

**Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 8: Surviving Disintegration**

**Chris Wells & Emma Nicholson
February 12, 2022**

Emma: Welcome to Positive Disintegration podcast. This is episode eight, Surviving Disintegration. Hello, listeners, Welcome back to Positive Disintegration, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm your host, Emma Nicholson, and with me today is co-host Chris Wells. And today, Chris, it's just the two of us.

Chris: Right. It's just us talking about surviving disintegration.

Emma: Cozy little chat.

Chris: That's right.

Emma: Not so cozy, though. I think before we get started, we'd better give people a bit of a content warning. So, listeners be warned that this podcast is going to contain discussion of suicide, depression, and drug use and some other horrible things that some listeners may find upsetting. If you need to tune out, now is the time to tune out.

Chris: Well, you're right that disintegration is kind of a sticky topic. It's difficult. And the things that we're going to talk about in this particular episode might be triggering for somebody who is having a difficult time or who's been through something similar.

Emma: What is it exactly that we're talking about, Chris? Like what is it that we mean when we say disintegration?

Chris: Well, to preface our personal remarks about disintegration, I'd like to read a paragraph that to me describes it well. It this from a monograph that Michael Piechowski wrote, it came out in 1975. "Positive disintegration means restructuring of the organization of affective and cognitive functions. It is called disintegration because the lower level of functioning must break down before it is replaced by a new organization of a higher level. The term positive is used in the same sense as when we speak of evolution from lower to higher forms of life. Rather than in terms of age or learning, development is measured in terms of structural and functional reorganizations. By this definition, if there's no restructuring, there is no development."

Emma: That's interesting because there is the disintegration part in that passage that you just read, so the falling away of stuff. But in order to be positive, there's obviously got to be that movement towards development.

Chris: Right. There's unilevel disintegration and there's multilevel disintegration too. And so each kind in that sense is different. It has different characteristics, and I don't really want to get into that exactly, because the point of this episode is more to talk about the experience of

disintegration that we have been through, or I can speak for myself that I've been through, and that's really what I want to talk about tonight. Because people ask me pretty regularly about my experiences of disintegration. It occurred to me that this is the perfect venue to share that information.

Emma: I think one of the reasons why that's important for us to share our perspectives on it, is one thing I see coming up on social media a lot is people saying, I've been through a disintegration. It's like, well, have you, have you been through that loosening of structures? Have you had the rug pulled out from under you insofar as your values and what you think and feel? Or are you just going through a tough time? So I guess that's one question is, how does someone know when they're actually going through a disintegration as opposed to just rough life circumstances?

Chris: Yeah, that's a good question and the answer to my mind is that the dynamisms are present in a disintegration. That's how Dąbrowski talked about the different processes of disintegration based on the various dynamisms. In my experience, my first disintegrations happened when I was young. The first one I would say was when I was in seventh grade, and then it happened again in high school more than once. And during those times when I was a tween or teenager, there was a lot of ambivalence and ambidendencies. But there were also multilevel dynamisms present too, although they were kind of lower level compared to how they would look later. I've been through disintegration many times in my life. I'd say that I probably went through a handful of disintegrations between the ages of 11 and 12 and 25, maybe more than that. Some of them, when I was younger, I would say they were partial. I don't think I had my first really major earth-shattering disintegration until I was 20 to 21.

Emma: You had a handful of disintegrations in your teen years. I'm guessing some people are more prone to having disintegrations than others. Because also two, I noticed there are some people that have them quite young. And I'm in the same boat as you. I started having my first lot when I was very young. In fact, I think my first would've been when I was seven, when my parents got divorced. Not that I knew what to make of it, but it goes back a very long way. So you find that there are some people that are prone to going through this experience?

Chris: Yeah, people who have strong overexcitabilities or strong developmental potential are going to be more likely to go through it. And so for me, I had strong overexcitability as a kid, and I had strong developmental potential. It was more than just the experience of overexcitabilities. I was identified as a highly gifted kid when I was 11, I guess maybe 10. And I also had evidence of multilevel dynamisms when I was young. And so all of those things together meant that I had a strong developmental potential. And then for me this is one of the things that led to multiple disintegrations for me, is that I had the experience of having an imaginal world, and the imaginal world came into existence when I was almost eight.

And the first night that I remember it, it was New Year's Eve when I was seven. And that night for the first time, it was as if I was seeing myself from outside of my body. And so I was watching myself and I started imagining myself dying by suicide. And so I watched myself do this in multiple ways, and then I was trying to get a sense of how people would feel if I killed myself. And so that night or that experience changed the whole way I experienced reality really.

