Episode Book

EPISODE #5592

Two Firewalls, One Relationship: Healing While the Threat Continues

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SYNOPSIS

Most trauma recovery models assume the threat has ended: you heal after the harmful relationship is behind you. But what if one relationship has to continue — a parent, a co-parent, a colleague — potentially for years? This episode explores what one writer calls the "dual-firewall problem": running strict information control with one person while staying open and vulnerable with everyone else. Both firewalls are correct. Neither can be run by the same settings. We dig into the ICD-11's framing of interpersonal disturbance as a core CPTSD feature, a grounded-theory study on how group compassion — not psychoeducation — drives change, and what STAIR and ESTAIR offer for context-specific skill use. Plus: why the phase-based treatment debate is still live, and what the research genuinely can't tell us about switching costs.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Here's the question Daniel put at the top of this one, and I want to let it sit for a second before we do anything with it. How does someone keep a defense alive for the one relationship that still requires it, possibly for years, without letting it become the way they relate to everybody else?



Herman

That's the whole episode right there.



Corn

It is. He starts from something we've talked about before, the way prolonged exposure to a hurtful or narcissistic person leaves you distrustful of people in general. But he says recovery is usually described as though the relationship ends and then healing begins. And his point is that for a lot of people the relationship doesn't end. It might be a parent, a relative, a co-parent, a colleague. Some degree of contact has to continue, potentially for years.



Herman

Which is not a niche situation. That's the thing. It reads like an edge case and it isn't.



Corn

Right. And he gives it a name. He calls it a dual-firewall problem. With the harmful person the firewall stays strict. You minimize what you share, you grey rock, you present a constrained version of yourself because you know vulnerability gets weaponized. With everybody else, recovery requires close to the opposite. People form relationships by sharing things, being transparent, taking risks, gradually allowing themselves to be vulnerable. His line is that a room full of people grey rocking each other would be a painfully awkward party.



Herman

He's not wrong.



Corn

Then he takes it one step further, and this is the image I keep chewing on. He says the person ends up like a part-time actor. Around one person they play a constrained version of themselves, one that may resemble an older version of themselves they spent enormous effort growing out of, and then they switch that posture off for everybody else. And then the last piece, the CPTSD question. Trauma recovery often involves recognizing that adaptations which once protected you aren't necessary anymore. What happens when some of them still are, in one corner of your life?



Herman

So the question isn't how to heal from a relationship that ended. It's how to heal while one relationship hasn't.



Corn

That's the episode. Let's get into it.



Herman

Let me define the thing precisely first, because I think the precision is where the difficulty lives. The dual-firewall problem is two contradictory relational operating systems running at the same time. One of them is maximum information control and emotional opacity with a single person. The other is maximum openness and vulnerability with everyone else. And both of them are correct. That's the part people miss. Neither firewall is a mistake.



Corn

Neither one is a malfunction.



Herman

Neither one. The strict firewall is the right response to a person who has demonstrated that what you give them gets used against you. The open firewall is the right response to the rest of the world, because it's the only thing that builds anything. So you're not choosing between a healthy behavior and a bad habit. You're choosing between two correct behaviors that cannot be run by the same settings.



Corn

Which is why the standard advice doesn't land. Every guide assumes one of the two is the problem.



Herman

And the clinical literature has a name for the guarded half, which is useful. The ICD-11 definition of complex PTSD is core PTSD symptoms plus three clusters it calls disturbances in self-organization. Affective dysregulation, negative self-concept, and problems in interpersonal relations. That third one is the crux for us. Interpersonal disturbance is written into the diagnosis as a core feature, not a side effect.



Corn

Not a symptom that shows up in some people. A defining one.



Herman

And the network analyses keep finding the same two items sitting at the center. Feeling distant or cut off from people, and finding it hard to stay emotionally close to people. Those two aren't just common in CPTSD, they're among the most central symptoms, and they act as bridges. They're how trauma connects to depression and to a lot of other things downstream.



Corn

So the thing recovery asks you to reduce is the same thing that's protecting you in one relationship.



Herman

That's the collision. And there's a detail that makes it stranger. Attachment anxiety, not avoidance, partially mediates the link between interpersonal trauma and CPTSD symptoms. Which means underneath the guardedness there's usually a relational hunger. The person isn't someone who stopped wanting closeness. They're someone who still wants it and has learned that reaching for it is dangerous.



Corn

That explains something the part-time-actor image doesn't. If it were pure avoidance, switching back to the open posture would just be effort. But if there's hunger under it, the guarded posture costs something every time you wear it. You're not putting down a shield. You're putting down something you actually want.



