Introduction and Keesha's Background

Welcome Keesha Ewers I am so glad that you're here and I'm so glad that we have the opportunity to speak. Now, what I'd like to have you do is introduce yourself to our audience and explain why you are have so much expertize in the area of early life trauma.

Sure. It's delightful to be here. Thank you. I started out as a R. N., actually in the ICU that I went into high adrenaline junkie medicine from the get go.

I was a 19 year old associate degree. Are in the hospital and works like that as. Over a ten year period running marathons skydiving. And then I had four children and I just drove myself in the most perfectionistic and also people pleasing way.

But as I look back now that I've ever seen anyone do. And when I was about 30, I was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. And it was like many of our patients say, right.

Like all of a sudden I'm sick, which is which is how I experienced it, too. And we both know that isn't the way it works. But I was diagnosed because I woke up overnight with ten extra pounds of puffiness, all over all my joints, and it was like someone had taken the batteries out of the Energizer Bunny, and I was just flattened.

And when I got in to be examined, the doctor who I saw asked me if I had a family history of autoimmune disease. And I said, Yeah, I think my grandfather had rheumatoid arthritis and was wheelchair bound with it at the end of his life.

And in fact, he died at the age that I am right now. I'm 57 years old, and that's when he died also. And she said, well, that's what you have. And you wrote two prescriptions for them off the pad and handed and said, hey, here's a prescription for methotrexate.

Here's one for a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Come back when you get worse, not when, and we'll change your meds. And I you know, I remember just trying to stop or the door knob like, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. I'm really disciplined.

I make all my own food. Is there anything else I could do here? And she said, No, it's genetic. You know, I think those kind of, like closed the book, put it on the shelf.

There's nothing more to discuss. You just drew the short end of the the straw there. And so I remember on my way home thinking the model of medicine that I've been born and raised into.

Obviously, you know, this is the answer there maybe. And I always tell my patients and students, like, if an herb had bitten me on the bottom, I would not have known what it was like.

I was so deeply into very acute care trauma medicine, and so I thought there might be a different answer out there. I have no idea. So I went home and I started looking on Pad Med where we keep our medical research and I was looking for something else.

Besides what the answer I'd gotten in that office and I found a compelling study on yoga and autoimmunity. So I went to my first yoga class the next day, and in the process of holding postures, I've never been in one before, you know, and how the yoga teacher wandered through the studio talking, she said, enough about this word.

Either Vedic medicine that I went, Oh, that's so interesting. So I your Vedas, this 10,000 year old sister science of yoga, that's the medical arm of it.

Autoimmune Diagnosis and Searching for Answers

And they discovered all those years ago that we are not all the same. There's not one way of feeding in water and taking care of yourself, you know, like that, that we are different.

That was so revolutionary to me, which is so fascinating, right? Because we usually go off of this ICD ten code. In my day it was I see nine and you know, and you match that, you match the symptomology, you go through your diagnostic criteria and they said, Oh, no, you're your individual.

Right. And I remember that was the first thing that set me back in my chair. And the second thing was autoimmunity is undigested anger. So all those years ago, they had this concept that you have to digest your feelings, your emotions, and your memories and experiences the same way you would any food that you ingest.

And I remember thinking, wow. And and also quite literally right on the heels of it, but I'm not an angry person. And then thinking next, maybe that's a problem that I disavow anger and strap on running shoes and go for a long, long miles.

You know, with that investigating, just looking at my watch and doing a personal best time and make myself super busy, achieve something so I feel better and I thought this might be a pattern that isn't very healthy.

First time I ever examined that and I thought, okay, so started becoming a yoga teacher certification program and I learned how to meditate. This idea of autoimmunity kept flashing in and out that I'm attacking myself.

Auto Well, that's interesting. That kind of means I'm committing suicide. And a suicidal question to ask myself anyway was, Is there a time in my life that I wanted to die?

