



Healing relational trauma

Guest: Heather Monroe

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, cohost of the Trauma Super Conference. Today, I'm speaking with Heather Monroe, an integrative psychotherapist who specializes in the healing of relational trauma. Heather's approach to helping people is creative, open and flexible, as she understands that just as the context of trauma is individual, so is the process of healing.

Thank you for joining me today, Heather.

Heather Monroe

Thank you for having me. It's so great to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So, Heather, I'd love it if we could start with an overview of what relational trauma is.

Heather Monroe

Yes. So I define relational trauma as a consistent disruption in the child's sense of safety. That's both physical and emotional safety within the family system.

And I was going to say that trauma isn't so much about what happened to you, it's about what happened inside of you. And so this is subjective and different for everyone. What one sibling might have thought was totally fine, another sibling could have been highly sensitive to, and it really did a number on them, because their body and their nervous system works differently than their sibling's nervous system.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you contextualize that right out of the gate, too, because so much of what can be difficult when we start coming to terms with our own trauma and then start to try to share those learnings or share that understanding with our families of origin where that trauma occurred, is a denial of your experience, because it's not shared by other people, or they're at a different place in their journey of understanding or in their coming to terms with all the things that have made them who they are and how they react to the outside world. And so I love that you just named that it's not the exact term or the exact events that happened to you, it's how your particular body makeup and nervous system interpreted those events.

[00:02:13] Heather Monroe

Exactly. And also what you were able to do in the midst of that event happening. We know that people in acute trauma situations, the ones that are able to escape and actually have the follow through within the body of getting out, are much less likely to have post traumatic stress disorder than the person who shut down or who wasn't able to escape, who froze. That person's nervous system gets stuck. So yeah, it really isn't about the event. It's about what happened inside your body during the event.

Meagen Gibson

And a lot of people are familiar with the terms fight or flight. And I think that's kind of what you're talking about. If you get to use the fight or flight and discharge what your body is generating as a response to an event, then it doesn't necessarily become a trauma that you've integrated into your system. But there's other types of event responses in the nervous system, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes. And I would also like to say that's with acute trauma, that's with, like, an automobile accident or a kidnapping or something. But what's different about relational trauma is that it's accumulative. This is something... It's like a consistent disruption. So the child's reality, the child's sense of emotional safety or even physical safety is constantly being disrupted. And that's a cumulative stress that's building up in the body. So you might not be able... It's not like one event. It's a constant event that's happening relationally with your caregivers, with the family system.

Meagen Gibson

And because we're wired for connection, and we're wired to preserve those relationships at all cost for our very survival, we're wired not to object or remove ourselves from those chronic situations. Right?

Heather Monroe

Yes. And we don't know any better when we're children. We're learning from our caretakers, essentially, I mean completely. So when a caretaker consistently denies a child's reality, like you just screamed at me, that was really scary. No, I didn't. I didn't scream at you. That's really disorienting. And if that keeps happening, that child is going to grow up having a very disoriented perception of what they see and what they hear. They'll be more prone to doubting themselves and denying their intuition, denying their own reality, than someone who didn't go through that.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm glad that you just arrived right there because I was going to say, let's go through some examples of what that chronic relational trauma might look like. That was one of them. I'm thinking of a situation where you express an emotion or you are maybe a sensitive child, and a parent just denies your sensitivity, like, "Stop crying!" or "You're fine." Or these more subtle ways of denying and dismissing your emotional state at all times.

[00:05:28] Heather Monroe

Yes. Absolutely. So that's definitely a denying of reality, a child's sense of reality. I also want to say, putting into context, because there is a negative connotation, not the way you said it, because I think we're both in the same boat of understanding sensitivity and what that looks like, but there is a negative connotation, I think, around like, a sensitive child. And the way that I'm looking at what a sensitive child is, is a child whose nervous system is more stimulated than a child whose nervous system doesn't get as activated.

So a child whose window of tolerance around stimulation, whether that's yelling or loud noises or things like that, it's how we're wired. So it's not as if a child gets to choose that they're overwhelmed by something. It's that their body, the biological workings of their body, are wired a certain way.