Because after that point, I had an imaginal world. It was as if that experience of being able to see outside of myself that night led to this phenomenon of having an imaginal world. And it's really hard to explain what I mean by that, but basically, it was as if I was suddenly able to experience another life parallel to the one I lived in everyday reality.

I had a different family there, and I lived in a different house. It was as if I was living like two lives parallel. And that lasted for decades of my life, and it looked different over time. And so when I was a kid, it was very much as if life was like a movie I was living, or I was experiencing it, like seeing a movie, if that makes sense. And so my imagination was very strong, and it felt kind of imposed on me in a way. It didn't feel like something I was in control of. It just happened.

Emma: That's a massive paradigm shift for an 8 year old to go through.

Chris: It is. So, that is something that I wasn't really aware of consciously, like it was happening. And of course, it's hard to explain. I knew it was happening. I knew I had this other world that I was living in, but I couldn't access it consciously. Meaning that, if you asked me if I had an imaginary world when it was happening, when I was young, I never would've admitted to it. Or it's not something that I was consciously aware of. It's not something that I talked about openly ever until I was older. The first time I ever talked with anybody about it was when I was 19. I didn't write about it in my journal until I was 19. And it was that night when I talked about it, although I alluded to it a couple times when I was in high school in my journal, but no, it wasn't something that I thought about. I just let it play out and it existed.

Part of the problem was that lack of connecting with it consciously—the fact that it was happening, it was still impacting my everyday reality. And so the important point here is that in that imaginable space, when I was a kid, I was very obsessed with suicide and death and also drugs. And so I started using drugs in my mind long before I ever used them in reality. This is very important. This is an important part of my story. So take note, listeners. By the time I was 10 in real life, I was imagining myself getting high, in this imaginable world. And so by the time I was 13, I had already progressed in my mind to using cocaine, not just smoking pot.

I was a drug addict in my mind by the time I was in high school. Whereas in real life, I was only experimenting. I was smoking pot by the time I was 14, but I wasn't doing it every day or anything. But in my mind, I was absolutely using drugs every day—needed them. I was also thinking about death and suicide. And so that had a profound impact on me in real life, of course. When you are constantly imagining something in your mind, it impacts your reality. That's just how it is.

Emma: And often it tends to manifest because that's where you're sort of fixated on.

Chris: Exactly. When I had this first earth-shattering experience of disintegration, I was confronting for the first time the fact that I didn't know who I was, and this is something that I had kind of struggled with for a few years before. But once I was consciously aware of having this imaginal world, and thinking about who I was there and who I was in everyday reality, it was this shock of realizing that I didn't really know who I was, and I realized that I was living

this false self. That's how I described it in my journal. Another important thing though to mention is that, I ended up going to drug treatment when I was a senior in high school.

I didn't really need to go to drug treatment. Again, I was an addict in my mind—I wasn't an addict yet in reality. But because I was so knowledgeable and had felt like I experienced drugs so seriously, it was really easy for me to go to Narcotics Anonymous meetings and fit right in and talk about being an addict because I had spent years using drugs in my head. After I went to drug treatment, or actually while I was still in treatment, I started writing a book. And so when I was 18, I wrote my autobiography of being a teenage drug addict. And the problem is that when I wrote this book, it was kind of a mix of truth and fiction, and it was called *No Guarantees*.

So, *No Guarantees*—I don't know, in this bizarre twist of fate, this book got published. Not only did I write this book at 18, but it was published. I had this book, about my experience of being an addict. And when it came out, it caused a lot of problems in my life. It disrupted a lot of relationships with my friends. It caused some issues with my family. It was problematic. And I think the most difficult thing for me to face was the fact that it was a mix of truth and fiction. And I didn't mean to do that. I know that this is not something that's really relatable for people, but you have to understand that I didn't sit down and write this book and think, well, this happened for real. And this was just in my head.

I was telling these stories and they blended together, and it just happened. And so when I was 20 and the book came out, it was really tough for me to face that reality of, oh my gosh, this didn't really happen. And then I felt like a fraud because I'm like, oh my God, how could I let this happen? And that was hard to face. But there was more than that. Around that time, I had a couple traumatic experiences that, occurred during that year when I was 20. And one of them was that I got arrested and the police raided our house. I was living at home, actually. And it's a long story as to how that happened. You have to suspend your curiosity around that. But the fact is, it never should have happened.

There was no reason for the police to raid our house, but in the United States, lots of people's houses are raided when they shouldn't be, by the police. And many people have had the experience I've had of opening the door to having guns in my face from cops. And after that happened, I had flashbacks and nightmares for months, because it's traumatic to open your door and have people pointing guns in your face and screaming at you. And so all of that was a mixture for my disintegration to happen. I had intense inner conflict around the book coming out and not having it be 100% true and accurate. Technically, it was true. The things that happened in my head felt as real to me as the things that happened in my real life. But try to explain that to other people. It sounded nuts. So, along with being arrested, it really threw me into a tailspin.

