

Episode 1b: Managing stress for clients and ourselves

Intro, 0:05

Welcome to the psychology of case management podcast: the show that helps you use psychological ideas to strengthen your relationship with your catastrophically injured clients and their professional networks, so you can achieve more for your clients and feel more fulfilled in your role.

Shabnam, 0:20

Hello, welcome to today's episode, I'm Dr Shabnam Berry-Khan, Director of PsychWorks Associates. And today's episode is on stress and stress management. 'Stress' is a word that gets bandied about an awful lot. And for the right reasons: it is something that all of us humans on this planet will experience time and again, and none of us are immune to it. And certainly if we're working in the personal injury world, we may even be exposed to more of it. And this podcast is to really acknowledge that to normalise that stress is something that is real, not just for us, but also for our clients. And in acknowledging that stress is present in the personal injury world, whether in the professional elements or the client elements of that world, we have a duty, we have a responsibility, perhaps, to think about that. And to try and minimise stress, because we all know that stress can really interfere with the jobs we're trying to do and what the client is wanting to achieve for themselves, which is a life they would have had, had it not been for the injury... so, no pressure! What is stress? It is our bodily response, our mind response, in fact, to pressure or threat, many different situations or life events will be perceived, as psychologists would say, as a stressor. And that might be something that is unfamiliar, something that was unexpected, something that threatens who we are, those we love, and where we feel that there might be little control in our lives. And our response to those stressors is what psychologists would call a stress response. And that stress response is very individual. We all deal with stress in such different ways. And that is partly linked to our genetic predisposition, our personality styles. But there are also sort of early life experiences, and perhaps events that make it easier or more difficult for us to cope with stress, sadly, and there might be more socio-economic factors that also mean that we deal with stress differently across the board. But one thing we do know: that when we have hit our particular threshold of stress, our body will produce the stress hormone, cortisol or adrenaline. And that will mean that we jumpstart into a sort of 'fight or flight' response, which helps us quickly respond to those threatening stresses or those situations that are stressful. In that sense, stress is actually quite helpful. It helps us push through uncomfortable or difficult situations that we might find ourselves in; things that would otherwise be a barrier. So, for example, attending a meeting that we really don't want to attend, because it's going to be tricky for some reason or other. But we have to attend it, it might mean that as we're thinking about a grievance within our care team, that we have to do it to the best of our ability. So we will search for the ways to do about it makes us basically work the hardest we can possibly work for our clients to get the best outcomes for them, as well as in a way that is based on, I guess, our abilities and our experiences. But we also know that too much stress can have a negative impact. And that a prolonged sense of stress can leave us feeling overwhelmed, unable to cope, it feels so much pressure that we perhaps end up feeling anxiety, depression, and perhaps even burnout. So I guess when we think about that bell curve, where to some degree, we need an element of stress to help us perform optimally, once we surpass that we are dipping downwards into poor performance with increased levels of stress, which is not a place we want to be at all, and certainly not what we want for our colleagues or indeed our clients or their families. So the impact of not managing our stress is huge. I think the other thing is that stress that we bring back. We're human, and we have had lives, and we have lives outside of our professional walls means that we're going to bring a certain flavour to our relationships with our clients, however much we try not to. And, you know, that is part of how good we are at coping. But sometimes it is just a difficult day. But there is interaction, obviously, our clients may have also had a difficult day. But the interview that I guess the point I'm trying to make is that the interaction between us and our clients within our stress responses and our stress experienced, stressful experiences, can compound situations. And I

think we have to be aware that this management of stress is not an outward-facing role, it is not something that our clients and families need to do, and that we don't have to do. And, equally, it's not something that we only have to do to improve the relationships with our clients and to improve the the outcomes that we can try and achieve for our clients. Because, actually, we need to encourage stress management across the board. It is a sort of universal responsibility, you could say. So in thinking... having that in mind, and thinking about how we can think about stress and manage stress across our clients and our families, our professional networks, care teams, therapy teams, we have with us Dr Alice Nicholls, clinical psychologist with PsychWorks Associates, who is going to talk through it with me. Welcome, Dr Alice Nicholls!

Alice, 6:35

Hi Shabnam, thank you for having me!

Shabnam, 6:38

Okay! So stress, that's a big topic. Stress is a two-way street. It's something that the work we do as professionals, is impacted by the people that we're working with and the stress that they're experiencing. But actually, we're bringing something that could be stressful to the situation as well. I'm wondering if a good thing might be to help our audience think a little bit about the psychological theory around stress?

