

Neuroplasticity for Creatives with Dana Smith

Hello and welcome to Down To Art. I'm your host Kristy Gordon and today I'm chatting with Dana Smith about neuroplasticity for creatives. So welcome Dana. It's so nice to have you here. Oh gosh, it's so nice to be here with you Kristy. Thanks for having me on. I'm super excited about our chat. Me too. And so Dana helps ambitious women get unstuck free from fear and in touch with their intuition to live their exquisite life with ease.

She's a certified life coach and a registered massage therapist who has synthesized a coaching method that incorporates the body's wisdom and leads her client towards their individual truth. So I think this is such an interesting topic. I guess we could start with basically what is neuroplasticity? Yeah, neuroplasticity is, and I'm no neuroscientist, but in the work that I've done around pain science and in coaching and positive psychology,

I've come to learn that neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to grow and change. It's plastic, it is flexible and it can develop and change according to what we ask it to do. And the potential in that space is absolutely inspiring. And I wanna help as many people as possible really become more in control of their bodies and their minds, responses to the stimulus that, you know, we all experience as we live lives as humans. Well that's so reassuring that we can change our brains. I'm so glad, isn't it? This is so great. Yes, actually, and and we did speak a little bit, I had a conversation with you last week and just started to touch upon this and I'll just share that I have been trying to apply some of the stuff that you talked about last week and I've been getting so much more work done as a result.

And so I just am so excited about this talk. Oh my gosh, that's wonderful. We just barely scratched the surface too. Well it's quite good information. Well, so how did you get into this kind work? It's been a journey. You know how life just, you know, looking back it makes perfect sense, but when you are earlier stages in your life,

you could never imagine which steps you take. So looking back, it makes perfect sense. Like I used to have a creative practice where I was, you know, I was working a lot more in craft and also doing a painting as well. And I was getting into selling my work, my foreign artwork, and I was managing galleries and you know, quite involved in the creative world and creative communities. And at a certain point I realized I wanted to affect people in a different way. You know, I've always had that desire to influence and create change in the world somehow. And I realized that I wanted to affect people through their bodies, not just through the impact that my artwork was doing. So I took a big fat hiatus from creative work and I studied as a massage therapist.

And so that was a rigorous challenging program which I just devoured cause I was so ready for deep learning and you know, formal education. And that was just super, super satisfying. And I built a career based on that. But it wasn't long until I realized in my massage practice that there was actually a lot more that I wanted to help people on that existed beyond the physical sensations and pain that they were experiencing.

I was starting to notice how an emotional state of a person could affect their perception of pain or discomfort in the body or vice versa. So in that space of trying to understand the body's connection to the mind and also the spirit, I was like, that's where I wanna go. So I fortunately had somebody just point out, Hey Dana, do you know what coaching is?

Cause I think you'd be really good at it. And so I sniffed that out, tried it on for size and I felt like I found my people and I was like, what? There's all these people out there who also just love

helping individuals make transformations in this way. This is incredible. So I dove straight into that as well. And since about 2015,

I've been doing both professions simultaneously, not at the same moment, but growing both those practices alongside. And I do feel like they both inform each other even though they don't necessarily happen in the same moments. So, so there's a long short answer. Well it's like, it's actually so amazing about how powerful our body is and how it does like affect our mental states.

And so like how, so I guess we basically, I don't know, probably oversimplifying, but we kind of basically have like two mental states. Like one we're really activated, whether that's like fear or excited, I don't know if this is right. Tell me if this is right. And then one where we're like, yeah, really like in the parasympathetic sort of calm,

relaxed, kind of, yeah. State, is that right? Like what do the two different sort of mental states feel like, how can we tell the difference? Yeah, that's a good question. So I think what you're talking about is our autonomic nervous system. And I think most of us are fairly familiar with the fight and flight state of being and then the rest and digest state of being.

And they each have a different reactions, set of reactions in the body. You know, for instance, and these came to be for, you know, for survival reasons, right? So, you know, when we were more primal versions of our human selves, we had these fight and flight reactions to save us from danger. And we still need that.

You know, it's like, it's good when we don't get run over by buses and we know how to get out of the roadway very quickly. Very important. And, but it's also really important for us to be able to toggle in and out of that state and switch into that parasympathetic state that rest and digest state as well. Because if we stay in one state too long,

we're gonna deplete our body's resources and that, that we get very unwell. And that's where awful things happen is when we stay too in that sympathetic or fight and flight mode, we, we don't digest our food, we can't rest properly, we don't have access to our creative potential and expression and it becomes very depleting and a lot of our world is operating from that state of being.

