



Conscious Life presents

Recognizing and Healing Emotional Neglect

Guest: Katherine Ripley

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome to this fourth edition of the Trauma Super conference. My name is Jaï Bristow and I'm one of your hosts, and today I am delighted to be welcoming somatic therapist Katherine Ripley. Welcome, Katherine.

Katherine Ripley

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for joining us today. So do you want to start, you're a somatic therapist, do you want to start by telling us a bit what that means, what somatic therapy is, and why you feel it's so important, maybe including some of your own journey?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah. So somatic therapy basically means that you are working with your body, and there's different modalities that involve the body. It's not all the same, but the common thread is that you are paying attention to what's going on in the body, the feelings that come up, the different parts, the different defenses that might be at work. And I think it's important to work through the body because there's so much there that we miss if we are only working cognitively, if we are only working through thoughts, you're going to miss all of the rich information that your body is holding.

And this was something that I discovered when I decided that I wanted to do some postgraduate training, specifically for trauma work, because at the time I was working mainly with domestic violence survivors, and I knew that I needed more training in order to be of good service to the people who I was working with. So I found a program that was specifically focused on training trauma therapists and didn't really know much about it before I went into it, but it was a two year program, so I knew it was going to be very thorough and very integrative.

[00:02:04]

And so that was where I discovered these somatic methods, these somatic ways of working with people, and right away, as I was learning them, I started incorporating a lot of them into the work that I was doing with the clients that I had. And I was seeing that it was just so transformative for people, being aware of their bodies, paying attention to what was happening with their bodies, what they were feeling in their bodies.

It started to feel for me like the work was getting so much deeper, so much more quickly, not to the point where it was overwhelming for people, because, of course, you still have to pace yourself when you're doing trauma work, but it was going more quickly in the sense that we weren't spending so much time getting distracted by all the thoughts or preoccupied with the thoughts, we were kind of going straight to the root of everything.

And when you go straight to the root and you really go in and notice what you're feeling and you start working with what's there at the core, the healing journey starts happening in such a different way, as opposed to if you're just working cognitively.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And I know from experience how true that is. And I think it's really important what you're saying that other forms of therapy that are more cognitive are also helpful, but the danger sometimes is getting too caught up in the stories, in the thoughts, getting distracted and almost identifying more strongly rather than finding out what's really going here. Whereas as soon as we sink into the body and into the feelings, the body has so much wisdom and is able to keep us more focused on the actual root of the problem or what's actually happening. And of course through that we recognize patterns and we recognize childhood stuff and all these things that come back up.

And I'm curious, you said you started a training that was specifically designed for trauma therapists and that at the time you were working a lot with domestic violence survivors. So we have a lot of specialists talking about trauma and it's such a buzzword these days and this is the fourth edition of the Trauma Conference and yet I'm curious, what's your definition of trauma when you say that, when you talk about being a trauma therapist?

Katherine Ripley

There's a couple of ways that I like to define it. One definition that I use is the too much, too fast, too soon definition. And with that we also add the caveat that too much could also be not enough because there are a lot of people who are survivors of neglect who did not get enough. And so in that way it was not too much, it was too little and that is also traumatizing.

And the other definition that I like to use, and this is the one that Gabor Maté uses, is that trauma is the wound that happens inside of you as the result of whatever your experience is. And when we're defining it as the wound and not as the event or events, then that brings it back to the person, to the human and the feelings, so that we really know what we're working with in terms of how does this impact you now, as opposed to what's the story?

[00:05:39] Jaï Bristow

100%. I'm curious more about that first definition because I'm familiar with that idea of trauma as the wound. It's not so much the event that happens because different events can be traumatizing depending on how the individual is impacted on the holding environment or lack thereof and all that kind of thing. And so for some people there's big obvious, quote unquote traumas, like a car accident or an attack, and even then within that it will traumatize a person more or less, depending on their capacity and resources and holding and all of that. But I've not actually heard the too fast or too much or too little, too fast, too soon definition before. So I'm wondering if you can elaborate a bit more on that.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, for sure. So I think that what that definition is communicating is that there's something that is overwhelming the system. So when a person faces something that is just beyond their capacity to handle it and then return back to baseline, that's what trauma is. Because on a day to day basis, we're always going to be encountering stressors and hopefully we have enough capacity to be able to handle the stressor and then come back to baseline relatively quickly and efficiently.

