



# Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

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## Season 1, Episode 13: Unhealed Betrayal is Making You Sick with Debi Silber, PhD

**Jodi:** Hi, I am so excited to be here today with one of my favorite people on the planet. Debi Silber is the founder of The Post Betrayal Institute and she is amazing. For those of you who aren't familiar with how betrayal might play in to the parasympathetic state, your vagus nerve has three responses that it can trigger. It can trigger the fight-or-flight sympathetic, the rest and digest parasympathetic state, or the free state, which is where we often land when we're in betrayal or shame or just paralyzed and unable to move forward. And Debi is so brilliant, she has put together a five-step amazing protocol to help you move out of stuck. So let's dive right in.

And, Debi, if you can tell us how unhealed betrayal keeps us sick, sad, and stuck, and maybe elaborate on some examples of betrayal.

**Debi:** Sure. Well, first of all, thanks so much, I'm so excited to just be here with you. What we've been told, "Time heals all wounds," that's not the case when it comes to betrayal. It just isn't because what happens is we just, we try to move forward from it, but if we don't do the work to face it, feel it, heal it, it just stays.

And I'll give you a few examples. We see it in relationships where if we don't do the work to heal, then we have repeat betrayals. The face has changed, but it's the same thing. Or we put that big wall up, it's like, "Nope, not letting anybody get close to us." Sure, we keep out the bad guys, but we keep out the good guys, too.

We see it in health where people go to the most well-meaning health experts, doctors, therapists, coaches to manage a stress-related symptom, illness, condition, disease, at the root of it is an unhealed betrayal.

We see it in business where people, they want to ask for that raise or promotion, but they're so afraid because their confidence was shattered in the betrayal so they don't have the confidence to ask. They're bitter and resentful instead, and that's the energy they bring to work with them every day. So it shows up in so many ways.

**Jodi:** Yeah, and you've done a ton of research about this, which is so impressive. And I'm curious because you're so smart, and you also have lived through it personally, and you're doing research, can you talk to the five stages you discovered of betrayal in your study?

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**Debi:** Right, yeah. And that was so exciting. There were three discoveries that we made. And one of them was that while we can stay stuck for years, decades, a lifetime, many of us do, if we're going to heal, we will move through five stages. And what's even more exciting about that is now we know what happens physically, mentally, and emotionally at every stage. And we know what it takes to move from one stage to the next.

So here are the five stages: The first is like a set up stage. And if you can imagine four legs of a table, the four legs being physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. What I saw with every single participant, me included, was a real heavy lean on the physical and the mental, and neglecting the emotional and the spiritual. So what does that mean? It means we're really good at thinking and doing and not really prioritizing the feeling and being.

**Jodi:** Right, because we don't know how.

**Debi:** That's it. And we're so busy getting things done and checking things off our list. But also, what happens is our intuition is there in the feeling and being part. And we turn that down. And it really could've served us. That's not to say that if we're busy, it's a set up for betrayal. Just saying what I saw. But if you imagine a table where we're only strengthening two legs, real easy for that table to topple over. And that's what happens.

Second stage. This is by far the scariest stage. This is shock. And this is the breakdown of the body, the mind, the world views the body. So we've ignited this stress response. So we are headed for every single stress-related symptom, illness, condition, disease, they are coming our way. Our mind is in a complete state of chaos and overwhelm. We cannot wrap our minds around what we just learned. It makes no sense and our world view is destroyed. Our world view is our mental model, "This is safe. These are the rules. I can trust this person," and in an instant, it's been shattered, and a new world view hasn't been formed yet.

**Jodi:** I love that. And I really want to land on that because the parasympathetic state is really all about safety. And the Corona Virus is making everyone feel unsafe. If someone that you've been with for 20 years, you find out has not been telling you the truth, that is mind-blowing and so betraying.

And then, when we're not feeling safe and our body isn't in the space, in the parasympathetic state, where it can actually allow you to heal and digest, if you stay stuck in that survival unsafe space, your immune system turns off, all of these things that you need for recovery and repair are not moving.

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**Debi:** Absolutely. And you said it, this sense of safety is completely shattered. I just finished writing my book. And I used this analogy where imagine a nest, imagine a bird building a nest where there are twigs, and sticks, and all these things to just create this wonderful sense of safety, this place, where the inhabitants of this nest will get what they need, and survive, and thrive.