Alice, 7:06

Yeah, sure. So, stress is a bodily response to threat. So you know, it's quite, it's got to come from our most ancient ancestors in that when, when this threat... our bodies react in a way to keep us safe. So our 'fight, flight, or freeze' response gets activated. And that's really designed to get us out of immediate danger. So although when we're stressed out, we might not be in any danger, our brains are still really caveman brains, and they don't really know any better. So they still triggering that same response, that would have got us out of danger if we were being hunted by a tiger. And that's not quite as helpful as it used to be. So it was great when we were running away from tigers. And you know, it still would be, if you, if someone tried to mug you in the street, it probably still would be helpful. But right now, if we are worrying that we've upset a co-worker, or remembering being in a car crash, our threat state is still getting activated. And we're still getting that surge of cortisol, and that fight, flight or freeze response, actually, with those things that we're able to think about that are actually in the past or in the future, we're able to keep our threat systems activated all the time. And that just leads to exhaustion and fatigue, and it can eventually lead to burnout as well. So unfortunately, they're the legacy of our caveman brain, combined with modern-day life. And our ability to think about the past and the future means that we're in a position where we are able to keep ourselves stressed all the time. And, you know, I say that like we're doing it on purpose. We're not doing it on purpose, you know, this... when things are threatening, our minds are automatically drawn to them because a threat, of being so important for our survival.

Shabnam, 8:52

That's really interesting. Thank you for that. So there's almost an automatic element to it that we almost have to think about counteracting, in order to be able to effectively survive in the day and age in which we live now. Is that fair to say?

Alice, 9:11

Yeah, absolutely. There is something very automatic about it. But what I would say is a lot of the time when we're stressed, we're stressing about something, it's either already happened, or is going to happen in the future. And actually, we are in some respects able to control that, because we don't necessarily have you know... if we're living in the moment, then unless we're being chased by a tiger or being mugged, or I don't

know, having a slanging match with someone, we aren't in immediate threat. So it is automatic but, equally, we do have some control over it, or we can learn to have some control over it.

Shabnam, 9:49

Right. And I guess, I guess the pitfall of not thinking about how to manage the manageable elements of stress, you know, which are very much internal processes, and thoughts and feelings that we are experiencing ourselves. burnout is real. I mean, we use that term usually in the work setting. But actually, it happens to people outside of the work setting, because stress is not a, you know, sort of setting-specific experience, is it?

Alice, 10:23

And of course, I've used really big examples I've noticed so far, but actually, there are really small stresses every day that kind of build up or have a cumulative effect as well. So, I don't know, like thinking you might have forgotten to put your kid's book in that book bag, things like that, you know, they they don't represent a massive threat, but there is still a threat in there: Oh, no, I might have failed to do something important. Or, you know, people might think something bad of me or if I don't get this report here in time, you know, people will think I'm lazy, or I'm not, I'm so to me that there's so much more subtle stressors that happen every day, you know, if I don't get dinner on the table at five, then, you know, people won't be able to do what they need to do this evening. And all of those things. They're all they're all our threat system getting activated. And actually, there can be lots and lots of tiny stressors every day. So not always a big event. It can be lots of little tiny events, too.

Shabnam, 11:18

Yeah, absolutely. And I think, you know, life is a mixture of all of those things. And we know that our stress capacity is finite. It's not just something that, you know, like an endless pot, if you like.

Alice, 11:32

And we've got different sized pots today, don't wait. You know, if we're in pain, or if we have sensory issues, or - I'm just thinking about our clients – with varying levels of ability, we don't all have the same amount of stress. So what what stresses out one person might not stress out another person or, you know, their... that capacity, it's finite, but that doesn't mean that there's like a set amount of stress that we can handle either.

Shabnam, 12:00

No, that's right, and perception plays a big part in that. So of course, that's really helpful summary of stress and how it really can impact all of us. It's a biological function that originally was related to our, you know, sort of prehistoric times. But that is now something that has a function, but it's not as functional, as it can be destructive, if it's not considered consciously. It's not something that will just go away, I don't think and certainly hasn't, in my experience of, you know, stressed clients, who come through my clinic. When we talk about stressful situations and stressful experiences to the case management sort of personal injury/case management world, you know, we're talking about those big droplets of stress into that finite, different-size container.

Alice, 13:02

Yeah, you add a trauma into that finite container... if you've got a trauma in there, then actually the capacity is already really limited, isn't it?

Shabnam, 13:10

Yeah, there's almost no room for little things, or rather little things can make it seem like the person is tipping over the edge, because their book hasn't been put in there. But in the child's book bag, because they're carrying an awful lot in the first place. It might be the trigger experience, but it's not the cause, so to speak. And having that in mind is, I think, really important, very supportive to client... the kind of clients that we see in case management and personal injury. So if you were to think about ideas that are supportive to stress management, and I think I am at this point, throwing everyone into the pot, that is sort of general ideas that are supportive to professionals and to our clients actually, the process which we would want to think about how to first... how to manage stress and how to think about tackling those biggest stress issues or indeed, those small chronic everyday stresses, you know, there are a few ideas... recognising signs and symptoms, I guess, is the first thing. Without that recognition, you're kind of not going to know what you're aiming at or what you're you know what you're trying to achieve or change.

