### Roz Etwaria transcript

**In the *It Changed my Life* series of podcasts I talk to clients about their experiences of therapy. In this episode, I'm honoured to be talking to a survivor of child sexual abuse, Roz Etwaria. In the October issue of *Therapy Today* Roz describes how she thought her life was all sorted, until the tectonic plates shifted, and the memories of child sexual abuse came flooding back. She credits her relationship with her therapist, which has now been going on for eight years, as saving her life. Welcome Roz.**

Thank you, glad to be here.

**Delighted to have you! So, first I'd like to start by thanking you for sharing your very moving story of your experience of having therapy in our October issue in the *It Changed my Life* column. It's quite a journey, and it starts from a place where you say you would never have contemplated going to therapy. Can you tell us a bit about what your life was like at that point?**

It was great! Life was wonderful! Everything that one could have wanted for her life was certainly in place for me from my perspective, which was not a full perspective, but it was all good! I did the things that I wanted to do, or thought I wanted to do. I had a relationship, I had a home, and therapy is something that I would always recommend for other people, but never for myself because there was no need for it. I had it all!

**You had it all!**

I had.

**Then in 2018 you say in the story, 'Your life fell apart as memories of childhood sexual abuse came back', and you started therapy, but how easy was it to get that help?**

That's an interesting question, so the tectonic plates of life shattered beneath my feet undoubtedly, but because I had already been an advocate for therapy, I was, yes, off I go because it is going to make everything better. I hope there's going to be a question on that a little later on. Now, the problem is, culturally I am British born, but I'm British born within a bigger culture, which is I grew up in a Caribbean style culture, but it's a little bit more complicated because my parentage is half Asian and black. Both parents come from Guyana. Now, what makes that difficult is finding a therapist who understands black identity, who understands what happens to you as a black person - and this is very true, and it's meant in no way to disrespect any therapist - but to find therapists who are actually trauma-informed on CSA and culturally connected is nigh-on-impossible.

**Yes, I can imagine.**

It's really difficult, and if that's not bad enough, you are living the trauma. It's alive. It's electric. It's running through your body, and you have to wait for therapy because the NHS has to go through a period of assessing you, and then finding somebody for you for five months, so 40 years of trauma, five months you are supposed to repair it! There are huge issues there. So, all along the way you find that there are barriers, and it's very, very difficult. I have to say I was blessed, I was very blessed, but it is really, really, really difficult. It's nigh-on-impossible.

**Yes, you say difficult, I was going to say that. It sounds more impossible than difficult, but, as you say, you were blessed, you connected with the right person, but you said your first response to therapy was to feel angry, so tell me about that.**

When you climb a tree and you fall out, and you break your leg, you roughly know how long it's going to heal. You know what you've done because you did it! You decided to climb that tree, you fell out and you took the risk. This isn't that kind of pain, and you go in looking for the salve, so you cut your knee your mother kisses it, 'Oh baby, it's going to be better', but this is a different kind of healing. You go in thinking, I'm going to sit down, I'm going to talk, and that was fine, but it doesn't work like that because the thing with our culture - and this is what the overriding European does - is it tells you nobody is to blame. You go in with an idea that nobody is to blame. You go in there thinking I'm a victim of childhood sexual abuse, and what happens is you find there is no such thing as childhood sexual abuse in isolation because it speaks to not having somebody to tell. It speaks to being prey because somebody recognised your vulnerability, or the vulnerability of your family if it is someone who came in and overrode the values of the family, or something like the church. Who will believe that the church abused? Well, they didn't, and they still don't in many cases.

You go in there and, all of a sudden, you're angry in my case because I was actually unprotected, not an easy thing to hear, and then you think does that mean I was unloved? Then you think why me? Then you think it must be my fault because remember we live in a culture that says, 'Nobody's to blame. Be positive. You're responsible for your life', and it's not true. It's not true, and that's why I was angry, probably still am, but don't tell the listeners.

