



Conscious Life presents

Finding Freedom from Systemic Trauma

Guest - Akilah Riley-Richardson

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming back the wonderful Akilah Riley-Richardson. Welcome, Akilah.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Hi, thanks for having me again.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for joining us again. So you are a relational healing facilitator, a couple's therapist, and a certified clinical trauma professional.

Now, in the conference on Healing Toxic Relationships, we talked a little bit about healing systemic trauma in relationships. And today we're going to touch upon this topic more around individuals and bring in some other crucial elements around trauma healing as well.

But do you want to start by defining what is systemic trauma and why is it so important that we talk about it?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Systemic trauma can be understood as any trauma that is inflicted by the system around us. And when I think about the system around us, I'm usually thinking about the wider culture or historical circumstances and all the isms, from sexism to racism to ableism, transphobia, all those things, all the ways in which our wider culture and wider discrimination and prejudice, et cetera, affects people's well-being. Systemic trauma is a kind of endurance trauma as this pervasive, continuous thing that people have to experience constantly in various forms.

[00:01:51] Jaï Bristow

I really appreciate the way you describe that. It's that kind of trauma that's cultural, and it's othering or discrimination.

Now, can you tell me a bit more about the connection between systemic trauma and developmental trauma?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Oh, yeah. In my work, I allow myself to learn from my clients. And understanding systemic trauma as developmental trauma, I think, is so important now for me because I'm seeing the ways in which systemic trauma affects people and their ability to accomplish particular milestones and how it manifests differently at different ages and stages.

I was working with a few clients who talked about the fact that even being able to develop an identity through adolescence became difficult because of systemic trauma, because their bodies were so necessarily preoccupied with survival that they didn't get the time to develop an identity.

Additionally, I remember one client was talking about rites of passage, and the fact that rites of passage are different for persons who experience systemic trauma. What systemic trauma does, it changes the trajectory of your life. The things that you need to be able to survive in a space or to be able to thrive when you're not experiencing systemic trauma are very different when you are.

Because systemic trauma pushes the body into survival and surviving the environment, and in adapting to the wider environment than necessarily going through its natural developmental process. There are things that are key markers of adolescence in terms of how the body changes.

That for persons who may be experiencing systemic trauma, may be very difficult to be with those things. So we take those things for granted, not understanding the ways in which systemic trauma switches the body's focus from you to how do I survive my system, the wider system around me, because with systemic trauma, no place feels safe.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's really important, that with systemic trauma, no place feels safe.

And you were talking about this link with developmental trauma. Could you give some examples of what you mean? You were talking, for example, about adolescence and how it will impact people who suffer from systemic trauma differently than others. Would you mind sharing some examples of what you mean by that?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah, I remember. For me, examples mean I share stories. I remember working with a client who actually offered to be recorded to share her story and her talking about menstruation and what that process would mean for, or should or would, mean for a girl. And the fact that she couldn't even stay and be with this process. As a young woman, newly menstruating, what this meant for

her, what this meant for her body, being able to understand. She didn't have the time to be with that because she had to think about surviving.

[00:05:14]

Or even when you think about moving from adolescence into adulthood and developing relationships, that even the ways in which she would form relationships with romantic partners would be different. That because the body didn't understand safety, that the body engaged in relationship development differently. Yes, that's just a couple of the ways.

It feels like the rites of passage are different. From what I've gleaned so far from my people who I've worked with, that the rites of passage are how much can I survive my environment? So bit by bit, it's how do I get closer and closer and closer to feeling safe?

As opposed to "how do I feel closer and closer and closer to developing my true self?". The rites of passage are associated with surviving. "How well can I survive? How well can I adapt from space to space?". And I know it really, for some of my clients, compromise their whole sense of self.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, that's really interesting the way you talk about it. And this idea that when you suffer from systemic trauma, that the focus is much more on being safe. When the whole system is discriminating against you, is othering you, and to varying degrees, depending on the intersections of your identity, depending on where in the world you exist. Right now there's certain countries, for example, where being certain identities is much more dangerous than in other countries. I'm not going to name them right now, but I think people know what I'm talking about.

