Managing trauma in the workplace

Guest: Melissa Douglass

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[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow

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

Melissa Douglass

Hi Jaia, thanks for having me.

Jaia Bristow

It's great to have you again. So, Melissa is a social worker, professor, professional development trainer, consultant and telemental health provider whose goal is rooted in advancing modern tech utilization and trauma informed strategies for wellness and equitable care. You can read her full bio below this video.

So Melissa, today we're talking about trauma in the workplace. And I think it's a fascinating topic because as anyone who's watched this conference or our previous conference knows, trauma is this thing that if you have trauma it impacts all your life. And so let's talk a bit about why it's important to talk about trauma in the workplace and how it can impact your life in the workplace.

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. I think it's important because there has definitely been a shift in expectations, like trauma informed care has become huge in the last, I would say, 15 or so years. And there has often, though, in our kind of antiquated, we'll just say, in our Western culture, at least, that we spend a lot of time at work. If we look at the hours, sometimes we spend more hours in our work time than we do with our actual family or with friends or just with personal.

And there's been this antiquated expectation because we often have not been accustomed to speaking about mental health or any kind of personal things in the workplace, that once someone clocks in and they're on the clock that they need to leave all of their personal stuff at the door. When you get to work or now, remote, when you log in, whatever you are going through, whatever you are experiencing before that, that should not be at play because you have a job to do, you have things to produce or people to manage.

And it's not inclusive of us as holistic human beings to assume and to think that we can be effective employees or leaders or give to a company or an organization and not acknowledge that mental and emotional health and well-being is a huge piece of that.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think, yeah, it's so important that, the idea that if it was that easy to just leave your trauma at the door at the beginning of a work day, then we could just leave our trauma at the door in all different areas of our lives. But of course it's not that simple.

Melissa Douglass

Wouldn't that be nice?

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. Wouldn't that be nice? So for starters, what are some ways that trauma... Because it's not just that we can't just leave trauma at the door, right, it's that the workplace can also activate or trigger certain trauma responses because of the setting.

So let's talk a bit about that first. What are some trauma responses that can show up in the workplace? And of course, keeping in mind that lots of people have different work environments.

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. Well, I think that just kind of understanding the basic responses to trauma or, if I back up a little bit, I'm thinking about the Triune Brain model by MacLean and Gray that kind of shows us how trauma affects the brain in our executive state, our emotional state, and that survival state. And when we think about where a lot of our emotions and feelings originate in the amygdala, when someone experiences trauma, that space is enlarged.

And I know we've often heard of the fight, flight or freeze response. And now more recently we also have heard of the fawn response, where people are people pleasing, they're being fixers, they're really falling into wanting to be the one to just have everyone be pleased and okay with things. But in this space, there is an overproduction of neurons. It creates that hypervigilance.

And so in the workplace, that can look like people being very unsettled, that can affect projects, that can affect communication, that can affect how someone leads, that can affect the interpersonal relationships with colleagues. When we think about the executive state and the prefrontal cortex, when someone has experienced trauma, that space shrinks, so it makes it harder to regulate thoughts and emotions. And sometimes we just perceive threats from everywhere.

So observing how people might show up in meetings or how people are communicating with their team members, I think this kind of area becomes a huge issue. Or the work in our HR departments, where we are thinking about policies and practices and how do we respond when people may not communicate effectively or they might be showing irritability in the workplace or threatening safety for other people, even if it's mental and emotional in that space.

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And then lastly, when we're thinking about our emotional state that's impacted, which also shrinks, when someone is experiencing or has experience of trauma, there's this lack of being able to distinguish between short and long term memories. And so people sometimes can be impacted in project management in this particular space.

Or if there are things that are said or done or felt that can spark one of those memories, we talk about triggers and how those can be experienced through all of our senses, so what our environments look like in the work space, what conversations look like, how people are being addressed or acknowledged, when we think about leadership styles, and sometimes how just that hierarchy can come with feelings of lack of being able to communicate effectively or feel like you're being heard.

