



Conscious Life presents

Anxiety and Systemic Trauma

Guest - Akilah Riley-Richardson

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today, I am so pleased to be welcoming back the wonderful Akilah Riley-Richardson. Welcome, Akilah.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Hi. Nice to be with you again.

Jaï Bristow

Nice to have you back. So you're a relational healing facilitator, a couples therapist, and a certified clinical trauma professional. And so today, we're going to be talking about anxiety. And to get us started, do you want to tell us a little bit about your views on anxiety diagnoses?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

I feel like anxiety diagnoses are complicated in the sense that I believe that there is... Physiologically, the experience of anxiety is real. So all the things that accompany anxiety in terms of the changes in respiration, digestion, what goes on with the air, everything. I think all of the physiological components are real.

But I feel there's something political in the diagnoses. We have to be very, very careful with that. So I don't want to say... I'm never a person who wants to throw out everything. I think two things can be true at the same time. I think something can be very helpful, and I think something can also be harmful. I think when anxiety diagnoses are used to pathologize or to say that somebody is disordered or experiencing a disorder, that's where my discomfort begins.

I'm walking in cautiously because like I said, I don't think it's all bad or all good. I think we just have to be with the reality that in some cases diagnosing people with anxiety is a political move. It's a power over move in some cases. Being able to tell somebody that what they are feeling is disordered has a political power over element to it, and I find that could be particularly harmful.

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Because a lot of my work is with marginalized people, primarily right now at this stage BIPOC and LGBTQI folks, I struggle when people say that people in these communities are struggling with anxiety. I'm thinking that this is a normal physiological response to people's context.

And so the word itself comes with so much in it that it can feel very uncomfortable for me at times. I'm very cautious when I use it. When I do use it because there may be no other word to be able to use it, I think it's important to normalize it, especially for bodies that are structurally disempowered.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And I think the word that most stuck out for me in what you just shared is "context" and "contextualizing." And like you say, it's very easy for everyone to see things through a certain lens and to pathologize and to categorize it as a disorder.

And if someone has a very wholesome, healthy life and has experienced a lot of anxiety with no context, with no reason, then I understand why there might be some concern around it. But as you rightfully say, when working with marginalized communities, there's a lot of reasons for it. There's a lot of context. It's a natural, normal response to a lot of what people experience and live through. I'm wondering if you want to share a little bit more about that.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah. Before I say more on that, I want to just go back to what you're saying. So even if somebody is living in an environment that appears to be safe, they probably have inherited certain predispositions because of what their ancestors have been through.

So I want to say that if you are a survivor... If you have a parent who's a Holocaust survivor, for example, because the research talks about that, you'd find that your stress profile would be different, and that you'd be more inclined to certain kinds of experiences affiliated with stress. I want to say that even when people are in environments that seem to be very peaceful, they may have inherited certain things from their ancestors.

Genetically, there's research to show us that you can inherit these things. Even in those cases, I wouldn't want us to use the word "disorder." When I think about systemic trauma in particular, there's this thing I always say when I teach about systemic trauma. I say it's chronic, it's pervasive, it's socially-based, it's unpredictable, it's disenfranchised. Those five central components would make it logical for anybody to have a heightened response or heightened activation in those spaces.

Like chronic, it's always going on. Always, always. Pervasive. It's everywhere, every context, every institution, the education system, the legal system, the judicial system. It's always there. We think about the fact that it's largely disenfranchised and invisible-ised.

I think I want to just be here a little bit with this, that when we're experiencing something that other people do not see as valid, which makes it disenfranchised... When we're experiencing something that is largely invisible-ised, meaning it's happening, but sometimes it's hard to be able to detect.

It's these small things that are happening, small forms of micro-aggression. All of these things can result in you feeling more alone in the world. This sense of feeling so alone in the world, it can

increase your primal panic. It makes sense then that a body that's holding all of this but has to hold it alone and has to also deal with invalidation, would be feeling very, very, quote, unquote, "anxious."

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Because in addition to having to deal with the trauma itself, you then have to deal with the other piece, which is the piece around being disenfranchised, the piece around not being heard. One of the biggest things about trauma is that it isn't exactly what you're holding, but it's what you're holding in the absence of an empathetic witness.

