



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Understanding what trauma healing looks like

Guest: Monique Koven

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[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, somatic experiencing practitioner in training 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 on their journey.

Monique Koven, thank you so much for being with us today.

Monique Koven

Thank you, and thank you for inviting me back.

Meagen Gibson

So I'd love if we could start by going into what are some of the misconceptions that people have about trauma healing?

Monique Koven

That's a great question. I think that people often think that especially once they discover that they have trauma, that okay, now I know this is complex trauma, it makes sense. What do I do about it?

And the mentality is often like we approach a problem. This is a problem, do this and then it's going to be finished or you're going to deal with it and it'll be over. The solution will be found.

And I think that that makes sense because especially for those of us who have had childhood trauma and experienced a lot of suffering, ongoing repeated trauma, and then we grow up, we realize this is what it is, it has a name and now my suffering will come to an end because I'm going to get the problem fixed.

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And so I think we have misconceptions that if we do this one thing or if we do this, that we're not going to feel our symptoms anymore.

I had one person recently say to me, so what do I need to do to not feel anxious anymore? I think that we have to understand that it's called complex trauma for a reason, because it's complex.

I'm referring specifically to repeated childhood trauma or developmental trauma and I think we need to have some understanding that healing takes time and that change can happen, but it may not look the way you may think it should look or even the way it might be presented sometimes.

Meagen Gibson

And I even want to back up just a little bit also because I realized that we may be doing just a disservice not by kind of outlining the different types of trauma.

Because I think a lot of people don't realize the differences in different types of trauma and different levels of trauma and discount their own experiences because they're not aware of things like complex trauma. So if you could kind of just do a little brief description of how those differ.

Monique Koven

Well, I'm going to say that trauma is a personal experience. Something can be traumatic for one person and not for another.

And if something that you experience is overwhelming to your system and impacts you and you don't really feel like you have any agency or there's really no way to deal with it, that energy sort of gets stuck in the body and you have this experience of really being stuck.

And that can happen in a one time event. For example, like bullying, well bullying is often repetitive. So I shouldn't say one time, but a one time event, let's say rape or a one time event that was extremely overwhelming and traumatic, a car accident where you felt like you couldn't escape, or repetitive where it happened on an ongoing it was regular, it was repetitive, it was expected.

And then you get into all the complex trauma, developmental trauma and attachment stuff and I wanted to talk a little bit about that. But really that's sort of what we see in the past, it was more recognized that trauma was a one time or not necessarily one time, but trauma was more like a veteran or an accident or a rape, a one time thing.

What we know now is children that have had experiences like bullying or repetitive childhood trauma, chaos, experiences like that where they were immobilized, couldn't get away and so on is trauma as well.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah and all of those we're not discounting one for the other. And also things like and when we talk about childhood traumas, I always like to contextualize for people too that it doesn't mean that there was any ill will intended by the parent necessarily.

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Neglect can come from medical needs and illness, things like that. Death in the family where the parents don't have the capacity to support both themselves and their children. These are not necessarily maliciously intended actions or neglectful actions. These are just the nature of human beings living tough lives sometimes. Yeah.

Monique Koven

I was just thinking about how, I was thinking of this earlier. I think it was Peter Levine who said trauma is... I shouldn't quote him because maybe he didn't say it exactly like that, but it's something like it is part of life.

And so even as you were discussing parents who were not intentional, often that just could be it. It could be from their generation where they didn't receive attunement and love and then they don't know how to actually show it and give that attunement.

And it's not necessarily maliciousness, it's just that they don't have that capacity because it was never shown to them.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Okay, great. So now that we've kind of laid out that context just a little bit better for people that might be joining us for the first time as a trauma recovery coach, I imagine that you see a lot of people who have been in pain for a long time, they want this quick fix.

And as we discussed earlier, because we're used to that in the medical and diagnosis community, we're used to okay I have this thing, I take a pill or I go to physical therapy.

I've got a creaky knee, I'm going to go do six weeks of PT and my knee is going to be stronger and I'm going to move on from this injury.

And so many traumas feel like an injury and a dysfunction of pattern. So why wouldn't I apply the same lens? And so why is developmental trauma so complex? And how do you kind of piece it apart on the journey toward healing?

Monique Koven

It's such a great question and I'm so glad because I think that in the past we would often see trauma from a cognitive perspective.

