



The trauma of concealment

Guest: Zayna Ratty

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[00:00:09] Jaia Bristow

Hello and welcome back to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be joined by Zayna Ratty. Welcome, Zayna.

Zayna Ratty

Hello, everybody.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm really excited about the conversation we're going to be having.

So, Zayna Ratty is an intersectional therapist who is an LGBTQIA+, GSRD, gender, sex and relationship diversity, race and ethnicity, hypno psychotherapist, presenter, columnist, podcaster and DEIA trainer based in Oxfordshire, UK.

And today we're going to be talking about the trauma of concealment. So do you want to start by telling us what you mean by that?

Zayna Ratty

So there is trauma that is created by concealment. And so the hope of talking about this today is, not only to talk about trauma, but also to talk about concealment and why we might conceal. So things around memory, consciousness and code switching.

Jaia Bristow

And so what exactly do you mean by concealment?

Zayna Ratty

So concealment is, to start with concealment isn't lying. And people will automatically jump to a conclusion that we are obviously being untruthful, and that isn't the case at all. Concealment can just be about neglecting to communicate something. And we can get caught up in what we call the relational paradox, where we will hide things so we won't communicate them correctly. People will

feel that they've got to know us when really they haven't, and then we can then worry about if they ever found the truth out.

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So I think concealment and encouraging people to look at it could be the key to effective trauma processing in the long-term.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And you talked about code switching. So could you explain what you mean by code switching?

Zayna Ratty

Yeah. So code switching is what we call a survival behavioral modification. So it's a technique that we use that's usually externally linked to past events that we may have perceived as traumatic events. And that's why we talk about trauma as well, because trauma comes in different shapes and sizes and flavors, too.

So code switching is an unconscious conditioned response. It's something that we do when we are self policing our own behavior, when we go into a situation and maybe we're quieter than we usually would be, or we're louder than we usually would be. It can be about avoiding negative stereotypes associated with facets of our identity, so that could be sexuality, gender, relationship, faith, religion, even the way we vote politically. We are trying to, by code switching, increase that in group bias. We don't want to be rejected.

But it can also be negative if we do it too much. It moves us further away from our authentic self. In some spaces we need it to shield us against systemic, institutional or even personal discrimination. We can go into a space of vigilant behavior where we are always preparing for a potential piece of discrimination or mistreatment or rejection and constantly code switching, constantly avoiding these stereotypes is emotionally draining, and ultimately it doesn't actually change your difference. It doesn't change your otherness.

Jaia Bristow

You've talked about different reasons why people might code switch and about code switching being one element of concealment, so I'm curious, what are some other elements of concealment? And what are some other reasons people might conceal?

Zayna Ratty

Yeah. So reasons that people might conceal, obviously I'm a psychotherapist and I encourage people never to conceal anything, because if you're not totally present in the room, then actually it's incredibly difficult to do the work. But it can be a feeling of not feeling safe about taking up space. So maybe we feel we don't fit there. And I hear this from clients a lot, I'm too much, or I'm not enough, or even if I do say something will be authentic, I don't feel seen or I don't feel heard.

It can be about a fear response. So obviously the four main fear responses, and one that affects particularly people who are neurodivergent, is a fawn response, a masking response. We want you to

appear neurotypical, we want you to sit down and be quiet, we want you to comply and all of these things that actually go against the functioning of a neurodivergent individual.

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So it can be about that rejection sensitivity, which can be another feature of neurodivergency. We can be going into spaces and concealing because we're living in that adapted self. Maybe we haven't really told ourselves the truth, and so we find it difficult to tell others it, too. We might be in a situation where there isn't, what we call a disclosure process, so that open, transparent, come as you are, be who you are, you're all wonderful. If we're in topographies that we feel not safe to be able to do that then we'll also conceal. We might have what we call a concealable stigma, which is something that's invisible. It could be an invisible disability. It could be relationship or gender or sexuality. It could be any type of diversity or marginalization. And I say, I can, to a somewhat extent, hide my sexuality, but I can't necessarily hide my race or ethnicity.