I'm leaning here on the work of Peter Levine in that regard, that we all need somebody to hold us when we're experiencing trauma. But with systemic trauma, sometimes it's so difficult to feel held because of the same context, the same environment that's violating you, the same environment that would not create space for you to be heard or for you to just experience any kind of... What am I looking for? Redress. All of these things can heighten the anxiety in the body.

Jai Bristow

I love the way that you've described all of that because I think it's so important in the work that you're doing where you're naming so much of what isn't usually named, right? And you're naming all these parts that are usually so invisible and that people kind of know about but can't always put their finger on.

And just, yeah, normalizing some of what so many people experience on a day-to-day basis. And again, you talked about safety earlier, and I'm wondering if you'd like to say a little bit more about that relationship with safety.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Oh, I love that line, "our relationship with safety." You see, this is why I love these conversations, because things come up to me.... Things come to me, sorry, when you say these things. When you interview us, you probably had interviewers say these things. "Our relationship with safety."

Safety is largely about threat reduction and protection. When there is, quote, unquote, "safety", it means that there's little to no threat around us, but that's all very different from safeness. But sometimes there can be no threat around us, but we are not feeling comfort within. We are not feeling protected. We are not feeling secure. As you just said that, Jai, it clicked to me that maybe in our current definitions of safeness, one of the things we need to include is that safeness is about your relationship to safety.

So when you said that my brain went "ding ding". I think because some of us may be in, quote, unquote, "safety", but we're not feeling safe. So safeness is our relationship to safety. Sometimes the relationship is one where we are accurately perceiving that there's no safety, and consequently, there is no safeness in the body.

And then sometimes, even when there is safety, there are things that have happened to us that are not allowing us to feel safe. I feel that when working with systemic trauma, especially when working with people who hold power and privilege in the world and them wanting to create safety for marginalized people.

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I think this is an important distinction that we need to have a conversation around because you can do many things to try to create safety, but persons are not experiencing safeness. Sometimes it has nothing to do with how "safe" you're trying to create, make this space be. Am I making sense? Yeah.

Jaï Bristow

Just to clarify, when you talk about the difference between safety and safeness, is it that safety is to do with your external environment and safeness is to do with your internal experience?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah, that's how I understand it. Others may say differently. People define things differently all the time. In no way am I trying to colonize the definition of safety or safeness. But this is one understanding of it that I buy into.

When I'm thinking about what could help to create a sense of safeness for people is being in spaces where there is accountability. I was doing some work with an organization recently. I was leaning on a quote I had heard once, which says that there are no brave spaces or safe spaces, they're only accountable spaces.

That it's very, very difficult or even unfair, to be quite honest to tell persons who have experienced systemic and historical trauma that you should feel safe here because I am trying to provide safety or that you should feel brave here. What I think might allow people to feel some semblance of that is accountability.

A huge part of being able to create a world where marginalized people can feel less anxiety is by ensuring that your world is more and more accountable. I think accountability is critical. In my work, I talk a lot about just the ways in which marginalized bodies have wired into them that nobody will listen, there will be no redress, there is to be no one accountable.

That's a theme, a relational theme living in the body. I wanted us to think about the relational theme of the fact that nobody will be accountable here. When I'm harmed, nobody will be accountable, how that raises so much distress in the body. I'm happy that you named this piece around anxiety and the relationship to safety, because we may be creating a safe context, but because of a lack of accountability, people don't feel a sense of safeness.

Jaï Bristow

That makes so much sense. I'm wondering if you could just, for those who don't quite know what you mean by accountability, because again, that's another one of those words which can mean slightly different things to different people, right? If you could give us your definition or an example to illustrate what you mean by that accountability that supports that safety.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

When I think about accountability, remember when I said that one of the things about systemic trauma is that it's disenfranchised. It's disenfranchised for two reasons. People often don't believe that what you experience is real, and people also don't treat you as somebody that is worthy of being heard. I want to add a third element.

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Now, things are emerging as we speak. I feel like disenfranchisement is also about the perpetrator as well. The power and privilege and the ways in which our society treats the perpetrator.

