



Creating inner safety for healing trauma

Guest: Monique Koven

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference. Today I'm speaking with Monique Koven, a certified trauma recovery coach and the host of the *Healing Trauma Podcast*.

She's worked for over 25 years as a social worker with vulnerable populations. She's also a survivor of childhood trauma. Her passion today is educating and supporting survivors by helping them understand how trauma can impact their bodies, minds and soul, and how to find safety and healing in their journey. Monique, thank you for joining me today.

Monique Koven

It's a pleasure to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So I would love it if you could start by telling me how and why you created the *Healing Trauma Podcast*.

Monique Koven

Yes. So it comes from a personal experience. I am a survivor of developmental trauma myself, and I started really having a lot of symptoms when my kids were born, which is very common, and I just didn't really understand what was happening. It didn't make sense, but I felt very anxious all the time. I felt unsafe. I would have these experiences where I would get hypervigilant and go into a freeze experience, which would happen every single day around a certain area of my house. And I literally would be glued to the floor. And I'd feel like I can't move. And this would happen every day, groundhog day.

And I knew I needed to get some support and help, someone to tell me what was happening, what was going on. Because on the outside I was happily married, had a nice family, thought I left my trauma behind, and had a good job as a social worker. But on the inside, I still felt a lot of the same sensations, like I was in danger when I wasn't.

[00:02:09] Meagen Gibson

So I tried getting help through various different kinds of approaches, different therapists. And finally I said, well, I'm not really getting anywhere, I'm going to see the specialist, and I went to see a psychiatrist. And I said, okay, she's going to know because she's a psychiatrist. And I told her about the freeze happening every day and about feeling. And she basically said, you have anxiety and you really need to do CBT. And CBT has been shown to be really effective, blah, blah, blah. So I'm like, okay, I'll do what I need to do.

Monique Koven

And I basically worked for 15 years following. I would see her every twice a year. 'What's going on? Any changes?' 'No. Still the same.' 'You've got to try harder'. And that whole experience, it was actually retraumatizing because I was trying to get help, which reminded me of how I was trying to get help in my childhood, and nobody was hearing me, understanding me. I was actually told that when I felt frozen and I felt like I needed to run, which is what I would do, it was what my body wanted to do, I was told I needed to stay, make myself stay. Which we know now is not what you do when you're in that kind of body response, trauma response.

Anyway, so it took a really long time until finally, I walked in with that book, Judith Herman's book, *Trauma and Recovery*, to her and said, 'I think I have PTSD', and she didn't say anything. And so finally I realized, I think I have complex trauma. And I got tested by both a psychiatrist and a therapist. And yes, I did. And I was like, it finally made sense. And I got the right therapy, and started training myself as a coach. And then I just realized, oh my gosh, there are so many people who are going through exactly what I'm going through, and they don't know where to turn or what to do. And I wanted to create a place where people could come and get that validation, get that understanding, know where to go and what to do. And that's why I started it. Long answer.

Meagen Gibson

I love that answer. And it gives such a great context and grounding point from which we can talk. And I heard so many familiar things in your story. And maybe you can relate in the same way I do, that there was only one thing that could happen to you after you gave birth, and that was postpartum depression, if you were going to have a side effect of birth. For a very long time. And that was the same thing that happened when I gave birth to my oldest.

And I know now that I suffered from really severe postpartum anxiety that nobody had talked about, that was definitely complex trauma related. But nobody had it. I would describe what was happening, they were like, 'oh, that sounds tough'. I just need more sleep. And I was like, actually, this might be more than that. But it took years and years and years for me to find somebody that heard and was able to put that picture together. I did not advocate for myself in the way that you did. I'm not a therapist. I'm not a social worker. I don't have that kind of training. I wasn't able to find those things on my own until much, much later. But, yeah, I related to so much of what you said.

And I was just actually listening to one of your podcast episodes today. It was Dr Clayton.

