



In Therapy Day 1 - What's your relationship with yourself?

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[00:00:21] Katie

So my name is Katie, and I'm 50 years of age, and I decided to embark upon this therapeutic journey because I'd reached point in my life where I have overcome a lot of my demons, I've stripped away various layers of the so called onion, I've revealed a core problem which is my anxieties and my struggles, my reactions to things in life, my emotions, and I want to explore the root cause of some of that.

At the end of 2019 I felt this year was going to be huge, it was going to be transformative in my life, and that's not with any knowledge whatsoever of what was going to happen in terms of the pandemic.

So it all started in January when my dog died, my companion, who was my best buddy, and then I had already decided at that point that I wanted to end my marriage. So I had put the wheels in motion on that. I knew, obviously, that I was going to be turning 50, and I knew that that was going to be a pivotal time in my life.

And then two weeks after that we went into lockdown. And then during lockdown my son got into his boarding school, my older daughter was obviously going to go off to University and that was still the plan but then my second daughter decided not to take a gap year, that she would go this year as well. And then my other son got selected for an educational program that was going to take him away from school so it ended up with, in September my husband left and all four kids left as well.

I think I've never really found my purpose, and I think the nearest I've ever come to finding a purpose is being a mom. And I've loved that, I've loved being a mom. I think because I've tried so hard for so many years to try and just find whatever it is I'm looking for, and I don't even, half the time even know what I'm looking for, is I'm tired, I'm exhausted, and I think my hope and my belief that this will do any good is weak. I've got some hope. I couldn't do this if I didn't have any hope, but I don't necessarily believe that it will work. And if it does, it'll just be temporary and I'll be back in the same situation again, misunderstood and not really fitting into this world.

Alex Howard

Well, Katie, welcome. I'm really happy that you're here. I've heard a few little bits and pieces from Oliver and Rachel, but I think a great starting point is I'd love to hear from you why you're here. What do you hope to get from the time that we have together?

[00:03:44] Katie

I have, I suppose, lived with acute anxiety and depression all my life. At various times in my life it has significantly affected me and debilitated me at times, starting from my teens when it first manifested itself and then at various points at University, that's where I really reached a very low point. And then having had my first baby, it was triggered again, and then various points in my life which have been traumatic or stressful.

I think because I'm a child, well I was born in the 70s, and I think during the 80s, when it all sort of started to come up, there wasn't really a focus on mental health, it wasn't there. It was something that was viewed as... The stigma that we talk about now, I wanted to shout and scream from the rooftops and everybody else wanted to brush under the carpet. That was how it was. So my first visit to a psychiatrist was our next door neighbor, and it never went on my records.

Alex Howard

And it was a psychiatrist?

Katie

A child psychiatrist, yeah. He was our next door neighbor. And that was to deal with, I had terrible health anxiety, and I thought I was dying all the time. And it was crippling because it was like living with a death sentence. I've always been the kind of person who wants to fully understand things. And I think growing up I said to my father on many, many occasions, "What if I've got leukemia?". And he'd say there's a 99.9% chance that you haven't. And I would automatically think, well, what about the 0.1% that I have? And how do you know? And how can you tell?

Alex Howard

It sounds like you had a big strategy of trying to think your way to a feeling of calmness or trying to think your way to a feeling of safety. If I can rationalize it enough in my mind, then I'll feel safe.

Katie

And I never could.

Alex Howard

But also I'm interested at this point, it sounds like the primary issue was anxiety. You mentioned anxiety and depression. Was the depression a result of the severity of the anxiety?

Katie

At that point it wasn't really depression at all, that's come later. So it was more anxiety. I can remember from when I was 7 or 8, feeling that dread and that anxiety. And my first coping mechanism, as I now understand it to be attention seeking, to try and get, my first cry for help was to be naughty at school, and I was really naughty.

Alex Howard

In what way?

[00:06:47] Katie

Humor has always been very important in my life. And I was always a clown. I was always very vocal. Again, this is another thing that's a theme that has run through my life, is I've always had a very strong sense of injustice. And obviously a classroom is a breeding ground for injustice.

Alex Howard

Sure.

Katie

And so I would call it out. And I couldn't understand why, as well as the other things, like falling off my chair and pretending to break my arm and stupid things. But I think it started, that the bad behavior started when I didn't feel heard.