Alice, 14:29

Yeah, I think this is a really nice first step actually but both for ourselves and for our clients and the people that we're working within the broader care system and the family system, is actually looking at what are the person's signs: How do you know that they're feeling stress? How do you know if you're feeling stressed? Are you reaching for the wine at five o'clock? Are you staying up late because you just want a bit of time to yourself and you're not getting it? Are you snappy? Are you snappy at people? For clients: you know, what are *their* signs? I'm trying to think about some of my clients. Again, people feeling a bit snappy as people may be reacting in a way that seems disproportionate reactions from people. People being tearful is a really clear sign. Sometimes you see people shut down. Sometimes people might just not want to deal with it, they might not be responding to calls or phone calls. Or they might, I mean, I think it can go either way. Sometimes you get... thinking more about families now: you might get a lot of contact when someone's stressed, or you might actually get complete lack of contact, but it's getting to know that client and their family, and actually what their pattern is, you know, do you get called in a crisis? Or actually, is it... do you hear about a crisis a week later? What's the situation?

Shabnam, 15:43

Yeah. And that's quite... so you can see how that could actually be quite tricky when we're thinking about our clients and the signs and symptoms that they might present. Because we're not there all the time, of course. And sometimes, in that moment of meeting our clients – you know, every fortnight, or whatever it is, it's different for different kinds of clients. Of course, I guess it's about setting that relationship up so that you are able to recognise change, and to observe something that's perhaps a bit different, or to have to be able to have conversations about challenges that are being experienced at the moments that are impacting on wellbeing in some way. Because it is stressful. And I guess it comes back to our point of making sure that that rapport, and that therapeutic alliance is there. But it's not always easy with our clients. And so sometimes I feel that you do have to be quite systemic in recognising those signs and symptoms. Care notes are... can be really helpful; supervision with care team members can be really helpful as ways of monitoring what the signs and symptoms might be; obviously, family members can be very helpful with that as well.

Alice, 16:59

Actually, it's a really nice conversation to have with someone when you're building your relationship with them to say, "Oh, you know, what happens to you when you're stressed, how would I know if you were stressed? What would that look like for you?" It can be a nice conversation to have and actually, you could have the same conversation with the family, couldn't you, when you're meeting the family: be asking them: What does the client look like when they're stressed? And so what do you as the family or as the care team

look like when you're stressed? So they're quite good conversations to have both for kind of getting your head around it, and but also getting the therapeutic alliance up and running.

Shabnam, 17:33

Yeah, definitely. There's nothing worse than talking about how to fix a stressful situation, when somebody doesn't necessarily understand your stress, the size of your stress pot, and the things that have been contained that it contained within that, and then trying to fix the problem somehow, or to make it better. I think it's a really good point. And I'm not sure that that's necessarily part of a sort of, like an IMA, for example, with a with the clients. Or, you know, it might be something that a psychologist talks about. But actually, it sounds like what you're suggesting, which is a really good idea, that maybe it's a question that every professional working with the client would do well to understand in terms of their assessment.

Alice, 18:18

And actually thinking about families and care teams, if you're asking them how the client looks when they're stressed, that's also useful for getting them to start to recognise the signs too, isn't it, so actually, just increase their awareness from early on.

Shabnam, 18:32

And of course, the same goes for us as professionals, it takes a lot of... I have found in my own life, it's taken quite a lot of practice to recognise what what a feeling and a thought might be about and the impact it has on me, I'm so used to being busy and I'm so used to working in a way that actually doesn't give a lot of space, often, to think about a new impact that something's had on me, because I'm almost always functioning at quite a sort of fast-paced level. So it takes me, particularly, quite a lot of effort to work out how something made me feel and what it was that put me in a bit of a foul mood, to be honest with you. I'm like my, you know, my swea... I know, my husband will often say to me swearing, you're swearing again. Like, yeah, that's one of my songs, for sure. And it you know, to be able to have that open conversation, not only with myself, but also with those around us. It's in the same way we would for our clients, it's a really helpful way to be a bit reflective about the impact of your day or that event on you. So it's not as easy as it sounds.

Alice, 19:52

No, I was thinking, as a psychologist, we talk about this in supervision quite a lot. So it's something I would have to take to supervision and I would say I'm feeling, so maybe my supervisor actually would say, How are you? How are you feeling? And we're about my stress levels. Not in any great depth, you know, they're not my therapist, but I would I would discuss, I would say, Oh, actually, you know I'm really stressed about this. And this. And we worked on holding that in mind as we talk to our clients. Do you do that in case management? Is that something you do?