**And I really wish - we're just recording this on audio - but I really wish our listeners had the visuals to this because you're very much just so animated, you really bring this to life. I can tell that you now have a living from public speaking, but more of that later. You touched on feeling unloved, that you felt okay, this must have happened to me because I was unloved, and you describe one of the wounds of childhood sexual abuse as being this lack of self-love and believing the abuse was your own fault. You've also described how the work you did with your therapist is about developing self-love. It sounds really powerful, and I just wondered if you could tell us about, there was a particular incident, wasn't there, about when you realised the shift that had been made and when you stopped blaming yourself, and finally realised that you could love yourself? Can you tell us about that?**

Well, I have to go back to the fact I'm blessed with my therapist. She's a black woman, and my goodness, she's phenomenal! Can I say her name?

**If that's okay with your therapist, and I know your therapist was aware that you wrote about your therapist.**

Oh, she knows I love her, and she would kill me, but Anthea Benjamin. I cannot praise her highly enough. We went through a series of exercises where I was releasing the energy that was trapped in the body. For those who may not believe it that are listening, there is a very good book called *The Body Holds a Score*, and it actually says how trauma is trapped in our body, and my first-hand experience of this is having these self-doubts, and literally patting my head and various parts of my body. You might think, well, what does that do? Man, it frees you up in an incredible way! We've been doing a series of exercises relentlessly for three or four weeks, and I remember this Friday night going in there like, 'I've got to do this', and we went through, and she said, 'Okay, repeat', and we went through the exercises, and there was a lightness. There was a physical lifting of my shoulders.

A pain had been there, a tension that I didn't even realise was there had dissipated because I could feel the extent that my shoulders could actually extend! But here's the amazing thing! That voice - and we all have an inner voice that casts doubt upon us, I call us the Poisonous Poet - I strangled it! I didn't actually hear the things that actually, 'You would be loveable, but', or, 'You're not loveable because'. I actually found myself saying, ''Man, I'm pretty damn fine. I'm fantastic'. I just felt good about myself, despite all the things that had happened because 2018 was pretty awful, and pretty traumatic. You've got to wait for the book, 'Sally, you have to wait for the book for that one'.

**Always the book.**

Yes, it was so traumatic, but this lifting not only helped with what had gone on in 2018, but it made me realise that I was, 'Hi, I am…'.

**Worthy.**

I remember feeling just, for no reason at all, and I'm normally a happy person, but this wasn't happy, this was joy. Let me tell you the difference. Happiness is the thing that you get on an ordinary everyday level. When you hit joy, it's a spiritual connection with something bigger, brighter and bolder than oneself! I just felt so energised. I was Superwoman. I felt so good. I felt so incredibly good. For the first time in my life, I looked in the mirror. I actually looked at myself. I mean not past, but I looked at myself.

**Wow!**

Yes, I just felt so exhilarated, and I remember getting out, jumping in my car and reversing into the wall. It was a light tap. It was not my fault. If the neighbour now is listening, it was nothing to do with me that wall. Mine was a light tap.

**And I believe you kept the bump. Did you keep the bump in the car just as a reminder?**

The bump is still in the car to remind me. Every time I look at it, I think nah, I love that bump!

**Wow, yes! That's amazing that liberating, isn't it, of feeling that it's okay to love yourself? Really interesting to hear about the body approach that you were using with Anthea, and it's something that, in the therapy world, we're really just exploring and we're embracing, and we're accepting about that connection with trauma in the body. I guess it's a testament to the therapeutic relationship between yourself and your therapist that you developed, that you stayed even though it did get so hard, that you stayed, and you worked it through. Are you actually still in therapy?**

Absolutely!

**Good to hear, yes.**

Well, I can't speak for anybody else, but I really can't see having 10/20/30/40/50/60 years in trauma, however old you are when it hits you, and then thinking that you can have that trauma dissipated/redeemed in five months. I think it will take years of ongoing, and it's constant. It's a bit like a zigzag, one goes forward and then you go back a bit, then you go forward a bit, then you hit the 'z', then you've got the zag, so it literally is I think continual work to get to who you are, and what you are.

**Absolutely.**

Yes.

**A lifelong relationship.**

Yes, I don't know when the point will come where I feel I can walk this path alone, and I'm sure it will come and I know I'm a hell of a lot closer to it than I was, but when that exact day will come, I don't know, but it will. It will come.