So you think about it differently, you understand why things happened, you change your thoughts and you'll think differently about it and then you should be better and if you're not, well, try harder and think differently.

And we just realize that that just does not work. Why? Because we now understand, thank you polyvagal theory and more, that trauma is really living in the body.

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And so one of the things we know is that very early certain patterns in our bodies, they become patterned.

So if we've had trauma and we have learned that not to expect, for example, let's say we didn't have safety with caregivers, we were sort of left on our own and we developed sort of a hypervigilance towards the environment, towards the world, because we didn't learn to expect predictable soothing, that everything was going to be okay.

And so we become hypervigilant and what happens is that this gets patterned, especially if we haven't had safety in our closest relationships. We go into the world and in our mind we know people are safe, I know what to do and yet we can feel our body constrict when someone tries to come closer.

What's happening? I don't get it. I would like to be friends with this person, I want to speak. All these things are happening, our mind is saying no but our body is responding.

So to answer your question, I think it's really important at the beginning to kind of understand that. It's really, really important because it will empower the survivor when they understand what's going on.

Because the biggest thing is why is this happening? And we get so afraid, like why am I responding when everything is safe now? What's wrong with me?

And to know that there's nothing wrong with you, this makes perfect sense in the context of what you were raised in and your body is doing exactly what it learned to do to protect you and just sort of giving them that education, the trauma informed education is super helpful.

So really we start there and then we move into, okay, so if I have a body that's hypervigilant and anxious and ready for the next threat, how can I show my body that it's actually safe today?

That's a hard one for many survivors because being in the present moment is extremely difficult and it can feel to the body like a threat because it learned that being in the present isn't safe because the shoe can drop at any moment.

So you have a lot of people who dissociate or they find themselves doing numbing behaviors or avoidance behaviors so they don't have to feel present.

So the beginning is really helping people, what are ways that you can just touch into a moment of safety in the present? So really work at that because had you asked me years ago what does it feel like to be safe? I would really say I don't know.

I have a joke, eating ice cream or sleeping, that's basically it. So we want to help people to feel safe because when you start to feel safe you can be present, you can connect to people, you can feel alive and present and in the now.

So that's another thing that we do is that and then, I mean there's so many other things if you've never used your voice because you learnt that it's not safe to say what you really feel, speaking up in the present is going to be a real challenge for you and will feel really threatening.

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Another area is getting in touch with your needs. What needs? Often we've been so cut off from what our body is feeling and what we need that getting in touch with it, often what happens is you may find yourself being a people pleaser, being directed towards other people's needs because that's what you learned as a trauma response and you may find yourself being that way and saying ignoring that you have any needs or really figuring out what they are.

So that, boundaries, learning what a safe relationship is. Many of us have grown up in homes that... We had emotionally immature parents or self absorbed parents, narcissistic alike and so there was no reciprocity.

So if you haven't learned reciprocity you may be going into your adulthood and not having or receiving or thinking that's kind of normal, that's how relationships are.

So learning what a safe relationship is that it's reciprocal and beginning to be in those and find those. Those are just some of the little things but as you can see, it's complex. There's many areas so you may start to work on one. Okay, how can I start to feel safe in my body?

And then you might look at, how can I use my voice, how can I feel safe in relationships? And it takes time.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. All of the things that you just outlined are so fantastic and reminds me that everybody comes to their trauma healing journey via a different inspiring incident if you will, or inspiring desire to remedy something.

I am one of the people that came to my trauma healing journey because I couldn't use my voice. People might find that hard to believe considering how much I talk for a living now, but I knew that I had a story to tell that was mine, that was personal.

And I felt that I could actually feel physically, the stuckness in my body. But I also related to a lot of what you said around food and how people find food so comforting, but you can develop dissociations around food and use it as a numbing technique and so things like mindful eating.

So you might come to trauma work with a trained trauma professional and say, I just don't understand my relationship with food and eating, and I know what's the right thing to nourish my body, and I don't feel my cues because I'm not in touch with my physical sensations and things like that. Is that kind of along the lines of what you're talking about?

Monique Koven

Absolutely. Oh, my goodness and all of these behaviors that in the past, we would say, a drug addict, we need to stop the drugs, or a food addict got to stop the food.

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We never really looked at the root cause, and really these behaviors are we're trying to just regulate ourselves.

