

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 195: TED BRODKIN AND ASHLEY PALLATHRA

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, the podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your professional and personal life, disrupting who you are now to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

Today, we're discussing the new book called *Missing Each Other: How to Cultivate Meaningful Connections* with its co-authors, Edward Ted Brodtkin and Ashley Pallathra.

Ted is a professor of psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania and has been named a top doctor in America for over a decade. He holds his M.D. from Harvard Medical School and fun fact, he attended the pre-college division of music at Juilliard where he studied the clarinet.

Ashley is a clinical psychology PhD candidate at the Catholic University of America. Previously, she was a clinical research coordinator at the medical school at the University of Pennsylvania.

In *Missing Each Other*, they argue that we need to tune back into each other, especially now. Because of COVID, We've all been pushed to a new S curve, one that increasingly involves digital forms of connection, making it possible to miss each other even more. Ted and Ashley, thanks for being here.

Ted Brodtkin: Thanks for having us.

Whitney Johnson: So, why this book? It's titled *Missing Each Other*. I'd love to hear why you decided on this particular topic.

Ted Brodtkin: You know, Ashley and I have been thinking about social connections for a long time. I mean, we come from the world of autism research and so that's part of what motivated this.

But just to zoom out for a second to the bigger picture, we humans are social beings, and the key to happiness in our personal lives and to effectiveness in our work is good connections with other people.

So, connections are super important, but unfortunately, our authentic connections are under assault in today's world. Life seems busier and more stressful than ever, drawing us apart. Live communication has been replaced more and more by social media texting and emailing. We're all so distracted by our smartphones that we often seem to miss the person that we're with like two ships passing in the night. And despite the proliferation of all these online virtual connections, it's well documented that loneliness has increased dramatically in America over the last few decades.

And then even beyond that, the quality of our connections seems to have a big importance in terms of the major problems that face us today like from the COVID-19 pandemic to racial injustice to the climate crisis.

These are huge issues that can only be addressed to people all over the world, cooperate and work together to address them and realize that we live in a highly interconnected world. That's really why we started to think about writing this book. And then and also, as I mentioned, we started an autism research. We started working together back in 2014. We were running a National Institute of Mental Health funded research study at the University of Pennsylvania.

And the goal of our study was to develop supports that would help adults on the autism spectrum and interacting with people.

So, Ashley and I combed the literature and consulted with many people. And in trying to find the best way to help adults on the spectrum. We, we feel like we ironically discovered something that would help all people and ourselves included, not just people on the spectrum. And essentially we came to realize that really the secret to authentic human connection lies in a process that we call attunement. So, that's how we came to the book.

Whitney Johnson: That's really interesting. I want to discuss attunement. But first, I'm curious about how you made the transition from researcher and research coordinator to co-writing this book. So often people have someone working for them and that person's ready to jump to the next S curve, but they're met with friction. They're told, "You have to stay there." Ashley, I'm curious, can you tell us what Ted did to make it possible for the two of you to write this book as equals?

Ashley Pallathra: When we started talking about the idea for this book, I still remember and I was in a really stressed headspace applying to graduate school, knowing that I was on this particular route. And he just allowed for a lot of space for me to wrangle with the idea, for us to think about and think through what it would be like to work on this project, the timeline, the, the ways that it would encroach on our different lives. And, and I think as, you know, you are changing that hierarchy. There is that implicit hierarchy within a kind of manager-employer relationship. Ted really did a wonderful job of just emphasizing and reemphasizing, "No if we do this, if we go in on this, we are equal partners. We bring an equal voice to this project. And I want you to have the freedom as much as myself to, to bring the ideas that I think are valuable and important" which was key to feeling that comfort and security when working with one another.

Whitney Johnson: Ted, do you want to add anything?

Ted Brodtkin: Well, thank you, Ashley.

