

The Peregrine Centre Rural Mental Health Podcast

Episode 24. Miniseries: Working with Trauma Part 1

Speaker Key:

RS Rebecca Sng

DR Dayle Raftery

TH Therapist

DA Dave

SU Sue

KI Kira

00:00:00

Intro Hello. I'm Dr Rebecca Sng, director of The Peregrine Centre. As we begin this episode of The Peregrine Rural Mental Health podcast, please join me in stopping to consider the land beneath your feet, wherever you might be listening from today. Let's take a moment together to acknowledge the traditional owners of that land. We pay our deepest respects to the elders of the past, those of the present, and the emerging elders of tomorrow. The Peregrine Rural Mental Health podcast is brought to you as part of our rural mental health partnership with New South Wales Health.

DR Hello, everyone, and welcome to this month's episode of The Peregrine Rural Mental Health Podcast. My name is Dayle Raftery. I'm a clinical psychologist and research associate at The Peregrine Centre. Today I'm quite excited because we're doing something a bit different. What you'll be hearing in this episode, and the next, is a roleplay around working with trauma.

00:01:01

As we go in, I'm going to be asking you to suspend your disbelief as I step into the role of 16-year-old Kira, who's been referred following some alcohol use at school. Joining Kira in this session is her mother, Sue, played by Laura Whalan, and her stepdad, Dave, played by Tony Barea.

This family live in a small town where Sue and Dave run a café together, and they've been waiting for this appointment for about six months. Greeting them in the therapy room is The Peregrine's own, Rebecca Sng, a family therapist and clinical psychologist.

As we go through, Rebecca and I will pause and reflect on what is happening in this session. Rebecca, I'm wondering what are some initial things you want our listeners to hold in mind through this session?

RS Thanks for having me, Dayle. I do think that this session is a good example of the kind of work people might be asked to do when there is trauma involved but they themselves perhaps aren't trauma specialists per se.

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When we talk about trauma, I guess it's really important to say this kind of single incident trauma, or the idea of maybe a car accident, which causes some kind of reexperiencing symptoms. And then we have other kinds of trauma which you perhaps refer to as complex trauma, and there are much more repetitive things often happen in families during our childhood years.

In this particular family you'll have to listen to the interviews to know more about them. But let me start by saying that I use a structure in this episode which I use with every family I see, and it's part of the Post-Milan family therapy tradition. And it's quite structured in the sense that there are things you're supposed to do every session.

The first one is engagement or meeting people as people, and classically I like to start with the kid, particularly the kid who perhaps isn't that keen to be there. That's usually how I like to start. There are exceptions to that. If I work with, let's say a very traditional Islamic family, I might start with the father. So engagement is meeting people. Concerns is thinking about people's worries. We'll talk more about that as we go.

Then there's something called onset, or this understanding from the family about when things started. You'll see in this session I skip that completely, and that is partly because sometimes I like to do that in a later session.

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Sequence, which is really understanding what's happening when a crisis is happening. And the last thing is called a relationship scan, which we definitely can talk about when we come to it at the end.

The other thing I just wanted to say before we get started is to think generally about working with people who've had trauma in their background. And I have this funny metaphor for you, and see if it makes sense to you, Dayle.

DR Sure.

RS Sometimes working with a family's experienced trauma is like coming to visit a town where a giant meteor has hit them right in the middle of the town.

DR That's pretty traumatic.

RS Yes. And so there's a giant impact site in the middle of the town, and it's very classic to come into town and say, hi, I'm here to talk about the meteor. Drive me to the impact site. That's the immediate thing to ask for. And that makes a lot of sense in some occasions, but there are lots of occasions where I think that that approach will lead you to miss out on certain things.

And so you'll see in this particular session, there is a suggestion of an impact site, but actually we take a bit of a detour, and the reason that we do that is to get to know this family a little bit better, but also to explore the effects of the trauma, not just the details of the traumatic incident.

And I think if there's one thing I'd like people to take away, it's that idea that you can work with the concept of how has this trauma affected you and what could

we do to help you with that sort of stuff, and not necessarily start or even ever get to the details of the impact site or the traumatic incident.

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And so as we explore this town together, then there'll be various signposts where we could turn off here, this might lead us closer to the crater, this might lead us completely out of town. And as we go ahead, I might try and see if I can reflect on why I took certain turnings, and why other turnings, even though I saw the sign, I perhaps chose to not take that turning at that time.

DR Sure.

RS If that makes sense to people we might just launch into the roleplay, and then as the roleplay goes we'll stop and have a little bit more of a reflection.

DR I think that sounds like a good plan.

TH All right. Hi, family. Welcome.

DA Hello.

SU Thank you.

TH Good to have everybody here today. I'm going to do a bit of a spiel at the beginning about what therapy is and a few of the boundaries of therapy. I do this for everybody.

00:06:15

Maybe I'll just start with this question. What are some of the reasons that people would see a therapist? Do you know? It's any kind of experience with people going to therapy. Kira, do you have any idea?

KI I'm here because the school counsellor said I had to be here.

TH Right. I think that's a very common experience, isn't it, that people come to therapy because someone else said, hey, you really probably want to go to therapy.

KI Yes.