Meagen Gibson

I'm really glad that you named that.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. Just want to name that for people.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And that's not really something that has been widely acknowledged or known until very recently is that we come into the world pre shaped in our nervous system's regularity and sensitivities, and that it's not our fault or the fault of our caregivers, that that's how our nervous system was made.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So I want to look at two things: over relational trauma and then covert. I want to spend more time on covert, because I think that's the lesser known and talked about. But overt is physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse. So that is when there is a real... And abandonment. So there's like a real..

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, like severe neglect, maybe?

Heather Monroe

Exactly, severe neglect. So there are real threats to survival there. And when that happens, all the things I'm going to talk about around the person are going to be affected.

Meagen Gibson

So we're talking about, if that's been going on consistently or even just if it goes on in the home, that child is going to be severely affected by that. Their perception of self is going to be completely disoriented, their boundary system, attachment system is going to be severely affected, especially if there's ongoing abuse. You're going to be seeing a real issue around attachment, like how we attach to others and the world around us.

[00:08:18] Heather Monroe

The other ways that relational trauma happens that's much more covert and insidious is if you look at emotional neglect and abandonment as an umbrella underneath the umbrella, there's shaming and blaming. There's inverted relationships, emotional incest, psychological control, and enmeshment. Those are like the five main ones that I like to look at, and I can go into each one if you want.

Meagen Gibson

And would those fall into more the complex PTSD sort of trauma bucket?

Heather Monroe

Yes. But also it depends the extent, right? There are nuances to all of this, too. When we're looking at complex PTSD, we're looking at a lot of different types of relational trauma that's going on, and it's usually sprinkled with overt as well. Like, if there's overt trauma, you better believe that these other things are happening as well, because you can't consistently abuse a child without shaming and blaming them, without somewhat of an inverted relationship, without emotional incest, like without these other things, psychological control. So yes. Like yes, complex PTSD, absolutely.

Meagen Gibson

And also. Okay. So yeah. I would love it if you went through those five different types of covert.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. So shaming and blaming. This is something where a couple of things happen. One is if our caretakers aren't attuned to what shame looks like in us as children. So shame can look like what we think about, like when someone implodes, so their posture slouches, rounded shoulders, unable to look at you. There is a freezing to a certain extent. There's a shutdown in our bodies, and we're not able to talk, not able to find our voice. So if a caregiver just doesn't recognize that that kid is in a shame response, they may not help them get out of it.

And if the way that they parent continues to create a shame response that is...

Meagen Gibson

Exacerbates it or continues it.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. Or just keeps wiring the brain that way so that when you grow up and somebody confronts you, or you're in a fight with your partner, you are going to shut down, like it turns into a shame response, a shutdown mode, because your nervous system has become wired in that way.

The other way that kids respond to shame, or can, is that they get big, and they get angry, or they get explosive. And so that too can be a shame response. And those two different responses need two different reactions around settling and calming and understanding.

So understanding the shame response in a child, but also just being, if your caretaker was the type of person who did blame you a lot, or was very shaming, like, "You shouldn't think that way, what's

wrong with you? What's wrong with you for wanting that bike? How dare you ask me that! You know that I can't afford that." Like those kind of...

[00:11:56] Meagen Gibson

Or a really common parenting response that I know, I used to say and have corrected myself, is the rhetorical question responses where it's like, "Why would you do that?" When a child literally does not have the understanding to be able to rationalize why they did something that hurt their sibling or broke something, like they didn't have a why when they did it?

Heather Monroe

Yes. Exactly. Or, "What's wrong with you?" Those kind of things. So that is a programming that's happening. And so that is definitely one of the ways that there can be, again, sprinkled in, or that can be something that is a go to parenting style that you experienced as a child.

With an inverted relationship, that looks like, if you had a parent who had a mental health issue, suffered from depression or anxiety, and they didn't get any support around that, you may become their caretaker, emotional caretaker. So inverted is whenever the child is taking care of the parents instead of the parent taking care of the child.

And obviously that's not natural. That's not the way it should work. So that's going to create...