Emma: And that would've had that dynamism of dissatisfaction in one's self sort of cropping up a lot. I guess because you had this book and some of the feedback that you would've got, particularly from the people that were close to you would've had you doubting yourself enormously, I would imagine.

Chris: Well, honestly, other people weren't even commenting so much to me about it from a negative perspective. It was certainly all from the feelings—and yes, no doubt dissatisfaction

was one of them—but really that year when I was 20, I think the thing that was plaguing me the most was disquietude with myself, because I really started to question my own sanity. I felt such a deep anxiety about whether or not I was losing my mind, because I thought, in my mind, it was totally crazy that I had even had this experience of having this other life. And I didn't have any language around it. I called it a dream world because that seemed like most accurate. I didn't know how else to describe it.

Now I have the language of imaginal world, thanks to Michael's book, *Mellow Out*, which I was able to see myself in his work there. Dąbrowski talks about people having a world of dreams. So when I came to Dąbrowski and Michael's work and saw these things, I was like, oh my, I just was like, holy shit. I had rarely seen myself in work like that. But anyway, I didn't know even how to talk about it when I was 20. It just was so outside of other people's experience who I knew. And so I really struggled with disquietude. And I also had astonishment with myself. It shocked me the things that I was going through and I was finally allowing myself to be aware of. I also experienced inferiority toward myself.

I knew that I could do so much more in my life. And instead of achieving like I had expected based on my experience of being gifted, I thought like a loser. I had dropped out of college and even though I had a book come out, what was my future? What prospects did I have? It felt like I was just a total failure. And so I also experienced guilt and shame around what was happening. But that being said, I also was struggling with some ambivalence because even though this book had come out about my recovery from addiction, I was using drugs again. And frankly, the worse my mental health was doing, the more I was interested in getting high. And so I went right to smoking pot again. But of course, like I mentioned, I got arrested and I wasn't convicted of a crime, but I did like this accelerated rehabilitation where, you don't get convicted and if you don't get in trouble, they will just drop the charges and your record is clean.

But I was smoking pot and then I was using cocaine and my urinalysis was coming back dirty. And so I was really screwing myself over because I couldn't stop getting high because I was really struggling mentally. I was depressed. I was so emotional suddenly. I had gone through like a period of not being able to feel for a while when I was 19 and when I first started. I shouldn't say, when I first started talking about the imaginal world, it was just this one time when I told my roommates. It's not like I was suddenly talking about it openly. It was just one night. But around that time I was like a mess. So it's hard to even like articulate how many things were going wrong and pulling it all together is tough.

Emma: I honestly don't think you need to put too many words around it. And because there'll be a lot of people out there that can relate. I'm sitting here listening and I'm ticking off dynamisms as well as stuff that happened to me, even though I didn't have the exact same experiences. I had different catalysts and stuff. So like I said before it kind of started when my parents got divorced when I was seven. And I remember that being the first realization for me that love wasn't a permanent thing, that it could expire. And that gave me sort of enormous anxiety. But also despite the fact my parents were telling me that this had nothing to do with me because my dad left and went and met another woman who had kids, I had this enormous sense of that there was something inadequate or wrong with me that I wasn't good enough, that he needed another

family to be with.

So I had huge feelings of dissatisfaction with myself at the age of seven. And kind of like fast forwarding like to where you got to in your sort of early twenties and that I also dropped out of university. And largely because the enormous cost of it, but because I'd been that gifted child, it was like, well, why can't you persist? Why can't you do something as simple as get through three years of uni? And like you, I kind of like hid, I went and hid under my weed blanket for many years because every time something was going wrong in my life, I'm like, well, fuck it, just get high. That's how we're going to deal with these things because we don't actually want to deal with them. We don't want to think about them. And I was in a relationship at the time that was probably not the best for me, and it was starting to sort of slide downhill.

But I got to the point where I was freaking out about it and because I had felt that much guilt and shame because I was blaming myself for everything that was going wrong. And that's where things started to get really bad for me. But like we are seeing these dynamisms that are popping up, that we've talked about across Dąbrowski's levels, like guilt and shame, dissatisfaction with oneself, that almost impostor syndrome feeling of you not being good enough. So yeah, it seems to be some repeating patterns there. Not in the circumstances, but the emotional reaction to it.

