

Episode 41: How to Unclench, with Dominique Antiglio

Mandy: Do you ever notice that you're completely clenched up as in your neck has gone missing, your jaw is ice grip. I was joking about this with a friend that I've spent most of my adult life clenched from eyebrows to kneecaps and we laughed. But when I reflected on it later, I realized I wasn't even joking.

Maybe you are clenched up too, in the shoulders, in the jaw, in the neck. I started getting curious about this when my dentist asked if I was stressed, because I'd clearly been grinding my molars for years, every time I've had a massage, it's the same thing. Your shoulders and neck are basically a slab of concrete.

So I asked an Osteopath friend for her thoughts. I asked a Yoga teacher and a Therapist. I dipped into my dog-eared copy of Bessel van der Kolk's book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, what is it about this area of the neck and jaw, particularly for people with any tendencies towards perfectionism and people pleasing, because a lot of friends and colleagues and clients have reported the same thing.

Is this area like a proverbial lint trap for all the things we don't say, for fear of confrontation or being disliked or things getting awkward. I wanted to know, so I invited Dominique Antiglio an acclaimed Sophrologist, bestselling author of *The Life Changing Power of Sophrology* and founder of leading online Sophrology platform, Be-Sophro.

She's also a regular speaker for Amazon, ASIC, the World Economic forum, the UK Government. I mean, okay, we're in good hands. She gives Master Classes to the Soho house, to Lululemon and many others, and I'm super jazzed to share her with you. If you're new here, welcome! I'm Dr. Mandy Lehto, Executive Coach and recovering perfectionist and overachiever.

If your life looks shiny and successful from the outside, but inside you're constantly questioning your good-enoughness, this podcast is for you. I drop us right into today's conversation where I ask Dominique, why the heck we are so clenched up. Ready? Let's roll.

Dominique: Basically, clenching muscle is a natural reaction to stress. So it's the fight or flight response, that you probably know about. It's basically when you have some sort of danger in nature, the body will start to find a way to make you stay alive. So either flying or fighting, and in order to do that, you need muscle power. You need to breathe more deeply. You need to have your heart racing up and, that prepares you to save your life. So when you are no longer in the jungle and you are in your office at work and you are, maybe having an animated conversation with a friend or something like that, you have the same response, like a stress response.

When you focus a lot on the screen, when you worry about your future, when you pull this, this emotional time that we can live in modern life, so we clenched our muscles and especially the, the region of the shoulders and the region of the neck and the jaw. These are very typical area where the body adds tension.

And, basically because we, often not aware of these tension and we don't let them flow by moving or by being aware that there is a level of stress, they stay, in your muscle and it almost becomes an habit for the body. So unless you start to understand why you do that and to break that habit in a way, the message, the body gives to this muscle is like stay clenched because there is a danger.

So it's important to understand for each individual, what is that danger about? You know, and there's many causes why, we can clench or have pain in this area of the body. So...

Mandy: And I'm curious in terms of this clenching and how the body almost has a, it almost bookmarks that position, like this is the status quo of how we are, because I notice a couple of things about myself. I noticed that often, if I'm reading something, I notice that my neck sort of disappears, if I'm in deep work at the computer, for example. And sometimes I notice that I'm not even breathing or I'm breathing really, really shallowly. So is there some correlation as well with very shallow breaths or holding one's breath in those circumstances.

Dominique: Yes, totally. You know what? My work as a Sophrologist and Osteopath, there's this thing about posture, for example. So the way you hold your head, the time we spend in certain posture, like watching our phone, watching on a screen. There's a direct link between eye movement and neck muscle, upper neck muscle, for example.

So when you are looking at a screen for a long time and you are static, you will add on muscle tension. It's automatic. It will just happen in your upper neck. The lack of movement in modern life, this is a big one, anything we do posturally for a long time, will affect the tension in the muscle.

For example, if you think about, moms, young moms lifting babies, for example, they often have pain in the wrist and they have pain in the shoulder, or when you breastfeed or all these positions, you adopt in daily life that are a bit static or repetitive. So... and of course the breast is not only the breast is a reflection of your inner state, so if you are stressed, you impact on your breast, but your posture and the way you hold the tension in your body also affects your capacity to breathe through the biggest lung, yeah. So if your cranial base and all the muscle in your open neck are very tight and you have eye movement and you are concentrating all of this gives neurologic input to your breathing system.

And you might simply just stop breathing because of stress and because of posture and because I mean, decreased breathing, hopefully not stop breathing, but you know what I mean?

Mandy: Yeah, that's absolutely fascinating. I had no idea about the connection between eye movement and musculature in the neck.

And I can't remember where I was reading it also, but the connection, just as a point of interest, this connection between people who may have had trauma in childhood or may have had to disappear themselves all of a sudden when it got stressful at home. And it can be that there's like a, almost like a disappearing, including with the breath when there's a moment of stress or confrontation.