Meagen Gibson

For specific reasons. Like for the reasons that we're talking about because it creates all of this attachment and relational confusion and roles and identities and how we end up showing up in our adult relationships with other people. Right?

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So that's an inverted relationship.

Emotional incest is basically when there is a sense of unboundariedness or a lack of containment around the child with regards to sexuality, the caretaker's sexuality or the child's sexuality. So, for instance, if you grew up in a home where you were objectified a lot, or a caretaker said, "Wow, if you weren't my child, you'd be in trouble," or "I would date you," like stuff like that.

Meagen Gibson

Or allow other relatives to do that to you as well.

Heather Monroe

Or strangers. Exactly. So an objectification. Some signs of emotional incest is if you felt really uncomfortable around a caretaker, you didn't like sitting on their lap, you didn't like hugging them. It wasn't as if they ever touched you. And that's what's so confusing about emotional incest. There might never have been anything of a physicality to it, but there was a containment issue that you could feel. So let's say when they put you to bed or they came home after and you were in bed, you would pretend you were asleep, because you didn't want to have that intimacy.

[00:15:13]

The other way that intimacy can really feel dangerous is if you had a caretaker that wasn't around a lot and didn't put in the legwork of just the mundane, regular ins and outs, but then would have these intense moments with you that felt too intense.

So that also feels like...

Meagen Gibson

Or demanded too much, what's the word, intimacy, in a limited amount of time? Because we only have this limited amount of time together, let's get really deep, really fast and really connect deeply when you haven't earned that in that relationship consistently over time.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So when this happens, you can grow up being really confused and even thinking, did something happen? I don't understand. Why am I feeling this way around this parent or this person in my family system, but nothing happened. At the same time, everything was happening in the sense of your needs not being taken care of or not being acknowledged.

Meagen Gibson

And protected.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Anything else with emotional incest... It's also when a caretaker treats the child like a surrogate husband or a surrogate wife. So there's that inverted emotional relationship with that lack of containment around what a relationship between two adults look like versus a child and an adult, especially intimate relationships between an adult.

Meagen Gibson

And I was thinking, as you were talking, also, even if the objectification wasn't directed at the child, if it was directed to other people of their same gender or sex, maybe that could also give them that feeling of objectification and a lack of safety just by being near it or exposed to it.

Heather Monroe

Absolutely. Yes. So that is emotional incest. Psychological control is trying to control a child's behavior by coercion, by withholding love. So if every time your parent got mad at you, they stopped speaking to you, and they wouldn't hug you, they wouldn't kiss you, they wouldn't show you affection. That is withholding. That's psychological control. Putting a carrot in front of them...

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, finances, maybe even?

[00:17:47] Heather Monroe

Yeah. That can absolutely look like psychological control. So there's a difference between boundary setting and using things against a child. So using your affection against a child, using your love against a child, or making that child feel like your love is conditional. And this is very different than behavioral, sorry, it's escaping me the term, authoritative parenting.

Authoritative parenting is using structure, keeping boundaries, and showing a child boundaries and consequences, but doing it with kindness. So there's that structure.

Meagen Gibson

The key is like attunement in that type of parenting... Authoritative. It just escaped my mind.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So there's...

Meagen Gibson

Boundaries and rules, but with really well formed attunement with the child.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. There's a difference. And authoritative parenting, all the research shows that that is actually a great way to parent, and it's really helpful.

Psychological control, we see the research shows that you have all sorts of different issues with psychological control. The behavior grows underground, but it doesn't necessarily stop. There's more truancy in schools with psychological control. There's all different kinds of ways that kids act out when that's being used like a main parenting tool.

And then the last one is enmeshment, which I'm sure a lot of you have heard the word, et cetera. Enmeshment is inverted relationship except with one more component. It's like, you can have an inverted relationship happening, and the child grows up to be really walled off, like, they know that that was not okay, and they create walls in relationships because of it.

The other type is an inverted relationship where the child gets lost in it in a way where they don't know where their emotions start and their parents ends. So the enmeshment is over performing in the parents life and underperforming in your life, like codependency. That's by definition of codependency.

