

# Heartbreak with Florence Williams

[00:00:00] **Florence Williams:** the whole reason our nervous system freaks out when we get divorced or have a breakup is that we feel our bodies register this grief or this pain, as though we have been left alone and abandoned you know, as humans, we don't like to be alone. it's not how we feel safe. I mean, we find safety in numbers. We're a social species.

But you know, when you've lost a major attachment bond like this, kind of all of a sudden your nervous system thinks, Oh my God, I am alone in the wilderness right now. That was Florence Williams on psychologists off the clock. We are four experts in psychology here to bring you cutting edge and science based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work, and health.

[00:00:51] **Debbie Sorensen:** I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, a clinical psychologist practicing in Mile High, Denver, Colorado, and author of Act for Burnout, Act Daily Journal, and the Act Daily Card Deck.

[00:01:01] **Emily Edlynn:** From America's Heartland, I'm Dr. Emily Edlynn a clinical psychologist based in Chicago, Illinois, and author of Autonomy Supportive Parenting.

[00:01:09] **Michael Herold:** Calling in from Vienna, Austria. I'm Michael Herold, ACT coach, confidence trainer, and author of an upcoming book on being a better conversationalist and making friends.

[00:01:18] **Jill Stoddard:** And from coastal New England, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, author of Be Mighty, The Big Book of Act Metaphors, and Impostor No More.

[00:01:25] **Emily Edlynn:** We hope you take what you learned here to build a rich and meaningful life.

[00:01:28] **Michael Herold:** Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

[00:01:37] **Jill Stoddard:** I'm here with Debbie to introduce today's episode where I interview Florence Williams on a topic I'm not sure we've really talked about on the podcast before, which is Heartbreak. And she tells a story about going through a divorce after 30 years, but of course, many of us have experienced heartbreak at all different stages of our life.

So Debbie, what was your reaction to this episode?

[00:02:01] **Debbie Sorensen:** Oh, it brought back a lot of memories of my own awful experiences of heartbreak. I mean, it's been a while. I've been married for a long time at this point and so, you know, for me most of the heartbreak that I experienced, at least romantic heartbreak, was back in my 20s, but I had a few pretty painful experiences with breakups and, you know, being either Broken up with or just one of those really complicated situations for whatever reason it didn't work out.

And, um, actually, as I was thinking about what we might talk about in our co host intro today, Jill, I was remembering she, she mentioned this just very briefly in the episode, but it really stood out to me. , which is about how when we're alone with ourselves in the course of a breakup, how we can get into this place of self blame and just overthinking.

And I really remember a lot of times being stuck in this place with heartbreak, where I would perseverate and try to figure out what happened and sort of take it personally as. If I was unlovable or something like that or what's wrong with me and she talked very briefly about that But I just I've heard other people talk about that too how it can be so hard when you're experiencing a breakup to to see that perspective taking on things and and to understand that You know, when you go through an experience like this often, it's, you know, it's not like there's something wrong with you per se, but it can sure feel like that when you're in that moment and just how painful it is to be in that particular place.

[00:03:44] **Jill Stoddard:** Absolutely. And, and she delves into it more deeply in the book. And another thing she talks about in the book that we didn't have time to get to where, and she uses science to explain it. It's what I really loved about this book and about her in the interview is this cool approach where she talks about all the science around rejection and heartbreak and loss and loneliness.

And one of the things she talks about in the book is how when we go through a heartbreak, we often act in ways that are. Really outside of the way that we might normally behave and like UW it was making me have flashbacks I was thinking about one really hard heartbreak back when I was in college and just remembering some of the ways that I acted during this heartbreak that were making me have so much like cringe and almost like shame feelings and, and reading the book made me, it was so normalizing and validating and like, oh, there's something that's going on in my brain and with my neurotransmitters that actually explains why I was acting this way.

So I do think it's a really interesting and helpful read to understand it's not your fault that there's actually biological stuff going on

[00:04:55] **Debbie Sorensen:** Yeah, that's so normalizing and validating because I can definitely think of things, I'm like, ugh, I wish I could go back in time because that's embarrassing, you know, what do they think of me? Yeah, definitely sometimes we're not maybe acting at our best in those moments because we are in pain, you know, and it's bringing out all kinds of thoughts and feelings and behaviors that are, yeah, that are not maybe how we typically operate.

[00:05:21] **Jill Stoddard:** and for the therapists in our audience, the other thing this reminded me of was a client that I saw a long time ago who came to me when her husband um, decided that he wanted a divorce and it was very shocking and a lot of what we were working on in therapy at the time were some Out of the ordinary for her kinds of behaviors, things that were not consistent with the way she would normally act, not consistent with her values.

And I was thinking of her as I listened to this episode , and it just made me realize this is a great episode potentially for therapists to share with clients who are going through heartbreak and like you said, blaming themselves or feeling just out of sorts that they're acting in ways that they don't understand and, you know, and just what a challenge it can be to manage that.

[00:06:07] **Debbie Sorensen:** Well, and I know for me, one of the things that really helped when I was in that place of Perseverating and just feeling really terrible about myself were my friends and my family who I could go to, who could really help me see things a different way, and that's also something that she talks about a lot in this episode.

[00:06:28] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, she does, and that, to me, was the most powerful take home message here, is when you go through heartbreak, even though we've all experienced heartbreak, you're not experiencing it all at the same time. So at the time you go through it, it might actually feel lonely if the rest of your friends don't happen to be getting divorced or going through breakups at the time.

And how when we're feeling really sad, we might tend to isolate. When in reality, the most critical thing that we need is each other, you know, it's, it's just yet another reminder about how important relationships are that, you know, when bonds and attachments are threatened, it really affects us as a species.

