**Katie Wix transcript**

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Hello and welcome to the BACP Therapy Today podcast.

Hello, my name is Sally Brown, and today I'm delighted to be talking to actor and writer Katie Wix. Katie recently shared her experiences of therapy in Therapy Today's, 'It Changed My Life', column. Katie's many tv and film roles include playing the straight-talking estate agent Carol, in Channel 4's BAFTA winning comedy 'Stath Lets Flats'. She played a ghost of a woman burned as a witch in BBC One's 'Ghosts' and a very raucous Fergie in the Channel 4 satire 'The Windsors'. Katie is also a writer and her memoir 'Delicacy' about body image, loss and mental health and has recently been published. Welcome Katie.

Hello, lovely to be here. Thank you.

Really great to have you here, and thanks for sharing your experiences of therapy. It's so valuable for us to hear about what it's like from the client's chair. I think a lot of what we take for granted as therapists about the therapeutic process can sometimes come as a surprise to clients. Perhaps even feel rejecting or challenging, especially during that first experience of therapy. I was just thinking about in your column, for instance, when you talked about being 15 minutes late for a session. Your first session I think it was, and feeling told off by the therapist. Can you tell us about that? What made you go back?

Well, I was just thinking what you said about, because writing the column, it was so lovely to be asked. Talking about therapy is something I'm not often asked about. It's such a big part of my life. As I was writing the column, I thought this is something I never get to talk about. Actually it's been a weekly event in my life for so many years, it's strange to suddenly realise that I've got all this stuff to say about it! I guess that we just don't really talk about it publicly. I think it's getting better. Anyway, that first session. The lateness thing was so interesting because the image I had before I got there was that I was paying for this benign figure in my life that was all empathy. Why else would you go into this job if you weren't going to be this caring person? Also, I was in such a bad place there was a lot of lateness back then. I think because my life was so chaotic. Timekeeping was one of the ways that it was just really poorly organised. Also, I had no sense of, I didn't even know what self-care was, or it was something I should be doing. I didn't even know what that meant. I just sort of was surviving and it was all about just if people like me, then I'm fine kind of thing.

When she brought up the lateness, and it wasn't even, looking back, she wasn't telling me off. She just commented on it. I felt so defensive and let down at the time, not now, but because I thought I'm in such pain and I'm struggling so much. I am so hard on myself that any outside criticism on top of what I'm already feeling, I'm just going to collapse. Why would you make me feel worse about this when I've come here because I'm despairing? Yes, it's so interesting thinking about that years and years later through a totally different lens. I just felt really kind of why are you making me feel worse? If you knew how difficult it was to even get here, you wouldn't be saying, and you're 15 minutes late. It felt like it wasn't my fault, and that she was being pedantic. I didn't understand.

It's all about timekeeping in therapy. We read a lot into it. But you went back, you went back for more.

Yes, it's funny. I was thinking about why I went back. Well, the answer, if I'm being really honest, it was partly because out of total co-dependency of not wanting to upset her. Again, I didn't even know the term co-dependency back then. Looking back, I was so bad at working out what I wanted and what I thought and felt about things that I don't even remember making this really… I don't even remember the moment of, yes, I'm going to go back. I just remember it being different factors of, well, she might be upset, or, I said I was going to go back, so I should. I think maybe on a deeper level I think I thought, well, I've got nothing to lose. It's not going to make me more unhappy. I think I was in such a bad place that I don't even remember having the ability to make really clear decisions for myself. It's all a bit of a blur of why I went back. I think curiosity rather than it feeling like this very positive, oh, okay, this might work. It was just all a kind of mess of [over speaking 00:06:02]

Yes, it's almost like the way you've got to deal with the first date isn't it? Actually not judge it on the first date, if you can, keep an open mind and something might emerge!

Yes, exactly. Also, looking back, I think it's, I was 26 I think, or maybe 27, I can't quite remember. I think that's quite young to start therapy. So many people I know now go. I think for most of them they were about 35, 30, it was a bit older. I think when people decide to go, if they do, or people I know that have suddenly gone into recovery at 42 or something, I think it's really interesting the age at which I guess you become desperate enough to want to change something. Looking back I also feel like I was so young. I have so much compassion as well for that day because I think no one really knows what they're doing at that age.