TH How I see therapy, for my own way of working, is that I like to have a conversation in therapy that you might not have otherwise. So my job is really to facilitate a conversation between the family that's unusual or different from what you might be having around the dinner table at home.

There's a few things about that. One is the things that we say in here are private or confidential, and there are exceptions to that and they mainly boil down to if I'm worried about the safety of someone. So if I'm worried about somebody's safety, then I may well have to tell somebody so that I can keep that person safe. That's part of my job.

There are also legal reasons as well. There might be some things like subpoenaing of notes and things like that in certain circumstances, and I'd need to follow the rules on that one. If that does come up and I do feel like I need to

tell somebody who's not in this room about what we talked about, I will let you know and we'll have a conversation about it.

00:07:43

Okay. Let's get started. I don't know you guys. I've only just met you out in the waiting room, so let's start with introductions maybe. Kira, could you introduce me to this man sitting next to you?

KI Yes. That's Dave. He's my stepdad. Him and Mum have been together for, I don't know, four, five years maybe.

SU Five years.

KI Okay.

TH And what does Dave like to do on the weekend, or spare time?

KI He's always watching sport.

TH He's into sport?

KI Yes.

TH Okay. Any particular kind of sport or all sports?

KI The football's always on.

TH The football. What kind of football?

00:08:31

KI I don't know.

TH Round ball or oblong ball? Oval ball.

KI Like footy, like rugby.

TH Like rugby. Okay, got you. Okay, let me double check with Dave. Is that reasonable? Are you into rugby?

DA I am into all sports. But yes, cricket in summer, and I do like the rugby, but I like soccer the round ball game as well.

TH Okay.

DA All ball sports.

TH All ball sports. Okay. Good to know. Okay, and Dave, maybe I'll ask you to introduce me to this lady sitting next to you.

DA This is Sue, my wife. And yes, as Kira mentioned, we've been together just over five years and we work together as well.

TH You work together?

SU Yes.

DA Yes. We run a café together.

00:09:26

TH Okay. And Sue, when she's not working at the café what does Sue like to do?

SU Do you not pay attention?

DA She spends a lot of time in the café. She's either home or working most of the time.

TH Okay. That's good to know. You don't have a lot of spare time. Would that be fair to say, Sue?

SU Correct. And then when I'm not working at the café I like to hang out with a few of the girls. We like to go out and hang out at night time sometimes, which is really nice because I really enjoy having the friendships that I... Yes.

TH Yes, all right. Okay. So you've got some good girlfriends.

SU I do. I do now.

TH Great.

SU Yes, it's great.

TH Okay. And Sue, who is this person sitting next to me?

SU This is my daughter, Kira.

00:10:18

TH All right. What does Kira like to do on the weekend?

SU Kira likes to... She's been into BMXing a little bit, actually. She likes a little bit of BMXing, which I really like to see. She really likes to go out and I like her to be outdoors.

TH Okay. Great.

SU Yes.

TH Okay. Is that fair to say, Kira? Is that a good thing to mention?

KI Yes, I like that.

TH Okay. Anything else that you like to do, Kira?

KI Not really. Mum and I used to bake a fair bit, but it's gone a bit tricky. She doesn't really like to bake vegan stuff, so we don't do that.

TH And you're vegan?

KI Yes.

TH Got you.

KI We don't do that much anymore now.

TH Okay. But that was a thing you enjoyed when you did do it?

KI Yes.

00:11:01

TH Got you.

KI Yes.

DR One thing that I noticed in that, that I thought was quite interesting, was getting the family to introduce each other, rather than themselves. What sorts of things are you listening out for when you do that?

RS To introduce each other, I'm asking a question that does double duty. Firstly, I'm interested in what Kira likes to do on the weekend, but I'm also interested in what her mum knows about what she likes to do on the weekend and how well she understands her life. And you'll see an example there where Dave says, I don't really know what Sue likes to do when she's not working. And that's not necessarily a sign of a terrible relationship, but it does tell me something about how Dave understands Sue.

The other thing about it is sometimes it's easier to talk about someone else than it is to talk about themselves. That's just a little trick that I use. It's not in the standard interview schedule, but I find it quite helpful.

DR And is it the same with asking each other what you think the other people's worries are?

RS Yes, there's a classic example of a circular question, that's a technical term for it, which is THINKING a little bit about others, and of course there's this idea of you could guess what Sue might be worried about, and that gives me some kind of understanding about what you think Sue's worried about. But it also gives Sue an experience of how you understand her.

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And Karl Tomm, who's a famous family therapist, talks about interventive interviewing, or this concept that the questions that we ask are an intervention in themselves. If we're trying to have a different conversation, suddenly Sue understands how Dave perceives her worries, and what sorts of things she thinks are really obvious that she worries about, but in fact perhaps aren't obvious to other people.

DR Right. It's this nice opportunity for the family to actually hear how they each perceive each other.

RS Yes.

DR And I suspect sometimes that would be a bit of a surprise for the family.

RS Yes.

DR Actually, oh gosh, mum is paying attention to me.

RS Yes, or even if they get it very wrong, I think that is actually... People are sometimes a bit scared about that, but that is good information to understand, that how I understand you is quite different from what's happening inside of you.

