Author Revolution Podcast Episode 82 – Stress & Trauma: Creativity’s Nemesis

Welcome to another episode of the Author Revolution podcast, my writerly friend. I hope you’re having an incredible week.

I, myself, am happy to say that I’ve finally finished Amends. It’s been a long time coming, despite my attempts at my ordinary 6-week writing sprints. One of the things I’ve discussed on the podcast is burn out and stress. My journey to become a full-time author hasn’t been an easy one. Over the past ten years, I’ve had to contend with a divorce, a family rift, a remarriage with a man from England, immigration, a baby being born with a cleft lip/cleft palate, a home constantly in a state of remodel, a pandemic, children at home distance learning for over a year, and now a custody dispute as my two older kids from that previous marriage have asked to stay with us full time.

I can, without a shadow of a doubt, tell you that my most creative times have been when I am feeling happy, safe, and secure. Not only that, but I’m also a better person when this is the case as well.

So, let me ask you… Are you one of the authors struggling with writing the past year? Has writer’s block gotten in the way of your publishing calendar?

We often hear authors talk about their writer’s block as if it’s some sort of nebulous thing. But when you dig into the neurology of it, the answers really become clear.

Writer’s block typically comes down to 1 of 2 things:

1. We’re not clear on what we want to write, therefor we procrastinate
2. Our creativity has been shut down by stress or trauma

The pandemic this past year has elevated the stress levels of most people. Particularly kids and their parents, but I’m sure it’s not just with them. We all handle stress differently, but prolonged, chronic stress is a whole other matter.

Stress and trauma hijack your brain. It can destroy your sense of calm, prevent you from thinking clearly, and destroys your creativity.

Here’s why:

Did you know there are actually 3 major regions of the brain and all of them have to work together in order to be operating to the best of your abilities?

1. The prefrontal cortex (Neo-mammalian brain) and it’s located right behind your forehead. It handles language, abstract thoughts, rational thoughts, planning, empathy, and the central awareness of ourselves and others.
2. The anterior cingulate cortex (Mammalian) is located right behind the PFC, but deeper into the brain. It’s responsible for handling emotions and sub-linguistic creativity.
3. The amygdala (Reptilian) is also deep inside the brain, and it serves to handle primal impulses, basic body functions, and how we deal with stress.

When stress isn’t present, we are able to access and function through all three levels of the brain, which means we can tap into our abstract thinking and dive into our creative selves.

However, when stress and trauma are present, our brain shuts down some of the higher function and goes into what psychologists call, trauma brain. Trauma brain interferes with the way we function in all aspects, not just our creativity, either. But since we’re talking about writing and creativity here, let’s stick with that.

So, when we’re dealing with heightened or chronic levels of stress or trauma:

The prefrontal cortex is underactivated.

The anterior cingulate cortex is underactiveated.

The amygdala is overactivated.

You are literally a walking, talking bag of fear.

When operating from trauma brain, you’ll often see people experience in a constant state of fear, agitation, or irritation. They might have a hard time feeling safe, relaxing, or sleeping. In addition, attention spans go out the window because the prefrontal cortex is underutilized.

The agitation, irritability, and inability to feel our feelings (or those of our characters) comes from the anterior cingulate cortex being underutilized.

I remember, during my divorce and the rift with my family over it, it was all I could do to function on a day-to-day basis. Even if I wanted to write, I wouldn’t have been able to. That’s why I published my first book, Pendomus in 2013, but didn’t publish the sequels until 2017. The gap in my publishing career was literally thanks to all of the turmoil and upheaval I had in my life at that time.

However, I can also say that chronic stress, burnout, and trauma in other forms has definitely taken its toll as well. One the divorce issues were passed and the rift was healed with my family, I was still operating in survival mode. I didn’t feel safe, so I worked constantly in order to fill that void.

Trauma for me turned into chronic stress and while my trauma brain healed, the amygdala was still running the show in a lot of ways. I found it extremely hard to connect on an emotional level to those around me. And for an empath, that felt super strange. Like I was walking through the world, but not really in it, if you know what I mean.

While I still was able to push through and get my writing in, I often look back and think – what the heck? I wrote that? Especially those early books. When I read them, I’m almost blown away by the emotional impact in them because as I was writing them, I really felt a strange disconnect. Like, I knew this is how I would feel, how others would feel, but I was personally not able to feel it at that particular moment in time.

Have you ever felt like that? It’s super weird.

Well, right now, as I go through this new child custody dispute, I keep having to remind myself to stay present, to function from a higher place – my prefrontal cortex. It’s very easy to relapse into trauma brain when you’ve already been there once, if you know what I mean.

In addition, now that my kids are almost 16 and 12, they’re hitting the teenage years and I struggle with knowing what’s trauma brain and what’s teenager brain. I mean, the pandemic has hit them hard, too. And that’s part of the reason they want this big shift, I think.

In my world, all of this has led to a slower than normal writing routine for 2021. I knew early on this year that I was going to need to pull back a bit, but at the very start, I hadn’t known just how much it was going to be necessary.

