

InVisible InCourage LIVE with Heidi Hanna

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Transcription provided by Stacie Valle for Virtual VRI

Wayne Connell: Welcome everyone to another addition of Invisible InCourage LIVE! We are here with Heidi Hanna!

I was on your website and I noticed your byline says "the stress detective." Let's talk about what that means and your journey. Tell us about your PhD and how you got there.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: I definitely have a story. If you go after 1 PhD you have a story, if you do a second one you must be a little twisted. But I am working on my second one right now. I always feel a little strange using the term "invisible disability" although that can be hard for me to say. There are people with "real" disabilities out there and I don't want to make mine seem bigger than it is. But when I was 12 I started fainting for now reason. But now I know I have a condition and I faint when I am over stimulated. It started as headaches and stomachaches when I was about 10 and I was often misdiagnosed. At the end of the day people said "its probably stress" and when 12 and being told that, I just pushed it all down.

I struggled with depression and anxiety but what is most interesting is that this invisible disability was embarrassing. It would happen on flights, dates, job interviews, etc. I always felt tension under the surface of everything I did. As a speaker traveling the world I felt like, "if only they knew what was going on in the inside." The good news is I have learned how to manage it and the drive has kept me learning. Switching from psychology now to human adaptability and emotions. The corporate space is helping us learn to adapt more positive ways and to deal with this epidemic of stress we have right now.

Wayne Connell: I have been following you on Facebook and you actually went through COVID-19. Right?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Yes and now. The short version there is that I was in Seattle and speaking for Boeing and they have been going through a lot and I was trying to help them navigate stress and their emotions at the end of February. I came home and felt sick and I gave myself 3 days to be sick. Normally I don't have time for that, but I decided to really take care of myself and to chill out and move appointments. Long story short, I "rallied" and went to Los Angeles and San Francisco, and they went to shelter in place but I was working so hard I didn't realize the magnitude of it.

I went home and was so tired of being sick. I had all the symptoms and felt I had a bad case of asthma for 8 weeks. So I went through it during a time that testing wasn't available and I knew I was going to be OK, although one morning I did go for a run before I should have and woke up in pain. So I called to find a test because my doctor wanted me tested, but no one would test me because I wasn't over 65.

That really took me back to the times as a kid when no one believed me that I was sick. But it turns out the nervous system will adapt based on factors and there are a lot of people with this shut down mechanism in their system. So I don't know for sure because I never got tested, but I was sick for 8 weeks. My husband did get sick but it was for one day. I was sick for 8 weeks. This is such a unique illness and it is bizarre how it is effecting us. One thing I want to say with our audience is to really pay attention to the emotional and mental impact. This is going to be for a while. Even if we get a vaccine right now, there will be a lingering effect that [fire alarms going off in Heidi's home.]

[Break]

One time that happened during a guided meditation. Crazy stuff happens. But it is about how we pivot. We can't get rid of the stress but it is about how we handle it.

Wayne Connell: Thinking about people with disabilities, and with my wife people ask her what is different and not much is other than a higher risk out there now. They have had to deal with people thinking they are lying or faking, people don't all have the right terminology to use. And part of the stress is dealing with how people interact with you. If someone doesn't believe you, how do you react to that?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: The thing I go back to is that we really can only change our own perception and experience in that moment. If anything, I have learned more to practice my own self compassion so that my tank is more full so I don't need other people to be more compassionate towards me. No one can really know what it is like to go through what we have been through. When people are trying to rush you through your story and they want to tell a story, it is so unhelpful. They are moving out of their discomfort because instead of just sitting with you in that, and asking you to tell them more, they move on. People also ask "what should we not say?" Well, don't tell me to just relax. I would have done that if I could. But ask me a question, "what do you need most right now?" People want to help but they don't know how. It isn't their fault they don't understand because they haven't had the experiences but maybe I can help them to be able to say "I see that you want to fix this, but I think I need to just feel the way I feel for a minute. Can you just sit with me or next to me?"

Sometimes we just need another human being to sit with us in the moment and not try to rush us.

Wayne Connell: People say "all they want to do is talk about their illness" but I say they aren't listening. Think about Job in the bible, his counselors thought he was just going on and on and to move on. But he just wanted someone to sit with him in the ashes. If you have been sick for 30 years odds are you have googled it to death.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Right. People try to tell you how to fix it when there really is no answer or fix. Stress and stimulation all activate the nervous system and make any disease or dysfunction worse. It doesn't mean relax and it will go away, but we can work on the emotional quality of being kinder to ourselves through it. To be more deeply connected to a few people instead of everyone on social media. Focus on recharging our own battery so we can move through the stress more gracefully. It starts with being kind to ourselves and then we have more capacity to be kind to other people. But we tend to jump to focus on what we can do for others.

Wayne Connell: People hear so much that they must be the problem, they start to believe it. You were talking about focusing on yourself, but if you are doing all you can don't be frustrated with yourself. How do you not? I tell people to earn the right to be a friend, then you can enter in. I love what you said about helping. We all want to help. I am having a hard time learning that people don't want your help all the time. But ask the person going through the difficult time how you can help them, because they know the answer.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: It is so important that we allow ourselves to sit in what we need to feel. So much of our problems is we don't want to feel it. If we push it down or away it magnifies it more. The more I am judging other people it is because I am judging myself. We are changing the lens with how we see the world. Not to sound too out-there, but paying more attention to the thoughts and what we tell ourselves. Our thoughts aren't who we are but often are triggered by

survival instincts, but they aren't always true. When they pop up, address them and see if it is how I feel. This is the "Monkey" brain we all have and I will tell it that I am choosing different. When that pops up and is harsh or critical, I just say "hey monkey, thanks, I know you are worried about me but I am good." And then we pivot to the positive and what we are grateful for and it can nudge us back to an effective place.