Shabnam, 20:22

Yeah, it's a good question. We do have supervision. And I think supervision varies greatly. I've had a range of different types of supervision in my time, and I would say that it's probably something that I've brought to supervision as a supervisee, rather than it being there as part of the structure. Now, that could have just been the people who were supervising me. And certainly, now I've got, I've got a good relationship with my supervisor. And we do have that built in now, as default. But I'm, yeah, I think it's something that, that supervisors, and indeed supervisees, in the case management world, regardless actually, of whether you're just a case manager, you know, and thinking about your role, but I guess any professional working in personal injury, that it's part and parcel of acknowledging you as a person in the work that you do, that

you're not just a sort of machine or an agent, you know, that that only looks outwards, towards the clients in the work that that needs to be done on, you know, on behalf of that client, that you yourself, it is incredibly validating actually, and I'm not sure that it's as built into professions outside of psychology, actually, as it probably ought to be. And, you know, I'm sure there is certainly a correlation between the types of supervision you get and that feeling of stress slash burnout, dare I say, I mean, I'm a big fan of reflective supervision. And that's certainly a podcast to be had. Because I think without that ability to focus on yourself, and to think about how something is impacting you, it makes life much harder. And it's not sharing your experience and your needs, in a support... what should be and what could be a very supportive relationship with the supervisor. And it's all you know, for me, I see it as safety for your client: there's no point you trying to work with a very stressed situation with the client, when you yourself are going through quite a tricky time, you're not going to be available to your clients. That is the bottom line. I know, when my mum was dying, and then eventually died, it was incredibly difficult to work in this field, with catastrophic injury, with trauma, emotional responses to events, that seemed so much bigger, because I was holding a really big trauma myself, or a really big, stressful, anxiety-provoking situation. Had I not had the supervision that I had, I'm not sure that I would have been able to manage my workload effectively enough for the sake of my client, but also, crucially, for me, I want to be in this game for the long run, I don't want to burn out. That's not in anyone's interest, certainly not in mine, and not my game plan at all. I think it's something that we as a profession, set up professionals working with personal injury would particularly do well to have built in to our supervision experience, is to think about how stressed we are.

Alice, 23:36

Yeah, I was just thinking, if you were to deny that if you were to go into supervision and hide the fact that you were very stressed, actually it would make it all a lot more stressful, it would make you have to pretend you were okay, when you weren't okay.

Shabnam, 23:49

Absolutely, for sure. And I suppose in a way, when you think about naturally, when you think about recognising or reflecting on those signs and symptoms, you're naturally going to think about what has caused that sign or symptom to present. So recognising the signs and symptoms would naturally lead you to thinking about the triggers of that sign or symptom and what is, you know, what kind of has caused this reaction, either in our clients or indeed in ourselves?

Alice, 24:24

Yeah. So once you've noticed that sign or symptom, you can say what was going on just before that, or what was that? What were they thinking about? What was what were they thinking about? What were they doing? What was happening around them? And it could be something that happens just then and there. It could be something that happened earlier in that week, or it could be something that had been going on for some time. So maybe you just haven't slept well, or you're worried about clients, or you've got stuff going on at home? Maybe you're hungry. Something to always ask me if I'm not quite myself, is do you need a snack? But you know, that's real, isn't it? Hunger is real. And it's real for our clients too, you know, are they hungry? Are they in pain, especially if clients aren't able to talk to us? If communication is an issue, then it's really basic stuff, are they constipated or they're in pain, do they have sensory needs aren't being met? Or is there something in their sensory environment that's upsetting them?

Shabnam, 25:27

And there are emotional triggers as well, aren't there? Anxiety is a big one: I'm feeling anxious, and I'm not sure what's going on any more. You know, kind of communicating change or routines, or changes in

routines can trigger a lot of anxiety, which is, we know is strongly linked to stress in the develop... the production of cortisol.

Alice, 25:53

Yeah, actually I just think about clients and that when staff teams change or when staff are off sick, and the impact that has on the client, you know, it just it's just one of those things that it's, you know, those kinds of changes that we kind of maybe brush over a little bit, but are for a client a massive deal.

Shabnam, 26:09

But I suspect we brush them over ourselves a little bit as well. I'm not always convinced, certainly from my own perspective, but I'm always as... I can manage transitions, as well as like, I think I should, or I believe I should, or I'm expected to. Transitioning from a weekend, for example, can be quite strict, you know, to a weekend, sorry – and from a weekend – can be quite stressful, because I'm trying to get everything done. So I you know, the rationale is that I don't want to be working over the weekend. So I end up working much later on a Friday than I'd like. But equally I often... I used to, not so much now, but I used to have very sleepless nights on a Sunday, because the week ahead would trigger something enough to disrupt my sleep. And it'd be a mixture of anxiety and feeling stressed about, you know, maybe a particular meeting or, you know, something related to a client's situation that was, you know, up and coming in my diary. I read something recently about how we just accept that not having good sleep is almost normal now. And that we're not doing ourselves any favours by accepting that bad sleep is part and parcel of being a modern working person. I, you know, I think we've resigned ourselves to something actually very, significantly unhelpful to us, that is not going to serve us well, and is not going to help manage that finite pot. That is the size that it is in our individual, you know, minds and will naturally, as you say, feed into our responses to what life will throw at us, be that professional or personal, from our personal lives.