Monique Koven

Oh yes.

[00:05:48] Meagen Gibson

And what I kept thinking is that this is just such a validating experience for people when they listen to your podcast that might have suspicions about their experience or might be just looking for answers or looking for guidance, and no one else in their lives, and especially not necessarily in their family systems, for whatever reason, is going to validate or legitimize that experience that they're having. They're going to try to deny or reason away your experience.

Monique Koven

Yeah. Exactly. And when people start to hear how much it actually makes sense, that they're not broken, that their responses make sense, it just opens up a little window of hope.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And from there, once we have a little bit of hope restored, we can move forward.

So we've talked through a couple of tiny examples of our personal stories, but what is trauma? How does it show up as an adult?

Monique Koven

Yeah. So what comes to my mind really is just, many people with complex trauma histories grew up in environments where they were not seen, they weren't heard, they had no one to attune to their needs or feelings, perhaps they weren't allowed to speak. In many of these families your feelings are like, you don't talk about them, so you stuff and you put it inside.

And what that does is you really learn that it's not safe to share my voice, to show up authentically, and you're not prepared because your nervous system has learned, these are learned patterns. We're not talking cognitively, but really in a felt sense that speaking up or saying what I need is dangerous. It's a threat. And so when I go to speak, when I'm about to say 'I need' or 'I want' something happens in our nervous system, we start getting activated.

And sometimes you can explain it like, I just feel the cement coming over me and my mouth just won't say what I want to say. This is very common with a lot of people that I work with. They're like, 'needs. I have needs?'. Just to begin, some of them are like, I have to remind myself to go to the bathroom or to drink.

So what happens is that you carry these experiences, this blueprint, into your adult life. And you might know, have a lot of knowledge, oh, I know now how to speak and I know I can ask for what I want. That's all fine up here, but your body still hasn't registered that, no, it's not safe. So this is where you bump into a lot of things.

And how it shows up is in relationships because we've had relational trauma. So relationships, it can show up in work with your peers, with your boss. It can show up in friendships. I've had people who say, I'm at the supermarket and someone in the supermarket she was rude to me and was really angry. It could be anywhere there's people, which is everywhere. So that's really how it shows up.

I can remember as a really young social worker fresh out of school, and I had this job where I was supposed to present, and I knew my stuff but, boy, my nervous system was like, this is dangerous, this

is dangerous. It's not dangerous. These are fine people. Well, my nervous system was like, uh-oh. So this is a little example of how it can show up in adulthood.

[00:09:36] Meagen Gibson

And some of those experiences, like the one that you just shared, you'll speak to your experience, but I know I've had those experiences in my past where it's something new. I was a teacher for several years, and the first time I taught a class I was absolutely terrified. My nervous system was just in disarray. But I knew, I was like, this is scary, but there's no threat here. And so I was able to work through that. And eventually, in that kind of exposure, that got easy. And I was like, oh, this is not only easy, it's fun. I'm good at it. I'm getting better at it. I enjoy it. But in environments where that is safe for you to do, that's somewhere where you can play with that edge and you can experiment. But there's going to be plenty of situations where that's not available to you maybe.

Monique Koven

Yes. That's right. So I think that in environments that are safer, we can try that out. But then in some environments it just may not feel good.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And it's not about what you're telling yourself or what's real or what's rational, it's what your body is interpreting as safety

Monique Koven

Exactly. Because our nervous system records. You hear, 'the body remembers', it really does. And a thing to note, which I'm sure you've heard already lots of times, is that your body isn't out to hurt you. I was angry at my body for a really long time. Like, what a stupid body I have. Actually, what a brilliant mechanism I have. It's trying to keep me safe, and it doesn't quite know that I'm safe now. And that's this whole thing with trauma is that our bodies still don't know that it's safe.

