

In Therapy Day 2 - Rediscover who you are

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[00:00:57] Katie

Hi there. I'm feeling okay today. I've not had a bad week. Not much has been going on. I've been working. I've been a bit irritable, I suppose. I think that's fair to say. I don't feel particularly fulfilled but then I think that's quite common I think with the COVID restrictions and lockdown and the monotony.

I'm reluctant to look into the future too far because that feels quite scary. Obviously, there's a huge amount of change going on in my life at the moment and looking too far ahead doesn't feel very safe for me.

Around certain things I'm feeling quite numb. I don't know if that numbness is just, well obviously, my head tells me it's because I'm an abnormal human being that doesn't have normal emotions, but it could be that I just can't face the trauma of a lot of those dysfunctional relationships. That's something I'd quite like to explore. Yeah, that's me.

I'm really struggling. I feel I've been eaten alive by this pain that I'm in. And I just don't want it anymore. I just want a normal family. I've come to the decision once again. I just have to cut everybody off because I can't cope with this pain and I feel so misunderstood. I feel like I don't have a voice, that I'm just a substandard human being. I just want to know how I should deal with this. I just want to know why I'm not good enough to be part of the family I was born into. It's really killing me.

Alex Howard

Katie, welcome back. It's nice to see you again. How have you been doing?

Katie

Not brilliant. I was pretty good after I saw you last, for a few days, and then I had a big trigger. But even when I say I was pretty good, I've still got this underlying sadness, I think it is, this underlying sadness that I'm lost.

Alex Howard

Without wanting to get too existential about it, there's a question of, as you're going through this very transformational chapter in your life, in terms of the end of the relationship and the kids all leaving home, and all of those roles and identities and frames of reference through which you've known yourself suddenly that all starts to shift and change. And there is that sense of how you're relating to

yourself, but who is the self that also you're relating to? Which is something which I think is being discovered at this point.

[00:04:21] Katie

Yeah. I suppose it's a bit like a metamorphosis. I'm discarding that character that I created, but there's a reluctance to fully get rid of it because I don't really know what's underneath, and it's really frightening and sad.

Alex Howard

Well, I think it is frightening. Whenever we go through a shedding of layers and letting go of who we've taken ourselves to be, things that have a sense of stability and we know ourselves by that, as that starts to change, in that lack of familiarity and lack of certainty, on a certain level it feels like we're dying because part of us is, we're shedding, we're letting go who we've taken ourselves to be. And we need to do that for something new to emerge. So it's almost like we have to make the space for something else to happen, but that making the space can be a really quite difficult process.

So part of the homework from last time was I really wanted to put the spotlight on your relationship with yourself. And I think as I was reading your email and as I was watching your video diaries, what really became clear to me in the current expression of those relationships is the hurt and the frustration with other people of not taking care of and meeting your emotional needs.

And I think part of the reason why that's so painful is because of the emotional neglect that you experience as a child. That there's a hurt place in you which is longing for someone to see it, to care for it, to tend to it. And as we were talking about last time, your relationship with yourself has been modeled on and informed by these different relationships with other people.

And I think it's very reasonable to feel frustrated at and angry at and hurt by these dynamics because I think they're hurtful.

Katie

Not at the age of 50, though.

Alex Howard

No, it still hurts. It hurts at any age. I don't think being older negates the hurt that one feels by the experiences that they've had. Sometimes it hurts more as one gets older because one understands more the impacts that it's had.

But I feel much more hopeful of our capacity to work on your relationship with yourself than I do of fixing all these other people. That's a little bit outside of our capacity to address. And changing your relationship with yourself doesn't necessarily result in changing those dynamics, but it does have the potential to change how you are impacted by those dynamics, and where you put those boundaries and how you feel about the boundaries within those dynamics.

So I was curious as to what you discovered. I know you've been writing, sounds like a lot, and hopefully it's been helpful. And I'm wondering, what are some of the things that you saw? What are some of the themes that came from that?

[00:07:47] Katie

I think one of the big things that I recognized how much I loathe myself and I can try and control and manipulate situations, not in a nasty way, but in a way to try and get that validation or to get people to understand my point of view or to get my voice heard. I can, and I see that, and I don't like that about myself at all. I want to just be me. Like I said at the beginning, I don't even know who me is

Alex Howard

Discovering who that is.