But we also, you know, we wouldn't wanna be too much and rest and digest either, right?

Because yeah, we might just get run over by a bus for instance. Yeah. Yeah. I guess I, because yeah, I guess I've heard that like different people have different levels of like stimulus that they need and and things like that. And so I totally hear you about like,

we need a bit of a balance and stuff. But I can also tell in my own life that like when I get overactivated, not only does it like mess with my creative process, but I also start making bad decisions in my life. You know, like I'm just like in that like trying to fix everything kind of stage and that's just not the state where all the good stuff kind of happens where everything's just in the flow and I'm like kind of plugged into like,

I don't know what my intuition's telling me about how to best, I don't know, see certain opportunities or, or whatever the case may be or whatever. Absolutely. Yeah. What kinda applications do you find for the artists that you work with in, in this work? Yeah, artists are very complex humans. I think most creatives can relate to that.

I think most artists and creatives have this deep desire to produce their work and express whatever it is that they need to express through their work. And so it's this internal pressure, this internal ambition to do something with this. You know, it's like this creative muse comes in and it has to burst for us through whatever medium people are working with. And that can sometimes become such a heavy burden for the artist,

especially if they aren't feeling like they're in that state of being where like you describe, you're in flow and everything's, you know, naturally leading one thing to the other. It's exciting and creative and fun and playful maybe. But when we get stuck in that other state of being, you know, that sympathetic state where, you know, it's like we're very hyper judgemental of ourselves.

We are very critical or comparing ourselves to other people, it just dries up the creative flow and it doesn't give us a lot of room for that breathing and space and spaciousness that's required for creative practice. So when, and I do find that a lot of folks who come to me who are ready to get out of that state of being and back into flow back closer to themselves, being able to trust themselves, know that it's all gonna work out, that, that their best creative work is gonna come from a calm body, but they don't know how to get there. Right? So that's, that's where working with somebody in kind, kind of a facilitated process can be really helpful cuz you get stuck in these neural loops, right?

So it's sometimes you can relate to that, hey, so you're like, okay, I know I have a bad thought train that I'm on, but I don't know how to get off this train. Like yeah, I have an idea of what that should be. You know, should in quotations. Cuz that's always a marker when, when we are shooting ourselves.

Yeah, Fair. Totally. Probably some like self sabotaging narratives, Plano role, but we don't know how to get out. So there that, and that's one, it's really helpful to, to get some outside help to help you chart a new pathway, a new neural pathway where you kind of are able to drop into that parasympathetic state where it's self-propelling and nourishing and calming so your nervous system can calm down and like you said,

you can make better decisions. Be that, you know, what color do I add next into this painting or something even more in the world. Yeah, yeah, totally. Well so then what are some of the ways that you, some of like calm the mind and calm, you know, the body and everything like that?

What are some of your techniques?

Yeah, it's so simple actually. It's so simple that it's easy to overlook Everything, but it's really true is like that Isn't that the truth? It's like, it's so simple, it must be very effective. So the exercise, you know, most of my people need to come back to their body, you know, that's why they come to me.

And you can see where this makes a, a nice link into the, the massage therapy work that I do, which is completely leading people back into their bodies. But it's just coming into your senses, you know, likened a lot to, you know, mindfulness meditation, but it doesn't have to be a sit on your cushion and block out the world and you know,

sit on your little timer for 25 minutes at night when the world is quiet and you have this designated space and time to do your meditative practice. Like you can already see how that creates barriers for people, right? Yes. It just feels like too hard. Yeah, totally. It can be as simple as why don't we just take a breath and feel the texture of the breath on my upper lip when I breathe through my nose,

you know? And when you do that for just 10 seconds of acute awareness, specifically on the texture of your breath over your top lip, what you've done is you shift neural tracks from that, you know, fight and flight state of mind to that rest and digest state of mind. And it only has to be 10 seconds. And this is what's very cool and makes it very accessible, is that you do simple exercises just playing with your senses like this. It could simply be rubbing your fingertips together and that's all you're doing. You're not thinking, you're not feeling too

many senses at once. All you're doing is just touching your two fingertips together as light as possible and just keeping your attention on that sensation. And you've shifted right into that, that track of of being again. So the beauty of this is that it, at 10 seconds of time, of course you can go longer, but if you just set the bar low and say, you know what, throughout the day in all these different circumstances, I'm gonna drop into my senses and feel or see or smell or hear. With such sensitivity,

what you're doing is you are increasing your brain's plasticity. So you're in different circumstances. So say you're in the supermarket or you're in a challenging work meeting or you're in your studio or what have you, any point in your day you challenge yourself to shift your attention just for 10 seconds. Like that you can do that. It's not a very big, you can shift your attention for 10 seconds at a time.

