



## Trauma and plurality

**Guest: Dr Meg-John Barker**

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**[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow**

Hello, and welcome to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be joined by Dr Meg-John Barker. Welcome, Meg-John Barker.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Hi, nice to be here.

**Jaia Bristow**

Nice to have you.

So, Meg-John and I, this is I think, the third time I've interviewed you. I got to interview you for the Relationship Super Conference and for my podcast, *Beyond Boxes*. And today we're going to be talking all about trauma, especially in terms of plurality. So do you want to tell people a bit about why you're interested in framing trauma through the lens of plurality and a bit about your work?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely. So if people don't know, I'm a self-help type writer, and I write about gender, sexuality, relationships and mental health. And I write these comic books for graphic guides about these subjects, but also, what I call anti self-help books. I wrote the comic books with Jules Scheele and the self-help books with Alex Iantaffi.

Why I'm so passionate about trauma and plurality is, well it's deeply, I guess it's personal and political. It's deeply personal in that I've had about, once a decade in my life I've had these really severe mental health crises, and I never understood them until the most recent time, which has really happened during the pandemic and a little bit before.

And the lens of trauma and the lens of plurality have really helped me to understand what's going on when I hit those times. Because it's so wild to go from being someone who's functioning fine in the world to someone who's just full of self hate, really distrustful of others, seeing the world as really dangerous, feeling like life is not worth living. How do we make sense that we can suddenly find ourselves in that place quite quickly, or gradually end up in that place and then having all these emotional flashbacks and churning thoughts and really a sense of the past really intruding on the present.

**[00:02:11]**

And that sense of plurality, which I guess we'll get into in a moment, of that we're multiple different parts, really helps me to understand how I can be doing fine and then suddenly I'm in that place and really feel like a child trying to navigate the world all of a sudden.

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense. You touched upon it briefly, but let's go more into what exactly you mean by plurality and these different parts?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

Also, what you mean by trauma because people have different definitions.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely. Well, I'll do the plurality bit first. And I suppose that's funny when you asked, 'who are you?' at the beginning, because I could say, I'm Dr Meg-John Barker and I've done these books. But I could also say, well, I'm these seven people and I actually have names for all my parts. And I've done a free book all about this on my website if people are interested in hearing more. Where I actually have conversations between my parts as blog posts or essays. So I'm really keen that the different parts of me have conversations about plurality and about how they understand it. So I guess I'm trying to live it.

There are a lot of books out there about this way of understanding things, and I'll mention some of the authors in a minute, but they tend to present it just from the one side of them. And I just thought it would be nice for people to see it modeled. So that's something that's really important in my writing about this.

And I think there's a real problem that this idea of plurality, or multiplicity, has been so demonized and pathologized in our culture. Our culture has this idea that people are singular units, and you have to be quite consistent. And it's like you're born into, you have an identity and that's fixed until you die. And so the idea of multiple personalities has been really stigmatized. And the only movies you will see about it, one of them is a serial killer, that kind of thing. So you're mad and you're bad if you're plural.

But actually, if you look at the books on this by the people who are really into this idea of plurality or parts work, or internal family systems is another approach, it says everybody has different sides themselves. And the idea of having an inner child or having an inner critic, which most of us can really relate to, is one in the spectrum. I definitely have a very vivid experience of it, so I probably would be diagnosed with DID, that's what Multiple Personality Disorder is now called, Dissociative Identity Disorder. But I am like many people who consider themselves plural systems, I'm quite critical of the idea that it's a disorder. And in a way it's just a trauma piece that makes it something incredibly difficult. The actual being plural part is a wonderful thing and being able to move between different parts of yourself at different times.

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But just to say upfront, the kind of writers that I'm drawing on are Hal and Sidra Stone, John Rowan, Dick Schwartz who did the internal family systems model, and Janina Fisher, who's built on some of his ideas with a more somatic trauma understanding as well. But there are lots of spiritualities that have always understood people having multiple energies. Or if you just watch the Pixar film *Inside out*, that's another way of understanding it that's very down home and familiar. Margot Feldman has also done some really nice work around using *Inside Out*, but also the different F's, fight, flight, freeze, fawn as maybe we can map out different parts onto those. There's lots of people who are playing with these ideas in really useful ways.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. And I really like the way you're reframing it. And talking about having different parts of ourselves doesn't have to be a bad thing. And having multiple personalities doesn't have to be a disorder. And I'm curious for you, how did you get in touch with these different parts? And how did you narrow it down to seven different personalities and seven different parts?