So, as authors, what do we do when stress or trauma is leading us further away from our creativity? Well, despite writing enough medical articles to practically be one -- I’m no doctor, but I can tell you what’s worked for me.

How to heal from trauma and stress

1. Talk to someone – Whether it be a friend, a family member, or a professional, you need to release some of the pent-up fears and frustrations before they overtake your neuropathways and become your go-to way of thinking. When my family and I were estranged, I definitely sought out therapy to wrap my head around things. Talking it out provided a way for me to heal the broken relationships and move past the hurt.
2. Root out the source – Do some digging into your past to see where the trauma or stress truly stems from. Sometimes, it’s not what you think it is. Maybe your feelings of fear and insecurity stem, not from your current financial situation, for example – but to the way you felt as a kid. Consider all the possibilities. Obviously, if you dealt with some big, traumatic event like abuse, you could be dealing with PTSD symptoms that haven’t been healed. So, even if you know the event, you may not have dealt with it properly. So, now’s the time to heal it.
3. Mindfulness routines – One of the ways I’ve been working on my mindset is by incorporating daily mindfulness routines into my day. Not only does it keep me grounded into a peaceful mindset, but it sets the stage for the day, as well. So what does a mindfulness routine look like? For me, it’s the Reality Hacker journal. I use it to set up my “quest” for the day so I am functioning with the mindset of accomplishing or attaining the thing I’m really after. For example, if I want to finish a writing a chapter – that would be my quest for the day. Then, I go into a couple of meditations that enhance that mental imagery and keep me in my prefrontal cortex. They’re not long – 5-10 minutes in total. They incorporate mental imagery, binaural beats, and deep breathing. Overall, I come out of those meditations feeling relaxed and mentally ready for whatever the day might throw at me. Yes, bizarre texts from the ex and all.
4. Exercise – but avoid any intense training. Skip the HIIT workouts and instead, focus on the movements that are repetitive in nature. Walking, hiking, running, kayaking, yoga, for example. The goal isn’t to beat your body into submission, it’s to lower cortisol levels (which are your stress hormones). I cannot speak more highly of walking or hiking outside. It’s my go-to stress workout. Nature has a way of soothing our souls, even when we’re feeling insanely stressed.
5. Take time off from writing – Look, it’s the last thing I want to do, too. But sometimes, you just need to give yourself the permission to take a break and sort some shit out. Your mental health, your happiness, and your life must come first. Screw the publishing schedule or rapid releasing. Your readers will understand, trust me. Do what you need to get back into a state of peace. The creativity will follow.
6. Journal – if you’re feeling stressed, sometimes you might not even realize why. I mean, remember what we said about the anterior cingulate cortex? It controls your emotions and your sense of self and others. As writers, one of the best ways to get over some of the stuff is to journal. I mean, writers write, right? Journaling can help us put trends into view, and allow us to process stuff that’s sitting out there like energetic thought-clutter in our brains. I use an app called Diarly these days. I’ve never been a great journaler, but I found that when I can break out my thoughts into segments, it helps. So, in this app, I have a journal for my Reality Hacker stuff, I have one for thoughts about the kids. I have another one for what I eat each day. I even have one that keeps track of tarot readings I do for myself. It doesn’t matter how you journal or if you do it by hand or in an app. What matters is that you do it consistently so you can work through what’s going on behind the scenes.
7. Fictionalize your trauma – We authors do this sort of thing anyway, but it’s worth mentioning. When I have the most profound stories, there’s something in the world that I’ve subconsciously taken in and want to deal with. Sometimes its political, sometimes its right here at home. When I look back at my stories, I can always spot the theme of what was happening in my real life at the time. Now, I don’t necessarily mean write out exactly what happens in your life – but maybe? Going through a crappy breakup? Sure, use elements of truth to deal with it. Have your characters do and say the stuff you wouldn’t feel confident in saying in reality.

Sometimes, I don’t think people in general talk enough about mental health and the way their lives are impacted by things like stress and trauma. Authors, in specific, get a lot of advice to “just keep writing” but that doesn’t address the issues stopping you from writing in the first place.

If your writing has suffered this past year, whether it’s from pandemic stress or something else, I really do encourage that rather than pushing through it, you take a beat to reassess your situation and find some calm again. Doing so will reboot the higher regions of the brain so you are functioning at your optimum level.

Well, that’s all I have for you this week.

As always, if you’d like to download today’s transcript or get links to the items I talked about today, you can always head over to authorrevolution.org/82.

I’m also super excited for next month. I haven’t yet talked about it on the podcast, but Rapid Release Roadmap is going to be a part of Infostack’s Write Publish Profit 4.0. If you’ve never heard of it before, stay tuned because it’s awesome. Just know that starting June 8th, you’ll be able to get a steal of a deal on not only Rapid Release Roadmap, but a TON of other resources as well – all for one low price. It’s pretty incredible.

I’ll be talking more about it next week.

Until then… go forth and start your author revolution.