Alice, 27:47

Yeah. I don't want to get too... on you. But of course, we do stress about not sleeping, don't we. And we stress about stressing. So it's not just that you're stressed, it's then that you're stressing that you're stressed.

Shabnam, 28:01

Yeah. And that's all adding to that pot lays droplets of stress. I think I remember in when we were training, and thinking about the CBT model of stress that it's this, you know, they're droplets of water, droplets of stress water, if you like, and that pot is finite. And how you think about the stress adds more droplets into that very finite pot that you know, is potentially going to be overflowing.

Alice, 28:28

When you're a case manager, there's also kind of I don't know that this is actually, I don't necessarily think this is conscious, but there's this idea that you're the person who's going to come and make things better. And I think sometimes that gets internalised and you think that means you have to be like this perfect coping machine and to be calm all the time. And containing, and actually you're also human, you're also going to find things stressful too, sometimes.

Shabnam, 28:53

Yeah, yeah. It makes me think about the coping strategies and that we have to cope with all of this stress that we have in our own lives that are brought on us by nature of the work we do. And indeed, our clients

had this situation happen to them through no fault of their own, in the main and are having to deal with that while trying to live life in the way that life is being lived by them and within their family units, etc. If we do not have good coping strategies, ultimately, that's not going to help, particularly if there are some very fixed stressors in our lives that we can't do an awful lot about. I suppose if the incomings can't be changed an awful lot or can be changed to some degree. What we can do is make the outgoings in terms of you know, kind of how we how we cope and thinking of the tap. When you think of the stress analogy, of the droplets coming in, the tap is the coping strategies that help drain that stress cup, thinking about that not just for ourselves, but for our clients as well.

Alice, 30:05

Yeah. And thinking about which things are doing that and which is kind of giving us the impression that doing that, but actually aren't. So like thinking about the large glass of wine or maybe the several, it might feel very helpful, but that maybe not the next day when you feel better in the short term, but in the long term, it's perhaps contributing to the problem.

Shabnam, 30:27

And then smoking has a similar cognitive trick, because the idea is that you are, you're actually possibly breathing better, because of your cigarette smoking, because you're breathing it, you're breathing out for longer than you're breathing in, and you feel relaxed. But actually, it's not because of the cigarettes, it's because of your breathing.

Alice, 30:47

I can really relate to that as an ex-smoker. Actually, I do recall that, and realising that, actually, the something about that when I stopped realising that the breathing pattern of breathing out for longer was actually really helpful, and actually gave me some of the same feelings I've been getting while I was smoking. So there's some of these strategies that are helpful, and some of them that aren't, I guess we've kind of discussed that the more obvious like not healthy unhealthy ones, I want to talk a little bit about avoidance: avoiding meetings that you don't want to go to, or phone calls from people who are contributing to your stress levels, or those were the situations that are contributing to your stress. Again, they make you feel better in the short term, but not so much in the long term, you know, you're kind of putting off the stress for later and probably making it worse for later as well.

Shabnam, 31:35

Mm, really good point, avoidance is a short-term solution, not a long-term solution. And just trying to think about how avoidance presents would look like in the work that we do. And maybe it would be things like not answering the phone, and maybe avoiding arranging to speak to a client who's tricky, or an allied professional who's a bit tricky, or doesn't make us feel good for whatever reason. And I suppose...

Alice, 32:01

Cancelling, cancelling appointments maybe, with physiotherapists.

Shabnam, 32:05

Psychologists are often cancelled, yes, as you know.

Alice, 32:11

Avoiding anything that might be a bit challenging or a bit difficult.

Shabnam, 32:13

I find our clients can sometimes avoid talking about the tricky thing that happened on a, you know, on a shift with a particular support worker and having to bite... the idea of kind of biting their tongue, and not knowing where to go with that, it does build up and it seems like in the moment, it just allows them to get on with their job, but the ill-will and the bad feeling towards that person does grow. And it becomes a long term, more tricky problem. And sometimes, potentially, unbeknownst to the person who is the tricky person.