Wayne Connell: I remember an incident early in COVID-19 and you were wearing a mask and the response was very different. My wife wore it and people thought she was sick, but she was trying to avoid getting sick.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: It is a little different than what you said. The first thing that happened was coughing. I had a cough. If I was clearing my throat people shot me the evil eye. I was like, relax everyone I can be out with a cough. And it was also weird because there was this moment where I have always pushed through my pain my entire life, and now I am being the tough one and going to work, and was that the right thing to do? But the weirdest part was the flip side, a couple weeks ago and I went for the first run I had been on and I didn't have a mask. I have had trauma related to my mouth and jaw, and a mask gives me a bit of a panic attack. I was so far away from anyone, and I avoided others, and I was opening up about my fear of going for a run again and then I got harassed by people saying "how dare you not have a mask on?" But people just don't know your story and where you are.

Our first reaction is to react back if someone else reacts to us and it elevates. Or I had a choice to say, "that person is fearful and I will be gracious in my answer." So I just don't post things like that, and I carry a mask with me and I put it up and down as needed. We just don't know the story someone else is bringing.

I am now dealing with a lot of utilities workers and many of them are getting bullied over masks. It is fascinating and what I am so curious about now is how we can adapt in positive and negative ways. Just ask the question, how are we adapting in ways positive and supportive that help us grow, and how are we adapting in ways that aren't the best of who we are.

Wayne Connell: Give us a couple techniques that can help deal with the stress. How do people cope dealing with the illness they already have and now they have stress on top of it.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: When I think about stress, I think about how it isn't good or bad, just what happens. Some stress is good and gets our adrenaline going. Like a fire alarm getting us mobilized. But the majority of our stress is chronic in nature and if you have chronic pain or inflammation then we produce cortisol and that becomes toxic. So stress is just a gap between demand and capacity and if you can figure out where to take action you can take it in a more positive way.

If you have an invisible disability and it is chronic pain oriented, you can't get rid of that easily. The demand is always there. It is how do we enhance the capacity side emotionally and mentally and spiritually and to think about doing that in a way aligned with how the brain works, from bottom to top. Calming our nervous system first is important so we sense before we feel, before we think. Many people try to think their way out of stress. If they can think different they think it will shift things but that catches us in a vicious spiral. If you can calm your nervous system with things like sound, smell or touch -- that will help to enhance blood flow to the brain so you can feel more positive and think clearly.

I use sounds like sound therapy and listening to beads or ocean waves

crashing. Waves is one of the most calming sounds to the neural system. Even things like colors - I put on bright pink because I am tired today and that energizes me. I actually have rows of essential oils I made to mimic the smell of being at the beach. It goes quickly to the fear center and starts to calm it down unconsciously. You can use gentle movement, even if you can't do big movement. Small movements to get circulation going. And touch or vibration therapy works really well. I have a chair now that has vibration to it. Not deep massage but just the vibration to bring more rhythmic balance to the nervous system.

I also love humor. Not to find funny in challenging times, but to look for ways to be amazed and amused by life.

Wayne Connell: One of the questions we always ask is that you need courage to get through the day. Not when things are going great but when there are challenges. So what gives you courage to make it through the day?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: I love that question. I think that for me one of the most important things I have done is to lean into my curiosity. For me courage comes in asking questions. The more difficult the experience, I am not even looking for a benefit, just to find some sort of meaning. Even like this, there is a lot of chaos going on. A bad question is, "why me?" and there is no question to that and it isn't true. I could sit there and just give up. Or I could say "what is the possible lesson in this, does it teach me something about the future?" and even if we can't answer it, it alleviates the pressure to answer it. So for me, I don't know the lesson in all of that, but I know if I wasn't doing this I wouldn't have this conversation with you.

As I shared before, I went through a very dark bout of depression and didn't feel on my game at all. But at the end 2 boys came up to me and

I could tell they had a type of cognitive disability and they said they loved my session the best. And it was so special. So even in those moments we don't know why something is happening the way it is, it could be in our struggles. It doesn't mean we want the challenges, but it means there is room for blessings in the challenges if we ask the questions.

Wayne Connell: Where can people learn more about you and your courses that are available?

Dr. Heidi Hanna: I have a lot of stuff going on. But Heidianna.com is the best space. I spend some time on Facebook and LinkedIn as well.

A shout out to Karen Buxman, we are bringing back a humor marathon to raise funds for [inaudible.]

Wayne Connell: I know you picked the longest day of the year for that as well.

Dr. Heidi Hanna: I did a golf marathon one year and no one came out to golf for it, so I asked Karen what we should do and she said all she wanted to do was laugh.

Wayne Connell: Thank you so much for being here and for the work you are doing. I hope you are healthy now and continuing in your amazing work and helping people deal with stress. Thank you so much heidi!

Dr. Heidi Hanna: Thanks Wayne!

[End of meeting]