So I definitely notice that I don't go into fights. Like I often don't get bigger. I notice that my breathing gets very, very shallow. And I, you know, I'll disappear into myself as well because of some of those experiences that obviously my body is still holding. So there's so much interesting stuff happening with us from the neck down as well.

Dominique: Totally! And this... it's a state of contraction, like when you are relaxed, when you are flowing, when you feel light, your body is in that opening. And when they are stressed, whatever they are, they might be all traumas, emotional trauma, also physical trauma, you know, people who've had a whiplash.

Who have had bad falls from horse riding, for example, they can also carry tension in their body, and therefore these weakened areas mechanically become, are becoming the place where they hold tension, yeah? And emotionally, of course, you know, they also, we have to remember the neck and throat area. It's also on a more energetic event, it's self-expression is, saying, who you are and is it's participating in the conversation, it's being free to talk.

And, uh, if you think about this area energetic in terms of, um, shakra or the meaning of this region, it's all linked with that. Like your ability to communicate, your ability to say who you are in the world. And in osteopathy or in sophrology, we don't distinguish like throat or neck.

It's kind of all working altogether, basically. So, you know, everything is connected. If you have a low back problem or some fear, you are going to contract your shoulder as well as your pelvis, as well as your posture being different. So it affects everything, basically.

Mandy: It's so interesting because the previous guest, is a woman called Natalie Costa. So she was on the previous episode and she was talking to us about how we can help our children and our girls in particular learn how to express anger, rage, and what we might deem challenging emotions that, you know, maybe growing up, I was certainly not encouraged to feel anger. It wasn't ladylike it was...be calm. How many times have we all heard that word 'calm down', which of course never has the effect of calming us down. But when I started practicing some of the techniques that Natalie suggested, so one of the things she said is what that we can help our daughters start to feel their emotions, is to give an emotion that lives in your body, a persona or a character. So she was working with a child who gave their anger, the persona of tornado. And that way we can learn how to separate from the feeling and we can express it with more ease. And I started to get really excited about this. So I named my own anger lava, and whenever lava starts stirring, I imagine lava lives in a moat, around the castle that is protecting some of my really tender emotions, like shame, grief, fear, hopelessness, disappointment, anger, all of those live in this castle that then the rage bubbles around like lava. And I noticed that lava has a special radio system that as soon as the lava starts coming up and I can feel it coming up.

And all of a sudden, it's got this special walkie talkie radio to talk to its coworker in my jaw that raised the drawbridge. And all of a sudden I find that like, there's some correlation between anger and the jaw going. It's almost like, don't say anything and nothing blows up. So that it's so interesting to start to understand how these kind of patterns and beliefs and learnings that are connected to emotions can cause something, as you were just talking about that this is the area of self-expression and releasing our opinions and all these things. And I mean, that was a really real 'aha' moment for me of learning the correlation between lava and her coworker, the jaw, the jaw clincher.

Dominique: Beautiful. And I think it's what you say really illustrate that once you start to give yourself that space to feel and be aware and acknowledge, by definition emotion, don't stay with you forever.

They last very... they don't last very long.

Mandy: Neuroanatomist Jill Bolte Taylor says, that the lifespan of an emotion is, wait for it about 90 seconds, mind blown. I read that in Lisa Oliver's beautiful book, "Already Enough", a path to self-acceptance. Oliver says that as meaning making machines, we create stories about our emotions and those are the things that velcro onto us.

The emotions themselves are fleeting. That made me think about how often I felt anger or rage or disappointment or dissatisfaction, but held myself back from expressing it because I created a story that it would be inconvenient or unbecoming, I know, right? Or that the fallout of standing up for myself would be too risky because there might be confrontation for heaven's sakes. So for years I told myself I wasn't good at expressing emotions or that it would be messy and people would think less of me or that it would look like I didn't have myself under control. So it was best to keep all that stuff locked up and tidied away. It was having this conversation with Dominique that made me reflect on how much of that unexpressed emotion is stored somewhere in my body, I suspect around my neck and jaw. I used to have regular sore throats. I lost my voice a couple of times a year. Hmm. Interesting, just thinking out loud here. So how about you? You start paying attention to when and where you clench up or when you hold your breath. Self-awareness is the first step to changing anything.

Yoga and meditation teacher, Julie Peters has written an article, which I'll link in the show notes and she says, I'm paraphrasing it here, but "When we feel an uncomfortable emotion, we'll often hold our breath and to do that, we often clench the jaw. And when there's any kind of jaw discomfort, she adds that there's almost always something that's not being said or some emotion that's not being expressed or some need that's not being meant. She offers some helpful questions that you might reflect on, if you're a journaler, I've cherry picked four of my favorite ones, but do go and check out the article link in my show notes. If you want more of this. So question one, what do I need to say that I'm not saying? Question two, do I feel held, understood and cared for in my emotional self. Question three, what do I do with my difficult emotions? And question four, what was I taught to do when I felt angry as a child or young adult? So let's get back to Dominique. I drop us back into the conversation where she's explaining that emotion does flow, if we just let it.

