

Interview on Childhood Sexual Abuse with Lesley, a provider

Hello, my name is Josie and I would like to welcome you back to Trauma Talks, Rising from the Ashes a podcast series brought to you by the UB School of Social Work the Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care. This series provides an opportunity for individuals to share their witness of how strength and resiliency has allowed individuals to rise from the ashes. Trauma talks follow people who have both worked in the field of trauma and those who have experienced trauma. Here we will reflect on how trauma informed care can assist those who have experienced traumatic events to embrace a new life of hope, strength, courage, safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. Today I am sitting here with Lesley, who is a licensed mental health counselor. On behalf of the institute, we would like to thank Lesley for being here today and for sharing her story with us. So, I am going to let Lesley begin with giving you, the audience, a sense of how she came to work in this field of mental health.

1:10 **Lesley:** Great, thanks Josie, and I am very happy to be here as well. Much of my life has been, it's not necessarily a straight and narrow path. I can't say that from a young age that I always wanted to be a therapist. I came into this, somewhat, in a round-about way. But I did always know that I wanted to do something to help people. And I wanted to do something that would be somewhat creative and also intellectually stimulating. I decided on mental health because I have a brother who has a very significant mental illness. He has paranoid schizophrenia, and growing up with that was very difficult and it absolutely makes an impact and takes a toll on the whole family. And so, I really felt strongly about wanting to see if I could make an impact with others to help change, since, you know, as you probably know, we're not great at treating our own family members so I didn't have a lot of success there with him. But, I thought maybe I can help others in that sense. My practice at the moment has a pretty holistic focus because I feel very strongly that the best way to do that, to really help support someone in taking those steps from themselves and encouraging their bodies and their brains to do what they were naturally meant to do, is to support all facets like physical, mental, emotional, all spiritual and relational. And so, I've built my practice like on that foundation to really try to help.

2:46 **Josie:** Uh, could you just give us, you know, a general idea of, you know, some of the, the folks that come here to your practice and it's very holistic sense. What kinds of things do you find that folks are bringing here with them?

3:00 **Lesley:** Absolutely! So, I will often have people call up and say specifically that they are looking for something that is more holistic, and I think the reason for that is because these days there, there can be such an over prescription of medications to deal with problems. And I am not knocking that, but I think they're not necessarily solutions. Right? They, they help in the short term but they're not going to teach someone skills, or teach them a different way to think about their situation. So, clients will come in primarily looking for help and support around anxiety, stress management, often depression – and both of those are pretty wide, so, you know, whether it's current like a job assessment stuff, or job stress, or whether there is a trauma history there that's creating some of the current anxiety, uh, relationship stress – any of those kinds of things, we tend to get at it from a holistic perspective. So, some of my clients are pretty well informed. They understand, for example, the link between diet and sleep and exercise and the impact that that has on one's physical health, as well as one's emotional health. So, we use a lot of

mindfulness here. Often clients will have a yoga practice or a meditation practice, something like that. And, you know, we can really work kind of towards the client's own investment and awareness level and just deepen and strengthen that from there.

4:29 **Josie:** Thank you so much.

4:30 **Lesley:** Sure!

4:31 **Josie:** So as you're talking, it's really obvious especially in terms of your holistic approach and the opportunities and the choices that are available to folks that come here that you're very in-tuned to values of trauma informed care. And, what trauma informed care does is it asks individuals, and service providers, to change the question from "what is wrong with somebody?" to "what has happened to this individual." And Fallot and Harris talk about Five Guiding Principles to Trauma Informed Care, as being: safety, trust, choice, collaboration, and empowerment. And so, when you're talking, I can hear how these are tools that you definitely utilize and these are, yeah, these are the tools that we have as organizations, as service providers, even as communities to really have a more trauma informed practice. So, do you want to take some time to just talk a little bit more in-depth about each of those values? So, to begin, can you talk a little bit about what safety – that could be physical safety or emotional safety – what does that mean for you as a provider in your practice?

