state of connection and this is where you just feel good. You can communicate, you are curious, you're compassionate, you're tolerant and you're resilient. And you have access to your thinking skills, your CEO is in charge there. So you're able to follow through with things. You're able to regulate your emotions. You're able to just manage a lot of different things that are thrown at you. And this is a state where we can call it, it's like a home base. So that's the first state.

Now, if the nervous system senses danger, it assigns you to a sympathetic state. And that sympathetic state is a hyper aroused state. I call it team hyper because everything on it is flavored with this activation. And that's where we hear of fight, flight and freeze. So if you have more of a fight energy, you may notice that you're a little bit angry and irritated and frustrated and maybe defensive.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

If you have more of that flight energy, you may find that you are anxious and worried and overthinking and ruminating and even just super busy, focused on being perfect at things. So that is the fight and flight. Now, freeze is also an activated state, but it's combined with a lower state of shutdown, which is the second protective state. So you're either going to go to safety or you get bumped up to team hyper.

You're going to stay in team hyper for a while, but then what happens is the nervous system is like, "Listen, we have tried to fight, we have tried to flee. We are running out of steam here. We've got to shut down and conserve energy." And that's what it will do, it will shut down and conserve energy. And you go down to what I call team hypo or the polyvagal theory calls it the dorsal zone. In that zone that is where you're trying to conserve energy.

And so you're going to feel just really low. Things are slow. Things are helpless and hopeless. This is where you see burnout. This is eventually what happens with people when they are so activated doing so much, keeping on going. Eventually, the system's like, "We can't keep this up. We're shutting down and conserving our energy." Because remember, the nervous system is all about survival and it knows we can't stay like this.

Jody: In that hyper state, yeah.

Leah: So you come to the shutdown state, you're low. And that's where depression, sadness, the other thing to notice about hyper and hypo, is you don't have access to your thinking skills. And that's a big piece, especially for us as coaches. When we see clients coming in and they're either activated or they're really under activated, they do not have their CEO online with them. They're not going to be able to be thinking as clearly. They need to be regulated. They need to be in that safe zone of resilience for them to access their CEO.

Jody: So good. Okay, so how do we get back to that safe zone?

Leah: Yeah, that is the challenge.

Jody: That would just be an easy answer, Leah.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

Leah: Well, the first thing is, is we all have different widths of our safety zone.

Jody: Okay, yeah, talk about that. I love that concept.

Leah: Yeah, because if you have grown up in an environment that maybe is more challenging or if you are exposed to a lot of stress in your life, chronic stress, even if you're as simple as really, really tired. Your zone of safety is going to move up and down. It's going to shrink and then it's going to get bigger. So when somebody has experienced a lot of trauma, their zone is very, very thin. And you may notice it by not having much tolerance for things.

So your child may do something, and when you have a large zone, you're like, "Sure sweetie, whatever you need, let me help you out." And if you are working with a very, very narrow zone, you may just bite their head off, "What do you want from me?" So that's the first thing to recognize is our zone changes and a lot of people have spent a lot of time with very narrow zones. Especially if they've grown up with these adverse childhood experiences or a lot of trauma, they may have a very, very narrow bandwidth, and they don't even know what it feels like to be home.

So they will have spent a lot of time up in that hypervigilant state. The challenge with being in something like a hypervigilant state, your body is not meant to be there. And so it can wreak all sorts of havoc, and that's where we start to see a lot of disease. We start to see a lot of chronic illness, a lot of chronic pain, a lot of anxiety. All those things are a function of being too long in an activated state because we're only meant to come up and then come back down.

So a lot of people they don't even realize that they're in an activated state. So the first place we have to start with is getting them to understand, maybe you've been functioning your whole life in activation. And a lot of my clients, that's what I see is, as I explain this to them, they're like, "I don't think I even know what home is. I've always been chronically busy. I've always had that anxious edge. I've always been a little short tempered."

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

And so we want them first to recognize what their landscapes are in each area.

Once they recognize that, then we're not trying to get them to leave that zone completely because it would be too dramatic if you're like, "You've lived here your whole life, now all of a sudden you have to live here." We have to very slowly start helping them build that zone of resilience. And that's where we're going to do things on a daily basis, I call it practice. We have to practice things that feel good and help our system feel good. It doesn't necessarily feel good for people at first if they've been dysregulated for a long time.

So we have to start very slowly and it's things like reading, helping them every once in a while, take a nice long exhalation, which calms our nervous system just instantaneously, it can calm our nervous system. Movement is another thing that we can do because we are moving that energy, we can do meditation, we can do creative expression. Social connection is a huge piece of it.

So all these things will help you grow your zone and that's what our goal is to grow our zone as wide as possible, so that when we're confronted with stressors, we can go up and down, but we're not going to be leaving and staying and going up in that team hyper.

Jody: So it's, correct me if I'm wrong, but I feel like it's all the things that maybe we all know we should be doing anyway but I love the idea of doing it for our mental and emotional health, nutrition, getting enough sleep.

Leah: Exactly. Getting daylight, getting out there, movement.