When I think about accountability, accountability exists in a context where we believe that the experience of the person who's been harmed is valid. We believe that the person who's harmed is a person worthy of being heard and as for us stopping to hear and listen and to fully be in the experience of that person.

We are willing... The third piece. We are willing to challenge ourselves to push past the ways in which part one privilege protects some people in our society from being held accountable. We're willing to confront those things. We're willing to push back against those things, and we're willing to pull those persons into spaces where they can answer for the ways in which they've created harm.

I want to say that harm has little to do with intention. When people harm, they often want to talk about the fact that they didn't mean it. There's a difference between what you meant and the consequence. How can we create worlds where we can distinguish between those two? We can be with the person and accept that, yes, you did not mean to harm, and communicate compassion and care there, and they still know that there must be some redress.

Must be some protection for the person who has been harmed. I want to say the reason why I think it needs to be some redress or some protection is because the harms that we commit often are as a result of subtle, unconsciously held beliefs about how the world works. It's not about intention. I want to share a story about my...

It's not the nicest story to share, in my opinion, but it's about my relationship with my own children, where there's a power differential. So this week... I notice it happens sometimes. When I'm very tired, I'm frustrated with something, and I'm communicating with them that sometimes my tone with them can be a little bit short. I could be snappy.

And I had this moment, Jaï, when I said to myself, "Why is it that... Akilah, why is it that you know... Some part of you know that you could be snappy here, but you can't do it in another context? You would not dare let this leak elsewhere."

Now, I consider myself to be relatively self-aware of power and that kind of thing. But yet still, there is some unconsciously held knowing in my body. As I'm saying that I'm feeling tearful, that says that this is a place where I can express displaced frustration or whatever. Even though I'm not consciously thinking about it, I do know that my body has learned something about power differentials. And so my body is abusing power. I'm not intentionally doing it, Jaï. I am not thinking I want to harm my children, no.

But there's this unconsciously held belief. There's this thing, this felt sense that I've learned from the world that's allowing me to play this thing out here. So I had to pull them in. Recently, I had to say, "You know what? Last week, I was snappy, and this is how I was behaving, and because I was really stressed, and you didn't deserve that from me."

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I had to be accountable. And so I want to bring that back to what we're speaking about here about just the ways in which people who hold power and privilege in our world. People who hold, for example, white bodies in the global north, that sometimes there is no intention to harm people of color.

But wired in you, just like wired in me as a parent, wired in you are often assumptions about how the world works, that you are carrying from your own ancestors. You are understanding racial dynamics, your body's understanding this in this unconscious way, and you have to be accountable. It does not matter if you're intended, but you have to be accountable.

So going back to all of this thing about accountability, it's being able to push past and do some really hard interrogation, some hard self-interrogation as well, to be able to create these kinds of accountable spaces. I know I said a lot. I hope I didn't get you lost there.

Jaï Bristow

Not at all. I think it's so important, the pieces you're bringing in around the different power dynamics and how easy it is to fall into those dynamics, and that when you're the one who has the power, whether it's on a personal level, like a parent and children, or on more systemic level, like white people and people of color, that in order to be accountability, it's like that example that you just gave.

It's repairing, it's acknowledging, it's taking responsibility and learning and doing things differently. I think that that's so important in conversations around safety and safeness and these conversations around anxiety, which, as you talked about, is often the lack of that safety and safeness, which is also to do with the lack of accountability. So I really, really appreciate you bringing all of this in.

I'm curious as well because in your definition of it, and you were talking about the diagnoses and the pathologizing and how it can be weaponized and how that's not particularly helpful. I'm wondering, what are some things that are more helpful? What are some ways that we can work with anxiety, rename anxiety, and offer it some more spaciousness and move away from that harmful pathologizing?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

As you know, I have an approach that I work with called Pride. P-R-I-D-E, which is Pivot, Rumble, Imagine, Develop, Evolve. Before I say more about this, I always have to give this disclaimer. I have no interest in model wars. I have no interest in having a model that is the model to heal. I'm not even trying to say that this is the way to work with anxiety. I think there's so much beauty out there, so many wonderful models, so many different ways.

This is how I think about it, and people are welcome to disregard, take pieces, whatever. Quite frankly, because of how my brain works, things are always evolving and changing. So what I'm saying now, after I've released it. It might sound... I won't be saying the same thing in two years.