Meagen Gibson

Our bodies don't feel like they're being respected by the clear and present signals that they're giving us. I have so much more respect for the sophistication and protective measures that my body will go through in order to send me very clear and unmistakable signals. And where it used to feel so terrifying to have body systems out of control, if you will, because obviously, I should just be able to tell myself to calm down. I should be able to tell myself I'm safe and everything will go back to normal. And that's just not the case, no matter how large your knowledge base is. And so you're still going to have these reactions. So now when that happens, and it's rare nowadays, but when it does happen, I always say thank you. I'm like, thank you for sending such a clear signal and message to me that this is not okay. That what's happening right now isn't okay for whatever reason, and that I need to pay attention to that.

Monique Koven

I love what you say about pay attention because we are so used to just bypassing because we've done that our whole life, and to start to begin to listen to the messages of our body is so important, because then we can work with it.

[00:12:47] Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And especially, I have so much sympathy for people in family systems because we get so much messaging that family is more important than anything and that it's 'blood over all', I can't think of all the sayings, but that you should move past anything and everything in order to preserve family relationships. And what a toxic message that we sometimes get because it causes us to try to compartmentalize and ignore and gaslight ourselves in our own messaging around what feels safe and what's okay for us.

Monique Koven

Yeah. You just reminded me of, I remember a long time ago someone told me that that's your mother father or whatever, and I remember inside feeling rage coming forward because I didn't have the words to say. But I wanted to say like you do not understand what you're talking about. And I think that's really the messages of society, is that we have to honor our families, and no matter what, stick to them. We know that that's just not good and not true for our mental health and our wellbeing.

Meagen Gibson

Not in a way that we have to abandon ourselves.

Monique Koven

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

So now that we've identified that we have trauma, what are some of the great therapies that are helpful to work with our trauma?

Monique Koven

So most of the people will say that, I've done CBT, and I've done talk therapy, and it wasn't helpful. And I want to say that it's not that talk therapy or even CBT is not helpful, it just may not be helpful for now, for the beginning, when you're starting your healing journey. Afterwards it can be very helpful. I think that getting insights and having these relational therapies are very helpful and meaningful.

But what is really super helpful, I find, are the somatic therapies and somatic meaning body based therapies where they work with the body bottom up approach versus the thoughts and changing your thoughts and reframing the experience. We all know we've reframed our traumas, and basically we still feel the same. Whereas body based you're really dealing with what's showing up in the moment.

And I myself have had, oh my gosh, the decades of being stuck in certain things have got resolved with somatic therapy, which has been absolutely amazing. So when I say somatic, I'm talking about sensorimotor psychotherapy, somatic experiencing those kind that really deal with the body and the responses and the patterning that are happening. Because in a lot of these experiences our bodies didn't get to do what they needed to do and what they were supposed to do. And so it's almost like it's still in a stuck, well it is in a stuck place. So when we are able to resolve that, our system goes back to equilibrium.

[00:16:08] Meagen Gibson

It disperses the usefulness of however your body is actually feeling at that moment.

Monique Koven

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And I often try to explain to people that one of the reasons that I love doing these conferences is just to help people gain an awareness of what's available to them. Because when you are confronted with, maybe we'll call it a lack of functionality, and that you maybe I haven't even identified as being trauma, and you go to seek help, you don't know what to look for. You don't know what your therapist should be, if they should be trauma-informed, or if they should have somatic training or all of the different modalities.

And so there's, just like I couldn't say that there's one way to cook a carrot or one way to tie your shoes, those are simplistic examples, but there's not one dedicated way to do anything. And so when it comes to healing or trauma, there's also all of these fantastic modalities. But I find that you are on the spectrum where you either don't know where to begin and you just want help or you know about everything, and you still don't know what might be right, right now, what might be the best tool at this moment.

So do you have any advice for people on that journey of figuring out what's going to work best and how to find really great practitioners to help you along that journey?