So even I have concealable stigmas that I might not necessarily want to bring out into a room. It can be a feeling of not wanting to be selfish, not wanting to take up too much space. And I call it the centered self versus being self centered. We're taught not to be self centered, not to be selfish, whereas actually to have a centered self is that stability and grounding and knowing who we are.

And one of the biggest ones, and I find in my practice why people conceal is vulnerability is perceived as a weakness. And actually, it's one of our greatest strengths to be vulnerable with people who we trust, to invite people into our authentic identities. And we don't like letting people down. We like pleasing people. We don't like judgment. And so sometimes we'll conceal in spaces to avoid others' judgment. Sometimes it's positive, and we don't recognize that and we think it's going to automatically be negative. And there's shame and guilt and so many more reasons why we might conceal, not only from everybody around us, so that includes work, but also why we might conceal from our very selves.

Jaia Bristow

And I think it's really important what you're talking about, about being vulnerable around people we can trust. And I think the word trust is super important because sometimes people have this idea that it's really important to be ourselves and to not conceal and to be vulnerable in front of everyone, but that can actually be really dangerous for certain people. And so again, the idea that, yes, to heal trauma we need to learn to be able to be our authentic selves and to be vulnerable in front of people, but not just anyone.

And you also mentioned earlier about how, for example, you can choose to hide your sexuality but you can't necessarily choose to hide your race or ethnicity. And I think each individual has certain areas that they can hide, divulge, conceal or not. And so I'm curious, when we do have the choice, why would someone decide to conceal or to code switch.

Zayna Ratty

Our brains take over at that point, particularly if we're in topographies that are unfamiliar to us. And so we then begin to rely on, and I guess this would be a good time to get a little bit of Carl Jung in here, he wasn't all so bad. And it's slide number one and it's demonstrating the conscious, subconscious and unconscious mind. So it also talks about what we might reveal and what we conceal.

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So Jung said, "until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate". Now, most people have heard of conscious, subconscious, unconscious. And in fact, if you are thinking and listening to this right now, then you are in a conscious state. And a lot of work is about bringing those things from this unconscious, through the subconscious, to the conscious so that we recognize why we're making the decisions that we're making, why we're choosing to conceal or we're choosing not to conceal.

So the conscious state is about the input from our senses. So you can hear us right now, you can see us right now, you can see the slide. And the subconscious, it holds that information just below the surface. So if you're looking at the slide right now, you'll be able to see there's a line just under the waterline. That's your subconscious. Further down, the bit right at the bottom is the unconscious. And the unconscious is made up of the thoughts, memories, desires, those bits deep within ourselves below our conscious awareness. Behaviors seem to originate here. So you'll conceal and maybe not even notice why you're concealing, maybe not even notice you are concealing.

So our brains can play little tricks on us at times when we're thinking about, is this place safe or is this not safe? And I guess that probably leads us on to thinking a little bit about memory. Because this is not about doubting our judgment. Memory is subjective. And in slide number two, there's a demonstration of what memory is and what it does and what it's made up from. Memory is not linear. We may remember something one way, and actually, maybe it didn't happen that way.

So memory influences how we react, respond, whether we conceal, reveal. So it can be really helpful to know that actually memory is exceedingly complex. It's not something that is just, oh, this thing happened. We remember it altogether. So at the top we've got long-term memory and then underneath we have declarative and nondeclarative, so implicit and explicit.

And usually what I talk a lot about is the episodic, that experienced event and the semantic, which is the knowledge, the concepts, the things that have been passed down, that intergenerational conditioning that takes place. We also have the skills and actions and that's where we actually begin to think, maybe we should conceal in this place, along with emotional conditioning. All of these things add up to explicit and implicit memory and then long-term memory.

So it can be that our brains are looking for patterns. And when our brains are looking for patterns, lots of things can happen, like how trauma can manifest, for instance, which is slide number three.