Alice, 32:47

And then having a conversation either with the person or with someone else in the system might really be helpful, or you know, with someone external, can be like a positive coping strategy, you know, and I guess thinking about the case manager themselves, you know, are you kind of debriefing with someone, or maybe a colleague you can talk to, and what makes you feel replenished? Actually maybe going for a walk, I don't know, doing some yoga... those are like the textbook kind of things, aren't they?

Shabnam, 33:18

My one is getting a massage...

Alice, 33:23

I actually really like doing some karate, which I always think everyone thinks is really aggressive, but I don't really think it is. It's just like yoga really with more shouting.

Shabnam, 33:35

That's channelling, that's channelling, isn't it, your chi energy? We launched straight into what not to do, but sometimes, which is a classic... But what can we be doing? Sometimes, I've got to say, it's taken me a long time to get to an understanding of what works for me, and I'm not even sure that I've honed it down that well, yet. It really took a long... it was a process to get to that stage, I have to say that I suppose that I'm you know, I don't have to feel stressed all the time. That's not me being efficient and good at my job. That's me being inefficient and potentially putting myself at risk to being crap at my job, because I wouldn't be available to my clients. So I you know, once I'd come to that realisation, I really had to work quite hard to find coping strategies that were adaptive, and enjoyable. Because I did try running. Not gonna lie. I did try running: the textbook one, as you said earlier. I hate running! It was actually more stressful, trying to make me go running. My husband is a keen runner. I'm not, I just can't do it. Can't be bothered.

Alice, 34:46

I think there's a risk when we do this stuff that looks like self-care that actually it's just another way of kind of punishing ourselves, or not being kind to ourselves. And actually, yeah, and I think that's a good question to ask yourself, if you're doing something that feels like it's meant to be healthy, it's meant to be good for you. Are you doing it out of kindness to yourself? Or are you doing it because you think you should?

Shabnam, 35:09

Because it's the right thing to do, because I read it in a book. I think you used the word replenishment, replenishing, what feels replenishing, I think, for me, that's really a helpful way to think about it. What ultimately at the end of my... am I going to get... is it going to add value to my life in some way, in an emotional way, it's not going to look like it's the parts, but actually, it's just not taking my boxes for me. And that could be you know, it's so different for different people, and you've got to think you've got to be, there's got to be an element of confidence around it, that this may not be what everyone likes to do. I really like it. I really like spending two hours in the bathtub, you know, with a particular bubble bath, you know, with a... watching a film, you know, I'm super-wrinkly at the end of it, but I tell you, it just does it for me: brilliant. Or the equivalent, but really being honest with yourself about what it is that works for you. And then making the time, of course, to actually do it because you *are* worth it, at the risk of sounding like a L'Oréal advert. It's a double piece of hard work, I think, doing the assessment on yourself to work out what it is that works and then implementing it and making the space for it. Because I think the impact of that is it becomes part of the neutralising, if you like of, of the stress. You know, and part of that exponential benefits, if you like, of any one coping strategy.

Alice, 36:41

Being busy and being stressed is pretty glorified, isn't it? Yeah, there's a lot of anxiety in the whole system isn't there?

Shabnam, 36:49

I sometimes wonder, and I think I've got no basis for this: this is just wondering: if there's almost limited permission, perhaps to be stressed in an everyday sense of feeling stressed, because our families are stressing us out, our relationships are stressing us out. And the work is busy, when we're working with families and clients where families may be breaking down. That work may have been a dream once upon a time, but isn't now, where relationships would have been what you would have expected this person to have done, had it not been for the injury. And now it's about supporting them to, you know, to have friendships, but not necessarily something that would be sort of, you know... that there's a sort of belief that the romantic element is not an option anymore, for whatever reason. And it's everything that we that we struggle with are things that other people would almost... some of our clients but almost aspire to, you know, I'll take a relation, you know, I'll take a you know, an annoying child any day.

Alice, 38:01

So that's really hard, if you're going to feel like you need to be hugely grateful for stuff, too.

Shabnam, 38:08

Exactly. I mean, I don't I just thought I was thinking about and how that would be, you know, a possible thought for some of the people, for some of the professionals who do work with...

Alice, 38:21

Yeah: "I've got so much to be grateful for in my life. So I can't now, you know, begrudge it or be stressed about it, because actually, look what's happened to this family?" Yeah, I can really see that. The thing that I think is important, and not always possible, but I think it's a really important thing to consider is actually out of the triggers you've identified what can be neutralised? Or could you get rid of this culture of glorified busy-ness and stress. And we can easily get sucked into feeling like we just need to do everything. We just need to cope with it. And actually, sometimes, you can delegate some stuff, you can outsource some jobs, some things might not be as important as you think they are. I think sometimes when we're really stressed,

we can get really kind of, we can start to think it's vitally important that something happens, when actually it's really not, you know.

Shabnam, 39:18

Stress has the habit of amplifying other stress, doesn't it?