**Jodi:** Yes, that's a sanctuary.

**Debi:** A sanctuary. And then imagine, the very being who created that nest, in a flash, shatters it. And those little chicks have one of two options, they could figure out how to survive or perish. That's it. And what I see so often with...Well, and that leads to stage 3, which is survival. And it's the most practical stage, "If you can't help me, get out of my way. How will I survive this experience? Where will I live? What will I do? How do I feed my kids?" It's so practical.

But here is the stage that we get stuck in because once we've figured out how to survive, so often we think, "Well, that's as good as it's going to get," and we plant roots there. And then we start receiving these small self-benefits. And then we start getting benefits from our story and we stay so stuck. And it's just we get to be right, we get someone to blame, we get, all of these things. And then we really start planting roots there.

But if we're willing to give up that story, if we're willing to grieve and mourn the loss, really, of our expectations, what we wanted, and didn't receive, all of that, we can move to the fourth stage. And this is finding and adjusting to a new normal. We know our old normal doesn't exist anymore, it's no longer an option. And we're making our new scenario work. And this is like a--

**Jodi:** Yes. And you shared a story once about the house being destroyed that I loved. Can you share that, it's such a great analogy?

**Debi:** Sure. And the easiest way, and it really hits at home so here we go. So if you imagine, here's a house. And here's the difference between resilience and transformation. Resilience is bringing back, restoring. We need that for our every day. Transformation's different. So let's say your house needs a new boiler. You get that boiler. That would be resilience. Let's say it needs a new paint job. You paint. That would be resilience. Or it needs a new roof. You get that roof, that's resilience.

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**Debi:** Here's transformation. A tornado comes by and levels your house. It's gone. Destroyed. Now, a new roof isn't going to fix it. A new boiler, a new paint job, none of those things will fix it. But here's the thing, we have every right to stand there at the lot where our house once sat and say, "Oh, my, gosh, this is tragic. This is horrible, awful, terrible." And you'd be right. And you can call all your friends over and say, "Look at this, isn't this the worst thing you've ever seen?" They'd all agree.

You don't have to do anything; however, should you choose to rebuild your house, why build the same one? There's nothing there. You can build anything. That's the gift in trauma. And we look for that gift in trauma. And there it is because, because of that destruction, complete and utter destruction of what was, it allows for the rebirth of something entirely new.

**Jodi:** Right. And what I love about you is I call it victim, being stuck in victim. And what you really teach people to do is not only to not feel tethered to that old story, but you were saying, "You could build a bigger house. You could build a mansion. You could have a huge kitchen that you always wanted. But trauma, in a very weird way, if you know how to navigate it correctly, can be a huge opportunity for transformation.

**Debi:** Absolutely. And that's what I see with when we move to that stage four and stage five. Like, with stage four, we're adjusting to that new normal, we're building that new house. And here's what's interesting, too. What I saw with so many of the participants, when you think about the analogy of rebuilding that house, if you had an old house, and even if you were moving to a new house, you wouldn't necessarily bring everything with you.

The things that don't represent the version of you, you want to become, you wouldn't bring. And I saw this with while we're rebuilding, and recreating this new version at last, we don't necessarily carry everything over. And some of the things we leave behind are friendships, friendships that no longer serve us. If your friends weren't there for you when you needed them during that time, we don't want to bring them along. If your friends, maybe indulged in gossip or low-level thinking or whatever it was, you may have outgrown that.

And it's really a beautiful time to just readjust, and we're making different choices, we're making different decisions. And then once we're in this new mental space, we're making this new norm our own, we can move in to the fifth most beautiful state. And this is healing, rebirth, and a new world view. The body starts to heal. We've turned down the stress response. And now we're actually rebuilding, repairing.

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**Debi:** We also didn't have the bandwidth for self-love, self-care. We weren't thinking about that. We were busy surviving. Now, we want to eat better, we want to nurture ourselves a little bit. Our mind changes. We have a new set of rules and beliefs that are forming based on what we've experienced. And we have a new world view based on what we've been through. And the four legs of the table, remember we were only prioritizing the physical and the mental, now we're solidly grounded because we're focused on the emotional and the spiritual, too.

**Jodi:** You know what I really love about all of this? I wondered, because, obviously, I went through my own trauma. And I really didn't have good role model for people that had transformed through victim, which is part of how I found you, but I started realizing, even with our health, you talked about you get to be right, you get to have your story, you get to have sympathy, I've noticed with the patients that I've worked with, that when they're stuck in victim, and they really want to tell you everything that's wrong, as opposed to noticing how they're healing or having the vision of what it might feel like to wake up with energy, to walk into the pantry, and remember why you went there, to have that vision of what the other side looks like, it's very hard for them to go there. It's almost like they need a roadmap. And I love that this is what you're providing people.