Chris: Yeah, it's interesting to me—one of the things that I've really explored my writing. Because I was writing throughout these times of going through disintegration, at least in high school and after, and like this time when I was 20, when I was going through all this stuff, it blows me away to see the things that I was writing because from a Dąbrowski perspective, it's been fascinating to revisit. I wrote about like, here's just a couple sentences, this is right before my 21st birthday.

I wrote, “I feel like I spent half my life with this personality that worked great in high school, but now it's showing its weaknesses. Things are different, suddenly, and they changed when I wasn't prepared.” Then I was also writing about—yeah, I was really aware of the fact that I had constructed this false self that I was living with. I was aware of the fact that it was allowing me to function. And so I would say, “For a while that personality worked and I was relatively happy with it. Unfortunately, I can no longer live with that false self, but I no longer remember who my real self is.”

So, it was this real struggle because I didn't even know who I was anymore. And it's like that experience of not knowing who I was, was just kind of tearing me apart. And that's the thing, all of a sudden I was so emotional and at that time I was working at Barnes and Noble, which isn't a job that should lead you to be crying in the workplace, but I would be there shelving books, or I worked in the stockroom, and I was the magazine person.

I would be just doing my work tasks and just crying—tears just pouring down my face, and I would have to go in the break room and just get it out of my system and try to go back to work. And I was like, what the hell? I had never had that experience of not being able to keep from being tearful at work. It completely felt like I was falling apart. I was falling apart. That time where I was working at Barnes and Noble and falling apart led to me just completely running from my life. I violated this accelerated rehabilitation or whatever the hell it was like, and I took

off and I left Connecticut and went to Arizona. Because I had been at Arizona State and so I thought, well if I could just get back to Tempe and live with my roommates again and get back in that environment, I'll be okay.

So, I took off one day. I packed my shit and left with my friend and drove to Arizona. Three months later I made a suicide attempt, and it was a totally unilevel suicide attempt, too. That's the thing, is that as I was crashing, I got to the point where I tried to escape life. I thought, well, I can't cope with life anymore. So, during this time when I was falling apart prior to that suicide attempt, I finally sought mental health treatment. [We removed the description of two suicide attempts.] But yeah, although that being said, it was just terrible. What a disaster. I can't say enough about how long it took me to physically recover from [the first suicide attempt] and then to do it again like two weeks later.

Emma: That's horrible.

Chris: So yeah, I made the two suicide attempts and then I ended up in the hospital about, I don't know, a week later maybe. And that was my first time, and I was involuntarily hospitalized, which is terrible. I can tell you that after that for a long time I thought of myself as—before the hospital and after.

Emma: It kind of splits your life almost into, like, puts a big bookmark in there. And I was just lucky that I stopped that shit in my life because I had two attempts. And it was weird because I moved after that, and I moved quite a long way from home and I had the car packed up with all my shit and I had my dog in the car and I went at some ridiculous hour in the morning driving up the freeway and fell asleep behind the wheel and had quite a bad car accident. Which I miraculously, I ended up with car on its side. Miraculously I wasn't badly hurt. I should have died. When the police came, they said you stopped about 15 meters from a ravine. And you should have gone pluming over the edge.

Let's put it this way. They sent the fire crew to extract the body from the car. They didn't send an ambulance. But it was in that moment that I realized that, shit, you know what? I don't actually want to die. So it was a near death experience that actually convinced me that, nah, you know what, we actually don't want to bail. And even though life got markedly worse for me after that, in my circumstances I didn't give up. But it's still painful to go back. And even recently when I moved house, I found one of those awful goodbye world letters, like stuck in a book somewhere and I'm just like, it's horrible to go back and read things from that period of your life. And it does, it kind of splits things two.

Chris: Yeah. It is hard to go back and revisit that stuff. There's no doubt. And I was suicidal many times after that. It took me a long time to—it was probably another, well more than 10 years before I stopped thinking of that as a possibility for me.

Emma: I was going to say, do you think that a part of that is that, like you were saying that you just want to go back to your normal life and go back to your roommate or whatever, and part of I think how they treat you is to just say, look, just go, they're actually like pushing you backwards, like back to your original integration. Like just go back to your normal life and forget about it

and set some small goals and get on with your job. And it's not until later when you find out about positive disintegration, the framework and everything that you realize that you shouldn't be trying to go back. You should be like, there are ways to push on through and get, but you don't because you don't have that information. It's almost like hitting a brick wall.

Chris: Yeah, I see what you're saying. And for me, I thought that if I went to Arizona, I wouldn't have to kill myself, but it didn't turn out that way. But I know what you mean. Later, when I was in the hospital and they were trying to help me find a path forward, it's true that I idealized the past and thought about maybe going back to who I had been or I didn't have a clear vision of what the future might look like. But really, my story is that it did take a long time. After that time in the hospital, I did manage to work for a while, but I ended up on disability for mental illness by the time I was 23. And so there were many other disintegrations ahead of me.