Alice, 39:22

It does. I've started sending out much shorter emails. I used to sort of sit, spend ages sort of thinking about wanting to make sure I, you know, really think about this email and how it comes across. And you know, actually it just meant it was taking too long. Everything was taking too long. And actually, it's been quite freeing, just to think I'm just gonna do a quick response. So some things don't need to be perfect. I guess that's what I'm saying is actually there's a, there was an element of perfectionism in there, wasn't there, thinking you have to say something perfectly and actually it just needs a response.

Shabnam, 39:52

Yeah, well, there's something about 'good enough' in there, isn't there? It's having a gauge of what is good enough.

Alice, 39:58

What would be a good enough response? And actually that that can apply to a lot of our work? I mean, I'm not saying that we shouldn't be striving for a high quality job, but the prioritisation that needs to happen within that: sometimes things can be good enough too.

Shabnam, 40:13

Yeah, definitely, I often find that even the gauge of what is good enough in certain professions. And I, you know, I wonder if case management would fall into this as well in personal injury professionals, but even good enough, is probably quite a high standard, to be fair. So yeah, so the idea of aiming for perfection is not only incredibly stressful, and frankly, impossible, having to aim for good enough, which would be I reckon, I think that would still be surpassed perhaps, or that that is still going to be relatively high, because from 10 out of 10, dropped to seven out of 10 feels like a loss. But it's still a first class pass, if you had to think of it in university terms. But yes, that's really that's a really good point.

Alice, 40:58

And that applies to our clients too you know, they are finding some elements of their rehab really hard. And what you're seeing is that actually, they've got like five sessions in a week, which might be ideal for their physical improvement, for example. But actually, it might just be really stressing them out. It might be about thinking about what would be good enough in terms of physi... I'm picking on a physiotherapist, I'm very sorry. Equally, you could say the same of psychology. You know, I mean, if they're finding weekly psychology sessions too much, or an hour-long conversation too much, it might be that half an hour would be enough. And sometimes, I think and I think this could feel really hard. But sometimes it can say actually, what would be more achievable, less, you know, less perfect, not like perhaps not your perfect rehabilitation programme, despite there being the funding for it. And I think that's hard, isn't it, when you know, there's loads of funding for loads of therapy, you want to use it and you want to get the best result for your client. But actually, it might be that you need take a step back and just think about what would be good enough. If that's what's contributing to the client's stress levels. I mean, as case managers, it's maybe using the assistants more if you've got an assistant or thinking about admin jobs that could be outsourced.

And thinking about your own personal stress. You know, things like outsourcing cooking and laundry and cleaning, buying in more childcare. And you know, whatever. Getting a dog walker, I don't know.

Shabnam, 42:30

Buying a gooseday box once in a while or my little chef. That's my thing. Treat myself as well. That's what it feels like. It's a double bonus.

Alice, 42:42

So yeah, think about what would make life easier because actually, if you're that stressed that you're, you know that you don't have time, or there's a feeling of not enough time, then is it actually where can you get time?

Shabnam, 42:51

And I suppose that does link in then with being able to focus better on the things that do work and that you do need to put a little bit more effort into to develop those coping skills. Because you're kind of getting rid of the, or outsourcing as you say, or getting rid of the things that can be tweaked to neutralise I think you used the word 'neutralise' – triggers, and that just gives you the space presumably to focus on the things that are working and that do need the effort to help you find a I guess, a new way to cope perhaps or can you do continue doing more of something?

Alice, 43:23

So I guess I'm gonna talk here really about making space that when you are making space then for some healthier coping, although potentially you won't need so much of it anyway, if things have been neutralised? Yeah, things like really basic things like getting enough sleep and eating and drinking regularly. That's all neutralising triggers as well, isn't it? It's kind of... that's healthy lifestyle stuff. But again, you know, if hunger and tiredness is an issue, then that will make a difference. When people come to me wanting help with their stress levels, is actually just looking at their expectations of themselves: they're normally too high. And you know, I will do work with people on increasing, you know, their coping skills and people do want, you know, they come to me saying, "Please, can you increase my coping skills?" And we could do that, you know, don't get me wrong, there are things we can do that are helpful, but actually, is there a really big question here that I think is normally the most important, which is actually what are you expecting of yourself, and is it realistic? And is you know, is it kind? And is there something you need to let go of in terms you know, you're holding on to like this level of stress, because you feel like you should be this busy? Just I would just urge people to think very carefully about what they're expecting themselves to cope with and whether it's reasonable. And taking into account, you know, their own uniqueness in that. So just because Sharon up the road is doing it all, it doesn't mean you should and doesn't mean that you can.