And the more times you take yourself to that place in different environments, it's almost like you're cross-training your brain, right? It's not like, oh, I go to the gym and I do the exact same exercises every day. What you're doing is you are doing different exercises in different environments so that you know you have ultimate fitness. Right. Does that make sense the way I describe that,

Christie? Yeah. And it's like actually amazing. Like it really, it is like really simple, but it does like really work. So it, yeah, this is like the kind of thing that I've been doing this week since we like last spoke. And yeah, I just have found like even with the paintings that I'm working on and I was getting like kind of stuck with some of them just like not quite knowing what to do, but eventually, I don't know, I just like calmed down enough that I would like do a whole bunch on them and then they get to a point where they look pretty good and then it's like fun to work on them, you know? But when they're in that like middle phase, it like starts to get hard. And so it's, and I also actually started even just like when I really take this information to heart and realize that if I calm the body,

the mind gets calmer. I like, this is kind of silly, but it really worked for me. I did like a little YouTube search for like spam music and I like put that on and just making it like everything they look like helped me be more calm and it's like really? Yeah, it's been really like kind of interesting how much it just keeps me at the easel.

Like, so yeah, I can see that like the work you do. And we were talking when we talked last time too, about how this is like really useful for group people who were like maybe working through creative block too. Do you have any experience helping people through creative block with these types of techniques? Yeah, a little bit. Yeah. I,

yeah, absolutely. So any type of block, honestly. True, true. And that's usually, that's usually who comes to coaching cuz they're feeling like they, you know, the people aren't where they wanna be, right? And they don't know how to get outta that state. So yes, this absolutely applies to creative walk also. And of course I think most of us can relate to that feeling of being stuck and trapped in a state of being Yeah.

That you don't wanna be, right? Yeah. The pain, the pain of that is just unbearable. Yeah, totally. And and like not knowing how to get pat, like it just almost perpetuates itself. You get more and more frustrated. Yeah, yeah, Exactly. And so when you get more frustrated, you give yourself more fodder. Yeah,

totally. For this fire of, of negative mindset, right? So it's like you just continue to deepen that neural path that is reinforcing negative mindset, right? So it's like, oh, I'm stuck, so therefore I'm never gonna be successful in my career. I have to work as a creative, it's my job to produce work, I have to,

and if I can't produce work, then I'm a complete failure. And it's like, and by next week I'll be sleeping under the bridge. Totally. You know, I should just throw in the towel now Gets worse and worse. Yeah, totally. And I think most of us can, could relate to that catastrophizing that we do. And it's like,

it's not true, right? Like none of that is true. But somewhere along the line we start to believe those lies. Those lies that we're not good enough, that we're not worthy of what we do that will always be in this pain feeling that we're having right now. And that's not true. That is absolutely not true. But we forget that we have a choice,

right? So what I love is helping people back off a little bit from the pressure of that toxic inner dialogue that happens. Yeah. Because you can't, it's like so loud and so tight Yeah. That there's nowhere to room, like no room to breathe and nowhere to gain perspective. So what we do is when we're working together, is we find ways to create calm in the body, create a little bit of space between all the cacophony of voices that we hear, all those awful, awful narratives. Some of them are lovely, but some of them are awful. Yeah. And a good sign for, for when, when it's an not a helpful narrative is how your body feels, right? So if your body feels tense, tight,

restricted, suffocating, dry, dull, vacuous, like hard, you know, it's like those are all really difficult states to, to work with, right? So if you can start to recognize how your body feels, start to recognize the types of thoughts that you're having when you're getting those body sensations, you begin to increase your perspective and you're able to go,

oh, I, I see that now I'm starting to feel that that thunder rolling over the hills where, you know, my neck pain really starts to bother me. Oh yeah. That's because I'm like frowning right now because I'm frustrated at this stage of my creative process and where I'm at in this painting. What happens if I just soften my shoulders a little bit?

