

“Trauma-informed Mindfulness, Teaching & Care”: Interview with Dr Sam Himelstein

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Transcribed by Julie Ann Lee

(Theme song – soft piano music)

ABK: Dr. Sam Himelstein is a licensed psychologist specializing in working with juvenile justice-involved youth, addiction and trauma. He travels to countries speaking at conferences and conducting professional trainings and is the president of the Center for Adolescent Studies. He’s passionate about training professionals from multiple disciplines in creating authentic healing relationships with adolescents that contribute to positive outcomes. A formerly incarcerated youth himself, Dr. Himelstein was privileged to change his life from a path of drugs, violence, crime and self destruction to one of healing and transformation. His mission is to help young people become aware of the power of self-awareness and transformation, and to train professionals with similar interests.

Sam, welcome to the show!

SH: Thank you so much for having me.

ABK: So you do mindfulness and emotional skills work with high risk and marginalized youth in the Juvenile Justice system, the Foster Care system and those suffering from addiction issues. All of these populations have high levels of complex trauma and violence in their lives. What you do is sort of like a **trauma-informed mindfulness** with all of that considered. What does trauma-informed mindfulness look like in your practice?

SH: Yeah. Great question! You know at the very basic level it means that when I teach somebody mindfulness and mindfulness-based strategies and skills, I’m taking into account all of the things that can potentially come up for youth who have been impacted by trauma.

So, a really basic example is if someone has been highly impacted by trauma and has had a lot of complex and developmental trauma in their lives, they may get really dysregulated when- if you ask them to close their eyes and meditate if they don’t know you that well, or if they just don’t feel quite safe with you or in the environment that they’re in - you know if it’s in a classroom or juvenile hall or something like that. So, it’s taking things like that into account.

That’s really like at the base – the bedrock of what trauma-informed mindfulness is. It’s teaching mindfulness whether it be meditation, daily mindfulness, other types of self-awareness activities and taking into account the fact that because this young person has experienced trauma it could impact the way in which they practice mindfulness, the way in which it helps them or doesn’t help them and just the lens in which they see their own internal experience. So, that’s what it is kind of at the base level.

ABK: Wow! So, it's really different than like what we think of, or what many of us might think of when we think of mindfulness, because you're taking into account their experience of trauma and the way that it impacts them psychologically, maybe on their body and like you said trust with closing of the eyes. What happens as the process unfolds? How does trauma-informed mindfulness change the energy or bring change?

SH: Yeah, well, you know one of the big things I talk about too, and is kind of like one of my main guidelines to practice trauma-informed mindfulness is to really foster in personal safety and explicitly think about relationship-building with your client or with your students, with the young person. And that's one of the main thing that really unfolds. It's building an **authentic relationship** with somebody so that they may, you know, whereas previously they may have not felt comfortable or safe even to do something like practice mindfulness. Once you're building this relationship with them and they feel a little bit of trust with you, then it's not completely out of left field or out of the ball park to ask them to potentially engage in a practice like mindfulness. So, that's one of the main things that unfolds is really the relationship at least in the way that I teach trauma-informed mindfulness.

My whole philosophy in working with young people traumatized or otherwise but particularly with trauma impacted youth is that the foundation is the relationship between me and them. And another thing too is just to kinda put it out there, it's like you know probably the biggest misconception that I hear about when I travel around the country doing speaking engagements and working with youth... around the country...is that people on first take think of mindfulness as formal meditation and sitting in a particular way and closing your eyes and trying to calm down which isn't really the case. **Mindfulness is simply the practice of being present with a non-reactive and non-judgemental attitude.**

So for example if you're feeling anxious and you practice mindfulness, the goal isn't necessarily to try and not be anxious; it's to try and sit with whatever those indicators of anxiety are in the moment with an attitude of non-reactivity. And, that's really important to put out there because with a lot of young people who've suffered from trauma, it may be really difficult for them to calm themselves down because their central nervous system can be so dysregulated and activated and triggered that if they think that mindfulness is just "calming down" as a lot of people do, then when they try it when I'm not there with them, they're going to think it doesn't work. That'd be a huge disservice to them because sometimes their central nervous systems or their subconscious or just something inside of themselves related to their trauma will not let them calm down because it's literally telling them that they need to be in that fight, flight or freeze for survival and for protection.

