

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - STACY BROOKMAN (Katie Elliott & Stacy Brookman)

My guest on today's show is Stacy Brookman, a woman with an extraordinary first-hand experience of the transformative power of writing. Stacy is a resilience and life-story-telling expert and host of the *Real Life Resilience* podcast.

.....

Stacy Brookman, thank you for joining me today!

Katie, it's a joy to be here - thanks for the invite.

Can you tell me what you do?

Sure. I teach people how to write their tough life stories in order to recover from trauma and then have the power to feel confident in themselves again.

Wow, it sounds like incredibly important work and why - why do you do what you do?

Well, for 10 years I was in a tough marriage and you know, at first it was a little quirky and as it went along, things started getting worse and worse. I started Googling some things and realised, well, this is more than just a tough relationship. I realised this is, well, I didn't even know the word abuse back then, but it was - it turned out it was emotional abuse. And ultimately I discovered that I was married to somebody who was not who I thought he was. And you know, later found the label sociopath. A psychologist told me, hey, this is what he is. But when you're in that much stress, your brain is in fog. And so I knew I just needed a break. I just needed something and I'd always kind of enjoyed writing. So I took a writing class. It was a memoir-writing class and it just so happened every week I would write stories of the crazy things that happened to me, you know, like, heater wires cut in my house and child protective services called or, you know, I found a listening device in my car and oh, all kinds of crazy things like that. And I would just write my stories out. And what I discovered was, through writing, all that chaos in my head became really clear. It became clear about actually what my life theme was. I thought my life theme was that I was a professional woman. I thought, you know, I was going through life, climbing the corporate ladder, but really my life theme was I didn't raise my hand. And I discovered that only through writing and discovering, wow, how did I get into this situation in the first place? I'm a professional woman, how in the world, did I get to accept some of that inappropriate behaviour? And I became really clear, not only

about how I got into it, but how I could get out, what next steps to take. And the stress level went down. And when you find words for the chaos that's in your head, the chaos that's in your life, when you find words and you have to put them down in black and white, something amazing happens. You become clear. And it's actually called the 'two minute miracle' because just writing two minutes a day is beneficial. And so that's what I do - I teach people how to do the things that I did to help me survive and thrive and get beyond that, which is writing about your life. And so that's what I teach.

That's extraordinary. So when you started the creative writing process, you were doing that just as a way of easing the stress, of doing something nice for yourself as a hobby?

I just needed something that wasn't divorce, wasn't kids, wasn't job, wasn't trying to survive. I knew I needed something that was a break, that - you're right - that was just for me. And this is what I did for fun. And what I ended up finding out was woah, it was incredibly healthy and it changed my life.

So it gave you insight into what was going on? It gave you an objective view of your situation that you didn't have before?

That's so true because, what I always say is, as human beings, we have a huge capacity for pulling the wool over our own eyes. We do that all the time and we just kind of ignore the little signs. We ignore this, ignore that. We just slog through our day. I mean, we do this, I did this for a decade with this marriage thinking, you know, it's gonna get better, it's gonna get better. But I was really fooling myself and as human beings, we do that. We don't want to face what's really happening. And so, it's called cognitive dissonance, you kind of, part of your brain says, okay, we're just going to block this off for a while and you just keep on going down the road. And it's a protective mechanism. But what really it does is it keeps us in these bad situations that we really should get out of and address. And so when you have to find words for what's happened to you in the past or what's happening to you right now, you gain control. You gain control over those emotions instead of letting the situation overpower you. And like we feel helpless sometimes in these tough situations, like there's no way out. When you start writing, you start learning and gaining control back over that, and I absolutely love that. It gives powerless people so much power.

So you encourage people to write about how they're feeling and what they're experiencing in order to get that kind of clarity and to start feeling more powerful?