There is a kind of instruction to that part, the concerns part, which is you want to get a full list of worries. Often if you ask parents what they worry about they'll just say my child. But you'll notice in that list of worries, and not unusually, work comes into play, finances come into play. All those kinds of things. So it's very important for children to hear, in this very first session, this is not just about how you've been bad and you've caused your parents to worry.

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The other thing about it is you want to understand why it's a worry, not just an annoyance or an irritation or something that gets to you. It's a worry. And you'll notice a couple of times I try to clarify why what someone is afraid of in that sense and what is it that they worry about in terms of caring for this other person.

DR Brilliant. Okay, we're going to move in and listen to a little bit more about this family and get to know them a bit more.

TH I'm wondering, in a minute, Kira, I'm going to ask Dave what he worries about. What do you think Dave's going to say?

KI Probably the café.

TH The café. Any specific thing about the café?

KI Just if it's going okay. If they're getting enough business, if the food orders are coming.

TH So running the business, that occupies his worries. Anything else?

00:15:16

KI I don't know. He might complain about me.

TH He might be worried about you?

KI Sure.

TH Okay. What would he be worried about you?

KI It's why we're here, right? I got into some stuff at school and now we're here.

TH Right, so that might be one of the things he worries about.

KI Yes.

TH Dave, is that a pretty good guess at the business, and then maybe worrying about Kira and the thing that happened at school? I think she said.

DA Yes, it's definitely a worry. The business is a concern. Providing for Sue and Kira is a main priority. And I guess both Sue's happiness and Kira's happiness are connected, so I obviously want them both to be happy. They're all linked.

TH So one of the things you worry about and not just worry about Kira but worry about Sue worrying about Kira. Is that right?

DA Yes, that's it.

TH I see. And you said providing for the family is important.

00:16:34

DA Yes.

TH Can I hear a little bit more about that? Is that an idea that came from your family that you grew up in or is that quite different from the family that you grew up in?

DA Yes, that's pretty much how I was raised. Work hard, provide for your family, give them everything that they need, and happiness should flow on from that.

TH Right. And sometimes when I talk to people, that's particularly a man's job in the way that they grew up. Is there a gender idea behind that as well?

DA Yes. Look, when I was growing up it was a bit more like that, but these days that's all changing and I get that. Sue works with me in the café and has done for some years now. Look, those kinds of roles all changed. But I think I still have to take probably a bigger portion of the responsibility as far as making sure that the business is going all right and that we're paying the bills and everything else. Not saying that Sue doesn't do that stuff, but yes.

TH Okay. I certainly understand why that would be a worry. Tell me a little bit more about what worries you about Kira and what's happening with Kira.

DA Just want to make sure that she's making the most out of school and get an education that she needs so that she can then go on and do whatever it is that she wants. And, again, me growing up that was drummed into us. Making sure that we did our studies, did our homework and making sure that we're prepping ourselves for adulthood I guess.

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TH Yes. And so the thing that might happen if she doesn't do that, the thing that you would fear might happen is she's limited in her choices. Is that what I'm getting?

DA Exactly. Whether she wants to study more or work in whatever field, just want to make sure that I'm providing to give her those opportunities so that she can do that.

TH So it is also partly about opportunities that you are providing to her? Is that right?

DA Yes, that's part of it.

TH Makes sense. Okay. Anything else that we're missing on that list of worries?

DA Just with Sue worrying about her as well. That affects me but affects all of us I guess. I just know sometimes that she holds it in and doesn't maybe express everything that's going on with her with relation to Kira, and that could be because of other stuff. I don't know. Yes, just sometimes feel like she might be holding stuff away.

TH Yes, okay. So not just that you worry about Sue worrying, but that she worries and doesn't feel like she can talk about it. Is that right?

DA Yes, perhaps. I'm not exactly sure.

TH Okay. I'm going to ask Sue what she worries about.

00:20:19

DA Yes.

TH And other than Kira, what else do you think she might put on that list?

DA Maybe me as well. Business as well. Maybe she worries about her own health. I'm pretty sure she does. We all do at different times. Maybe she worries about making sure that Kira's doing all right and is healthy and all the rest of it.

TH Yes. Okay. How did Dave do, Sue, with that list?

SU Yes, pretty good. I don't like to be told that I'm holding things in, because I like to think that I'm a lot more open these days, and Dave is to thank for that as well. But I definitely don't try and purposefully hold things in, but I do worry about Kira. I worry that she's not happy.

I'm also a little bit worried that Dave is a little harder on her than I am and that might be affecting her a little bit. He's a little more strict than I am. We do have different views on that. I want to see Kira happy with whatever she's happy with, whether that be going to university like Dave really wants her to do or whether she would be happy working in the café. Her happiness is really important to me because she's been through a lot and I just want to see her happy.

TH Can I interrupt just for a second, because you said a couple of things that are interesting to me. You said in the past there's been a time in which I had to be a bit more guarded about my feelings, and then you also said Kira's been through a lot. Can you tell me a bit more about those two statements?

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SU My first marriage was a little bit rough. Probably wasn't the best of circumstances. Luke was his name and we got together. I fell pregnant with Kira pretty early. That probably just wasn't a good start to start with, 20 and pregnant in an early relationship. That was a little bit tricky. It was a rough time. We did break up when Kira was quite young.