That's another like huge tenet of trauma informed mindfulness. It's really teaching mindfulness as it should be taught in its pure form of not simply just meditating and "calming down" but more of being present with an attitude of non-judgement, of non-reactivity, trying to develop a mind of equanimity and balance. So, anyway, I could go on but that's kind of the bulk of the answer to your question.

ABK: It's really interesting because I'm hearing your description of mindfulness and it's really different from how I've seen it in the popular culture and even how I've seen it in the school setting, where it does seem to often be interpreted ...as kind of like 'okay this is the thing that's gonna calm people down' or almost sort of like a suppressive force. I think particularly in like a classroom where it might be used

to calm the kids down to get everyone to settle down, and you're suggesting something that's really quite different than that. Is that right?

SH: Yeah and I am suggesting something that's quite different from that but I also just want to own that this is nothing new. This is something that I learned from the pioneers in this field and they have been stable, you know, everybody from folks who have had direct experience with the more spiritual side of mindfulness, to the more secular side of mindfulness have been quite stable in this tradition on what mindfulness actually is and isn't.

And really to speak to your example about calming kids down in school, I do think there is that misconception. It is ultimately a problem in my opinion because when a principal or school system or teacher buys into this idea of mindfulness because it's going to calm the kids in their class down, what comes up for me is that really what they are trying to do is calm down their own anxiety because they are dealing with this class of 20 kids or 30 kids or whatever, 15 really traumatized kids or something like that. They're really trying to manage their own experience and if they think of mindfulness as just simply that's going to calm the class down while that actually could happen - like that could be a result of mindfulness practice. At the end of the day, they're trying to manage their own experience so they don't have to deal with that much disruption.

The core to me and to a lot of the people that I've learned from, and followed and been taught this practice – the core of it is really learning how to be present. Learning to sit in acceptance of your present learning experience. Learning how to cultivate equanimity and balance of mind, you know. And sometimes that means when a trauma impacted kid is really triggered in the moment, sometimes that means that their system just won't let them calm down, or won't let them relax, right?

ABK: Right.

SH: For good reason. They've been hurt in their past and their body and their subconscious is saying 'hey, you're in a dangerous situation right now, so you shouldn't be relaxed, your protective mechanisms should be up.' And while they may not actually physically be in a dangerous situation, that is the really one of the main tenets of somebody who's been impacted severely by trauma. They misinterpret neutral or non-threatening stimuli as threatening and dangerous. That's part of their system, you know, being compromised with complex trauma over and over and over again and learning how to adapt in those situations.

When you put a bunch of those young people in a class together or in a situation together, that can be really tough for a teacher to manage. And if a teacher or even a therapist or whomever is like 'yeah, mindfulness will help them calm down' – that's ultimately helping the teacher's experience at least, you know, looking at it through the lens I'm looking at at the moment-

[10:00]

ABK: Mm-hmm.

SH: -not to say that the idea of helping somebody calm down is bad. I teach calming and relaxation techniques all the time to my clients who've been impacted by trauma. They can actually get better at that with training, it's just something that's slightly different from mindfulness in that it's not necessarily

something that's something to be used when somebody is completely triggered because their system won't let them calm down.

ABK: Right. I mean you might want to be doing mindfulness at a time when someone isn't in **meltdown**. That's the expression in the autistic community for everything you're just describing in kind of getting into that fight or flight experience and just melting down. Trying to do it in that kind of a situation is not very effective.

SH: Right. That's absolutely right. And that's what I teach people all over the world, like, you know, there's a colleague of mine who has a really saying 'Strike while the iron is cold' as opposed to strike you when the iron is *hot*. So, when they're not in meltdown, when they're not triggered out of the **window of tolerance** (to take a trauma term), that's when you can teach them a bunch of skills like mindfulness or like calming techniques or relaxation techniques. And they can get better at it over time.

The key is how do they then integrate that to when they do get triggered. Well, it's still very, very difficult for somebody who gets triggered out of the window of tolerance to be mindful in those moments, cause literally in those moments what's happening is their mind is becoming fragmented and oftentimes their somatic body, you know their central nervous system is taking over and that's when young people will go into that fight, flight or freeze, or be on that spectrum. I've found more success in teaching kids mindfulness that you know – present moment awareness with an attitude of non-reactivity – I've found more success in that in helping them bridge that into those moments where they're really triggered or at least on the way to getting really triggered, to help kind of reset their awareness, pause for a moment and choose to do things that might help them not get so triggered.

