



PREVENT. RESIST. SUPPORT.

Episode 10: Sex After Trauma

with Kaleigh Trace



University
of Windsor

Office of Sexual Violence Prevention,
Resistance, and Support

Prevent Resist Support Podcast

Season 2 Episode 10: Sex After Trauma with Kaleigh Trace

Anne Rudzinski: Hi everyone, I'm Anne and this is Prevent Resist Support.

Music: I got your back my dear and I know that you got mine. I feel that hope and fear but I know we'll hold the line. Keep your head up. Keep your hand out when your breath is feeling short. Prevent, Resist, Support.

Anne: Hi everyone. Today we have a really awesome episode on sex after sexual assault with Kaleigh Trace. Kaleigh is a therapist and a Sexual Health Educator here in Ontario. She has a Master's of Science and Couple and Family Therapy from the University of Guelph. Kaylee is also a Registered Psychotherapist with the College of Registered Psychotherapists in Ontario. Kaleigh is also the author of one of our absolute favorite zines here at the Office of Sexual Violence. Kaleigh is the author of Take Heart a workbook for exploring sex after trauma. She describes the zine in her own words as a workbook for people who want to explore their sexuality, and who might be coming to this journey with a suitcase of tough stuff that they're carrying with them. And we absolutely love that. We love this zine. I love that quote, I really can't wait for you to hear her interview with her. You can find out more information about Kaleigh on her website, www.kaleightrace.com. And we'll make sure that that is in the episode description for you so that you don't have to worry about writing it down right now. So without further ado, let's get into our episode with Kaleigh.

Great. So welcome, Kaleigh, we're so excited to have you here.

Kaleigh Trace: Thanks. I'm so excited to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Anne: Can we start out by hearing a little bit about the work that you're doing and how you got into your super cool job?

Kaleigh: Sure, yeah. So my current job is that I am a couples therapist. And I do do individual therapy too. But primarily, I'm a couples therapist, and I do sex therapy. I have been doing this for about four years. And I am able to do this because I have a Master's of Science and Couple and Family Therapy from the University of Guelph. And I'm a Registered Psychotherapist. But the reason that I was interested in doing this kind of work is because for eight years prior to going to grad school, I worked at a really cool feminist sex shop called Venus NV, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and I loved working there so much. And it was such an incredible opportunity. And it really offered me this amazing experience to get to speak to people about what felt so shameful in their lives, which is so for many of us is sex. And so I was having these really intimate conversations with people about their sex lives. And I realized, Oh, I love having intimate conversations with people. And I should do this all the time.

Anne: Oh, my god, I had no idea you worked there. That is my absolute favourite shop. I used to live on the east coast. I used to go there all the time. And I was like I tell everybody about it. I'm like this shop is so great. We actually order from there from our office.

Kaleigh: Oh cool!

Anne: We order from them and they give us the best stuff. I love them so much.

Kaleigh: That is so so awesome. Yeah, yeah, it was it was such an incredible opportunity. I started working there when I was only 22. So I really feel like I got to grow up there because I was there till I was 30. Yeah,

Anne: Wow. That's so incredible. I just, I love them so much. And then we know you through the office, because we have one of your zines we

have Take Heart, which is described as a workbook for exploring and reclaiming your sexuality after sexual assault. And so I want to know what gave you the idea to put this workbook together. We love it so much. Where did it come from?

Kaleigh: Oh, I'm so glad that it's well used there. So the this zine or workbook was actually a school project that I did as part of my graduate work. So I went to grad school to become a couples therapist, knowing that I already worked in sex for so many years and knowing that sex can be incredible and empowering and healing. And I really believe that sex is this potential site of healing. But because I also had been working in sex for so long, I know that it's also a site of trauma for so many of us. And I come from a long line of survivors of sexual violence. I was raised by survivors of sexual violence. And so it's always been really important to me to figure out how do we talk about how radical and valuable sex can be while also acknowledging that it is scary, and traumatic and can be used in ways that are meant to harm. So writing this zine was part of my graduate work, which centered around working with survivors of childhood sexual violence, and it really allowed me a place to talk about my beliefs and these things that matter to me.