Monique Koven

That's such a good question. And my heart goes out to that because I remember being there and of course trying so many different things. But I would say, this is my own personal advice, okay, so why don't you inquire about different kinds of somatic modalities? And you can start by looking on YouTube. There's so many good videos on what is somatic experiencing? What is sensorimotor psychotherapy? Start there.

And I would say, listen to your body, where it draws you. So I have on my podcast, I think I did a five session series on 'what is IFS?', 'What is somatic experiencing?', 'What is sensorimotor?'. Just so that people can get a little taste, and then they have to decide what feels right for them.

Meagen Gibson

At the moment. Exactly.

Monique Koven

Yeah. And I also want to say there are other things that might not be therapy that can actually help. A lot of people have talked about really learning how to be in their body with yoga or with other kinds. There's a lot of other ways that can be helpful in addition to therapy.

[00:18:55] Meagen Gibson

Movement and expressive arts.

Monique Koven

Exactly. As a part of that, there's not just one thing, there can be several things. So many people that I work with, they're working with therapists, they're doing coaching as well. It's a lifestyle change I think, healing.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Absolutely. There was something I was going to say, and I was listening so intently that I lost it.

So what do you think are some other things that are really important to a healing journey? Because it's also hard when you're at the beginning to understand where you're going and how long it might take to get there. People have a destination mindset sometimes like, 'I'm going to heal my trauma.'

Monique Koven

I did. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

As did I. 'I'm going to fix this'. And that's not quite how it works as life reveals to you. So what are some of the things that are important along that journey?

Monique Koven

Well, the first thing I'll say is don't do what I did way back when, which was, how many sessions until...

Meagen Gibson

How long is this going to take?

Monique Koven

Because it really does. Just think about how many years, we're talking developmental trauma, and a lot of them is procedural. It takes time. So that's the first thing is that you have to realize this is a healing journey, there's no, 'I'm going to get to here and there'. You're going to feel changes but it happens in increments, and it's a building process.

And so that's the first thing I would say is let's be realistic about healing. And if anybody tells you it's quick, then I would just think twice about that. So that's one of the things. Did I answer your question?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I was just going to say also that it's not a straight line either. Like you might make significant progress in a particular way and then because life continues to happen, as you're working through your trauma, something might come up. You might have the death of a loved one, or you might incur a pandemic for instance and it's going to exacerbate or open up a new corner that you didn't realize was present and then you feel a little bit like you're at the beginning again. But it's really just like, okay,

now that I've unloaded this other thing and teased it apart, I've loosened it up, there's room for more parts of myself to come forward that need love and attention and care.

[00:21:28] Monique Koven

Yes. But now I'm remembering some of the things you were asking as well with that question. And that is what some things are. And I'm just thinking about how learning about boundaries is really important, because a lot of people will tell me that as soon as they started to place some kind of boundaries around the relationships with maybe some of their family, they started feeling like 100lbs less lighter.

And sometimes it's really hard to heal when you're still actively there. And it doesn't mean you're going to cut off ties, it just means you can take a little healing break for a little bit and allow yourself to have some space away to heal. And I know that can be really hard. I remember thinking I could never do that. Oh, yes I could. You can do that. You can do that. That's part of the healing, is learning about boundaries because boundaries are oh, they are life saving. And they're so important and boundaries not just in that area, but in all areas, because a lot of us just have holes inside. And holes not meaning we're deformed or there's problems, but rather we haven't learned about reciprocity. And that no is no. I can say yes and I can say no. We haven't learned those basic things. And so we really need to learn boundaries. That's one thing.

And the second thing is learning about safe relationships. Another thing where we come into adulthood and we're not prepared. We just know what we know. A lot of people will say, oh, I got into a relationship after relationship with a narcissist. I don't get that. And just, what is a safe person? What is a safe friend? What does that feel like? And learning about that. Somebody who listens with empathy. 'What?'. Somebody that gives and takes, that's a safe relationship.