I started going backwards in my in my timeline, looking for a place, the potential way I wanted to die. And I. I found this little girl version of myself that was ten years old and being sexually abused by the vice principal of my elementary school that I was attending.

And I remember looking at her and thinking she didn't understand what was going on and did want to off the planet. And I wonder if these two things are connected.

And turns out science tells us, yes, it is. And in those days we didn't have the ISS study quite yet. And we'll talk about that here in a minute. But, you know, I thought I'll bet they are somehow linked.

And so I got really committed to let's let's heal that. And my rheumatoid arthritis was gone within six months. All of my markers were negative. My fingers had started to already do a little deformity on my pinkies, which I have a little bit of today.

But everything stopped. And, you know, I thought, wow, this is really amazing, right? I also had changed my diet, cut out sugar or stopped eating gluten.

Some things that we normally tell all of our patients with autoimmunity that those things hadn't. They'd done about 40% of a show, but when I did this work and really got into, okay, this is probably a big part of it, that is what ultimately put it completely into reversal.

And it's never been back since. Now, I went back to school after that and said, okay, so this this time period that we live in, we tend to segment medicine.

You know, it has specialties and coming from the intensive care unit and also doing a lot of hospice work by that time, I saw that, you know, those are the two places where there are team meetings and people gather and really collaborate about, you know, from the specialties.

But you have to be ventilated basically or with a terminal illness. And I thought, how do I bring this way of seeing

things as integrative model to the world of, you know, chronic illness like autoimmunity?

And I went back to school to really study that and investigate it. And became a nurse practitioner and then got a Ph. D. looking at the link between unresolved trauma and illness.

Yoga, Trauma, and Rheumatoid Arthritis Recovery

It was quite, quite profound, you know, and we started asking people about aces in my clinical trials and I was shocked at what I was uncovering. And, you know, there's not been a lot nearly enough keep investigating that in the setting of MMS.

And no, actually, I think that's a very, very important observation. And why don't we talk about. Oh, I think the study. Yeah, I was just going to say necessity is the mother of invention.

Right? You and I both wound up where we are today because of personal experience. Oh. Yeah, yeah. No, absolutely. It's very motivating. So the ISS study was conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Senators Centers for Disease Control in between 1995 and 1997, the largest study of its kind.

It was done when Kaiser Enrollees, who interestingly enough, started out as being in a weight loss program. And, you know, a lot of people were successfully losing weight in this Kaiser weight loss clinic model that they had and several were dropping out of, even though they're successfully losing weight before they got to their goal.

And luckily, the director of that program was curious enough to start asking questions and started calling people in and asking what was going on. And it turned out that many of them had sexual abuse in their childhood.

And this instigated the study. And, you know, over 3000 participants were asked the questions, you know, ten questions before the age of 18. Did you experience what we would call capital T traumas, sexual abuse, domestic violence, witness against your mother, physical, emotional, psychological abuse, neglect.

Any of these you know, did your did you have a caregiver or a parent that was addicted to a substance or mentally ill or incarcerated or dead? You know, these are the capital T traumas.

Now, what they found was, you know, we are still unpacking today, but the link between the higher if you say yes to any one of those, that's an ace score of 1 to 3.

For the higher that ACES score, the more likely you are to experience any of the chronic illnesses that we have. You know, on the list of our industrialized cultures and genetic expression and your relationship quality, you know, your physical fitness and exercise motivations.

The one that I actually found the most compelling in the findings was The higher your aces score, the least likely you were to engage in consistent self care.

So if you feel that you have been neglected or abandoned, not protected, not worthy of protection in the child, might remember that brain of the child is not fully developed till or 26 years old with the prefrontal cortex, right?

The executive function. So we're living a lot in that primal amygdala limbic system of am I okay? Am I going to make it? Am I getting the rules that these adults that are in charge are giving me?

So there's a lot of hyper vigilance. And so these patterns are established at a very, very young age in response to the experiences that we have. And we know that, you know, biologically we're wired to have our limbic system alarm.