But if there is something that is too much or it happens too fast so that it overwhelms the system, then it may not be possible to return back to baseline. And that's when you get all of the after effects that you're dealing with trying to get back to your equilibrium. And people may need to seek support from therapy in order to return back to their equilibrium.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, it's a super interesting definition and I like that idea because also it really takes into account the individual. So it's not like this event, a bit like you were saying about the other definition around the wound, it's not like, oh, this event is traumatic. It's like whatever takes you above capacity and different people have different capacity and different resources, but also each individual has different capacity at different times.

So if we're in a situation where we've done a lot of trauma healing work or we're not in a stressful situation, whatever, we're in a situation where we're at our baseline already, and something happens, then it's a lot easier to regulate and come back to the baseline. Whereas if you're in a situation where there's already a lot of stress and you're already dealing with a lot and you're already not at baseline and you're in a, I always mix up parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous state, but you're in the stressed one, then when another thing comes on, and I often talk about layers of trauma, then there's more that's added and it becomes harder and harder to come back to the baseline.

So I think that idea or that definition of it's something that happens that goes above, beyond your capacity to come back to the baseline is a fantastic definition of trauma. And I'm curious, you also spoke earlier about the too much but also that can be too less as in neglect and abuse. And I know that that's an area you focus on quite a lot as well.

So I'm wondering if we could talk a little bit more about that and how you work, how that shows up, because it's harder to spot sometimes. It's easier to say, oh, I have trauma because in my childhood I survived an attack or an accident. But the neglect, especially if it's more emotional, can

be much harder to pinpoint. So I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about that and the impacts of that.

[00:09:30] Katherine Ripley

Sure, yeah. One question that I ask my clients when I start working with them is when you were a kid and you were upset, who did you go to? And a lot of them say nobody. And if that is their answer to that question, that's a pretty clear indication that there was some kind of emotional neglect there. Because children having a much more limited capacity to regulate themselves and having much more limited resources are naturally inclined to seek out support from adults when they have big feelings.

So if a child has to learn to not go to anyone and to try to self-regulate when they have big feelings, then that's an indication that they grew up in an environment where they didn't feel that they could trust any of the adults with their emotions. And that is really difficult for a child to actually know that something is wrong there, because they don't have the language or the vocabulary to be able to say that they're uncomfortable and they wish that they could have more support from somebody.

And so it's not until they get into their adulthood and they come into therapy because they feel anxious or they feel depressed and they're not sure why they're feeling that way, and then they realize, oh, I didn't get the emotional support that I needed as a kid. And so what tends to happen is that when a child is not getting emotional support from any caregiver, their feelings are very scary for them because they have to handle them on their own. And they grow up into adults who may feel anxious every time they start having a feeling, because they still don't really quite know what to do with it.

And there is no internal concept of being able to have a supportive person who is there with them to sit with them through that big feeling. And so they're struggling a lot. And it's not until people can actually put language to what they went through, oh, I was emotionally neglected as a child, not until they can put that language to it that they can actually start to make sense of why they're currently struggling the way that they're struggling.

Jai Bristow

And I really hear how, again, it's sort of subtle. People wouldn't use that language until you ask that question of when you were in distress as a child, who did you go to or who did you feel you could go to? And it's like, oh, nobody. There was nobody that I felt safe going to. And that's when you suddenly realize. And again, we know from doing all this therapy and these conversations that it's not about placing blame necessarily on the parents, because there are many reasons why this situation might have happened.

It might be that the parents were just struggling to work and afford to provide. And so it's really important for people listening that you can use that language of emotional neglect without making your caregivers like villains. Because I know that sometimes people have a lot of guilt of, yes, but they were just trying their best. So I'm wondering if there's more you want to say about that as well, about that relationship.

