

Post Traumatic Mental Injury

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IN THIS TRANSCRIPT

1. PTMI - What is PTMI – reframing of an existing term
2. PTMI - The difference between disorder and injury
3. PTMI - The brain at birth
4. PTMI - Safe environment - labelling emotions
5. PTMI - Impact on siblings - family working together
6. PTMI - Growing up in a safe space
7. PTMI - Communicating strategies - eating together
8. PTMI - Key messages

1. PTMI - What is PTMI – reframing of an existing term

Hi my name is Shelley and I am neurodivergent and I am a parent of neurodiverse children. Hi I'm Sue and um gosh these days I describe myself as a youth worker with a medical degree so I work with young people in all sorts of roles with my medical hat on family planning and addiction and now youth development basically. I'm so interested to learn about what you've got to say today.

Well I was just saying earlier you know trauma is this um word that we bandy around an awful lot um and people don't realize really they think it's kind of like being an accident or maybe having being a victim of some sort of abuse or loads of other different things and I don't think people realize how it affects the brain um never mind what it is and I often think it's in the eye that hold a bit like wine or art you know you like it or you don't or you know it's how you receive it that's damaged basically and I got really interested in youth development and brain development and especially the changes that happen at puberty um because we're learning more and more about that um it's way more to learn um as you probably I'm sure you appreciate um and what happens when it goes wrong and and really often what's happened from birth onwards or even in the womb actually has changed it that often sets you up for more damage at puberty or the way you react to things of puberty in terms of how the brain changes um so I've got I've been fascinated by this um and kind of looked at it we did a workshop where we talked about trauma and people talked about how they have perceived trauma and we talked about post-traumatic stress disorder and I'm sure you've heard about that very much so and it's a you know everybody talks about it and then they'd say complex post-traumatic stress disorder um and again it means different things to different people um and somebody in the workshop said no let's call it post-traumatic stress injury and then it became post-traumatic mental injury because of the way it affects your mental health because the word injury implies it's not your fault you've been injured by something or somebody and an injury also implies you can recover which is not you know the effects will last for a long time but you can recover and you can restore because the brain is so amazing amazingly flexible that you can restore different pathways and different ways of doing things so it's fascinated me for a long time.

So this is intense. This isn't a new diagnosis it's a reframing of an old diagnosis. It's a reframing yeah that's right I'm just I love a lot of people I've talked to about the reframing bit think yes that's right you know it's not my fault um and I think that's can be quite helpful.

2. PTMI - The difference between disorder and injury

Can you talk about the word disorder as it's used in mental health and how it is different from injury? I think disorder well for me being a doctor but I'd be interested to see what you think disorder means disease it means something's wrong with you and we have to fix you and you know we have lots of skills of fixing but the brain's quite hard to fix and it's more about understanding and how we can change environments this is from my point of view change environments and change people it change kind of journeying with people so that they can actually change their brains themselves usually because we don't actually we don't have the skills but I'm interested to hear what you think.

I'm interested in it maybe in relation to for example ADHD which is also a disorder but it's a disorder that's a disorder that's a disorder that's a disorder and well for me it's a superpower it's a strength but I don't necessarily see it as a disease or something that I need to fix it's more something that I can recognize the strengths of the differences in the way my brain works and then scaffold for the weaknesses of and accommodate it rather than try and fix it because I don't think it's something to be fixed necessarily.

Yep and I totally agree with you and autism is the same yeah autism spectrum I've emphasized spectrum because it's different for different people in terms of the way their brain has developed just you're just different and for me if our society could accept neurodiversity as a difference and go yay diversity and actually say wow look at your strengths you're so you can super focus and okay maybe you have other sensory issues but let's say you're a neurodiversity and you're a neurodiversity and you're a neurodiversity and you have other sensory issues but let's say you're a neurodiversity and you're a neurodiversity how we can accommodate you've got it and the interesting thing is that some of the symptoms or experiences that people have for autism post-traumatic mental injury adhd are incredibly similar and I wonder and you might be able to speak to this the way that the world perceives these disorders as they're currently called causes some of that mental anxiety and some of that mental injury that means that you can be autistic and also be suffering the effects of the world not accommodating you you're so right um because they make you a victim and when you be made a victim you lose your confidence um and the world does things to you rather than you saying yes i've experienced that how can i learn from it and how can i now go on and either help other people or do something different you