If we have a lion chasing us in one of those big kinds of, I have to fight, I have to flee or I have to play dead. So we have so many different kinds of things that we respond in that way too.

In our contemporary, modern society, because we're so achievement and productivity oriented that we're on that alert constantly and will be more and more like that if we have these early beliefs that we created that I'm not good enough, I have to do X in order to receive respect, love, whatever it is that we decided was important.

The ACE Study and Childhood Trauma

So the more trauma that we have in childhood, the more our nervous system is going to be on this high alert about our safety, our place in the world, the contexts that we hold inside the bigger environment. And we aren't wired to be able to sustain life in that way.

You know, it's supposed to be a quick get get out of danger and then shake it off like a gazelle would right after lions chased it and it reaches safety or die get eaten.

So the way that we do it is, is constant liminal space in-between thresholds, right? And we're not designed biologically to be able to handle that. So if we we know in the way that we're wired, if we're put on the outside of the firelight circle in tribal days, then so any experience of betrayal or rejection, feeling not good enough, not part of the tribe, we don't fit in that's actually experienced as a trauma because the saber tooth tiger can eat us if were isolated and alone.

So we have set up a culture in which we are often times just traumatized and we get up in the morning by the very nature of the way that we live as humans outside of community.

You know, the pandemic hasn't helped at all. And so this is generating that response inside of our nervous system that then the immune system will follow.

You know, and that's certainly what I see in my clinical practice. It is certainly what we've observed in our clinical trials. We did a recent study where we added in this questionnaire and you know, I was quite surprised at just how many of our patients reported aces, you know, and know when I read that is the study.

They looked at the questionnaire I scored myself and I saw well way too high I to. High score if I'm conservative a three and I can find ways to be five you know I mean, the thing of it is, is it's really important to understand.

I mean, I'm a I'm a Navy brat. So my dad was out to sea all the time. So is that neglect and abandonment on an eye level that you would think of? No, that was his job.

And I experienced it as an absence of that protective energy at a time when I really needed it. So it doesn't really people will start to overthink this.

I don't know. You know, I had a really great childhood and I always say That's fantastic. And everybody's had trauma because the capital T traumas that we're talking about right now are very important and there was a study I ran across in my Ph. D.

work. Oh, my gosh, it was so revolutionary to me about how it opened this up. It was looking at people going through an fMRI scan, and we already knew at the time that the study was done that the architecture of the brain changes in response to trauma.

So people that have been studied with post-traumatic stress disorder, you know, it shows on brain scans that there's a shrinkage in the prefrontal cortex at adult executive function that says what to put on your fork and what to put in your glass and how to spend your money and who to hang out with.

Like those really important decisions that you make as an adult that shrinks and you get a growth, especially in the right side of the amygdala and the volume of it.

So PTSD, this is the change of the architecture of the brain. Well, what they discovered is people that rated themselves high on a perceived stress index.

You know, the one that says in the last year, have you been divorced, have you gotten married? Have you gotten a raise? Have you been laid off? Have you you know, like all of those normal life stressors.

So when people reported themselves as persistently overwhelmed, they had the same exact change in the architecture of their brains. Now, this one was just mind blowing to me because what I was doing is I was tracking brain scans and I was discovering something I'd never seen, written about or talked about in that.

Was that the part of the brain, the parts of the brain required for female libido, sexual desire are the same ones hijacked by PTSD. So this was an interesting correlative for me because I went, Oh, so for women, when you're constantly stressed out, then of course you're not in the mood for sex because you've got it right.

So their brain, the actual function of the brain is being otherwise occupied. So we know, like if you think critically about this, of course, your body is going to say, you know what, if you're a zebra being chased by a lion, then all of the hormones that are responsible for reproduction get co-opted for survival.

Your digestive system shuts down. It's not safe to pee and poop out on the savanna if you got a lion chasing you. And it's certainly not safe to reproduce.