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, it sounds like codependency. I don't know if that's where you're going. Yeah.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. Exactly. So enmeshment is, I don't know where I end and my parent begins. I don't know if I'm feeling my feelings or if I'm feeling my parents' feelings, that kind of thing. So instead of like a shutdown or a wall off, that's actually open wide, like wide open.

[00:20:46] Meagen Gibson

A surrender of self to other.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Not knowing where the boundaries are in that. Yeah.

So those are the main ones that I always look at when assessing a client and looking at what the relationships were like in the family system.

Meagen Gibson

And that last one. Sorry I interrupted you. The last one, now I've totally forgotten my train of thought. Go ahead. It'll come back.

Heather Monroe

And I do that assessment, because when I see effects, certain issues in the self of how that person is functioning, I can pretty much know that these other things were happening. And so when I check in about these more covert ways that relational trauma manifests, you can bet that all these things were percolating in the background.

Meagen Gibson

And I'm sure people come to you not saying, like, here's what happened. And I understand that this is why. They come to you, and they say, I can't stay in a committed relationship, and I don't know why, or every time I have conflict with my partner, I shut down, and that's a problem for them. Or they come to you with a relational problem, and then it's your job to excavate and say, and the big joke is everybody's like, oh, tell me about your relationship with your mother. But there's a reason why we start with these origin family stories because they really do shape how we relate to people in our adult lives.

Heather Monroe

They are the blueprint from which we have to heal. They mark the spiritual journey that we are on in life.

Meagen Gibson

Right. They determine which trail you take on the trailhead, like which terrain you're going to need to navigate to get to the same summit everybody else is after.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. And so just like circumstances are going to be different for relational trauma, but the effects are the same, just like the circumstances for healing are going to be different for each person, but the results are the same. So some of the results of relational trauma that I see again and again are attachment issues, boundary issues, self esteem, perception, intuition, and self care. Those six things are like the big ones that I work on with clients and that I see being on a loop, that are consistent issues within their environment of themselves.

[00:23:34] Meagen Gibson

I saw a tweet a couple of years ago, I can't believe I'm going to quote Twitter, but I saw a tweet the other day or a couple of years ago that said something to the effect of, "Are you highly empathetic, or do you just have unresolved relational trauma?" And I was like that, oh, that refrains things quite a bit. And so I started doing some digging in that way. I was like, oh, because empathy is great, and empathy is a valuable skill and characteristic to possess. But when it goes into that enmeshment codependency behavior territory where you aren't able to do self care because you're surrendering your needs to everybody else in your life, that's where we need to do the work, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes. Or were you born that way with being open and empathetic and also had an uncontained caregiver who just didn't have an eye on that and so weren't taught how to create boundaries around your empathy? So could it be both?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Absolutely. I'm glad that you said that.

Heather Monroe

So these look... Do you want me to go through a little bit of what each one looks like?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Heather Monroe

Okay, cool. So, attachment science, adult attachment science, has been emerging, the adult attachment science. And it's really cool because we know now that you can get better no matter where you are in your attachment style. And there are ways to really work towards secure attachment.

But what I mean by it affects your attachment is that when there is consistent disruption to your sense of attunement and connection to your caregiver, it's going to affect your relationships and how you relate to other people, how you attach. And like you said, we are hardwired biologically for connection, which is going to make how we attach essential for our survival, but also whether we're thriving, because relationships are one of the biggest indicators of wellbeing in our society or just in ourselves, how well we feel in our lives are also about our relationships.

Meagen Gibson

Before you get into them, I just wanted to say that I recognize that we've used the word attunement, but we haven't actually talked about what that might look like or what it is, so if you could touch on that really shortly.

Heather Monroe

That's a great question.

[00:26:22] Meagen Gibson

Or briefly, I guess is the word.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. So attunement, it is simply when a caretaker knows what your need is at that moment.

And let me just say, we are not wired for perfection, which is wonderful.