Shabnam, 44:51

Yes there's something about 'living relatively', which can actually be unhelpful. Actually, within all of this, there's a clear theme coming out for me, which is compassion, self-compassion, and being, I suppose, in the same way, compassionate towards our clients, which we're probably better at, to be honest with you, than self-compassion. But in a way, that's a bona fide style or type of coping strategy, possibly one of the best ones you're likely to find. Because the moment we're compassionate to ourselves, we're likely to bypass any issues about not being good enough or not deserving, and questioning, oh, gosh, no one else does this. It's only me who does it, or, you know, kind of judging ourselves and others about the situation that they find themselves in, and they should be able to cope and they must be able to cope.

Alice, 45:43

Yeah, I think that's a lovely point, actually, if we are actually if we know that, if we're compassionate towards other people, sorry, if we're compassionate towards ourselves, it's much easier to be compassionate towards other people: we are already activating the right kind of neurological pathways, we're already releasing oxytocin. And, actually, it means that we can go in and be genuinely compassionate and caring towards our clients. When we're stressed. If we're in threat, then actually, we might be going through the motions and doing what we need to do. But we are unlikely to be feeling genuine compassion, because our biology just isn't really wired up to do that. If we are really feeling stressed, it's very hard to really have that genuine wish to relieve suffering. And that really genuine feeling of warmth. So, yeah, if you can't be compassionate for yourself, then actually be compassionate for yourself *for your clients*. Because actually, if you're being compassionate towards yourself, it'll be much easier.

Shabnam, 46:44

And you'll be more consistent at it and you'll be more believable. That's it. Otherwise, it's something that happened today, but I'm not I'm not really sure it's going to happen tomorrow when I also need it, perhaps. And when I think about compassion, I often think about ideas that are very gentle. And I suppose I think you said 'replenishing'. It's a word that's really stuck with me during this chat today. And I'm thinking about mindfulness. And we talked about breathing, and that you said karate, but I suppose maybe the softer version of that would be sort of Pilates or yoga or something like this, and thinking about how those, I suppose are more likely to be part of your repertoire of coping strategies, if... you know... and will likely to be stuck to, if you, I suppose, you know, people do do it generally. But I think it feels like it's more easy to stick to them when when compassion is involved in, in the mindset.

Alice, 47:45

Yeah. And I think the, I think it actually has a more of a beneficial impact as well, if you're doing it with compassion in mind, because I think, again, you're activating that neurological pathway for the release of oxytocin. You're being caring towards yourself, and you're... So, when you do that, you're generating the right feeling, you're generating the feeling of compassion, rather than going through the motions with something, which is so easy to do. And you might get some physical benefit from that. And you might get some endorphins, it might make you feel better, but unless you're doing out of genuine care and compassion for yourself, it won't have like the full impact.

Shabnam, 48:23

No, I can see that, that makes perfect sense. Sometimes I wonder if it's seen as a bit of a sort of dirty word, because it said so often, and it doesn't always carry meaning. And it just makes people feel a little bit uncomfortable as something that they should be doing but aren't doing and don't know how to do. I think it can for some people, it can feel stressful, because it's not something that they necessarily, they don't know how to make it happen for themselves. But there's so much out there saying that it's the way forward. Being kind to yourself is, this is always a starting point, you've got to put the oxygen mask on yourself before you can give it to other people. Yes, we're in the helping field. So how do we give compassion which is such a core quality and a core role in what we do? When we haven't actually worked it out for ourselves? We're putting the mask on other people before we're putting on ourselves. I mean, it hasn't... you know, that's functional, but it doesn't feel like it's by law, the right way to do it.

Alice, 49:27

Just not as sustainable, is it?

Shabnam, 49:29

No, well, that's it. In terms of sort of wrapping up our conversation today, which has been really helpful in thinking about what the signs and symptoms are, you know, doing that analysis on ourselves and our clients, thinking about the triggers. And what our coping strategies are, how to neutralise our triggers, but also increasing our coping skills and bringing compassion into that, I guess it's coming back to that point that none of us are immune to stress. And there has to be an acceptance, really, about stress being something that all of us have. And to deny that of ourselves is the road to burnout. But it's also going, it makes... I guess, it improves the quality of our relationships with our clients, because it makes us more available to our clients, and can make us better at the quality of our relationships with them as well. You know, life is complicated. And stress just adds another complication into the mix, which neither I don't think us as professionals would advocate as being appropriate and certainly not for our catastrophically injured clients. So I think it's been really helpful to have a, I guess, an honest conversation about what is stress and that it does exist. Yes, amongst our clients, absolutely. But also within us, personal injury clients. And if there is nothing to take away from this podcast, other than it's okay to acknowledge one's own... your own stress, then I think I would be really pleased about that. And I thank you again for joining us, Alice, it's been a really informative chat.

Alice, 51:15

Thank you for having me.

Shabnam, 51:17

I'll look forward to next time!

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