Dominique: Then by definition, these emotion flow. They express themselves and they pass and they don't stay stuck in your body.

So it's almost having a daily awareness or minute to minute awareness of what is happening for me now, like I've just hanged the phone with this person and I feel attention somewhere, or I feel a bit agitated. What is it? What is happening with me? And also, there's also technique to release all this old emotion.

In osteopathy, for example, they have a lot of emotional release technique. And I used to be an osteopath, so I used to work with the Joe with the awareness of anger. And I can't tell you the number of people on the table have released deep anger, like sometimes screaming or even I've been doing that on the Osteopathic couch, where suddenly you reach that place in the body where there's this emotion coming from nowhere and you know exactly what it is all about. And it's just being able to let it appear, embrace it and be okay about it. And once it's released, gosh, your whole mechanics and your whole body and your whole cell just starts to breathe differently to hold yourself differently to, and life has just got another light.

It's just, when you are able to release that.

Mandy: What I would love is I know we're audio-only. I would love some techniques that people who are new to this. And some of what you say today will be revolutionary for many many listeners. I would love some techniques that they could experiment with to start to un-clench.

To start to even notice that from the jaw down to wherever they are clenched up. As I said, like from jaw to the bottom of my butt, I have been pretty much rock solid for most of my adult life. So starting to do some of these practices, like some that I've learned from you, has been a game-changer. So take us, take us wherever you wanna go first. Like what's one suggestion that you would give to listeners.

Dominique: Thank you, Mandy. I think the principle is about breathing and movement. So if you have those two components, you already, uh, in a good place to start releasing anger, being more aware of it. So the first step in or anger or clenching..I mean, generally like holding tension and that can be anywhere in the body, can be in the face or in the shoulders or in the buttocks, you said before.

So, basically, one easy exercise that you can practice is, simply increasing the tension. So if you feel you have tense shoulder, you could simply inhale. And then tense your shoulder even more, like lift them up towards your ear a little bit, or clench your fist and clench your arms, muscle. And then when you are ready, you exhale through the mouth, perhaps, and immediately you release your shoulder down or you, you un-clench your jaw for example and you try to relax. For example, you could do that sitting. So simply inhaling, tensing every muscle of your body, increasing that tension and being aware again.

I feel angry. I feel, frustrated. I feel stuck and you can even say this to yourself. I feel this way. And then when I exhale, I can decide to release it, because actually that's the power you have. You can't change your past. You can't change the message that I've been given to you in your childhood, but suddenly through your body, you can teach your body to just be, in a different programming. You can deprogram through body awareness, a lot of these patterns. So that would be one inhaling-exhaling and clenching-releasing. There's a one that I really like in Sophrology where you simply stand and you could shake your body in the way that even if it feels weird, like you find a space in your home and you just give yourself permission to shake your arms, to shake, or even you could dance, you could put a music on and move your body in a bit of a chaotic way, I would say. So that's, instead of being in this constriction, you give yourself permission to express that held energy somehow.

We call it the rag doll. So we jump on one spot and we let the whole body being completely floppy and letting yourself breathe through this exercise. Because when we do that, we tend to wanting to do it well, so we hold the breath again. So it's nice to give yourself permission to breathe through it.

And then there's a third one that is really nice is the head rotation. So you could do this sitting at your desk, for example. So you exhale, to empty your lungs completely. Then you inhale through your nose. You feel

your lungs with air. You keep the air inside your lungs and you do a flexion, a slow flexion, a light extension of your head.

So looking down and then looking up to the ceiling a few times. And when you are ready, you exhale. And then you pause and you listen to what it is that you feel. And sometimes all you can feel initially is tension. And that's the tricky bit. So you just have to stay with that and understand that deprogramming tension takes repetition and it's okay to feel tension because that's your body saying, "Hey, listen, I have something going on. Can you look after me?" So, you can do that. You can do the same with the rotation as well, or with a little shoulder pump as well, or whatever feels right. And those long slow exhale, generally, you can do this when you drive, you can do this at your desk. They will lower the stress in your sympathetic nervous system, then will calm muscle tension. So if you do like, I don't know, 15 long slow exhale, you should start to feel the muscle tension in your entire body decreasing a bit.

Mandy: There is three brilliant tools for you. So clench all your muscles, shoulders, fist, butt, squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, and then exhale. As you release, imagining all the tension, leaving your body. I love doing that one on airplanes or even in bed, if I get restless legs. So there's multiple uses for that one.