Meagen Gibson

Nobody is all knowing and omniscient.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Our caretakers did not need to be attuned to us 100% of the time, 80% of the time they didn't need to be. I mean, sorry. They didn't need to be attuned to us all the time. It just had to be more than not.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Heather Monroe

When you're little, when a baby's little attunement would look the baby's crying, they need to be changed. They don't need to go to sleep, or they need to be fed, their diapers don't need to be changed. That kind of thing.

When you get older, the attunement looks more emotional. And so if she's crying or he's crying, how am I going to help his nervous system calm down and get back to baseline? So it really becomes an attunement in nervous systems. And the best way for us to calm down is actually to co-regulate with somebody else.

Meagen Gibson

...who's calm.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So that is attunement. It is like, how am I going to get this nervous system to calm, to coregulate with my nervous system, because my nervous system is calm right now. If I'm always anxious, like just a really anxious caretaker, and I see the kid crying, and I start freaking out, that is really going to disrupt even more that child's nervous system, because I'm not attuned, and I'm not able to coregulate and to get that child to calm down. So that's attunement.

Attachment, I don't want to spend too much time on it because this isn't...

[00:28:36] Meagen Gibson

We could go on for a whole, like 3 hours, just about attachment.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. But in a nutshell, if you are anxiously attached, you are going to always be hyper vigilant, always looking for abandonment, someone abandoning you. But you will cling to that person. So in relationship, it's going to look like your world gets smaller and smaller. When you get into a relationship, you become almost fixated on this person. They become your higher power almost, in bright Broadway lights, instead of just a normal human being. You look for them to almost save you, and you cling to them. And when they show you any sign of indifference or not as attached as you are, that creates more anxiety. And so then you go to be even more attached to them.

Being anxiously attached feels like I cannot get close enough. I never can get close enough. That is how it feels. And usually, we end up becoming attached to people who are avoidantly attached. Avoidantly attached people... So if anxiously attached people are connected but not protected, like they don't know how to create boundaries, an avoidantly attached person is protected, walls all around them, but not connected. So we are going to be Islands unto ourselves, incredibly self sufficient. We are going to be ambiguous around creating labels for relationships we won't want. We're scared of commitment, all those things. We create intensity outside relationships instead of inside relationships. We mistake both attachment types mistake intensity for intimacy because that's the only way we feel like we are in some sort of attachment with each other.

Meagen Gibson

Almost co-create unsafety as attachment.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So we become addicted to the ups and downs and ups and downs and ups and downs.

And then there's disorganized attachment. That happens when you have really overt relational trauma or trauma in the family system, and you go from disorganized in your attachment so it's unpredictable. You will be anxiously attached then avoidantly attached. And it's because the person who is supposed to make you feel safe was also the person that was responsible for your terror.

So if you came from a physically abusive, sexually abusive, emotionally abusive home, you're so disoriented, so disorganized, all the time that your nervous system becomes just as disoriented, too. So you're submissive one second, then you are completely domineering and pushing people away the next second, then clinging to them the next second. It's just you're all over the place.

Meagen Gibson

And that can come from having parents who had different styles themselves. Right? Like if you had one abusive parent and one anxiously avoidant parent, the mix of that in yourself and how you were treated by both of them would be that disorganized.

[00:31:54] Heather Monroe

Yes. Usually, though, there would have to be one of them that was abusive, where there was a real abusiveness to it. So that's attachment.

Boundaries, the way our boundary system is affected. So I look at boundaries as boundaries protect us from the world. They protect us from harm, from allowing other people's thoughts to infiltrate our own, other people's ideas. Our bodies, they protect our bodies. So boundaries are like putting a hand up and saying, "Stop!" The boundaries are also about containment. It's about protecting the world from us so that we don't offend, so that we aren't belligerent with our thoughts and with our beliefs and with our bodies towards other people.

So boundaries, I think that's really important, it's containment and protection, and they're supposed to work in balance with each other. When there is relational trauma, you either are connected and not protected so you allow a lot of thoughts and ideas and beliefs to infiltrate yourself because you were disempowered as a child a lot of the time. So you might have come from a family that was like, "You're not supposed to believe that, you don't know what you're talking about." Your thoughts and beliefs and curiosity were never valued, and so you've internalized and devalued yourself. So it's hard for you to take up space. So there's connected and not protected. So you're totally no walls.