And that it's, it's not time to hide, it's time to really reach out and, and get support and, and stay attached to the other humans that are in your life if you're detaching from an important figure.

[00:07:19] **Debbie Sorensen:** Which can be hard, because I think when you're in that place of feeling really blue and sad and down in the dumps, sometimes you just feel like Crawling into bed and isolating and so it does sometimes take a little bit of effort to go out and get that support, but You know at that exact moment when it can be really hard to access is really when you need it.

[00:07:39] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, and I think she does a great job of, of kind of coming around to why that's so important. And so hopefully, our listeners are not experiencing too much heartbreak, but if you are, we hope that this episode is especially useful to you.

Hey everybody, it's Jill here and I'm so excited for today's episode because we are talking about a book that is kind of different than a lot of the books that we typically cover on Psychologists Off the Clock.

So I will be talking to Florence Williams today about her book Heartbreak. Florence Williams is a journalist, author, and podcaster. Her first book, Breasts, A Natural and Unnatural History, received the Los Angeles Times Book Prize in Science and Technology and the 2013 Audie in General Nonfiction. The Nature Fix was an Audible bestseller and was named a top summer read by J. P. Morgan. Her latest book, Heartbreak, which she's here to talk about today, was called Showstopping and Courageous by Publishers Weekly. She is a contributing editor at Outside Magazine and a freelance writer for the New York Times and numerous other publications.

A fellow at the Center for Humans and Nature and a visiting scholar at George Washington University, Florence's work focuses on the environment, health, and science. A certified forest bathing guide and experienced workshop leader, Florence loves leading groups through nature immersive experiences and watching the transformation, connection, and healing that results.

Florence, welcome to Psychologists Off The Clock.

[00:09:11] **Florence Williams:** Thank you so much. Jill. It's great to be here with you today.

[00:09:14] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, I'm excited to have you because like I said in the introduction, this is a little bit of a different sort of book than we usually

cover because it is nonfiction, which all of the books we cover are nonfiction, but it's really sort of a memoir outlining your personal experience of heartbreak. But what makes it really unique and interesting is that it's also a journalistic and scientific exploration of heartbreak, the way it affects our bodies, our recovery from it.

So I thought maybe we could start with the personal and then get into some of the cool science. So can you tell our listeners a little about your story, what happened and why it prompted you to write the book?

[00:09:55] **Florence Williams:** Yes, sure. Thanks. And I, you know, I do consider the book kind of a scientific memoir, or sort of first person science, you know, it's kind of this funny hybrid. Yeah, I mean, I am a science writer. I write books often that stem from questions, you know, arising in my own life. And so when I went through this really devastating divorce, and I started noticing pretty significant changes in my health and in my body.

Um, I started just asking a lot of questions, you know, like, what is happening? I felt like so much had been written about the kind of, um, you know, drama of heartbreak from a poetic standpoint or from pop music. But I couldn't really find out much about what was going, what was happening to my immune system because of heartbreak.

And um, so what, so what happened to me is that I had been with the same partner for 32 years. Um, I met him when I was 18, like my first day in college. Um, so really my entire adult life. And then after 25 years of marriage, um, he, you know, basically said he didn't want to do this anymore. And. It was, you know, a surprise, honestly, and, and it felt kind of one sided and so, you know, I had these stages that people go through, you know, the shock of it, you know, the sort of like disbelief, but, but very quickly, it kind of morphed into, you know, these stages of grief and loneliness and loss.

And physically, you know, what I noticed was that I felt kind of existentially freaked out, like I didn't really know what this meant for my family and for myself and for my future. And that registered in my body as anxiety, I would say. Um, I lost 20 pounds pretty fast. I had trouble sleeping. I felt really, like, jangled and jittery, uh, you know, that I learned later, or all sorts of, um, you know, downstream effects of these, uh, stress hormones, you know, coursing through my body.

Um, but that's what really, that's what happened that kind of launched this investigation. Hmm.

[00:12:17] **Jill Stoddard:** made me think of is, I'm a therapist and I'm an anxiety specialist and one of the things that we know really fuels anxiety is kind of this, um, there are these three ingredients that really fuel anxiety. One is uncertainty. One is a lack of perceived control and one is a high sense of responsibility.

And as I was reading this, you know, you're talking about all the, all of the science and a lot of medicine and on the, and, and psychology. And I just kept thinking, wow, there is so much uncertainty. There is such a lack of perceived control because this really came out of left field. This was not your choice.

This was really. Like done to you. And then just that responsibility, both as a parent and a person who now has to support herself. And I just thought, wow, like what a recipe for anxiety and stress hormones

[00:13:10] **Florence Williams:** exactly. And also, I think when something like this happens, you know, when you're used to having this strong bond, the social support figure in your life day in and day out, and suddenly they're gone, like they've taken their suitcase and they are gone. Um, you have to rethink, you have to actually like relearn completely how to navigate this new world.

You know, I had to figure out, like, how do I fix the lawnmower? How do I pay the bills ? am I going to take my kids on spring break? You know, it's like, um, and, and what's going to become of me. And am I going to die poor and alone, you know, and like my mother did, honestly, you know, it, it like brought up right off these issues.