5:49 **Lesley:** Absolutely! And I think it's good that you start with that one because I think that that one is the most fundamental one before we can really have any of those other values that you're talking about – trust, collaboration, empowerment – any of those things. We need to feel safe. So, I take that absolutely very seriously. And, as you can see just looking around the office, I have done what I can to create a very safe, welcoming, relaxing, non-threatening, environment. One of the biggest things that I think we can notice here is that I don't use the overhead lights because I find those personally very jarring, so, much dimmer, calmer, quieter, space. I have the fountains, a lot of blankets, and cushions and things that particularly trauma survivors may need, or want, to feel more comfortable in the space. Right? So, for many people who have a trauma background, and certainly depending on how old they were, you know, developmentally, when the trauma occurred – safety can be a huge issue. I work with many adults who will say to me, "I just, I never feel safe. I don't have a safe place, I don't know what that is. I don't feel safe in my body." So, if they were somehow victimized where their body was at risk, whether that was sexual or physical abuse, particularly as children, they have, it isn't safe to be in their bodies. Right? That's why there is so much dissociation when there is trauma. We leave to, to try to protect. So, not only do I try to create a physical environment that is conducive to that, but then a lot of my foundational work, particularly with trauma survivors is to help establish that sense of safety. And I may go back as far as in the womb because that's where it can start. Right? If a child is conceived and wasn't wanted, or if the mother say was the victim of domestic violence herself and beaten – those things infringe upon the fetus, and that child is born into the world already not feeling safe. Right? And so from our nervous system perspective, that's a body memory that's stored in there. That is not gonna just clear out on its own because we recognize that, or we think about it in a certain way. We really have to take some very focused trauma informed steps and use those modalities that are available to us to help the person's body and nervous system clear that out. So, what that looks like in practical terms is that I may draw up

some coping, grounding skills to have someone get a sense of, okay, if you look around the office here, you feel relatively as safe as you possibly can. There's nothing bad happening to you right now, what is that like in your body? And then, try to strengthen there and just do a lot of resourcing with them to have them experience that sense of safety because they think if this can be a safe place for them to come back to week after week, then they have a better shot at being able to dig into some of those deeper layers, work through that stuff so that then in their outside life they can have that internal sense of safety, outside in the real world.

9:29 **Josie:** And that's really powerful how you point out that the lack of safety, or the loss of safety, can start at conception. It can start as an individual is growing and there is literature that definitely supports that what happens at that stage during gestation is hugely impact-able. So that's really, really powerful. The next value is trust, which as you know, and have pointed out, is a hugely important aspect when working with vulnerable populations, especially trauma survivors. When we think about trust, we also think about consistency and being transparent. So, what are some of the strategies and ways that you work to build that trust among the individuals that come to see you.

10:24 **Lesley:** A few different things. I mean one of them is that I do have them at that level of transparency with my clients, and I know it's going to be a rough road for them and that it's going to be the first time that they are going to be talking about this stuff, or working through that with somebody. Who, I understand, they don't know me. Right? You know, I usually just address that and their concerns there. And we talk about, I do a fair amount of education around what trust means to them, why it makes sense that often times the only person they may trust is themselves, if they even trust themselves. Right? And depending on what their experiences have been, those experiences might have demonstrated to them that in fact people are not trustworthy. So we do a lot of work around when is it ok and when is it not okay to trust somebody. And I am pretty up front about how that includes me as well, and that if the entire person, or parts of a person, don't trust me that that's just fine and they can distrust me for as long as they need to in order to feel safe and see that I am going to be here week after week, very consistently, and empathically connecting with them so that there isn't going to be anything bad that happens there. We do a lot of work around boundaries because I think that those are fundamental to establishing trust and knowing not just for other people, but knowing for one's self, being able to discern is this okay for me? Do I want to be here? Not just with therapy but wherever – if you're at a gathering with friends, or you're in a board meeting, or whatever that is – is this okay for me to be here, is this good for me or adding benefit or value, or not. And if not, what do I need to do in this moment to take care of myself and learn to trust the inner self to then dictate and guide. And I think absolutely, most of us, can't get through life just on our own. Right? We are in relationships with other people. Often there are others in our lives who are good supports, who, whether or not we had them as children, but who can demonstrate ok there can be some consistency, some level of dependability, honest communication. That doesn't mean that that other person is perfect and nothing is ever going to mess up, but that that is an indication on how we can trust. For a client who may have not had that person in their life before, like I am okay being that person in the short term until they can develop some outside relationships that are healthier.