Or there's protected and not connected. So this person is going to be really boundary'd. Nothing infiltrates them. No ideas or beliefs can infiltrate their ideas and beliefs. But that person might not be contained. They might be belligerent with their ideas. They might be walled off, but also be disruptive or not have respect for other people's boundaries.

So it goes both ways. You could be overly protected but also uncontained, or overly protected and overly contained.

An overly contained person is someone who's really rigid, who doesn't know social cues. So if they're on a date, they wouldn't know if you wanted them to touch you or not, and they would contain themselves. It's just an over-containment around themselves, their body, their ideas, that kind of thing. Does that make sense?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I was thinking, as you were talking as well, that regardless of how it looks on the outside, that the core wounds are the same on the inside, whether you're super protected and not connected or unprotected and not connected, it's the same kind of wounded person on the inside that wants to be protected and connected.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So, a healthy boundary system is connected and protected.

And I just want to say we oscillate. It depends who we're dealing with. How safe do we feel, how secure do we feel in that relationship? If we feel really secure in a friendship, our boundary system is going to be pretty intact. If we're in a toxic relationship, it's going to be all over the place, because that is just the nature of toxic relationships.

[00:35:40] Meagen Gibson

Right. And also that securely attached relationships can also waiver when there's stress or illness or outside major stressors that are going to come in and make you revert into whatever your stress response is going to be in that relationship. Right?

Heather Monroe

Exactly. And also how your nervous system is wired. So I tend to be wired more towards connected and not protected. I tend to be more anxiously wired. My partner is more wired towards shut down, more protected and not connected. We're both securely attached. But when we're really stimulated, he's going to turn away and I'm going to turn towards and want to engage where he wants to disengage. So again, it's how you're wired. It's how you react. It's all those things.

Meagen Gibson

Yes, go ahead. No, I was going to say, I'm mindful of the time, and I really wanted to make sure that we give people some kind of frame for, now that we've created this awareness, there's all this awareness, and people might be self identifying and things like that, but if we've identified our kind of insecure attachment style, where do we go from here? How do we move through that? And whose help do we need?

Heather Monroe

Okay. That's great. I'm in this work because I know it works. And I see people heal all the time from relational trauma. It's longer term work, of course, but that's okay. You've got the rest of your life. You're either going to spend it recycling these cycles or you're going to spend it creating the future of your choosing. And I really look at the person holistically. I'm looking at it from a body perspective, spiritual perspective, mental and emotional perspective, just the whole entire... I assess from that kind of mindset.

So what I have found is that the best way to really start healing from relational trauma is start to become aware of our bodies, because the nature of trauma takes us out of the present moment and out of our bodies. So with that being said, there is a lot of work that's going to be incredibly helpful.

I'm a student of Peter Levine, Somatic Experiencing. I'm in his training program. That is some of the most powerful work I've done and seen because it directly connects us to a consciousness around what's going on internally with our nervous system and with our bodies.

So becoming conscious of what we feel because language is... because emotions are the language of the body. Becoming curious about what we're feeling, what goes on in our nervous system when we're feeling something, and tending to getting us back to baseline. So getting us back to a neutral place internally is going to be one of the most important pieces of work. Because once we're empowered enough to take control of our body and take control of understanding our nervous system enough to learn how to attune it ourselves, it is going to create a platform to leap off of in the rest.

Because how can you work on boundaries if you're not aware of what it feels like in your body when a boundary is crossed? How can you work on boundaries or containment if you don't know what it feels like when you're overly contained or that you're totally shut off? I really see the body as the vessel

towards our own healing. So being consciously aware of the body, starting to do mindfulness body work, like yoga, like Tai Chi, like breath work, those sorts of things, is going to be really important.

[00:40:08]

I think getting into therapy is not so much a top down. So I think talk therapy is fantastic. I think that it's really important to start connecting the dots. And the nature of trauma is that it shuts off this part of our brain. So a lot of trauma can't be talked about, or it can be talked about, but it's felt in a different place. So experiential therapies I found to be the most effective, like Somatic Experiencing, like art therapy, like music therapy, like movements of sorts.