Um, and then the stories we tell ourselves about being rejected. So there's that layered on top of it too. That sort of social rejection, that ostracism, that, wow, I must be an unlovable person if this has happened to me. And

[00:14:06] **Jill Stoddard:** And the loss of your extended family, I mean, you tell a story about, spending, I think it was a holiday with your in laws who weren't going to be your in laws anymore. These people who had been part of your family for 40 years or something at that

[00:14:19] **Florence Williams:** Yeah. Decades, decades. I mean, well, 32 years. Yeah. Right. And, and, um, yeah. And they, you know, they, I'm still close to some of them, but you know, people sort of fall off these, like, you know, people who are close in your lives kind of like fall away. and, you know, I think with something like divorce and heartbreak, even though it is sooner or later,

something that happens to many of us, um, you don't necessarily know people who are going through it at the same time, right?

Like, it only happens a couple times in a lifetime. And so it feels very singular. It feels very lonely. Um, you know, all of my friends were still in their long marriages and so it's very isolating kind of place to be also.

[00:15:03] **Jill Stoddard:** and I found it really interesting. So you interview a number of experts, scientists, et cetera. And one of the people you talked to, I love you, you had a quote in the book that was love protects your heart while loss weakens it sometimes forever. And you interviewed a scientist, Dr. Uccino, and he said of all the ways to be single.

So, you know, single, just not partnered, divorced, widowed, that divorce is the worst. For your health.

[00:15:31] **Florence Williams:** Yes, that's what the epidemiology shows. And I was of course discouraged to learn this, but people who have been through divorce actually have a 26 percent increased risk of death. They have um, an increased risk of chronic illness, increased risk of depression, increased risk of heart attack. I mean, it just kind of goes on and on, and more so than people who have never been married.

So I thought that that was interesting. It also seems like if you are in a bad marriage, that is also bad for your health. Um, you know, at one point I said to him, well, is it better to be divorced than to be in a bad marriage? And I thought for sure he would say, absolutely. Um, but he didn't really. He, he said they're both bad.

Um, but he said, um, you know, it looks like divorce is kind of the worst, really. I was like, oh my god. So then, so then

[00:16:23] **Jill Stoddard:** And what what was the quote? Was it him? Someone, when you asked someone, what is there to do? And the answer was, don't stay heartbroken forever. Do you remember that

[00:16:33] **Florence Williams:** yes, that was also one of my kind of lead scientists in this book. Dr. Stephen Cole, who's a psychoneuroimmunologist, uh, at UCLA, who studies actually the effects of loneliness on our immune system specifically. So he became a major character for me. and he said heartbreak is one of the hidden landmines of human existence.

You know, it sets you up for this chronic inflammation that leads to disease. And, um, so that also I found very depressing and discouraging. Um, you know, fortunately, I also found some psychologists who were like, Yes, this is all true, but we know that some individuals are really resilient. And we have some advice for how to become that way and become one of those people who can defy the odds.

And so I felt like that was really an important story to tell. Because maybe this was a way I could learn to feel better and I could also share this with other people.

[00:17:35] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, what I, I loved the sort of structure of the book, you know, because it's like a scientific memoir or first person nonfiction kind of book.

[00:17:46] **Florence Williams:** Yeah, like a first person science book or a um, scientific memoir.

[00:17:51] **Jill Stoddard:** Scientific memoir. And so, you know, we go on the journey with the narrator, who is you, and it starts out with all of the heartbreak y things, and then all of the science that shows the negative impacts of heartbreak and loneliness and rejection.

But as we see over time, You grow, you change, you evolve, you learn, and there are suggestions for, you know, this isn't just a death sentence. There are things that we can do, that we can bounce back, and even just the passage of time, of course, we know, is one of the best healers of heartbreak. But before we get to the Good stuff.

This book is chock full of research studies, and I think you did a gorgeous job of presenting them in a way that is accessible and digestible to people who are not science y.

[00:18:41] **Florence Williams:** Hmm. Thank you

[00:18:42] **Jill Stoddard:** you know, as podcasters, we often get an advanced review copy and, my co host and I all like to have paper because we take all these notes in the margins.

But this book was so memoir y that I just wanted to read it on my Kindle at night. You know, when I was going to bed at night and so I had both copies of



the books because I needed to take notes, but also I just wanted to read it. And so it really does read like a, you know, a pleasurable novel type of book.

It doesn't read like a textbook.

[00:19:12] **Florence Williams:** I'm so glad to hear that. Yeah. I really wanted to take my readers on a journey

[00:19:16] **Jill Stoddard:** You did. You absolutely achieved that. And so, so I thought, you know, there's no way we could go over all of the studies and all of the research. So I thought I would just ask you if there were one or two or three that you found particularly compelling or interesting or heartbreaking

[00:19:35] **Florence Williams:** Hmm.

[00:19:36] **Jill Stoddard:** you wanted to share with our listeners.

[00:19:39] **Florence Williams:** Yeah, sure. Um, you know, I mentioned Steve Cole and, uh, he has really spent his career, as I say, studying how loneliness, kind of, uh, is, is written into our immune system and how our cells deal with it, sort of how they monitor our social state. and so, you know, some of his studies have been really fascinating.

And for example, um, you know, early in the 90s, he was studying gay men with HIV and found that, the men who progressed more quickly to full blown AIDS. So in other words, men whose T cells were more, uh, you know, vulnerable to the virus were men who, also reported being more socially isolated, um, or more closeted.

So, um, you know, they had this significant social stress, on top of this virus. And, um, you know, we've known for a long time that people who. Say they feel lonely, have a, uh, significantly increased higher risk of death and disease. Um, to the point where it's kind of the equivalent, loneliness is the equivalent, you know, smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

That's a statistic we often hear. And of course now we're living in an epidemic of loneliness. So loneliness is not just, a sort of bummer feeling, but it actually sets you up for serious illness. Um, which is why I think there's an urgency, you know, to help people who feel lonely and who feel heartbroken.

