



Episode #82:

**Dr. Gail Saltz Talks About the Power of
Different**

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Dr. Saltz: You want to spend maybe 20 percent of your time working on a relative weakness, but you really want to spend about 80 percent of your time working on a relative strength because that is where a child is going to get their identity to feel good about themselves and to be able to do something even as something else might be hard, but to be able to do something where they can invest themselves and fly.

Debbie: Welcome to the TiLT parenting podcast, a podcast featuring interviews and conversations aimed at inspiring, informing, and supporting parents raising differently wired kids. I'm your host, Debbie Reber, and today I'm talking with Dr Gail Saltz, a psychiatrist, speaker, podcaster, media commentator, and an expert on a variety of psychological and mental health issues. She's also the author of the new book, the Power of Different: the Link Between Disorder and Genius, and that's what we're going to be talking about today in our conversation, Doctor Saltz and I talk about the connection between neuro diversity and strengths. How kids can be best primed to tap into their gifts and reach their full potential. What needs to happen to eliminate the stigma associated with being differently wired and much more. I hope you enjoy our conversation. And before I get to our conversation, I wanted to let you know I've just launched my new after the show video series. These are two to three minute videos where I highlight key takeaways from the conversations I have with my guests or give you tips about how to take what you've learned and make it work for your family. So after you've listened to this episode, go to [tiltparenting.com/after the show](http://tiltparenting.com/after-the-show) to watch the episode stemming from my conversation with Dr. Saltz and sign up to get new episodes of the podcast and after the show series delivered to your inbox each week and now I'll get on with the show.

Debbie: Hi Dr. Saltz, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Saltz: Thank you for having me.

Debbie: We have a lot to get through and you are a busy woman, so I want to dive right in and I'd love to start by just talking about your new book, the Power of Different. I'm curious to know, what was your inspiration for writing this particular book? You've worked in so many different areas of mental health and I'd love to know the story for this particular book.

Dr. Saltz: Sure. this book has been definitely percolating in my mind for many years fueled by a combination of things. One is that I have felt for a very long time that we have a very uni-dimensional way of looking at mental health issues informed greatly by stigma that, you know, there's sort of this very negative negative view of being different in any way from others. And while mental health issues can definitely cause suffering and I'm in the business of treating that and I think people should get treatment and I don't want to minimize the suffering. It is really clearly more complex than that as I've seen in many years of practice

where I treat many actually very high functioning people who are really successful but are suffering nonetheless. Obviously the reason they come to see me, and I was really struck by how many people found ways to use a very particular strength that was associated very much though with the issue that they were struggling with, so that became apparent to me during practice. Then I started hosting a series at the 92nd street Y called psycho biography where we explore what makes someone tick. That subject was, or is I should say, it's ongoing, a person who has been highly successful really at a genius level, in terms of changing our world in the arts or in the sciences or in history and found that pretty much anybody I chose that sort of uniformly is recognized at that level, had a mental health issue. So that was really struck by that. And I've always been fascinated with the subject of genius and extraordinary creativity and achievement. Probably somewhat informed by having grown up with a brother who actually won the Nobel prize at age 41, which is one of the youngest people. He's an astrophysicist and you know, I've always been very fascinated by the way he thinks and his creativity and his curiosity and sort of what goes into making someone like that.

Debbie: Wow. If you could see my face when you said 41 winning the Nobel Prize astrophysicist, that's incredible and wow. Yeah. My son will be really excited to hear that because he is all about astrophysics. That's awesome

Dr. Saltz: Yeah he has interest in this area of the expanding universe and dark energy that, that was the work.

Debbie: So cool. So cool.

So I'm curious about this term genius. What does, what does that mean when you say that?

Dr. Saltz: So, you know, I'm trying to be careful in the book to say that really. I think that there is genius with a capital G, which is, is really, I think reserved for people who have thought of something that really changed the trajectory of their field and have our world and it's so, you know, out of the box uniquely different in terms of their thought process that, you know, they're there at the end of that bell shape curve really. And they're probably a couple of standard deviations off of it. but I also wanted to include extraordinary achievement. And so I call that genius with a small g, you know, that there are many people who really have a very particular strength that they apply in a certain arena that has allowed them to come up with some, you know, very creative, innovative thoughts that lead to real achievement in an area. And, you know, they may not be off the charts in terms of, you know, the Leonardo Da Vinci's or the Albert Einsteins, but, you know, they are, they do have extraordinary ability.