And then having to care for Luke. It was difficult having to get back together because of that. He'd hurt himself badly and I didn't want to leave him with no one. That was difficult. To have a partner who'd distance themselves was hard, so I kept things in so I wouldn't make him upset, and he got more distant, which led to obviously what it led to, and that was very difficult for Kira.

TH And when you say sometimes I had to keep things in because I wasn't sure how he would react, where there ever times when things were unsafe in that household?

SU No, I wouldn't say unsafe, but I just wasn't sure about his temper sometimes. No, I wouldn't say unsafe. I never thought Kira was in danger or myself, no. But it was just more the temperament of him at the time. Little bit volatile, but I didn't feel in danger, no.

TH Right. So not unsafe but maybe a bit unpredictable.

SU Yes.

00:24:18

TH I understand. Okay. Obviously I'd like to hear more about the past, but if I can just concentrate on that list of worries Dave mentioned. Maybe worrying about Dave, also worrying about the business and also worrying about Kira. You said I worry that she's happy or not. What is it that worries you about that, if that makes sense?

SU The reason we're here is with her drinking, I suppose I worry that I don't want her to follow in my footsteps. There was a time when I was smoking a lot of marijuana after what happened with Luke, and I don't want to feel like I've passed that on to Kira, so that concerns me.

TH All right. I did notice you'd said before Luke was something, so you're talking about him in past tense. Does that mean he's passed away?

SU Yes. He died by suicide when Kira was eight.

TH Right. That's pretty big.

SU Yes. Definitely.

TH Okay. I'm going to ask Kira what she worries about. Do you think that would be on the list?

SU At the time, she didn't want to see anyone, she didn't want to talk to anyone and I really didn't want to push her into it. Being so young I didn't want her to have to talk about it constantly, so I didn't get her to see anyone. Maybe her not talking to anyone spiralled into that. I'm not sure.

00:26:00

TH Okay. But in your mind you do see some connection maybe?

SU Yes, I think so.

TH I see. Okay. Anything else you think Kira might worry about?

SU I think maybe Dave perhaps. As I said, I know he would never ever hurt us ever. He's loud, and I know he wants the best for Kira, but he can be loud in his yelling, and I think that scares her. But I 100% know he would never hurt us. Never. He has done the world of good for both of us, but maybe she's worried about his temper.

TH Okay. Let's ask her. Kira, your mum mentioned a couple of things there. Is she in the ballpark?

KI I guess. Yes, I think it's hard sometimes knowing what they want.

TH What do you mean by that?

KI Dave always gets really mad at me that I'm not studying, but I don't like it. And then mum says it's fine, I can do what I want, and it's always been really hard to know what they want from me.

TH What will happen if you don't give your parents what they want?

KI They'll be mad.

00:27:39

TH Okay. Tell me what's scary about them getting mad.

KI Like mum was just saying, Dave yells all the time and it gets really loud, and that scares me because dad did the same thing.

TH And does it sometimes bring up memories?

KI Yes.

TH I see. I'm going to go to Dave just for a second. Dave, because we've been talking about you a little bit, is this a surprise what Sue's saying about the volume?

DA A little bit. Yes, look, I do speak pretty loudly generally speaking I guess. I guess I grew up in a household where that was how it was, so maybe that's rubbed off a bit. I don't know. I guess when I express myself and I see maybe that I feel like I'm not being listened to or not being acknowledged. I'm just saying things because I care. And when I'm being ignored or I ask for something and then it doesn't get done, I might get a little bit upset about that and that's expressed through my voice, the tone that I maybe take.

TH Let me ask you this, Dave. Kira's here, quite teary, quite upset. How does it feel to hear her describe the experience of the conflict in that way?

DA It's disappointing. It's upsetting. I don't really see what I'm saying is being hurtful or anything like that. I feel that I'm trying to just be positive and trying to help as best I can.

00:30:12

TH If I can get this right, Dave, the intention is to communicate concern and to very clearly express to Kira what you hope for her. Is that right?

DA Yes. My parents used to yell at me if I done something wrong or if I didn't do what I was told or if I wasn't doing my homework or if I was playing up and all the rest of it. But I'd get upset, too, I guess, but move on.

TH And given that the intention is really an act of love, an act of trying to express concern, but the effect that we're seeing here is Kira quite upset and distressed. And she did mention sometimes it reminds her of stuff from the past when she wasn't feeling very like things were predictable. How does that feel to see the effects of what you're doing, regardless of your very good intentions?

DA Again, it doesn't feel good.

TH Sometimes when it doesn't feel good it's a sign of change happening, if that makes sense. That's the kind of questioning of what's happening. Does that make sense to you, Dave?

DA Kind of. What do you mean by change?

TH Just sometimes when it doesn't feel good, sometimes that's a little signal that it's worth having a bit of a rethink about what's happening. And I wondered if,

actually, we could do that in a minute. I'll just finish the question with Kira, but maybe we could have a think about that little interaction we were talking about. So Kira, the list of concerns, it sounds like one is making both Sue and Dave proud of you. That's a worry?

00:32:18

KI Yes.

TH Any other worries your mum mentioned? Luke, your dad?

KI It's hard to talk about him. We don't really.

TH And is that because you don't really think about him or you think about him a lot but it's hard to talk about him?

KI I think about him a lot. But I feel like if I bring it up mum will get upset, and I don't want that.