That those suffering, therefore, from the systemic trauma, for example, a woman menstruating, or not necessarily a woman, but someone menstruating, someone with a womb who is menstruating is going to have a very different experience than someone who isn't.

And that those who don't have these extra layers of trauma and discrimination and oppression and othering are just going to be able to live their lives, to be able to focus on their goals, on their objectives, on their evolution, on their growth. And that that's nothing wrong with that. That's great. That's wonderful. And we have to look at the people who aren't able to do that, who are being actively blocked from doing that.

And they don't have the time and space to be worrying about getting on with their lives and growing, because they're just constantly in survival mode, which of course, puts a lot of stress on their nervous system and their ways of being. So I really appreciate you bringing in that piece.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yes, most definitely. You said something about when you use the word suffering from systemic trauma, my body paused a little bit. And it's because I was working with a client once and we were talking about, yes, there are ways in which there are definitely markers of struggle...

[00:08:31]

But we're talking about just the ways in which persons who experience systemic trauma redefine what it means to be privileged. Because now being able to survive, being able to navigate, becomes this powerful site of resilience. And the creative ways in which they're resilient.

I remember a client saying to me, "we have our own rites of passage, and some of it is tied to the fact that we need to survive this, and some of it is tied to our creativity". So we create our own trajectory. We create our own route to wellness. And on that route to wellness, there are unique skills that you have to develop when you're navigating systemic trauma.

I know I paused when you said, suffering. Not that the word suffering is wrong, but it pushed me to remember that there's a big picture, too. Like when I think about the transwomen that I have had the benefit of experiencing, even here in Trinidad and Tobago, I think about their strength and not resilience, but their resistance.

I always remember that word resistance, that the ability to resist and push back becomes a unique skill that you develop, becomes a rite of passage. That ability to do that as a result of systemic trauma, and so widening the definition of what it means to be human becomes necessary or inevitable when you're experiencing that kind of trauma.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And in our conversation for the Heal Toxic Relationships Super Conference, we talked about embracing the messiness in relationships. This idea of fixing, healing and this binary between hurt and suffering, or healing and good. Life is a lot more complex than that. Life is a lot more messy than that. And part of that is about embracing and learning to live within the messiness.

So I really appreciate the way you're bringing in this piece that instead of naming it as suffering and focusing on the suffering and the victimhood of people who experience trauma, whether that's systemic or interpersonal or situational. There's all different types of trauma.

And that part of life often is going through trauma. Some of us will experience trauma our whole lives. And that within that there is the possibility to get to a point where that isn't the whole identity. The identity isn't about suffering. There is also connecting to goodness and connecting to all these things, whilst also acknowledging the reality of experiencing trauma. Just to clarify, is that what you were saying?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Yeah, and it makes the therapeutic experience even more provocative. I've been following the work of Tyson Yunkaporta. I hope I'm pronouncing his name right. He talks about aboriginal culture and the whole idea of the yarn. These conversations. This dialogical process. And when we are working with people who are experiencing systemic trauma, can therapy land more as a yarn, as a dialogical process that focuses on hearing how people rumble with their world, make sense of their world, cultivate rites of passage in their world, adapt to their world, and can the therapeutic process evolve from that?

[00:12:32]

And I'm tying that back to what you're saying, because if we realize that it's messy. There's this binary that we focus on between healing and hurt and wellness and whatever is the opposite of that. But these binaries are sometimes confronted when we treat our intervention as this dialogical process that will birth something.

Tyson talks a lot about the fact that once I've uttered a piece of knowledge, I've uttered it for the sake of it being taken by somebody else. And that person is responsible for creating something different and something new.

And I think about the fact that when we come into our work with people who experience systemic trauma and we name things like developmental trauma, we name depression and anxiety, all those different things that we may see. The persons who are with us in those moments have the opportunity to dialogue with us about their experiences and in that moment, to stretch our ideas of what it means to be human, just based on their identities.