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I mean, it was a surprise. I remember studying this in psychology back in the day, multiple personalities, and people were questioning if it even existed, the reality of it, saying it's just something made up between therapists and clients. So that had been my view and I'd seen myself very much as a single individual, which is why those times and severe PTSD times were really confusing for me, because suddenly I was like a very different person.

But it was more, I guess, 5 or 6 years ago. And I think perhaps being trans or nonbinary helped because I was exploring different gendered parts of me. And I was also exploring different parts of my sexuality and the kink world and the queer world. And I think it was those things that started to make me realize, this is not just role play, this is not just like playing a part of this differently gendered, differently sexuality part, actually this feels like a completely different embodiment. Like I'm navigating the world in a lot of ways. There's this quite gentle woman, very much about helping people, but here I am suddenly this really cocky guy or this really dominant masculine energy, like what's going on here?

And so I started to just explore some more through fiction, through journal writing, we can get into maybe some of the how to's later. And it became really clear, I could really feel when I was in one of those energies or another of them, or sometimes two present together. And over time it became very clear that there were seven. Although I like Dick Schwartz's idea around internal family systems that maybe even those parts have their own system. So they're quite complicated. They also have different layers to them as well. But for me, it's quite a clear seven. But some people have plural systems, there's hundreds of them. Some people, it might be only three. So there's no right number of parts or something. It's just different experiences for different people.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And I guess again, the word parts is quite broad. So different, if you're focusing on more the inner child, the inner teenager, the inner adult or the inner critic, for example, or if you're focusing more on gendered and the way you feel and the more masculine or the more feminine or more dominant or more submissive parts, then that will bring up different things. So depending on the lens you put on, it

sounds like there can be different numbers and different ways of exploring it. And as you said, hopefully we'll have lots of time to get into that in a bit.

**[00:08:56] Dr Meg-John Barker**

There's definitely lots of routes into exploring it. And no right or wrong way. But I think just having that experience like, whoa, I'm now in a very different, my feelings are different, my embodiment is different, even my taste might be different. Maybe, if I can express it quite vividly, people are like, whoa, you suddenly seem like a lot smaller or a lot bigger. It is that vivid, for me at least.

**Jaia Bristow**

And I think we all have that thing where we often feel quite different with different people and what relationships we have with certain social groups or professionally, and the way we are with our family and with our partner or partners or friends, can be quite different. I'm sure everyone can relate to some degree to feeling different in different situations or contexts or with different people. Or feeling, again, younger or older or more, depending on who we're relating to, but even when we're on our own, I know I've had experiences where I feel very different.

And for me, I used to compare it to in the *Narnia* series, the very first book, there's a whole scene with, I think it was Prince Caspian, and he's under a curse. Anyway, I won't get into it too much. But again, he has these different parts and then night falls and he changes into a different person and you have to figure out which one is the real him and whether it's the cursed him or the real him. And I always used to feel like that, again, when I was very depressed or dealing with difficult mental health stuff. And then I shift into a different phase and feel more related to that. And so I think it's really an interesting lens to be talking about trauma.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

That's a great way in. I think kids books, and *Inside Out* and things like that, are such a great way because they make it so accessible. And I just hate how confused people must have to be when they don't have this knowledge to draw on. And often people do dissociate somewhat between different states so it's really confusing experiences like, God I was out in the world doing all this stuff and now I can't imagine how I could have done that. And it's really disconcerting.

Whereas if you've got this understanding, it's like, oh, that's okay. I've got these multiple parts to myself, and they have really different ways of being. And I just have to get to know them a lot better and then that's going to be easier on me to shift between those different energies or whatever. And some people call them parts or cells or alters, there's loads of different words, but that's all referring to the same thing.

**Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. And so, first of all, what's your definition of trauma? What are you talking about when you're talking about trauma? And how does plurality link into this trauma lens?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. So for me, I always think about cultural and developmental trauma, which you can bring together under intergenerational trauma, I guess. And I think they both work in quite similar ways. And I've started to call it violence and silence as the two pivotal bits.