I love the word you used, "spaciousness", and I want to be with that word. I want to thank you for teaching me as we talk, Jaï. You're really teaching me about how to think about the work more, or

at least help me to see some things that I should have been seeing. Because the model for me is about spaciousness.

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When you just said it, I was like, ooh, that's what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to give us room. Room and space is one of the spoils of colonialism. Room and space. Spoils of racism. Room and space. Spoils of homophobia. That we don't have room, Jai. In sitting with people, I'm thinking how can I create room for all of you?

The P is about pivoting. Helping you to not only look inside, but look outside and to see what is shaping this anxious experience. What is feeding this? What are the structures around me that I've even internalized to some extent that are feeding this? The room to rumble, to interrogate. I feel like when you're living in a marginalized body, you're so focused on surviving that there's no room to rumble and interrogate because you're so focused on surviving.

I think when we're hearing marginalized people, doing the arguing and the space to rumble, to interrogate what is feeding their behavior and to challenge it, and to ask themselves, "Whose imagination am I living in? What have I privileged in my body? What have I not?"

I think that's so important. And giving them space to understand and create new ways of being in the world. When there are no opportunities to have, when there are no new ways that it could possibly be because the systemic context is just so harmful, giving them the space to rename their experience.

I was working with a client recently who was experiencing... The client told me that they had been in therapy before, and they were told that they were emotionally repressed. I was like, "Well, of course, you're repressed. This makes complete sense. How else can you survive biphobia?" Because the client was bisexual. "How else can you survive biphobia? You need to be repressed."

Then what becomes necessary is to rename the experience. "Repressed" is such a pathologizing term, in my opinion. How else can I name this, or how else can I redefine what repressed means? I'm thinking I'm bringing it back here to anxiety. After we give people this space to understand what's feeding their anxiety, to interrogate it, we give them this space to rename what they're experiencing.

Do we want to call this anxiety? Do we want to call this something else? Give people that power to make sense of their reality. Renaming does not mean that we are discarding the old. We can hold both. We can hold both, and we can seek different forms of treatment as a result. If you want to engage in pharmacotherapy to deal with anxiety, that's fine. I'm not trying to discredit or discard any of those things.

What we're just trying to do is to give people room to see what's feeding their experiences and giving them space to rename it and then to create new ways of being with their anxiety. I think your relationship to your anxiety is very, very important. I think being able to go into... I'm leaning here on some work from Dan Siegel, Juliane Taylor Shore, Deb Dana, et cetera.

But being able to witness this, witness this anxiety with intense compassion, I think is so important. Intense compassion, intense kindness. One of the things that I've realized is that sometimes we're

trying to undo and unlearn, but sometimes we can't undo and unlearn. Sometimes we just have to grieve.

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This is the reality. I have to trust that this anxiety is important. I have to be with that anxiety from a place of grieving that I will never be able to feel safeness in my body. Therefore, I have to now develop skills to be able to deal with the world and to deal with my anxiety. I'm very cautious when it comes to trying to help marginalized people to feel less anxious. In fact, I think sometimes that could be counterproductive.

It could be quite anti-therapeutic. Like I was saying to a client of mine recently, I don't know if it's helpful for us to get rid of this anxiety. We do all this work here, and you leave here in this kumbaya state, but then you need your hypervigilance to be able to survive your world.

Another client of mine recently... The client has given me permission to use this quote because I think it's so powerful. The client is a black man in the US. When we were talking about the police system in the US and taxes, the client said, "I feel like I'm paying them to kill me." That line stood out to me forever, Jaï. There are people walking around feeling in their bodies that they are paying systems to kill them.

When a client like that says to me, "I'm feeling anxious", I don't know if I want to be doing any, "Let's breathe and center yourself." I'm thinking, "Damn, you need to be anxious. How else are you going to survive this?"

I think it's about giving that spaciousness to people to rename and decide what their relationship is going to be like with anxiety. Do they want to welcome it, embrace it? And then what of these skills do they want to implement to be able to manage it so that they can also live? Because the thing is that living in an anxious state, it does take away part of your living, your ability to live fully and freely in the world.