So trauma can manifest in isolation, confusion, low resilience, insomnia, disproportionate guilt. This is one I hear a lot, it's obviously my fault as a default. And that usually goes back to a time in somebody's life where actually maybe they did do something and were told, 'well, obviously everything is your fault', so you then take that forward. Your memory gets in the way and it says, every time this happened, it's your fault. Feel the guilt. Feel the shame. Chronic shame is much worse than disproportionate guilt. And we'll be talking a little bit about shame and guilt later. We can have communication problems. It can be hyper or hypo vigilant. So either over vigilant or completely disassociated and not vigilant at all.

We react instead of respond. So reaction is about an emotional, so again, that's coming up from your unconscious through your long-term memory and making you react instead of responding, which is doing something while taking a step back and thinking about what you're doing, thinking about the implications of what you're doing. You can have intrusive thoughts, mood changes, it can even be

around substance, alcohol misuse, anhedonia, which is the inability to feel pleasure in something that's pleasurable. Something that we used to always love doing all of a sudden loses all of its pleasurable abilities.

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We can self pathologize. We can have relationship problems. We can develop maladaptive coping mechanisms, that disassociation, that being too loud, being too quiet, thinking, well, actually I won't go into that place because it's not safe in the first place. And along with depression. There's lots of things that all eventually add together to make up our experience of trauma. And that's further perpetuated if we are concealing, whether that event is traumatic or not.

Jaia Bristow

That makes sense. And I guess we sometimes talk about big T trauma and small T trauma. And people have this idea that you need to have had one massive traumatic event for us to have trauma responses in the body, and we realize that that's not the case, especially for people who belong to oppressed and marginalized groups where they're facing constant microaggressions, for example. And we have Roxy Manning, who is excellent, who is going to be talking a bit about the trauma of microaggressions and how we can respond to those, especially using NVC, nonviolent communication, for example, as one of the tools.

Zayna Ratty

Yeah, that sounds absolutely amazing. We do think trauma is an individual extraordinarily stressful event, whereas it can be the cumulative effect of lots of smaller, repeated effects. And actually, it might not be something you've even undergone yourself. It can be intergenerational. We find this in marginalized communities. The trauma is passed down, particularly from the primary caregivers, and then as an adult that becomes part of your narrative, that becomes part of your unconscious. It can even be difference based. The very notion that you are different from someone else is a source of trauma. It can be collective or individual or both at the same time.

We've seen with lockdown and with the pandemic that we've had a collective trauma but in between that large collective trauma, we've all had individual ones. So we've had this compound effect of lots of layers of trauma that have caused us maybe not to come forward. There has been stigma about saying somebody has had COVID or vaccination or any contentious issue where there is likely to be difference, there is likely to be some trauma.

Jaia Bristow

And I love what you're talking about, about the layers of trauma. I think that so often gets overlooked, and in some ways that can almost be a definition of intersectionality. It's the different layers of trauma. And as well, when you're talking about intergenerational trauma, but also, I think it's very applicable to what you're talking about in terms of concealment, we sometimes mirror, if we have a parent for example who is code switching a lot or concealing parts of their identity in certain spaces, we learn to do the same. We learn, oh, that's not allowed to express that part of my identity in that space.

And it's like you and I were talking at the very beginning before we started recording this, about how this idea that sometimes we have to be professional and when people ask that dreaded question, 'how are you?', do you show up authentically or do you conceal? Do you use the social norms? Do you say, 'I'm fine, how are you? Oh weather, oh time of year, oh this oh that?'

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[00:17:52] Zayna Ratty

Yeah, absolutely. When we're asked that question, or we ask that question of somebody else, we are running through a patterning in our mind of, do I answer historically? Do I answer in the present? Or do I answer in the future? Am I worrying about something in the future? Am I keeping with me some trauma from the past? Or am I actually showing up as myself today? So it's a very simple question we ask it day in, day out, the amount of time, let's face it, if we'd had £1 for everybody that anybody had said, 'how are you?' and you'd gone, 'fine', we'd be rich. We wouldn't need to win the lottery. But it is a case that it's a question that is asked, and we don't know why it's asked sometimes. So if you really want to know how someone is, follow that up with something else.