13:00 **Josie:** I know you've mentioned that now, and in the past, you've worked with individuals who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse, which is obviously one really huge example of a breach of trust at a very vulnerable age. So, I think it's very powerful to know that your work in building trust is first of all, in establishing those boundaries that were broken and really shattered for survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and also that you are comfortable with you, yourself, and your practice being consistent and allowing them to just trust you until they can really come to the realization of a safe individual that they may find here. So, that's really powerful. So, the next value is choice and we've already been talking so much about this. You know you've referenced how folks come in here many times because they are specifically interested in this holistic approach. I'm wondering if we could just talk a little bit more about how you came to value giving client choice in terms of the services you provide and in terms of what they can delve into when they come into your practice.

14:31 **Lesley:** Right. I think this one, again, is like the middle value. Right? So we've talked about safety and trust, now we're at choice and then I know we are moving onto collaboration and empowerment. So I think choice needing to be, er, is well placed being in the middle there because it is somewhat of the pivotal point between those other ones, right? If we don't ever feel safe, and we can't trust, it's very difficult to make choices, or for people who have a trauma background where they may not have been safe, certainly not able to trust whoever, or whatever adults were involved in that situation, but they also likely if they were children did not have choices. They were helpless in those situations, or they did what they could with what they had available to them in that moment, which often times is not enough. So, again, choice is absolutely paramount to one's healing. I mean I firmly believe, well I have training and I'm somewhat of an expert in this field and I've been doing it for many years, I don't know a client better necessarily than they know themselves. So, I don't feel like it's my place to dictate or tell someone this is what you need to do. And I think often times, our sort of mainstream medical model functions in that way where we go to see doctors or psychiatrists or whoever that may be, to tell us what is wrong with us, and then tell us how to fix it. I just don't, that's just not a value that I share. I believe that we all have the capacity to heal ourselves. We certainly need the right circumstances and the right type of support and the right skill set, and you know sometimes medications or sometimes surgeries or whatever that may be, but I really look at myself more as a partner with my clients rather than a detached or removed sort of expert that would say "this is what you need." So, when a client is here I always ask them at the end of the first session you know, "what are you looking for?" Because I may certainly have opinions on what I think they need to do differently in their lives to get themselves on a better track, or whatever that is, there is only going to be an investment on their part for what they're interested in. And so, it's really about trying to meet them where they're at and work on the goals that they establish for themselves, right? And for people who have been disempowered or not been able to exercise choice, so particularly like childhood survivors of sexual abuse, it's really important that they can dictate and in some ways how that information gets shared, what their story is, who gets to know that. It is, as far as, what they choose to do with their bodies going forward in relationships and things like that. So, a good part of the work is also focused in that vein when I'm working with that kind of population so that they get to learn that it is okay to make these decisions for one's self, and that nobody else needs to tell you, "oh you need to do this," or "don't do that," or "be this way," or "don't be that way."

18:01 **Josie:** And in talking about choice, you perfectly inter-wove the way in which you collaborate with your clients and beyond in your practice and maybe you do do this, or not. Are there times where you also are facilitating or collaborating with the individuals in your clients lives, do families ever take part?