Debbie: Right. OK, that makes sense. I'd love to talk more about that connection between difference in strength. We had a guest on the show a couple months ago who we talked about the connection between neuro-diversity and creativity. And one of the things that stayed with me from our conversation was that if you have a

child, for example, in a classroom who is really struggling to fit into the norms of a traditional education and there's something going on, then we should be thinking that must be a really creative person. Like there's something else going on here. I'm curious to know your thoughts on that and what you see or what you found in your research about that connection between someone who is differently wired and then having these maybe unusual strengths.

Dr. Saltz: So I think you can't say it's always, and it's across the board, but what I did. So what I did find and I, you know, really looked at numerous studies and data to support it, is that this occurs on what is called a U shaped curve. So it seems that if you had to make a sweeping statement, which, you know, I, I try not to do very often and really try to look at individual wiring issues. But if you do look across the board, you would find that people who are severely impaired. So maybe they are suffering from symptoms as a result of the difference in wiring. But it is probably, I'm talking about often untreated and causing real impairment. And therefore the more severe end or the top of the U shaped curve those people are really not able to manifest whatever strengths they might have because of the impairment.

But also if you look at the other side of the top of that U have, which is people who don't have anything different going on, they don't have different wiring, they sort fall into, you know, they appear fairly symptom free perhaps, but also don't have this difference. They too seem to have lower rates of particular kinds of strengths. Creativity is often one of them, but there are others and if you look at the bottom of the U, which is people who have mild to moderate differences and mild to moderate symptoms with those differences, they seem to have higher rates, significantly higher rates of creativity of whatever the, you know, if we're, we could be looking at different areas, you know, so it depends on what's causing the problem in the classroom. Is it an attentional issue. So they have high distractibility which may be due to wiring, for example, in the default network of the brain, which regulates one's ability to decide when to attend and not to attend.

As a result of that wiring, they also have differences in wiring which lead to increased number of unusual out of the box thoughts. They're often contained in daydreams and such and they have an ability to piece together those thoughts to come up with what ended up being very productive ideas if they're not too impaired, and so you find that a lot of people who really excelled in the past and even at genius level, extraordinary levels in the arts in the sciences often fit into that middle of that U shaped curve where they have these very particular wirings that lead them to have those strengths.

Debbie: It's so interesting. You know, a lot of our audience here is comprised of kids who are kind of, I call them stuck. A lot of our kids have invisible differences and they're the kids who who seem like they should be fitting in fine, but for whatever reason they are struggling in a traditional classroom. We have a lot of parents with kids who have ADHD, a lot of twice exceptional kids that our parents are raising and so I guess I have a two-fold question. One is what do our

kids need in order to feel supported in having what they need to uncover perhaps that untapped greatness or if there is genius within, and then also what should parents be doing to make sure that their kids are reaching their potential. It's a big question. I know

Dr. Saltz: It is a big question. And rightfully so, you know, unfortunately our current educational system, a wonderful in some ways is really lacking in dimensionality that, you know, there are a certain set of standards. It's totally uniform. Everybody's supposed to jump through the same hoop, you know, on their way to the next place. And that's what they're rewarded for. And we don't in our current system have a much understanding of, and allowances for, the fact that many kids will be what I would call angular. Their relative strengths and relative weaknesses are pretty disparate.

So it's not that they're pretty good at a lot of things and, and not too terrible at many things, but instead they are have some profound weaknesses in certain areas. You know, if it's a learning issue, you know, that might be a very targeted issue like reading or speed of reading or auditory processing or it may be as you've brought up a problem with distractibility and impulsivity related to wiring issue in the default network or it may be an anxiety issue, which is very common in childhood. One out of every five kids will have an anxiety disorder at some point, but it makes, it means that they are prone to having certain areas in school be very difficult and other areas that they have potential extreme strength and may mean there will be good in one subject and not so good at others or it may mean that they have a particular issue that's interfering with many subjects because of the way that they're being taught very specifically. You know, maybe, um, teachers are using only, you know, auditory, they just lecture in front of a class. There's nothing visual and there are really a vision, they have visual strengths as a learner, but they can't tap into that. So just, you know, there's so many different possibilities, but suffice it to say that this uniformity along with any lack of insight into what your child's strengths might be.