**I know that you've now forged this career campaigning for rights of child sexual abuse victim-survivors, and also providing and facilitating safe spaces for survivor support groups. I'm thinking that's one reason why therapy has a continued role in your life, and we'll come on to that, protecting you from the burnout that goes along with that work. Can you tell us about your work and your campaigning, and how it begun and what you're doing now with that?**

Interestingly enough, I felt really strongly about childhood sexual assault way before my own tsunami in 2018. I've always felt that children get a rough deal in society. I used to read these debates that still happen in the House of Lords and in Parliament, and, indeed in the newspapers and in churches where parents think they own children. There's a little bit of slavery going on here. They think they own the right to the spirit of another human being, and I looked at our society and how we treat our girls in particular, so I'm not saying this doesn't happen to boys because it does, and I'm not saying that women don't do it, we have this thing where children are felt owned. We have the *Daily Mail*doing these surveys, and '50 per cent of parents don't want their children being taught sex education in schools, especially when they're young because they'll teach them how to be gay!' You can't teach somebody how to be gay, but - and this thing where, 'We're going to teach children to be trans'. Actually, it's a condition that we ought to be empathetic to, or, 'We're going to teach them to be gay', you know, can't teach children to be gay - have been barriers to what I believe the real problem is.

There are a high proportion of children who are sexually abused, and it's not by a man in the dirty raincoat who is a stranger. It actually happens within the intimate environment of the family, and family and friends. Because of my cultural background, family has a wide definition. People that are well-known to the family are aunts and uncles. That's where the abuse happens. It happens within the environment that we know, and I believe that's why people are resistant to it and they find excuses, such as, 'You teach her how to be gay!' No! That always made me angry. I remember seeing a picture of a girl who had cancer, a little girl, and she's lying on the hospital bed and next to her is her dad and he's reading to her. He's got his spectacles on, and you think he's daddy, until you read further down and find that this seven-year-old girl had been raped by her father since she was four, and he doesn't do one day in prison because in the United States of America he goes to jail, she doesn't get medical care.

He gets away with it because the mother writes a letter to the judge and says, 'If you jail him, she doesn't get medical care', and I was moved enormously by that story, enormously, afraid that this is where our country is going, that we are going to end up with this stupid principle of health insurance, and that another little girl would be abused, or boy in that way, and that the person, the perpetrator will get away with it because as a society we have removed that safety system that says health comes first. That was one of the impetuses. The second one is I feel that the imagery around our children is so terribly, terribly wrong. There needs to be a shift in particularly our girls, ideas that our boys wear a badge of honour if at 15 or 14 they're having sex with a little woman, somebody in their 30s or 40s. It's abuse, end of. It's not a badge of honour because it actually affects them and their thinking and their being for life, and exactly for our girls.

That's why I've always been an ardent campaigner for the fact that children - I'm not campaigning for the adults - I'm campaigning for the children at this point saying that all children have a right to their body, and anything within the vest and underwear area is a no-no. Nobody has access to that area, and every single school should teach it because the parents who don't teach it are allowing the abuse to happen. We live in a society where, at some level, the abuse becomes acceptable because, Sally, I'm sure you've come across the headlines that says, 'School teacher and his 15-year-old girlfriend', and then it goes on to say that the woman encouraged the teacher. Well, actually, she's a 15-year-old girl and consent comes at 16 in this country, and those headlines that distort what a girl is, or that stupid expression about being a young lady.

**Absolutely, yes.**

'Boys will be boys!', and 'Girls will be girls', even when they're 14/15/16.

**It's complex, isn't it? It's about the media. It's about culture. It's about parenting. How do you know where to start, Roz, because there is so much to do?**

I'd divided what I feel needs doing into three headings. The overall thing that Little Rhoda, or Survivor Voices wants to do is have hope, help and healing for victim-survivors, so we have to deal with the adult child because those adult children are mothers and fathers, and employees and colleagues, and brothers and sisters and so on, and they are in a great deal of pain. It means, to a certain extent, you're this functional member of society in so far as you may not be as good in your relationship as you can be. Hands up, I didn't know, I thought I was the best thing since slice bread! By the way, I am the best thing since slice bread, but let's just say the quality of the bread has improved since therapy! It affects how we work in relationships. I had huge trust issues, and if you can't love yourself, sweetie, I don't know how you're going to go about loving anybody else in the way that they might need to be cared for, so hope, help and healing for the adult survivor through support groups. That way we know we're giving a space, and an opportunity for people to say, 'My God, this happened to me and it's not okay', and to scream and shout about it, and recognise how painful it is.