What happens if I step back from the work that I'm doing so that I can take a step back in my mind? Yes. Yeah. Right? Yeah, totally. So our, our bodies and our minds do work together to create our reality as humans, right? So yeah, finding a way to dance between those, you know, those body sensations,

the types of thoughts that we're having and just backing off a little so that you can make a choice about it and go, oh, I see what's happening right now. I could believe, you know, all that toxic stuff I'm telling myself that I'm gonna be a failure forever or I could maybe believe something else. Maybe, I don't know what that is right now,

but maybe I'll open up a little bit of space for that possibility. Yeah. And that's where magic happens. That's where the change can occur. That's how we start to evolve into our next versions of ourselves. Yeah. And you can kinda see how that helps you get out of stuckness a little bit, right? Yeah. And, and we're like,

one thing I really love about this and the way you're like talking about it too, like last time we talked, one of my thoughts was like, you know, but I do believe in feeling my feelings and not just like, like sometimes I, you know, was talking to you about how sometimes it's beneficial for me to just like cry a bunch and let it all out or whatever.

But you're not saying that it's like all positive thinking and that you sort of like shove everything under a rock or whatever. Cuz even with this whole, you know, the times where we need to like kind of really grieve something or whatever, that's actually you pointed out like holding space in a compassionate way for yourself and like that can actually have the experience of softness around it.

And do you wanna talk a bit about that too? Because I thought that was such an interesting point and I that really spoke to me too. Yeah. Yeah. How, hmm. There's so much to say in this space. Great. That's a great prompt. So just imagine, let's just do an experiment cuz we're, we're using this analogy of like having two neural tracks, right? We're playing with that. So imagine you're experiencing great grief, right? So maybe you've had something like that happen where you know it, it consumes you for a time and no matter what you do, no matter how you think about it, you're in that state of grief and loss. Right? And there's nothing you can do to change that. You're just in it, right? That's part of the human experience. So in an oversight, oversimplified way and you know, the way that we're looking at it in this conversation, if you showed up for yourself in that space and it's like you are still sad, why are you still sad? You should be over this by now. You've given yourself enough time to be moving through this grief and this loss and you really should be somewhere else. Cuz you know what, you have that series of paintings that you know is going up into an exhibition soon and you really ought to get your ducks in a row. You know what? You're gonna become a failure. You're gonna like be an embarrassment to your creative colleagues that you work, work with, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Versus wow, I'm feeling incredibly sad right now. Like this is really real for me and you know what? I believe that I can hold this sadness and this grief and I can still be an excellent person and an excellent artist and show up in all the different ways that I know how to show up while still being sad. Yeah. Right. Like that's what it does is, like you said, it leads to self-compassion and it's a lot more gentle. It doesn't freak out the nervous system when you're in that state of being because you can retraumatize yourself also. Right? Like we can hurt ourselves by the way that we speak to ourselves. So I, I get the sense that you're kind of like me that, you know, you kind of wanna be more gentle sometimes. Cause gentleness actually takes us further than we give it credit for. And there's lots of messages in the world that, you know, that go big, go home narrative that's like pretty toxic. That productivity narrative that we're all bought into on some levels internalized, internalized that. And it's pretty toxic and very depleting. And the more self resourced people that we have in the world who know how to recognize, you know, I'm which state of being they're in and can make some conscious choice about how they interact from this moment forward, that can really create some powerful impacts. Not only in your creative work but just in your regular everyday relationships and how you show up in the world and yeah. The impacts of gentleness don't get enough credit. Yeah. Yeah. And I love that how it is like still gentle. It may feel like negative or whatever, but like it's really still part of the like gentle like softness or whatever that you're describing. It's that's, it's really interesting. So how has this practice helped you with your creative practice and your business endeavors? Do you have any examples? I know you do art yourself. I do. I do. In a, just for myself sort of way, which has been very, That's awesome. Cool. Yep. To come back to that way like, and I've really shown up in as my wise inner self, you know, in my creative practice. And if I hadn't done this work myself, I would still, and that was part of the reason why I stopped doing my creative work is cause I realized how awful I was being to myself. I was so mean. Yeah. So mean. Yeah. That really gets in the way. I see that with students sometimes. Like, and a lot of the time the student who's actually quite good will be the one who's