Anne: I love that. The zine is so wonderful. And I think you know if folks are interested in one we'll certainly send you one. So the info for that will be in our episode description. I would love to know how can folks know when they're ready to start exploring sex and sexuality after a sexual assault? Because I think that's kind of hard to know sometimes I think the timelines are different for everyone. So what does that look like?

Kaleigh: Yeah, part of why I wrote this zine is because that question is such a hard one. How do we know when it's the right time to start exploring sex and sexuality after we've survived sexual assault and sexual violence? And the reason it's such a hard question is because we are also different and the impact that sexual assault can have on a person and their sexuality is so different, you know, some folks might be ready to have sex right away, and might experience sex as this really empowering space of reclamation. Other people might find sex really triggering and scary and might need to take time away from physical intimacy. And really, there's no right or wrong way to be here. And

there's no right time to start exploring sex after experiencing sexual assault. There's no solid answer. But the one thing that I would say is to try when you are having sex with yourself or with other people, to pay attention to your body. Because often when we experience a sexual assault, we disconnect from our body and our bodily sensations, to lessen the physical and emotional pain of the experience. And after a sexual assault, our nervous systems can often repeat this kind of physical numbing or dissociation as a way to protect us. So if we can try to practice noticing our body, and what sensations we're feeling, when we are trying to have sex, it's a really helpful way to make sure that we're working to experience sex in ways that are present. Does that does that make sense?

Anne: Yeah, absolutely. I think you know, for some folks that are looking for, you know, a way to start having sex again, or to start exploring it. It's hard to know when you're ready. And so I think some of that just like, listen to your body, think about how you're feeling. And then I think we're going to talk through some of the things that you can do when you're starting to get into that process. So I think that's wonderful. Before we get into that, though, I would love to know in the workbook, you talk about the potential of sex and sexuality to be healing and empowering. And I'm curious, what does that look like? What does healing and empowering sex look like?

Kaleigh: Oh, good question. I believe that when we are having consensual sex, we are having an opportunity to feel inside our skin, to feel really in our bodies. And our bodies are so powerful. And doing things that involve being in our bodies can just be really empowering, be that having sex, be that eating a really good meal intentionally, be that having an incredible workout. And so I think when we are given in our lives, opportunities that allow us to notice our bodies and be inside our bodies, that can be really valuable. Doing that with sex is incredibly valuable, because sex is so fraught and can be so challenging. So I guess that's what I mean, when I think that's sex can be healing. And I say that with a lot of carefulness. Because I know that sex can be scary, too. But when we are engaging with our sexuality, in ways that allow us to pay attention to ourselves, I think it's a really beautiful space, or can be a really beautiful space.

Anne: Yeah, I think there's also like, sometimes for some folks a sense of reclamation, like reclaiming sex after having a negative sexual experience. Can you speak to that at all?

Kaleigh: Yeah, of course. Well, I'm going to speak to this more later. But I think a reality for most of us is that we have negative sexual experiences, be that moments of sexual violence or sexual assault, be that receiving negative messages about our body. So negative sexual experiences abound, being able to have positive sexual experiences, to have experiences where we trust that our body is valuable and good, where we get to feel pleasure in our body, regardless of the way that it's shaped or smells. That is so such an act of reclamation, as you say, it's such an incredible opportunity to say, You know what, those negative experiences aren't going to define this act for me, I actually get to remake it in my own shape, and redefine what this thing means for me.

Anne: I love that you've talked about like the messaging that we get as well, I think that's so important to think about that as a piece as a piece of that, that whole puzzle. So I'm curious to know, what does the process of exploring sexuality after trauma look like? Can you give folks a bit of a snapshot of what you know involved in that process?