So this is where I often say, if you as a parent become aware that your child is struggling, obviously I would say to you, you know, an evaluation to look at what the struggles about and whether there is a treatment, you know, that wouldn't be too difficult to get, which often is the case to be honest. That would help them. I'm all for that as is anybody in the mental health arena. But at the same time, I feel like that's, that's where we are right now. If there's something really severe than it might get picked up and it might be looked at and it might be treated and that's good, but it's missing the whole half that has to do with and what are those child's particular strengths. So it's important for a parent to be able to expose their child to numerous things and look for what does work for them and what does light their fire.

And often neuro-psych testing, if it's not very apparent is really helpful for that because it doesn't just identify weaknesses, it does also identify strengths and to be able to go back to your school, and this is what's hard because, you know,

some schools are more amenable to others to be perfectly honest, but you know, the more that you can make a relationship with the teacher and show them very specifically where your child's strengths lie and say, for example, you know, would it be possible for Steven to approach projects that you assign with this in mind. That, you know, this is hard for him, but this is really where he can show you what he knows and in a creative way and, you know, can we work together to see if there are methods of letting him do the work in such a way that you really show you what he knows. A lot of teachers are excited by that and would, if they had that liaison going on. But as a parent I certainly advise you to make every effort to make that happen.

Debbie: Yeah. I'm curious to know more about the the testing or does to talk about that a little more? I've had a couple experts on the podcast talk about evaluations in the diagnostic process and a lot of people are kind of anti-label or don't want to test. They don't want to go down that road for various reasons. I hear that from listeners. I have listeners all over the world and I know certain countries it's more of a liability than in others to have that label attached. And so what are your thoughts on kind of the cost-benefit of having that? I mean I think I know your answer, but I want to know a little bit more of the benefits of having those neuro-psych evaluations done and when they should happen and how a child can really benefit from that?

Dr. Saltz: So you know, a good neuro-psychological evaluation isn't really designed to say, to produce a label. It's actually designed to show where relative strengths and weaknesses are. You know, whether we're talking about. I mean, how are one spatial relations ability? how are ones verbal abilities? how are ones math abilities? how are ones? And it gets obviously much more subtle than that, you know, is the reading issue has to do with speed decoding, you know, it gets very specific. And that's not to say that therefore I'm, here's the diagnosis. Sometimes it's helpful to have a diagnosis because of course, unfortunately, and this is why, by the way, I break the book into symptoms, not diagnoses. Why? Because diagnoses are limited. They are the language we have to use to talk with schools, insurance companies, clinicians used to talk to each other, um, but they're really rudimentary and they are not. I think they will be changing.

Debbie: It's not, it's not really the language of the future in terms of how we understand brain wiring systems, on the other hand are. So you know, if your child is anxious or you know, why is your child anxious? Is it because it takes them a really long time to read something and they're aware that they're not where somebody else's in the reading and that makes them anxious. And then why is that? What is happening in the reading? So breaking it down into little bite size pieces at the same time, the testing will show you a strength that might not be being uncovered in the classroom, a potential for a place to excel. And that is very important because while you do want to spend, you know, I spoke with many people who are sort of on the forefront of this area and working with kids who are on the autism spectrum who are struggling with an attentional issue.

Dr. Saltz: You want to spend maybe 20 percent of your time working on a relative weakness, but you really want to spend about 80 percent of your time working on a relative strength because that is where a child is going to get their identity to feel good about themselves and to be able to do something even as something else might be hard, but to be able to do something where they can invest themselves and fly. So, we, you know, part of the problem with diagnosis is, as you're alluding to, is they're so attached to stigma. They're so attached to this negative way of thinking and parents understandably that we don't even want to go there because it feels like some sort of a death sentence to be, you know, presented with this diagnosis of what this means now your child can never be successful. And really my point in showing all this data is that's simply not true.

Dr. Saltz: But it is important to know where things stand. You know, it's not, genius is not about IQ. IQ points are one measure of something, but they are really just one factor. And in fact, if you look at historically at people who have extraordinarily high IQs, you know, 140, 150, some of them really have trouble being successful people because there's some other issues that seem to come along with extremely high IQ. You do need a certain amount of intelligence to manifest certain amount of success. But it's not as high as most people think of, you know, being extremely smart. And so it's not that I'm saying get testing and tell your child every single bit of information because you really, testing has is data driven, but it also has a clinical component where somebody is sitting down and looking at the whole package of your kid with this data and making sense of it and just throwing numbers out is not that useful. So you need a good tester who isn't just farming it out to an intern and saying, just give me the numbers and then we're going to say something about it. You need somebody who is sophisticated at testing and can put together what they're seeing with the child and what's happening in the classroom and what's happening at home with the data that that becomes available, but that data is really useful in terms of identifying very particular strengths and then guiding in terms of how to play to those strengths.