Jaia Bristow

And so we've talked about why people conceal. We've talked a little bit about what that looks like. Do you have anything else to add in terms of what that looks like? Or would you like us to now talk about how to manage that, how to deal with that, how to recover from that?

Zayna Ratty

I guess it's something that I actually use a lot with my clients, is something that I created called The Emotional Wormhole and it's slide number four. And what it shows, what it is, is a demonstration of quite how easy it is to conceal, quite how easy it is to bring forth a historical traumatic response.

And it's about point A and point B. It's a timeline. Unless we're Doctor Who, time moves in one direction. And having that historical feeling or event or moment, so I put feeling because it could be semantic, episodic, is it declarative memory? And having a present feeling, event or moment, so we'll go into a space maybe that we haven't been in before. And our brains are great at identifying patterns.

Okay, you have your unconscious, you have the patterning, you have the conditioning, you have a previous reaction or response and what happens is point A and point B move closer together. So that's what's demonstrated by the middle image that has bend in the middle. And then the image at the bottom is about the Emotional Wormhole. It's how incredibly quickly, and pretty unconsciously, we can jump from point B to point A and respond in the present as we may have reacted in the past without necessarily knowing why.

It doesn't even need to be exactly the same scenario. It could be, I call it the drop down menu in your mind. You have a drop down menu in your mind and it appears, and it goes, right okay, so it looks like this, tick. I feel like this, tick. And then it goes, okay so it's obviously a similar situation so we're going to go through that Emotional wormhole, and we're going to do what we did last time, whether that actually benefited us or not. Any coping mechanism is a coping mechanism because it works, it doesn't necessarily mean it's really good for you.

Jaia Bristow

And that's how a lot of trauma gets trapped in the body, is coping mechanisms that aren't actually particularly healthy. So can you offer some strategies that are healthier?

Zayna Ratty

It is about authenticity. And it is about really showing up for yourself and whether that's around boundaries, and whether that's also, we need to bear in mind that boundaries look different in

different cultures. So what might be a westernized boundary, might not work anywhere else. So therapy isn't necessarily transferable across the globe, you actually have to look at where it's being used and look at the culture and the race and the ethnicity that's being used within.

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So one thing that I use with lots of my clients is about emotions. Very often we'll think, oh, we're feeling one emotion. We'll attach to that one emotion, and we'll go, yeah, that's definitely what we're feeling. Okay, so we're going to act upon that. So I encourage my clients to have some more what we call, emotional literacy. So looking at, is what I'm feeling really what I'm feeling? So become embodied. Think about how that feels. Where are your shoulders? How tense is your neck right now? And think about advancing your emotional vocabulary.

Don't just think it's, and this will be slide number five, it's a lovely rainbow wheel of emotions. We are so much more capable of feeling than we think we are. We will run, and there's a therapist saying of, "anger is always the top emotion". And what we want to get to are the bottom ones because those are the ones that can shift. If we can begin to shift those emotions, then actually, what we can do is we can begin to transform the response to the trigger, the stimuli of what we're doing.

So am I angry or am I frustrated? Pick one of those central emotions and work that out and ask yourself, which one sits right for me right now? Is it just anger? Possibly not just anger. It's likely to be, we are far more complex than that. We don't necessarily understand all this yet. We are that complex. So am I enraged? Am I agitated? What does frustration feel like for me? How does that feel in my body? Because quite often our minds, we rationalize everything and go, oh, yes this definitely has a complete explanation. Whereas our hearts don't always. I say that our eyes see in odds and our hearts feeling evens. It's a demonstration of saying that they don't agree. Try listening to the one that maybe you ignore the most.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I think that's really insightful in terms of understanding the ways that we can sometimes be, almost not quite in conflict with ourselves, but we jump to conclusions within our own feelings.