You know, it's, yes, time does heal heartbreak for most of us eventually. But if we can speed that up, you know, to any degree, uh, it is absolutely worth doing because your immune cells are in the balance here and, and

you

[00:21:34] **Jill Stoddard:** time doesn't cure loneliness. So if you're going through a heartbreak that might be cured with time, it might be a good time to reach out to the rest of your support system.

[00:21:46] **Florence Williams:** Absolutely. Of course, that's one of the tips, you know, that we can talk about. yeah, so I, you know, I would say that's one of the studies that really influenced me. Another study that really influenced me early on, um, again was, talking to someone who told me about sort of the secrets to resilience for individuals going through really tough times.

Um, specifically Dr. Paula Williams, who's a psychologist at the University of Utah. and what she has found, and I had never heard this before, uh, and I was so interested in it. She said that she thinks the people who are most resilient are the ones who are in some ways the most sensitive to beauty, who are able to cultivate And being awe prone, uh, is very correlated with the personality trait of openness.

People who are open to beauty, kind of open to curiosity, who, um, you know, love learning. Uh, these are the people who seem to kind of take life's blows more in stride. Perhaps because they're able to, Not just focus on their own problems, you know, but they're sort of interested in the external world and maybe they can sort of integrate, you know, what their sensory systems and their intellectual systems are telling them about the rest of the world and sort of integrate that into their own personal dramas.

[00:23:06] **Jill Stoddard:** Like seeing a little more of the big picture.

[00:23:08] **Florence Williams:** see more of the big picture somehow.

[00:23:10] **Jill Stoddard:** maybe even, I mean, I'm not a particularly spiritual person, but it brings to mind kind of a definition of spirituality where it seems like it's, you know, that perspective of being one small cog, being part of something connected, interconnected, but part of something that's much bigger

[00:23:27] **Florence Williams:** That's exactly right. The people who are able to tap into that particular response are the ones who recover and I just, I thought

that was so fascinating, especially because she also said that openness is maybe the only personality trait that we can really shift, you

[00:23:46] **Florence Williams:** fixed. That's the good news. So if we're, if we're someone who is not necessarily like prone to finding awe, you know, in every detail of life, we can actually train ourselves and learn to become more that way.

And so I found that just wildly hopeful. That became my project, you know, for sort of the two years of reporting that I worked on this book was like, how can I find more awe? How can I learn to become a more open person? you Know,

[00:24:13] **Jill Stoddard:** it fits so beautifully with the work that you already do on nature, because what better way to cultivate awe than to put yourself out in nature,

[00:24:24] **Florence Williams:** That's right. I mean, it turns out that. There are, you know, according to, um, psychologists, you know, there, there may be like seven or eight major ways we access awe. And nature is just one of them. You know, I knew for me that that's like an easy shortcut to awe me, but, you know, for someone else that might be, um, you know, listening to music or, um, you know, going to.

beautiful cathedrals and, you know, singing in a choir. It might be looking at art. It might be, you know, witnessing the moral courage of other people. Other people are, if you look at sort of global surveys of, awe, people report that actually witnessing other people Perform sort of acts of bravery or courage.

Um, that's actually the most commonly experienced awe worldwide. So, um, Dacher Keltner, who's, you know, like one of the most famous psychologists studying awe right now at the university of California, Berkeley, he just wrote a book about, uh, in which he talks about trying to. And what he did was he found himself reading these biographies of, you know, Gandhi, because that's what gave him a feeling of awe. It's like, wow, I want to know, I want to know about these, these individuals who are changing the world and doing these amazing things. Um, and so there are lots of ways I think that we can kind of tap in to this, this kind of really fundamental human emotion that honestly we kind of don't experience that much anymore.

[00:26:01] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, right, we don't. We're so, so busy thinking ahead or ruminating about the past and you really have to be present to have an experience

[00:26:09] **Florence Williams:** And as you say, I think it also helps to be outside. You know, we used to look at the Milky Way every single night.

used to sing and dance by the fire and watch the sunset and know what the moon was doing, you know, and now we're just inside all the time. So we don't,

[00:26:23] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah, I don't experience a lot of awe at my computer, right? But it also makes me think of how little ego is present when you have an experience of awe. And one of the things that you talk about in the book and experienced is psychedelics,

[00:26:41] **Florence Williams:** I did. Yes.

You know, as I say, I was on this like two year journey to try to find awe and psychedelics is sort of, awe, on steroids, right? In fact, there, there is a theory that the reason people taking psychedelics therapeutically have had such success, you know, kind of getting through trauma and other things, um, is because of the pathway of awe.

Like, they have this almost spiritual, mystical experience on the psychedelics because They feel like they're kind of one with the universe. I had never really felt that way until I, I did with a therapist, um, take some psilocybin. Um, And, you know, I took a big enough dose that I really did have a classic mystical experience where I felt like I was one filament of light among millions of other filaments of light.

And I couldn't really tell which one was me and which one was everyone else. And we were all swimming in this beautiful kind of atmosphere together. Um. You know, that was really powerful. And you kind of do, you're so convinced that this is the true message of the universe, that we are all connected, um, our egos are just, you know, a bunch of molecules kind of tricking our consciousness.

Um, and I came out of that experience feeling far less afraid of my future, um, and far better able to kind of, um, disconnect from my marriage. More optimistic, really.

[00:28:22] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, and what's so, I think, is really interesting about that, that you, it's sort of the point I think you come around to at the end of the book, is even though you were having this experience alone, I mean, you were with a therapist, but you were sort of, you were tripping alone, but your experience was about interconnectedness.