There are just so many spaces when we understand trauma and understand that each person that we work with, whether it's a direct staff or leadership or someone at the executive level, we all have these histories and experiences that not only affect us on the mental state but they also affect us just in our bodies.

So when we think about people being irritable or decreasing productivity and performance, we see those show up in performance evaluations or performance, what do we call them when we have to put people on, performance plans sometimes at work because they're not producing in the way that we desire, when we're losing our ability to concentrate sometimes or focus or sometimes we're disengaged.

Those are all things that can impact the workplace and not only impact that particular individual, but also impact the ability for companies and organizations to sometimes meet their goals. And often we don't see how important that productivity space is when we think about our people that work for us.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think there's a few key elements in what you're saying, there's the individual side of it like going into work, into a work environment with unresolved trauma can be really difficult, it can be activating, it can affect our day to day tasks, our productivity, it can affect the way we communicate with colleagues, the way we show up in meetings, that kind of thing.

But also as an employer, for example, or as someone else who works in the company, I hate that we still measure success by productivity, but we do. So, like you say, it impacts not just the productivity but how well an organization runs if these things aren't addressed, which is why it's important to be having this conversation. It's important that we care because it's not just something that impacts a few employees on an individual level, but it impacts the whole organization.

So what are things that can be done to support workplace wellness and approaching this, especially because people have different types of trauma, people have different work environments, people have different structures, I don't know if we have exactly a magical template that we can apply to everything, but what are some sort of very essential level, some key things that can be done, to support a better, more safe, inclusive, well-being feeling in a workplace?

[00:09:23] Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. So we may not have a magical solution, but we definitely have a research and evidence based strategy and framework. So SAMHSA actually developed a framework for trauma informed care back in 2014 that includes principles for a trauma informed approach. So first things first is when we talk about trauma informed care, that's really the intro basic level that just recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma plays in an individual's life.

So all of this conversation that we talked about, that's basic trauma informed care, realizing that when people show up, trauma can also show up. But what I love about the SAMHSA approach is that they champion what's called a trauma informed system of care. And that includes trauma informed approaches as well as trauma specific services which all come together for us to have a trauma informed system of care.

And so a system of care is a multi level, trauma informed approach that's inclusive of this cross strategy system. So not only just our employees, not only the people that we might serve, or our customers, as we might say, but we're thinking of leadership, management directors, direct care service, service workers. We're thinking of partners that we might engage with.

We're thinking of every single sector that comes with an organization to really make sure that we have strategy aligned with policies, practices and services that really support healing and resilience for everyone. And so the SAMHSA framework has identified six core principles of the trauma informed approach.

And the first is just safety. Really thinking, how does our physical and emotional safety, like how do we create that environment for the people that not only work for us, for the people that we serve as well?

The second principle is trustworthiness and transparency. Are we really having conversations about this? Are we pretending like mental health is taboo, or it's not normalized, or these things are not really true factors that are showing up? And are we being honest about expectations, boundaries? What does our HR process and procedure for grievances or giving feedback, what does that look like? Does it feel punitive to the employees or does it really create a system of trustworthiness and transparency that says we're all working together to make sure that everyone feels safe?

The third principle is peer support, so how are we building good rapport and trust among the people that we work beside and that we're working with for many, many hours of our days and our weeks?

The fourth principle is collaboration and mutuality, so how are we, again, working on multi levels, making sure that everyone is on the same page in the direction that we're wanting to go to make sure that trauma informed approaches are not only spoken about, but they're actually felt within our organizations and our companies?

The fifth principle is are we empowering our employees? Do they have a space to feel like they have a voice? Are they able to make choices? Are we making sure it doesn't feel like a dictatorship? And then the last one, number six, the principle is just cultural, historical and gender issues and making sure that we're addressing them from an inclusive and a trauma informed space.