18:27 **Lesley:** Yes. So, particularly if I am working with someone who has a PTSD history, or is maybe just coming forth about the sexual abuse or whatever it was that happened to them, I will often times suggest that either they have a conversation with their partner or their family members, or they come into the office and we do kind of an educational session about, okay, so your loved one here, you know when they are telling you that they are not in the mood to be having sex, they are not meaning that personally against you, it doesn't mean they don't love you, it doesn't mean they don't want to do that, but this is what's going on in the background for them. And, to try to help educate about what happens, what flash backs look like, what body memories are, and give them some really good tools and resources for how to support instead. Because I think a lot of times the partners mean well, and I know this from years ago, I used to run some support groups for women who had been abused as children. And, our final session included all of the spouses and partners. A lot of these men had stuck with these women for many many years, they understood that something was there but maybe their wives had not disclosed to them the full extent of what that was. And so, what I heard over and over again was, "we want to help," and "this is so hard to watch my wife go through this, and I don't know what do, and I don't know how to make this better, and I wasn't the one who did it so I feel like I can't fix it for her," which at least they are correct. They can't fix it. But, often times having those pieces, as far as what really does work for a survivor and what doesn't can be helpful because they think unwittingly our partners can sometimes re-traumatize without meaning to. You know, say things like, "well that was a long time ago," or, "I'm not that guy," and things like that. And so, without having an understanding on how trauma registers in the brain and in the body, they are meaning well but they may not understand that that moment that was thirty years ago feels like it's happening all over right now, and perhaps if they got that piece, they could say something or approach in a different way. So, we will do collaborative sessions like that or at least really coach my clients how to talk with their partners on that if they don't want to have them come in. I have some good lists of resources and handouts and things that I will provide as well. So, yeah. I think that's a big part of it for sure.

21:13 **Josie:** Yeah that's outstanding. It really illustrates the way, and how to, take the hard work that folks will be doing – whether it's in a support group, or coming to you one on one, and really expanding that beyond that limited space, which is huge. So, the last value is empowerment, which is really a powerful principle because it's not just about cheerleading, it's really about growing power and belief in one's self. So, what role does empowerment play for you personally in the lives of your clients? How do you see that happening in your practice?

21:56 **Lesley:** So, when I founded the center I founded it upon three values: One of them was kindness and everything that that entails. One of them is authenticity. And the third one is empowerment. And that one is probably, well I don't want to say it's more important than the other ones but for me personally, that has been such a journey and I, for my own process of self-empowerment, have learned that value of being able to stand securely on one's own feet, take steps you need to to, you know, put your life in a certain direction or take care of yourself or

whatever that looks like, without, not that it's not about caring what other people think, but being able to do that in spite of other people who may not be able to be in support of those same steps, and how very important that is for an individual. And so, because it's so, I would not be where I am today if I had not done that. I had very little support when I was starting out on my own and building this practice. I heard "oh, you'll never be able to do it," and "everybody in private practice fails," and all of those kinds of things. I had one or two people maybe who were like, "oh you can do it and you'll be fine." So, you know, much of my life I would say I was fairly independent at anyway, just because of circumstance, and so, I already knew I could pretty much take care of myself. But then being able to take these steps, which I mean you're in school for counseling or psychology yourself, we're not taught how to run a business. So, that's all stuff I had to learn on my own, and that was very empowering to be able to gain that knowledge and be able to do this so that I could actually help and treat people in the way that I want to. Right? Without having to necessarily conform to an agencies standard or something like that which may sometimes be at odds with the approach I might want to take. For clients coming in, whether they are male, female, young, older, empowerment is something that we always talk about. I think that our culture is such that so many people are people pleasers and we are taught to kind of smile and nod, or go along with things, not rock the boat – and internally, that may not sit well. Or, over a period of time, that doesn't serve us because we are not exercising our own voices. You know, there is something to be said for compromise and collaboration and all of that, right? So I certainly don't encourage people to just no matter what anybody else says, be the voice of dissent. That isn't necessarily my purpose (laughs). But, to have them be able to in whatever ways they can muster to set those boundaries and either say no, or just speak up when something isn't working, or something as simple as you know, you're deciding where you are going to get take out from and your partner always wants Chinese and you hate Chinese and you want Mexican, you know, to be able to say that. Right? Because I think that when people star then that feels different inside, right? There is more congruence internally between what that feels like in our body and where are mental state is at, right? And if we can bring that into balance than I feel that you are able to live your authentic life because you're coming from this place of certainty or strength internally. And, you really need those empowerment skills to get there, you know? And for anyone in general with a trauma background, needs to be empowered in some way. Often times as women we all have, even in this day and age, been disempowered in some way just because of our sex. Or, not even talking about race and religion or anything like that, right? But, in all of the ways that people can be disempowered on a daily basis, or have that someway used against them, or taken away in terms of boundaries, like being able to heal from that trauma that resuscitates, being able to take those steps forward and be empowered and kind of reclaim that.