It's just that was the first one that completely broke me down to the point where I wasn't able to function, where I made the [suicide] attempts. But then, really my functioning just ground to a halt by the time I was on disability. I basically lived in my bedroom, and I took my medication, I slept, I was writing, I kept trying to go back to school, but there were other times of just completely falling apart. Two years after that first disintegration, there was another one and it was worse in some ways. Because I saw myself as so much sicker two years later and then the next year I was still struggling. And interestingly, the multilevel dynamisms were less clear for a while. The one I described when I was working at Barnes and Noble, that was 1994.

Well, in 1997, when I was going through disintegration again there were fewer multilevel dynamisms involved. It was way more ambivalence and ambivalence. I was really struggling with, am I just going to be a drug addict? I should just kill myself. But again, in the imaginable world, I was killing myself. There was one point in my journal where I described the realization that I was dying by suicide in the imaginal world. And so in real life, I was also struggling with suicide. But it occurred to me that I wasn't going to stop being suicidal in my real life until I managed to figure it out in my mind. So, that was the conflict I was dealing with, where I at least was aware at that point. You can see the progress in that. Things became more conscious for me. I was able to articulate these things in my journal. And so that was obvious growth for me.

But on the other hand, by that point I was more institutionalized. I was used to going in and out of the hospital. I saw myself as a mental patient. By the time I was 24 and 25, I was very much seeing myself as disabled and mentally ill and kind of hopeless. And unfortunately, other people were starting to see me that way too which was problematic.

Emma: Not supportive at all.

Chris: Well, I was lucky because I did have supportive people, but I just am thinking, I have my medical records, which I didn't see until I was in my forties. But I know that when I was 25, I went to the Menninger clinic and they wondered whether or not I was treatable. It was at that point where I was seen as like an intractable mental patient at that point.

Emma: And that's got a really mess with your sense of identity.

Chris: Well, I'm glad I didn't know. I'm glad I didn't realize how bad they thought I was at the time. Oh my God. And what kills me, honestly, is that when you read my journals from that particular time in the hospital, I was trying so hard finally to get my shit together. I really was serious about wanting to be well, and yet, to be fair, I was still totally self-sabotaging and screwing up. But you can see in my words that I really was making progress. It was definitely hard for me to see years later that they wrote things like, that I was untreatable. I met with a vocational counselor and talked about wanting to be a doctor and they were like—her expectations are ridiculously unreasonable and not going to happen.

Emma: You're sitting there thinking, I'm getting better. And they're like, yeah, no.

Chris: They're like, no. They recommended that I should consider long term residential treatment. And yeah, that's what they thought would help me—spending a year in the hospital, but I disagreed. I left.

Emma: Just tell us about the surviving part of your disintegration, because I'm interested in how you made, after obviously going through a lot of different disintegrations. Like what was the point where it became positive for you?

Chris: Well, I think that even in those hard times, there were still positive things. The positive parts—even in those hard years—were the connections that I was making and the fact that I was learning in the relationships I was in—even with a doctor I had, or friends that I made, it was evident there. But the reality is that I had to go through a lot more hard times before things really got better before I made what would, in 1999, I had a sudden dynamic insight. A moment of insight in which it was totally clear to me that what I needed to do and how to change. And I knew in that moment that I would never use hard drugs again. That I would never be that person anymore. I knew in that moment that everything was going to change, and it did.

But to get to that point, I had to really, really, fall apart even more. I was smoking crack at that point. I was either going to change my life or I was going to end up in prison or be dead. It was very clear to me. And I was what, like 26. By the time I was 26, I had been through many disintegrations. I had been hospitalized 12 times. I'd been on like—who even knows how many medications? I was a veteran of disability by that point. It really started to feel hopeless except it didn't feel hopeless because I also knew that I had this enormous potential.

Even when I was in the hospital, I was always recognized as being very gifted and that giftedness was something that I knew existed, even at the worst times. I was the kind of person who was smoking crack, but reading books about research and interviewing people that I was smoking crack with about what it was like to be a crack head or to sell crack. And so I was kind of ridiculous in that way.

Emma: Always researching.

Chris: Always researching. Yes. My mother used to call me an experience collector when I was young, and I don't think it was meant to be a compliment. It was more like, I was going to accidentally die because of like the ridiculous things that I was doing.

Emma: Collecting the wrong experiences.