3. PTMI - The brain at birth

but I'd love to explain to you how I've worked out how the brain changes it's very simplified but hopefully it makes sense I'll use the whiteboard okay okay so if this this is I'm not a very good drawer okay but if you think of the brain that's the brain cut in half looked at sideways okay and there's the spinal cord taking messages from the brain down to the body and bringing messages back up and then here's the kind of fight flight or freeze reaction it produces adrenaline and noradrenaline and cortisol in response to what's going on and that's the only bit all the bits are there when you're born but that's the only bit that actually functions when you're born we're really useless as a species but then the bits of the brain like the bits that you know your vision and your hearing and your coordination of movement you can sort of watch it happening in front of your eyes as a parent it's really amazing isn't it the way it happens really is and those kind of are all there and then the hypothalamus which is I'm not going to get loads and loads of functions okay and but one of the important things I'm going to focus on is the amygdala and the amygdala is the part of the brain that looks out for threat and danger and what happens so all these things are all functioning away that's fine there's a little bit of cortex that's the thinking part of the brain a little bit of that functioning when you're growing up but really doesn't really come online till puberty or start to come online to puberty and then you've got and you're in puberty this comes alive and most expressed importantly the puke that the amygdala grows just normally it grows because this is the time when in caveman times you were thrown out and you had to look out for threatened danger yourself but before then your parents did it but now you do it and apparently in caveman times puberty was about 10 or 11 not like now well puberty still 10 or 11 but it's you know we're not thrown out quite so much having said that if you do have to look out for threat and danger yourself before puberty it's already grown and then a puberty young so it's not surprising that all our children and young people who were living through the earthquake or even in the womb at the earthquake time and they've shown this in other natural disasters like the Ice Age the ice thing that happened in Canada got a whole load of people who are extra anxious looking out for danger and hyper alert all the time when puberty happens which really explains a lot of the behavior of our children and young people now because everybody knows also that you're hyper alert you're kind of having flashbacks and you're kind of looking out for danger all the time extra than normal more than adults and what happens then your sleep disturbed and guess what your sleep disturbance leads to low mood and you're always interpreting things in a negative way and you always looking out for the bad things and you don't benefit from the good things we've got a whole generation in Christchurch there's all that and then you've got all the more stuff you know with the Facebook and social media and having to keep up and firmo and you know all those different things pressures from parents you've got to get a job you know all this kind of stuff.

Schools.. get your qualifications. You've got to decide at 13 what subjects you're going to study. You've got it yeah so it's not surprising that the levels of anxiety and depression are zooming up and especially if you've already had the effects of trauma. So we are seeing that in the population in Christchurch. And yeah and people don't believe us that we're worse in Christchurch but I think we are but having said that if you've been a victim of any kind of abuse whether it be neglect, whether it be sexual, mental, verbal, emotional, if you've got a parent who's not really present because of their own mental illness or their own addiction problems or they're in jail or they're too busy running high-five businesses then that's already grown a bit already.

So we're beginning to see that as well with parents that are addicted to their own devices raising children. Yeah and this intergenerational trauma because one of the things that happens when you're in a middle is like this and usually what happens in when you haven't been a victim or anything's happened to you this kind of shrinks back down because the cortex control bit comes online and says there there dear don't worry I'm in charge now you don't have to be. You know be so anxious looking out it's okay I'm gonna take control now but that gets damaged as it's being developed by trauma.