A lot of the things that we purport to be healthy living and healthy, whole-hearted living are features of privilege. And I think the field... We really... I don't know. The field has the number in some ways by saying that this is what mental health looks like and being able to be integrated. What they haven't said is that those things are tied to occupying positions of privilege in the world.

How do we support persons who have to live in anxiety to also have some glimmer of what it feels like to be centered, to be fully immersed in experiences? How do we create those opportunities as well? And those things come from skills, but it's a long process and there is definitely no end in sight.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, I'm really, really touched by everything you've just shared. And just, again, recognizing the reality and the need for anxiety for a lot of people living in today's world. And you talked about compassion and kindness. Again, I think that it's a lot easier when we step away from pathologizing, when we recognize the need for anxiety and the importance that it actually plays.

That's what you're talking about. We recognize the reality then it's easier to have compassion and kindness. That's why I'm so grateful for this conversation and for your work and for bringing this

piece into the conference, because I think it's something that, again, can be very easily overlooked.

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The ways that you're talking about, like renaming and deciding and choosing what relationship one has with one's anxiety. It's not about pushing it away or necessarily embracing it fully. It's like that is an area where there is choice and autonomy in choosing what relationship is had with it. Then again, as you say, the importance of finding skills in which to live and that everyone deserves to be grounded and centered, even whilst living in very anxiety-inducing situations and in a very anxiety-inducing world.

I'm wondering if we can go into some of those skills of how to develop some of those skills.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah, I'm so glad that you raised that. When I think about skill-building it depends on what is showing up for me in the room. Sometimes the skill work looks like being able to... How to tend to oneself becomes a skill. I know this might sound weird, but just knowing how to tend to oneself.

When you're in a space that is actually safe, but you're not experiencing safeness, how do we teach people how to engage in self-tending, to practice self-compassion? You can lean on the work of, I think it's Paul Gilbert and Dennis Tirch looking at Compassion-Focused Therapy. You can lean a bit on the work of Juliane Taylor Shore, I think as well, and the STAIR model, how do we teach people how to be kind to themselves, and what are these steps and the processes. So that's one.

Boundary setting, I think, is also very important. Teaching people when it is safe. It just came up for me that I didn't realize before. There are a lot of boundaries work out there. There are a lot of boundary exercises out there. And in those exercises, we learn about how to protect oneself mentally and also knowing when to contain.

Something just came to me as we were speaking, I think also teaching people when to have those kinds of protective boundaries and when not to. For example, protective boundaries essentially are about having two things, discernment and acceptance. Understanding that... Discernment is about understanding that what's happening outside of me does not impact me.

So being able to discern. And acceptance is saying, "You know what? It's okay for this thing to be happening outside of me." So that enables me to then have these protective boundaries. What I'm realizing now, as I'm talking about it, is that we have to teach people not only how to practice boundary work, how to build mental and protective boundaries, but knowing when to and when not to.

Because there are times when you have to take in what's happening around you because if you don't, you could be harmed. It's about discerning when to put on this boundary and to protect oneself and knowing, "Okay, when do I have to pull this down? Because I know I have to respond."

So I think about tending. I think about boundaries. I think about skills and grieving. I think that might sound weird. But being able to teach people how to grieve their realities without self-blame and self-victimization.

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There are some things that will never change, and that's painful to say, but it's true. How do we teach people to be with grief differently? It's not these five stages I'm moving through. When you're grieving from a marginalized position, you're grieving in a constant state of grief. How do we teach people to work with grief and to be with grief?

The other piece is around mindfulness and witnessing mind. Teaching people how to track their bodies, to go into witnessing mind state, to look for sensations that are coming up, that are attached to different activation states in their bodies. The purpose of being able to do that is because when you get into a state of mindfulness, the brain releases GABA, which allows you to regulate a little bit.

You're going to teach them how to practice that witnessing mind bit by bit. I want to say that in order for you to teach skills... When I say you being the therapist, your own relationship with power, your own relationship with not knowing, and your own relationship with realizing that what people are experiencing makes sense is really important. I'm leaning again on the work of Juliane Taylor Shore here, because I think when we walk in with skills-building as being an investment in a product, meaning that after I teach these skills, the client should be...