Kaleigh: Yeah, this is where I wanted to speak about that more. I so appreciate you asking this question in this way. What is the process of exploring sexuality after trauma look like? Because something that I believe, as I just alluded to, is that very few of us come to sex without trauma. Because we live in a society that endorses some traumatic messages about sex, whether that's the trauma of surviving sexual assault, or the trauma of growing up queer, trans in a heteronormative world, or the trauma of being socialized a boy or being socialized to girl, like these are all traumas. And I like to say that because I think the mythology that sex is easy for some people hurts us all. I think sex is complicated for almost all of us. And that's such an important thing to remember that there's this mythology of sex being easy is mythology. And it's normal and okay, for us to experience sex as challenging in our own way. So, yeah, when you ask about what exploring sex after trauma looks like, I think that there is a degree to which many of us are doing that. And so it can

look a myriad of ways. But something I will say more specifically, is that for folks who have experienced a sexual assault, and they're working to engage in consensual sex after this experience of violence, some things that can often occur are, you know, physical numbness, emotional distress, genital pain, dissociation, flashbacks. And these things can happen, because our nervous system has learned that some of the stimuli associated with sex like closeness or touch, or certain smells, are signs of danger. And I know that this sounds really heavy and scary. But I think it's actually valuable to know like, this is normal. And this is our nervous system protecting us, because our nervous systems are responsive. And we can teach our nervous systems that these stimuli don't always signal threat, they might signal safety. So if we remember, okay, my, my body is doing this, my nervous system is doing this to protect me. And I need to go slow and teach my nervous system or retrain it that this doesn't have to be a danger sign. I think that allows us to remember that we all have the capacity or opportunity to relearn what these stimuli mean.

Anne: Yeah, I love that I think it's so important to think about, what does that trauma look like? What does you know, having that experience again, look like? And then I think one of the things that is really, like stressful or frightening, or, you know, the, the sense of anticipation that comes from, you know, what happens if a trigger comes up while I'm trying to have sex? So how can folks manage triggers that come up while they're having sex?

Kaleigh: Yeah, that's such an important and practical question. I love it. Because that's going to happen for lots of us, lots of people are going to be triggered during sex. And here I have a bit more of a concrete answer. I feel like I've been a little bit mealy mouthed so far, because everybody is so different. But there are some concrete things we can do about triggers. So the first thing we can do is try to figure out what our triggers are. And that's a challenge. Like, that isn't an easy thing to do. They can change and they can be context dependent. But it's something that I really encourage folks to try to figure out like, okay, what are some parts of the body that I know are hard to touch? What are some positions that I know are hard to accomplish? What are some words that I know don't make me feel good? So try to have a sense in

your own mind, like, these are things that I know can trigger me. I also think that if you're in a relationship with a person that feels safe enough, it's valuable to share that list with them. You don't have to do that. I know that some of us engage in sexual relationships where we don't feel ready to be that emotionally vulnerable. And that is totally okay. But if you can, I think it's valuable to share that with the people we're engaging in sex with. So that's the first thing is know your triggers. The second thing is to have a safety plan for if you are triggered, and that can look so many different ways. One thing I often suggest to people is that it is totally okay to take a bathroom break. You know, if you're having sex with somebody, and you don't feel ready to share with them that you're being triggered, or what your triggers are, you can just say, hey, I need to, I need to pause for a second to get a glass of water, I need to go to the bathroom. It's totally okay and appropriate to have pauses during sex, which is another myth that I think we don't totally believe and know is that we think we just started it all happened so fast, lots people pause, it's totally normal. Or you can have a more explicit safety plan that you share with your partner like okay, if you notice me start breathing rapidly, can you pause? Can you stop touching me? Or can you touch me in a specific way? Some people find it really grounding to be held really tightly, some people find it really grounding, to not be touched at all. So have a bit of a plan for if and when you're triggered. And then the third thing I have to say about how to manage triggers that come up during sex is to most importantly, treat yourself with compassion and kindness. Because when we are triggered during sex, as I said earlier, it's really just our nervous system doing this smart thing, warning us that we're in danger and trying to keep us alive. And often I find our initial response is to get angry with our body and our nervous system because it's not complying with what our brain wants, and that anger just amplifies the trigger. It's like imagine getting really angry at a scared kid. It's just gonna make that scared kid more scared. So if we can be compassionate and have a compassionate internal voice that says, okay, like, Thank you, I appreciate that you're trying to keep me safe. It's okay. If we can soothe ourselves rather than get angry with ourselves, that can make a real difference for how elevated or amplified that trigger can get.