TH All right.

KI Yes.

TH What's your reaction to that, Sue? That statement.

SU Obviously I feel sad hearing her say that, and how tearful she is. And I didn't think that... I thought not talking about it was the best thing.

TH Yes. Makes sense. All right.

00:33:16

DR Okay, so a fair bit happened in that chunk. We heard Kira get really quite upset after listening to the worries of her parents. We got to hear a little bit more about Dave. I'm wondering what sorts of things are in your mind after hearing all of that.

RS Let me answer your question with a question. How did it feel playing Kira? Why do you think she was upset? What made you feel upset at that time?

DR Sure. If I throw myself back there, I remember just listening to Sue and Dave describe how worried they were about Kira, about me. I actually really felt it in my body. I felt so sad. And I felt like I couldn't meet their expectations and that it was so confusing for me. And so the emotion that came out was something that was actually sitting in my body, listening to them and thinking about this 16-year-old who's trying her best.

RS Yes. I think that's such an interesting point when we talk about trauma. And of course there is after trauma this obsession with safety and security, that being the primary focus in almost everything you do.

But there is this also tremendous capacity for grief and feeling lost. Wanting to go forward, wanting to have a normal life or whatever it is. Feel okay and not really knowing how to go about it. A lot of people who have been through trauma say it rocked my world or it turned my world upside down. Nothing makes sense anymore. And I think that's a really good example of it, where you're just trying

to be a good kid and you don't really know how you're going to be able to do that.

I think there are also a few maybe techniques or little things that happened in that session. When high emotion comes, when things are hot, and sometimes the first instinct is to steer away from that and to say, oh gosh, the family are going to have an argument now or something like that. I think you want to make a really good conscious decision whether you do want to avoid that or turn it down, or whether you actually want to see what happens when people do get emotional.

00:35:32

I do also think when you have someone who is upset, often, and this is particularly true of the rural families I work with, there's an instinct to move away from that upsetness and, I think Dave said earlier, move on. Get on with it. And so there's an intention of trying to sit with it and trying to stay in that moment. But you'll see that in that session I did move from Kira and I moved over to Dave to understand his reaction of seeing Kira upset. And then I also did ask Sue.

It's not necessarily that I want to put Kira in the spotlight and just spend a lot of time having her be more and more vulnerable, but I'm interested in what happens in this family when people do have strong emotions.

I guess there's also this sense of trying to acknowledge Dave's intention, whilst also getting him to acknowledge the effect of what is happening here in the cycles. And of course, as in all family therapy, there'll be some kind of contribution that Kira makes as well. It's not all about Dave, but given it is the first session and Dave is the adult, let's see if we can get somewhere. This is an interesting turning to take, and see where this leads us.

00:36:58

I think the other thing that I might just mention there is predictability. You'll notice that Sue said, oh, Luke was definitely not dangerous in any way, and that may well be true or that may turn out to be less true. I'm not sure at this point. But if it is true at this point, that doesn't preclude the idea that some kind of trauma has happened.

But this family is not comfortable calling it trauma at this point, and lots of families are much more comfortable in calling something unpredictable. And that can be something like moving around a lot, which isn't life-threatening, but can be incredibly destabilising. I like the word predictability. I think a lot of families gel with it.

DR I think you hear it in this. Sue picks it up really well and she continues to use it.

RS Yes. And then the last thing I would talk about is just, we had a little conversation with Dave about providing and the concept of culture. And I mean culture with a little C. Sometimes people think of culture as being born overseas or something, but I mean culture like the family you grew up in or the ways that things were done the way that you grew up.

And I asked a little bit about gender. For those who are interested, that's what makes Post-Milan different from Milan, is that we're quite interested in gender. And you'll see that Dave says, oh no I think people are equal, except that I also think that it's more of my job.

00:38:32

DR It's the man's job.

RS And that might be just a quirk of this particular family. It might lead to nothing. We went down that street, we saw that maybe it leads to a bit of a cul-de-sac. Maybe it doesn't. Maybe there is something about his feeling of doing a good job of providing for this family that is really triggering his anger when he's yelling.

DR Yes. I think it's also interesting thinking about culture for this family where it is a blended family. Dave is a stepparent.

RS True, yes.

DR And he has been around for five years, I think. And there's something a little bit different in that. Stepparents play a really important role, but I think it's worth acknowledging that there has been disruption within this family, but they would've functioned a certain way. And now Dave has come in and is trying to fit or adapt to that I suppose. That was one thing in my mind.

RS Yes. I think we should talk much more about that when we get to the relationship scan.

DR Yes.

00:39:39

RS The other thing that I was thinking about, Dayle, was when Kira said I didn't want to talk about it because I didn't want to upset my mum. There was this feeling in my mind that I was thinking about my dad a lot and I still do think about my dad a lot, but I don't want to talk about it because mum will get upset. That is obviously an extremely common experience. That can be a common experience even in a, inverted commas, normal death.

But particularly in a very complicated situation like a suicide, we see this pattern of getting isolated by one's own grief and the family drifting away from each other because they're worried that they're going to upset other people. Not just by causing them upset and we don't want them to suffer, but also that I worry that if I upset them too much they will die by suicide.