I don't know if I'm making sense, or if I'm being very vague, but just being with people differently. And we're working with them into moving from diagnosing and implementing interventions to dialoguing and learning and generating and creating.

Jaï Bristow

What I'm hearing, and what I'm taking away from what you're saying is really this idea that therapy, the healing journey, whatever we want to call it that, again, it's not about this binary, and it's not about getting from A to B.

It's part of a process, and there's opportunities within that to dialogue, to explore, to discover, to find out about oneself. And it's not so simple as, this binary of bad, good or broken, fixed or traumatized, healed. And it's not about getting from this place to this place.

It's more about the complexity of life, the complexity of the human experience, where there's all these different things going on. And I spoke to Partha Vaidya on this conference about embracing the complexity and the multidimensional selves and bringing in spirituality and psychology together and all that kind of thing.

And I've had some really interesting conversations on this conference which relate to that, and in my own journey, about just the complexity of the human experience. This is now the fourth edition of the Trauma Super Conference and the more I have these conversations, the more I learn and the more I experience life, myself and my own journey. And I'm going to continue calling it a journey for now, but not as a linear, but as just bringing in more elements.

So that's what I'm hearing you saying, that it's more complex than we think, and that within that, we can embrace messiness, we can talk about experiencing trauma. And that doesn't mean condoning trauma. It's not like, "yay, trauma, let's include that in life because it's fantastic and we love it". It's not saying that "Systemic trauma... oh, well, that's normal. That's cool. That's fine. Let's do that". It's more about just acknowledging the realities of each individual's experience.

[00:16:20] Akilah Riley-Richardson

I'm so glad. A couple of things you said there, you said last piece about acknowledging the realities of each person's experience. So systemic people who experience trauma on the whole, and even systemic trauma, particularly in this case, their implicit memory system is affected by trauma.

And when I say implicit memory system, I'm talking about those deep, unconscious, automatic things that are known to them. Those deep emotional memories or procedural memories, just the way that life feels for them. Their deep knowings about "what does it mean to be me"?

And as they walk into the world, walking on that kind of terrain where the world feels like that, certainly, as I like to say, they're in the GLITCH. Yeah. So the GLITCH is this acronym that I have. G is for grief. L is for liminality. I is for imagining. T is for trying it out. C is for creating. And H is for honoring the process.

They're in the GLITCH because for a person who isn't experiencing intense systemic trauma, there's a way that life moves. I do this. I go to school, then I go to high school, then I get a job, then I get partnered. But when you're in the GLITCH, life does not work according to conventional standards.

And often they're experiencing the GLITCH. And then we come to therapy with therapists. Sometimes the therapists realize that they're also in the GLITCH. All those ideas with how we're supposed to do this work. All the best techniques sometimes don't work. Sometimes when we're working with systemic trauma, and that's because of how pervasive it is that it never ends. It's an endurance type of trauma.

So you go out, you experience it again. It's just constantly in your system. And so it becomes necessary to grieve. It becomes necessary to grieve the fact that I may not heal from this. This may be with me all of the time. And I think grief is an important part of the work. G for grief, grieving the work.

L is for liminality. And liminality is this lost space, this space of transition from one to another where we're not too sure where we are. And we have to get comfortable with liminality.

And why I love talking with people is because I learn. So when you were speaking just now, I think you said like myself, but I did not hear like myself. I heard life myself. And so I thought to myself, "oh, my God, what would it be like to life myself"? My brain went off. "Ooh lifeing myself...lifeing myself... lifeing therapy. What does that mean?"

I have to say, in this moment, this idea came to me. So L, I think, is for liminality and lifeing ourselves, which is to root ourselves in the reality and the messiness of the not knowing right now, where we are in the lostness and taking in our context.