Chris: Exactly. But yeah, the dynamisms were there. And it's interesting because each time I went through a disintegration later, like on the other side of that moment of insight that I had, or that experience when I was 26, when I realized I was going to be able to put that stuff behind me. At that point, the dynamisms started to get stronger. My dissatisfaction was deeper with myself. I was more disgusted with myself. My guilt was more significant, stronger guilt in that not only did I feel bad, but I was moved to rectify my errors, or I was moved to make things right. The dynamisms were stronger and the organizing restructuring dynamisms were stronger too.

And really that's what saves you, is that I was able to be more effective in my autopsychotherapy. And when your inner psychic transformation is really working well, you're learning from your experiences. You're not repeating them. The growth, it's more effective. It's more lasting. It's transformative.

Emma: I think too, that's an important point for people to note is that just because the storm of your life has passed doesn't mean that the disintegration is over because you have to go through that period of, shit what have I done with my life? Even when you are out of the bad circumstances and you're turning things around, as you say, you get that guilt and that shame, like I certainly did of looking back on my life going, I have tanked my life. I've wasted so many years. What am I doing with myself? And even though in some ways it pushed me on to do better in my present situation, I was still struggling with looking back at my past and absolutely cringing every time I thought about stuff. And that didn't help the addictive parts of my personality at all.

It just made me drink more and smoke more cigarettes and smoke more drugs. And some of it got worse before it got better because I had to face where I'd been. And so I think that's important for other people to understand is it doesn't just immediately go, you don't just snap your fingers and that's it, you're better. There's still more processing to go through.

Chris: Yeah. It's a whole journey. That's right. When I finally moved away from smoking crack, I actually literally moved. I went from living in Las Vegas to living in the Los Angeles area. I remember the feeling of it was as if I had to figure out how to be in the world again. I had been living close to downtown in Las Vegas, in terrible circumstances, Really bad. So, now I was back in the world and trying to feel comfortable in the world and just like being in the grocery store or cashing my check or whatever, it all felt so strange, and it took a long time to feel like I was human again, I guess.

It was a journey. And I met my husband. It's interesting because I met my husband so soon after being in that world and living that life that I felt obligated to tell him right away. I was like, are you sure you even want to be with me? I'm a real mess, or, I have been very recently. And that was almost 22 years ago now that we've been together. So, it's interesting to me that we connected at that time in my life where I was just coming out of a really tough several years stretch of disintegration. I don't know what I would've done without him. He was such a stable loving person and presence in my life from our first times together. That was a big part of what

saved me, I think, because it just, I don't know, it's hard to explain, but being with him has always been so comfortable for me.

Emma: It kind of gives you a life, a bit of security. And ironically, I met my husband too at a time when I was a complete hot mess, but I was coming out of my stuff. But I think having someone supportive in your life helps stabilize the things around you and after eventually you can return your attention to fixing yourself on the inside once life stops being so chaotic it allows you that focus and that space. And I guess he must have seen your potential.

Chris: I guess so. And of course, I had to learn a lot and grow in our early relationship. I made a million mistakes with him, and I was a real asshole at times for the first 10 years that we were together. There's times in my journals, even after my son was born where I describe, the need to stop being such an with Jason and to do something about my explosive anger. And now when I tell Jason about this stuff, he's like, I don't remember you being like that. I'm like, well, it's in my journal. I wrote about being explosive and angry.

Emma: He's doing a good parsing and glossing those bits over his memory.

Chris: Yeah, right. We've clearly both rewritten the past in some ways, in different ways. But yeah, it's interesting to me. You have to have the right kind of relationship in order to really grow in it because in order for me to get through those times and change and be a better spouse, like it also meant that he was able to kind of absorb that from me and be a loving partner and be the person that I was able to grow with, which is really incredible and special. And it's the kind of thing you can only hope for in a partner.

Emma: And subsequent disintegrations that you have when you're in that sort of loving, supportive environment are vastly different to the ones that you have when you're out in the world flailing in your life circumstances.

Chris: Definitely. Yeah. Well, because we were able to mirror each other in some ways. I think it helped me to be able to recognize my failings—my flaws—so much faster thanks to him in so many ways. And I would say that also happens when you have a kid, because oh my God, being a parent has led me to see another whole set of failings that I have, and areas that I need to work on. It's another whole kind of disintegration.

Emma: So, Chris, I want to ask you, did you have like a, well, not final because obviously it's an ongoing process, but what I'd like to call a final disintegration, like the one where you just went through it? Because I know you found Dąbrowski's theory a few years ago. Was there that kind of eye-opening last sort of disintegration where you finally got onto the framework and like aha, I know what this is now I know what to do with it?