And I would also just say that I think it's a myth, I guess, that someone in a higher up position, for lack of a better word, whether it's a teacher or the student or an employer or an employee, it's a myth that the learning goes in only one direction. You know, that it's only the student learning from the teacher, let's say. Because the reality is the teacher learns from the student, too. It's a reciprocal relationship. Now, there is a power differential in that kind of relationship that it's important to face the reality of that. But we learn a lot from the people who work in our labs or work in our companies or whatever. And then things change and that person grows up and becomes more independent and, but yet becomes more of an equal. And that's what you want. So, I've really valued this collaboration with Ashley. I am glad that we've been able to make that shift.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it's good. All right. So you have a book that we've been talking about.

So tell us what is attunement?

Ashley Pallathra: The big question, right? Um, attunement, I think is really, you can think of it as like the fundamental social skill. It's the foundation for connection. It's the foundation for human relationships. And it's something that we need now more than ever before. And I think attunement is more of an elevated definition of connection because you really think about it's the ability to be aware of your own state of mind and body while also tuning in and connecting to that of another person. So, it's our ability to really make contact with others, not just at the thought level, but also at the gut and emotional level. Right now, in this conversation with the three of us, I'm working to attune myself to this conversation, to attune myself to both of you. And also not just paying attention to you guys, but I'm also trying to pay close attention to my own breaths and my own nerves. I'm nervous. I'm trying to regulate myself. And I think by doing that balance, and that's the theme in the book, it's that balance between your conscious awareness between the other person and yourself, that facilitates a much stronger, um, tuned in connection. If that makes sense.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, it does. And you know, something you just said, actually, that's really interesting. I had a conversation with a professional colleague the other day and he was saying, "Oh, I really don't like Zoom calls. I like to see people in person." And after I read your book, I was like, "Oh, that's probably what's going on."

And you have to tell me if my hypothesis is correct. It's probably what's going on is that we struggle to pick up those cues regardless. But when we struggle to pick them up even more, if we're on the spectrum, then having a phone call, having a Zoom call, not being able to be in person, disadvantages as a person even more in terms of them being able to know how to interact with the people that they're interacting with. Does that make sense?

Ashley Pallathra: That absolutely makes sense. I think that also probably ties into the Zoom fatigue that we are constantly hearing about because our brains are so used to that, so used to being in sync with someone in person, picking up on all of those verbal but also nonverbal cues. And the fact that we feel like we're with the person, but we're not getting that information, is, it makes me so much more tired after seeing clients all day over the computer rather than in person. You don't get that same sort of energy that you normally do.

Whitney Johnson: Oh, that's interesting. So you're saying that you're, you're interacting, but because you're not sort of physically in that room and that molecular energy that's happening, you're not getting as much of that because you're not with them in person. So, you're more tired. That's interesting.

Ted Brodtkin: Yeah, absolutely.

And I think that our brains, the way our brains work is where when we're interacting with someone, we're processing all this information. You know, what we're seeing from them, their body language, their facial expressions, their tone of voice, their eye contact, et cetera.

And we're somehow integrating it and interpreting it.

And if we're not getting all those streams of information or sometimes over Zoom, if they're mistimed, you know, like if there's a little bit of a lag so that these cues that we're getting are just out of sync. There is a way in which we can miss each other over Zoom, I think.

Whitney Johnson: Hmm.

I think you started to allude to this, but how do you see social media impacting attunement?

Ted Brodtkin: Through electronic communication, we're not getting a lot of the cues that we would get in person.

And then social media is its own universe.

Number one, people may not be really presenting a fully authentic version of themselves. We often present sort of the best version of ourselves or the idealized versions of ourselves over social media.

And so, the authenticity of the connection may leave something to be desired.

It's not usually a one-on-one connection the way a conversation would be, but there's all kinds of other people, quote unquote, "watching or commenting" or whatever.

And then there's the issue of the way, what the algorithms that social media companies use and feed to us and what they show us that may sway us one way or another in terms of our opinions about things.

So, it's, it's very artificial and it's not really, you know, the way we're, we were evolved to interact and attune to each other.

Whitney Johnson: Fascinating.

Now that we have a good idea of what the goal is, let's turn to the four components of how to achieve attunement. Take us through the first one.

Ted Brodtkin: So, the first component of attunement is what we call relaxed awareness.

Relaxed awareness is what we consider to be the foundational state of mind and body.

And all of the other three elements of attunement sort of rest on this foundational state of mind and body.