26:31 **Josie:** Definitely. It makes me think in my mind, of empowerment as really refusing to be defined by either an experience in the case of a trauma survivor, or even a refusal to be defined by the external opinions around you. You pointed that out. You know, "you'll never be able to do this," and empowerment is really finding it within yourself that this is what I really want and this is who I really am, and that is possible.

27:07 **Lesley:** Right, and I think that it, I mean for me what helped is finding people that were in the therapeutic community that also believed it was possible that I could do that. And then working and aligning with them in those messages rather than all the nay-sayers. Right? And so

if I can be that person for one of my clients who believes in them, who sees the potential that they have, right? That there is that seed within them that just at some point is going to bloom or blossom, and they are going to have what they want because they are working diligently towards that, then if I need to be the one who holds that vision for them, I am absolutely happy to do that because if you've got no one else in your life to do that for you, it's sometimes very hard for you to see that yourself. Or, you want to see it, but it's hard to believe that when you don't have any external support around that. You know, that's really how I look around that.

28:05 **Josie:** Thank you, so much! So, some folks who are listening may be work in the field of mental health, they may be working with folks that have experienced trauma, be that childhood sexual abuse, or any other types of trauma that they bring to therapy and a therapeutic environment. Do you have any final words in terms of why it's so important to keep these values in mind, trauma informed care, in this kind of environment.

28:37 **Lesley:** Yeah, I mean what I would say about that is that in order to provide, maybe this is my value but, in order to provide ethical therapy, you know as mental health counselors or psychotherapists like our first tenant that we can't to make sure we are holding, is that we are doing no harm. I think in order to work effectively with trauma survivors, one, we have to have a handle on our own trauma history. There is the potential for a lot of counter transference, things happening in the sessions maybe beyond some of the other issues when things hit close to home so that we're not putting our, say, lens or histories onto the client with expectations, I feel like that's one. And the other part of doing no harm there is to really be informed and have some specific trainings in the different trauma modules that are out there that are evidence based, that work very very well, and that are grounded in those principles of safety, trust, choice, empowerment, collaboration. Right? So that a client coming in for healing work around that and is not going to then be unnecessarily triggered or in another way re-traumatized because the therapist doesn't know what they are doing. And I really can't tell you the number of times that I've had people come in and tell me there previous experiences in therapy that have me shaking my head a little bit about why was this person trying to treat you for this when clearly they didn't know what they were doing based on, I don't want to be judge-y of another therapist but, based on what the client's telling me, happened. So, I really think that training is absolutely necessary if you want to do this work. It's not easy. I mean, I don't know necessarily that any therapy is easy work, but it requires the understanding of those deeper levels.

30:46 **Josie:** Absolutely. I really appreciate it that you started that off by saying that using these principles to guide the practice is essential to being an ethical practitioner. And, that's so true to really be providing the best practice and really do no harm and to pull out the best in individuals that come here very vulnerable and raw, so essential.

31:14 **Lesley:** Right. And I think too another piece of that is to have really good consultation yourself, because, you know there's, as informed and well trained as we may be, there may be things that you know we either, it's just a sticking point for us, or we don't have experience with that, or we haven't come across that before, and so to have others that have very solid trauma informed practices themselves to use as sounding boards and to help support.

31:45 **Josey:** Definitely. Well thank you so much. On behalf of the Institute of Trauma and Trauma Informed Care, I just really wanted to express our gratitude for taking the time to speak with us today, and to share your story. It's been a real pleasure, so thank you!

31:59 **Lesley:** You're absolutely welcome, I am happy to do it!