Katie

And I just feel very depressed at the moment. I don't have any motivation. And I feel fairly lonely again, the exact thing I've been craving all my life, to be loved and nurtured and cherished, I've kind of pushed away. Because when I wrote that was one of the things that came out that I don't know what it feels like to be unconditionally loved and to be the most important thing in somebody else's eyes. I don't know what that feels like. I believe that my estranged husband, I believe he's a good man, I believe that's what he wanted to do, but I could never receive it because it was never... Because of that I always felt worthless. I always felt unlovable. I always felt that I couldn't be loved. And so even when he tried, I couldn't receive it because I didn't think I deserved it.

Alex Howard

So you would have had barriers and defenses up.

Katie

And that's what he's always said. That's what he's always said to me. So there's been a really big sadness about my marriage.

This week he sent me a letter saying was I sure this is definitely what I wanted. And that he accepted, because up until now he's never accepted any part in the breakdown of the marriage. And I'm just so fed up of being blamed by everybody for everything. I know that I've got issues. I do feel like I've achieved quite a lot, considering I've pretty much been on my own in this world.

Alex Howard

And you've also had a familiar role of being scapegoated. And so you also, rightly and understandably, have a level of sensitivity towards being scapegoated. And when a marriage goes wrong, I don't think one can always say it's 50/50, but there are always two parts, and it's normally pretty close to 50/50.

Part of what it sounds like you've been noticing is the different ways you find yourself feeling in different relationships, which is disappointed by people and hurt by people and feeling angry and feeling scapegoated. So that's a common dynamic it sounds like which is there in different relationships. I'm wondering, what else did you notice?

[00:11:15] Katie

Well, often I feel just totally... Through my life, whether I've been feeling up or down or indifferent, I've wondered what the purpose of life is. And then I can even feel it now, people around me rolling their eyes going, "oh my God here she goes again". And I don't know if it relates back to my terrible fear of death or whatever, but I think I've always had this big drive to have to achieve something, I have to do something that's meaningful in this life. And I've always lived life to the absolute full. I wanted to experience life, I wanted to take on life with both arms and really just live it to it's full. I don't really know what I'm saying.

Alex Howard

Well, I think what you're saying is that there's fundamental questions around purpose and around what life's purpose is, what your purpose is, and particularly when you're at these various crossroads in your life, what do the next decades of your life look like? And where do you want to put your energy and your focus?

Where you've been somewhat defined by the role of being a wife and a mother for the last few decades, and suddenly those roles are changing. And there's a place where that feels scary and that feels sad and that feels confusing. But there's also, within that, there's also opportunity. As those doors close because of various reasons, that also means you have to make choices around, well, where do you put your heart? Where do you put your focus? Where do you put your energy.

Katie

My career is always something I've defined myself by. If I'm successful then I've proved something. To who? I don't know. To myself I suppose.

Alex Howard

Coming back again to the relationship with yourself, it sounds like there's been quite a lot of inner critic that's also been there, self judgement, blaming of yourself, beating up of yourself, questioning of yourself, say a bit about what you notice with that.

Katie

I think I just buy into what everybody else has told me all my life. To be honest I don't even know because I've always thought of myself as a kind, loving, giving person, but I don't know if I've been kind and loving and giving to feed a need in myself, whether that's really me. I'm just questioning whether fundamentally, I'm just a pretty awful human being. That's where I'm at at the moment.

Alex Howard

I'm going to phrase that slightly differently. I think you're inner critic, that judgmental, critical voice that we have, it's running a theme of judgment of you on that line. There's a place where you're wondering, who am I? If I'm not this role and I'm not that role and I'm not that, what am I that's not all of that? Now that's, as we said a little bit earlier, that's a very vulnerable and sensitive place to be.

And then what I think is happening is that critical voice is then using that vulnerability as a way then to attack and to beat you up.

[00:15:03] Katie

Maybe.

Alex Howard

I'm sitting here thinking a bit more strategically. There are different pieces of work, in a sense, that we know we want to do. There's pieces of work around your inner critic, there's pieces of work around managing some of the different dynamics, there's this overall theme around how you're relating to yourself. But one of the things that I'm also aware of is it sounds like a lot of your moment to moment, day to day experience of yourself and the world just feels quite tumultuous, just feels quite stirred up.