Right. So a lot of what you talk about in the book is loneliness and rejection and how problematic that is. I also just want to say we didn't talk about it here, but in the book, it was really interesting to learn the theories and hypotheses that go deeper behind why loneliness is bad for your health and your immune system.

So people can read about that in detail. It was really, I was like, wow, this is so cool. So fascinating. Um, so, so I want to come back to this idea of kind of togetherness and community. But before we do that, you wrote *The Nature Fix*, a whole book on the healing properties of nature. And in this book, *Heartbreak*, you talk about choosing to go on this very long river journey.

And you did that partly with friends and family and partly solo. I'm curious, what prompted you to take that journey? Like what was it that you hoped to get?

[00:29:38] **Florence Williams:** Mm hmm. Well, after I wrote the nature fix, you know, so much of that book, looks at the scientific evidence about why we feel better when we're outside. but I only in that book, I only go as far as the three day effect, um, which is this idea that actually three days in the wilderness can be really, um, You know, life altering and fundamentally perspective shifting.

And, um, there's something that sort of magical that happens after three days. But, but, but this, this divorce for me was so traumatic. I was like, you know what I need, I need a lot more than three days. Um, I grew up running rivers. in the wilderness with my dad. So I was, you know, relatively skilled and comfortable doing that.

Um, I love the metaphor of rowing my own boat, you know, after having been partnered for 30 years, I had to learn how to be alone and I had to learn how to take care of myself. And so I love the metaphor of just like paddling my own canoe. And I also wanted to access a sense of bravery and self confidence because that was really demolished, you know, in after this kind of state of rejection, right, that I was in.

Um, so those were my intentions and of course, you know, when you're out there in the wilderness by yourself for 13 days, there's also a lot of time to reflect. There's a lot of time to experience awe and beauty. Um, I wanted to become better at meditating and I thought it would be helpful, you know, to be out there where there are no distractions, not very many, you know, there's like no environmental human noise, for example, and I

[00:31:20] **Jill Stoddard:** But you'll always have your own brain with you.

[00:31:22] **Florence Williams:** you always have your own brain.

It turns out, it turns out there is that, um, yeah, so those were the intentions. And, you know, we, we actually, I worked with Dr. Cole at UCLA to test my immune cells, Before and after the river trip, as well as at various other time points during the reporting for the book, um, you know, to sort of see, and I guess my hope was like, okay, you know, 30 days in the wilderness, like I'm going to come out cured.

I'm going to be a shiny new person ready to take on the rest of my life. That was my, kind of my hope and my expectation

didn't happen.

[00:31:59] **Jill Stoddard:** I was going to say. So what lessons, I'm curious, like what lessons did you learn from the river? Because you definitely learned quite a few. But what also, like, what can nature do and not do? Cause you also learned that there were limits

[00:32:13] **Florence Williams:** That's right.

[00:32:14] **Jill Stoddard:** and partially because of that pre and post blood work. I also think we should mention somewhere.

I can't believe it hasn't come up yet, but, before we talk about that, cause it's, I guess, kind of related to your blood work, but do you want to talk about the diabetes? Cause

that's like pretty mind boggling.

[00:32:30] **Florence Williams:** definitely. Um, maybe six months or a year after the split. Um, I was diagnosed with type one diabetes, which is an autoimmune disease. Um, that's usually diagnosed in children, fairly unusual to be diagnosed as an adult with that.

And, um, I, Um, and I also learned that sometimes other adults going through difficult divorces also get diagnosed with this disease. I was, you know, I, when my friends heard, heard this, they would say, Oh my God, I heard that happened to so and so, um, and I would talk to so and so and, you know, sure enough. Um, and so

[00:33:09] **Jill Stoddard:** I,

remember in the book you say, is divorce diabetes a thing? And like, sure enough, it turns out divorce diabetes

[00:33:15] **Florence Williams:** kind of is a thing. I mean, it's really impossible to say, you know, with an N of one, you know, whether this is a cause and effect, but according to the experts I spoke to at Stanford University, these autoimmune diseases are often triggered by, uh, a traumatic event, uh, you know, in my case, it was type one diabetes.

Um, so, you know, Yeah, I mean, there was definitely a lot of weird inflammation going on in my body. And I felt this intense urgency to try to get better because I didn't want to get worse. I didn't want lots more autoimmune diseases coming online because once you get one, you're more likely to get more.

Um, you know, I just wanted to, I just wanted my body to really heal. And so, you know, that was a major urgency in, in driving the reporting and the book.

[00:34:08] **Jill Stoddard:** And it's something you can at least try to control in an otherwise uncontrollable situation, right? You can't control the divorce and this decision your husband has made, but maybe you can try to take control of the impacts that it's, that it's having.

[00:34:23] **Florence Williams:** Although, you know, it's hard to know how to do that, right? We, modern medicine doesn't know how to reverse autoimmune disease. Um, you know, we know how to help calm the nervous system and, um, but still there's a lot of new science there. And, you know, so, so this was, I thought, you know, very interesting path to, to try to discover.

[00:34:42] **Jill Stoddard:** So then tell, tell us what you did and didn't, what you did learn from the river and kind of what those, what, where, where you learned the limits

[00:34:49] **Florence Williams:** when I got off the river, um, first of all, I would say I didn't feel like a shiny new person. In fact, being alone in the wilderness. It's kind of a stressful environment because you have to really watch your back. You have to watch everything you do. You have to be hyper vigilant to survive out there.