**Debi:** Well, that's one of the greatest aspects of it is that that measure of comfort knowing, "Okay, I've been to stage two. What do I need to get to that stage three? What do I have to do to get to stage four? It's so interesting because we've had over 6,000 people, at this point take the Post-Syndrome Betrayal assessment. And that was one of the other discoveries that there is this collection of physical, mental, and emotional symptoms so common to betrayal. And I actually have, if you want me to just go through a few of them?

**Jodi:** Yeah, would you? Because I think people, when they think of betrayal, they think of their husband cheating on them. Like, I think betrayal is any time your life goes off script. It could be that you wanted to have a natural childbirth. And you had a C-section. I have friends, my oldest is 15, who still think that feels like a betrayal that their birth didn't go the way they wanted it to. So, yes, that would be very helpful.

**Debi:** Betrayal of expectations, absolutely.

**Jodi:** Exactly, exactly.

**Debi:** Sure, yeah. So, and this is out of the 6,000 people who've taken the Post-Betrayal Syndrome quiz, 78% constantly revisit their experience. So think about what that does right there.

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**Jodi:** Oh, absolutely. And just to loop this in to the parasympathetic state, any kind of mental stress triggers your body to go into that survival state where you can't feel safe.

**Debi:** Mmm hmm. Eighty-one percent feel a loss of personal power. Eighty percent are hypervigilant. Ninety-four percent deal with painful triggers. Sixtyfour percent say that they struggle emotionally. Here are the physical symptoms: 71% have low energy, 68% sleep issues, 63% extreme fatigue, 47% weight changes, and 45% digestive issues.

**Jodi:** Which makes sense because the parasympathetic state, when you're not feeling safe, all of the blood routes away from your organs of digestion. And that's actually an earlier indicator. This is really interesting.

**Debi:** And think about even just energetically, think about what the digestive does—absorbs, digests, and processes. Isn't betrayal something challenging to digest, absorb, and process?

**Jodi:** It's incredibly challenging. And so where do you start with people when you work with people?

**Debi:** I start by assessing where they are because when someone is that stage two, that shock, they just need to know they're not alone, they're not crazy, and there's a way out, there's a way to heal from it. When someone is in that stage three of they're just rooted in their story and they're in survival, they need to know there's something better if they're willing to let go off their story. So it really depends on what stage they're in if they're ready to make sense and meaning out of their experience.

And that's when we'll do something that's called the coherent narrative, where I'll ask them a series of questions. And those questions will have them find the benefit of their story. Then they'll say, "Benefit?!" Then I know, we need to do some healing work here if we're not ready to find the benefit. But when you are, it's transformative.

**Jodi:** You're shifting them out of victim.

**Debi:** Absolutely.

**Jodi:** Oh, that's amazing. What kinds of questions do you ask?

**Debi:** Ah, what did you learn?

**Jodi:** Okay

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**Debi:** What did you gain? What do you now see so clearly? What's become so obvious to you? What needed to be healed? What was the gift? What will you not allow? What have you...? And it's really just to invite those series of questions where they look at it and say, "Oh, my, gosh, that person who hurt me the most actually was my greatest teacher."

**Jodi:** Yes. Yes, because to your metaphor of building the bigger house, it enabled you to stop putting up with things that you really didn't want to tolerate. The fact that they blew up your life, there were aspects of your life that maybe were ready to go.

**Debi:** And that's when the betrayal stops repeating because the lesson's learned--

**Jodi:** I love that! So once people--

**Debi:** because otherwise we just keep repeating it.

**Jodi:** That's so incredibly powerful. And I'm curious, how is post-betrayal transformation different from post-traumatic growth?

**Debi:** Originally when I was doing this study, I always like the upside of something because trauma just sticks.

**Jodi:** Well, we're optimists, this is why we get along.

**Debi:** Right. So I was studying betrayal and post-traumatic growth. And what I found was post-traumatic growth is the upside, how that experience gave you new insights, perspectives that you didn't have before that crisis. But then, I asked all my study participants who've been through it, I said, "If you've been through a trauma, besides betrayal, does it feel different for you because I know I've been through death of a loved one. I was in ICU for 11 days with peritonitis. So I know disease, as well, but it felt so different, does it feel different for you?"

