

In Therapy Day 5 - The power of vulnerability

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[00:00:47] Katie

Hi there, it's the 20th of January, and I thought I'd just give a quick update. I've not been so good since I last spoke to Alex. I had a triggering phone call, which I mentioned to him, and it sent me into an anxiety spin. My ex-husband decided that he was going to dramatically cut the financial contribution he makes to both the household and the kids.

And yes, it resulted in a few sleepless nights. I've been having high anxiety symptoms, struggling to take a deep breath and my mind has been going crazy. I've been doing three meditations a day to try and relax my nervous system, but I'm struggling now to be honest.

And I've also been thinking a lot about my parents. I haven't contacted them for a long time and I don't think I'm feeling very comfortable with the whole no contact thing, especially with the relentless COVID, negative news that's also triggering huge anxiety within me.

Nothing else, really much to report on. I'm carrying on with the RESET program. I'm trying to do the stop when my thoughts race out of control. But I'm not sleeping brilliantly. I'm struggling to cope with that a little bit. So all in all I don't feel like I'm in a very good space but anyway, there we are. Onwards and upwards.

Alex Howard

Hi, Katie. Can you hear me?

Katie

Yeah. Can you hear me?

Alex Howard

I can hear you. It's a miracle.

How are you doing?

Katie

I've not been great to be honest.

[00:03:39]

I've been really anxious, so much so that I just think I've just got myself into an acute state where I'm struggling with breathing. And the more I concentrate on the breathing and the meditation, the more anxious I'm getting because I feel like I can't take a deep breath all the time, so I'm constantly trying to take a deep breath. And last night it kind of reached a peak where I've been trying so hard with the meditations and the stop process and doing that body scan, and I don't know, I just think all the news and all the other stuff going on in my life I just got into a bit of an acute state.

So I did phone my GP this morning just to say, well last night I thought I was dying. I just got myself into real... And the more I couldn't breathe, the more I was trying to breathe and then the more panicky I was getting. Anyway, she prescribed me a couple of days of Diazepam just to try and relax my muscles. I don't know if that's the right thing to do or not. I do feel calmer.

Alex Howard

Talk me through what's been happening just in terms of the events. I'm sure that's had some kind of impact on what's happening as well since I spoke to you a couple of weeks ago, just so I've got the full picture.

Katie

I think the last time I spoke to you I'd had a phone call from my husband saying that he was going to cut off money. And that's really what triggered a lot of anxiety in me.

I heard that my cousin, who's only a few years older than me, had been hospitalized and on high dependency with COVID.

Alex Howard

Wow.

Katie

And that triggered a huge amount of anxiety. She's out now and she's fine, but she's still recovering.

Alex Howard

Wow. That's really hard.

Katie

Yeah. But you asked me to write down stuff that made me feel good.

Alex Howard

Yeah. How did that go? And also I want to come on to how you got on with modules four and five, but let's start with the exercise around the things that you feel proud of each day, noticing those things. How was that?

[00:05:54] Katie

The first few days I couldn't find anything that I felt proud of. I just didn't put pressure on myself to do that. But then I have been doing the meditation much more and I have been doing my walks, so that was one thing. I thought I'm proud of myself for the self-care. And then also this not engaging in the conflict. So these emails have been going back and forth between me and Simon have been quite civil and quite dignified. And I have paused between them. Normally if I get an email, I'll fire back a response immediately but I've paused and just let it kind of sink in.

Alex Howard

That's amazing. And that shows you that when you change your behavior, you can impact upon your relationships with other people. And it might not be the case that the really complicated relationships like your ex and your mother and that sort of thing change overnight, but hopefully it empowers you to realize that, hang on, I changed how I dealt with this situation, and it actually had a positive impact on changing the situation.

Katie

Yeah. So I put that down.

And then the other thing I put down was that I have always vested huge importance in my identity as a successful journalist, comms person. And that was my identity. And actually that's gone. So my identity was either a mother of four, a wife of a successful journalist, a successful journalist, but it was never me. So my identity was always pinned on one of those things, a mental health loser, whatever.