Debbie: I love what you said about the 20-80 ratio. I haven't heard it like that before. I mean, it's pretty clear that a lot of just the traditional education model does seem to be very much of a deficit space. You know, like, Oh, you're struggling with this. Let's put all our efforts into that. And I like flipping it on its head and that's just a good number to have in mind too just that, that 20 percent, I think that's a really nice benchmark and something that I'll certainly, I homeschool my differently wired child, but that's something I'll keep in mind too, in terms of the ratio. I just have a question about education. Just wanting to know your thoughts. It can be challenging to find the right fit for a lot of kids who are differently wired in a traditional setting. Many of us end up homeschooling. It sounds like you're a proponent of being a strong advocate for your child in a traditional school setting. Have you found any school settings or maybe educational philosophies that tend to work better for kids who are angular thinkers, angular learners?

Dr. Saltz: Well, you know, generally speaking, it's the more children in a classroom per teacher, you know, the more difficult that can be to do and the more administratively the school is, or isn't willing to think this way and just basically say, you know, there are schools who say like, we're just not equipped to deal with kids with differences. And obviously that's going to be a problem, but I think there are, there are schools and so this is, if you're looking at schools, obviously you know, you really want to ask them point blank, you know, are... not that you're saying to the school like my child was the only child so you know, make it all about them. But is there flexibility in the system? I guess I would say that's the biggest component. Is there flexibility so that you can communicate with the teacher and talk about how some things can be individualized to allow your child... not, you know, not, don't do that project, but you know, can you brainstorm and come back to the teacher with possibilities of ways to do that project.

Dr. Saltz: And you know, I don't know that I can tell you across the board this is the model because I can't say that I've seen one. There are children who because of what's going on with them don't do well in an extremely unstructured setting. And then there are children who, you know, because of what is particularly going on with them, don't do well in a particularly rigid setting. And again, testing can be helpful to give you some ideas as to which direction to go in. But it can be individual.

Debbie: Thank you for that. I want to make sure that we get to talk about your book a little bit more before we go. So could you tell us about your book, *The Power of Different*, we know what the inspiration for it, who had it been written for, and kind of what do you hope it does in the world?

Dr. Saltz: The world it's written for a lay public. I definitely wanted this to be accessible to anybody who's struggling with something or love someone who's struggling with something. I wanted parents to feel comfortable, you know, being able to digest and think about this for their child. And so it's, it's, it's really for everybody, but it, it does have, you know, the, the real science in it, you know, it, it's not a story. You know, I really back it up with a lot of data and I broke it down by, as I mentioned earlier, symptoms so that if the issue is a learning difference, if the issue is distractibility of certain sorts, if it's anxiety or melancholy or cycling mood or divergent thinking even, and then of course, you know, I looked at Autism as well in terms of difficulty relating to others.

So I tried to frame this so that people would sort of know where they're fitting because people aren't diagnoses, people, experienced symptoms. And then I interviewed many, many people who are extraordinary achievers. Definitely, you know, many of the genius level. I have Nobel Prize winners in here and others, who you may not have heard of. They're not the Einstein, you know, that obviously, but they, they, you may or may not have heard of them. Some of you may have David Sedaris, you know, some, you may not have the most decorated paleontologists in the nation, but they all struggled with a real mental health

issue. And I think it gives you a flavor of what it's like to struggle with that and at the same time to uncover and understand what actually your strength is and how they did that. I talked to many children who are really gifted children, clearly, you know, excelling in various educational environments but clearly also suffer with a real symptom.

And so I, I try not to, I'm careful not to really minimize what it means to suffer and what it means to be stigmatized, which is the other big point of the book, which is, you know, we are really still stigmatizing these issues. Besides the fact that it keeps many people from seeking treatment. Those that do often feel shamed. They feel shamed, their parents feel shamed. And honestly, this does nothing for anyone. It's a real deterrent from careful care. It's a real self esteem crusher. And so I also, my hope in writing this is that people would understand the reality that many of these people are the ones that we frankly look up to and are amazed by what they have accomplished in their lives and how invaluable that's been to our society. We just didn't know that they struggled in silence with this issue, which caused a lot of suffering.