[00:13:08] Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. And that's a really important thing for a lot of people when they're coming into therapy. Some people are kind of scared about therapy because they anticipate that the therapist is going to villainize their parents. And so it's important to be able to have the both and conception of yes, your parents did try their best, that's not necessarily true for everybody, but for a lot of my clients it's true, they did try their best and you still did not get what you needed and both of those things can be true at the same time.

So it doesn't have to be a sort of black and white, your parents were bad people because they didn't give you what you needed. That's not always the case and we don't have to be so rigid in labeling things like that. Two seemingly contradictory ideas can be true at the same time.

Jaï Bristow

That's definitely one of the things I've learned doing this kind of work. And I'm a big fan of yes and statements, and not just the statements, but being, like we're talking about somatic therapy, so sometimes being able to hold those seemingly contradicting feelings in the body of love towards one's family or appreciation or gratitude whilst also feeling a lot of hurt and neglect and anger. And they seem contradicting and yet as humans we are naturally complex with lots of different complex emotions and that it's okay to acknowledge those emotions.

Katherine Ripley

Yes, that's absolutely true.

Jaï Bristow

And I'm curious as well how this kind of neglect can manifest in adult relationships. I know you work a lot with attachment and different attachment styles so maybe you can talk about how emotional neglect and sometimes even abuse and before we go into that, I just want to acknowledge something you said earlier, how we can hold the yes and, the both can be true, and sometimes the parents just weren't doing their best. Sometimes they were actually abusive, neglectful parents and that those might have the same effect on the child depending, but that they are two different cases and both either can be true and either will have a big impact on the child.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, that's definitely true and sometimes that changes the way that people process their experience. For some people, knowing that their parents did try their best can facilitate having empathy for their parents and being able to maintain a relatively healthy relationship with their parents in adulthood, depending on what the circumstances are there, and that can be supportive for them.

So sometimes people still do want to maintain that empathy and those relationships while they are doing their healing journey and some people don't want to maintain relationships with their parents or with the people who raised them and that's also fine, it's all depending on what people's experience was and what is the best thing for them now in the present.

[00:16:34] Jaï Bristow

100%. And I think it's really important. And that's why it's really great to work with a therapist, because it's really taking things case by case and not having a blanket way of working with someone. So it's not just like all people should follow these exact steps and then TADA, you're cured, sort of thing. But it's like, okay, so in this case, maybe cutting ties for either temporarily or long term is a good idea.

In this case, maybe having a conversation with the caregivers, in this case, whatever it may be, and we don't know what it is until, and it's finding the best thing for each individual, as well as knowing that that can change over time as well, and that it's okay to change one's mind and that in the same way we can hold complex emotions, it's also okay to shift as we evolve and we grow and we get in touch with different feelings and histories.

So I'm curious about attachment styles and how this emotional neglect, often, and sometimes even as far as abuse, can impact adult relationships.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. A lot of people have fears about getting close in adulthood. And this goes for all of the insecure attachment styles, no matter how it manifests, there is always some kind of fear of being in close relationships with other people. And people have different defense mechanisms that they use in order to prevent people from getting close, and they're not always aware of those things.

I have a lot of people come in to work with me who might say something like, I really want to be in a healthy relationship, but I just can't seem to find one. It just never seems to work out for me. And so that opens up this whole exploration of, okay, well, let's look at how you're showing up in these relationships and what parts of you are operating in these relationships.

A lot of times what we find is that there may be parts that are very deeply terrified of being abandoned and rejected because in childhood they were abandoned and rejected in a way, like we said, it's subtle because the caregivers oftentimes are present, they are physically present, but there's really no emotional nurturing coming from the parents. And maybe the parents don't have the capacity to really hold the child's emotions.