Meagen Gibson

And to circle back to something you said even before that ties into that, is the boundaries thing. And at the beginning when you're learning what boundaries are, if you're someone like me who is a little bit codependent in their past, you're learning them, and then you're practicing them. And it's not only you're not great at first, you've got to try it a few times, but it's really uncomfortable to not only communicate, the communicating part is actually easy. Once you get to the point where you're actually going to communicate a boundary, you're like, oh God, that kind of feels good. But then it feels really uncomfortable to hold it because it will immediately get tested. It's just like pouring fuel on a fire. Someone's like, oh, you don't want me to push that. You don't want me to do this, and you're just like, yes, and then you have to just hold it and that burns. That's like holding a bowl over your head in a squat for 3 hours.

And I think it was Brené Brown I heard on her podcast, *Unlocking Us* the other day, she was talking to her sisters, and they were reflecting to her that when she first started implementing boundaries, that she was a real boundary bully, and she had a boundary cape. She was just like putting up boundaries everywhere, and they were really rigid. And they were weaponized. And so in the learning curve of learning how to do that, we're learning how to assert ourselves and create boundaries and yet not be these altruistic virtuous warriors out teaching everyone else about how awful they are. It's more of a self thing.

And the reason that I got there was because you were talking about safe relationships, figuring out what a safe relationship is, and I think boundaries and practicing boundaries is such a great way for

that to reveal itself, because I don't have any relationships with safe people to whom boundaries are a threat.

[00:25:29] Monique Koven

Yeah. Exactly. If it's a threat to them or they're getting angry, there's your indication.

Meagen Gibson

And people might be confused, and they might want to know more and they might want to try to understand. So it's not like they're just going to say, oh, okay. There might be some follow up inquiry around a boundary, but the people that I trust, that are safe relationships for me, they don't get angry, and they don't resent me when I put up a boundary or when I express or communicate a boundary.

Monique Koven

Yes. Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

One of the things that I like to, and I've said this in a couple of interviews, but that I like to always emphasize is that, if you've got trauma, you've identified you have trauma, or even if you haven't and you go to a counselor or you go to a coach, you go to a therapist and they suggest or lead you to the point where you're acknowledging that you have trauma, you don't have to disclose any of it. And maybe you want to talk through that.

And you mentioned earlier in your own therapy that a lot of it was retraumatizing. And the methodologies that you were using then was furthering your trauma or deepening your trauma, not resolving anything or loosening anything up. And I think people often resist starting any sort of therapy around trauma because they think that they're just going to have to tell these stories again. They're going to have to put themselves in these places again. And it's just simply not true.

Monique Koven

Yeah. I think that that's more with the somatic approaches that they don't need to know your story because your body tells a story by itself. It just does. So that's good to know if that is something that is holding you back because you're afraid. And you're right, they're afraid. I see that a lot when I do my consults, you can see their face already in the headlights. And I just have to remind them not to worry, we're not going to go there. We don't have to go there. And it's like, ah. Because we feel it when we start talking about it, it feels like we're right back there.

Meagen Gibson

And as a trauma healing coach, how does that look different than it does around therapy? What's the difference in the modalities?

Monique Koven

I see myself, well, first of all, the work that I do is I was trained with Deb Dana, so I do a lot of helping you understand what's happening, what's going on with your nervous system. So I would have really liked to know that I wish somebody would have told me what was happening there.

[00:28:02]

So that's a lot of what I do is really, I see it as a first step, and it's a place to really prepare I think, for maybe some of the deeper work that you would do in therapy. So it's really learning about your nervous system, learning how to regulate, providing regulating tools, that kind of thing. So that's more of the work that I do and just to provide support.

Meagen Gibson

Wonderful. Well, Monique, thank you for being with us. Where can people find out more about you and your awesome podcast?

Monique Koven

So pretty easy to remember, thehealingtraumapodcast.com is my website and the podcast is called *The Healing Trauma Podcast*.

Meagen Gibson

Alright. Thank you very much for being with us.

Monique Koven

Pleasure.