

TRANSFORMING PAIN INTO SUPERPOWER: A HEARING IMPAIRED THERAPIST AND HER JOURNEY

Thank you so much for this opportunity to share. Sharing with you is already healing for me because what I used to hide, you've welcomed me to talk about. So, I'll start with a story:

When I was 2 years old, my family moved to England. During that time, my parents were more and more aware that something was off with me. I didn't respond to them from another room, and yet I wasn't a defiant kid. All signs pointed to "Our daughter can't hear." I've had nerve deafness since birth. My Mom took me to several doctors and none took her or me seriously. "She just has wax buildup." "She's got a behavior problem, that's why she doesn't answer you when you call."

Fast forward to when I was 5 years old. We moved back to the states and my Mom finally got a doctor to test me for hearing loss. I have 65-70 decibel loss in both ears. The clinical label is severely to profoundly hearing impaired. On some charts, I'm considered deaf.

As we walked to the car from the clinic the day I got my hearing aids, I said "Mom! I can hear the leaves under my feet!" It was the first of many new sounds. I didn't want to take my hearing aids off at night because hearing was so delightful, "Just a little longer, Mommy."

Hearing aids amplify the residual hearing you have - they don't correct it. I still rely on lip reading to communicate. I can't watch movies without closed captions and talking on the phone can be difficult. It's easy to scare me. If my husband comes up behind me and I'm working on something - all he has to do is say "Hi" and I come out of my skin. People ask me where I'm from - not able to place my accent. I make up an excuse and say "Oh, I'm from everywhere" (my Dad was in the air force and we moved around a lot, so it's partly true). But, the real truth is I sound exactly like my sister who has the same hearing loss. Our "accent" is actually a nasal sound because we can't hear our own voice. It's much more pronounced with our hearing aids off.

My goal in life was always to be normal. As a kid in school, I did everything to hide my hearing aids and to adapt. Even in college, I didn't use any of the free disability resources available (like a note taker). I still cover my ears with my hair even when I wear my hair up - it's an old habit.

When I got my hearing aids at age 5, my parents had the choice to enroll me in a school for kids with disabilities and teach me sign language or to enroll me in mainstream school. They choose the mainstream way. I have no idea what I would do as a parent today. There are probably more options now instead of "deaf community" or "hearing world".

The message for me growing up was: "You can do anything you want, Kelly. Nothing holds you back."

And, so - in order to be normal - my body had to override my limitations. Not only was I normal - only those close to me knew about my hearing impairment, I was an overachiever. I accomplished more because of this "override." It's kind of like when you're shooting to hit this mark and the only way you can do it is overshoot - so you do. Every time.

You already know the consequence of that. Eventually you crash.

When I work twice as hard as a non-hearing person to hear (constantly scanning the scene for verbal/facial cues), it's hard for me to be in my body.

After my own EFT therapy with my husband, I started to embrace my hearing impairment. It's a beautiful part of me. Not a part to discard or override. I learned of my own shame and then I learned how to be soft and to need help.

The pandemic was the sweetest awareness of all. I would be in public places in a mask (which didn't happen that often) - but when it did...I was more disabled than ever. Now my one adaptation was gone - lip reading. It was like I didn't have ears or eyes. I said to a postal worker when mailing a package for a friend, "I'm having a hard time hearing you. I'm hearing impaired and normally I rely on lip reading." She was so kind. "Oh! I'm so sorry. Let me speak loudly." And she looked at me while talking. She wrote down some things for the harder bits.

I've never felt more loved by a stranger. And to think all these years I could have been advocating for myself. I would have NEVER asked for help when not being able to hear. Not until it was impossible. I would have taken the responsibility myself. I should hear.

Let's take this to the therapy room. I have a superpower. I am ninja quick with microexpressions. It's how I've survived my entire life. It's how I could belong and feel lovable. This skill is a sad adaptation, but wow. My attunement and ability to move in quickly - I contribute that to being hearing impaired. It's like I hear with my eyes. Stay out of content? Don't worry! I can't hear it!

People have always said I'm an amazing listener. They feel like they're the only one in the room. It's because they have to be. I can't listen to two conversations at once. With all my adaptations - that is one that I can not do.

A therapist I supervised asked me to do an intensive with a couple of hers. She sat in on the intensive and it dualled as supervision. She told me, "You do miss stuff, but it's amazing - it doesn't seem to matter. You still get them where they need to be and seem to tune into what matters."

I didn't even know I had missed things - but like she said, I guess it didn't matter. It was also better that I didn't know I was missing things. It's good for me to not be aware of my hearing-impairment when I'm with a couple. Most of my clients don't know I'm hearing impaired until I need to change a hearing aid battery in the middle of a session. I'm still working on embracing this and being explicit - it's been a life of hiding, so I'm gentle with myself.

What is your superpower? What pain can be transformed in your work? Do you have a trauma history that gives you an intimate knowledge of the fearful-avoidant attachment strategy? Do you have a fear of anger because of what happened to you? And now in session, when you get triggered - you've learned to lean in and use your own discomfort? What part of you have you tried to discard that you can now bring to the light. Our own disowned parts become our superpower in this gorgeous work that we do. I challenge you to dive deep with a friend or partner and get brave. It could change your work forever.