Like you cannot get hurt when you're alone. You can't tie your boat in wrong and have it go down the river without you and your entire water supply. you can't, um, you just can't screw up really. You can't hurt yourself, you know, all this stuff. So, You know, it's funny. I mean, the whole reason our nervous system freaks out when we get divorced or have a breakup like this is that we feel our bodies register this grief or this pain, as though we have been left alone and abandoned.

on the savannah. you know, as humans, we don't like to be alone. it's not how we feel safe. I mean, we find safety in numbers. We're a social species. Obviously, in modern life, lots of people live alone and they are fine, but that's also because they have a social support network. They feel safe.

But you know, when you've lost a major attachment bond like this, kind of all of a sudden your nervous system thinks, Oh my God, I am alone in the wilderness right now. And so it was kind of ironic that my way of trying to solve that was to literally go into the wilderness alone.

blood work back, it was like, yeah, you know, your blood still looks like the blood of a lonely person.

That is the quote that Dr. Cole told me, um, my inflammation markers were still high as though my body were still preparing for attack. It was like preparing to be bitten by a predator or whatever. and that's, you know, inflammation is useful if you're about to be bitten by a predator, but it's not useful.

if you're just, you know, alone for weeks or months at a time and feeling, feeling sorry for yourself, not useful at all. Bad for our health. So, yeah. while I do feel like I got some things out of the river trip. I did learn how to meditate. That was helpful. I did do some deep thinking, but the problem with deep thinking when you're by yourself is it's also pretty easy to spiral into a lot of negative thoughts.

As I discovered, um, my therapist had actually given me some homework on the trip and she said, why don't you do some journaling about, you know, your role in what went wrong in the marriage, which is probably a reasonable thing to ask, but you know, I ended up like going down this very deep, dark rabbit hole all by myself where I was like, Oh my God, I am so flawed.

I have this wrong with me, and I have that wrong with me, and I didn't do this well, and I didn't do that well, and wow, no wonder he left me, and nobody is ever going to love me again. And there was no one there to say, oh, you're



actually, you're overdoing it a bit, or that's not realistic. These stories that you're telling yourself, are not real.

And in fact, when I got back, a friend of mine, who's also a therapist, said, yeah, you know, you're not supposed to go to those dark places without support. And I was like, Oh, shoot. I did it wrong. And

[00:38:14] **Jill Stoddard:** like you said, the metaphor and I need to learn how to paddle my own boat. I need to learn how to do things for myself. I want to feel courageous and strong and those intentions all make so much sense. And doing all these really hard things alone, and especially processing everything that's happened alone, turns out, isn't actually what we need as humans.

[00:38:38] **Florence Williams:** right. You know, the whole self reliance thing is so overdetermined in our culture.

[00:38:44] **Jill Stoddard:** our culture,

[00:38:45] **Florence Williams:** Um, maybe it's good to have some help and support from community.

[00:38:51] **Jill Stoddard:** Well, in thinking evolutionarily, we don't have the fangs and the claws and the running at high speeds, right? Early humans who hunted and gathered and traveled together had a survival advantage. If you got kicked out of your tribe, you were literally dead

and and yet culturally, we have this like independence thing that doesn't actually make sense medically, or when you, when you look at

the science that you dug

into.

[00:39:17] **Florence Williams:** right. What our cells really want is to feel safe. How do we feel safe? We feel safe when we support each other.

[00:39:28] **Jill Stoddard:** yeah. And I think you even had some research in there, um, by Sue Carter about oxytocin. Um, right, the, the tend and befriend, the bonding and love hormone and, you know, it all points to how necessary we are to each other and so then it makes sense that divorce would be so impactful and that we need our people to be able to bounce back from that.

And going back to the psychedelics experience, that you had this experience of being a part of all of the other people. Even though it was something you were doing alone.

[00:40:07] **Florence Williams:** Exactly. It was so comforting and beautiful.

[00:40:10] **Jill Stoddard:** yeah,

[00:40:10] **Florence Williams:** Um, but I do think you raise some interesting observations about why I think men and women sometimes have a different time, recovering from divorce. Um, women do tend to be better at that tend and befriend. You know, we reach out to our girlfriends, we support each other, um, we talk, and we kind of process.

And it looks like women do actually recover from, from divorce better than men do. Um, a lot of men tend to kind of stuff it and stuff their emotions and not talk about it, not seek help. Um, they tend to have more trouble with substance abuse, um, and with kind of destructive lifestyle behaviors after divorce.

you know, again, I think that, this kind of data is really worth bringing forward and mentioning. Uh, you know, places like the UK now have a minister of loneliness,

uh, and this is someone who understands this, you know, and is trying to kind of engineer program, like social programs, what they call social prescriptions to help people who are lonely get out of their houses.

Um, they have these men's sheds,

[00:41:21] **Jill Stoddard:** that. Yeah. Talk about the men's sheds.

Those are

so,

so

[00:41:25] **Florence Williams:** these, these, kind of old, lonely divorce guys or, or, um, retired guys, or, you know, um, men who feel a little bit isolated, um, they can go to these basically kind of converted garages and work with power

tools, you know, and, uh, make bird cages and whatever it is and hang out, you know, and like work side by side.

And eventually they'll have a cup of tea and, There's this kind of sideways way that they'll start talking to each other. and it's been really, really helpful to their sense of, happiness

[00:42:00] **Jill Stoddard:** I loved that. I thought it was so cute and it reminded me of the advice for talking to your teenagers as a parent, that the best way to talk to teens is in the car cause you're side by side facing forward, not making eye contact. And the, the men's sheds kind of reminded me of that too. We can focus on, you know, whatever we're hammering or sawing and have this conversation side by side.

And it's, it feels less vulnerable.