Herman

That's why it feels like loss and not just fatigue.



Corn

Okay. So now the other firewall. Why does healing with the rest of the world require the opposite of grey rocking? Because that's the half people treat as obvious and it isn't obvious at all.



Herman

There's a study that answers it directly, and it's the one I'd build the episode around if I had to pick. It's a grounded-theory study of women completing group treatment for CPTSD, and the authors named their model building a compassionate armour. Three mechanisms of change came out of it. Valued relationships formed in the group. Developing a comprehensive understanding of oneself and one's difficulties. And experiencing emotions and compassion from others.



Corn

The second one is the psychoeducation piece.



Herman

It is. And here's the finding that matters. Psychoeducation alone was insufficient. Understanding your own condition, knowing why you do the things you do, naming the pattern, none of that was the active ingredient. The relational experience was. Being in a room with people who understood and receiving compassion from them, that's what moved people.



Corn

So you can't read your way out.



Herman

You cannot read your way out. Which is a hard sentence for a certain kind of person to hear, and I include myself in that category.



Corn

It's also exactly what Daniel is pointing at with the awkward party. If the mechanism of change is receiving compassion from other people, then a room full of people who have all decided not to disclose anything has no mechanism in it. Everyone is safe and nothing happens. No data exchanged, no relationship formed, nobody gets better.



Herman

The party is a surprisingly precise thought experiment. Grey rocking is an information strategy. It works by making you uninteresting to a specific person. Point it at a room and you've built a machine that produces nothing.



Corn

Let me push on the framework question, because Daniel asked it directly and I don't want us to skip past it. Does CPTSD actually help here, or is it a label people reach for because it sounds like it explains the situation?



Herman

It helps in three ways and fails in one way, and the failure is the interesting part. It helps because it names interpersonal disturbance as core rather than incidental. It helps because it reframes the guardedness as a trauma adaptation rather than a character flaw, which matters enormously for how people treat themselves. And it helps because it comes with skills-based tools aimed at exactly this domain. That's three real things.



Corn

And the failure?



Herman

Standard CPTSD recovery assumes the threat has ended. The whole arc is built on the idea that you're safe now, the danger is in the past, and the adaptations that protected you can be recognized as no longer necessary and gradually retired. The dual-firewall case is a partial-threat environment. Some of the adaptations are still load-bearing. They're not relics. They're current equipment.



Corn

So the framework describes the problem accurately and then hands you a recovery model built for a different situation.



Herman

That's the honest version. And I want to be careful here, because I don't think this is a small technicality. If you take a standard trauma-recovery framework into a situation where the threat is ongoing, and the framework says the adaptations are no longer necessary, you can end up pressuring someone to dismantle protection they still need. That's not a theoretical harm.



Corn

There's a version of this that would be damaging. Someone in therapy being told the guardedness is a symptom to work on, when the guardedness is the thing keeping them intact.



Herman

And the person often can't tell the difference either, from the inside. The same behavior, the same feeling, in two different contexts, one of which is a symptom and one of which is a survival tool. You can't introspect your way to which one you're doing.



Corn

So what does the field actually offer? Because there is something aimed at this, isn't there.



Herman

There is. STAIR, Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation, developed by Marylene Cloitre. It's a phase-based protocol, and the first phase is explicitly about affect regulation and interpersonal regulation before you do any trauma processing. The name alone tells you the field recognized that people needed interpersonal skills before they could use them.



Corn

And there's a newer version.



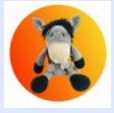
Herman

ESTAIR, Enhanced STAIR. Flexible and modular. The patient gets choice in which skills to target and in what sequence. That modularity is the conceptually important bit for our topic, because it allows for context-specific skill use rather than one global posture. You're not being taught a single way to be with people. You're being given a set of tools and some discretion about when to use which.



Corn

That's the closest thing in the literature to the part-time actor problem.



Herman

It's the closest clinical analogue, yes. Not the same thing, but it's the field moving in that direction.



Corn

Now the caveat, because I know you have one and I'd rather you say it than have someone write in about it.



Herman

The phase-based treatment debate is live and I don't want to present stabilize first, then process as settled, because it isn't. A systematic review and meta-analysis published this year found no significant differences between phase-based and non-phase-based interventions across most outcomes. An RCT this year found that emotion-regulation improvement during the STAIR phase did not predict later PTSD symptom reduction. And a 2023 trial found prolonged exposure outperformed STAIR narrative therapy on PTSD symptoms at one-year follow-up.