I've found more success with that than with calming techniques because although those can be effective too, again if somebody's in meltdown- to use your term--or if somebody's out of the window of tolerance or extremely triggered, it's that much harder to calm the system down because literally their internal system is chaotic-

ABK: Mm-hmm.

SH: It's going haywire.

ABK: Right. So, it's about having the tools to kind of be prepared... the tools or the script if it starts to happen.

SH: Right.

ABK: Now, what about... there's gotta be like a reciprocal aspect to it too...What are you or other people teaching to the *teachers* about being mindful themselves or about de-escalation and staying calm themselves? Because I see often in situations like I'm think of especially in Special Education or in other group home settings where the people in charge often don't have control over how they're feeling or are not taking a mindful approach and de-escalating things. Is there a way to train and teach that to the workers as well?

SH: Yeah. Absolutely. I mean it's the most important thing to actually emphasize in your trainings that this is a critical variable in not just the situation but your overall relationship with the young folks being that we as providers, whether you're therapist, a teacher, a mentor, a juvenile justice staff, or a group

home staff – whatever you do, we're human beings. Like we get triggered sometimes, we get frustrated sometimes. Sometimes our own traumas may get triggered right, like a whole bunch of different things can happen, and it's so important that we learn our own self awareness self-management techniques so that we can manage ourselves in those moments so that we can be more skillful with the youth.

Literally if you practice this- this practice of **attunement** which in attuning into yourself and then that will help you attune in to someone else in our personal attunement. The more you do that, the more you're able to stay present with yourself with a non-reactive attitude and if frustration comes up or anxiety or discomfort comes up to not react to that and then behaviourally react to it and you know maybe say something unskillful to a youth or something like that. The more you're able to do that, then you're more able you are to actually practice calming yourself down in those moments.

Now, this is a little bit of a diversion from what I was talking about earlier: while mindfulness is the practice of being present to what is, whether it's anxiety or whatever and not trying to necessarily calm it down, if you in those moments when a kid has a meltdown or gets really, really triggered – if you can learn to first be mindful and then calm *yourself* down if you're activated – that in and of itself can be a skillful intervention when you're working with someone who's really activated. While this doesn't work all the time, I've had many experiences and I've talked to professionals all over the country, the world really, who've had similar experiences where if they're able to be in the same space with somebody who's really triggered and able to calm themselves down for a little bit – that sometimes has the impact of helping a young person calm down to not maybe an escalation from a scale of 1-10 from a 10 to a 2, but maybe from like a 10 to a 7 or 8, and then it helps them just be open to other interventions.

So yes, this is a long way of saying it's really important to train staff to being mindful of themselves, to practice self-awareness, self-regulation, because they are a critical part of the interaction when somebody gets extremely triggered. You could say something just out of your own reactivity and it may not be that bad in your mind, but that can escalate the young person ten-fold or exponentially just because they are so triggered in the moment.

If you think about a relationship over time with you know the example of somebody working in a group home, or a teacher or something like that that's working with kids over time. The more kids see you doing self-regulating yourself, trying to practice skillful speech and to tune into themselves, to tune in to you, that really help the situation.

You're actually modelling what you're trying to get the youth to do which is check in with themselves, be mindful, be mindful to what is whatever their triggers are and then choose from an array of different practices to help themselves from that moment. Sometimes it may be trying to calm themselves down, sometimes it may not. Sometimes it may be going to exercise to get the energy out or something like that, or sometimes it may just be practicing pure mindfulness and being present to what is with a non-reactive attitude.

And the flip side of that is true as well – if they see you constantly reacting, constantly berating, constantly making the situation worse, then that leads to future ruptures, future impasse, and the opposite of what we're trying to do at the bedrock of this work which is trying to build authentic

relationships and foster inter-personal and emotional safety.