So finding a therapist who is not just psychodynamically trained but trained in other modalities that really give you an experience rather than talking your way through these things.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

Heather Monroe

Does that make sense?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I understand why people are attracted to talk therapy at first, especially since it might be the only venue in which they've had their experiences validated and not normalized, but just validated as like this is something that happens to people, you're not alone. And then there's plenty of help and research to get you through this, right. But that might be the first place they've ever heard that kind of validation or reflection.

Heather Monroe

100%. Also, this is safer than this, when we experience...

Meagen Gibson

Especially at first. Right? If you've uncovered a trauma history, and somebody asks you to meditate, it's not necessarily going to be a safe place to go without some better somatic kind of body work first.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Yes. So finding someone who's trained and experienced in a modality is going to be really important.

And I was also going to say with healing, another important aspect is also coming to understand and rely on our intuition. A lot of people don't even know what that is because we're so cut off. And again, the body is going to be the best source. Intuition, we all have it. It's just that it's been cut off. And so coming back to that knowing, to that place of knowing, is just really important in the process of healing. And being able to be confident in what you see and what you hear, and have that validated, come back to you and validated by another human being, is also really important. Learning how to trust yourself.

[00:42:50] Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And it's a practice. Just like you said, you wouldn't go to the gym and expect to be able to lift all the heaviest weight in the gym. You would have to continually practice and build those muscles and familiarize yourself with those kind of tools and machines, if you will, to go with the weight room analogy.

Heather Monroe

Yes. Exactly. Those are big chunks of kind of starting the building blocks of healing from this. And then you've got community. You've got what you're putting in your body, right, like nutrition, those kinds of things. All of that. Self care is one of the biggest things that's affected by relational trauma, not knowing our wants from our needs and not being in touch with what we need versus what we want and what is going to benefit us.

I would also say that behavior plays a big component of healing. So back to talk therapy. It is great and it is essential to know where all these things come from. But talking about it isn't enough. At a certain point, a behavioral component has to come in. So that's where courage comes in. And yes, I know I have boundary issues. I know that I am connected and not protected. Well, now I'm empowered enough, and I know my body enough. I have to start protecting myself, which means I have to find the courage to sit with those uncomfortable feelings of saying, "You're not allowed to touch me like that," or "I disagree," or, "I'm going to not go to your party tonight because I don't feel comfortable." You don't need to say that, but it's saying no.

So there's a behavioral component with healing that really is up to you. No one can do that for you. And that takes courage. And it takes bravery. And it takes listening and following through with that knowing that you're getting in touch with in therapy.

Meagen Gibson

And it circles back to what you said earlier so nicely about having to do the body work to figure out what feels like a boundary has been crossed in your body before you can then, because of that sensory information, understand when you're connected but not protected, and then assert a boundary, and then sit with that discomfort again of, like, okay. Because the amateurs think that we're going to set a boundary and everybody's just going to go, oh, well, there's the fence line. Let's all just do what we can to respect the boundary that Meagen set. And that's not whatever happens. Like, 100% of the time, most people will test the boundary right away. And so, yeah, being able to sit in that.

Heather Monroe

We're all just toddlers, right? If someone sets a boundary and we just want to push against it, see how real it is, because we're all out to get our needs met, and our needs might not coincide with your needs.

Meagen Gibson

It's true. I just had this flash memory of when my son was two, and when I would drop him off at preschool, I noticed that the other kids were all building with blocks and magnet tiles, and these things that you could build these big towers. And when my son would walk in, they would all protect what they were creating. And I said, hey, what's going on with that? Don't they want to share? And the teacher said, "Oh, they want to share. But Bruce, will... Your son walks in and just knocks everybody's

stuff down." Right? He's going to see their big, shiny creation and knock it over. He was two. He's grown out of that since then. But, yeah, that's what it reminds me of when we're trying to set boundaries as adults, we're just the big toddlers walking around, trying to knock everybody else's boundaries over.