And relaxed awareness means being aware of yourself and your environment, including other people, while staying calm and relaxed. Which actually, when you think about it, can be really challenging because there's a lot of things going on in our daily lives and in our world that make us stressed and make us feel tense.

To give you a better picture of this, of relaxed awareness, I think it's helpful to think about some people who are really, really good at this, unusually good at this. And one of them is the basketball legend, Michael Jordan, who was really great at getting into the state of relaxed awareness. And I think that's part of what made him such an amazing basketball player.

His coach on the Chicago Bulls in the 1990's, Phil Jackson remarked, "The most serene person I've ever seen is Michael. He has a great sense of awareness. He loves the feeling of being calm in the midst of a storm of activity."

If you can imagine, if you were Michael Jordan or a basketball player like that in a really high stakes game at a playoff's game, the amount of pressure that's on you, the amount of noise, the amount of commotion, the crowd, and to be able to stay calm and relaxed in that situation is kind of amazing.

And he was able to do that. And because he was able to do that, because he was not physically tense or mentally tense, he could just flow.

Because what happens is if we get too tense and too anxious, it's hard to stay connected.

We lose that connection. If things stress us out too much and we can't regulate ourselves then we tend to get reactive and it's hard for us to be responsive. We're more reactive and somehow that can interfere with the connection.

Whitney Johnson: What suggestions do you have for people?

Well, I'll give you a simple two step thing.

We have some exercises in the book, and I mean, I might just note that some of these ideas come from the martial art Tai Chi and some of the exercises in the book are from that. They're also based on Zen meditation or some kind of mindfulness meditation.

Basically, number one, you can try a mini exercise on your own and maybe practice this once a day for literally one minute or maybe five minutes. And then number two, you could integrate this into talking with other people.

So, what the exercise is, is imagine your head is gently suspended from above and let your shoulders relax down. So, as your head is suspended from above and your shoulders relaxed down, you can feel a sort of gentle lengthening in your neck. And just become aware of your breath and feel a breath coming in. Feels as if it fills your belly as it comes in and then your belly relaxes and lets it go. And if you can get into this posture and have a little bit of breath awareness, you might start to feel almost immediately or within seconds a little more relaxed, a little less tense.

And so you can try that for a minute, a day, or you can increase it to five minutes a day. Of course, your mind will wander and you'll think about something else. "Oh, my God, there's this deadline." But then try to just bring your mind back to your breath and relaxing your shoulders and having your head suspended.

Try it and when you interact with someone in a conversation with someone, maybe you're about to have a conversation with someone that you're a little bit nervous about.

And so before that conversation for a minute or two, try to just do what I just described and then go into that conversation and occasionally in the conversation, check in on yourself. And if you feel yourself tensing up, just relax your shoulders. And if you do this enough on your own, you won't even have to consciously go through all the steps that I just described.

You could just sort of naturally do that and regulate yourself during the conversation.

Whitney Johnson: So, I just did it while you were talking. My head is suspended, my shoulders down, and I started to breathe. And it does make a difference.

It's so interesting, isn't it, how just those little small things that we can do that they allow us just to relax and be able to be more present.

I love this.

Ashley, listening is the second component of attunement. Tell us what you mean by that.

Ashley Pallathra: We don't mean any sort of fancy definition. Listening is really just how we are able to kind of be attentive and listen to someone undistracted in a way that allows us to tune in. And I mean, it sounds simple, but it really is an art form. And honestly, it's quite rare and pretty precious. I mean, how often do we really get someone to just undistractedly listen to us? So, I think it's a skill that that takes energy and practice in order to, to strengthen. And we also don't mean listening just as like the literal understanding of what someone is saying to you, but also thinking about the nuances of how they're communicating. We've mentioned this, but the tone of someone's voice, the pauses in their speech, their facial expressions, their body language, how much eye contact they're making you. All of those things are giving you little bits of information that communicates with you, what they're feeling, what they're trying to say to you. And it helps you start to resonate with them, physically and emotionally. I guess the other part to also think about is to listen really well, you don't necessarily totally immerse yourself and to mesh yourself with the other person. You don't want to lose yourself in what they're saying or what they're feeling instead. And this is the continual theme. You want to find that balance between the awareness of what they're saying, but also the awareness of how what they're saying and what you're hearing is, is making you feel and finding that balance between the two.