Yes, but part of you clearly did know what you needed and sought out to get it. How easy was it though, to find, to get that help? Are you surprised for instance that you weren't ever referred for NHS treatment, because you'd been struggling before that?

Yes, well, I think what's really interesting about that to me though is because after, I had a really bad car accident, which I write about in the book. Obviously in terms of my physical body the NHS were incredible. All the loved ones around me that I've lost or have been ill, they've always been such a big part of me and my family's life. They've always been amazing. Yes, it was strange. I had a few counselling sessions straight after the accident that I don't really remember and weren't really that useful. Partly because I was on such strong painkillers. I mean, I remember I wish I'd had more of a conversation about how addictive the painkillers were before I went on them. I also wish I'd had a better conversation with my GP about the anti-depressants before I went on them about how hard it would be to come off them. I remember that. I suppose that I just never asked for help, so I wasn't going to get any. I was on a waiting list and I think it was about four months to wait on the NHS.

The following week I got a job, so I just was like, okay, I'm going to spend the money. She was amazing, she charged me not the full amount to begin with. I was really, really lucky. Yes, I think if I'd been more persistent in trying to get help, then maybe I would have fared better.

I love the image you use in your piece about the cushion. You started off clutching it and then it gradually moved to your lap and then it moves to the sofa next to you as the trust developed between you and therapist. This year, for the past year, clients haven't been able to sit in the room together with their therapist. I wondered whether you think then something would be lost by that?

Yes, it's so interesting. In some ways, I've found the opposite. There's been real benefits to it in some ways. Just small things. I definitely went through a period of depression in the beginning of lockdown. I think that it was actually a real relief not to have to get dressed and leave the house and physically go to her office. Yes, because I just didn't feel like I had the strength to do it and I wasn't in a good place at all. It just was a huge effort to look presentable. In that regard I'm really grateful that I could curl up in a ball on the sofa. There were times when there was something about being in my own environment made me feel even less self-conscious. Interestingly, we've had some incredibly raw and in-depth sessions over Zoom. I don't know whether it's because I always had to deal with so much body shame from such a young age.

There's something I like about just being a head on a screen and not having to be a body in the room. Some days, even now, I find it quite stressful, this sense that a body is going to be judged in the world. Sometimes I just feel this real relief that I don't have to look presentable and physically be there. I've really enjoyed it, but I'm really looking forward to being in the same room as her. I think I am missing out on lots of things by not physically being there. It does feel as though we're one removed from reality somehow on the Zoom. I don't know if that's why I felt more, like I think I've been even more vulnerable on the Zoom. Maybe because it doesn't feel real! Maybe that's why it's working.

Yes, it's complex, isn't it? Offers you that bit of a barrier, but at the same time it seems to create a vulnerability. It is good to hear that you want to get back in the room.

Yes, no, I do definitely because I imagine, I think it will be really interesting to see what it's like to be back in the room. I think over lockdown we have dropped down to a slightly deeper level of connection. I just hope that when I'm back in the room I still feel that. That it isn't that Zoom has allowed me to feel less shy or something.

You just mentioned the body shaming. You talk a lot about that in the book and about how that's all part and parcel of growing up and also in your career in the performing arts. Also you talk about the whole binge and starve cycle that you got into. That you didn't even realise it was an eating disorder because it's such commonplace behaviour. Do you think therapy has played a part in helping you [over speaking 00:13:38]?

Yes, definitely. I think the first time I went, I think that's when it had its most impact. I think it was like a very, very slow unpacking of the problem. I feel like there were weeks or months even where nothing would change but we were trying to work on compassion. I think taking the edge off the extremity of the emotions. Just taking the edge off. I think there was my actions and what I was doing and not doing and all the different things that you can do. Whether it was under-eating or over-exercising or whatever. I think it was more my feelings about fatness and thinness. What I associated with them and what that meant and how that would affect how I viewed myself and what I felt I had the right to. Yes, a lot of anxiety if I would fall back into old patterns. I suppose it was focusing less on what other people were thinking and feeling. Trying to establish some self-image that could stay the same, no matter what was happening with my body.