[00:42:22] **Florence Williams:** Right. We don't have to call it therapy, you know?

[00:42:25] **Jill Stoddard:** It's

not a heart to heart. We're just chatting

while we work.

[00:42:28] **Florence Williams:** We're just, we're just hanging out, having a, having a cup of tea.

[00:42:31] **Jill Stoddard:** So great. I was curious if you gave any thought, like, do you think that your age and stage of life affected this at all? Like, do you think this whole experience would have been different if this had happened when you were 40 versus 50?

[00:42:46] **Florence Williams:** You know, it's hard to know because

I've only really been heartbroken once when I was 50.

But my age, I mean, I think, look, for, for women across the board, it's, it's not easy turning 50. Right? Like there's so many ways our culture tells us we are worthless. You know, unsexy and, insignificant. so to be rejected, like right at that milestone of life felt like this kind of cosmic joke.

it did really hit me hard. Um, my therapist also really helped convince me that I was You know, not necessarily being realistic about that. You know, she's like, plenty of women over 50 fall in love again. You know, it's, you know, your, your life is not over . and so that became important to hear, really

important to hear.

Um, it also became really important to me to find role models for women who had gone through this and were thriving.

Because I didn't, I just didn't really know that many divorced older women, like my life was not filled with them.

Um, although my mother had been one, um, but that I would not say was a positive role model.

I mean, my mother really had a hard time after her

divorce. So, um, that was helpful to me to kind of seek out, you know, these like super women. Um,

to, and I think that that's an important message. Yeah.

[00:44:13] **Jill Stoddard:** it's such an interesting time. So I'm about the same age as you. And so I was just thinking about this, you know, I turned 50, well, last year, technically now I'm right on the verge of 51, but, and thinking this is a time in my life where I feel really strong and, you know, kind of more confident like that time where you start to give zero F's about things, you know, you don't care what other people think anymore.

And simultaneously, exactly what you said. We also get all these. Cultural messages about our lack of worth at this stage. And I certainly noticed that even though I feel like I look better than I ever have, men don't look at me. Because I'm 50, you know, and that what an interesting time. I could really see the path going In a number of different ways having this happen at this particular stage of life So I was just curious if you had thought about that and I also thought it was really interesting if I'm remembering correctly That um, the thing they call broken heart syndrome, I think is the

technical term Takotsubo,

how do you pronounce it?

[00:45:10] **Florence Williams:** Takotsubo,

[00:45:12] **Jill Stoddard:** So that 80 percent of those cases are in postmenopausal women so that there's something going on with estrogen deprivation most likely

[00:45:20] **Florence Williams:** Yes, uh, yet another, yet another problem chalked up to estrogen deprivation.

Yeah,

there's something about the estrogen that seems to protect our heart, from, uh, well, what happens in broken heart syndrome is, uh, it's not like a blockage of an artery, which is sort of a classic heart attack. Um, It's more that your left ventricle gets kind of stunned by, stress hormones after a, you know, a traumatic or very emotional event.

Um, yes, it often happens, you know, after someone has died in your life or even after a pet has died, for example. and, uh, there's something about the estrogen that does seem to kind of protect the heart cells, you know, from the shock of, um, you know, norepinephrine or, you know, whatever it is, that's, causing those muscles to misfire in your, in your heart.

[00:46:11] **Jill Stoddard:** it's so interesting So I'm curious so based on all of the things As you learned, for anyone else, you know, listeners out there who are navigating a painful or unwanted loss or, or even transition, what do you recommend? So based on what you learned personally, and then also through the science, I'm sure people are going to start coming to you now as the heartbreak experts,

right? I

just got dumped, Florence! What do

I do? Yeah. Yeah.

[00:46:41] **Florence Williams:** it. Um, yeah, you know, uh, I, I tend to give people advice in sort of three big buckets. Um, and the first one is to find some calm because we're in fight or flight. And that's what's kind of really aggravating our, immune cells. So however it is that you can find calm, you know, and it may be through meditation or breathing or, you know, being in

nature, you know, for me, um, but really important to prioritize doing some of that kind of self care work.

Um, but the second piece is connection. So first is calm, then connection. Again, finding people who have been through this, finding role models. You may need to break out of your normal friend group because you want advice from people, who have been through it. But being vulnerable. being honest about your emotions, really feeling your emotions, then I think can help connect you in a more authentic way with, with people around you who can help.

Um, and then the final piece is this kind of, um, meaning making. Like what what lessons can you take away from this moving forward? how can you help others? You know, what is going to be your purpose now? I mean, we know that that's key to what in the field call post traumatic growth. You know, it's how can we make this not just about ourselves, but what can we learn going forward to help others?

And I think that those seem to be kind of the three major buckets, um, for getting through this.

[00:48:16] **Jill Stoddard:** it. I love it. And so you're still doing part of your job is you, what was it? A certified forest bathing guide and workshop leader. And you lead groups through nature, immersive experiences that lead to transformation and connection and healing. And so what, like, what if somebody was interested in trying?

Something like that. Like, how do they even begin to find that kind, if they're going through something difficult and they think that this might be a way, they'd like to make that part of their healing journey. Any specific recommendations there?

[00:48:49] **Florence Williams:** Well, you know, I do think sometimes these women's retreats can be really helpful for people. Um, you know, I lead them in the wilderness and I call them nature fix retreats or journey into awe retreats. Um, and their chance for women to be together and bond, but also have this kind of nature immersion where we can really feel grounded.

kind of ceremonialize in some ways or ritualize these milestones or big life transitions. Doesn't have to be divorce. I am really now a fan of forest bathing and nature immersion. as you mentioned, I got licensed to be a so called forest therapy or forest bathing guide. a lot of arboretums and, um, botanical gardens, museums, um, are, are sponsoring some of these experiences.