Whitney Johnson: How did you get good at this and decide that you wanted to get good at it? How did you practice it?

Ashley Pallathra: Well, I will say that I can't call myself an expert. I feel like this is a skill that you're constantly and continually building on and strengthening. But for me, it starts with that first foundation, relaxed awareness. It sounds counterintuitive, but going inward, noticing how you're feeling in those moments and saving energy and space for that, I think helps me listen better. So, in this situation, on a podcast or on an interview, taking some time,

both cognitively and just kind of some of your energy and directing it back at, "OK, let me check in with my breath. Let me check in with my shoulders. Are they really tense? Are my arms crossed?" All of those things are potentially inhibiting you from being able to listen fully and wholly to that other person. And so while you it feels like, "Oh, I don't want to take my attention away, I want to be really in tuned and listen to what they're saying," actually, if you get lost in, in maybe the sadness of someone's story, maybe that sadness that you start to feel will overpower and kind of take over your ability to, to continually be in tune.

Whitney Johnson: It's so interesting, I don't know about you all, but I think the people it's hardest to practice what you are talking about is with those closest to us. My husband and my two children, I, I struggle to be a good listener. In general, I'm a pretty good listener. But I think, you know, the closer we are to someone, so this idea of missing each other or the closer we are, it is hard.

So, if all of you who are listening saying, "Oh, yeah, I'm going to do what Ted and Ashley say," like, it's hard. And you're right, it does sound so deceptively simple.

So, the third component you mentioned in your book is understanding. Explain to us what this means in terms of, or in the context of attunement.

Ashley Pallathra: Understanding, you know, it means, what it sounds like.

It's our ability to really understand someone else, understand ourselves, and then understand the dynamics that are happening between us. So, you're picking up on their cues like we've been talking about, but also you're trying to now understand things from their perspective. What is it like to be in their shoes? What is it getting, you know, getting a sense of what motivates them, their likes, their dislikes. All those things are going to inform how you understand their perspective.

That's probably a big piece, too, of the research that we've done in the past on some kind of perspective taking and, and we use the term "social cognition" of how do you understand that someone else is going to have a different viewpoint than you? And it's probably filtering the way that they see things.

Another probably important aspect of understanding is the idea that there is a lot of things I get in the way of us being able to understand one another, especially our assumptions about one another, our attributions about people, my own emotion or reactivity, my own triggers. Like, there's so many different filters that we have and everyone's combination of filters is unique and our perspective and point of view, it isn't going through that. And we have to understand that for ourselves and also for other people, which, which takes time and definitely a lot of practice.

Whitney Johnson: So, would you call this empathy? Is that what you would call it? Or is it more of just you're trying to put yourself into another person's shoes and see the world through their, their glasses?

Ashley Pallathra: I think it's all of the above. Each person is evolving and changing all the time. So, I think one key aspect of understanding is that to understand another person is a work in progress. You're never going to fully understand someone. So, I would say the two main things is to, to remember, to stay humble in that process, but also stay curious and open about their experience.

Whitney Johnson: So, what's a practical tip for doing that, Ashley?

Ashley Pallathra: I think, number one, you relax your body and you take that breath. So, you use that exercise that we described before.

Because that's going to be the launching point to give you the cognitive energy that you need to pause and reflect on someone's experience and to, to reflect on maybe the external factors or other variables that are playing a role in your interaction. I guess to give you an example, we make attributions about people all the time. Sometimes they're internal, so we might explain away a situation because it's a facet of someone's personality and their choice. Or we might make an external attribution and explain away a situation because of some sort of outside variable. So, we talk about a story in the book of a woman who was passed over for promotion to a male coworker. And so, an internal

attribution might be, "Oh, you know, Aleena really just doesn't work as hard as George. And so, she doesn't really deserve to be promoted right now."

That's really making attribution about her versus an external one would say, "You know what, there's a lot of male leadership in this office. And another option is that maybe her qualifications were underestimated. Maybe there was some sort of gender bias in play during this decision making."