And hands down unanimously, every single participant said, "Oh, my, gosh, it's entirely different." And it's because betrayal feels so personal. So we feel so intentional so we take it so personally. So what has to be rebuilt is a sense of trust, belonging. We have this sense of abandonment, rejection, our confidence, that all has to be rebuilt. So if I had to give--

**Jodi:** Is there shame in there, too?

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**Debi:** There's a lot of shame, too, because here we didn't even do anything, but we feel so much shame as if somehow, we were less than. Let's say it's a partnership betrayal. So if I were to give an equation, it would be posttraumatic growth plus the rebuilding of the self, equals post-betrayal transformation.

**Jodi:** That's amazing. And then in addition to retelling the victim's story from a place of empowerment, what are some of the strategies that you employ to help people navigate that journey?

**Debi:** It really is a combination of physical, mental, emotional, psychological, spiritual. One of the things is that we have to learn how to trust again. I actually teach a four-step trust rebuilding process because these are, think about it, we're never betrayed by people we don't know, these are people we're closest to.

So it's as if the person you thought you knew so well just took a mask off and said, "Oh, no, no, this is who I've really been." That is such a shock to the body and mind. So we have to learn to trust again, feel safe again before we can open our heart again. So it's a combination of how do we rebuild the body, rework the mind, find the benefit, and the git in all of this so that we can use this experience as a launchpad to create our next best self?

**Jodi:** That's amazing! And you mentioned the changing in the cast of characters that sometimes certain friends don't fit any more. What are some of the other bumps in the road that aren't expected that people don't know are going to happen that are a part of the journey?

**Debi:** Yeah, I'll tell you, there were three groups in the study who did not heal. And I'll share who they were. But what I also found was there's a real lean towards spirituality. And this could be the spiritual side of your religion, it could be you abandoned religion completely, and moved towards spirituality. And at first, I thought, "Well, you know what? We just want to feel more connected." And that's a part of it. But that wasn't the whole thing. And I noticed I did this, as well.

When you're betrayed and trust is shattered, you don't trust your betrayer, you don't trust yourself, because, "Look, I'm a bright person, how did I not know? How did I not see?" So eventually, "Well, at least, I could trust in something bigger than me." So it's a place to start rebuilding that trust. So that was—

**Jodi:** I love that. And it also helps you shift the perspective from your own victim being right view to a bigger like understand of how this might help you grow.



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**Debi:** Well, also, because from a complete human standpoint, it makes no sense at all. Our human selves can say, "Oh, I get it." No, it's only the spiritual side where we say, "Oh, okay, you know, maybe we needed a complete and utter destruction to create something new. What doesn't kill us, makes us stronger," all of those things.

And that's the spiritual side that we need to get us through something like this. And it was amazing how the people that healed, they all did that. And that's what I saw so consistently.

**Jodi:** That's really interesting. I always loved those books that looked at a story from a different perspective. Like we get how it takes the Wicked Witches perspective or Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, that definitely was something that happened to me with Max.

Once I was able to step out of my own drama and pain, and look at it from a bigger perspective, it was much easier to put my own feelings. Like, I was able to see things differently. And then I was able to realign. And, also, once I was able to be optimistic and to hope again, and you really helped with that, that whole image of rebuilding your house, that made a huge difference in my ability to get out of stuck because there was something to look forward to.

**Debi:** Well, because otherwise nothing makes sense. Then we look at it and we say, "Why is...I'm a good person. Why should something bad happen? I didn't do...You know, what did I do?" And we take it personally. And when we look at from that more spiritual perspective, we can come up with the conclusion of, "I just don't know." And it's okay. I may never have those [crosstalk 21:51].

**Jodi:** Yes, and I think it brings in safety, too. This idea that we're part of a bigger picture.

**Debi:** Absolutely. And I'll share with you the groups that didn't heal because anybody who's watching this, it's so helpful to know because you may be stuck. And this could be why. So these were the three groups: One was where they were numbing, avoiding, distracting. So they were using things like food, drugs, alcohol, work, TV, keeping busy, reckless behavior--

**Jodi:** Exercise.

**Debi:** exercise, yeah, in order to numb, avoid, distract. Now, it may have made it a bit easier to get through the day, but they did not heal. And I remember thinking, "Oh, well, you know...And as a researcher, you're not supposed to assume, but I was new at this. And I just assumed that the people who were the hardest hit would grow the least because they had the most to overcome. That had nothing to do with it at all. It was the ones who would face it, feel it, heal it, grew so much more than the ones who were numbing, avoiding, distracting. So that was one group. The second group was they refused to accept their betrayal and mourn their loss.

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**Jodi:** Oh, denial.

**Debi:** That's the group in that analogy of the house. That would be the person who's standing there crying and screaming about their house forever.