Brain's amazing okay that might have got damaged or even destroyed but it can make new ones and the way you do that number one develop a safe environment with people who care about you and number two talk because talk and this is what teenagers hate but talk and putting that into words helps make those new connections yeah and what happens in puberty and I think this is what happens in terms of neurodiversity is that all these centers get linked up because the brain has to make room because these are all gray matter if you like all nerve centers this is white matter and the connections is what makes the brain function the best and I think if those connections getting kind of a bit muddled up sometimes during development or partly influence of genetics lots of different influences but mostly genetics they get connected up and the idea is you get connected up so your brain can work faster and more efficiently but sometimes those connections can get a bit muddled hence I think in neurodiversity that the sensory stuff in terms of autism and how people are really don't like bright lights or tastes or feels or that kind of thing because the links have gone a bit different but other things develop that can compensate for those and often when people are hyper alert because this is really big they also get sensory things they hate bright lights and loud voices because they're going like this all the time yeah um so I think people when I explain this to people I think it's really important to make sure teenagers they go that's what it's like they don't like this bit but when I tell them that's the healing bit but it's true and it takes a long time it doesn't happen overnight it takes years so we're talking about teenagers at the moment but the thing that came to my mind just when we were talking about it is um with the limited resources that exist for parents especially those children to raise their children they are now living in hyper vigilant households continuously yep and that's why this is so important and so much help needs to be given to families so the parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles too so they understand what's going on and that they need to rather than going oh just calm down will you um say okay do we need to do to create a calming environment so would it be fair to say that this could be getting worse across the generations or is it just a point at the moment what happens if this isn't developed properly and you're hyper alert is your emotions do this and people go i think i might have bipolar well no it's just that your emotions aren't regulated properly because this has been damaged by the trauma and adhd and autism for example both have dysregulation of emotions as component yeah so we know that um what just people on the autistic spectrum get paddies and it's because their anxiety is overwhelming them usually um and it may be that because that's made worse by the environment whereas if they have the right environment they're fine um so it's about actually focusing on yes the focusing on the young person or the child or the family but what creation how can we create environments where people can thrive and the reason why we have more and more of this is that when you're brought up by a parent who does this the attachment goes wrong so you you don't you don't know what to expect because one day your parents wonderful the next minute they're not and so you can't attach them securely so we're getting more and more of this because it's a little bit of that

4. PTMI - Safe environment - labelling emotions

So we were talking just now about what we can see, the changes in the brain, where the amygdala has become oversized as the result of injury, either from intergenerational, where it's coming through genetically from the parents, epigenetics. Epigenetics, yes, it's a complex term, but it's easy just to say you've experienced something. Or in my case, one of my children was exposed to high levels of cortisol during pregnancy because I was very sick during pregnancy, or as a result of trauma after birth, and all of these can cause the amygdala to become oversized. And then it can become intergenerational by going through to the next generation.

But we were talking about if the cortex is able to make new connections to help the amygdala become regulated again, its size become regulated, and its function become regulated. And you were talking... You were talking about having a safe environment is one of the ways that we can help the cortex develop new connections. Can we talk a little bit about that? Yes, I think it's not easy, that's for sure. I think sometimes people forget that when they feel that... Well, for a start off, I think a lot of parents get the blame. You've got an unruly child. They're always running. They're always running around, or they're always being rude, or they're always doing this, that, or the other bad behavior.

It must be the parent's fault, you know? And that's number one thing we have to say. Look, if it's the parent's fault, that's just like saying, your child's got diabetes, it's your fault. It's not like that. And so that's number one. We have to really address that attitude. And

then we have to go... And to me, if everybody could say, this is a behavior. It's a way of communication. What's underneath it? What are they trying to tell us? Whether you're an adult or a child, actually. Because adults often tell us more about their behavior than what they say. So I think, you know, this is a communication.

What's underneath it? What is this person trying to say? And actually just making that effort to understand what's underneath goes a long way to creating a safe environment. Rather than just taking the behavior at face value. So that's number one. I think number two is, I love the Thomas the Tank Engine books. With their different expressions. They've now got a Thomas the Tank Engine autism version, which is great. Because all the different emotions are expressed. And if you can give emotions labels, that's so helpful. Because often, especially as children, but actually teenagers, animals, a lot of adults can't label their emotion.