Corn

So the sequencing claim is contested.



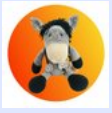
Herman

The sequencing claim is contested. What holds up better is the interpersonal regulation component specifically. Psychodynamic and phase-based approaches show more significant and enduring gains in affect regulation, self-concept, and interpersonal functioning. Those are the exact three domains of the dual-firewall problem. So I'd say the field is confident that this domain matters and considerably less confident about the order you should do things in.



Corn

Which is a useful distinction for a listener. The tool is better supported than the schedule.



Herman

That's a fair way to put it.



Corn

So the framework names the problem but assumes the threat is over. What does it actually cost to run both firewalls at once, and what happens over years?



Herman

The switching cost is the part the literature is weakest on, honestly. Nobody has a validated protocol for the exact scenario. What I can say is that the closest clinical analogue is the expressive and contextual flexibility that ESTAIR's modular design implies. The ability to move between modes deliberately rather than being stuck in one.



Herman

It's doing all the work. Because there's a version of the switch that's chosen and a version that's reflexive, and they feel completely different from the inside even though the behavior looks identical from outside. The compassionate armour framing is aimed exactly at that. The goal isn't to dismantle the armour. It's to transform it. Keep the protective capacity, strip out the shame, make it something you put on rather than something that closes over you.



Corn

Chosen armour rather than reflexive flinch.



Herman

That's the distinction. And I think it's the most useful single idea in this whole episode.



Corn

Why does it feel like regression, though? Because that's the part Daniel names and I think it's the part that actually hurts. The guarded self is an older self. It's someone they worked to stop being. And then they have to put that person back on for Thanksgiving.



Herman

Because it isn't just effort. It's re-inhabiting an identity you've been actively dismantling. If you spent three years learning to say what you actually think, and then you sit across from one person and go back to agreeable and vague and pleasant, the message you receive from yourself is that the three years didn't take. Even though what you're actually doing is a sophisticated, context-aware deployment of a skill you now have.



Corn

The progress is invisible from the inside.



Herman

Completely invisible. And the shame piece is what makes it corrosive. If the switch is driven by shame, it confirms the story that you're still that person. If it's driven by choice, it's just a thing you're doing, for a reason, for an hour.



Corn

Let me put the structural piece in here, because I don't want the whole episode to live in the psychology and skip why people can't just leave.



Herman

Please.



Corn

Post-separation abuse is well documented and it often escalates rather than stopping. A qualitative systematic review found domestic violence persisting after separation through a range of forms of abuse. And there's a term for the legal version. Custodial violence. Legal proceedings and contact arrangements used to maintain power and control over the ex-partner.



Herman

And the institutions deciding those arrangements frequently don't take the abuser's violence into account.



Corn

Which is the part that should make people angry. The survivor is structurally compelled into ongoing contact by a system that isn't weighing the thing that would argue against it. You're not choosing to keep the firewall up. You're being handed a schedule that requires it.



Herman

And this is where I'd push back on any framing that treats grey rock and information control as pathologies to be extinguished. In that context they're rational adaptations to a continuing threat. The person isn't broken. They're reading the situation correctly.



Corn

They're the sanest response available.



Herman

In that one relationship, yes.



Corn

Which brings the two halves back together. The same behavior is correct in one context and costly in another.



Herman

And the cost is the generalization risk. If you rehearse the guarded posture daily for years, it doesn't stay in its box. It bleeds. You show up to a work dinner and the same flatness that protects you in a custody handoff reads as coldness to people who've done nothing to you.



Corn

The co-parent who has to coordinate logistics every week and hold grey rock through it, and then sits at a work dinner where the same setting is just... wrong. Nobody there deserves it.



Herman

And they can't necessarily feel the difference in the moment. That's the trap. The posture doesn't announce which context it's in.



Corn

There's another population in this that I don't want us to skip, which is the kids. The same review found children in these arrangements struggling with mixed feelings toward the harmful parent, finding it hard to trust them, cautious about the parent's intentions around love and interest. That's the dual-firewall problem being learned in real time by people who didn't choose it and don't have the vocabulary for it.



Herman

They're running both firewalls and nobody taught them either one.



Corn

Right. So let me try to pull the honest synthesis, because I think we owe Daniel one. There's no validated protocol for this exact scenario. The literature describes the components. It describes the DSO cluster, it describes the compassionate armour, it describes post-separation control. It does not offer an evidence-based playbook for selectively retaining defenses for one ongoing relationship.