[00:46:43] Heather Monroe

Absolutely. I mean, Coronavirus has really put a spotlight on boundaries for my clients, for myself, I think for everyone. And it's like, what are my boundaries around safety, with meeting with people, with people being vaccinated, not vaccinated, like, in my house. What does that look like? Where am I not protecting myself in order to make someone else feel comfortable? Like, "Oh, yeah, you can hug me, I'm okay," knowing that person just got off a plane and whatever.

So it's about respecting ourselves and knowing that our boundaries are going to look different than other people's. And in the end, if it doesn't work for me, it's not going to work for you, either.

Meagen Gibson

Right. And then it can be very situational, situation to situation, right? Yeah. It's been tough. And it's been a test. I've literally just been through that this week of setting boundaries, and people were like, "Wait a minute, but you did this over here," and I was like, "Yes, but here's the new information that I have now that's leading me to this boundary that I've just set." Not that I need to explain myself, but I also think of people that, like my neighbor, just had a baby two days ago, right. Whatever she says about how close I can come to that baby is fine with me, right? Yeah. We've all just got to be considerate of other people. And you're right, just be constantly reassessing. And it's been a great practice. You're right.

Heather Monroe

And boundaries move, and information changes. And I think also, giving yourself the right... Relational trauma, it makes things very black and white, like, we tend to think, but I said yes now, so I can't say no now. And it's also learning that flow state, that balance is a flow, and that things change, and we have to adapt to those changes. So that's another component of what you work on in your healing.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Being able to say that it's not you, it's me. This is what I'm doing for me right now. It has nothing to do with my reflection of my relationship with you.

Heather Monroe

Yeah. And so I think lastly, what I'll say is that, I'll reiterate what I said in the beginning that, just like the circumstances of healing are different for people, there are hallmarkers that show that you are healing from relational trauma. One is that you feel in control or very safe in your body. You're feeling more and more safe in your body. You're trusting more and more what's happening inside your body like, oh, that just made my heart beat really fast, and I got triggered. Let me take a step back. Or I'm feeling really anxious right now. I'm feeling desperate to make a decision. I'm going to pause and calm down. All of these are just signs of becoming more aligned and more in balance with yourself. Being able to stand up for yourself and what you believe in, in more than half of scenarios, like more or less of the time. And all of this is progress.

[00:49:53]

So someone who is healing from relational trauma, at first, it feels like you've just thrown all the stuff, all the balls, into the air and they're filling everywhere. But you'll notice that there are markers for progress, and the first ones are just feeling a little bit more safe in your body, trusting your own intuition, noting that your behavior is consistent with your values and beliefs, and that you are starting to be attracted to people that have similar... that aren't as intense. The relationships, friendships, aren't as intense. They're more like this, and that feel safe to you all of a sudden. You're not as attracted to intensity as you were. These are all markers for healing.

Meagen Gibson

And the way that looks to me cognitively that I think about that often is that I'm able to respond to things instead of reacting to things.

Heather Monroe

Yes. Absolutely. And again, this is not perfection. This is just about more so do I feel in control of my life and my relationships more than I don't? What does my environment feel like? How do I feel my environment? Does it feel like chaos to me? Like I'm grabbing on and I have no control? Or do I feel totally walled off and insulated? Or am I starting to feel more open to possibilities and more in control of my actions, but also my own destiny, that things aren't happening to me, they're happening for me? And I think that that switch from two to four is when we feel more in control with what we can do to dance within what happens for us, to actually engage in it because we have a choice within it. It's not just things that happen to us, and we're just taking it. It's like, oh, that happened. What can I do with this? I'm going to go over here with this.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. Heather, it's been great being with you today. Thank you for everything. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Heather Monroe

You can go to my website, www.monroewellness.com. And my social medias are [Monroe Wellness](#), so you can find me there. Sign up for my newsletter. I send out all the upcoming events that I'll be doing, any in person workshops, that I'm doing or speaking events.

Meagen Gibson

Thank goodness for us all getting back out into the world a little bit, as we deem it safe to do so.

Thanks again, Heather.

Heather Monroe

Absolutely. Bye.