And I think that creates a tricky foundation from which to then address and engage in those other issues, if that makes sense. I think what would be a helpful place for us to put some focus initially is, for want of a better term, I sometimes call psychological scaffolding. That just putting some sort of foundations and some stability in place which just helps calm things and help things settle a little bit more. And it's not that necessarily doing that is going to fix the bigger issues, but it creates a safer and a more stable place from which then to meet those other issues.

Does that make a certain amount of sense?

Katie

Yeah. And I know, I get that. And I have been in that place before. I have managed to... And I think there is a tendency for me to lurch from one drama to the next because that's a familiar way of living. When I don't do that, at the moment I'm just finding doing anything... I just haven't got any motivation to do anything.

Alex Howard

But I think that lack of motivation is a product of a state of overwhelm.

Katie

I'm getting to the point now with the pain I'm feeling this minute just almost feels unbearable.

Alex Howard

So what happens if you just let the pain be there? In this moment we don't need to fix it, we don't need to get rid of it. But when the pain comes up and you try and get away from the pain or you judge the pain or you repress the pain, that causes you more pain.

Katie

This is a pattern as well where I just feel like getting up and running away because I can't bear it.

Alex Howard

Well, here's the thing, much of the suffering we experience in life is not actually the pain. It's all the things we do in response to the pain. So we feel emotional pain that hurts, it physically hurts when

you feel emotional pain, but then we go and we drink, for example, and then we cause a whole new set of pains as a result of doing it.

[00:18:07]

Or we're in pain and to escape the pain we go into our mind and we live in anxiety, which is what you did for many years in your early life. But then you have a whole new set of pains, because you have all the pain associated with all the health anxiety that you experience. They're constantly going at that chapter of your life and it's like you have a whole new set of pain.

Or we feel this pain here and we don't want to bear this pain here so we just vomit our anger at everyone, and then we cause pain, and then we have to mop that up.

Katie

And I'm doing that to a certain extent. I think I probably have done that in terms of ending my marriage, in terms of acting out at work, which I do.

Alex Howard

So the point that I'm making is this pain that you're experiencing, as much as it hurts, and we will talk about it, and I will help you with strategies to help metabolize it and process it, but what's making that pain worse is all the other strategies that you've been using to try and avoid the pain. I think it's an important point. Does that make sense to you?

Katie

It does.

Alex Howard

Part of what's happened is you've got a series of patterns of thinking, let's say that you've got into, which are what I call get into jail free cards. So, you know Monopoly? I've been playing a lot of Monopoly recently because of lockdown. So in Monopoly you have get out of jail free cards. Well, I talk about get into jail free cards. They're ways of thinking that basically guarantee you put yourself in a psychological jail.

I think it would be helpful for us to spend some time figuring out what these get into jail free cards are. And I want to reiterate a point I made earlier, it's not that I think that we just need to shift these and everything else is going to fix, I think working on some of these patterns will just help calm things a little bit more and will help stabilize things a bit, which then helps us when it comes to working... So to put it in a slightly different way, it's very clear to me that we need to do some work on your heart and your emotions, but I think we need to have a certain stability and foundation to do that work in a helpful way, because that work can be, by definition, destabilizing temporarily because you're opening up all this stuff that's not being felt, which can be quite intense.

It's sort of like you don't want to service the ship in a storm. You want to get to calm waters and go right, well, we actually want to have a look at the engine room, look at what's happening here and we want to sort that out, but we just need to stabilize what's happening a bit more first.

[00:21:05]

So I think you've got a whole series of thinking, which is in the category of, "I've already lived 50 years. I've tried all these things. Nothing's going to work. I've always been this way. I'm always going to be this way. It's not possible to change". Basically, "I can't do it. It won't work". Can you give me some more examples of that?

Katie

"There's something fundamentally wrong for me".

Alex Howard

So, "I'm broken".

So there's a belief that people can have, which is, "I'm sure it works for other people, but it won't work for me because I'm broken".

Katie

"I'm unlucky". That's another one. "They have the luck. I don't have any luck". And it's not true because I have had a lot of luck in my life, being able to have four kids and two girls, two boys.