Debbie: I love that message so much. I think that's why, you know, well, one reason why I was so thrilled to have you on the show, I really resonate with your book and this message and the conversation around stigma and shame. And that's a big inspiration for why I created TiLT was to try to change the way neurodiversity is experienced in the world by neurodivergent people and the parents raising the millions of kids around the world who are unique and extraordinary. I'm just curious to know, what do you think would be kind of some of the most powerful ways to change the conversation? You know, I'm trying to help parents own up to what's happening in their lives, to speak out, to not hide and secrecy about what's going on, but to be real and open about what's going on and embracing who our kids are. What do you see as some of the biggest game changers to really shift the way diversity is perceived?

Dr. Saltz: Well, I do think talking about it is probably the most important thing as you're pointing out. I think talking about it backed with real information so that it's not just people saying, you know, I want it to be OK, but, you know, understanding the ways in which it can be a real strength. I mean, I don't want to say that people who don't have a difference can't be creative because of course they can, but they actually may not have the edge, that many people who are struggling with something like this do have. It's part of the reason that evolutionarily these things have stuck around and that if we could talk more openly about it more people would, would get help for the things that are hampering them or causing suffering for them. And that would be frankly better for all of us because the rates are such that pretty much every single person knows or loves someone who is in a struggle.

And so these are not small numbers, you know, close to 50 percent of Americans at some point in their life will have a mental health diagnosis. And that means that pretty much a hundred percent of us are effected. Depression is the number one source of disability in this country and billions of dollars are lost in

productivity. And often it's because people wait so long to get treatment because they don't want to tell others and they don't even want to tell themselves that they're struggling. So I think that if more people could share, since we know the numbers are this high, that frankly would desensitize us to the idea that this is odd or unusual and, you know, terrible handicap. If we could talk about it in the biologic sense that it exists, which is, you know these are differences in brain wiring, changes in neurotransmitters.

Just like, no one would be ashamed to say I just got diagnosed with diabetes, you know, I just got diagnosed with heart disease. I have to attend to this, because I will feel better and I live longer and I live more productively. I do think a part of that is understanding what would you know, you might be able to play to enhance your situation, which is the strengths that come with this different wiring.

Debbie: Thank you. Well, I want to respect your time where we're coming up on a half hour, but I would love to just share with listeners where they can find you. You have a podcast, you have a lot of resources on your website. So what's the best way for people to connect?

Dr. Saltz: Sure, I have a website at www.drgailsaltz.com people can tweet me @DrGailSaltz. I do answer things and a facebook page, and the book, they can find pretty much wherever books are sold, certainly on Amazon and Barnes and noble, but you know, many bookstores are covering it or trying to get out there and talk to educators and frankly anyone, anyone who is aware that this issue is affecting them. So I have a year coming up with many, many talks and I hope people will engage in the conversation.

Debbie: That's exciting. Well, congratulations on the book and I hope your message just reaches so many people at such important work. And listeners, I'll leave links for all these resources on the show notes so you don't have to be madly scrambling these things down. And Dr. Saltz thank you so much for being a guest on the podcast today. I really appreciate it.

Dr. Saltz: Well, thank you so much for having me and for sharing the message.

Debbie: You've been listening to the TiLT parenting podcast for the show notes for this episode, including links to Dr Saltz website, her books, her Power of Different podcast and the rest of the resources mentioned in our conversation. Visit, tiltparenting.com/session eighty two, and don't forget to check out my after the show short video where I share my top takeaways from my conversation with Dr Saltz. You'll find a link in the show notes page or you can go straight to tiltparenting.com/after the show and a quick invitation to try for free the differently wired seven-day challenge. If you haven't gone through it yet when you sign up, I'll email you a short inspirational video every day for one week with the tip you can incorporate into your life right away to shift your experience in a positive way. You also be invited to join a private facebook group for people who've gone through or are doing the challenge. More than



800 people have gone through the challenge so far. It's free, it's ongoing, and it's designed to help you find some more peace and confidence in your parenting journey today. To Join, visit tiltparenting.com/sevenday. If you like what you heard on today's episode, consider subscribing or leaving a review on itunes. Both things help our podcast get noticed in the crowded podcast space. Thanks again for listening. For more information on TiLT parenting, visit www.tillparenting.com.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Dr. Gail Saltz's website](#)
- [The Power of Different: The Link Between Disorder and Genius](#) by Dr. Gail Saltz
- [The Power of Different podcast](#)
- [The Powerful Connection Between Creativity and Neurodiversity](#), with Kathryn Haydon (podcast)