And so, of course, we know this on an enduring level. And of course, the endocrine system is governed by the brain. So it does make sense. But I had never seen it in scans and like that level of brain architecture change.

So it creates that mechanical change as well as the biochemical change to be thinking thoughts or ruminating intrusive thoughts about your common everyday stressors.

Yeah, no, that that makes altogether too much sense. Now we've just gone through a lot of stressors. Your early life stress, your current ongoing stress, which, which most people are going to fit.

One of those two buckets of now, both right. What what can we do? I mean, okay, so I come to you, Kisha and I talk about my early life stress and the fact that I know just before my M. S.

was diagnosed, I had severe adult stress load work.

Brain Changes, Stress, and Nervous System Effects

Yeah. What would you have told me had had I been in your in your office? I first present this like that from an innovative medicine perspective. We have five layers, five bodies, not just the physical body, but next to the physical body is the energy body.

And next to that is the emotional body where we store all of our doubts, fears, meanings that we've created throughout a lifetime. And that that's that enters through the energy system to our bodies that are physical, that we think of as us and affects how we express our genetics, you know, how our nervous system responds, the organs, the glands, the immune system, the microbiome, all of it.

So when we start talking about all those connections on a physical level, it's actually instigated by how we perceive side first lay. That is the framework like this, this part we need to be on common ground so that we can proceed.

The other two remaining layers to us are like our higher wisdom and what Carl Jung would call the portal to the collective unconscious. It's where when we're like, when I'm hiking in the mountains, I'll get a download about something.

You're in the shower, you get an epiphany, that big inspiration and energy. We want that all the time. It's the flow of bliss and we can't get to it consistently if we're toxic in these other layers.

So the first thing that I have people do, and this is what I'll say on Sunday interviews and podcast interviews, is just spend the first 24 hours observing your thoughts, just observing your own mind.

A lot of times people think that the mind is master, but actually it goes it's crazy. I mean, if you start watching how your mind goes, I don't know who counts the stuff, but apparently, you know, we have a lot of fox in a day and 94% of them are recycled.

We've already had them. So if you're jumbled all the time, it's like I scuba dove. And if you go into a water where it's been choppy and it's windy on the surface, then there's not really good visibility.

And so the ability to just generate an awareness of your own self, consistently called awake awareness, to be able to expand 24 hours of your you're not obviously not 24 but 16 hours let's say of your you're awake time and just watch.

What's the tone you speak to yourself in with the theme. What's the urgency in your life? What is it that you drive yourself with? Do you speak to yourself in a way that you would a small child that's in trouble if that kindness and compassion and true presence and attunement this reveals your attachment style, you know, so there's a wounding that we have in child that carries forth unless we do what Joseph Campbell's hero's journey instructs us to do, take the illness as a call to action and learn a new skill.

Find a mentor, learn a new skill, practice it come out. Life will give you all kinds of opportunities to practice that. And then you become the master, the oracle, you know, the one that can teach the community.

You and I are both in positions of that. Now, here's the thing. People get really upset by this, then you'll get challenged again. It's like it's a cycle, right? It's how it works.

It's the human life. So being able to put that in perspective, you're not a victim of your life. These are things that have happened. And now what? And so what I have people do is for 24 hours, observe the theme and then we come back together and start talking about like, what did they notice?

And there's a really great little exercise. I encourage people to do where you have like a little a little bag of white rocks and a little bag of black runs pebbles.

And at the end of your day, do this for 40 days, the end of your day, after you've been observing your own thoughts for everything, life affirming thought that you have a white one in the middle of your dining room table or your floor or your bed for every life destructive one that you have.

Then you put a black one in there. And what I mean by life, affirmative and life destructive is. Is there a place where you've been driving yourself? Oh, I didn't get that done. I can't believe it.

There's so much to do. I'm never going to keep up. You know, that's a life destructive thought if I diagnosed with breast cancer tomorrow, so much of what you think is so urgent is going to shift immediately, right?