**[00:11:58]**

So cultural trauma is really this white western, capitalist, colonialist normal way of being, which is really violent and traumatizing. Which is the way that our struggles are individualized, there's something wrong with you. The way families and relationships are very private, the ownership of property, the idea that we should all be seeking success and pleasure more and more and more all the time. The split between ourselves and others and the exploitation of some people by others and exploitation of land. You can see these lists all over the place but it's a really traumatizing way of being, obviously it has been imposed around the world.

And the silence that it's presented as factors, like just how things are. So this is massive cultural gaslighting that suggests that, if you're not doing well under the system, there must be something wrong with you. Rather than that you're probably a marginalized or oppressed person who's being massively exploited. So on a cultural level we live in this traumatizing culture, literally traumatizing the planet. And while people are becoming more aware of it, it's still really the normative system, and it's really hurting people. And then there's this double hurting because people are being silenced around it, or gas lit around it all the time.

And then developmental trauma, the way a lot of this is passed down through families, but as I understand it, particularly around emotion. Under that cultural system it's only acceptable to have certain emotions, and you have to perform a certain version of yourself that's successful and happy and good.

And so what happens is when kids are struggling in various ways, their parents aren't able to tolerate that. They're not able to tolerate those difficult feelings that are coming up. And so it's this understanding where caregivers, or the other people around the kid, they can't hold and hear the feelings that are coming up for those kids. And that means that the kids themselves can't learn how to hold and hear those feelings so they're overwhelmed by the feelings.

And sometimes that's because the kids are abandoned, they're left alone with their overwhelming feelings, they're neglected. And sometimes it's because, almost the other way, that caregivers and others are too intrusive, and are punishing them for having the feelings or projecting all their feelings onto the child. And that leaves us with all that kind of attachment stuff that comes from all of that.

So we've got the cultural trauma and the way it's manifested in families, and where plurality comes in is that way of seeing things is that, we'd all have these different plural states quite naturally, and apparently there's research with kids that shows that they do flow through really different states. But with trauma, with those kinds of things happening in your family and in the world around you, they become these big rifts and these big splits internally where some parts get completely dissociated or cast out and other parts become really foregrounded and have to take on all the load.

So, for example, if a kid becomes very hypervigilant in a family, like that could be a hypervigilant part that becomes very foregrounded because they're trying to protect themselves from overwhelming amounts of fear.

And I do like the internal family systems model here, which suggests we have some parts that are protectors and some parts that are exiles, they're holding the trauma, they're holding those feelings that are so difficult, that we need other parts to protect them. So with hypervigilance, for example, that hypervigilant part could be seen as the one that's protecting you from the extremely overwhelming fear and shame that might come up if you're not constantly worrying about everything.

checking everything. Or you might become a very parentified child, a very helpful kind of child and that's a protector from your own vulnerability because it wasn't okay to be vulnerable again, either in your family or in the world around you when you were small.

### **[00:16:21]**

So we become these split off parts, I guess. And from my experience, when you're then retraumatized, when really hard things happen in your life, what might happen is that you go back then and that's that experience that's really disconcerting or sudden, and this was happening for me about a year ago. It's like, I am experiencing the world as a terrified child, literally. A lot of the day I'm really terrified, even the smallest thing is going wrong. And it's so scary because how do I come and do an interview for a trauma conference? How do I live my life and do my work? And it's really terrifying because I've already done all this stuff so I can't take it back and return to bed.

And then recently I've been much more working with the inner critic energy which is very angry. And again, like, gosh, how am I suddenly this nice person is suddenly full of rage? And again, how do I deal with these really quite overwhelming levels of rage? And in both cases, what really helps is to see that's part of me, and that part of me, because they haven't been healed before or held and heard, they have to come in with this overwhelming energy. And it feels like, oh, this is who I am. This is all I am. It's all I've ever been. How did I ever think otherwise? But that's just that part has overwhelmed the system. And if their emotions can be held and heard now by me, by my therapist, by the people around me, then hopefully over time, they can become more manageable. That part where you have to scream in order to be able to be heard.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I'm curious because I do a lot of spiritual practices as well. And we talk about some of this in the same way. But to clarify, do you feel like your parts are constant, but that they're just screaming at times? Or because the way we sometimes talk about it it's parts frozen in time, almost. And then you can digest those emotions. And again, the same way you're talking about if it's held by oneself, by a therapist, by a teacher, by friends, by family, whoever it is, if there's space for it, for the feelings to be felt and held, rather than repressed and suppressed or released in an unhealthy way, then those parts can be more digested and integrated into one's whole self. That's the lens that I see it through. So I'm curious, whether for you, it's like they're constant parts or how it works in your view.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