Anne: I love that we're having this conversation today because as you're telling me about it, I'm realizing that I've been watching Sex Education. I don't know if you watch sex. Okay.

Kaleigh: Yeah, I love it. Yeah.

Anne: And this was actually one of the themes of the most recent season. I don't know if you if you're caught up, I don't want to spoil it.

Kaleigh: I finished it, so you can say whatever.

Anne: Ok great. So the character Amy, she's had this experience of sexual assault on a bus in the previous season. And there's like this beautiful moment where all these women get on the bus with her, made me cry. I really love it.

Kaleigh: Yes.

Anne: But in the most recent season, she starts to see a therapist because she's having a hard time enjoying sex with other people again, after her trauma. I thought this is just such an interesting conversation to have given that I've just finished watching that season. And so in the show, I think she's enjoying sex for one or masturbation, but she's not enjoying having sex with her partner and ultimately decides that that's like, not something she wants to explore at the moment. I think she ultimately decides she wants to be alone and like be with herself and focus on personal growth, which is like, Good for her. But yeah, did you have any thoughts about that? Did you think it was like an accurate portrayal of that process? Did you think it was maybe like not accurate? Did you think it was empowering? I don't know. What did you think of that season?

Kaleigh: Well, I love Sex Education. I love it so much. And I feel so grateful that people who are younger than me have access to it, I would have loved to have access to that show when I was a younger person. And also people my age like we all need access to better sex education, regardless of our age. I'm in my mid 30s, just for clarification. And lots of

folks in their mid 30s also need sex education. So I love that show. I really did love, I love Amy. She's my favourite character. And I love her story arc. I'm so glad that she sought out therapy. And I'm so glad that her complicated relationship to sex after assault was portrayed because that's so real. And I thought that part of what happened in her therapy is that Jean, the therapist, encouraged her to feel excited and compassionate towards her body, to like believe that her body is beautiful, and that her beautiful body does not actually invite violence that she can celebrate having a beautiful vulva. And that doesn't mean that violence should and will come to her body. So I loved it. I thought it was great.

Anne: I just feel like I really want like the vulva cupcakes. Like, I want to have somebody make vulva cupcakes, I want to bring them around like, loved that whole scene. So amazing.

Kaleigh: Yeah, same.

Anne: Okay, love that we just like took a fast minute to talk about Sex Education, cuz I'm just like really pumped about that show right now. Um, one of the things that I would love to know about because I think, you know, some of our listeners are survivors. And I love that. And some of our listeners are people who are partnered with survivors. So I would love to know, from your perspective, what can somebody do if they're the partner of somebody who is going through this process? Or somebody with sexual trauma? And I think, as you've said, like, we all have sexual trauma. So I think this is good advice for everyone. But how can you be a good supportive partner around sex and sexuality when you are trying to have sex with somebody who has some trauma around sex?