The other thing that you get from the support group is being able to identify it was wrong! It wasn't my fault! That's one aspect. The other aspect I touched on, which is going out and campaigning and saying to people wherever I can find the space to say, 'Sex education compulsory in schools as soon as possible. Three, if we can do it, for three-year-olds, nobody touches you within this area and if they do, this is where you report it', because sometimes it's dad and mum won't believe it. Sometimes it's mum, and dad definitely won't believe it. Sometimes it's a sibling. There has to be somewhere to report, so there are things like Childline, maybe somebody at school. That's the second aspect. The third aspect is the trauma sensitive, or trauma-informed and cultural approach because quite often what happens in the medical profession - look, they do a great job, this is not I don't respect the medical profession - but you go in there as an alcoholic, and they will tell you you're an alcoholic. That's the symptom, it's not the cause.

You go in there - and our society is a wonderful example of this - 'You're fat because you eat too much food, so all you have to do is stop eating and you'll lose weight'. There is a psychological element here, and there is obesity that is matched with trauma. It could be childhood sexual trauma. It could be the trauma [unclear word 0:23:37.5] that people like myself carry, but trauma, and that Cortisol actually affects body weight. It's having trauma-informed therapy, and going in and recognising alcohol, drinking, eating, all these things are not the cause, they are the symptom, what's behind it. That's the third element that I am all about. Let's have a real conversation about why people are having these problems. Let's look behind and stop assuming it's because they like alcohol too much, they like drinking too much. It's deeper. It's deeper than that. That's the three prongs that we work on, and, overall, my goal, what I would like to see, is that we have two homes - I love this - I want to have two places, one for boys, one for girls, where they can actually go and get this therapy, particularly BIPOC black, indigenous and people of colour.

**Okay, so that's a long-term goal for you that you're working towards.**

Yes.

**Obviously, it's really important, it's much needed work, but I'm wondering about the emotional impact and how you protect yourself from secondary trauma and burnout whilst given that you're not doubt hearing people's stories a lot about what's going on.**

It's a really important thing. First of all, we've set up the group, so I am one of the facilitators and we are on rotation, and we work very closely with Survivors Voices. In the group, one person will lead, one person will close, and we have the option to go and see a therapist every quarter as a group, but, as I said earlier, I am so blessed with my therapist because I am still in therapy, and I am able to speak to her. I think the other protection, or safeguard I put in for myself when I do any of this work, I don't actually talk about myself. The first time I ever, ever publicly addressed the fact that I am a victim-survivor was in the article for you.

**Wow, I wasn't aware of that, Roz. Thank you for that.**

It's the way it's done. There is not anywhere else.

**It's a big honour, yes, and I guess that's very important, isn't it? It's an important boundary to put in there to protect yourself.**

It is because when I'm speaking generally, people like one's own story, and I don't think everybody is worthy of hearing my story. There's a bad book there! We only don't believe everybody's worthy of hearing our stories. I think we have to be mindful of who we tell, and why we don't, because I don't need - and there's not an arrogance in this, so I really don't want anybody listening to it to see it this way - I don't need anybody to tell me how bad it is, how good it is, or anything else. Those are decisions, and feelings that are mine, and mine alone. Sometimes you have a conversation with somebody, and they will then tell you who you should be prosecuting and why. You might not be in the space for that, or how you felt with it. On the other hand, somebody may be empathising, and empathising they tell you their story, 'Ah, I thought we were talking about me'. There are all these things in between, whereas certain people I can go and say, 'This happened too', and they will just be there, and in the way they listen, or in the way they hold me I know that they understand, and that you need sometimes, just the ear that hears.