For me, I experience all seven around, and in fact I make it my business to make sure each part gets some time every day to make sure everyone's doing all right. But yeah, to answer your question, I think there's definitely a sense of the more traumatized parts are frozen in time. They're really seeing now through the lens of the past, which isn't to say, now isn't pretty damn scary, because it really is. So perhaps that's one reason why a lot of people are experiencing this a lot at the moment, because the dangerousness of the present is echoing how dangerous childhood felt.

So, yeah, there's a piece where they're frozen in time, and actually going back to those memories and really holding and hearing them now can help to release some of that process, some of that stuff that's been unprocessed. I find those ideas really helpful.

But there's also a piece for me that, it's like each energy of those seven, sometimes I see it like they're seven colors of the rainbow, and there's some similar ideas here in Tibetan Buddhism, which I draw on quite a lot, that these energies, there's nothing wrong with them. It's that they've got tangled up

and twisted. So definitely with the inner critic, for example, like the grief, rage feeling that I associate with her, that part of me, it's really valid. It's really vital. And it's been a real problem that I haven't been able to fully experience that in life. But because rage was so unacceptable in my upbringing and so dangerous, it got turned in against myself. And that's the inner critic piece. Or if anyone was treating me badly, I think I would feel that burst of energy and anger towards them and then immediately turn it in back on myself.

**[00:20:44]**

So when the inner critic comes in, like violently over my life, what she's usually saying is, somebody's done something, like something nonconsensual has happened here, something injustice happened here. But I can't vocalize that in any way other than self attack. That's the only thing I'm able to say. And now it's a process of trying to enable her to be able to say what she's seeing for real rather than doing that. So if the system hears that self critical voice getting higher and higher, it's like, okay, something out there is triggering this, there's some injustice, there's some non-consensual treatment. And it's just like how to listen, how to really hear what's being said rather than these overwhelming, churning thoughts being applied to absolutely everything. Does that make sense?

**Jaia Bristow**

It does. It's interesting that your inner critic is female, it sounds like.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah we call her Morgan. Well, she was a monster for a while.

**Jaia Bristow**

And it sounds like when Morgan's present that that's almost a sign that there's something that needs to be looked at, rather than completely identifying with Morgan and 100% becoming Morgan and believing all the criticism Morgan is throwing at you or other people. Or it's like, oh, okay, Morgan's here, it means that there's something to be looked at, something's being triggered.

And I guess again, it's interesting talking about the word trigger and triggering in terms of trauma and different parts, because the way I see it often is that when we get triggered, it's one of those frozen parts that has been triggered. That's what you say. It's going back in time. And it's one of the ways I've dealt with dealing with trauma is remembering that I'm safe at this moment. And that it is actually this part that is still relating to history rather than relating to the present. So I'm curious if you have a bit more to say about that and how we can use these parts and this lens of plurality to heal trauma.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I really like the idea from Bonnie Badenoch, that instead of triggered, she uses touched and awoken. It's like that's what happened is this part has been touched and awoken, and it's an opportunity now to heal them.

I think there's something a bit complex around this, is it the past? Is it the present? Which I'm still working through myself, because I feel like each of these parts and their energy has this real potential to actually see the present quite clearly and do something quite useful. But it's because they're still so mired in the past, perhaps, and have to often speak in these overwhelming ways.

**[00:23:28]**

It's like, again, there's another part of me, Robin, who's very about connection and really doesn't want to be lonely. And again, that's got very tangled up so he's the part that could really be needy and project things onto other people. It's about working with that, but not eradicating that desire for connection, which is a really healthy, useful thing to have.

So there's almost a sense of disentangling them or helping to heal the bits of the past that have become all stuck on them, so that they can flow more easily, and also they can trust themselves, and they can trust the rest of the system rather than constantly being scared they're going to be cast out again or pushed forward again and have to do too much work.