And that is a form of being rejected when you have a big feeling and your parent just cannot handle it. And so when people grow up with that fear of being rejected, in a way, they put up certain defenses to try to prevent people from getting too close to them. Because the logic there is like, if I prevent you from getting too close to me, then I don't have to worry about being rejected by you. And there's this very deep polarization between the parts that really want connection, that really want to be in these loving and authentic relationships with people. And the parts that are terrified of that because it's too risky.

So a lot of the work there is getting those parts to be aware of each other, to be aware that there is that dichotomy there, and getting to know exactly what the fears are and opening up the possibility that maybe the parts that are really scared could recognize that, okay, you're not a child anymore, you're an adult now, and you have more resources and more capacity. So maybe it's worth it to take this risk and be in connection with someone.

[00:20:51] Jaï Bristow

And again, it's very helpful to have, whether it's a therapist or a practitioner or someone supporting you and guiding you through that process because it can feel scary and histories come up and that fear of rejection. And even if someone's doing all the right things, quote unquote, and offering nothing but green flags, it can be very easy to be looking for something to interpret as rejection in those moments. So then it helps to have someone who knows you and knows your history to help sort of guide you through those kinds of relationships.

Katherine Ripley

Yes. Absolutely.

Jaï Bristow

And I know that you work a little bit with sort of different forms of, other forms of trauma, and you talk a lot about the traumatic effects of sort of different types of social inequality, whether that's poverty and capitalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, transphobia, all these very well known obias and isms. And I'm curious if you wanted to say a bit more about that and why it's important for you to position yourself on these topics, to speak about these topics, and why you believe that other therapists should do the same.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. A lot of the clients who I have worked with have been struggling with things that are due to these broader social factors, these forms of oppression and discrimination. This came up a lot when I was mainly doing domestic violence work. A lot of the people who I worked with were struggling with not being able to leave an abusive relationship because they literally didn't have a place to go, not being able to have secure, safe housing that they could go to in order to leave this person who was abusing them.

So I think it's important to take a stance on capitalism and the way that it oppresses people and restricts their options because so many of people's problems could be solved if safe housing was actually a human right that we were all guaranteed. And it's important to say that out loud, because I don't want for people to be under the impression that they have failed in some way because they're not able to leave this abusive relationship or because they are anxious all the time about not being able to make enough money and pay rent and take care of their kids.

If somebody is anxious or depressed because of those things, it's not their fault, it's a societal failing and I think that if therapists and other healing workers don't say these kinds of things out loud, if we don't say these things to our clients, then we are kind of being complicit in allowing them to believe that maybe it's my fault that I'm struggling with all of this stuff, maybe something is wrong with me that I can't get my head on straight.

Well, no, it's not. You're up against 1000 different obstacles right now and it makes sense that you're struggling and that's, in fact, by design, I mean, we could get into the whole discussion of the whole political system. But ultimately the point is that I think that people have the right to know that if they are struggling that it's not their fault, that it's due to all of these different injustices that are in place.

[00:25:12]

And it can feel kind of powerless sometimes like as a worker that I see people struggling with these things and I'm limited in what I can actually do about it, but if I can at least say, yes, this is a big part of the reason why you're having a hard time, then at least maybe they will take some of the blame off of themselves.

Jaï Bristow

I'm really appreciative that you brought this piece in. I mean, my whole work is all about looking at becoming aware of and freeing ourselves from oppressive structures both externally in society as well as internally. And I think that therapy, mindfulness, nonviolent communication, all these different tools can work really well to support that kind of freeing ourselves from structures externally and internally, as I say.

And so in the same way you were talking earlier about when you're working with someone who's been traumatized by emotional neglect that until they actually name that, they can't necessarily work with it, they can't free themselves from it because they feel like the problem is them. We take things so personally and so if we don't name that or we come up with saying no, I can't say that because then I'm demonizing my caregivers or whatever it is.

So by having someone who can support them in saying it's okay and having the both and, naming it and then working with that, by naming the structure, by naming the issue, we can work with it. I think it's equally important to do it with sort of societal structures. Naming that, if you live in a black or brown body in a very white society, then, again, when you were talking about the definition of trauma as coming back to the baseline, then it will be harder to come back to the baseline because you will constantly be living in a state of fear or dread, especially in countries like the US, where you can literally be killed because of the color of your skin.