And they're typically like a three hour experience. Um, You know, you might want to look into this in your area and try it out. You know, it's like, I don't know, sometimes what 30, 40 bucks or something for the afternoon. Um, sometimes they're offered for free and, um, you know, check it out. And it's. just a very different way of moving through a natural area, like a forest, where, you know, you're not hiking, you are really trying to open all of your senses, kind of feel like the sensory animal that we all are, and forge this kind of deeper connection, with some of the elements of nature, and, and I have just watched so many people do that today.

have very meaningful and profound experiences, even in just a few hours.

[00:50:25] **Jill Stoddard:** And is there something that happens aside, I mean, so I'm trying to imagine this kind of mindful experience of seeing and smelling and touching and hearing. What surrounds me in a, and to be honest with you, I think that whenever I've heard of forest bathing, I assumed it was like kind of just hiking, right?

Just like being out in the forest. Um, is there something that happens like almost like when you take psychedelics? Is there something that happens beyond just an experience of awe? Like do people have these personal insights that get triggered by the bark of a tree? what are some of

[00:50:59] **Florence Williams:** you'd, you'd be surprised how often that happens. I mean, I think it's best to go in without expectations, you know,

and as guides, you know, we don't have expectations that you're going to come out like totally transformed. But we sort of issue what we call invitations where one of it might be, um.

You know, go find a tree that kind of speaks to you, you know, that, that, that, you find appealing, like maybe there's a tree at, like, if you look at this direction, is there a tree that seems to kind of, call out to you .And sure enough, you know, people were like, okay, you know. This sounds a little hokey, but fine.

I'll go sit next to this tree because I kind of like the way the bark is peeling off over here, but there's new growth over here or whatever it is. and you're just sitting with this tree for like 20 minutes and you're getting to know this tree and pretty soon the tree kind of starts talking to you. And, uh, you can even ask the tree some questions. What does this tree want you to know right now? And sure enough, like there are some messages there that are probably subconsciously

rooted in your body that now can find some expression. It's kind of a way to access your own inner wisdom.

Um, and we have it, right?

We have this inner wisdom, but we are not. I think of it as like the space where you feel like you're not Quiet enough or free from distractions enough to listen to it

So that's it's almost like a deep listening kind

of exercise and it can be really cool.

[00:52:23] **Jill Stoddard:** I love that. I want to do this. I have this, um, so I was, I know I should, well, we were talking before we started recording that I had been living in San Diego for a long time. And now I'm back home in Massachusetts. And, it took a couple years for me to convince my husband to move back home.

You know, leaving San Diego to come back to New England winters is a big, a big

ask.

[00:52:42] **Florence Williams:** that is a big

ask

[00:52:43] **Jill Stoddard:** big ask. But one of the things when I was explaining to him, when I was trying to like make him understand why this felt so deeply important, I said, I just keep getting this image of a tree and the last 25 years being in San Diego have been all growth.

They've been all the branches and the leaves and the growth, and that's been exactly right for this stage of life. And now I'm. Deeply craving roots, and I just haven't been able to feel rooted here, and I need to be back home to feel the roots, and so I, I feel connected to this idea of trees, I've thought about maybe even getting a tree tattoo, and anyway, we moved, and I'm here now, and he's been able to say like, I get it now, you know, he misses California, but we spend all this time with our extended family, and he's like, yep,



[00:53:31] **Florence Williams:** We are creatures of nature

[00:53:33] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

[00:53:34] **Florence Williams:** and we are meant to feel connected to the natural world. So when we can find that, it can be really, really full of information and power and insight.

[00:53:45] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah.

[00:53:46] **Florence Williams:** found. So that's really

[00:53:47] **Jill Stoddard:** And connection. I mean, I think what some of the most connecting experiences I've had have just been hiking with my son.

You know, we, it's like our little thing, we, I call him Lil Sherpa, cause he's like my little guide, he's almost 10 now, but we've been doing this for a few years together now, and you know, he just like drops these pearls of wisdom, and he's just, he's just this great little guide. And you know, we've had so many amazing experiences of connection, and if we were walking around a track inside a gymnasium, I'm quite certain we would not be having those same experiences, that it's really that, you know, we would not be having those same experiences, that it's really that being outside And hearing the crunch beneath your sneakers, you know?

Yes, absolutely. Yeah,

[00:54:24] **Florence Williams:** Like you're giving him the sense of comfort out there

that he'll be able to draw upon

in his times of difficulty.

[00:54:32] **Jill Stoddard:** Yeah. Now we need to get back out there, even though it's cold. Well Thank you for such a I loved this book. I highly recommend it. It really is different and, and wonderful. So if people want to find out more about you, where can they find you?

[00:54:46] **Florence Williams:** Oh, yeah. Thanks so much for asking. Um, you know, uh, everything's kind of in one place, which is [FlorenceWilliams.com](http://FlorenceWilliams.com).

Pretty easy. And there are links to my social there and links to my books, links to my retreats, um, the audio work that I've done. I've made some podcasts kind of on these topics and, and they're in there too.

So

[00:55:05] **Jill Stoddard:** Amazing. Well, we will be sure to link to all of that in the show notes. Thank you, Florence, so much for joining me. It was great to chat with

You

[00:55:12] **Florence Williams:** too, Jill. Take care. thank you for listening to Psychologists Off the Clock. If you enjoy our podcast, you can help us out by leaving a review or contributing on Patreon.

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