like crying in the bathroom. You know, like there's so hard on themselves. And then someone who else who maybe isn't even like, maybe doesn't even have the same skills as the person who's crying in the bathroom, they might think that they're doing pretty good and then they get better faster too, cuz they don't block themselves with all the like negative thoughts. Nice. I'm so glad you've seen that. Well I'm sorry for the people experiencing that. Yeah, Me too. But I know it's really hard. Yeah. Oh it's so hard to see. But you've pinpointed something totally, totally relevant. Yeah. Like just be nice to yourself because we'll get there faster wherever there is. Totally. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And yeah, and then to keep reminding ourselves that that's not like the goal anyways. Yeah. So my creative practice is just about permission right now. I'm giving myself permission to not be attached to any outcome. I am Just like the best way to do it. Yeah. Let's see what happens next. It's like, oh well that didn't work. Or maybe it did. I dunno. I don't care. Keep going. Yeah. Oh, that's like the best. I I also do that actually. And it's, yeah, it's really good. The benefits to be, I'm so curious. What's that? What have been the benefits for you to give yourself that big fat permission slip? Well that's when my work started to get more intuitive, more complex, like more imaginative. Like, I had to really totally kind of let go a little bit so that I could actually just try whatever kind of intuitive like weird thing I sort of felt curious about, you know? And like a lot of the time that it starts out looking like little scribbles, you know, like, but I just have to be like, whatever, I'll probably figure that out eventually. Yeah. Cause we can it out eventually whether or Not Ourselves in the process. Yeah, yeah, exactly. And sometimes it takes like a really long time and after a while I'm like, I'm not sure if I am gonna figure this out. But anyways. Yeah. And that's where the choice point is too, just to reinforce is like, well, we're gonna get to wherever we're gonna get to. Yeah. And the choice is how we treat ourselves On the way. Yeah, yeah. For sure. Yeah, totally. And so, yeah, this has been so interesting. So, and so you run a program, you know, that you, where you help creatives sort of move out of some of their limiting mindsets and things like that. Can you tell us a little bit about that and where people can find you if they want to check that out? Absolutely. My website is Dana Sek Wellness. If you just Googled that, and I'll link you that link in the notes as well. Yeah. So I typically work with people, there's two offers that I have. One is the one-to-one coaching. And so we did lots of this mindset work and kind of this body mind based work, but you'll get me like one-on-one for six months and I'm like right all up in your space, cheering you on, challenging you, holding you accountable. And it's a really courageous, juicy, beautiful space where, you know, you can look at it as like two people working towards one person's outcomes. So it's kinda like 200% human power and effort and psychic power all like going towards one person's development. So the, the power of it is really profound. And part of that is this program that I facilitate that we've been talking a lot about this mental fitness program called Positive Intelligence. And this is a work of, of somebody named Shaza Shain. And he's a super smarty pants from Stanford. He's got like a PhD in neuroscience and positive psychology and all these is all these cool things. He's also a coach and an educator. And through his years of work, he's put together this program where it synthesizes all these different modalities into a six week deep dive where you rewire your brain. You know, a lot of what we've been talking about is very much what the positive intelligence program is, but it teaches you and you develop this daily practice. And I facilitate groups of people through that.

And it's like a very profound fast way to improve your quality of living. You know, you can apply it to absolutely anything. I love working with creatives because I really honestly believe that our very troubled world needs a lot more beauty and a lot more expression to help us process all, all of the hard stuff that we're living through. So I'm a very, very big believer in supporting the artists of the world to, to help us really visualize and see what our new world is going to become. I see. You know, I see artists, activists and creators are the visionaries of the new world. And so I wanna support that. I believe that there's so much more for our world to become, and I see all of us creators as part of that.

So what if we could do it where we're in control of our brains function, where we can be quieter with those negative mindsets and not per, not perpetuating them by operating from that place, but we operate from a different place where we believe and trust and allow. And there's a lot of those other very powerful but quieter forces that we can train ourselves to,

to create influence with. Yeah. So there's the positive intelligence program and then there's the coaching and I do them both. Yeah. That was a long-winded way of seeing how, can you find me? No, but that's so beautiful and I'll definitely include links to to, so, so it's the one website and people can find out information about both on your website.

I'll definitely include a link in the notes. Absolutely. Two new website. Thank you. I do have a, a newsletter that I send out every couple of weeks too, just musings on what I'm thinking about from kind of these perspectives that we've shared. Yeah. So those are the ways that you can link up. Hmm. Perfect. So people can sign up for your e-newsletter as will.

Well, this has been so interesting, Dana, and it's so good to talk to you. And just thank you so much for chatting with me today. Oh, thanks so much for having me, Christie. It's such a delight. I really believe in you and your work as well. Aw, thank you. Well, I definitely hope to talk to you again soon.

Talk Christ soon. Bye. Thanks, Kristy. Bye. I Hope you've enjoyed this, this episode of Down To Art. And if you're interested in any of my classes or seeing my paintings, you can check out my work at KristyGordon.com or look at the online classes I have at KristyGordoncourses.com where you can learn about my online art mentoring program as well as the different streamed online classes that I have.

If you've never taken any of my classes, I would suggest you start with the self-portrait class. So thank you for joining us today.