And I'm also thinking about the interview I did for this conference with Dr Meg-John Barker, talking about the different plurality and the different parts we have in ourselves and how certain parts of ourselves can be traumatized. And when you're talking about, is it anger? Is it frustration? Maybe one part of us is feeling really angry in that moment, and another part is feeling really hurt, and another part is feeling frustrated, and another is feeling rejected.

Sometimes I feel like that's part of the issue, is that we feel like we're only allowed one emotion at a time. And actually, when we tune in, there can be a whole range and nuances of different feelings and emotions.

Zayna Ratty

There's an intervention in ACT, acceptance and commitment therapy, that talks about passengers on your bus. And you're going along and you're driving your bus and there's lots of passengers on there and bearing in mind which is the noisiest one right now? It's not the only passenger on your bus, you've got lots of them. And Gestalt therapy, for instance, deals with these and looks at these parts of ourselves.

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One thing I encourage people to think about is about shame and guilt. So much of this comes down to that shame, that shame lives in the unconscious, it's difficult to reach. And trying to shift that from shame to guilt. Shame exists in that nonverbal space. And remember when we're trying to rationalize our way out of things, and it's actually in our hearts, it's really difficult to do. Whereas if you can think about it as guilt, guilt is relational strength because it helps us to express regret. It helps us to empathize with others and take responsibility, take accountability for ourselves, for our actions and why we may have acted that way and become attuned to those inner dialogues.

When I'm in session I call them thought gremlins, and we give them names and we dress them up and we invite them into the room. Instead of going, no, you don't belong in here. We're only talking to one at a time. We're not. We're talking to the multiplicity of our interconnected identities. So expand that capacity to observe those other thoughts, those other feelings, those other emotions. Have some inner compassion with yourself. Nobody is the finished work here. We're all on a narrative and witness and mourn your wounds. That vulnerability is strength and always will be.

Think about the things that trigger you to conceal. Write them down, talk to them, have a conversation with them, dress them up, put big googly eyes on them and sunglasses and communicate with all those parts of you. Because concealment and trauma manifest in uncomfortable emotions, they hide there because quite often we won't go near it. And quite often therapy is about pointing people towards and going, yes, this is hard, yes, it's uncomfortable, but ignoring it hasn't helped so far so let's try something a bit different.

Jaia Bristow

And how does one find that balance between maintaining a sense of safety and not retraumatizing parts of ourselves due to patterns, and also trying to remain authentic?

Zayna Ratty

And that's why things like having embodied other parts actually really help because you aren't going back into it. So in hypnosis you would do it as in you're watching a television screen. So if you're reenacting something, you're not going back into it. You are re-scripting it, not reenacting it. And that's for the avoidance of that retraumatization.

I was somewhere a little while ago and somebody said, 'oh, no, feel all your feelings when they come to you'. And I went, 'no, I'd rather you didn't do that. Let them in slowly, talk to them one at a time. You don't have to feel everything at once'. Because if you do, then you're likely to get confused and think this is just anger because you'll be overwhelmed.

Jaia Bristow

So then is it the idea that if you let them all in at once, you feel overwhelmed and then you just feel the most dominant feeling and you don't get to experience the subtleties and the nuance?

Zayna Ratty

Or you don't feel any at all, so what you do is you shut them all out. You go, it's Pandora's box, I don't want to open that because I know there's lots of stuff there. And so what you need to do is just open it a little bit and go, okay, what does it look like? What does it feel like? Who'd like to come and talk

today? Who would like to come and communicate how they are feeling? And being able to acknowledge.

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And I think this happens quite a lot with people who have mixed heritage or are marginalized in some of the facets of their identity, is they have all these different boxes, so I'm this and I'm that, and I joke and say I'm a great diversity box ticker, because I am on most forms. But it's true, it's many a true word said in jest, as my grandmother, God bless her soul, would say. You are all of these different people. Everybody has an intersectional identity. So why wouldn't we have an intersectional emotional identity to go with that?

Jaia Bristow

Yes. It makes a lot of sense. On that note, how can people get started? And do you have any suggestions? Can people work with you directly? Can you tell us more about you and your work?