I think we can be at risk of further harming people. People need to take their time to develop these skills that are required for them, given their context. When you're sitting with somebody in an artificial environment, like a therapeutic room, you are teaching things that people may be able to practice with you, but sometimes it'll be very challenging to practice outside.

I think even the way that we teach skills, we have to approach this from a very humble, egalitarian power with space, because the things we want people to be able to learn may be very difficult in the context that they occupy. Yeah?

Jaï Bristow

No, thank you for all of that. And I think it's really important to bring in these skills and also recognize the difficulty of some of these skills, right? And so what is it that you observe when people struggle to practice some of these?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

It's so interesting. Can I say every time a question is asked, yeah, another aha moment comes up for me. So I was thinking to myself as you said the word "skills." I was like, "Hmmm, is that word skill even a power over move? A powerful word where we think, yeah, for people to deal with anxiety, they need these skills.

But then maybe what they're doing day by day in terms of surviving are skills as well, Jaï. As you said it, my brain went, "Hmmm, Akilah. You need to rethink this."

Typically, when we think about anxiety, we see things like find... The Fs, right? Find, fix, flight, fight, freeze, right? My body just said, these are some big skills that people have. They are typically not seen as... Yeah, they're typically not seen as skills.

But literally, I began to think about flight as a skill. When people are experiencing some horror, the only first thing they want to do is just get away from it, especially when there's no accountability,

there's no redress, there's no way to stop that. It's about how do I get away from this? Flight. Then there's no redress, there is nobody to soothe, there's no way to help the person go back to an integrated state.

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There is this increased horror and there's this rage to fight. Then even when it begins to escalate there, you can see the person moving into this freeze, which is this interesting space between... the sympathetic nervous system and the dorsal vagal system, this terror in the body that causes the person to freeze, this height of immobility.

A lot of times when persons are harmed... You hear them talk about that, being like, "My body just froze. I didn't know what to do." I'm thinking of all these first three things as skills. The other thing I'm thinking of with the skill is when the body just realizes, "You know what? I need to find a way to be able to manage this. I'm looking, I'm finding, I'm seeking, I'm seeking, I'm finding, trying to find somewhere out." That finding reflex is also a skill.

And then the fixing piece. I want to say that the fixing and the way that some of us fawn and try to regulate another person so that we can get safe. I know there's a distinction between fawning and appeasing, and I encourage us to, if we can, look at the work of Linda Thai, as Linda distinguishes between those two, fawning and appeasing.

I can't remember the distinction, to be quite honest right now, but I know that with one of them, it's about I need to feel safe. So what I'm going to do is to please you and please you and please you so that I can be safe. I'm going fawn. I'm going to tell you how wonderful you are. I'm going to work really hard so that I can be safe, or I'm going to hold back everything that I feel inside, just not to further offend you.

And I'm seeing now with no equivocation that the ability to do that when experiencing harm that you know will not be seen. You know this harm will be disenfranchised, the ability of your nervous system to do that is a skill.

I want to say that being able to appease, being able to fawn, being able to hold back so that you could keep yourself safe is a skill. I think when we work with people, we need to help them to see how their body naturally has these skills. I guess I'm dialing back because things are emerging as we speak. I know I presented some things as the skills we need to teach people.

Now, as I'm seeing it now, Jaï, I think the first thing we need to do is to honor the natural skills that people have for surviving. And then we could furnish them with some of these things, but in no way are these things better than what the body naturally does to take care of them.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's beautiful. I love the way that something that's often framed as trauma responses, the way you're talking about them as skills, because that's what they are, right? Survival skills. I think, again, framing it in that way supports the compassion, and kindness that you were talking about earlier.

Then the skills you were talking about beforehand are skills you were teaching in order to be able to live and to manage in this world, in this body, with this anxiety, in this society, in all of that. And

yet, again, it's what you were talking about before, "to have both and...". To be able to honor those survival skills and also cultivate other skills so that we're coming out of survival mode and into living mode.