Alex Howard

It sounds like you wanted to be heard and seen. There was something around your emotional needs as a child not being seen, not being heard. And ultimately the consequence of that, it sounds like you didn't feel emotionally held and emotionally safe. And so the way that you dealt with that was by going to your mind to escape your feelings. So it was like, I have all these things that are happening in my body, my emotions and my feelings, they don't feel safe, they don't feel held, so I've got to go up here. And so you increasingly learnt a strategy of disconnecting emotionally.

The problem is that's a perfect recipe for anxiety, because part of the resolution to anxiety is coming into the body and feeling the safety that's there inside of ourselves. But when we try to think our way there, we get further and further away from it, and we get more anxious then we try and think and it becomes a self perpetuating cycle.

Katie

Yeah. And that's exactly what happened.

Alex Howard

So understanding things that happened as a child is important to us to a point, but it's not going to change anything. What's going to change things is changing how you relate to yourself in terms of your emotions and your thoughts in your life. How you relate to yourself now, that's the piece that really is what matters to us.

Katie

Yeah.

Alex Howard

Talk to me a bit more about just how life evolved then from your 20s into 30s, and just the key beats and moments, particularly in terms of your mental health.

[00:08:58] Katie

From the age of 18 really, I began to lead a double life. So it was trying to deal with this anxiety and this mental health problem on my own, essentially, and then pursuing what was expected of me.

Alex Howard

What were you doing in terms of vocation and that sort of thing?

Katie

Well, when I decided that I didn't want... I begged my parents to send me to RADA because I wanted to be on the stage, and they wouldn't because that wasn't academic enough. So I think at some point I decided... I was very good at English and I decided I'd do journalism. And I think that as well was linked to this whole, it will give me a voice, people will recognize me. I wanted to be a famous foreign correspondent. Fame was a big thing for me. I wanted fame.

Alex Howard

Because your value as a human being was tied to your achievements.

Katie

Yeah. And I wanted people to know... It felt like it would, if I was recognized, then I'd have achieved something. It wasn't enough to be a journalist, I had to be the best journalist, I had to work for the best company.

And this is a strange event in my life because I'd set up a load of work experience with The Times and The Guardian and the BBC and Leicester Mercury, which is where my parents were living at the time, in Leicester. And I did a week there, and at the end of the week they offered me a full time job, and I accepted it. And I've often thought that was a really strange thing for me to do because I had all this other work experience set up at these great institutions and I don't know why I accepted that job to this day, but it's where I met my husband.

Alex Howard

Life has it's interesting twists and turns.

Katie

Yeah. Anyway, I was there for 3 years and I did very well there. I got promoted quite quickly, I won a couple of awards, and then within 3 years I was at the BBC. And that was what drove me. Because I knew that I was flawed, so flawed. And I didn't want anybody to know about it. So I basically drank and worked my way through my 20s to try and just not deal with this.

Alex Howard

To numb how you were feeling.

[00:11:34] Katie

Yeah. And then I had a baby very quickly after that. I found out I was pregnant and I got the job at the BBC in the same week. My husband said, there's no way we can go to London now. And I said, watch me.

So I went. He wouldn't come. We'd been married for 3 months, and he never in a million years thought I'd just go. And I was pregnant as well. And I came down and I rented myself a little flat and I'd go back at weekends. And that's where our problems really began, I think.

Alex Howard

And then what happened when the baby came?

Katie

So in those days you only got 3 months off work when you had a baby, and I didn't want to have more than that anyway, I was so driven with my career. But I ended up having a lot more than that off because I ended up crashing again because my anxiety just came back with a vengeance.

And then my parents offered to pay for me to have another thing of CBT and I went to see somebody privately. And that's where I really picked up some tools where we went through breaking the cycle and getting out of that and what if the worst happened, and facing that. And if it does, how would you deal with it?

And I remember then, and I had notes which I referred back to, but the anxiety wasn't about me at that point, it was about my daughter. That was interesting because it completely shifted. I remember she fell and hit the back of her head on a shelf and I was convinced that she had a brain hemorrhage, and she had a little spot and it was meningitis, and a tiny cough and she had whooping cough.