I sucked my thumb until they put braces in my mouth, and good for me because I didn't have anything, but I found my thumb, so good for me.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, exactly. And it's so validating too because when you think about how sophisticated our bodies are, and Dr Ron Siegel, who I interviewed this year always reminds me that we were not developed as human beings to be happy.

We developed over millions and millions of years to stay alive and all of these coping mechanisms that we use and develop to get through hard things and survive, they're literally meant for our survival.

So we can forgive ourselves for thumbsucking until we got braces or for developing over a long period of time an unhealthy relationship with food or those kinds of things. It makes sense is what I'm saying.

Monique Koven

And what I see is that as soon as people start to understand, that the shame starts to...because it's no longer you, it's my body responds to. It's not personalized, which is really great.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah and it's taken me a long, long time to get here but I've noticed now because there's nothing more humbling than when you've been on a trauma healing journey for a while, and then you are put into a situation where you just emotionally regress very quickly.

It's been about a year since that happened, but you're like, wow. And then there's a grace that comes after that. I'm like, okay wow, I'm going to just allow my body and my brain to have an experience, and it doesn't mean that I'm done.

And also just in less threatening situations than that though, even just socially, if you come upon an intense situation that doesn't even involve you.

I had this situation in the last three months where there was an intense situation publicly out in the world that I just happened to be near and kind of a bystander of and got completely flooded with dysregulation.

Which is an uncomfortable feeling even if it's not about you. But I was able to in that moment, just say thank you to my body. It was like, wow, thank you for raising my heart rate in case I needed to take action and thank you for making my brain and my actual vision very focused.

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Like I could feel all of these things happening out of my control of my body and understood like this is to protect me. I feel like I'm in danger or adjacent to danger as it was and my body is designed to do this and to keep me alive.

Monique Koven

Yeah, I love that. I mean, I wish someone would have just said that to me when I was going through my healing and trauma wasn't even recognized at the time.

And just to say that would have been like, okay, yeah, our bodies are there for us because often we think our bodies have maliciousness against us because they're making us anxious but they're really there designed to protect us and help us.

Meagen Gibson

Begging for our attention, right?

Monique Koven

Yes. Love it.

Meagen Gibson

So what are some of the options for support on a trauma healing path? I know you're a coach, so that's obviously one methodology, so please tell us about that and then some of the other paths.

Monique Koven

I love that because I think what's so important for trauma survivors is choice and now that we understand, for the most part we're beginning to understand, it's really important that if you do work with someone, you work with someone who is trauma informed and that is trauma trained because maybe they might use that lingo.

Yes, trauma informed but you can ask are you trained and in what? Because often if you go for help for trauma and they are not trauma trained, then they might start to work with things in the mind, back to your thoughts and then you can start to think that this is your fault, that you're not trying hard enough and all that.

So today there's lots of choice for trauma informed support and work. There is coaching, different kinds of coaching out there.

On my podcast I really do try to invite different modalities so people can get a taste of what's this, what's that? I can talk about what I do and what I love and support that is out there as well.

So for me, a lot of the work that I do is just helping people understand what's happening and help them to begin to find ways to feel safe in their bodies and how to do that and how to start to feel some self compassion for yourself and your responses, which is so important, being a compassionate witness and so on.

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The other stuff is there's options like different modalities like IFS which is Internal Family Systems which is kind of parts work.

I am a big fan of Inner Relational Focusing. I'm training in that right now. I love that because that is one where it's a felt sense, it's a somatic work where we really develop a compassion towards our responses and a relationship with them.

So that's when I love I said somatic, maybe I didn't. Somatic experiencing is one, I love Sensorimotor Psychotherapy.

A lot of the bottom up approaches are extremely helpful for trauma, EMDR. All of those are really, really helpful and trauma healing is cumulative. So that means that you can do something for a while and you might feel like, okay, maybe I'll do something else and then you might do something else.

It's cumulative, it'll all be helpful and just be patient with yourself. Take your time. Every bit helps. My own healing journey, it was a journey of just growing the capacity and it was slow and steady and I'm very different from what I once was.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you name that. I mean it is a lot slower than most people would like and it is something that grows over time.

And I know from my experience, and maybe you've had the same, please tell me but there are times when I don't want the somatic part, where I'm like, we're going to spend a little time working through my trauma in the thinking part.

We're going to go top down for a while, right? And it's intentional. I'm like, you know what I need right now? I need a top down approach. We're just going to talk and then you reach a period where I've said all the words about that particular piece, now I've got to integrate it.