Yes, absolutely. There's so many people bearing heartbreak and, and that's who I want to reach because most people put on that confident persona and they don't

want to share, you know, what's happening. I was a professional woman on the outside. I went to work, I was a consultant and I worked with high level people and they had no idea. I had to keep up this outward persona, even though inside I was crushed, had low self esteem, my home life was a mess because of this abuse. And it was crazy because you have to hold both of those people inside of yourself, and that's not healthy. It's not really healthy at all. In fact, there was a point in time where my ex was turning off the water in our house when I needed to use it. And so I had to go to a local grocery store and use their bathroom to wash my face, wash my hair and get ready for work and then go to work and present professional persona. And it was crazy. I was so thankful when I finally didn't have to do that anymore, but nobody knew. Nobody knew that. That's why I loved my writer's circle so much when I wrote my stories out. It was amazing to have other people hold my story without judgement. And that's what we're all afraid of, right? We're afraid if we tell somebody they're going to think less of us - and they may. But you've got to get that out. You've got to get your story out so then you can heal. And when you heal, you start to develop that resilience and your life can be joyful. Honestly. People who are in really bad situations right now, just imagine that your life could be joyful. It really can. And writing is the beginning of that.

Extraordinary. I have to say I've had a writing practice of my own, which I, I'm not exaggerating, but I genuinely believe saved my life because it enabled me to understand myself and to know what I needed to do to help myself get better...

Yeah.

...in a way that nothing else ever had. So I'm very aware of the power of writing, but that's an amazing thing. And how has that led to work that you're doing now?

Yeah. So once I realised that, I started doing some research, like, okay, why is this so good for me? You know, why am I feeling so much calmer when my life was still in chaos? And there is a wide body of research behind this. I mean it even boosts your immune system. And I'm like, everybody needs to know this. Even if you're not a writer, just writing the things down about the tough times in your life is incredibly healthy and will do miracles for you. And so I started teaching at the local community college and then I started online teaching people to recover from trauma by writing their life stories. And it's not a book, it's not a full memoir, it's just writing about the tough times. You never have to share it with anybody else. And it's not like your eighth grade English teacher, you know, saying you've got to have punctuation properly. It's not about that at all. It's just about writing down your feelings in your heart and getting that clarity.

I was reading something just the other day about different types of stories that we tell ourselves. I think the definitions were 'redemption' and 'contamination', the types of stories that we use. And people who tell redemption stories generally are talking about difficult things that have happened, but then telling the story from the perspective of how they are now stronger or they've come away with things that they didn't have before. Whereas contamination stories tend to be associated with people feeling that something happened that has been ruined everything and they have no possibility of coming back from that.

Right.

Not surprisingly, there's a much stronger association with anxiety and depression when people tend to tell those stories, but I guess we can learn to tell different stories. Would that be your experience from the teaching you've done?

Yes. Even if you've had something really horrible happen to you, and I know lots of people, a lot of our stories started in childhood and when stories happened to you back then, you take a piece of you, that eight year old, that 15 year old, and you take that into adulthood and you actually operate in adulthood in pieces of your life as that eight year old. You respond as that 15 year old. And so even if you've had really horrible experiences, as a lot of people have, and you've come through it, it is affecting how you operate as an adult. So it's really incredibly healthy to go back right through some of that tough stuff to get it out because it's in there. And that's what PTSD is all about. Those memories are stored in a different part of your brain than regular memories and so they can come back to haunt you, they affect what you do. But when you write them out, those memories are placed in the part of the brain where regular memories are and they can fade like regular memories. And so that's the beauty of writing.

Amazing. It sounds like fantastic work to be doing. Do you love it?

I absolutely love it. You know what I mean? People, when they start writing and they have that transformation, I mean if you've ever been stuck anywhere in your life - and it might be stuck in business, it might be stuck personally, it might be stuck somewhere - if you start writing about it, you're going to get to the bottom of it and you get yourself unstuck. The other thing I do, which I didn't realise at the time, how beneficial it was, is to stop and reflect inwards and also do a little bit of meditation. And I like that because it helps you check in with your body and so many of us are checked out. We're checked out mentally, we're checked out physically and that's how we start going downhill. It is so easy to get caught up in the busyness of what's happening in your daily life and the chores that you have to do, but the conscious decision to stop and look inside - what's going on in my

thoughts, what's going on in my body - that is a conscious decision that I have to make every single day.