Kaleigh: Yeah, you know, I guess the first piece of advice I have, feels perhaps predictable, but I think is also quite profound, which is to listen and believe them. And so often, we our capacity to listen to our partners and believe them is interrupted by our own shame and insecurity. And so I think what often happens is that when our partner is perhaps struggling with sex because of their own history, we take it personally, we feel like we're not enough or we're too threatening, or we're not

desirable enough. And it becomes this statement on our own value. And I extend empathy. I you know, I've been there I think sex is fraught. And so it's easy to take things personally. But I really encourage anybody partnered with a survivor of sexual violence, to listen to their partner, believe their partner and not walk away feeling like they are bad or not enough or a problem. Because that actually just spirals the the the struggles to have connective sex just it just adds to that struggle. So work really hard to not take it personally. And that might mean like consulting with a therapist of your own and engaging with your partner's consent, engaging in conversations with friends by yourself that help you figure out how do I do this? Like, how do I stay good support person without getting stuck in my own story?

Anne: Yeah. And I also think just like, respect their boundaries, if they tell you they don't want to do something don't. Don't push for it. Leave it alone.

Kaleigh: Yeah, yeah, of course, I think that's such an important point. And sometimes I hear from people like in my work as a couples therapist, like, but I really want this thing. I know, my partner doesn't like this particular thing, but I really want it. And I understand it's really stressful when we have disparate desires. But having sex with somebody who doesn't really want to be doing that thing with you isn't gonna feel good, it's not going to give you the thing you're looking for. So you're gonna have to figure out how to reconcile that. And, you know, there's lots of ways there's lots of ways to reconcile disparate desires. So trust that it won't actually feel good to be doing something with your partner that they don't really want to do.

Anne: Oh, I love that you touched on that, because I feel like we see so often that one partner really wants something that the other partner doesn't want. And we see that a lot in a very gendered way where men want some very specific sex acts that women often like, don't want or don't enjoy. And so I love that we're just like, touching on that message of, it's okay to have disparate desires, it's okay to have different desires than your partner. I'm like, why would you want to do something with your partner that they really don't want to do?

Kaleigh: Yeah, it's gonna feel crappy probably for everybody.

Anne: Yeah. 100%. So those are the questions I had planned. Was there anything else that you wanted to share with our listeners about this, this process of getting back into sex and sexuality after trauma?

Kaleigh: I guess, to echo myself a little bit, it's an important point. So I want to repeat it, but I just really want everybody listening to know, you know, you're not alone. And it's not your fault. None of it was never your fault. It is not your fault. That harm was done to your body. And it is not your fault. If now your body is protecting you in ways that your brain does not want it to. I believe that our bodies want to live and have allowed us to survive. So if we can be kind to ourselves and our bodies, and to our nervous systems, that's really the best thing that we can do. I think healing takes time. But the one way to expedite that journey is to give ourselves grace and compassion. So that's it. I guess that's the takeaway that feels most important to me.

Anne: I love that. Thank you so much for visiting with us. It's so exciting to have you here to talk about this zine that we've been using in our office for years. And it's just so exciting to now have this like podcast episode as a companion to that. So just thank you so much for chatting with me today.

Kaleigh: Oh, thank you. It's been really fun.

Anne: So that was our chat with Kaleigh Trace. I hope that you really enjoyed it. Again, you can find the information about Kaleigh in our episode description. And again, thank you so much for joining us today. The Prevent Resist Support podcast is a part of the Office of Sexual Violence at the University of Windsor. Our full Office title is the Office of Sexual Violence Prevention, Resistance and Support. You can find us on our website which is at www.uwindsor.ca/prevent-resist-support. Or you can email us at our email address which is svsupport@uwindsor.ca. So S V like sexual violence support uwindsor.ca. If you are a member of our University of Windsor community and you would like some support around sexual violence or any unwanted sexual experience, you can reach out to us at the Office of Sexual Violence Prevention, Resistance and Support on our website, which is

uwindsor.ca/prevent-resist-support. You can also reach out to us by email at svsupport@uwindsor.ca. If you are not a member of our UWindsor community but would like to learn about support resources near you, you can check out the Coalition of Rape Crisis Centres, their website is sexualassaultsupport.ca