So we're making sure that the culture that we have within our organization is one that does not champion stereotypes or biases and that we really incorporate the differences in really the value that's within diversity and the different cultures that oftentimes always make up a team within an organization.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love that there is a magical template after all, or maybe not magical, it's a very evidence-based, fact based, template, right? And then each one of these elements, whether we're looking at safety, whether we're looking at trust and transparency, whether we're looking at peer support, whether we're looking at the ability to communicate with management and service workers and the people we're serving and the people who are being served, all these different things.

All of these things are not only just crucial, but each one of them can be adapted to the organization itself. So it's not like we're saying there's one size fits all. It's like here are some of the essential elements, here are the headlines, here is what needs to happen to create a supportive, safe, trusting environment at work where the employees are content, the leadership and management is content, the people being served are content.

It's like a win, win, win all round, no one loses by having this kind of ethos in the workplace. And I love as well that, like you said, it can be adapted. And I love what you were talking about. It's also really important to have a sort of inclusive, equitable place where we can talk about gender issues or racial or cultural issues in the workplace because of course these things play into workplace wellness.

You can't have one without the other, right? You can't have a safe, transparent, trusting environment which isn't triggering and activating for the employees and the management and where everyone feels like it's a good workspace without having that element as well.

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. You're so spot on. And this is the work that I really enjoy and love doing because every organization, every space, it has its own culture, it has its own mission, its own values, its own story. You have people that have bought into that larger vision and we want to make sure that the people that are on the team that are champion and that's moving that forward feels like they are seen as a whole person and not just a part of the work to get these things done.

Jaia Bristow

A cog in the machine.

Melissa Douglass

Yeah, there was some research that came out not too long ago that said there was only about 50% of employees in the United States that actually felt like their company or organizations they work for really cared about their wellbeing. And so when we think about just what goes into how we

show up or how we even get to the places that we work, for a lot of people, there's schooling, there's education, there's training, there's hours.

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There's so much professional and personal development that goes into showing up in a sector, in a field, in a space, to put your best foot forward, to give all of your skills and talents and abilities to work with an organization because you have a personal mission and desire to be a part of this larger mission. And so it's kind of heartbreaking to hear that when we show up and we give so much that so many, almost 50% of employees, feel that the place that they're giving that time and attention and energy to does not care about their personal well-being. That's not good. It's not good.

I love that with the SAMHSA trauma informed approach, that there are these principles of trauma informed approaches and it also comes with ten areas on how to implement those approaches. And, like you said, I love that each organization is different. So being able to go in and to give an assessment, see at what stage and place that an organization is in, and not only hear from the people that are kind of over implementing, but also hear from the staff because we also know that the perspectives of the two can be very different.

Like what leadership intends to be one way, the people that it actually affects, it might impact them in a totally different way. So going in and doing assessments and really understanding culture of the organization, really being clear about what the trauma informed approach that we really want to really navigate and go after within our organization and giving guidance on what that looks like so that we can raise that percentage of people that feel like we care about their well-being should be the absolute goal of every organization and company out there.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And a few things come to mind as you're talking. Again, as has already been mentioned, it's like win, win, win for everyone, right? Why would you not want an organization and a workplace where people are happy and content and feel fulfilled? But it also makes me think about, because obviously if the employees feel like the organization cares about them or management cares about them, they're going to care about the organization, and they're going to work from a place not of just, this is how I get my paycheck, but they're going to want to give their all.

They're going to want to do a good job, right? So again, it seems obvious to me, but there we go. And the other thing that really comes to mind when you're speaking is how the relationship, with trauma, we see that lots of people who have trauma don't always have the healthiest relationships in their lives, right? And I think that that can be true with the relationship with work or your workplace or your organization or your boss or whoever it is.