So I do like Dick Schwarz's idea that it's like a family system. And in a dysfunctional family system everyone gets pushed into these different roles, and some people get cast out entirely and made the scapegoats and all of this. And what we're trying to do is like family therapy. Everyone is a valued member of the system and let's check out the dynamics that end up playing out and try and, again, just build these really trusting bonds where everyone can feel listened to and everyone's needs can be met.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I really like that. I think that's really supportive. And I know I am definitely, constantly having conversations in my head with myself and different parts saying different things. And that again, talking about children's stories, you often see that in cartoons with the little devil or the little angel on the side. And it's caricatural but it's true to have those different voices in our heads sometimes pushing us in different directions and feeling really torn about what to do.

And when you're talking about the past and present and which is which, I think it's good to remember that time isn't actually linear, because for those parts in that moment, the past and the present are one. In that moment when you feel those feelings, those feelings, visceral, physical feelings in your body that you can't just be like, oh, it's past trauma, get over it, because if not none of us would be traumatized, we'd just to shake it off and move on like animals.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

I hate that that seems to be the attitude again in this culture that's so individualized and this idea that everyone should just be, like these very free agents who are responsible for themselves and can easily see where they're acting out unconscious stuff and be these rational adults. We're just not. We are these systems full of traumatized parts. And in a way, it's more dangerous to be covering that over and pretending that you can be this super functional adult under this extremely traumatizing system that we're in with all of this traumatic baggage from the past.

So I think we need to treat ourselves and each other deeply, kindly and assume that we've all got these areas and that those are the parts that need the most love because they were treated so appallingly as small children, small, vulnerable children.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And especially at the moment, you and I were talking a bit about this off camera as it were, about just the pandemic that's been going on for a year and a half now, more than that. By the time this comes out in December it's coming up to almost 2 years that we've been living in this pandemic. There is no going back to what it was like before. And then on top of that, there's all the



other worldly things happening between the climate crisis, wars, and then each country feeling even more going into individualistic mode rather than community and supporting. And I think this idea of really being kind and gentle to ourselves is so important.

### **[00:27:27] Dr Meg-John Barker**

That's vital. And I think a lot of people at this time they're really turned in against themselves and turned out against each other because I think we're just the background level of trauma is so high, and it echoes that dangerousness of our past when for real, we felt very endangered because we were so vulnerable and so small.

And so people are, if you don't have this framework, you're acting out in the world from these parts and thinking, oh, that's just me. Oh, that person must have done something terribly wrong. I'm going to blame them and attack them. And of course, then that person, we're often pinging off each other like pinball. That was the trigger for that person and suddenly they're back in the place where they get attacked all the time, and they want to hide from the world. And a lot of us are very turned in.

Again, the inner critic piece is so vital here because so many of us turn in against ourselves. And even if we are attacking others, we're often attacking ourselves just as much, or we're desperately trying to please and keep everyone happy, which is just impossible.

Yeah. I just think there's a lot of that about and how we can hold steady and really tend to ourselves, but also see that that's what's happening in other people. And in an ideal world, be able to see that's what's going on and not turn it in against ourselves, but just be that endpoint of, oh, I see what's going on. That person's traumatized and acting out. That's really understandable right now.

And I have a theory that the more you're with these energies in yourself, the more able you might be able to hold other people, too. So an angry attack is one that I find incredibly hard in other people without disintegrating or people pleasing. But the more I'm with Morgan's energy in me, this real rage, it hasn't happened yet but I'm hopeful that one of these days that's going to come at me, and I'm going to be like, oh, I know that one. I get that. And I can just be, I don't know, stand firm but gentle in that, rather than seeing something about me and collapsing.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think we've touched upon this a bit, the systems, the outer systems and the inner systems and being able to see that and understand that and how important it is. It's one of the things I teach, for example, in my workshops on power, privilege, and prejudice. It's that if we don't recognize the systems in play, then we internalize all of the messaging we're getting from society. And as a queer, disabled woman of color, I get a lot of negative messaging from society. But once I understand that that's just the systems I live in and it's not me, it's not me, Jaia Bristow, who is inferior in any way, that really helps.

And I think what you're talking about is doing the same with internal systems and understanding the different emotions and the different parts and how it all plays and plays out together. And I think what you're saying is true. I've worked a lot with anger in myself, and then it happened to me, again I used to feel really small in anger, especially around men and male masculine voices. If I heard a loud male voice in a room, I would immediately shrink and go small and get shaky. I'd often start crying, even if the voice wasn't directed at me, even if the anger wasn't directed at me, just being in the room with that.