It was really hard. It was really up and down. Partly because of the world we live in. It's not just an individual problem. Even now, I have bad days. I think I always feel slightly anxious when I have a really full stomach. I feel really uncomfortable and want to get rid of it and feel guilt. I felt that yesterday. I still always have this instinct to stay in control of it. It really helps, and just the reading I did on my own as well.

Absolutely. In your memoir you write about your experience of caring for your mother. She died from a brain tumour and having already lost your father to dementia and your closest friend very suddenly. All within the space of two years. I think you captured really well how in the dark we all still are about how to be around someone who is grieving and what to expect from them. Then there's this darkly comic passage where you're still in the depths of your grief. Then you're booked to do a voice over for a crisp ad. You somehow have to embody this crisp with these minutely nuanced emotions. I was reading it on the train, and I laughed out loud, but it was also really bleak. I could feel for you in your pain at having to do this thing. I just wondered whether the only way to survive grief is to adopt that fake, I'm okay, I'll go and do a crisp ad persona. It's almost like shielding everyone else from your pain.

Yes, I mean, moments like that are so surreal that I think you just have to go with them. It's really interesting because occasionally I feel as though sometimes when I'm forced into acting as though I'm okay, it can actually have that effect of… I guess it's the kind of fake it until you make it. Sometimes when I'm forced into a better place, it's like I've tricked myself into having a better day. I sort of think, oh, that's kind of annoying that that's what worked, because I was just going to sit here and wallow in it today. But [?I feel like 0:18:27.6] put my trousers on and go out and take part in society and I feel better! It's a bit like with exercise. I get really annoyed at how effective it is! I've started doing it again this year. It is remarkable that on the day I do it, it's like my whole universe changes. I think I notice now on days I don't do any. I have a lot of friends who use exercises to primarily treat their depression. I think what I hear a lot is some people say, yes, it works, but it's temporary. The high lasts a couple of hours. Or it doesn't always work. Sometimes it works, sometimes I feel nothing, which I also find really interesting. I feel that way too, that it's sometimes a temporary fix, but still really effective.

I think there are times where I would be forced to act as if everything was okay, and it really, really wasn't. The resentment that I felt and the anger and how bad it is for my health when I have to keep all that tension in. It's so lonely when you feel like you can't say to someone, I feel terrible, I have to go. I still have this voice that says I'm being melodramatic. That you should just force yourself to get on with stuff, but I've got better at being able to think, yes, I could force myself to do this and feel worse. Or I could just be honest, and say, I'm really sorry, I'm going to have to risk letting someone down because I need to look after myself today. I don't know if that's an answer!

I guess I'm just struck by how much loss you have experienced. Also as well as, obviously, a major car accident. Yet your career is built around comedy, so humour is obviously a really big part of your life. I wondered if there is a connection there? Is humour part of a kind of survival instinct in helping us process all this stuff?

Yes, I think it must be. I remember really distinctly a point not long after dad… It's funny how all the losses happened close together, it's such a blur sometimes which is a separate point. I'd really love to read more about trauma and memory and what's going on. It's strange how I've forgotten major details of what happened! That's interesting. I remember one of my best friends, my oldest best friends, she works in child services. She said that she was reading an article and it was something about how children who had a strong sense of the absurd coped really well. It was just a very niche kind of study. She sent me that as a headline, and she said it made me think of you. I really knew why because that sense of how absurd it is. Those moments where I was doing the voice of a crisp and I'd seen a psychiatrist that morning. I just was like, this is so odd, the contrast. I definitely have that sense of how weird it is, particularly with death, when something so profound happens next to the most banal thing.