And gradually, over the last few years, I think it is, but this has consolidated that process. I've let go of those identities, and I'm really much more in connection with me, and I'm soothing and nurturing. And I think that's why I might be in this stage of anxiety because I feel very vulnerable.

Alex Howard

I think it raises a very important thing which is, when we're so used to relating to the world through those identities, there's a certain comfort and familiarity of those identities, although it's also draining, and they become barriers to the world. Because what happens is we relate through those identities, and people relate to us through those identities, which means we don't fully feel the connection, the holding, the support of life, because we're always once removed.

But equally, when you take those identities away, initially there is this place of, "Well, who the fuck am I if I'm not all these people?". And that feels on a felt level, it feels very vulnerable and very shaky, very young, very delicate. And as much as that might feel scary, it's also a good sign, because it means you're doing something new, something which is unfamiliar.

Katie

And it's almost reconnecting with that little girl that was so frightened and bewildered and anxious before I started using different substances and techniques to try and survive.

Alex Howard

Well, part of the reason why you use those substances and techniques was to try and protect her and get away from those difficult feelings.

[00:09:41] Katie

So now I've stripped all that away. It's kind of, oh my God I'm just left with this kind of... And I think that's also why it's so upsetting to continue to be told that I'm this horrible, controlling, mean, manipulative person when they don't know how hard I've been working, I've been working so hard to not act out in those behaviors. I've been working so hard not to throw my toys out of the pram. In the past, I have thrown dinner plates on the floor and screamed and shouted.

Alex Howard

I suspect it wasn't the first thing you attempted to do to make things different.

Katie

It wasn't.

Alex Howard

That comes down a path where many things have been attempted before one gets to the point like that.

Katie

Yeah.

Alex Howard

How have you been getting on with the other part of the homework? I asked you to go into modules four and five with the stop process and the presence process. And I wonder how that's been. And also, I'd love to talk a bit about some of the things that you found yourself using the technique on.

Katie

So the stop process, I've used it but I didn't find that as helpful as the presence process, but I think one leads onto the other. So the stop process, I have caught myself going into thought processes.

So last night is a good example, and I was trying to use it last night when I did get myself into a state. I was thinking, I can't take a deep breath so maybe it's COVID and I've got a bit of a cough. And then my head just started literally going, and then I've got this, I've got aches and pain, and I know that's one symptom. And then I'm overweight so if I go into hospital I'm going to be on a ventilator and I'm going to die and then they won't know where all my stuff, my paperwork is. My head literally just went off.

Alex Howard

As you probably remember from the module, what I call snowball thinking, you start with a little snow and then it rolls down the mountain and it gets bigger and bigger and bigger each step that it goes.

[00:11:55] Katie

And then I was thinking on it, and even if I called an ambulance now they won't... And I was going, I say pause, just pause and try and get that, and I do the pause and then I say, it's going to be okay. And then go into that just breathing, trying to breathe.

But the problem is, my problem at the moment is I'm struggling to breathe. So if I focus on the fact that I'm struggling to breathe, it almost gets worse. Really since the trigger, since my husband told me he wasn't going to give me any more money.

That has been resolved. And that is something else I'm really proud of as well, actually. Because I didn't fire off an email saying, "you disgusting piece of whatever". I just said it will put me in an enormously difficult situation. It will cause me a lot of stress. And at the end of the day, ultimately, it's children who will suffer, not me, because we'll both get a really bad credit rating if we can't pay our mortgage and then we won't be able to get anything else anyway.

But I didn't say it in any anger. And then we have actually had an email conversation about possibly looking at doing some kind of therapy, joint therapy. And I don't know where it would lead, I don't know what the outcome will be, but it's about just trying to have a more constructive relationship, whether we're a part altogether.

Alex Howard

I think having some kind of mediation or couples therapy, whatever stage of the process you guys consider yourself to be at, I think would be really good. I think trying to deal with the emotion of separation alongside the practicalities of separation without some sort of holding and support, I think is very difficult.