And it is. It's really hard to put a word to how you're feeling. But at the same time, the more you can actually describe in words, that's what helps too, because that helps that brain connection and helps different brain connections grow. It's a bit like color. And I found this analogy very helpful. I can't remember where I heard it from. But, um, and it was like, you know how people, everybody knows some people see red as green or the other way around. And, you know, they can't differentiate. Um, and it's a bit like that with emotions. You know, some people see red, some people see magenta, crimsons, you know, all these different versions.

If you look into a paint shop, it's unbelievable the different names they give to colors. Um, but if we could actually hone down on emotions and see the different colors and give words to those emotions, it's very, very helpful. Now that takes a lot of skill. So that's where counselors can come in, um, and can help people identify how they're feeling and give them words. And that's really helpful. Um, but there aren't enough counselors. Um, the other thing that can happen is I think if we could actually give much, much support, um, and I don't, I really don't want post-traumatic mental injury or, but, but it'd be lovely if ACC could fund help for parents and giving them a break, um, and also help for parents to help with their emotional ups and downs.

Um, but it will be, there's enabling good lives funding for people with which can help give a break to parents, um, and focus on their needs as well. But that doesn't exist for some of these neurodiverse situations. No. Um, I don't want to be seen as a person with a disability because they have different abilities. It's not just a person with a disability who's got a disability or injury. You only get it if you tick a certain box. Exactly. And, but, and again, I don't want them to be seen as people with disabilities. It's different abilities. And actually, when you think about all the people with disabilities in the accepted form, they're different abilities.

Everybody says, wow, that child, you know, So if we can think of different people with different abilities wouldn't that be brilliant? Very much so and as a parent of children with different abilities and having different abilities myself, I've definitely tried to take the approach of scaffolding around them to meet their needs rather than try and change them to identify their strengths and celebrate theirs. Yeah and that's exactly the way to go and sometimes parents need help to identify that because you know you've been able to identify that but that's where I think if we could get family counsellors more and the concept of family counselling has been there for a while and but usually it's around dysfunctional families if you like and it's something wrong with your communication or something like that.

But if we could actually think of family counselling as the norm i.e everybody has coaching then the old, olden days, not that long ago, you know families used to do that for each other. You'd have grandparents around, you'd have aunts and uncles around, you'd have cousins around and you could use the strengths of those groups of people because they're all different, we all have different strengths, to actually help the ones that their weaknesses weren't doing so well. So we really are seeing changes in the way that society is operating affecting the way that children are growing. Absolutely.

5. PTMI - Impact on siblings - family working together

Can we also talk for a minute about what we would expect to see in siblings of? So, for example, you've got a child that is neurodivergent or autistic, or they've suffered a very clear trauma, that we understand the cause of that trauma. And so we understand that with this newly reframed injury, that their amygdala would be enlarged. And what would we expect to see in the siblings or parents that are dealing with that child that is less able to regulate and more distressed by their inability to control the world around them? That's a really good question, because often the siblings of children who've got the thing, if you like, or the different ability, are left out.

And they may not have anything different in there. They may not have their abilities, but they're suffering from being left out, just about. And I think if we can, that's why we need to be so much more holistic in the way we treat families. And trying to, a different training for people who are working with families, so that they can see every member is contributing or decreasing the energy, if you like, of that family. It's kind of like, the way we isolate, the sick person in our society with that sickness model that we have, or the illness model that we have. You know, we say we've got a mental, we've got a health system.

It's not a health system, it's a sickness system. And it's a really important thing to do, to heal the sick. And, you know, it's really, really, really helpful. Gosh, when you think about when there was no system, if you like, for healing the sick, you know, natural was to die at 35. And so we've done a whole lot of help. But at the same time, we've kind of, in that individualistic approach, we've kind of left out the

fact that we are pack animals and we work together. And we've kind of forgotten that. And I'd love to see us come back and say, we're a whole family. Let's see all our strengths and weaknesses.

Sometimes I say to teenagers in families, how about, and to parents of teenagers, how about you call a flat meeting? Because we're all working together and, you know, living together, sort of like in a flat, because people don't leave home anymore. Or if they do, they come back fairly fast. What kind of environment can we create so that we can live together? And that often means practically, OK, here are the jobs that you need to do. To run a home. Let's list them. Everybody comes up with contributions as to what's in that list. And then, OK, who's good at what? So who's good at tidying or who's good at whatever?