And so it's looking at your job as a relationship and it's like if it's a relationship where, let's be honest, some jobs are abusive relationships, the employees are expected to give their all, they have demanding hours, very little pay, they're not valued, they don't get any benefits. It's like, why, of course we live in a capitalistic society where people do need to pay their bills but it's like, why would you want to put yourself in that position?

Rather than have this sort of mutually beneficial relationship where the employee is wanting to support the organization and the organization is wanting to support its employees. And again, that

can look like different things in different places. It's not just everyone has to implement the same exact thing. It's not like an artificial intelligence robot is going to write a list of rules. It's checking in and finding out what's actually needed.

[00:20:55] Melissa Douglass

That's so true. And of course, with employees and people that are experiencing or living through trauma and trauma responses and they're still showing up every day and trying to put their best foot forward with as much as they have to give, I think it's so important for employees to remember that they have to put them first.

So whatever that looks like in regards to their own personal wellness, if that's therapy, if that's remembering their coping skills and enforcing boundaries. I think one thing that I see very frequently when it comes to just the whole trauma response piece and how it affects, like you shared, of course, the relationship with their work is that there's this push and this kind of overcompensation of needing to prove myself, because of what I've experienced in the past, I'm showing up in my workspace and I'm working the long hours.

I'm going above and beyond. I'm taking on the responsibility. I am doing the job of two, three, or four, if I notice that, my organization is understaffed because I have that innate need. I might be fawning as a trauma response. And I'm having that need and desire to prove myself, to show that I can do all the things that I'm worthy of being here and all of these things.

And it does create a very unhealthy relationship with the work and sometimes the people that you're answering to, whether it's my direct boss or a leader above that, I think it's really important for employees to remember, whatever that personal wellness strategy is for yourself, make sure that that is replicated, no matter where you are.

And so if that's work, what are the boundaries that need to be enforced? What are the effective communication skills that sometimes might need to be practiced? When I'm thinking about the commitments that I'm taking on, am I really considering my entire plate? Am I managing and regulating my emotions effectively? And am I communicating with either my direct report or HR when I feel that the environment that I'm in may not be conducive to those strategies that I'm trying to implement for myself?

And on the other side, for employers, are we making sure that we are protecting everyone? Is there empathy, is there non-judgment that's coming when people are communicating and sharing their struggles in the workplace? Is there strict based communication and person centered language when we are communicating with our employees to make sure that they feel like people first and not just workers or someone that has to produce for an organization?

Are we actively listening? Are we facilitating the dignity and instilling dignity and worth of the person? Are we being observant? Are we being compassionate? Are we not only following up but we're following through? All of these things are things that we can remember if we are in leadership in an organization or if we're an employee in an organization, the people have to be first. And if we focus on that and focus on the strategies on how to take care of the people that are the driving force, then we're better for it all around.

[00:24:36] Jaia Bristow

I love that. I think that's an amazing policy for people to have and to go forward in life thinking in that way. And I also just want to rewind a little bit because unfortunately, whilst we've established why it makes sense to have workplace wellness programs, to have organizations that care about everyone that they're employing or that they're serving or that they're in contact with from leadership managers all the way down, it's not always the case.

And just like in a painful, difficult relationship, it can be really hard to set boundaries, it can be hard to leave the relationship, it can be hard to communicate what's going on, especially if someone has a lot of trauma. And then when we take the workplace, which isn't like a romantic relationship, if you're leaving the workplace can also put someone in jeopardy financially which then brings a whole other thing.

And then we've touched upon this a tiny bit but there's also the issue around you're talking about people pleasing and needing to do well and working much too much, that is more likely to happen for people from marginalized and oppressed groups, for example. And so for someone who is in, excuse my language, but a shit job, is someone who's working in an environment that is very activating or triggering the trauma which is really painful and difficult, do you have a few tips on coping strategies, or strategies on how to set boundaries, or finding a way of removing oneself from the situation, or any other kind of strategies?