Alex Howard

So just to complete the narrative to now, so the anxiety became more fixated towards your daughter but was still impacting, but you had more tools, let's say. Just catch me up.

Katie

I had four babies in very quick succession, so I had four in 5 years.

Alex Howard

Wow. That's something.

Katie

I've paid the price I can tell you.

But one of the reasons I did that, which is quite difficult to say as well, is because I felt so amazing when I was pregnant.

[00:13:58] Alex Howard

In what way?

Katie

I just felt this sort of peace and a serenity and a happiness that I'd never experienced before. I had wonderful pregnancies. And that's why I've always wondered in my life whether it's hormonal, this whole thing that goes on with me, because the pregnancies were just amazing. And I loved having little babies around me and I love being needed.

Alex Howard

A sense of purpose.

Katie

Yeah, a real sense of purpose, and that's what I lost.

Alex Howard

So it sounds to me like the depression has been a consequence of the hopelessness of not knowing what else to do to deal with the anxiety. So as opposed to being its own unique issue in of itself, it sounds like it's more a consequence of what's gone on with the anxiety.

Katie

I'm very, very depressed at the moment, and it's because I've just loathe myself. I look back and think, what a life, what a life, what a disaster, what a failure. I've lost everything. That's what I feel like at the moment.

People's view of me is very different from my view of me. And people's idea of me, from how I present to the world, is very different to how I feel inside. Although I've had moments of happiness in my life, like when my kids were born and on the day I got married, for example, those moments, those glimpses of happiness, I fundamentally haven't had peace of mind or happiness as an ongoing, consistent state of mind ever.

And my whole life has been underpinned, I suppose, by this anxiety and this fear and this sadness. I suppose I always wanted to give to my kids what I never had for myself. I always wanted them to feel that they were unconditionally loved, that they were safe and secure, and that I would protect them come what may. And I think they did feel that. I think they do feel that.

But sometimes I've gone over the top and I've fought battles that maybe weren't battles to be fought. And a lot of that was probably on behalf of the hurt little girl that's inside of me that never had that support as a child. I think having stripped away all the layers of those onions, I realized that I'm just frightened.

Alex Howard

I'm really interested in what your relationship with yourself is like. And this sort of ongoing feeling through your life of not feeling seen and not feeling heard and not feeling held by other people. And

often when there's a significant wound about that, it also manifests in how we are with ourselves. You've also spoken about that inner critic, judgmental voice towards you.

[00:17:02]

So I'd be interested to hear a bit more. At this point you're at this big transformational point in your life, where things that have given you a sense of familiarity and a sense of purpose and a sense of belonging have been changing. And, yeah, I'm just curious, as you reflect on it now, what comes up in terms of, do you feel that you're being kind towards yourself? Do you feel you're being cruel towards yourself?

Katie

I hate myself. I hate who I am.

Alex Howard

How does that manifest in your life? If I was to be living in your mind and your heart and your body, how would I experience that?

Katie

I don't know. I don't really take care of myself. I think this is where I'm really struggling at the moment, because I just spent 20 years taking care of kids.

I don't think I really know who I am.

Alex Howard

That's a really interesting point, though, because you hate yourself, but you don't know who you are. So how do you know who to hate?

Katie

I hate the fact that my life has just been dogged. I've sat for the last few weeks, because I've been very on my own for the last few weeks, and I've sat just thinking, I don't think I can do another 20/30 years. I've worked so hard to try and deal with this incessant noise.

Alex Howard

The impression I get is that you've really mastered, and I'm sure no one's perfect as a mother, but you've really invested your heart and your energy in being there for your kids and being loving and being attentive, and doesn't mean you've always got it right but your intention has been to get it right.

Katie

150%.

[00:19:40] Alex Howard

So doing a great job as a parent doesn't mean your children don't struggle. The question is, do your children know that they're loved?

Katie

They definitely know that.

Alex Howard

That's all one can do, ultimately, I think, as a parent. One can do their best in other ways but as you say, that's the key to the kingdom. That's the heart of it.

I think what needs to happen at this next chapter of your life is you mastering how to be that loving, attentive, kind figure for yourself.