Chris: I wouldn't say that, no, because honestly, I went through a disintegration just a couple years ago, or, well, let's see. I went through a period of disintegration as I was getting to know Michael and the theory. And so it's hard to say—at this point, I would say that I feel like there are more disintegrations in my future. I certainly wouldn't say that they're over. If my life has shown me anything, it's that there's always another disintegration around the bend. But yeah, I

went through this one with Michael that was intense. It was—yeah, intense is a good way to put it.

Emma: Did it feel different in so far as the survivability of this and the usefulness of it was more clear than it had been previously?

Chris: Well, it was so different. It was different because the disintegration I went through, it was like 2017 to maybe 2019. It was kind of a beautiful disintegration in some ways. I mean, it was an expansion of my heart, that's how I see it. It was more of a spiritual emergence in some ways compared to the disintegrations when I was younger that felt like I was completely losing my mind and falling apart. This time it felt like it was like both painful, and kind of ecstatic in some ways, and beautiful. Exactly. But it was hard, and the dynamisms were still there. This time though, instead of like screwing up with my psychiatrist and being an idiot, I was like screwing up with Michael Piechowski and being an idiot in different ways.

So, yeah, it's interesting. It was like this time the disintegration was that I was going from feeling like I was mentally ill to realizing that I wasn't. It was a total flip of what it had been like in the past. A big part of my story is the fact that I spent many years really dooming myself or condemning myself to being mentally ill and broken. And on the other side of it now has been this mind-blowing experience of realizing how wrong that was. And that really, I've gone through all of these deep periods of growth, and the person I am now is a product of all of that. And I've done so much rebuilding and work to be a better person that now I realize that my job is to help other people find their way out of suffering.

Emma: That's beautifully put. And that's such a beautiful thing to be striving for, to be able to not only have that realization in yourself but then want to be able to pass that gift onto other people and from speaking with yourself. And then the other episode when we had Kate Arms on, it seems that when people get through this process, like the first thing that you want to do is say, look, I've found something beautiful and rich and rewarding and I want to share that. Because you've been to the place of suffering but you've now seen the light at the other end of it and realize how wonderful it is. And you're driven to share it.

Chris: It's true. But I know that you feel the same thing, and that's why you created Adults with Overexcitabilities.

Emma: Yeah, I accidentally—I tried to do creative writing to keep myself occupied while we had all those bush fires in 2019. But I was a big chicken, so I wrote fanfiction because I'm like, I'm not creating a whole world from scratch. And then I kind of almost did a self insert character where I based one of the characters on myself. But in doing that, I accidentally found my authentic voice because I kept going well, how would I actually react to that situation and not, what does my external social mask tell me is my reaction. What's my deep-seated feeling about this? And so I spent like a couple of weeks questioning myself and trying to find my authentic self. And I did it by accident and then ended up going, oh, what the hell happened to me? Because I went through this like dark night of the soul process where I dealt with a whole lot of trauma from the past, and that's when I end up accidentally googling and finding Dąbrowski's framework and finding myself and making sense to myself.

And I've been through disintegration since then, and I've had the same experience of you were like, it's been painful, but it's also been really beautiful. And you're right, that's exactly why I started that YouTube channel, blog, and that I have to reach out. There's gotta be other people out there like me that have been struggling the same. And if I can give them any bit of information that can help turn that awful, awful experience into something beautiful I'm going to do it, man. What else is there in life?

Chris: Yeah, exactly. It's true. I have to say, one thing that I really hope from sharing about having an imaginal world is that more people will reach out to me and tell me about their experience of having this. Because one of the blessings of talking about it in the past couple or few years has been that I have at least met, well, two people who do. And I'm sure that there's more. And so if I could just one more thing about the more recent disintegration experience that I went through, like since knowing Michael and discovering the theory is that I don't have the experience of having an imaginal world anymore. Interestingly, around the time when I was meeting Michael and I was trying to explain it to him, it started, like I started somehow dismantling that process and changing it or transforming it. And so now finally, and it's hard to pinpoint exactly when it happened, but I've somehow integrated my two realities. And so now I am only living in this one everyday reality.

Emma: I was going to say, do you think it's like your other crutches, like your addictions and stuff? Because I know personally after getting onto the Nebraska bandwagon, I'm finding a way forward. I'm like, I don't need these other crutches. Not only that, I need myself unfettered and unblanketed. I need to know who I really am and not who I am high. I need to discover the actual self. And so do you think that's part of your process of going, you know what, ditch all the crutches because we've gotta figure out how we really walk in this world?

Chris: You know, I'm not sure. I never really saw it as a crutch or an escape exactly. It's more like it was just a process to me. It's just how my mind worked. And so I never could have predicted that it would go away. That's what's strange to me. Like even though it's gone now and I don't have the same experience of living a concurrent reality because that's what was happening. It was as if I was living two lives at the same time. I think that now that part of what you're saying is true, that in order for me to do the work that I need to do, I have to be fully present in reality.