Tyson talks about that the power of context is so important. So lifeing the work, because too often we're pulling the work. The work is top down. It's not ground up. We have to ground the work in the realities of people. Let people's stories tell you the next move. Then we imagine, yeah, where we're going, we try it out. T for trying it out, we create something new.

[00:19:52]

And then H we honor the process. I want to stay there. Cos I don't want us to bypass what it means to honor the process. For so many persons who are experiencing trauma, their whole sense of being in the world is not honored. So when we honor people's process, when we honor how people come to new ways of being with their realities and new ways of trauma, that's a pivotal step.

We take time to celebrate how people move, and we understand the critical and pivotal role of honoring the realities and how people who experience the systemic trauma survive and thrive in their own ways. Because so often our society does not hold space to even see, much less honor.

So honor, I'm not saying honor in a loose way. Honor for me, is an integral, critical part. And people can sit and discuss. What does it mean to look like to honor the journey? Do we need to have an honoring ceremony? Yes, I'm gonna be that intense.

When we sit and we reflect on your journey, do we need to cultivate an honoring ceremony? Ceremony how you show up in the world, that we constantly be part of the therapeutic work day by day. How do we teach people to honor? Honor how they survive the GLITCH and to stop and to pause and to note their rites of passage. And how they move through this world.

They can hold the pain, they can hold the grief. They can hold the grief. So it isn't so much of a stage process, but it's a simultaneous, we're grieving, we're imagining we're doing, all at the same time, hold grief and pause and hold space for how we honor and how we life ourselves. I'm taking that, how we are life ourselves in the moments.

Jai Bristow

It's really beautiful what you're sharing. And I like that expression of lifeing ourselves. Because life is happening and sometimes we mix it up. We try and make life fit into these very restrained ideas and boxes of how things should be. As opposed to bringing all these practices and incorporating them into life.

So it feels like lifeing ourselves is centering life again. This idea of, there's a glitch. I love the term, "like a glitch in the matrix". I'm a big fan of The Matrix. And that sense of there's a glitch in the matrix, or there's a glitch happening. Like, things aren't going the way they quote unquote should, but that's where the magic happens.

That is real life is the glitches more than the escalator or the belief that this is what I should do. This is the way everyone does it, and turning into these clones and cogs in a machine and everyone doing the same thing. The glitches are what's interesting. The glitch is where we connect with life and we start questioning not so much what can life do for me, but how am I living? What is my role in life? I'm seeing you making lots of very excited faces.

[00:23:23] Akilah Riley-Richardson

Because you're exciting me. Because in this moment, I am growing even as you speak. You're right. I was in a beautiful training recently where my trainer talked about grief and despair and being the portals to emergence, and that we need to sometimes, as therapists, let people go into despair.

I know that may sound like what let people go into despair, but sometimes people need to see that this particular path actually has there is no hope here. They need to stay with it a little bit, because on the other side of that is lifeing ourselves. Oh, I love that. It's like, "Okay, now what? Life is not this. Now what?".

We rush too quickly. I think it terrifies us. I think grief is hard. I think also because we learn that these stages, that grief, we have denial and bargain, and it isn't clean. Sometimes we can't get over it. So I'm not even saying that after people do this, they're going to be happy. There might be a part of you that may be struggling for a while.

And we hold the grief and the honoring at the same time. We sit with the despair of, oh, my God, I'm in this system. And I'll say for me that as a black practitioner from the global south, I don't know when we're ever going to be able to really fully move past the horrible vestiges of colonialism and racism, xenophobia, I don't know. And I've had to grieve that while honoring the ways in which I'm navigating global north spaces. I've had to do that. I've had to life myself.

Jaï Bristow

And I think it's really beautiful what you're bringing in, and that going into despair, allowing the rawness and the messiness of grief. And like you say, even grief is one of those things that there's a template of how you should do it and the five stages, and this is how grief is.