Then there's Dominique's rag doll, shake it out. Great one to do while you're waiting for the kettle to boil. And then there's that deep inhale and holding the breath and doing that slow flexion, which means you're nodding very, very slowly whilst holding your breath and then you exhale. And that's where you check in. This is your like sacred moment to check in, mind and body. What is going on in your body, that connection, that collection of information in that point of connection is really useful. So you might write yourself a post-it note and stick it up somewhere that will remind you to do this stuff, they work, but you have to remember to do it.

Remember Susie Redding from episode 28, which is by the way, my most downloaded episode, so go back and check it out if you haven't already. Susie is a self care pioneer and author of eight brilliant books and a new fantastic set of self-care cards. And I like to think of her as a Sparky, super kind, mind and body Yoda. Her work like Dominique's has been really helpful in my own journey.

So, Susie, I wanna welcome you back to play with us for a bit. I'm curious about your take on why we hold so much tension in our jaw.

Susie: I think this is how we literally muscle our way through our day. And it shows up in our jaw because we're chomping down on those things that, maybe it would be harmful to say out loud, it's the words we haven't said. It's the facial expressions that we haven't shown. So it's not just text stress. It's not just a physical manifestation. This is mental and emotional stress as well.

Mandy: So we've got some tools from Dominique and I'm curious what you might recommend for us.

Susie: For the shoulders, we need a freedom of movement. So I'd be doing the chicken wing shoulder rolls to free the shoulder, to release the chest, because the thing is when we get round there, like you said, it diminishes our ability to breathe. So, the chicken wing shoulder roll frees the shoulder joint, but it's also a breathing practice, that's very powerful for that reason.

So we need fingertips on shoulders to form our little chicken wing, and then it's the inhale elbows up and exhale elbows back and down. It's always up, back and down because that's the rotation that draws us into that tall, upright posture that connects us with personal power. So that's the first one, that's for the shoulders.

Mandy: That feels really good.

Susie: Ah, it's really freeing isn't it? And then, let's build on that. So, you know, that sense of we've lost our neck, sometimes we need to use a little bit of exertion to trigger the physical relaxation. So I'd suggest the shrug and sigh. So with that, let's squeeze shoulders up to ears, and then as we exhale with a side, let your day drop from your shoulders. You don't have to hold it together, every minute of the day.

Shoulders up, exhale with a side. Let it go. It's right to release. It's alright to have a little breather.

Mandy: It's really cleansing just to do even a couple of those.

Susie: Yeah, that's it. One will do it. Right? And then for the jaw itself, I think just bringing your awareness to the face, with a little pitter patter of the fingertips across the cheekbones, just really gently as you do that, maybe open and close the mouth a couple of times. Consciously softening your jaw, softening the tongue, softening your eyes.

We are releasing all of those things we haven't said. All of those facial expressions we haven't shown. And then let's stroke, fingertips fairly down from cheekbones down. To the bottom of the jaw, really firm stroke and allow your mouth to open as you do. So you'll feel there's a very thick band of muscle that's called the TMJ that gets super tight.

Mandy: Yeah.

Susie: So stroking downwards across that muscle.

Mandy: Oh, my God feels incredibly good doing that. I'm so pleased.

Susie: We need to finish with a little tenderness. So can we rub hands together to create warmth? And then let's cup the chin in our hands, letting the fingertips curl round to the temples.

Let your chin drop along towards your chest. Close your eyes, and just remind yourself that you are deserving of kindness. You are deserving of tenderness. And that we can extend those things to ourselves. We can be our own calm, safe place.

Mandy: Thank you, Susie. Let's go back to Dominique for the final brick of wisdom.

Dominique: Life is an invitation to basically learn to go through our day in a lighter way. To take things less seriously and to invite your body and your mind to flow through your day in a little bit less urgent way. And I think learning these exercise, learning these simple tools will help you do that because at the end of the day, I believe we're on this planet to also enjoy our time and to make the most of connection and relationships and whatever we do, we can learn to do it with a bit more lightness and a bit more joy.

Mandy: What I'm hoping you'll take away from this episode is awareness. First that you might in fact, be clenching, be it your jaw, face, neck, or wherever, and get curious about it. Go to my website and find those questions from Julie Peters to journal on from this episode, if you are a journaler can be really helpful and try some of Dominique's and Susie's techniques to start releasing those areas on the regular.

After the recording, Dominique and I were also just talking as a debrief and she also mentioned that singing is a great way to start releasing that throat chakra area. So start belting out your favorite tunes, it's good for you. If you know any fellow crunchers, please share this episode and your apple podcast reviews make me sing out loud.

I promise I'm in a Shania Twain phase. And did you see her documentary on Netflix by the way? So good. Put a digress. So thank you for listening. Let's do this all again in two weeks.