Or again, if you're living in extreme poverty and trying to, even if it's not extreme poverty, if you just can't afford the basics and can't afford to leave a certain relationship or a certain situation, by naming that and recognizing it, it already, as you say, takes off some of the extra layers of judgment and self-blame and allows more space to start recognizing it and finding solutions within that and working with that and factoring that in as well. So, thank you for bringing that piece in because I think it's super important.

And I'm curious, yeah, I know you mentioned naming it is already super important, what are some things once people, whether it's to do with internal structure or external structures, once we recognize them and name them, what are some things people can do to work, what are some things you found with your clients to work with these structures and to work with, for example, whether it's to do with race or finances or gender or all these things, how do you use your therapeutic approach to support these kind of issues, working with these issues?

Katherine Ripley

Sure, some people find it fulfilling to get involved with some kind of activist work. Not necessarily everybody wants to go down that path but I always encourage and support people if that is something that they do want to do, because that can be an outlet to try to enact some kind of change to these oppressive societal structures. So I always encourage people to join groups if they can, if they have access to them.

[00:29:19]

And sometimes that can be emotional support groups for whatever it is that they are having a hard time with and they just want to be in connection with other people who are having those same struggles. And sometimes it can be activist groups where there's goals that they have for what they want to accomplish politically and that can also be really helpful outlets to, A, be in solidarity with other people who are struggling with the same things and, B, put your energy into something constructive to try to produce some kind of meaningful change.

Jaï Bristow

Wonderful. I love that we've talked about how helpful it is to have a therapist or other practitioner helping guide you and support you, but how a lot of healing can also happen in community. So finding support groups, finding activist groups, finding whatever it is, communities of people going through similar things and healing together, as well as having a therapist or someone to support you. And I think they're very complementary, it doesn't have to be one or the other. So that's fantastic.

Katherine Ripley

Exactly. Yeah. I think it's important for me to actually recognize when people need support beyond just me, because I want to be as helpful as I can for people but sometimes people really need just more community with others and that's something that they'll go out and seek outside of the space that I've created with them. And that's another important part of my job, is saying, hey, I think that you need something else besides just me. I'm glad that you're benefiting from our work, but people also need to be in community with each other.

Jaï Bristow

100%. And just like we talked about naming an issue, whether it's an internal issue like emotional abuse, naming the realities of the society we live in, I think for therapists, naming their limitations is also really important and can actually make the clients feel much safer. And so to be able to say, hey, I want to continue working with you, I think we're doing good work, and I think that there's only so much I can do as an individual. I think a community support group or being in community would also support your healing. I think it's super important because we can get into dangerous territory when one person thinks that they have all the answers for someone. So I think that's really important. Katherine, how can people find out more about you and your work?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, so you can follow me on Instagram. It is [@therapy.with.katherine](#). I am also on TikTok [@therapywithkatherine](#). All one word, no periods. And you can find my linktree there. I am accepting new clients. So if you are in New York and you are interested in working with me, you can find my social media and go through the link in my bio. I'm also going to be running some workshops that are open to everybody regardless of location, so you can find all of the information about that also on my social media pages.

[00:32:50] Jaï Bristow

That's wonderful. And I know you also offer a huge amount of free content, whether on Instagram or TikTok, little videos, helping people, sharing your own experiences, sharing things you've learned, working with clients. So, again, people who are less financially able to afford therapy or workshops also have access to those free resources. And do you offer lower rates or accessible rates as well for the people who we mentioned might belong to different groups who are less able to access and afford therapy?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, so I do have a limited number of sliding scale slots. I do have a waiting list currently for sliding scale because I'm limited in what I can afford to offer as far as reduced rates, but you can absolutely reach out to me if you want to get on the waiting list. If you go to my social media, you can find a link to email me so you can reach out to me that way.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today, Katherine. This has been a fantastic conversation.

Katherine Ripley

Of course. Thank you for having me.