And so just having those two thoughts, it takes more cognitive energy for the second one to think about what's happening around that person and around that one situation.

Whitney Johnson: So, if we're willing to take a breath, it's like we create pent up energy that allows us to potentially go down a new pathway and say, "What else could be true in this situation? Now, I know the experience that I'm having around this person and what I think is true, but what else could be true and am I willing to even consider that?"

Does that sound right?

Ashley Pallathra: Yeah, absolutely. You don't know what you don't know. You don't know much more than your own lived experience, but that is not an excuse.

You still have this ability to work on it, like we're saying.

Whitney Johnson: Yeah, OK, let's go to mutual responsiveness. Ted, what are your thoughts?

Ted Brodtkin: Yes, mutual responsiveness is a little bit different from the other ones because mutual responsiveness is the active element of attunement in the sense that relaxed awareness is a state of mind. Listening, we're taking in information from the other person resonating with them, understanding we're sort of processing that information.

But mutual responsiveness is how we actually act towards the other person. And there are a few parts of responsiveness that we highlight in the book.

The first part of mutual responsiveness is what we call meeting the other person where they are. Through your relaxed awareness and you're listening and your understanding, you get a sense of what's on the other person's mind, what's important to them, what mood are they in, and then you meet them there. It's an interesting approach because I think we, as part of our American culture, I think it may be part of business culture as well, is to value asserting ourselves. Like, we need to be assertive, we need to be the leader. Leadership is important driving the agenda.

So, this idea of meeting the other person where they are may seem counterintuitive, kind of passive.

"Why should I meet them where they are?"

But the point that we're trying to make in the book is that actually meeting the other person where they are puts you in a more powerful position than you would be otherwise.

Not, not more powerful over the person, but it gives you the power to make a connection. To picture this, maybe let's go back to the idea of parenting. I don't know about you with your kids, Whitney, but like for me, when my kids would come home at the end of the day of school and I would say, "How is your day?"

They would say, "fine." "Can't you tell me anything?"

Like, "It was fine" and, you know, nothing would come out. And no amount of insisting that they tell me what happened would get them to tell me. But if I took a different approach of, like, they're playing some game and, you know, I sort of join in with this game that they're playing, whatever it is, like throwing a ball around or something.

And then in the course of that, everything comes out about their day.

So, in other words, like I meet them where they are and through doing that, I form a connection with them. And as that connection feels good to them, then they're ready to open up and tell me what their day was like. And it doesn't just work with kids. It works with adults, too. If you if you get a sense of where this person is and you meet them there and you form a connection, then you actually have more agency.

Whitney Johnson: I want to comment on that for a minute, because I think there's something really interesting about this idea of meeting someone where they are.

On the one hand, there is some element of, of humility when you're willing to meet a person where they are. And as you just said, there's also a great deal of power in that because there's movement, it's not power over someone else, but it's your power and it's your ability to be attuned. You're connected with yourself and because you're connected with yourself, that allows you to connect with other people and to be more responsive.

I would love it if you would share your thoughts on how practicing attunement helps us weed out that sense of, "I'm superior or inferior to another person."

Ted Brodtkin: Yes, absolutely. I think there may be exceptions, but generally you're going to have more power through connection.

If you don't connect with the other person, you're missing them and you are, you're unable to have agency and an interaction with them.

As I mentioned, we talk about Tai Chi in the book and there's a story about this famous Tai Chi master named Chenzhou Wong. And he has a saying. When he's teaching a beginning student, he says, "First I follow the student, later the student understands and the student follows me." And what he means by that is, um, when he's starting with the beginning student, he tries to get a sense of, "What is the student interested in? What do they want to learn? What do they want to get out of Tai Chi?"

And they, he starts there. He doesn't start by lecturing them about Tai Chi, impressing them with his skill and so on.

He starts by getting a sense of who they are, what interests them and who meets them there.

And it doesn't even matter where they are, as long as you can meet them there and form a connection, then they can start to learn from him and then they can start to appreciate, "Oh, wow, this is really an incredible art." And then they start to be willing to follow him because they appreciate something about this art that they didn't know anything about at the beginning.