**So, I guess the decision to write a book is not an easy one. How is that going? How is that process going?**

The book is in, God, for my life must be in three parts because the book is in three parts, so it tells the story of the tectonic plates of my life shatter, the tsunami of the memories coming back, and in that it answers a question from the very ignorant people. I don't mean ignorant, they're horrible, but I mean ignorant without knowledge that these things come back to you later in life, not because the perpetrator is dead and you want to see them, but because perhaps the body feels safe at that point, or it can't deal with the pressure any more and it explodes. That's why it comes back later in life I believe. The first part just addresses that question, and a very unusual part to have this happen. The second and third parts are about the journey where you can end up because, quite honestly, without a huge belief in spirituality - I follow [unclear word 0:29:10.9], they are my life philosophies - I'm not sure I would be here to tell the tale.

They are quite powerful things to hold on to the concept of something far bigger, an infinite intelligence that actually created this world that we are on. They're a really important part of the book, and they're in it, and the reason why I think each and every person reading the book should return to humanity, because I do believe that somewhere along the line, we lose our connection with our spiritual self and, therefore, our humanity. From telling the story from those two aspects, I'm not in it. I'm not in it. It then becomes something bigger and more important than who I am, and what I am.

**You're also a songwriter, Roz, and I wondered where that comes into this. Is that all part of the healing process for you?**

Interestingly enough, no. What happened was I have always had a huge love and passion for music, and the one thing I wasn't gifted with was a voice, so what I can do, and what I do love are words. I used to manage a band and I was a songwriter with the band, and I wrote half, if not more than half of the album with the artist, so that's where the song writing comes in. Of course, now, it's writing speeches, but yes, I love words, and I love music. I do think music is instrumental to healing because what it does is it takes you away from yourself, and if you listen to an artist called Arlo Parks, she does this song on depression called *Black Dog*. Oh, I cannot believe that a person in their 20s can capture so brilliantly what it is like to be under that cloud of depression. Amazing! Amazing! Amazing! Amazing, and I know playing it one ought to be depressed, but somehow it lifts you. It takes you away from that, and I think perhaps that connection is because you understand somebody else recognises that very pain, that place that you're in. Amazing, amazing track! So, yes, music is important.

**Yes, I agree with you on that. Arlo Parks is also a regular on my Spotify playlists. I haven't come across that track though, Roz. Thanks for the recommendation, that's going on straightaway. I wondered if we could touch on the profession in general. Obviously, this podcast is listened to by therapists, and we all want to know, how can we better help survivors of childhood sexual abuse? What are we getting right, and what do we need to do better?**

Where I'm sitting - and I've been involved with three therapists - I mean, yes, Andy is brilliant. She's going to tell me off, I know it, she's brilliant. Where I think it goes wrong with some therapists is they are not culturally informed, and you really need to be culturally aware. When I say black, notice I say communities because the black experience is not a homogenous, single experience, so there are nuances that need to be recognised, so I think that's really important. I'd love to see more black therapists doing work generally, but in CSA because there is special, or certain cultural behaviours that go into that. I would like to see all therapists be trauma-informed, which sounds really weird given that you're going to see a therapist, but I've actually heard people talk about, and I've actually met therapists who don't understand what it does when you're in that position.

They sort of tell you, and actually no, or they come up with ideas of therapy that they want to experiment - and this is something that's been really big in your support groups where they feel they are being re-traumatised by the therapy that's being done. This rapid eye movement therapy doesn't work for a number of the people who are adult victim-survivors of childhood sexual abuse that I have come across. That's been difficult for them.

**Okay, that's interesting, yes.**

More enquiry by therapists is important, and I sometimes get the feeling - and this is, again, from the groups that I've worked with, and I've worked with, I would now say hundreds of people - the therapist doesn't fit the individual. They've got five months on the NHS; they haven't had a choice of therapists. Remember you're in a vulnerable position, so you feel that the person knows more than you, or you're hoping they do because they're your therapist, but you don't know how to say to them, 'I don't like working with you', or, 'You're not the person for me', because remember we're victim-survivors. You're coming from a place of not being empowered because you were a child when somebody imposed themselves on you in the most violent of ways, and you can see this playing out. I spoke to a victim-survivor from America, did a wonderful podcast with her, and she said 71 per cent of women who were in domestically abusive relationships were actual victim-survivors, so that shows you how it impacts on the individuality to stand up for oneself. You need therapists who might recognise the relationship isn't working, and have what it takes to say, 'Look, this may not be the best relationship for you, try somebody else'.