Herman

It doesn't. And I'd rather say that plainly than dress up a synthesis as a prescription.



Corn

The same. So what I'd offer is three principles the literature points toward, with the caveat that none of them is validated for this exact situation. One. Contextual and deliberate rather than global. ESTAIR's modular design is the model. The tool is chosen per context, not worn as a permanent setting.



Herman

Two. Transform the armour rather than removing it. Keep the protective capacity. Strip the shame. Make it chosen.



Corn

And three. Protect the openness elsewhere. Deliberately maintain at least one or a few relationships where you actually disclose, as an anchor against the guarded posture becoming the default.



Herman

That third one is the one I'd underline. The group-relationship findings say the relational experience is the active ingredient of recovery. If the guarded posture is eating your relational bandwidth, you're starving the thing that heals you.



Corn

And the timescale. The compassionate armour model explicitly frames change as an ongoing journey that continued after treatment finished. Not a course you complete. Which matters for Daniel's phrasing, potentially for years. This isn't a problem with a completion date.



Herman

It's a condition you manage, not a task you close.



Herman

The night auditor thing. I did that for a stretch. Hotel front desk, overnight shift.



Corn

You were a night auditor.



Herman

I was a night auditor. And that job teaches you something specific. You learn to be pleasant and unmemorable to everyone who comes through the lobby at three in the morning, because the ones who remember you are the ones who come back. You don't want to be remembered. You want to be the same three sentences every night.



Corn

That's professional grey rocking.



Herman

It's the closest I've come to it. And I was good at it. But the trick wasn't being dull. Everyone thinks it's being dull. It was being consistent. Same three sentences, same tone, every night, no variation. The regulars stopped trying to get more out of me because there was never more to get. Once they'd established there was nothing behind the desk, they stopped knocking.



Corn

So the firewall works by predictability, not by blankness.



Herman

Predictability. And here's why I bring it up. The dual-firewall problem sounds like someone who has to be a night auditor at one front desk and a completely different person at every other front desk in the building. And I don't know how anyone does that without the auditor voice leaking into the other shifts. Because the auditor voice isn't a mask you take off. It's a way of holding your face. It stays.



Corn

What kept it from becoming you everywhere?



Herman

One person on the day shift. We actually talked. Not about anything in particular. But she was the one person I wasn't doing the three sentences with. And I didn't realize until years later that she was the thing keeping me human, not the job. The job was the job. She was the anchor.



Corn

One person, not a program.



Herman

One person. That's what it looks like in practice. One person you don't perform for.



Corn

That's the thing the research can't quite give us. The studies tell you the relational experience is the active ingredient. They don't tell you it's one woman on the day shift who you didn't even notice was doing it.



Herman

They can't. That part only shows up in the retelling.



Corn

Here's where I've landed, and I'll put it as an open question rather than a conclusion, because I think that's what it is. If the adaptations are still necessary for one relationship, what does recovery even mean? Is it the retirement of defenses? Or is it the deliberate, chosen, context-specific deployment of them? Because those are two different finish lines and I don't think the field has picked one.



Herman

I don't think it has either. And the compassionate armour image is the closest thing to an answer. Transforming it. Chosen, self-compassionate, flexible, rather than reflexive and shame-driven. The armor stays. What changes is who's wearing it and why.



Corn

The honest gap. There's no validated protocol for this exact scenario, and the phase-based treatment debate is live. This is a place where lived experience and clinical research haven't fully met. People are doing this every day without a playbook.



Herman

Which is going to change. As post-separation abuse and custodial violence get better documented, the clinical literature is going to have to develop models that assume ongoing contact rather than treating no-contact as the default endpoint of recovery. That assumption is baked into almost everything right now and it doesn't match how a lot of people actually live.



Corn

That's the forward-looking version. The models will have to catch up to the situation.



Herman

They will. The situation isn't going anywhere.



Corn

Before we go, one thing from the research that didn't fit anywhere. The compassionate armour study found that the change continued after treatment finished. The women kept going. The model wasn't a course they completed and walked away from. It was a process that kept unfolding once the formal support was gone.



Herman

Which tells you the group wasn't the cure. The group was the place they learned the thing they then kept doing.



Corn

That's the cutting-room floor. If you got something out of this one, a review wherever you're listening is the easiest way to help. And you can always write to us, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com. Everything lives at my weird prompts dot com. Thanks as always to our producer, Hilbert Flumingtop, who keeps this whole thing running. This has been My Weird Prompts, the human-AI collaboration podcast. We'll be back soon.