We're going to go some bottom up, right? And we're literally speaking in terms of for people who haven't heard that kind of terminology before, we're talking like in your head, your thoughts about things, your memories or things like that.

And then bottom up meaning how does that feel in your body? Where does it feel in your body? What is the sensation in your body?

So I'd love if you could describe that bottom up approach a little bit more for people and what somatic experience kind of entails and the investigation or the unfolding that is kind of involved in that.

Monique Koven

Yeah, I won't be able to give you a big definition of somatic experiencing. I'm training in that right now, but I don't think I'm far enough to be able to. I don't think I would do it justice.

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But I do have a really great episode on there from somatic experiencing on the podcast.

But in general, what bottom up approach is versus top down is really getting a sense of what is happening in our bodies because trauma lives in our bodies.

If we're triggered, it's not something we can sort of think it through. So an example would be like if I was walking through the forest and a tree fell on me, I would remember that because that was traumatic and so the next time I would walk in the forest you could see my shoulders up, my arms, my body remembers that.

So somatic work would be looking at ways that we can help our felt sense to feel a little bit safer, to help our bodies know that even though we may feel some anxiety in the moment, there are other places in our body that feel safe and to feel into that so that we see that it's not all consuming.

There's parts of us that are also grounded and sitting still and our feet are on the floor and sort of getting a feel for that.

But for the most part I think it's reattaching ourselves back into our body so we can feel what we were designed to feel and to let it move through instead of oh no, it's too much, kind of like bypassing it or just staying upstairs.

When we start to allow ourselves to feel it, what we discover is that it does move through, it does dissipate but we're often too afraid because we remember how horrible we felt in the past so we don't want to go there.

So it's slowly allowing ourselves to feel it in small bits at first and then just allowing it to move through and seeing that it does move through and that we build the capacity to be with certain sensations and feelings.

Inner Relationship Focusing, which is what I was telling you about earlier. You actually develop a relationship with some of those sensations and feelings and you get to know it and you relate to it and it's really a lovely way to show compassion to parts of you that you just didn't want anything to do with.

So it's really lovely.

Meagen Gibson

That sounds lovely. And also brings me back to a point you made earlier about just the kind of support that you have as well. Right?

Because part of the reason that it may feel unsafe to investigate or listen to those parts and those sensations is because we were never allowed to have them in an environment that was safe before.

We were never supported in a way that was emotionally mature or with someone that had the capacity to hold whatever big emotions or big feelings or big sensations we were having.

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And so we got the messages that it wasn't okay to have those. And so getting the right support, people trauma informed and trauma trained as you said before. Really integral, kind of in that journey as somebody that can hold space for all that stuff.

Monique Koven

Absolutely.

Meagen Gibson

So on that note, are there any types of support you think people should avoid when they're seeking support for their trauma?

Monique Koven

I have a thought in my head, but I'm not going to say it because I don't want to say it.

But I would just say that it's important that you meet with someone who really does understand the body and the mind, because it is both, but one that doesn't just focus on the thoughts and upstairs and just thinking about things.

You can ask a lot of questions to the person that you seek out, find out the kind of training they did and look that up. What is that?

And also you want to listen to your body. When you're with someone, so I remember myself in the past when I saw someone because I was so disconnected from what I felt didn't matter if I didn't connect with her or because I didn't listen to that anyway.

But you do want to listen because if you feel safe with that person, then you'll really be able to get some nice work done. If you don't, you might find yourself holding back. So pay attention to how you feel with the person as well.

Meagen Gibson

That's a great reminder. I think that's great and it can be overwhelming, I'm sure, at the beginning of your trauma journey and you're trying to get healing and there's so many things to navigate, especially if you're here in the States with insurance and providers and who takes it and who doesn't and who's trained in the right modality.

So it's very overwhelming, so I encourage people to definitely also check out your podcast because I think that you do a great job when you interview people, of bringing people with different areas of expertise that can talk about how their expertise relates to trauma, healing, and recovery. So that's a great thing to check out.

Monique Koven, how can people find out more about you and your podcast?

[00:27:01] Monique Koven

Well, the podcast is called the *Healing Trauma Podcast*, and it's the same name for my website, thehealingtraumapodcast.com.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thank you so much for being with us today.

Monique Koven

Thank you.