Katie

That's what I've been trying to do and just can't

Alex Howard

It has to be important enough and it has to be the focus that if you think of how challenging it would have been at times as a mother, has been at times as a mother, it sounds like you've begun to realize that's what you need at this chapter. And there's a growing motivation and wish to do that, and you're sat here saying, I think, "help, I don't quite know how to do it".

But I think what's important for the beginning of our journey together is figuring out... It's like having a map of 100 different paths we can go down, and I think what's important at this point is we're clear of what's the journey that we're going on? And it feels to me that the core of this journey is your relationship with yourself.

Katie

Yes, it is. I know that. It is.

Alex Howard

And I think the homework that I'd like you to do between now and next time, and I think you're probably already doing this informally, but I think to have a bit more structure around it would be helpful, would be to do, I don't know if you've ever done journaling in the past, but to take some time each evening to reflect on that day and how you were in relationship to yourself that day.

So an example might be that, it's tonight and you're sat at home, and it doesn't have to be, you can do it in the morning of the following day but do it as a daily practice. You're sat at home tonight and you're reflecting back and you think on your journey home and then that inner critic voice started saying to you all the things you shouldn't have said to me, or all the things that you did wrong. So that would be an example of your relationship to yourself.

Another example might be that you wake up tomorrow morning, let's say, and you're feeling a bit tender and delicate, and you say to yourself, just get over it and stop being pathetic.

[00:22:17]

So I'm really interested in both the internal dialogue, like the way that your integrity is speaking to you, but also how you're treating yourself. Are you making space for your feelings or are you shutting them down? Are you allowing yourself to be vulnerable around others or telling yourself that that's not it? Just the way that you're being with yourself, just to take some time each day to reflect a little bit on that, and that will then form a little bit of the foundation for where we continue our journey together with this.

Katie

Okay.

Alex Howard

How does that sound to you? And what questions do you have?

Katie

Do you want me to write that down?

Alex Howard

You can handwrite it or you can write it on the computer or phone or whatever. And you can either send me all of it or send me bits of it. What I'm particularly looking for, probably two things, one, often just by putting a spotlight on these things they become more obvious to us. But also I'm looking for some of the themes and some of the patterns, because often it goes from being, "I'm not being kind to myself", to really seeing some of the examples of that. And that allows us to be a bit more practical and tangible in terms of working with it.

Katie

Yeah. And I never think I'm good enough with anything I ever do. So that is something that is a constant dialogue.

Alex Howard

Yeah. I want to say as well, the relationship we have with ourselves can change. It's a product of how you were related to and how you've learned to relate to yourself. But the reason I know that can change is you've been very different with your kids than how your parents were with you, and also how you've been with yourself. So I know you have a kind heart. I know you have tenderness and sensitivity and love and generosity. Those things are there. We don't need to cultivate those qualities. We need to change how you're using those qualities and learn to use them towards yourself.

Katie

Then that voice is just saying to me, but you've only done that, it's not the real you. The real you is nasty, vindictive, horrible.

[00:24:33] Alex Howard

We'll get into that. That voice has had quite a lot of power up until now, but just because it had power up until now doesn't mean it's going to have power going forward.

Any questions? Any other questions you've got for me today?

Katie

No, that's been great. Thank you.

Alex Howard

Great. Thanks, Katie.

Katie

So after my first session today with Alex I'm feeling quite raw, quite exposed, I suppose, quite vulnerable. It's not a feeling that I particularly like. But I think alongside that I'm also feeling quite hopeful that maybe I can nail some of these issues. And I'm also quite confident that he managed to get to the nub of the issue quite quickly which has given me confidence that I'm on the right track.

When he pinpointed the fact that I've struggled with relationships all my life really but the biggest relationship I've struggled with is with myself, that felt good. That felt that he'd really understood.

The idea of having to sit down each day and reflect on how I'm treating myself is an interesting one. And I've done quite a bit of journaling in the past but it's always been a bit erratic and not very structured. I think it's been at moments of crisis or deep emotion where I've just sort of poured out my emotions, but I think this will be a bit more cohesive and it's something that I'm going to be aware of during the day and that little voice that's constantly niggling away trying to bring me down.

It's a battle. I view it quite often as a battle. That I'm just constantly fighting this battle to try and... It's almost like it's two steps backwards, one step forward all the time in my life, and that's what I want to try and really, really focus on. So I think it'll be a good exercise for me to do.