So, absolutely... like in all of my trainings for example I focus on our own awareness, our own ability to attune to ourselves and then also self-care as well where like being able to do this, being able to be present in those moments and not get behaviourally reactive or at least attempt to do that in and of itself. Not only does it help us do our job better but in and of itself it's a self-care practice because it will help you get less burned out over time. Less stress will get compounded when you're working with these situations in the moment and not letting yourself get too reactive, if that makes sense.

ABK: It does. It does. I love the idea that you talk about in your work about how important it is to be authentic when working with youth. That sense of authenticity really brings things down to the ground where you can really work together and from what you're saying you really can't get very far in the kind of work that you do unless you can be authentic. Is that right?

SH: Yeah. That- that's my opinion for sure. I mean, authenticity can be thought of and we could talk about it in so many different ways. Like on a very basic level it's like when I practice attunement with myself, and I practice my own mindfulness in for example a tricky situation or a tense situation with a young person or a group or a class or something like that, at a core level I'm practicing authenticity because I'm being present to what's actually happening with me in the moment and that's a form of authenticity right. And other forms of authenticity are things like when you know you're just hanging out with youth and you're in the art and practice of being a human being with them.

Then sometimes they may ask you about yourself and you're in a situation where you don't have to say *everything* about yourself all the time, but there may be times where you do want to practice what we call **skillful self- disclosure** and talking about yourself in a way that's authentic, that shows sometimes maybe a commonality with the youth or at least just shows them that you're also a human being with wants and opinions, and preferences and things like that...and that builds relationship. ... You know when you're in some of those situations and maybe you are feeling frustrated and maybe you did decide to express that to a young person. There's a time and a place for that, right? You shouldn't always do that, you should think about it before you do it and not just be reactive, you know.

That's the idea of being mindful – it helps us think before we actually just react to a young person in a situation. But you might say to a group of youth or to a young person if you feel like it's appropriate, if you feel like the relationship is there, like 'hey, I'm feeling really frustrated right now' and use that to help them see you in those moments as an authentic human being.

[21:07]

ABK: Right.

SH: You're not just a "teacher" or therapist or group home staff that becomes **otherised** in the minds of the youth because for their whole lives they've been getting otherised by this "system" of teachers and staff and all these folks that have marginalized them...so they in turn will marginalize back the adults in their lives as just people that's part of the system that can't do anything for them or won't want to help them. So, the authenticity is huge because it kind of bridges that. It's like 'no, I really want to be here. I really want to get to know who you are' and part of being in a real human being connection or be in a

real human relationship--even though it is a professional relationship--means that there's going to be some aspect of you knowing who I am.

ABK: Yeah.

SH: ...It's very huge and I emphasize that in a lot of different ways and youth really just pick up on that especially ... impacted youth. A lot of youth have been interpersonally abused and manipulated by the adults in their lives whether it's family, community, older friends whatever it is. They learn how to kind of sniff out inauthenticity and manipulation in some circumstances as a survival mechanism. So when you can just literally practice authenticity and keep it in the forefront of your mind and think of it as a self-awareness practice, rather than just some stable trait (either you have it or you don't) or you're a 5 out of 10 on the scale of authenticity or whatever, you know.

If you don't think about it like that and you think about it as an organic self-awareness practice that you can activate over time and bring it more to the forefront of the relationship and be skillful in building the relationship, then there's a better chance that actually happens in that a whole bunch of amazing things can come from that when you focus on the human connection and the human beingness of the youth you work with--and of yourself as well.

ABK: Yeah. When you talk about being authentic and especially about the sort of honesty that we've been talking about it makes me think of when I was in high school. I went to a high school for at-risk kids. I got sent there and it was actually a good experience. The teachers were- a lot of them were sort of old hippies and they were cool for the most part...we'd call them by the first name, and there was kind of a personal connection there. And I was remembering when I first started there I was in math class and there was this kid and he took his math book and threw it across the room and the teacher looked at him and he said 'what's going on with you?' and then the kid said 'well, I, you know, dropped a hit of acid before I came to school and I'm really tripping really hard' and the teacher was like, 'well you know, this is really hard for me because I have to teach this class and I can't teach the class with people doing this stuff.'

And that was such a *moment* for me because I had never really seen a teacher talking about, from their perspective, in a way that was calm and compassionate, but also really honest. It was that moment of being able to get in and say like 'we're in a relationship together, we're in the school together.' Another teacher might have been tempted to say something different like '*drugs are not allowed in school*' or something like that, right? that really wouldn't have been authentic in the same way that Steve was being authentic with the student. It was really a life changing experience for me to [go to school] with people who worked that way with kids and to see adults that way because I had never seen adults in that way before as authentic people. I had seen them as authority figures.