Zayna Ratty

Yeah. So I call myself an intersectional therapist and consultant, and that's because I work with the whole of you. We laugh in session and we cry in session and we show up as yourself. And my aim as a psychotherapist is to facilitate a safe but also a brave space. This is brave stuff. This is confronting things that might have been there for years that we've ignored. And that's why it's so important to find a therapist that you can really be yourself with, that you can bring it all along, pop it all in a massive rucksack, bring it along, dump it on the desk, and go right, we're going to start somewhere.

And I always say, I put on my wellies and we wade into the bath of muggy bath water that people present. Because people are fantastic. I'm so lucky to do the job I do, and my clients are amazing, and it's not easy. I've been through a therapeutic process myself, and it is not easy, but it is worth it. It's so worth it to know so much more about yourself, to avoid that retraumatization, to know why you are doing particular things in particular places, than it is to not know.

Knowledge is most definitely power, particularly when you're talking about yourself. So I write on Medium, [@Zayna Ratty](#), my Twitter is [@zrtherapy](#). You can get hold of me through my website, which is [zayna.net](#)

And because this is about moving towards a deeper, more congruent, emotional connection with yourself and having that introspection before we can then go out and have it with others, always believe you are worthy of owning all those parts. I always say, personal agency doesn't necessarily have to be pretty, and sometimes it isn't. But it's so important to do, because expressing authenticity can be a challenging process. We're not going to pretend that you come along and this is sweetness and light, because quite often it isn't. But these positive rewards that you get from them, that authenticity of self, of being able to show up in spaces, of creating boundaries that are culturally sensitive for you, all experiencing that self acceptance is ultimately long-term gain for you to take forward into other places in your life.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. I love that. And I know from my own personal experience of having been through that journey and becoming more authentically me and showing up in all different spaces as myself whilst being aware, as well, of the environment and making sure I'm safe, has really opened things up for

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me. And I'm very grateful that I've had access to the resources and to therapy and other resources for me to be able to do that.

[00:34:43]

And before we finish off, other than therapy, do you have any resources for people, especially people who can't necessarily afford therapy?

Zayna Ratty

Yeah. So there are resources online, there's Facebook support groups. If you're a member of a marginalized community, there's lots of support groups out there where you can learn from other people who have maybe been through that journey.

There are therapists out there who do volunteer work. There's places like Switchboard, there's the LGBT Foundation in Manchester. Your GP is obviously a first stop, and maybe there might be a little bit of a wait. Mental health budgets are stretched and some therapists, I know me included, offer a low cost scheme, that's a pay it forward scheme. So I'd rather somebody saw me at a lower cost than didn't see me at all.

Meetup is sometimes a good place. It depends where you live, largely geographical, I'm out in Oxford which means there's not a lot on it. But if you're in London or if you're in Manchester or if you're in Brighton then there's a lot more things. It's about finding your community, getting some peer support.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think that's so important as well, especially when we feel like we can't be ourselves in so many areas of our life. If we find groups of people where we feel mirrored and safe and held, we can get that peer support and that's everything.

I fully rely on my peer support groups. I have a few. Especially for those of us with multiple intersections of layers of trauma, layers of oppression, layers of all the difficult stuff, it's even more important to have that peer support. Because sometimes we don't notice how much weight we're carrying on our shoulders and how tense we are and how much we have our guard up and how much we are concealing until we're in an environment where we are safe and connected and surrounded by people who have similar experiences to us, who have similar identities and therefore similar experiences, similar trauma and similar ways of managing that and can support each other.

Zayna Ratty

Yeah absolutely. Places in workplaces usually have marginalized speciality network groups that you can go and join and find some visibility and representation, find someone who mirrors you. Because quite often, if you are marginalized and you go into these spaces and you don't see many people who mirror you it immediately takes you into a fear response, will lead you to concealment and will lead you to trauma.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. Well, thank you so much for your time today, Zayna. Check out zayna.net for people who want to find out more about Zayna and her work.

[00:37:58] Zayna Ratty

Thank you. Take care, everyone.