And so there is this kind of fear of anybody not being okay. I just wanted to flag that as a common process, and how incredibly difficult it is for families to then come together in grief a lot of the time, and how brave you have to be in order to share your grief together. But the wonderful rewards that that ability to grieve together can give a family.

DR Yes, one I thought was really interesting after Kira says that is Sue echoes it.

RS That's true.

DR Sue has the same, of course I think about it, but I don't want to upset Kira, so I don't talk about it with her. And I think it's a nice moment of, oh, we are thinking about the same thing. Maybe we can approach this together.

RS And maybe not talking about it doesn't stop us thinking about it.

00:41:32

DR Yes.

RS Okay. Let's jump back in and then I think we'll come back a bit later and do a bit more reflecting.

TH Are you questioning that thought at the moment? That assumption I guess?

SU Of course, yes. Of course. Because I feel like I did the wrong thing.

TH So at the moment you're feeling slightly guilty. Is that right?

SU Yes.

TH Okay. What part does guilt play in your parenting of Kira? It's a funny question, but I think guilt plays a part in all of our parenting, yes.

SU Absolutely. I think speaking about the outbursts from Dave and from Luke, I know that I was also guilty. There was a certain time... Look, Luke had just died and I didn't know how to cope with it, and as I said, drugs helped but I realised that I was very distant from Kira and there would be times when I would just have outbursts and they were very unpredictable as well.

But just in that time I've gotten so much better. So much better, especially since meeting Dave and off the drugs, and I feel like I'm more predictable. But there definitely was that time when I realised it just feels like a big pile on for her. So, I do. I'm sorry.

00:43:13

TH Sorry. Okay. Kira, it strikes me that you lost both your parents in a period of time. Just for a while Sue came back on line for a bit, but she was not available to you for a little while.

KI Yes.

TH That must have been really tough.

KI Yes, it was. I was really lonely. I felt like I had to look after mum. I needed to be looked after.

TH Yes. How old were you then?

KI I was eight.

TH Pretty young.

KI Yes.

TH And Sue, you said I feel sorry for her. I feel guilty about it.

- SU Of course. No one wants to see their... I don't want to see her cry right now.
- TH Yes. But in some ways you recognise it was a completely reasonable reaction to a really horrible death.
- SU Yes. I know it was the wrong thing to do, but at the time it felt like the right thing to do for me.
- 00:44:17
- TH Did it feel like that was your only way of keeping your head above water at that time?
- SU Yes. I had no family. I don't get along with my family. I don't see my family. Luke's family are overbearing and I just don't get along with them. And it was me and Kira, and I realise that, but at the time it just felt like me and it just felt like it was just me alone.
- TH Right. But you did keep your head above water at that time, and you managed to come out the other end.
- SU Yes.
- TH What do you think that says about you as a mum, that you managed to get through that period of really strong distress?
- SU I hope that I'm stronger than... I hope Kira thinks I'm strong.
- TH Yes. Maybe we should ask her. What do you think?
- KI Yes. I wish that you could have been there for me a bit more, but at the same time I know that it was really hard for you, too. And I'm glad that you're better now.
- 00:45:27
- TH And it sounds like you kind of got it, you kind of got that it was really, really hard for your mum. And in fact, you wanted to look after your mum.
- KI Yes.
- TH Even as you wanted to be looked after.
- KI Yes.
- TH You said at the top that sometimes you really worry about making both Sue and Dave happy with you.
- KI Yes.
- TH Do you think that's a form of looking after them?
- KI Yes, I guess so. If they don't have to worry about me then that's good. That's one thing off their mind.
- TH So in some ways your intention is to minimise their worry about you, as in to make it small.

KI Yes.

TH But the beginning of this session they talked about, well, actually we are quite worried about Kira.

KI Yes.

TH Yes.

00:46:20

DR Okay, that was a short section that we've just heard, but there's a lot of signposts to pick up there, I suppose. And I guess building up what we were talking about before with acknowledging how people have survived. I think Sue's ability to hold the space that she was maybe not the best parent that she could have been, but actually, she was doing what she needed to do to survive to get through that period. There's a lot of richness in that short little section.

RS Yes, and it's funny isn't it? Sometimes when people say, oh, I'm uncomfortable with having more than one person in the room, this is the kind of thing sometimes people are worried about because one person thinks one thing. What if by validating Kira's experience, I'm making Sue feel more guilty.

But this is a good example, I think, where it is possible to strike a balance between of course, she's doing the best she could, and I guess that's what I meant by keeping her head above water. And that, we are talking about trauma, is a classic reaction to trauma that you want to push away the reexperiencing symptoms, you want to push away those feelings, and so you do anything you can to do that. And that can be of course, drinking and drug use is the most common. But that can be things like working a lot or gambling a lot or promiscuity, or all sorts of stuff that makes you feel and at the same time makes you not feel.

00:48:01

There is a, of course, standard reaction that Sue's showing. That doesn't mean that Kira's experience is any less valid. And actually I thought, in a funny way, the fact that she knew she needed her mum, that she said I... She didn't use the word deserve, but I deserve to be looked after, or I needed you and you weren't there for me, I think is actually a comment on what a great job Sue has done, and maybe Luke has done, because I don't know much about his interaction.