And I wonder if people want or are kind of afraid of being authentic when they are in authority positions because it'll undermine their authority ...or what exactly stops so many people working with youth in authority from being able to just go, 'hold up, I'm just going to be myself right now.' What do you suppose holds people back from- from doing that?

SH: (Deep breath) Yeah, great question and really great example just from your own life experiences of seeing what we were just talking about in action. I think that's just amazing and I'm glad that you got

that experience. It sounds like that teacher was really skillful.

You know, I think there are a number of things that hold people back. On a very basic level, I think you, you know, these human beings who become teachers and therapists and whatever else – group home staff, sometimes they get trained to not show their emotion. I don't think they would ever get trained in the language of 'don't be authentic', but that's kind of the message that gets sent when it's like "this is what it means to be a teacher" and an ego gets formed around that and part of it is authority. And when authority gets, you know, impinged upon ego then they want to assert themselves and assert the ego by asserting authority.

I think that happens in a lot of ways in different professions. Like for example in therapy a lot of graduate schools will tell you not to self-disclose because a client will take that information and manipulate it or something like that. And while, of course, that goes back to a very older tradition of, you know, somewhat secrecy, somewhat 'you shouldn't know too much about me because this process is all about you' which has some truth to it because people can over-disclose and people can do that inappropriately at times. But really at the end of the day, I think that the message that gets sent is *show less of yourself* and that compromises the expression of authenticity at times that can actually help, especially when we're working with youth and especially when we're working with a trauma-impacted youth.

Then the other thing is just like any other -ism that's out there, **ageism** is definitely a thing and youth are youth and all of these people that we're talking about are generally adults that are generally, you know, in middle age. Sometimes they're younger adults but, you know, they're adults. They're not youth, they're not minors, and that is a dynamic that's there. There is a power dynamic that's there and sometimes that authority gets to people and they just think 'I should be listened to because you know, I'm 35 or this person is 15. I'm 20 years older than them'. So, I think that kind of gets in the way of it too. And I think it's important for adults to be able to take a look in the mirror and see what their stance is on working with young people and folks that don't value the very real and inspiring in excellence that comes from the minds of young people. They're gonna have tougher times because they're gonna get wrapped up more in the authority dynamic.

So those are some of the things that I think get in your way and make it difficult, and it's hard but the good news is, in my opinion at least, like as long as somebody is willing to be introspective and open which is a big *if* for some folks, but if that's there, a lot of this is learnable. It's not hard to learn to be introspective, to be less reactive, to become aware of our **unconscious biases** when it comes to working with youth ... It's not, or I shouldn't say 'it's not hard' but it's not complex to do that as long as you're continuously working towards it, if you're committed to self-awareness and self-growth then you can actually pick from very low-hanging fruit in this work and get some better outcomes sooner just by changing things inside of yourself – not even talking about how I would respond to, or set a boundary or something with youth, right?

Of course, it's still important to have boundaries, that's important but a lot of that low-hanging fruit just comes from working inside yourself. I can't tell you how many parent-sessions I've had-- I do a lot of parent coaching of teens-- where just within the first 3 or 4 sessions, not even meeting the kid, not doing any family therapy yet, there's been so many changes when they're willing to look in the mirror

and change a few things about themselves. So, it's the very same thing, you know, with the professionals, with the adults we work with.

[30:27]

ABK: That's so interesting. It's that sort of self-work as a way to help in one's work with others ...and your whole work seems to shift some pretty established ideas about therapy, for example you have stance on change. You talk about stance on change which is going in as a therapist or a teacher or as a worker with the intention to connect instead of the intention to change. You say, "don't get too wrapped up in behavioural outcomes but rather focus more so on self awareness and the strength of the relationship", so you're focussing really on a big picture, rather than like a little checklist of behavioural outcomes which is what we see a lot, for example in the Special Education system.