And the reality is everyone has their own ways of grieving. And I've been grieving recently. I won't go into details, but a loss of a very close relationship. And I discovered, I went through a stage (which wasn't in the five templated stages) of hatred, where I really connected to this feeling of wanting to make the person suffer as much as I was suffering. The person who had, quote unquote, caused this grief. And it was a beautiful experience for me.

I didn't act upon it, thankfully, but to become aware of, oh, this is new, or maybe it's not new, but this was the first time I was really noticing it in my grieving and being like, okay, this is my reality. It's not anger, it's not bargaining, it's not, what are the other ones? Anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. And there's another one, denial.

It's none of those, and it's not in any order. It's just my experience of grieving. And by allowing it and recognizing that all, the full range of emotions, from anger, hatred, sadness, joy, love, appreciation, everything is just part of life. We're so caught in categorizing. And of course, acting from a place of those emotions can become dangerous, but it can be dangerous on both sides, I reckon.

So it's not about saying, oh, life is free range, and throw out all the rules and all the templates and everything we've learned. No, it's how can we apply? How can we not try and fit life into that, but recognize what's happening with life and then name things?

[00:27:43]

Mel Cassidy, who I've interviewed on this conference, but who I also interviewed for my podcast, *Beyond Boxes*. We were talking about labels and identity more in terms of sexuality and relationship styles and stuff. And we were talking about the importance of giving descriptive rather than prescriptive labels. Descriptive rather than prescriptive language to our experience. And I feel like this is very applicable here as well. We can describe what we're experiencing without prescribing how we should be experiencing.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

I love that. It's important. As you say that it's just bringing me back to letting the therapy ground itself in people's reality. And understanding that when people are able to describe what they're experiencing. That kind of rumble, is neurobiologically, that's very powerful.

So even the conventional notions of therapy talk about the fact that one of the parts to healing is being able to differentiate. Like look at ourselves and develop a relationship with parts of ourselves. So differentiating and then linking. And when we teach people how to step back, watch their experiences and ask themselves how I feel.

What is my relationship to how I'm experiencing reality right now. There's so many powerful things that happen in the brain. Once the brain goes into this witnessing stance. So we could see how we are lifeing. We can watch ourselves in this process. Immediately the brain sends some nice soothing chemicals, some GABA. And then we give that love and compassion. We want to get more GABA, more oxytocin. We give ourselves that love and compassion. So I want to say that these things we are talking about. They also have a strong neurobiological component and benefit.

We need to be able to differentiate. And then link. Find what is our relationship to how we are lifeing. Oh, I tell you, that lifeing thing is the best thing I've heard since,... the best accidental thing I just heard.

But watching yourself and how you're lifeing, and it's not living. How you're lifeing. Because what you're doing, a piece is now coming to me, Jaï. You are making meaning of life constantly. So that's why I like lifeing. Because you're constantly creating meaning of life.

When you're experiencing systemic trauma. Your lifeing messages are: "Life is hard, life is difficult, life is not safe". These are your lifeing messages. And so if we learn how to stop and watch how we're lifeing. And see this path. Say, "Ah, this is how I am seeing the world. This is how I'm relating to my world. What do I feel toward this? What do I want to do with this? Do I require more tenderness to this? Do I want to speak to this differently?"

Because the part of us that's lifeing is so preoccupied with survival. That I don't get a chance to have the internal dialogue. So I know I spoke about the idea of the yarn with the therapist and the client creating something new and having a dialogical process. And an integral part is that internal yarn. The discussion with the selves. And there are therapies that elude to this, and cover this in many ways.

[00:31:24]

I think the critical part of it for persons who are experiencing systemic trauma to remember is that the world outside is often so noisy and so complicated. I've had a client who's experienced in systemic trauma once say to me, "I feel that I'm always pulled out of the truth of my experiences".

And so being able to do the internal yarn is not just simply me being able to develop a relationship with my selves. It's a decolonizing political move. When I sit with the parts of myself that are experiencing real to decolonizing political move, I am giving myself the ability to be in my truth, in a way that I am not always allowed to be because I'm so busy trying to adapt myself to survive. So I want us to sit with that. That when we do this work of how people be with themselves and look at their parts, there's a decolonizing political move in the work.