Because yes, in a big picture sense, I really hope people listening to this will start asking for more for themselves and communicating and all the things you listed and that employers and organizations will hear this and sort of check in and see what's needed and we see more and more programs in place. And I think it's different in different countries and cultures as well, like the US has a particularly bad work life balance, I think, compared to other countries but they also have much more of a sense around putting in place programs, perhaps, than other countries.

So whilst I really hope that that's happening on a broader level, for individuals listening to this who just need that support in their sort of day to day of managing their trauma in the workplace, do you have any coping strategies or any tips?

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. I think that it kind of first starts with the awareness of what's happening, because if we're just sitting in the cycle of this abuse, as we can name it in this particular situation, if we're just sitting in it, then we're continuing to harm ourselves. And just that question of what is this really costing me? When we consider that getting a new job and going through interviewing processes and preparing yourself to exit a situation like this, absolutely it's a process.

I know the old saying was it's a full time job trying to get a job. That's absolutely true. But I think what is important is when that decision is made, that this is just not working for me, that this is costing me more in regards to my mental and emotional safety, my peace, my ability to just kind of be in this system and environment, if it's costing me so much more mentally and emotionally, then we have to be firm about when we make the decision to say enough is enough and this is costing me way too much.

And so I think teaming up with somebody that can help hold that person accountable, whether it's a therapist, whether it's a good friend, whether it's a good family member, but someone that has the ability to see what's happening and that also has strategy around walking through a process. And I think a huge piece, excuse me, of acknowledgement here, is that with that, we are also navigating change management and we're also going to have to navigate grief at the same time.

Because unfortunately, often we don't realize how toxic work environments are until we're already very deep in them, right? And so there was initially probably an expectation that this is going to be a great role or a good position or a great opportunity or I was going to climb the ladder or whatever that might look like. When we're in the space of realization that this is not going to work for me and that this is actually costing me way more than it's worth at this time, then sometimes we actually have to grieve that reality.

That I'm going to have to make a new decision and a new choice and walk away from this. And that needs compassion, that needs understanding, that needs someone that can show empathy, that can help that person stay true to the decision that they made and see it all the way through. So I think what I hear myself saying is that once that awareness is there, communicate with somebody because it's very often challenging to go through something like that alone.

And so communicating with someone that's a trusted person to say, hey, I think I need to do this, can you stand alongside me through it? And if that is someone that needs to be like a therapist or something like that, making sure that there is a process developed on timing. So starting to get those things together by looking for a new job and maybe doing some interviews and preparing yourself for updating your resume or even going out on the job search again.

But creating what that plan and that process might be so that there is not an impulsive decision that just says, well, I'm just walking away and I'm quitting because that's the best for me. For some people, that might work, if you financially have some other things to fall back on, but for other people, that's not a reality. And there has to be a plan and a process in place. Oftentimes, like when someone may make the decision to leave an abusive relationship, there has to be planning, there has to be a process that allows for them to follow through and to be able to stand in that change that they have.

So outside of all just the normal coping strategies of making sure that you are considering your needs and what you have to and need to do for yourself, being very self aware and being honest in the reality that this is not working for you, teaming up with a support person and then creating a plan of action that you can follow to lead yourself through finally exiting that situation.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I think it's really important to remember that it doesn't have to be all or nothing. It doesn't have to be, I'm stuck in this job, I don't have a choice, there is no exit and it doesn't have to be, okay, I hate this job. I'm going to go in and quit tomorrow when I go into the office and I'm done with it. And it can be something where it's like checking in with yourself, what's true, what's not, what's coming up?

Get support. And you talk about therapists and friends, talk it through and put a plan together. And if people have, again, this is a privilege, but if people have a safety net, whether they have savings

or whether they have family members who can support them or friends that they can go and stay with for a while whilst they're in a transition period, those kind of things can be really supportive as well.