SH: Yeah. Absolutely, you know, this is really a function of like the present day kind of "post positivistic evidence-based paradigm" that is really influencing therapy and really influencing the field of education as well that is really focussed on *outcome* and really focussed on the small slice of outcome which is really 'behavioural outcome', you know. You see a lot of wanting to reduce behavioural symptoms, but not as much wanting to increase other subjective outcomes that lead to greater life success for example.

So yeah, it really is a big picture outlook like you're saying and the parallel to that is like in the field of education would be not as much focussing on the things that are kind of like the little things that are happening that can be looked at as "negative behaviours" but more so the overall ability of this young person to learn, to have a positive relationship with education down the road...to be a lifelong learner, to not drop out of high school, things like that, right? So the key is that if you go in too fast too soon and try to focus on change and solution--especially with trauma impacted youth--you can miss the human being side of it and they can feel missed. They can feel like "this person is just judging me on my behaviours" whether they think it consciously or not, but they get that feeling, that vibration of this person that's just trying to *change me* and a lot of people don't like that idea even if they know at a core level that there are some things that should probably change about myself.

So, the clarification I always say because I know that is kind of like a departure from a lot of the standard kind of narratives these days, the clarification is not that change is bad, it's not that there's no place to talk explicitly about change, it's just that the skillful thing to do is, like anywhere else is to go in when you start a relationship is to go in, be attuned to that other person, have that interpersonal awareness, focus on building the relationship and if it feels too soon to push for some sort of change, to not push for that change because pushing for that change would oftentimes just cause some form of rebelliousness or resistance that actually wouldn't be there if you didn't do that.

Now, there's people that I've worked with that have done just that and you know not pushed for change and had an alternative or radical stance on change as I like to call it, but then later in the relationship after 6 months of working with them, I had a really strong relationship with them and I could have some really frank conversations with them about their behaviours that are leading to their ultimate unhappiness and the discomfort that they're in because they're in Juvenile Hall or they keep getting suspended from school or whatever it is, right, but I have that relationship at that point and they trust me at a level to where I can bring those things up and it won't be the same resistance or rebelliousness to me as in the beginning of the relationship, end the relationship, right.

ABK: Right.

SH: So I say all of this because like I said the dominant paradigm right now in the therapy world is this post-positivistic, you know very, very reductionistic view of how therapy works, but that is not the only view.

I definitely just want to give a quick shout out to the forefathers and the existential and the analytic worlds and therapy that have been pushing what I've been talking about for a very, very long time. And even, there are even camps these days you know, I don't know if you're familiar with motivational interviewing and things like that but they also talk about *rolling with resistance*, rather than just talking about change too early. And obviously therapy is a very different context than of the classroom setting, but this applies to the classroom setting too. In no way am I suggesting that there should not be boundaries there, right? You want to have boundaries. Boundaries are actually a healthy thing even if a person doesn't like those boundaries when they're in your classroom.

But there's a difference between holding boundaries and really trying to pick out negative behaviours, isolate them, label them, judge them and push too hard to change those too soon when those are usually the only ways that that young person has known to protect themselves psychologically. Like, that's learned behaviour, right, so they learn that over time and now a teacher is saying 'you shouldn't do that,' and by the way, you know *the kid feels like you are the problem, right* – that's what the young person feels like a lot of the time and the teacher's not taken it into account that there's all this trauma that led to these behaviours, so you can't just flip a switch and not do this anymore.

This is learned behaviour, so it needs to be unlearned, it needs to be deconditioned and that happens in therapy, that happens in educational settings as well when you have really good teachers who really know how to hold boundaries and help teach other types of skills beyond you know, when somebody has a meltdown for example if a problem is too hard or whatever from whatever situation.

So, that's my kind of caveat, don't focus too fast, too soon, too hard on behavioural change or read the situation. Be willing to focus on the relationship and self-awareness. Doing that [builds] this sublevel subconscious emotionally corrective experience. It's like I'm not just going to meet you and tell you all of the things that are wrong with you, right, even with the best intentions. We might not use language that sounds like that, but a young person can really feel that way. And when I meet you and I just want to build trust and build a relationship and focus on self-awareness and focus on whatever goals you develop. I'm kind of honouring you and empowering you to (at least at the beginning) drive the ship.

Like the young person is the one who gets to lead in a way, and in a sense that can be very corrective experience because most of young people's lives are getting told what to do and what not to do by adults.