But it was that, his ability to form that connection initially that gave him the power to do that.

One other important part of mutual responsiveness is what we call staying in the flow. Which is different from going with the flow. Going with the flow is sort of a passive thing. You're just passively letting the river carry you down.

Staying in the flow means staying in the flow with the other person.

So, staying in the interaction, not getting ahead of them, not getting behind them, but staying with them and by staying with them in the interaction, let's say in the conversation, again, you're able to have more agency. You're able to have more power to sway the conversation, but just you maintain that connection with them.

Whitney Johnson: So, in our work, we, we talk about the S curve of Learning™ and building momentum along our curve. And one of the seven accelerants is battling our entitlement, which is basically approaching people as neither inferior nor superior to you. And I'd love it if you just freestyle for a moment on how practicing attunement helps us weed out that sense of, "I am superior or inferior to another person."

Ashley Pallathra: Attunement comes into play. When you think about entitlement as maybe a rigid form of your ego. The ego is how you see yourself, whether it's superior or inferior. It's often an unconscious part of your mind, but it's also a very strong one that kind of leads you to act in particular ways, and it also makes you get defensive about how things go. And so, I think disarming your ego brings about better awareness to yourself. It allows you to communicate better with others. And I think that's the, probably the key area that you can start to dissolve that entitlement a bit. And attunement comes into play because that's what it is. It's continual conscious awareness. It's shifting your perspective and it's becoming more in tune with both how you're perceiving things and then how the other person is and finding that balance and that, and that dynamic between the two.

Whitney Johnson: Your book, *Missing Each Other*, will be available on January 25th. Tell us where people could find it and where they can find you if they'd like to engage further.

Ashley Pallathra: Yeah. So we have a Web site. It's missingeachother.com.

And the whole book title is *Missing Each Other: How to Cultivate Meaningful Connections*. You can also find each of us on Twitter @ashleypallathra and @tedbrodtkin and P-like Peter-a-l-l-a-t-h-r-a great.

Whitney Johnson: Any final thoughts?

Ted Brodtkin: I would say that, um, take a leap of faith and try it out. Try out these approaches. Take one or two of these exercises like the relaxed awareness exercises, and do them for five minutes a day, 10 minutes a day, even one minute a day. Every day for a week, or better yet, do them for two weeks or a month and it may seem a little bit funny at first, like, "Why is it pretending that my head is suspended from above and relaxing my shoulders down will have anything whatsoever to do with improving my connections?"

But, so, I think if you take that leap of faith and you try it out and you develop that muscle memory and then you try to integrate it into some of your interactions with other people, I think you'll see that it really can transform your way of interacting and make your connections better and generally make you happier.

That's what I would leave listeners with.

Ashley Pallathra: Absolutely. Just take a breath. Take a breath, take a beat, even if it's just one or two moments, mindful moments during the day and any sort of conversation or even if you're alone. I think taking that pause at least once, you'll really start to see that impact and then over time, being able to try these out, like Ted said, for a longer period of time, we're hoping, we're very hopeful that it'll resonate with people.

Whitney Johnson: All right, relax your shoulders and take a breath.

Ted and Ashley, thank you so much for being with us.

Ashley Pallathra: Oh, thank you so much, Whitney.

Ted Brodtkin: This was great.

I love how Ted and Ashley describe attunement, an elevated form of human connection. One that considers not just connecting visually eye to eye with another person, but really considering my state of body and mind is part of that connection.

I really enjoyed some of the exercises they suggested in the book, the breathing, the meditation, all in service of my moving up the S curve when it comes to how I'm connecting with the people around me, especially my family. People it's easiest for me to miss.

As a way of connecting with you, Ted and Ashley have kindly agreed to make five copies of their book available. If you'd like to be eligible for one of the copies, connect with me on Instagram @johnsonwhitney and tell me what you appreciated, what you enjoyed about this episode.

Thank you again to Ted Brodtkin and Ashley Pallathra for being our guests. Thank you to our team, Jennifer Brotherson, Emily Cottrell, Whitney Jobe, Steve Ludwig, Melissa Ruddy and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson.
And this is Disrupt Yourself.