Just tiny things, like the week she died I remember I was by her bedside and all we could hear was this quiz show coming through the next room. I just remember thinking, I can't believe this is the soundtrack to my mother dying. I never would have predicted that. I didn't really bother me. Nothing had been how I thought it was going to be. Yes, these very surreal moments which I would find really funny because they were just so odd. Yes, my whole family were funny and that really, really helped. I think everyone kept their sense of humour through the whole thing, strangely. What was also quite difficult was because both my parents ended up with it being a problem in their brain. For both of them, with the tumour and dementia, there was always a point where they weren't themselves. That was quite sad. That was difficult to deal with because humour was such a connection. Humour in our family was a way of saying, I'm okay, you okay? If we're laughing about this then we're sort of signalling that we're kind of okay. Once that had gone, that was hard, because I felt there was no way of seeing how they, you know? It was just sort of hand holding. That was hard. Once we'd lost that ability to communicate and sort of riff almost.

It's such a form of connection isn't it?

I think it's like a love language, I really do. When I meet someone who has really exactly the same sense of humour, and you make a really specific reference to a bit in a tv show and they're like, yes, I love that bit too! It's just heaven, I love it!

Almost fast forwards the connection somehow.

Yes, totally. Unfortunately, comedians don't always make the best partners, they don't make the best boyfriends! A lot of my female friends in comedy would agree with me. Which is a shame, because I think that when you're in the world of comedy it tells you so much about that person. What they like, what they don't like. It's like a tribal thing.

That sounds absolutely fascinating. I'm dying to ask you about that. That's a subject for a whole other podcast. I was just wondering about the role of humour in therapy. Are there ever funny moments? Is it appropriate do you feel? Have you ever laughed with your therapists over the years?

Yes, well, I've definitely had times where I've made my therapist laugh, but I didn't mean to! She's laughed at something, and I've been like, what? Like it was lost on me why it was funny. Then she's pointed something out to me, and I've been like, oh, right, yes, that is very ironic or that is ridiculous actually what I'm saying. No, it's funny because in some ways because I think of it as such a sacred space and I think because humour is so much connected to work, that's there almost this relief of I don't have to be funny in this space. You're not expecting me to be funny. If anything, I feel like I push against it. I'm like, oh, this is my hour a week to be painfully sincere and that's actually really nice! I've got friends who are the opposite. Where they make jokes because they're nervous or whatever. I feel like when I'm nervous I'm just rigidly sincere!

Absolutely. You're not paying to make the therapist laugh either.

I also think that when I was younger, particularly with boys. I remember a couple of boys would say to me, oh, I like you because you're funny. Then I had this thing in my head of they only want me, like on, when I'm being shiny and hilarious, putting on a show. I think I really got into my head that nobody was interested in the sad person, or insecurity or whatever, that it was really unattractive. They wanted this confident, loud person. I think at the beginning of therapy a lot of it was saying, I have this persona, and actually it's not real, so what do I do about that? Just thinking that the two couldn't co-exist like they do now. Yes, I just thought I'll have to get rid of the truthful one. I do remember that. Almost saying people only like me if I'm funny and having to really to unpack that. What's funny is that now I think that people who I know who are on all the time are exhausting! It doesn't feel very real.

Now, when I look at people, I'm like, oh my God, I mean, thank God I didn't just carry on and be like that all the time. Yes, it was a lot of anti-humour in the beginning! As in, like, please, I just don't want to be funny in here! Please, I'll do anything, it's exhausting!

Great place to sort of try that out almost and still feel like you're accepting, I should imagine?

Yes, definitely. I'd forgotten about that. It's really funny to remember it. I'd completely forgotten that I used to feel like that.

It's really great to hear that you see therapy, as you called it, another thing you do to look after yourself and a lifelong thing that you expect to do. Which is obviously just a really proactive approach. I think it's still unusual for people to take that preventative or maintenance approach to therapy. The equivalent of exercising or going to the gym. As you say, even today, it's hard to talk about going to therapy. Do you find that even in your industry that it's still, people aren't that open about it, or are they?

Well, yes I feel so aware of the privilege I have to be able to go and so many people don't have access. Yes, I mean, I feel really very privileged that I can afford to go. Yes, it's interesting. I think it's definitely more common to talk about and I feel like people make jokes about it more as well. Almost like they're self-parodying themselves. It's funny, there are still some circumstances in which I wouldn't bring it up. Just some sort of weird instinct that makes me think, oh, this isn't quite the right room to start talking about that stuff. That's just some sort of intuitive feeling. I think on the whole it's less shocking. I don't think anybody thinks it means there's something strange about you any more. I think people judge it less if you talk about it.