ABK: Right, you talk about going into it with a beginner's mind, like when you work with young people and learning to understand them first before imposing the system on them that's like... I hate the behaviour checklist. I hate it. It's really big in education of autistic students right now that there's just a checklist and everything is a "behaviour" and a lot of the times behaviours are really responses to stimuli in the environment that could be changed because classrooms don't have universal design or

accessible design for autistic students most of the time.

And so, when you look at the system and change that you can make in the broader system rather than, 'oh this kid, he's like freaking out, let's get him to stop his *behaviours*' rather than making changes within the environment in order to make it a more comfortable environment so that the "behaviours" don't even happen.

And I wanted to talk a little bit more about behaviours because radical behaviourism or a form of radical behaviourism, **Applied Behaviour Analytics**, is still being used a lot with autistic students and actually even toddlers in **IBI** programs and as well in group home settings. One of the behaviours that they tend to want to stop is what's called **stimming**. Stimming is kind of rocking, fidgeting, flapping your hands, maybe tapping your foot, spinning or lining things up. For a very long time, and this is just starting to change, for very long time those were seen as behaviours to extinguish.

SH: Mm-hmm.

ABK: And what we obviously know now is that you shouldn't be "rewarding" people for stopping those behaviours because those behaviours are a way to ground and they are kind of a natural way of moving for autistic people.

SH: Right.

ABK: So, we're seeing newer trends in psychology- they aren't really newer. Like you said, they harken back to this sort of renaissance that you talked about, but I think maybe the pendulum is switching back at least, that it's really wrong to take away people's movements and call them 'negative behaviour'.

[40:13]

SH: Kind of piggy-backing on your example, it's like, I'm certainly not an expert in autism or Behaviour Analysis, but looking at that through the lens of a young person that I've seen who is highly traumatized. They are rocking or doing something physically – that's a way for their central nervous system to regulate itself. And so, a lot of the times when the central nervous system is really activated, sitting still and trying to meditate is probably the hardest thing that you can do and if we look at the definition of how I define *mindfulness* and how a lot of folks define it in somewhere or another of present moment awareness with an attitude of non-reactivity, that's- that's what it is. It's not sitting completely still with your eyes closed and meditating on your breath - that's a very specific form of mindfulness meditation.

So you can be present when you do a lot of different things and the concept of **bilateral stimulation** is huge for me and other types of techniques that bilaterally stimulate the central nervous system that tends to help the central nervous system calm down a little bit, and movement-based activities can do that. Sometimes I will practice more of a pure mindfulness technique with somebody because I know there is a little bit more of a chance for them to feel somewhat more regulated, so that would be like mindful walking or something like that...

ABK: Interesting.

SH: ...where I invite them to just be aware of all the muscles that are moving in their legs as they walk slowly or something like that.

ABK: Mm-hmm.

SH: But that could also be other forms of movement like stretching, you know, like warm-up movements and circular movements with the joints and things like that. Or more prominent movements like taking a ball and bouncing [it] and going on a short walk with somebody and helping them be present to what's happening in their body while at the same time the bilateral stimulation helps their nervous system to regulate itself, right.

Like when that happens you can still practice mindfulness and still practice being present without necessarily meditating and I think that's probably another- I should have said this earlier but probably another of the main kind of core guidelines or tenets of trauma-informed mindfulness in my view beyond the relationship, beyond just taking into account what trauma can do to somebody is just **mindfulness beyond meditation**. It's doing what we call these **informal mindfulness**, really daily mindfulness activities. Taking a walk or folding laundry, or mindful eating or just being really present with somebody else in a conversation, like all of these types of things that can still foster mindfulness but you're not meditating.

Those often can be the gateway for somebody who is so traumatized that they just can't sit still and close their eyes. If they learn to practice some of these techniques over time they build some proficiency in them, hopefully some mastery in them and then they can start to sit with their internal present experience a little bit longer. So, sometimes the goal can be like if I work with somebody and they're like there's no way they're gonna sit down and close their eyes or meditate formally for 60 seconds, I may do a bunch of these other activities with the goal of one day them being able to sit down for 60 seconds and be present to their experience without reacting. So, that's kind of how I see the movement piece, and the informal mindfulness side of things. Like it's a very critical piece of working with folks because it can help them develop the skill over time and lead them up to the more advanced techniques like formal meditation.