OK, you do that job then, because you're good at that. Who needs to learn better about how to deal with it? OK, you do that job and you buddy up. Wouldn't that be good if we could do that? Actually, really from an early age, not from teenagers. Actually, early age. So that that's part of how belonging to this family works.

6. PTMI - Growing up in a safe space

So my next question is, if the amygdala is enlarged, would we expect that some of that executive functioning would be affected by this as well, like the coming online, you know, we know that we're born with not much going on but breathing and eating and then slowly these other things are coming online and the prefrontal cortex at the front, the blinking part breaks the last bit to come online. Does the amygdala being enlarged cause it to come online later? Does it have an impact on? I think it's more the connection coming online between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex that's delayed. So you could be already a little bit delayed, for example from ADHD we can see that there is a delay in it developing and then further delayed by the lack of connections between that and the amygdala.

So that calming down. It doesn't come online early enough. But we can form those connections earlier so they're already in place. Well, growing up in a safe family where you have good attachment and you feel secure and you know what to expect, that is really helpful. That's what forms those connections. Wouldn't it be nice? But that's, you know, our world is not made like that so we have to learn to try and create that. So acceptance is really helpful. Yeah. It's really helpful. Thinking about what's underneath and behaviour as a communication, what are they trying to tell me? And the next thing that occurs to me is education, which is already slammed.

If they originally were responsible for reading, writing, arithmetic, and now they have become pseudo-parent educators as well, and they have very complex classrooms, but we're talking about this being... Holistic. We would need to see it in education as well. Oh, we certainly would. It's a bit like saying, you know, focusing on the child and giving them the skills and then going back to the same home environment. It's a waste of time. I would love to see schools, and this means employers and parents changing their expectations. And I would love to see them being development nurturers, not qualifications factories.

Yeah. Yeah. factories. Wouldn't that be great? That would be wonderful. And we've got, we know enough now about brain development and we've still got a heap, I mean now, 50 years time we'll look back and say, oh what was that woman talking about, she was floating here, it was crazy stuff. I'm sure they will, you know, but at the same time that's the point, we're learning more but we need to use that learning in how we do things.

7. PTMI - Communicating strategies - eating together

So I have three boys, and communication with boys can be different. When you ask me to talk to them, it can be good on some days and hard on some days. Can we talk about what you mean by talk in the context of this mental issue? Sure. Well, partly putting into words the description of emotions. That's a really helpful thing. And that you have to do from when they're little. That's why I love to be the tank engine. But then I think as they get older, their interests are developing and they're starting to realize what they're good at and what they like doing. Not necessarily subjects of school, but what they're interested in.

So often it's about starting with listening. What are they interested in? And then start to talk about that. And then move it, perhaps, to what you'd quite like to talk about so that it's kind of starting with what they are interested in first. Because, you know, we all know children are incredibly egocentric. They don't change overnight just because they're now teenagers, but they learn to listen to others by being listened to. It's like respect. You know, people don't automatically respect others. They respect when they're being listened to. They respect when they're being respected. And I think it's that two way thing that we need to develop.

So the listening first and then trying to get them to talk. So one of the pieces of advice that I got in the early days is you have to find out what your kids like and you need to learn to love it. If they like matchsticks, now you like matchsticks. And I can't say I like Fortnite much, but it's definitely been something that's come through with my children. One of the pieces of advice that I have lived through raising my boys was eating dinner at the table every night. And it seemed it was necessary at the time because it ticked a box in terms of me being recognized as a more functioning parent.

And that is what gives you security and the safe environment for your brain to develop. And you learn to interact and you learn to interact with respect and take your turn. It has been amazing. I'm so grateful. It's been amazing. We've had other people join us at the table, we were forced, because we were, and it's okay that we were, forced to do this for the greater good. And it really has shown the benefit of it. And then we've had other people join us at the table. And I remember also one of my boys saying afterwards, wow, that person has no skills to sit at the table and talk to other people.

8. PTMI - Key messages

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