So why wait for that? You start noticing how do the ratios of your pebbles show up and then in the middle of your bed or your dining room table or your floor.

And as you do this, you start the next day, you know, okay, so there are a lot of black holes in there last night. So as you start observing your thoughts for that day, you start noticing, I don't really want to put a black couple in, so I'm going to change the channel on that thought.

Another one of our thoughts is Train of thought, right? Your train doesn't need to go willy nilly. It has a conductor and you your higher consciousness, that fourth layer of you actually is the conductor.

Healing Framework and Self-Awareness Practices

If you will put the conductor at the helm and you can change the speed, you can slow it down, you can change everything about your thought trans structures, because actually it's your thoughts that activate your endocrine system.

It's your thoughts, your perceptions that send your adrenals into a fight or flight freeze and faint notes. That's not something that's just happening out here that you're a passive observer and passenger.

You're actually in charge if you'll take charge. And so that's the first place I start. And then I do all the functional medicine testing that we do to take a look at what's been the impact over the years of, you know, your microbiome, your adrenals and hormones, all of those things.

And while we're waiting for the data, you're practicing this, you're becoming the conductor of your own train of thought. I right there, I always think of as 50% of the solution.

I think of food and supplements as 25 and 25. This right here is 50 huge. Yeah. Yeah, it is huge. I think what you're doing is just so brilliant. Is this the freedom framework that we just described?

Yeah, that that is so important. You know, I talked to my tribe about that in the terms of self-help talk, am I giving myself this continual barrage of defeats and negativity or am I giving myself this continuous barrage of I'm making progress, I'm doing great things.

And so there's a coach and a critic. Can I listen to the critic and listen to coach? Right. The judge is important. The critic. Right. It helps to remember not to stick bobby pins in the outlet when you were three years old, you know, it helped you to remember that someone told you, don't go run out in the street because a car might hit you like these.

That's the one that's trying to keep you safe. But when you're an adult, you can give that one a retirement package because you've learned what you need to stay alive already.

Right. You can say thank you for your service. Don't don't criticize the critic, right? Don't just the judge have compassion for that part and then send it to Fiji.

It deserves a little vacation. Right? You know it. And I can recognize that. Okay. I've made some decisions as an adult that were not good ones. I'm like, okay, I'm not going to make that decision again, but I don't have to keep beating myself up over the fact that I made some poor decisions, just like, Yeah, okay.

I don't have the discernment of your higher consciousness without the berating tyranny of the judge. I can learn that. Okay, that that was a decision that was not good.

I don't make those decisions anymore. I make different decisions that are life affirming. And so, yes, I think we have a very similar message that we give to our tribe that we have to be on track.

Okay, so how do people find you, Kisha? If people want to come see you, is that possible? How would people come to you? So I see people online and I Dr. Icon d r k e j dot com.

Solving the autoimmune puzzle is a great way to enter into the framework that I use and understand the real impact that emotional, mental and physical trauma has had on your current day health and what's something we didn't mention was that you are just because you have an ACS score of one to 3 to 10 that's not set in stone any more than your genetics are.

So, you know, the ACS quizzes in my book and then I follow it up with saying, So now you have a number and now let's unpack it.

Finding Keesha and Final Takeaways

You don't have to have the outcomes from the study because these folks that were studied didn't have something that was presented to them as an intervention, as a way of healing that right.

And so without having any kind of observer intervention, then here's the outcome. But that doesn't need to be your

outcome. And in fact, we know that you can change the trajectory of the findings of that study simply by engaging in that self care.

Absolutely. Absolutely. We have all sorts of hope. Keesha's recovered from severe or I recovered from severe. M. S we both had significant early life stress that we at about the same age really that had a huge impact on Keesha's life and had a dramatic impact on my life as well.

Keesha this has been wonderful. I am so grateful for the opportunity to do this interview. I'm grateful for our friendship now. Look forward to seeing you very soon.

Thank you so much by everybody.