**Yes.**

The person that is with you doesn't always have the courage, or the tools to say, 'This doesn't work for me'. It might be therapy and a drink, and I'm supposed to be giving up the drink. I think that's really important, a lesson my own therapist, because I'm terrible at this, I'm really, really awful, 'Give me the answer please', and it's like, 'No!' Not shielding the individual. It takes time, but allowing them to grow, and to grow into the decisions that they want to make, but I can see why the shorthand pixel, 'I think that's wrong in your life and you should do this', I can see why it's attractive. I would love it, and I can see why it would work temporarily, but I think resisting that as a therapist. I think they're pretty big asks to ask somebody to not see you I think is a really big ask. I think to hear that you may not be culturally aware or, as a therapist, to hear that you are not sufficiently trauma-informed may sound even presumptuous, but these are things that I've heard from, and felt with other people, and on occasion I've experienced it when I've spoken, or try to connect with other people outside.

**I think, yes, what you're talking about is there is this conflict I think for a lot of therapists in we want to help, that's why we got into the profession, so if someone comes to us and we can clearly see, we can immediately think yes, yes, I can help this person, but what we also have to hold in mind at all times is, am I the right person to help this person? Can I actually help, or am I just thinking that I can? Being aware of the limits of our competence at all times. Thank you. Thank you. That has given us loads of food for thought, and it's been great to talk to you today, Roz, but we're coming to the end of our time, and I wondered if we could end with just a look at what's on the horizon for you. You've talked about the book. What else do you want to achieve in your one wonderful and precious life, to paraphrase Mary Oliver?**

It changes minute-by-minute. I would love to see come to fruition the hope, help and healing that [unclear word 0:38:45.3] homes because they are not exclusively, but they are particularly for BIPOC people. I think it's really important that black, indigenous and people of colour have a place where they can go to, because we carry so many extra burdens or obstacles that we have to overcome, so that's important for me. I really want to see the law change in terms of the way victim-survivors are treated in court. It really needs to change because the burden of proof is ridiculous. Basically, what we're saying is something that happened to a child where you have unsafe memories, because the memory is affected, doesn't count as much as against the perpetrator who sat there, knew what was going on, and can actually dodge the questions because the rules are in their favour, and against that of the victim-survivor. I'd like to see massive change happen there.

The education campaign I would like to see that happen, massive change there, but, most of all, I'd love to see a cultural shift, so we don't need Little Rhoda Org, so we don't need Survivors Voices. Every single person, or most people will identify the wrongness with the way we treat our children, and our mental health support within society. Vote for politicians that actually care about the human element of life because the economy can collapse, we will still live, but we can't live if inside we're dead. We can't be the best people that we can be. We can survive, but we cannot thrive, and that's about the human spirit, and that's about the way we change the way we individually look at the world, and what we want from this society. I want one where our children are valued, where our women are valued, and politicians speak less about the economy and more about what they're going to do with the taxes that they ought to be collecting to make lives better, and therapists available like a prescription. We need less drugs and more therapists. They need to be in booths where you can turn up and say, 'I'm hurting', because…

**I love that idea, therapy booths on the street where you can just drop in and be heard when you need to. That's a great idea.**

Seriously, I do a podcast called *Insight*. I do a short series of them, and I did one on suicide because it's something that I've been involved in, and in it the chap from Samaritans, we talk about one person who literally, somebody said hello to him on the way to the railway station and that saved his life.

[Over speaking 0:42:02.8]

Imagine if you could go along a high street - you know they are all closing down, right - but you can walk along a high street, and you can walk in and say to somebody face-to-face, 'I'm hurting', and it could be a therapist like you, Sally, who says, 'I care. I'm listening'. What a full-on difference that would make, and it's not an impossible dream. We could have coffee shops.

**Not if you're behind it, Roz. Watch this space I will say!**

Yes.

**Thank you, again. It's been wonderful to talk to you, and I wish you the best of luck with all of your work, your very important work that you're so passionate about.**

It's been my pleasure, Sally. Thank you for having me, and I hope it will make a difference, and if you're a BIPOC person and you do hear this, find a therapist if you need one. It's the best thing you can do. You deserve it. Thanks, Sally.

**Thanks.**