Again, I remember really early on, God, I haven't thought about this in so long, I remember being on the tube on my way to therapy and bumping into someone. A guy I'd gone to university with or something, and the panic of him going, oh, you live in such-and-such don't you? What are you doing here at seven o'clock on a Wednesday? I can remember just the panic of, oh my God, what am I going to say? I was talking to someone about it this week when they were talking about going to support meetings, like a similar thing of what the hell do I say? I just remember the panic. It just wasn't an option that I would have told the truth. Now, I would just obviously tell the truth and I don't think they would care in the slightest.

You see, that's progress on one level isn't it?

Definitely. Just occasionally, for some reason, I feel like this isn't safe to say something. That just happens with people in general!

There's almost that kind of judgement and shame detector that's obviously working there on some level.

Yes, or that they'll feel embarrassed or something. It would be too strange. I remember I think I once accidentally put it through into my accounts, and my accountant said, oh, what's this? I had to be like, oh, sorry, I put that receipt in by mistake, that's for therapy. Then I was like, but I could claim it back! No, that's not going to happen! Yes, I think it's much more common to talk about.

As a sort of lifelong fan then, shall we say? Can you sum up or do you even know what you get from talking to a therapist that you don't get from just talking to friends or family?

What's been really useful is realising that sometimes when I say something to a friend they'll have their own reaction, which is to do with their stuff. To be able to separate out that from what I'd said and all of that. Sometimes I think just the relief of knowing with a therapist that they're not going to react necessarily. They're containing your stuff and that it's safe to say something. What took me a long time to be able to say, even in therapy, if something was wrong or something had bothered me, or I wasn't sure about something. It took a long time to feel like it was still equal in some ways. I think it's like having someone who is on my side and is advocating for me in every situation. Sometimes I would worry and think, but what if they're just going on my account of what happened? This other person isn't here to say what happened. Maybe nobody knows what happened because this is what I think happened, but I always…

I'm not making much sense. I think having someone on my side has been really amazing. I think someone who is able to take my pain more seriously than I can sometimes, because I'm really good at minimising stuff. Or saying that's not perfect, but maybe it's good enough, whatever. She'll always stop me and want to drill down and be like, no, I don't know if that is good enough actually. That's quite difficult to hear, but I think I've heard it enough times now that I sort of agree with her. I don't know. I had it last week. I had a really busy day and I had to go and do something which required a lot of preparation and effort and concentration. I said to her, look, I don't want a heavy one today because I have to go and do this thing after this. I just don't want to check in. I just don't want to deal with any of it today, because I've got to be this really highly functioning person. I can't do that if I spend the next hour going over whatever. Then we ended up having this really intense session!

It was interesting. Then I ended up feeling loads better. I really needed it for release and I thought that the solution was just to harden myself and keep going. I think sometimes just being forced to stop is really good. I think at the beginning, it did change my life definitely. When I think of the therapy I had from the transition from my 20's to my 30's, I think that was pretty life changing. Now, I suppose the change is less dramatic. I think as I've got older the challenges are different. Now it's different things that I'm concerned with. It's a different kind of approach now I think. It's almost less about change and more about self-acceptance weirdly if that makes sense? It's less like I'm going to change and I'm going to be really different. Now it feels a bit more like accepting. Just accepting.

How wonderful. It's amazing that the same process can used in that very different way. Depending on what stage you are and what you need to get from it.

Yes.

You know Katie, it's just been so great to talk to you today. I just want to say thank you so much for being so open about your experiences. Just really illuminating to hear about that. I just wish you all the best of luck with all your, I know you have a lot of various projects on the go, you're busy. We'll be looking out for them. Also, for future writing projects. I thoroughly enjoyed your memoir. I can highly recommend that to everyone listening.

Oh, I loved talking to you. Thank you.

Thank you so much.

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Thank you for listening to the BACP Therapy Today podcast. We hope that you enjoyed it. Remember if you've got any ideas or suggestions on what we might include in future additions, please do not hesitate to get in touch. Thanks again.