Katie

Yeah. So that's a bit of a development which I do feel happy about.

Alex Howard

What I think would be really helpful would be to spend a week or two really drilling working with the stop process and the presence process. And I think particularly, if you remember going back a few sessions ago, and we talked about these get into jail free cards, these ways of thinking where you guarantee that you get yourself in a psychological prison. And I think some of these patterns that are playing out, like, "It's all my fault that she's like this", or "I've just been a failure as a mother and this is my comeuppance for that". When you go into those patterns or when you find yourself getting reactive and wanting to go to war with her again, using your pause and just settling and calming your system I think would help you enormously.

And I think it does sound like the not being able to breathe was a symptom that was triggered by the financial stress. Because it's almost like money is like oxygen when you haven't got enough of it, in a sense. So I'm hoping that with the resolving of that you can just start to find a bit more space in your chest and just relax a bit more fully back into yourself.

[00:15:11] Katie

The presence process I loved. Just concentrating on fully relaxing your legs and your arms. The problem is my neck is still very painful so I need to incorporate relaxing my neck as well, which I was doing.

Alex Howard

Do you ever do any kind of yoga?

Katie

Yeah, I do. Well, I haven't done it for the last few weeks because of this money situation, but I was doing it every week.

Alex Howard

Yeah, and there's tons of good stuff on YouTube, but I would start doing 20/30 minutes of yoga each day. I think when you've got that neck tightness it's the sort of thing to help with that ease.

It's almost like, I'd love you to have a period of time where there's a really intensive period of self-care, like meditation every day, yoga every day, presence process multiple times through the day. Keep going with the journaling of positive things about yourself. And it's almost like I'm going to really actively work to bring things back into balance.

And, A, I think you'll be amazed at the impact you can have, but B, it's also incredibly empowering because then you go from, in future, being afraid of those symptoms to going, hang on, I've been in this place before and I was able to shift it and get myself out of it.

Katie

I might take a week off work and literally just do that process.

Alex Howard

I think that would be great.

Katie

Yeah, I might do that.

Alex Howard

Having a sustained week or so of some time off work, and it's like you almost go on a mini retreat. You're really committing to self-care in a really focused way. I think it's not just about shifting things now, it's about realizing that you can impact on how you feel, which I think is much more empowering for the future.

Katie

Yeah. I just think I did get into a real, just whatever I was doing I just couldn't get... I was waking up at 04:00 in the morning and my head was already in full session.

[00:17:12] Alex Howard

There's a lot that you're already doing right. I think you've done great to keep going with the meditation, to keep going with the homework. I just think we need to double down for a little bit to just get things into a really solid place. I just want to really bed down the psychological scaffolding, like just getting things really solid. And also in this newer place of you meeting the world, not through all of these images and ideas, just making sure that that self-care is really in place to support that.

Katie

Yeah, I agree. And it's painful but I know that the work is helping, even though on the surface I'm still sort of struggling a bit. But I think that's part of it.

Alex Howard

Totally. And this sort of therapeutic work isn't easy. The measure of success is not that everything suddenly feels effortless. It's hard work, but it's work that's worth doing. And I think you're feeling some of the fruits of that work, even though it's still really tough at the moment.

Katie

It's just a new way of feeling and being for me. So it's not familiar, so it's anxiety provoking.

Alex Howard

And it takes effort as well because it's not yet fully locked in.

Katie

Yeah. Definitely.

Alex Howard

It definitely feels like things are calming. That's in two weeks time, if we see each other, perhaps in person, in four weeks time hopefully things are looking better by then.

Katie

Yeah. Thanks, Alex.

Alex Howard

You're welcome, Katie. And keep going with modules four and five at this point. Keep working on bedding that in because I think that's also going to help a lot as well.

Okay. Lovely.

Katie

Thank you.

[00:18:56] Alex Howard

All right. Take care.