**[00:30:48]**

And over the years of doing huge amounts of work, it happened to me earlier this year that there was someone who was very angry, who was masculine, who was very drunk as well so it was coming out, and he was aiming it all at me and was just yelling at me and saying horrible things to me, and I was able to just stand there and feel super grounded and let him vent completely. And then at the end was kind of like, okay, we'll talk about this tomorrow when you're sober. And then after he left I checked in with myself, and there was a little bit of shakiness and a little bit of nervousness, and I was able to process that.

So it's possible, as you say, when you work with these emotions and these parts of yourself, to then be more able to hold and be present when it's coming from outside as well.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

That's an amazing story. I'm aspiring to that. I really have faith that that is the case. It's like these energies become, or these parts become so disowned in us. And it's really telling to me that the two parts that I've most disowned are the two parts I find most difficult, those energies are most difficult in other people. And I think there's something about, they become hated out there and hated in here but if we can really work with them, and this idea that we're bringing them home and making them safe enough, then again, I think there's real potential here.

And I just love the systemic understanding. It's almost like the individual is just the wrong level of analysis for anything. We can't individualize, as you say, all these systemic oppressions that are happening around us and that we are operating within. If we internalize those we're replicating that violence on ourselves and then as an individual. We are not this one thing, we are a system as well, of which some parts are already liberated, already unable to be their full potential, and other parts are still locked in the past and frozen and stuck. And it's about just trying to do that work of liberating all of them, I suppose.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I really like that, the idea that each part can evolve, and then as each part evolves as well, different parts will be called forward in different moments. So in the example I gave, it wasn't the young, fearful, shrinking child that was called forward who had suddenly grown. It was that through doing all the work she felt protected and it was another part of me, a stronger part, that was present in that moment.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

And we need to talk about that because I guess people could be left with, well if I'm all these traumatized parts, who's the one bringing them home or looking after them? And I really like the sense that we have containing parts and traumatized parts. Or perhaps it's just that some of those energies haven't been so traumatized, whereas others have. But for me, it's equally important to cultivate containing parts as well as doing that work of healing the more traumatized parts, because otherwise who's going to do it?

And that's been so recent for me, I never understood the idea of loving yourself. I couldn't possibly understand what it would mean. It just did not compute for years. And this plural thing has given me this understanding that I can be in one part of me like loving another part. And actually, that's really easy, even with the most difficult parts, I suppose, like the inner critic or the really desperate, needy

part. It just seems quite automatic from these more containing parts, and some would call them parental parts.

**[00:34:31]**

So this is where it links to the idea of secure attachment that you get in some of the trauma literature, that if you haven't had that secure attachment growing up with caregivers or others, you can get it now with yourself. And that's how you do it. It's like you cultivate these containing parts.

And really, it's only been for the last year that mine have been accessible 24/7. Before that they were almost like a patchwork of little moments when I had received a lot of kindness and nurturing from somebody, or I had seen a character in a movie doing that and related to or something. And then gradually putting together these containing parts and then gradually running the show a bit more, living day to day life and then noticing when a traumatized part was up, and then at those points, turning towards that and doing that work of whatever needed doing in that moment with that part. So that's the way it operates for me is having really three parts that are more containing, and it's been gradually working through four parts that are more traumatized than actually each one of those often coming forward for a few months where they are the part that's needing the most work, and then a sense that they've done that piece, at least for now, and then moving on to another one.

**Jaia Bristow**

And so do you have practical tips on how people can cultivate these containing parts?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I've got a little Zoom on plural selves on my website that gives a lot of ideas like, how can you get in touch with what is yours? Because if people were where I was 7 years ago, they would be like, it does not compute, I'm just this person. But there's a lot of different ways that you can start to see, oh, okay, like you said, how are you in different relationships is one, or just starting to feel the different energies.

You can use movement, you can use art. And I found journaling really helpful. So one of the first things I did was, it came from Hal and Sidra Stone, this kind of idea of interviewing the different parts and just asking them, who are you? Where do you come from in my life? What do you want? What do you need? Those kinds of questions. And interviewing them.

And for a while I was like, is it 9 parts? Is it 7? It can take a while. Sometimes you can get this initial idea. And yeah, sometimes mapping them on to maybe the different emotions in *Inside Out* or the fight, flight, freeze and fawn, the sense that we all have those capacities in us but some are more foregrounded and backgrounded.