But in Kira's early life, somehow she's got the idea that she deserves to be looked after, and that is not the case with a lot of young people and children that I see. And I think it's wonderful that she has that, and in fact she's got this very higher order understanding that, I'm angry with my mum but she was doing the best that she could. Some children have got that, and some children, it takes them a very long time to get to that radical acceptance of what has happened.

DR Yes, to be able to hold the anger and it was what it was I guess.

RS Yes, and I guess that anger can also be grief, if that makes sense.

DR Yes.

RS Maybe in this presentation Kira's not presenting as a very angry kid. She's more a sad kid, and that is about the loss, what could have been, the mum I could have had and the childhood I could have had.

It does really lead me to this idea about guilt in parenting, and as you know, I work a lot in domestic violence, and one of the very common reactions to that kind of experience where they haven't been able to be there for their child is that women particularly, men as well, feel guilty. And because they feel guilty, they find it hard to set limits with their kid. And I don't know if that's what's happening here. We certainly see a little bit later on that Sue maybe doesn't set as many limits as Dave does.

00:50:12

But that idea of I could never say no to them, I can only ever give them things that make them happy, I cannot tolerate when they're unhappy with me is a really common reaction to domestic violence. In fact, there was a famous study in Scandinavia where they interviewed a hundred women who've been through domestic violence, asking them about their parenting concerns, and that was one of the major themes. How hard it is when you feel that guilty to be a good parent.

And you'll notice I ask Sue about that. I ask, are you feeling guilty? That didn't go anywhere. She did not pick that up and that's a good example of trying to turn down a street and finding it...

DR Oh, the road's closed.

RS Yes, road's closed. That doesn't mean I might not visit that in a later session.

DR Sure, yes. Are there any other signposts in that section that maybe you noticed but perhaps chose not to turn down those roads?

RS Yes. I'm interested in this period of time when Sue wasn't doing well and then Dave came into their lives. And she talked a little bit about Dave rescuing them. She didn't use that word, but that idea of I was doing really badly and then Dave came and I was doing okay. And I'm interested in that. That could be a whole neighbourhood of this town that we could explore.

00:51:31

And why would I think that's important? I guess that might say something about how Sue feels she can assert her own needs, how she can be critical of Dave or perceived to be critical of Dave. But also, and I don't think there's a worry here, but if she wanted to leave Dave, would there be some sense in which I couldn't leave because if I don't have Dave...

DR I'll fall apart.

RS I'll fall apart. I'll use a lot of drugs and I'll be a bad parent. I think that is interesting and I shelved that for a later date. And I do also, related to that, Sue said a few things about being isolated at that time. Not talking to her family. When people say I don't talk to my family, I will shelve that. I would like to know a bit about what happened there. And I don't talk to Luke's family and I'm quite isolated.

You'll notice at the very beginning you asked me, why do we ask people what they do at the weekend, and she said I hang out with my girlfriends. And she said I now have a bunch of good girlfriends, and I'll be interested in that because there's a glimmer of resource. Is there something there that we can be building on? And is there something there that is a sign of recovery and points to some kind of skill or strength in Sue.

DR Sure.

00:53:02

RS I've stored those away for later. I've seen those signs, noted them on the map and decided to keep driving.

DR What helps you to decide to keep driving when you've got all of these potential avenues to go down? It's tempting, right?

RS Yes.

DR What things are in your mind of thinking, okay, I'll just shelve that?

RS Yes, that's a really tricky question...

DR Oh yes.

RS Because I think the calculation is instantaneous, but you don't necessarily know what goes into it. Part of it is instinct, part of it, I think, is the size of that turning. If you think, for instance, why doesn't she talk to her family? That's a long conversation, so that's why I chose not to go down there.

DR As you said, it's a whole neighbourhood.

RS It's a whole neighbourhood. I think that there's also a sense of what takes me out of town? What takes me towards the impact site and do I want to go to the impact site right now? Do I feel like we're ready? And sometimes you don't know. You've got to take the turn, and they will detour you if they need to.

00:54:06

I also think sometimes, though, you want to focus in on understanding what's going on for this family, if that makes sense. Some things are going to be really relevant to that core story, some things are good to know, but not necessarily exactly related to that core story. And sometimes you make that decision and you find later, oh, I missed that turn off and that turn off actually was really important. I don't have a magic wand about that. That just happens.

DR We accept that we're human.

RS Yes, and I guess it's important to say that there's no scientific algorithm about it. I do though think let's not turn off so much that we forget where we were going.

DR Yes. Okay. We'll jump in and listen to the last few minutes of this half. Catch you on the other side.

TH Tell me a little bit about the drinking. Your mum said she's made this guess that it's something to do with trying to keep the emotions a little bit inside. Is that what you said, mum?

SU Yes, I think so. I wasn't really sure why, but I think looking back at me and the way that I coped with the marijuana, then maybe it is something. I don't know, something, yes, a way to cope. But I don't know what it is to cope with right now. I'm not sure exactly what is happening right now that's making her upset.

TH Why Kira would feel she's going under. Is that right?

00:56:00

SU Yes.

TH I understand. But you do have this understanding about maybe she feels like at this time it's her way of keeping her head above water.

SU Yes.

TH Let me ask you this, Kira. If there was another way to feel like you were keeping your head above water, would you be interested in it?

KI Yes.

TH Okay. Because it sounds like in a way the drinking has helped you. It's helped trying to dampen down some of these feelings.