**Jodi:** Right, right.

**Debi:** And the thing is, sure you have every right to, but they still didn't heal. The third group, this was interesting, this was the group where the betrayer had no consequences. So this was the group that tried to turn the other cheek. They tried to, whether it was because they didn't want to break up a family, a financial concern, fear, religion, that was a big reason why they stayed, not only did they not heal, this was the most physically sick group, by far.

**Jodi:** Oh, that's so interesting because they were carrying it for other people. Look, I actually think anger, shame, blame, anger works best when we move through it, when we get it out. If we carry it for other people, that shame or guilt, and if we're blaming other people, we're projecting their stuff. And so if there are not consequences, then they're carrying it for that other person. That's really interesting.

Did you have strategies to help shift those three groups so that they could show up more?

**Debi:** You know willingness is the biggest word that came from all of it because if they were unwilling, nothing changed. Nothing.

**Jodi:** Right. You can lead the horse to water, but you can't make them drink.

**Debi:** That's it. And they could see it so clearly, but their fear was bigger. Their fear was bigger. Fear of just, "Well, I don't know if I can make it on my own. So let me just see if I can overlook it." Or just not wanting to end, let's say end, the marriage. And they thought, "Okay, well, we'll just fix it from this place." And all I saw was a continual deterioration of the relationship, plus a deterioration of them, where there's something about that complete, "no," the death of the old me, and the death of the old relationship, but that allows for the rebirth.

Like, in my two betrayals, and my first was my family, and then the second was my husband, rebuilding's always a choice, whether you rebuild yourself and move on, that's what I did with my family, or if the situation lends itself, if you're willing, and you want to, you rebuild something entirely different with the person who hurt you. And that's what I—

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**Jodi:** Yes, which you have done, which is incredibly admirable. Yeah, you're the role model for this. I have one final question. And that's how can betrayal from years ago impact us now? So this idea of the unsolved betrayal.

**Debi:** It's so interesting because we don't even realize it. Sometimes I'll just say the word, and people are like, "Oh, that's what it is." And it goes back so many years. And then what happens is we keep finding relationships, not that they're good, they're just so familiar.

**Jodi:** Yes, and so we repeat the pattern.

**Debi:** That feeling is so familiar. And it becomes a pattern. And it's interesting, someone interviewed me a couple of weeks ago, and he said, "Well, Debi, I really haven't had a betrayal." And so we were talking and he said, "Oh, my, gosh, because, you know, I was four years old, my brother used to always break my stuff. And I got this great toy." And he said, "Can I play with it." And I said, "No, you're going to break it." And he goes, "No, I promise." He took it. Two minutes later, he broke the toy. He goes, "You know, I'm 36, I don't let anybody touch my things." And that's it. It doesn't heal unless we address it.

**Jodi:** Exactly, exactly. And there's a lot of research within illness. Like, if we don't process emotions, they just get stuck. And until we're able to actually release them, and address them, that stuck can be back pain, that stuck can be your liver holding on to toxins so you can't release things. This is a really powerful tool. So if you have advice for those people that are listening who might feel a little stuck, what's a great low-hanging fruit exercise or strategy they could try today?

**Debi:** Well, first of all, I would say to anybody who's struggling with a betrayal, I get it. It is so painful. And I would say, even though it was done to you, it's not about you. Feel that and know that--

**Jodi:** I love that validation.

**Debi:** because that's the truth. And we don't think that. We take it so personally. So that's the first thing that I would say. And then give yourself some space and time. It takes time to navigate through this. And sometimes the best thing you can do, and the hardest thing you can do, is get out of bed. But we're only moving one of two ways, further or closer to what we want. So if you do no more than just be aware of what can I do, the slightest, tiniest thing I can do to move me in the direction towards what I want, maybe that's all you can do for now. And that's a great start.

**Jodi:** I love that. That's a really great start. That's brilliant. Thank you so much. And can you tell people where they can find you?

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**Debi:** Sure! Take the quiz. That's really it. It's PBTInstitute.com/quiz. See where you are. And I'll be honest, some of those questions are a little jarring because it's meant to create an awareness so that you could do something about it. But we can't change what we're not aware of. So I'd say take the quiz.

**Jodi:** No, that's amazing. And even my coping mechanism is overachieving and doing. If I'm so busy that I can pass out at night without having to think or feel, it really helps. And I do default to that occasionally. But it's also almost like really slow and steady steps. Like you were saying, just taking that first step because it inches you. You can crawl a marathon and still cross the finish line. It's not a race.

**Debi:** Yeah, oh, I love that.

**Jodi:** Thank you so much. This was great!

**Debi:** Thank you, my friend!