There's lots of different routes in but I suppose the ones I found most helpful is journaling as a conversation. And at first it might seem a bit like pretend, but just go with it. Okay, I'm going to talk to my inner child. Then self talk, like just chatting. And Dick Schwartz's new book, *No Bad Parts*, has got lots of really nice ideas for how you might just tune into a feeling in your body. And like, what's that trying to say? It's a bit like focusing. But instead of just listening to the feeling you're actually like, which part is trying to speak to me here? And as you go towards that feeling, if something else comes in, it's like, too far to go to that feeling or a that's another part coming in to try and protect, so then you can talk to that part, or you can ask that part to step back while you talk to this part. So you can do it almost like a meditation.

**[00:38:04]**

And I also find it helpful just to do a very basic meditation of just trying to be with the energies that are coming up. And just be like, oh, that's the energy. Instead of going into all of the thoughts, just keep coming back to, how does that energy feel in my body? That grief, rage of Morgan's, for example, or that loneliness of Robin's. And that is a really basic way of just showing them that they're welcome and there's no problem with that energy being there, but they don't have to get in the figuring out, all of the trying to act it out. They can just be here in the body.

### **Jaia Bristow**

That's really important, remembering that we can get in touch with these parts in a very felt sense way, rather than in an intellectual mental way. Because, especially if people are struggling with mental health or with other things, sometimes trying to figure it all out and being really heady can make trauma a lot worse. So the idea of tuning more into the feelings and coming back into the body and connecting to the different parts in that way sounds really beautiful and helpful.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

That is probably the go to, it's like those overwhelming feelings just continually bringing it back to, how does this feeling actually feel? And it turns out often it is the churning thoughts, it's the hypervigilance, it's the inner critic thoughts, it's all of that that's the really painful thing. And the feeling in the body is beautiful.

And then I do like a lot of Pema Chödrön's practices which are about when you feel it in your body and then you feel it for everyone else who's feeling it. And there is this beautiful sense of, I'm getting in touch with all of these energies, some of which I've never been able to let myself feel and now I can feel them and now it's like, oh God, I know what it's like to be that person. That person I found so difficult, who I thought had treated me so badly. I suddenly have this insight into what the world must be like as there is in this all the time, and they're responding in a similar way all the time, rather than being able to just be with the energy.

So it's like reconnection on every level, the way we said everything is a system. It reconnects us when we've been so disconnected, we've been so disconnected from the different parts of ourselves, we're reconnecting. But we've been so disconnected from others and now, on some kind of level, we're reconnecting with them, too, because we know what it's like to be operating from this place.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, that's really beautiful. And I love the idea. It's something I often talk about with lots of friends and stuff, this idea that the more, and it's something you mentioned at the beginning, the more you can connect to yourself and build capacity to be with all your own emotions and feelings and parts and ages and genders and all those elements in yourself, the more you then have capacity to be with someone else. And then when they're coming from a more traumatized part, from a more frozen part, from a more difficult part, then it can bring up more compassion in oneself rather than frustration or anger, or, why are they acting like this? It's just like you can see that they're coming from, identified with or have in themselves, in that moment, a very traumatized, frozen, difficult part.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

And that's where we don't have to get pulled into the drama and the dynamic with them. And that doesn't mean ever taking abuse or non-consensual behavior, I think this can be misunderstood as like

you get to this place and then suddenly you just let everything happen and you don't do any social justice work or you let people abuse you because, oh, I know where it's coming from. That's not helpful for you or for them. But it's like you cannot get caught up in it. You cannot get into escalating it because you're coming back at that person with all your blame. And you're not collapsing yourself in shame or doing people please which just keeps it all going. You're more and more able, hopefully to step back and maybe respond in a wise way or maybe just absent yourself from the situation at different times.