Jaï Bristow

Wow. Yes, absolutely. Thank you. There's so many gems in what you've said, and I really appreciate the way you've described that. That kind of work and the messages that those experiencing systemic trauma receive about life and the hardship and the "You don't belong, you're not good enough. You're othered. Life is meant to be hard. You have to work harder".

That is the messaging received and that then again, there's ways of coming into our experience and of experiencing life, not through that lens. And to get to a point where we're comfortable experiencing life as it is as opposed to how we're told it should be, does require all these elements you gave. Does require going through a GLITCH. Does require this grieving, but grieving authentically. This liminality, which is this sort of like lost space, this centering of life and lifeing ourselves as opposed to. And the unknown, you know. I can't remember the other. What was the I again?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Imagining.

Jaï Bristow

Imagining. Imagining a better life or imagine not even a better life, but imagining a different way. Imagine allowing. Because our imagination can't be controlled in the same ways that other elements can. And then the T was trust?

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Trying it out. Maybe that's what the T should be for.

Jaï Bristow

I like it. Trying it out. Trusting enough to try it out. Loving this co-creation here.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

T is now for trust, guys.

[00:34:17] Jaï Bristow

I think it's for trusting enough to try it out. And then remind me of the C again.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Creating. Creating something. I want to just say that creating is another political move. Colonized and the marginalized often don't get the opportunity to create. But creating for us is often resistance. I'm from Trinidad and Tobago, and I think about the emergence of calypso music and the first calypsonian was a slave. We create to resist, we create to survive. And so I don't want us to ever underestimate the political and strong psychological move that creating something new is for persons who are feeling dispossessed.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. Creativity is so important. And actually a lot of art comes from creativity from within trauma. And so I'm really glad you brought in that piece of creativity and collaboration as well. A lot of what you're talking about and creativity and imagining something new can come through collaboration... another C... can come through collaboration.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

I will credit you, guys. Promise!

Jaï Bristow

Collective healing. I'm giving you some more C's here. And then H, the honoring is that one I won't forget. Honoring the process, honoring oneself, honoring life, whilst still recognizing the realities.

None of what we've talked about is to dismiss the reality of the trauma. It's more the opposite. It's about recognizing the reality of the trauma and still finding fulfillment and spiritual growth and healing and joy and creativity from within that. And that that's part of the healing. That's how we heal ourselves. That's how we heal with each other. And that's a big part of, as you say, there's bottom down and ground up, and we need both in this journey.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Top down. Yeah, definitely. And you know what I like about this moment? I talked about yarning and dialogical processes and how they're rooted in context and create something new. And I'm so honored that we didn't just sit here and just talk about a bunch of platitudes. We knitted a new yarn, we created something new. We now know that C is for collaboration and we now know about lifeing ourselves.

Jaï Bristow

We modeled what we were talking about. So thank you, Akilah. Thank you for bringing in all these beautiful elements. And the ways you talk about it and the hope I hear. There we go. That's another H. Hope, honoring and hope. Because there is hope. There is hope that we can do this

work. And the more we have these kinds of conversations, the more we have these events where we can bring in voices from all over and we can share together and we can connect to the humanity. There's another H, if you want it.

[00:37:41] Akilah Riley-Richardson

Just keep throwing it out, you just take it and run with it. By now, I can't credit you anymore. I just need to give it to you.

Jaï Bristow

No, no, it's collaboration, remember, is the C. You brought in this framework. I'm just being creative. That's what you were encouraging to do.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

We are just in this conference, new things are happening. Let's go!

Jaï Bristow

Exactly. And on that note, sadly, we are out of time. So, Akilah, thank you so, so much for today's beautiful conversation. Collaboration. Sharing this has been a very enlivening conversation, and I really appreciate everything you've brought to the table. Thank you.

Akilah Riley-Richardson

Thank you. Thank you for having me.