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And it's not always possible, but if it is, we're sometimes surprised by how willing our loved ones are to help us. And that if we're like yeah, if we talk to trusted people and loved ones, they're willing to do what they can to help us create a plan and provide resources whilst we're coming up with that plan and help us update our resume. Or might hear about job opportunities or might be able to offer a couch to crash on whilst we're in between, or whatever it may be.

So I think using the resources that we have in terms of loved ones, again, or a therapist to talk through it and put a plan together, we can feel very stuck and alone at times and trauma can reinforce that feeling. And so it's so important, I think, to reach out to others.

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. And I just want to add to that, when someone has experience of trauma in the workplace, and they're looking to transition to a different workplace, that you're going to go with you, right? So being very sure that you take time to acknowledge what you've experienced and work through and maybe go through another if you've already been through therapy or some other kind of support, realizing whatever that situation is that you're deciding to walk away from, as you look for or seek that next place of employment, or if it's entrepreneurship or whatever that looks like, you're going to also show up in that space, too.

And how are you working through some of those things that you've worked through in the past or that you've experienced so that you can be your best self no matter what you decide to do next? But then also being very careful and asking questions in those new spaces that you might be looking to enter just to see what the responses look like in regards to asking maybe in an interview, what are the policies like? How is the culture in regards to this place of employment being family friendly or not?

So just seeing how they answer questions in regards to if there are responsibilities for children or if there are some caregiver responsibilities, or even if someone isn't partnered or has children, what is the culture like around that? Thinking and asking questions around what are the strategies in place, or what are the approaches for inclusivity here? What are the policies around the people within the organization? How do you respond to time off requests? Or what does the wellness program look like? Or how is communication usually facilitated here?

Just asking questions that sometimes are the things that can create harm for us and sometimes the things that we've experienced before, trying to do your best diligence of opening the floor for just getting an idea of what that looks like in this other place, fully knowing that we don't know until we're actually there. But even just opening the conversation and asking like, how is wellness championed?

Or how do communication processes usually work? Or how does this look within the organization in regards to HR policies and practices and things? Can sometimes give you a little bit of a window in regards to how openly or not people respond to those kinds of questions to let you know, is this possibly a safe environment for me or not?

[00:36:22] Jaia Bristow

I love that. And there's so much in what you said. There's so many threads I want to go on, but I'm aware of time. But a few things that resonated for me is one, remembering, like you said at the very beginning, our work environment tends to be somewhere we spend a lot of time. So it's important that it's not an environment which makes us miserable, right? It's important that it's not an environment where that whole, like, do you live to work or work to live or something with those kinds of expressions.

It's like, does it have to be one or the other? Is it possible to create an environment where you spend a lot of time, a healthy, supportive environment? The other thing that's really resonated in what you're saying is around, like you say, you go where you go. So changing jobs is going to change the environment, but you're still going to be with yourself. So what are some things that you need to look at in your own self and each one of us needs to look at and work on?

But also what are some things that we know are important for us, so that we're not just repeating the same patterns in the same way that we might repeat the same patterns in relationships, like in a work environment, that we're asking and making sure that we're really getting our needs met and that's something that can be easier to do, in some ways, at the start of a new job but, of course, can be done in a new job.

Another thing that really stuck with me in what you were saying was sometimes people get stuck in I've been here for so many years, I've put in this much amount of time or energy and feel like they can't leave for that reason. And I remember many, many years ago, this is a very random anecdote, but someone, I think, who was a poker player was teaching me how to play poker. I've never properly done it, but they said something about when you're playing poker, you can't think of the chips you've already put into the pot in the middle.

You have to look just at the cards you have in your hand and the chips you have in front of you before making a decision, because if not, that's where you go wrong. And I feel like this is a similar analogy where it's like you have to look at your reality and your truth right now. Is this job satisfying your needs? It doesn't matter that you've put ten years into the job already.