Jody: Sunshine, vitamins and nutrients, all the normal 'healthy' behaviors, physically, spiritually. That most of us are walking around going, "I know I should do that", are what increase that zone of safety and get us back to regulated, is that what you're saying?

Leah: Exactly. And we want to be doing this not only because we want to increase our zone, but because on a daily level, we're confronted with

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

stressors and these stressors literally it builds up stress in our system. And on a daily basis, we need to release that stress from our system. We call it, close the stress cycle. And all those things will help you move through stress as well. So doing movement and breathing not only is it growing our zone, but it is also helping us on a daily basis, reset.

So that we're not continuing to build and build and build and eventually toppling over into dysregulation because we just can't take it anymore. We're going up during the day and then we're coming down because we've hit that reset button, going up and coming down, hit that reset button. So it is really powerful to think to yourself, this movement is not just because I want to get extra steps in because I'm concerned about my weight, but this movement is helping me alleviate that stress, and it's helping me build my resilience, it's helping me stay regulated.

And to me, it's so much more motivating to do all the things that I know 'I should' be doing when I just see there's so many physical and emotional and spiritual benefits to it.

Jody: Okay, so Leah, what I hear you saying then is that participating in all these healthy behaviors has the long term benefit of increasing that zone of resilience, that's going to probably take some time, right?

Leah: Yeah.

Jody: But also the immediate short term benefit of helping you deal with whatever stressors or triggers come along. So it's a double win to do these seemingly small and yet sometimes challenging to make ourselves do.

Leah: Yeah, absolutely.

Jody: Okay, I want to ask you about cold plunging because it's such a trend right now. And everybody says it totally regulates your nervous system. Is that true? And if so, how so?

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

Leah: Yeah. So the thing with cold plunging, first of all, I think people just love the show, *Limitless* with Chris Hemsworth because there's a whole episode of cold plunging.

Jody: Wait a second. How did I not know about this?

Leah: [Inaudible] had his shirt off the entire one.

Jody: Right, I'm writing it down.

Leah: It's actually a fantastic show because it does talk a lot about stress and some of the things we've been talking about and it talks about cold plunging. So something like cold plunging, what it does is it sort of pushes your nervous system, it taxes your nervous system. So while we want to do things that feel good and make us feel at home, we are trying to grow our zone of resilience, which means we have to push up against some borders.

So cold plunging, that's what it does, it sort of deliberately stresses our system. And so I mean think about it, if you get into an ice bath right now, chances are you're not just going to melt into it. You're going to be like, ahh, it's going to be really jarring. And then you're going to try to regulate yourself to tolerate it. So you're going to probably do some breathing, maybe do some movement. You're going to start saying affirmations, "I can do this. I can do this."

There's lots of other benefits that if you watch the show, they go through what's going on for your immune system and so many other things. But for the nervous system, it really is pushing it to challenge. And we want to do some hard things and cold plunging is hard. And the more you do it, the more you're able to tolerate it. And then the hope is that it does transfer over into everyday life, that when you're presented with stressors, you have a sort of a broader range that you can tolerate these stressors.

The same thing can be said that's almost the same reason why we do things like high intensity training, again, we're taxing our system. We're putting it into a stress state, a very controlled stress state. And then we're learning how to manage it and we're bringing our heart back down. Or even

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

doing things like a hard goal, starting a business, doing things that are challenging, we are pushing our nervous system. Learning how to regulate and get things done and then coming back to home from it.

Jody: I love that so much. Okay, so I can see that when we're in hyper, that hyperarousal state, I don't know about others but for me it's like, okay, I should get out and go for a walk because I'm kind of stressed or I'm kind of overwhelmed or I'm a little anxious or whatever. When you're in hypo, like you said and everything is trying to shut down to conserve energy, it's super hard to get yourself to do anything.

Leah: It is, yeah. It is 'easier' and I'll use that in quotes because it's still hard when you're hypo to bring yourself down. When you are in hypo, it is much harder. You have to actually be adding energy into the system to bring you back up. That I think one of the places that can be really helpful to start is with something called coregulation. And that is your ability with somebody else's nervous system to be communicating back and forth.

And when somebody is in that hypo state and they really are feeling low, having somebody there with you supporting you can be the first step. So that's why it is so important that we have connection and that we have that coregulation. And it's not that they are going to be there like your coach saying, "Get up, we're going to go run five laps." They may just sit beside you. And they may just maybe put their hand on your back, just sort of gentle movements.

I love the analogy I heard from someone, I don't know who to give it credit for, but it's think of that hypo aroused state as a turtle pulling its head inside. And when you come down and you want the turtle to start moving, you're not going to pick the turtle up and start shaking it and say, "Come on, let's get going." Because that's going to be too jarring for the system. And it's going to cause the turtle to retreat even more. I've never done it with a turtle, but I'm assuming the turtle will retreat even more.

But we want to be very gentle and sort of persuasive in a kind way, inspiring the turtle to push their head out, but it's going to be very slow

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

movements. We do want to add energy, so movement is helpful, but it's not going to be as I said, let's go run a marathon. It may even start with, let's imagine you getting up and doing something and that sort of starts that brain pattern where, okay, I can imagine myself getting up and moving.