And so how did you make that part of how you are now in a consistent way?

That's a good question. I think I did it because it was incredibly valuable to me. I again became much calmer and when I started doing that, I'm like, okay, all these things that I'm worried about, it's going to be okay. Worry starts to affect how you think and what you do. Your brain doesn't understand that it's not critical or it is critical. Your brain just says, "Hey, you've got to worry about this". When you, when you stop and think, okay, should I really be worried about this? Have I done everything I can do to avoid whatever I'm worried about? Yes. Okay, then move on. And that internal reflection is what really calms your nervous system down. It calms everything down. And that could help so many people reduce their stress and then get more things done.

And when that was a new behaviour for you, did you set aside specific time for introspection or has it always just been something that you do as and when you think about it?

Yeah, I put it an appointment on my phone at noon every single day. Then I realised I'm always doing something noon so I put it at 10:00 AM so, yeah. And sometimes I'll just dismiss it. I'm too busy doing something. And sometimes I'll put, you know, a pause for 10 minutes and tell me again in 10 minutes. But most of the time I do, I'm just like, "Okay, let's just take an assessment. Let's think about what am I worried about? What am I excited about? What am I doing and what should I be doing?"

And so you make an appointment, a daily appointment with yourself to check in?

I do. It comes up on my phone. Boom.

I love that. I certainly wish I'd learned to do that a lot sooner, but hey, these things happen when they do, don't they?

Yes.

Do you have a *Little Challenge* for our listeners? So a *Little Challenge*, just to recap - it's something that most people could reasonably do, so it's not too physically demanding, it's affordable, and it's something that if you do it consistently over time should bring benefits to your life.

Mmhm.

What would your *Little Challenge* be?

My challenge would be for the next five days to free-write your thoughts around a tough time in your life. And what free-writing means is, you don't even stop for punctuation, spelling, grammar, nothing. You just put your pen to your paper or your hands to the keyboard and just write, write, write, write, write, write. And so think about, okay, what was the toughest point in my life? And write - what did you see? What did you smell? What did you hear? What did you touch, what did you taste? And then how did you feel? So the five senses and how did you feel? And just start writing. What that's going to do is get all that chaos out in your head and down onto paper, so you become very clear and then you can dismiss it. You gain control, you gain the power over what's happened to you rather than it controlling you and your thoughts. And so just five days, if you can take 10 minutes to, if you can only take five minutes, just take five minutes and start writing that stuff down. And not sentences, just put, you know, "I saw this, I smelled this, I felt the rough of her apron or I smelled her fried chicken cooking" or whatever that is. Just write down all of those things and you're going to start gaining insights and your brain will tell you, "I have this to do on my grocery list". That's okay. Write your grocery list and then get back to the tough time in your life. And then after that, take another tough time. Then take a great time, take a positive time and start writing those things down and you will be amazed. Your brain's going to put out some garbage at first. But ultimately if you keep writing, you will get to golden nuggets of insight that you never knew were in there. And that's the magic of writing.

Amazing. Amazing. Thank you for that Stacy. So if people are excited about what you're talking about and they'd like to know more about what you do, where can they find you?

Sure, they can find me at stacybrookman.com and I'm also on Instagram, Pinterest, Facebook, all the social medias. Oh. And the podcast, my podcast is called *Real Life Resilience - stories of recovery from life's most difficult trauma*. You can find that over on iTunes.

Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining me today. It's been an absolute pleasure talking with you.

Thanks Katie, this is really cool. I'm excited about what you're putting out into the world.

Thank you.