Alex Howard

And a child that wasn't supposed to make it at one point.

Katie

I've got this real urge at the moment just to live in the mountains and grow my own food and have dogs and just walk. And I've always had that since I was a child, to be honest.

Alex Howard

But you've not acted on it.

Katie

I have periodically, on holidays and things like that, but I've never lived that life. But I haven't got the courage to do it. That's another belief, "I haven't got the courage".

Alex Howard

Good. So we're getting them uncovered. So we've got, "There's something fundamentally wrong with me". We've got, "I haven't got what it takes". We've got, "I haven't got the courage". What are the other get into jail free cards? The other patterns of thinking you get into that cause you to get stuck?

Katie

I suppose it's subconscious but it does invade my consciousness as well, "the world is out to get me".

[00:22:58] Alex Howard

And I think in that category probably falls that, "people can't be trusted", "people are manipulative", "people are trying to get something from me" because of the relationships you've had in terms of family.

Katie

Well, people just don't understand me. Why can't people just accept me? For a long time I celebrated my differentness, my weirdness, whatever it is, my quirkiness, but I celebrated it on the exterior and actually inside I was dying.

Alex Howard

But it's what one could call a counterphobic strategy, which is that you feel afraid so you act as though you're not afraid as a way of hiding the fact that you're afraid.

Coming to your homework, I want to move the spotlight a little bit onto these get into jail free cards and into these different categories of thinking that you get into. And I want to really work on catching and seeing that happening.

The awareness alone is sometimes helpful, because if we can see, hang on, I'm going into this pattern of I'm broken and I can't do it. And Alex and I talked about that and actually, that might not be true. That's actually a pattern of thinking that I go into, which feels true when I'm in it but actually, it may not be the case.

I'm going to give you access to an online video program that I've created that quite often people that we do these sessions with have gone through. And it's called the RESET program and it was primarily designed for people that want to reset their nervous system where there's a lot of anxiety, and that can be health anxiety, that can be trauma induced anxiety, but where the system is significantly over ramped. That's part of what I think, it's certainly part of what's been the history and part of what's going on. But the tools and the strategies in there, some of those I think are going to be very helpful for the work that we're going to do together.

So there might be elements where the teaching is not quite landing on what you're working with, but if you can let that pass, the tools and strategies that are in there, and what it means is by you going through some of that stuff outside of the sessions that we do, it just means that we can be more productive in the work we do together. Because rather than me sat here spending 3 hours teaching you something, you can go and watch it and then we can be talking about it in the sessions.

So I'd like you to go through, if possible, between now and next time, the first three modules. The modules are an hour plus supplementary pieces. But even if you just watch those hour pieces before. And I think what will also be helpful.

The first module is all about commitment and motivation, and I think that some of that will be helpful. The second module is about meditation and mindfulness, and I think that, I really think it will help to get back to having a daily meditation practice. I think it would just help settle things. The third module is, although I don't talk about it as a module because an example of the frame is a bit different, the broader conversation around these get into jail free cards, in that module I talk about patterns of thinking.

[00:26:23]

If you can do those between now and next time, in the next session what I'd like to come into is, I'd like to teach you some practical techniques to actually work to break and shift some of those thought patterns. But I'd like to build the awareness before.

And as I said, I put this, probably the next session and maybe even the session afterwards, in this category of let's just calm things down, let's settle things, let's get you in a place where you feel a bit more steady and gentle with yourself and then use that scaffolding and foundation to then come into some of these other places. How does that sound to you?

Katie

That sounds great.

Alex Howard

Okay.

Katie

And I'm really grateful for the help.

Alex Howard

No, of course. It's my pleasure.

I'd like you also to do, like you were doing the journaling last time, on the get into jail free cards. So at some point in each day, often in the evening it's helpful, what get into jail free cards did I use today?

Katie

It's nothing like I've done before so I'm hopeful. Because sometimes I just hear people say, do this, do that and I think I've been there, I've done it and nothing ever bloody changes. But this isn't. I haven't done this before.

Alex Howard

Any final questions for today?

Katie

No.

Alex Howard

Okay.

Katie

I don't think so.

[00:27:46] Alex Howard

Good. Thank you, Katie. I will see you in a couple of weeks.

Katie

Okay. Thank you very much.