Interestingly, I think that the thing that caused this shift for me is that getting to know Michael really opened me up to more mindfulness techniques, and I just naturally started working toward living in the present and being more one-pointed in my work, and not being so distracted. And also, I stopped taking psychiatric medication. Until I was working with Michael and getting to know him. I was still taking medication and I stopped taking all meds in 2017. So, all of this was happening at the same time.

It was a really major shift in my life, and it's been amazing to see that I can live in this one reality, and I can't even imagine kind of constantly shifting in and out of that dream state anymore. It feels good to be present, and I can see the improvement in my relationships, with my family, especially with my son. And so I feel some regret and guilt even about the realization

that so many of his early years, he was having a mother who was living in more than one reality. And I wish that I had always been as present for him as I try to be now.

Emma: Like, to flip that looking backwards and having a regret moment. Do you think if you told your younger self that was in crisis, hey, one day, here's where you're going to be sitting on this podcast free of that secondary world, talking to a bunch of people about how you survived all this stuff. Do you think your younger self would've believed it?

Chris: I do think my younger self would've believed it. It's funny because I grew up being told that I was going to do great things someday. So, I don't know if I'm ever going to do anything that gets called great, but I think that I would have believed that I could have done something better than I was doing then. That's for sure. I knew that I had the potential to be a professional. I always wanted to be a doctor and so I didn't know that I was going to get my PhD. I expected to be a medical doctor, but I do think I could have believed it. However, if you told me I'd be studying and talking about this theory that was an alternative to the medical model, I would've found that harder to believe.

I was absolutely convinced that I had a chemical imbalance and that I was mentally ill. I absolutely saw myself as being flawed and broken and it took me a long time to get out of that state of mind where I was seeing myself as the problem. And not that I had a hard time adapting to everyday reality. I still have a hard time. I'm never going to be somebody who can work a nine-to-five job. I was just talking to a friend about that yesterday. The more gifted you are, the stronger your overexcitabilities—if that's your lot in life to have these things—the harder it is to just fit into some ready-made job that someone else has defined.

Emma: Some of us had to do it, they pay our bills.

Chris: It's true, but there's no job that is ever going to be right for me. Every time I've ever worked in my life, I've known that it was keeping me from my real work. Even when I was a kid, I would be doing my job and being like, well, I'm supposed to be writing and I'm supposed to be making a difference in the world. It's like when you have that strong sense of mission and when you have a personality ideal and you know that you're supposed to be doing something bigger than what you're doing, or I knew that I had this mission and that my job was to help people, to help them out of their suffering. Even when I was in high school, I was aware of this, however, I had no idea what it would look like. That's the problem is that it took me decades to figure it out. I'm still figuring it out.

Emma: Well, I think you're doing a very good job of it. Even with this podcast, you're helping people. So I think you're on the path to fulfilling your life purpose.

Chris: I think so too. I finally feel like I'm doing the work, and I'm not like waiting to do the work anymore. It's a good feeling.

Emma: I think that message, Chris, if you're finding your purpose and your life work and particularly getting past your medicated phase and surviving all this, I hope our listeners are going to be really inspired by this. Maybe they'll resonate with it if they've been through their

own journeys and come out the other side, but particularly I hope that if there is anyone out there who's feeling currently, like their life is a hot mess, that they might take some inspiration from it. That there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

Chris: I hope so. That's right. Hang in there. There is a light at the end of the tunnel. And remember that you have so much more agency in your life than you give yourself credit for. We really do create our own reality. I believe that. And I want to encourage people to reach out to us, especially if you hear our stories and you want to share, we welcome that. Please feel free to write. Absolutely. Well put.

Emma: This has been amazing, Chris. Thanks so much for joining me here today and thanks so much for sharing your story and particularly at such a personal level. I find it's very courageous.

Chris: Well, I feel the same about you. Thank you for sharing yourself. It's not easy for us to come on and do this, but I really believe that this is a way to make a difference.

Emma: It's eating the hot dog. It's knowing that it's full of hooves and unpleasant bits and pieces, but understanding that there's a greater need. So it's that hunger to help people that's driving us forward and giving us that courage to eat the hot dog.

Chris: That's right.

Emma: And on that terrible analogy, folks, thank you as well for listening to us and joining us here on the podcast today. If you have any questions, feedback, or if you want to reach out to us about today's episode, please do. You can email us at Positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com or reach out to us via Twitter or Instagram. And until next time, keep walking that path to your authentic self.