ABK: When you look at the way that you're doing it, you're looking at trauma-informed mindfulness and it seems like everyone should be doing that way because, if you're in any classroom or any kind of workplace or any kind of situation, you really don't know who in that group of people has experienced trauma. So, it would seem to me that we should *always* be doing our mindfulness in a trauma-informed way.

SH: Yeah, absolutely and I really appreciate that question cause I get asked that- I get asked in some way or another the question of 'well, how do you determine whether somebody is traumatized or not and does that matter, shouldn't you just be doing this anyways?' and I always say yes. Think about it like 'cultural competence.' Oh I hate that word cultural competence, I don't know why I just said that...but cultural awareness, cultural humility, cultural sensitivity – should you be practicing cultural humility all the time? Well, yeah. You should.

And you know, because you sometimes can tell when somebody is from a different culture than you, sometimes you can't and would you want to offend somebody? And hopefully the answer would be no,

so you should be practicing cultural awareness as much as you can. It's the same thing with trauma informed practices especially if you're in the teacher role, right because that's- you probably have less information about the student themselves than you would if you were a psychologist getting all this extra data, doing all these expensive interviews and things like that.

So, you may not know if someone's disruptive behaviour is a result of intense trauma or not, but the question is: does it hurt to practice to implement trauma informed practices and policies and cast a wide net? And the answer is no, it doesn't, because at the core it's about building relationships, it's about fostering emotional safety. It's about helping people increase and enhance their self-awareness and insight of themselves so that they can continue to empower themselves to live purposeful and meaningful and happy lives- you know that's the end-game for me at least. So absolutely, I agree with you and I think we should be doing that.

As much as I am a mindfulness champion, there's definitely a fad going on with it and to some extent you could say the phrase *trauma-informed* has been a victim of that too, and so for me everything I teach, everything I do is trauma-informed. Everything I do has to do with my relationship with people that I'm working with and to me that's the true core. All the other stuff comes along with thinking about trauma, thinking about all these other aspects of it, but it's definitely skillful. Cause if you look at, you know, I wrote this blog post on guidelines for trauma-informed mindfulness, and I have a book coming out called *Trauma Informed Mindfulness with Teens*, probably in the late fall of 2019. If you just look at what all those guidelines are, that's still a recipe for success whether your kids have trauma or not, it's just that when they do have trauma we really want to make sure that we're taking some of those things into account or else we may be doing them a disservice.

ABK: So interesting. It's been so interesting talking to you. I have one more question and that is what are you up to this year? What are some of your new projects that we can look forward to?

SH: Thank you for asking. A lot! I'm doing a lot this year. I'm super busy all the time but it's really good. I do a bunch of different speaking engagements around the United States. I travel to other countries too but it's mostly in the United States. And those are many different topics that really lie at the intersection of mindfulness, trauma-informed care and building up unique relationships with youth. Some of those are kind of open to the public, some of those are not. I have the Center for Adolescent Studies which is my training institute through which I do those speaking engagements, but also host completely online trainings in trauma informed care, and this year we'll be building up some more around working with youth with substance use. Particularly for parents, things like that. And as I was mentioning before too, I have this book coming out that I'll probably do some tours and some speaking engagements.

And that's on top of the direct youth work that I do- I still work with people, and I still work with young people in my therapy practice as a psychologist and I absolutely love doing that. It's one of my biggest passions. So, it's a lot of things. The best way to kind of keep in touch with me and what I'm up to is CenterForAdolescentStudies.com and in my personal website SamHimelstein.com that'll have information on speaking engagements, trainings and books...

ABK: Thank you very much. Anyone who's listening you can find all the links on the blog associated with this podcast. So, the more you want to read, it's there on the blog.

Thank you so much Sam Himelstein. It's been very interesting speaking to you.

SH: Well, thank you so much for having me. It's been an honour and I really appreciate the work you're doing with this podcast.

ABK: Thanks.

(Theme song – soft piano music)

ABK: We were speaking with Sam Himelstein, the President for the Center for Adolescent Studies. He spoke to us from California. If you're listening to this on iTunes or Stitcher, you can learn more about this episode and the podcast by visiting our podcast website at NonCompliantPodcast.com.

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