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And I love, Akilah... I love just how real you are with all your responses. And not offering step by step, book by book. You're like, "Yeah, here's my model. Take it or leave it. Take what you want, what you don't want. Oh, here's something that's coming to me now." And it's so refreshing to just witness the ways in which you model what you speak about and the realness and authenticity that shines through as you share some of this.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah. I'm happy that I'm having this moment with you now where I could just be like, "This is a skill, and we have to honor it as a skill." As opposed to an adaptation. This is a skill that has kept people safe. For those of us who occupy BIPOC bodies in particular, we know that if our ancestors didn't have these skills, we wouldn't be here.

If they didn't know how to appease and fawn and this and that they may have been killed, and we wouldn't have been here. I want to just honor how they lived with anxiety and how they've taken care of themselves and us, and that they didn't need an outside somebody...

They have their own trauma theories, trauma therapy. They were working it out. They were working it out moment by moment. And yes, we're carrying a lot in our bodies, but we're also carrying some tools that they gave to us that the field of psychotherapy is sometimes quite invested in pathologizing and wanting to put a diagnosis to.

I don't know in what world would we tell marginalized people that they should not know how to fawn and appease. That's not our reality. I have had to learn how to fawn and appease. I have had to learn how to fawn and appease white bodies. I say that with no shame. It's not manipulative. It's not designed to get anything. I don't know how to explain it.

I've had some moments where I feel this unconscious thing in my body that says, "If you don't appease, there's harm coming your way, that you don't have the skills to deal with, and you don't even..."

And I want to say this piece, "You don't have the power here to be able to stop the harm or deal with the impact of the harm. You don't have the power." And that's where... When I talk about grieving as a skill, Jaï, I talk about the fact that how do we teach people... I hate the word "teach."

How do we be with people grieving in a different way that is outside the textbook? Knowing that you can't move through this until you accept it, that you may be constantly uncomfortable with the fact that you will not have power here.

I think each therapist... I don't have a template for this. I think each therapist has to search within and figure out, "Okay, how do I support this grief?" Understanding the context and understanding that this thing may not, will not, cannot shift or change.

[00:43:38] Jaï Bristow

100%. And I'm really struck and touched by everything you're sharing and connecting to things in my own personal experience as well. Because I think that, again, what you're talking about, the issues with pathologizing and diagnosing, and diagnosing as disorder, is that there's a lot of judgment in that, right?

And that often, having hosted a lot of trauma summits now and a lot of these conferences, I understand that often when people talk about that, it's the idea of... It's the belief that there is safety. It's like, "Come out of your trauma responses because you're actually safe. Those trauma responses help you survive when you're in danger, but most of the time you're not, and you need to teach your body and your system that you're not."

But as you've rightfully mentioned earlier, for people in marginalized bodies, most of the time there is not that safety. And even if there is that safety, there's probably not that safeness. And so then we need those survival skills in a way that other people might not. And I, again, have used fawning to get me out of some really nasty situations that I won't go into in this conversation.

But I think, yeah, the way that you're honoring that instead of dismissing, pathologizing, saying that that is not how we should feel or we should be able to get rid of that or evolve from that or whatever the language is, is so important to recognize.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah. I don't have anything else to add, but yeah.

Jaï Bristow

Akilah, unfortunately, we're coming to an end now. Is there anything you would like to add before we finish?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

I don't even know what to say besides I'm grateful for every survival strategy that sits in the body of marginalized people. I'm also sorry for the times when earlier in my training, when I pathologized it, when I fell into white body psychotherapy.

Now I am sitting with a recognition of how much people need to fawn and appease and fix and find and run. Just celebrating that as some beautiful skills that we all need to learn and that the client can become the teacher.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. The story you gave earlier, the quote from one of your clients about paying the system to kill them, that's a really good example of a time where fawning and appeasing...

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Oh, God, yeah.

Jaï Bristow

And so, again, as you say, it's so important. Akilah, for those who don't want to be pathologized and would like to work with you, how can they find out more about you and your work?

[00:46:44] Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah, if you want to, you can Google me, Akilah Riley-Richardson. I do have a [website](#), and on the website, there's a way to contact me, or you can send me an email at info@akilahrileyrichardson.com. Once you go on the website, it's pretty easy to just follow. You could subscribe. Let's get into conversations where we're co-changing the world.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time and for this wonderful conversation. I really appreciate it, and I really appreciate you.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

I appreciate you, too. Thanks for having me.