If you're unhappy and you want to do something else, it's never too late, in my opinion, to find something that, either work environment or a different job or something else that feels better for one's emotional, mental well-being. Because ultimately, if we only have one life, we don't want to spend a large percentage of that miserable in a really unsupportive work space.

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. One question that I have really kept at the center of myself and in things that I teach or that I talk about is just that question of what is my yes costing me? Because when we commit to something, even if it's a commitment to this job that we've committed to for all these years, it's costing you something. It's costing you time, it's costing you peace, it might be costing you a lot of stress, it's costing elevating through the stages of burnout to now you're at the full burnout syndrome.

It's costing you your health, it's costing you your time, it's costing you your relationships. Like, that's a huge cost. And oftentimes, it is actually automatic. When we say yes to one thing, we're

automatically saying no to something else. So if we're committing to saying yes to staying at this job because I've been loyal to it for all of this time or I've stuck it out or I don't want to lose the time that I put in, that's great, you've communicated a yes now, but you're automatically saying no to what might be better for you, to increasing your health outcomes, to increasing your sleep and your appetite and your overall well-being.

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And if we think of it that way, then sometimes it becomes a little bit of a heart check to say, like, oh, that's real. Because when you're on autopilot, you're not always considering the mental and emotional impact of some of the things that come with you just kind of coasting sometimes.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's so important. And the other thing to remember for people listening is that as well as your therapist, your friends, your family members, there are professionals who specialize in helping you find a new job or switch jobs or understand what kind of job would be more fulfilling for you. And Melissa is one of them. So Melissa, how can we find out more about you and your work?

Melissa Douglass

Absolutely. So you can find out more about me at melissadlcsw.com. I also might have just shared my practice website, which is goaldrivencounseling.com. And you can find my personal link through that as well. But anxiety and trauma and identity are all my kind of specialties. And I have found myself working a lot with professional women. It just has become a niche of mine. And I see the same things all the time, very deep trauma histories, very high anxiety, lots of high functioning depression, which is the technical term dysthymia.

I see a lot of just working to prove, working to prove, working to prove, and then realizing at some point, after many, many years of doing that, that there is really no fulfillment in what they've been doing for a very long time because there was a detachment from what they needed on a mental and emotional level. And then you have people that are entering middle or older ages, and they're realizing, I don't really know who I am or what I like or what I want or what I need.

Because I've been so wrapped up in proving things to everybody else or meeting the demands of everybody else that I lost sight of what was important for me. And I often see that when we strip away the title, when we strip away the things that they thought was important, typically, from a professional sense, it goes right back to a trauma history from childhood or young adulthood and having to re-acknowledge and touch on those things and work through those things to realize that there's freedom.

And they have the ability to seek and explore a whole new place and area in life they didn't even know was possible for them. And so I see a lot of that in the individual space and on the organizational level where I also do work. And I see a lot of organizations that are realizing that if we don't get serious about seeing our people and valuing our people in the ways that they need to be valued, then we're going to lose it. People are leaving the workforce, people are starting their own businesses.

People are saying, enough is enough, I'm going to go on leave or I'm going to make the decision that's best for me. And organizations are really realizing that the real return on investment for their

companies or their organizations is in wellness initiatives. And I'm seeing that coupled with DEI strategies very largely, and I'm very glad to see it happening.

[00:43:57] Jaia Bristow

100%. I think that link with diversity, equity and inclusivity, DEI strategies as you say, is really, really important. And I wish we had more time to go into it more, but unfortunately we don't today. But there's so many more ways we could go. And I really appreciate you sharing that, the work you do and what comes up for people, because it's amazing how entwined it can be, like the way we show up in a work environment, how much that has to do with the way we show up in the world, in our history around trauma and all sorts. So thank you so much for your time today, Melissa. I really appreciate it.

Melissa Douglass

Thank you so much. I always enjoy these conversations. It's such an amazing conference and opportunity for so many people to learn. So thank you again so much for having me.