**[00:42:14]**

But you have this more, it's really much more clarity, I think, and less confusion. But again, I just don't want to give people any idea that this is easy or quick. No, it's really not. And there's always going to be edges where you can't go. But I hope what you get more able to do, I think what I'm getting more able to do, is to say to people, oh, this one is still too hard for me. I know you want me to sit here and hear how angry you are with me, that is not something I'm capable of. I'm working on it, but it's not something that I can be around right now. So knowing where your limits are too, and then working those edges.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And I think that's such an important distinction, and also having compassion for someone is having compassion for yourself first. I think you and I have talked about this in a previous interview. And it doesn't mean not setting clear boundaries. And again, in the example I gave where the person was yelling at me, it was like I held it and I stayed centered and got in touch with myself and my feelings and could see that that person was an attack, but I didn't just go, oh, yeah, you're right, and took it all on board. And I was like, okay, I hear that you're really angry right now, and we will talk about this again when you're sober.

It's still so important to set boundaries. And in that moment I was able to handle it. But if I felt like, oh, it was a young, frozen, shaky child that had been triggered in that moment who couldn't handle a raised voice, then the right response would have been to just walk away, or ask a friend to come and support.

And again, things like allyship is so important because again, especially when we're talking about systemic injustices and things like that or social justice work, but it's that so often people in marginalizing and oppressed groups will have a more traumatized and frozen part that's being triggered.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Touched and awoken.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Touched and awoken. And so to have someone who can come and just shield a bit and offer some protection and support. And allyship can be in a lot of different forms. It can be engaging with the person who's attacking and take them away. It can be about protecting the person who is under attack or about offering them support. And again, I talk a lot about this in other work I do, so I won't get into it too much.

**[00:44:38] Dr Meg-John Barker**

No. But I love that example because again, it's about knowing your limits. It's like, okay, I'm the marginalized trans person here. I know being with somebody who's usually transphobic is an edge for me, it's going to be too far. I shouldn't have to deal with that. So absolutely, that's the point at which it's better for me to have the ally deal with that situation.

But it also works in conflicts as well, more like interpersonal conflicts, again, if you know your edges, you can be like, this is not one I can deal with directly, me and the other person. I'm going to need somebody in accountability process as well. Maybe we have our support people and they have their support people and those are the ones who do some of the work. It's like knowing where we're too traumatized to do it ourselves, and we need that holding through it, or it's just not appropriate for us to be having to do it.

And also the places where we do have capacity. And it's like, actually, I'm there now with this particular person or with this particular situation. I can do that myself and do what you did. That real grounded, I'm holding that traumatized part of myself. So just kind of knowing. But yeah, I think again, it's easy to get into this idea that this is all very individual practice, and it's all kind of meditation and self work. But actually it's really helpful if you can have practitioners that you work with, perhaps who can help you hold and hear the different parts. I bring my parts to therapy, the ones who are struggling, and then they have a therapy session.

And also this idea from Pete Walker of reparenting my committee. We need our support people around us. We need the people we can practice doing relationships differently with as we reconfigure our systems. And then in an ideal world, we need much more consensual and trauma-informed communities where everybody is doing this work and is helping each other do it, because it's really hard to do it alone when the culture is telling you to do anything but.

**Jaia Bristow**

100%. So I really like that message of it's not all individualistic. And yes, you need to tune into your own body to be able to do this work. But even just that part, you can do with support from other people.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Oh, yeah. Sometimes you can't do it yourself. Like sometimes I've really needed my therapist to slow me right down and help me access that part. And if you can't afford therapy, if you can't get low cost trauma-informed therapy, or therapists who work in this way, you can do some of it peer to peer, supporting each other through some of these felt sense practices and support groups around doing this work.

But I think trying to go alone, because it was put there in relationship and it was put there by these unjust systems so we need to heal it, in relationship and in a systemic way as well. If we remain within traumatized relationships and systems then it's just going to keep playing out however much work we're doing ourselves.

**Jaia Bristow**

Meg-John, I'm mindful of time, which is a shame because I'd love to talk to you all day. But how can people find out more about you and your work?

**[00:47:51] Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, it's all on my website, which is [rewriting-the-rules.com](https://rewriting-the-rules.com) or if you just Google me I think it's the first thing that comes up.

And I put out a whole free book about trauma and one on plurality and one on consent. So they kind of deal with all of this and the way they work together. And then there's some free Zooms on there and lots of blog posts and stuff as well, as well as links to the books that you can pay money for that are out there in the world as well. And I'm working on one at the moment on mental health, which is going to cover a lot of this territory, so that will be out next year.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Thank you so much. And for people watching you can read Meg-John's full bio and the link to their website just below here.

And thank you so much for your time today, Meg-John. I've really appreciated it.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Thanks again.