And then the next step would be actually doing something. Sometimes for some people, they may feel that they can activate themselves more and sort of do some shaking or some do some activated breathing to bring energy into their system. But for a lot of people, it's just going to be baby, micro steps that they take to add energy back into their system.

Jody: Okay, that's powerful. Where does coaching come into play with all of this, do you think?

Leah: So I love working with the mindset as you do and working with the model. And what I had found when I was working with the model is some people they just do so well. You teach them the model and they're like, "Okay, I can work on my thoughts", and so forth. And I started to realize that's when people are regulated. When they're regulated and they have access to their CEO, they are able to be coached by tools such as the model.

But then there were other people that just couldn't quite shake it and you hear them say things like, "Oh, I know this is just a thought, but, and I've tried changing it but I just keep getting stuck and I feel stuck." And I started to realize, these are people who often have flavors of dysregulation or they are completely dysregulated. And so I started looking at, alright, we can work with them with their thought work when they are regulated. But when they are dysregulated we kind of have to start with their story of their nervous system as opposed to their cognitive story.

So I start working with them on alright, let's figure out what do your landscapes look like? What is safety to you? Can we build up that zone? And then start doing the things to help you maintain good health. Those sort of pillars of good health, like we said, the movement and nutrition and sleep, doing those things.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

When they do those things and they start spending a little bit more time in a regulated state, that's when I can step in and say, "Alright, let's start looking at your thoughts." Because your thoughts, your feelings, your actions, they are all sort of driven by what state you are in, in the nervous system. Every state has a different physiology. It has different postures and breathing, but it has different thoughts and feelings and actions as well. So you want to get familiar with where are these thoughts and feelings, actions coming from and what flavor do they look like?

Jody: Do you think there's anything to, because just thinking back over my experience both as a client of coaching, as a coach myself and witnessing tens of thousands of people, both in my own coaching program and with other coaches. Is there anything to being in an environment where you're learning maybe something intriguing or you're around a teacher or coach who is able to in an appropriate way, bring a slightly different energy that that can help regulate you?

Because I feel like a lot of people are drawn to let's say Brooke Castillo, who is our teacher, for example, because of her energy and the things she's teaching. And it almost can, especially for somebody in maybe a little bit of a hypo state, can lift you into a place where you're more excited now, more energized. I get energized as well, but also have kind of a calming, laid back presence. And I feel like people are drawn to that, they want to be around my energy because I'm not stressed and anxious.

Sometimes I wonder if a part of it isn't, I would totally agree with you, when somebody's dysregulated, we're not going to get in there and go, "What are you thinking and why are you thinking that?" And that kind of really hard coaching, but I feel like being in the environment, I have people tell me all the time listening to the coaching calls, I sometimes think is in some way regulating their nervous system a little bit.

Leah: Yeah. And that's the coregulation piece and that's what people are feeding off. I am regulating by being in your presence. I am regulating by hearing your voice, looking at your facial tone, your words, your actions. And then for other people, I may need some upregulation and so I will want

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

to turn to somebody who is maybe more energetic and we're constantly drawing from that. So absolutely, it's exactly what coregulation is, yeah.

Jody: That's interesting. Yeah, so fascinating, Leah, I love all of this.

Leah: It is, it's so much fun. The reason I also think it's so much fun, is it really helps you in relationships because you start to understand that people do what they do in so many ways because of their nervous system. And I do what I do because of my nervous system. So it kind of removes some of the shame and the blame. And even as the parents, so often I would look at my kids and maybe one of them would be doing something that I just thought what is wrong with them? Why are they doing that? And I find that so irritating and frustrating.

And now I really can sit back and say, "What's going on with their nervous system?" I see that they are totally aroused. Or I'll be like, "That reaction, their nervous system is causing me to sense that something's going on in my nervous system so before I do anything, I want to regulate myself." So it kind of gives that space in relationships too. It removes the shame and the blame and so it's not a choice. It's not a moral thing. It's not a weakness. It's your nervous system.

And your nervous system is something you didn't have control over. You do now, not that you have control over your actual nervous system because it's unconscious, but you do have control that you can build your zone of resilience. You can start identifying when you're in the different states and actively do things to help yourself.

Jody: That's so good. Leah Davidson, where can people get more help and more of your brilliance?

Leah: So I am on Instagram and Facebook @leahdavidsonlifecoaching. I am also, that's my website leahdavidsonlifecoaching.com. And I have a podcast called *Building Resilience*. So I talk a lot about all the things that we talked about today. There's pretty much separate episodes on each topic. So that's a good place to find me.

418: Nervous System Regulation with Leah Davidson

Jody: So, good, thank you for everything that you've taught me. It really has made me I feel like a better coach and helped me in my personal life. And I'm excited to just keep learning from you. Thank you for coming on today.

Leah: Thank you so much for having me, Jody.

Coaching changed my life and I've watched it change the lives of thousands of men and women since, but is it right for you? You'll only know by giving it a try. Try it out today at jodymoore.com/trial.