KI Yes, it makes my brain quiet and I can get through the school day without it being really hard. It makes things easier.

TH So you're continuing to go to school?

KI Yes.

TH All right. Why?

KI Because I have to.

TH Right. Who says you have to?

00:56:57

KI Mum and Dave and the teachers.

TH Right. Is that the only reason?

KI I don't know. I don't really like school, but I guess it gives me something to do. And sometimes there's some teachers there that are nice and check in.

TH Okay. Anything else that you worry about, Kira?

KI I worry about what's after school and what I'm going to do.

TH Right. So you share that with Dave. Dave mentioned that as a worry as well. That's a shared worry, you're not sure what's going to happen in the future.

KI Yes.

TH Okay.

KI Yes, I don't know. I worry about whether I'm going to stay in this town. Everyone knows what happened.

TH What do you mean by what happened? With your dad?

KI What happened to dad.

TH Right.

KI And sometimes that makes it a bit hard and sometimes I want to get out, but at the same time I don't really want to leave mum.

00:58:11

TH Okay. Because you worry about her?

KI Yes.

TH Okay. So if I can get the list right. I worry about mum and Dave.

KI Yes.

TH I worry about what might happen after I leave school.

KI Yes.

TH Anything else?

KI I don't think so.

TH Okay. Great.

DR Okay, this is where we're going to pause the session today. We've spent a little bit of time getting to know the family, getting to understand how they understand each other. There's obviously a lot of questions that remain. We've only spent half an hour with this family. And so I'm wondering what's in your mind, Rebecca, around what we know so far.

00:59:05

RS Yes, that's a good point. Already we know quite a lot. We know there's been an impact site, and that is the suicide of the father. We do know that there's conflict with Dave and Kira, and an intention on Dave's side to hope for the best, to have Kira make something of herself. And there is this question whether that is a reflection of how well he's doing his job as provider of this family. That seemed like it in the back of my mind.

There's certainly this theme about being isolated by grief, and Sue doing the best she could at a period of time, but being a little bit absent, and Kira having to fend for herself at that time. And Kira's statement about not really knowing how to make her parents happy, and this idea about looking after them, that we need to keep everybody happy in this family or okay in this family.

These are the kinds of things that are going through my mind. I guess there's also the classic example of drug use for avoidance after trauma. And I thought

Sue's question, which is such a common question by parents, why is it still going on? What does she need to avoid now? It certainly must be something that lots of parents think about. They're safe now, so why are they still having symptoms, in inverted commas.

And I think that's very much something we need to explore as we go on, that trauma like this, particularly the trauma that I'm going to talk about in a minute, is not a one-off, okay, it happened we get over it.

DR There's no neat ending.

01:00:47

RS Yes. I do think, and this is an important point I suppose, that some people would say the trauma here is the death, the death by suicide. I might point out that there was a period before that which you might call traumatic or you might just call it extremely unpredictable where Luke was having the problem with the pain pills and in fact was very hard to read and was quite scary. Kira uses the word scary.

You might think maybe the question mark is there a kind of complex trauma going on as well where as a young child, probably six, seven, eight, Kira is exposed to this unpredictable threat.

DR Yes, a real inconsistency. Just not being sure what's going to happen.

RS Yes. Sue may well be telling the truth that there has been no physical abuse, all those kinds of things, but that doesn't mean that Luke might not have said stuff like I wish you were never born, or get out, you're not my daughter any more. Those kinds of things, which are a threat in the attachment sense.

DR Yes, of course.

RS And so whenever we're talking about trauma, again, let's talk about safety and security. Physical safety, emotional security, those things are uppermost in the minds of people who have been through trauma. And I guess just to finish this episode, I want to talk about hope.

01:02:21

DR Okay.

RS And that seems like a contrast to the things that we've previously been talking about. There's a lot of talk in this family about the future. When Kira finishes school, what's she going to do?

And Sue had some really lovely dreams for Kira, like she's going to do whatever she wants to do. And that is a very common answer by parents, but it is also lovely, isn't it? This idea of a vision of Kira's life not run by safety and security but run by whatever Kira wants to do. And I think that's a really nice image that I will shelve and bring out again in later sessions, because I think that's an image they all seem to be behind.

It's just that Dave sees it slightly differently. He thinks in order to do what you want to do, you have to have choices, and those choices are based on how you

work at this point. That doesn't mean that he doesn't also want Kira to have this kind of life.

DR Yes, you can hear that he really does. He wants her to do well. In his mind doing well is going to university, and as you said, opening up choices.

RS Yes. And choices is a really important sign of recovery from trauma, that I don't have to take the option that is the safest option. I can take the option that perhaps is exciting or leads to new opportunities or maybe puts me out there, and even if I fall flat on my face I feel like it's the brave option. All those things become open to me if I don't only have to make my decisions based on threat.

01:04:01

DR Yes, very different mindset.

RS I think in terms of just pausing there halfway through this session, we already know a lot. And the thing that I'm then interested in going further into is, exactly what's happening when the family get together, and when these kinds of difficult maybe arguments between Kira and Dave occur, what is happening exactly?

DR Okay, I look forward to talking about it and getting to know more about this family, and I hope our listeners join us for part two.

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01:05:10