

[00:00:00] **Tamsin:** Hey Swathi, how are you?

[00:00:07] **Swathi:** I'm alright. How are you, Tamsin?

[00:00:08] **Tamsin:** Yeah, not bad.

[00:00:09] **Swathi:** It's a question we ask each other a lot, but I don't know if we always wait to hear a proper answer. But I think we all struggle sometimes. Maybe we've been through something traumatic or we're feeling stressed or we're just unsure what we want to prioritise in life.

[00:00:24] **Tamsin:** Of course, talking to family and friends can be helpful.

[00:00:26] **Swathi:** But sometimes it's not quite enough.

[00:00:28] **Tamsin:** So in this episode, we're exploring the role that professionals - therapists and counsellors -, can play in those situations.

[00:00:35] **Liga Sparite:** Hello, my name is Liga Sparite and I'm a tutor on the postgraduate counselling programme. I'm also a private practitioner in my own therapeutic service and yeah, and I'm actually also an alumni from University of Aberdeen.

[00:00:50] **Tamsin:** Liga has had a pretty interesting career path, and it's not quite what you might expect.

[00:00:54] **Liga Sparite:** Well, if we kind of start unwind, go into the past, I'm actually coming from a totally different background. [00:01:00] So in my early years, I went into architecture. I had nothing to do with therapy. I went more into arts. And let's say that after doing that for about 15 years, I understood that I was missing something in all that experience, and that was really more about missing that human connection. I was spending my days, hours and hours, in front of the computer, chatting with my colleagues at times, but that was not fulfilling. It wasn't giving me what I needed, and I really wanted to connect and share.

[00:01:30] So, yeah, so that basic relationship was not there, and I still get emotional when I talk about that, which, which makes absolute sense. Yeah. So there was something there for me that prompted me to really ask myself, how do I want my life to be? And when I gave myself that second chance, I said, okay, let's put everything aside.

[00:01:53] Let's go on to a university website - I knew I wanted to go back in learning - and let's see what it [00:02:00] is that I really want to do, what it is that comes from myself. And there were two courses when I was scrolling through that kind of talked to me. One was, it was a postgraduate course in mindfulness, and the other one was postgraduate course in person-centred counselling.

[00:02:17] And the first abstract at the very top, when you read through it, it said, this course is really about you getting to know yourself. And you're becoming more open and more whole as a person. So I didn't even come into this experience wanting to be a therapist. I really wanted to be... me. Yeah. So that has a huge fundamental meaning for me, why I started this journey.

[00:02:43] And also going through all these experiences of learning and practicing and going into the profession. That just further embedded in me this absolute belief that this really works. And it's bigger than just doing something. It taught me [00:03:00] how to be comfortable in my own skin, how to not be afraid of different parts of me that were not entirely clear, or of which I was not that aware, and how to basically start to accept myself and eventually get to that place where I can say even I love myself, which is very difficult, uh, in modern age because we are very focused on relationships with someone else, but we are not that focused on developing the relationship with ourselves.

[00:03:30] And when it comes to a humanistic therapy, that's the very basis, the core of this is to offer a relationship that is based on our authentic way of being. So it's really that development of you to be your authentic self and then you can connect to someone else's authenticity. That's really the core of it.

[00:03:51] **Tamsin:** You can hear by the crack in her voice that this means so much to her and I think it's just so interesting, that idea before you can offer therapy to someone else that you need to [00:04:00] be comfortable with yourself.

[00:04:01] I feel like so much of the time there are expectations or norms that might prevent us from truly being ourselves or fully being accepted for who we are.

[00:04:09] **Swathi:** Yeah, and I think one of those norms, and one that Liga is clearly challenging, is that it's not okay or it's not normal to cry in public.

[00:04:17] **Liga Sparite:** I am a crier. I have become more than comfortable with my own tears, and that's also been part of the learning journey I had as a

student where, because it's an experiential course, which means you actually have to self reflect and go through experiences and pull your learning and understanding of theory through that. It's almost like you have to do it to understand.

[00:04:41] I've been uncovering layers of my own past wounds and, and insecurities, and I've worked through that. And, and I have cried in front of people, in front of the group. And I have, and I've just noticed that it never took away from how I felt about myself. It just made this connection stronger. And [00:05:00] I think it is amazing strength to be able to be vulnerable in front of people and to feel okay about that.

[00:05:09] **Tamsin:** Mm, definitely.

[00:05:09] **Liga Sparite:** So although you do see me becoming emotional at the moment and I kind of, I do get a sense that like, oh, what might be happening there? Are you okay? I am okay. And I can say that in full honesty because I accept that part of myself.

[00:05:24] I think part of it's probably linked also to compassion I feel for myself. So, you know, that's not something you usually talk about. We can feel compassion for others and that compassion also, you might notice when you watch some movies, you know, or read a book and you start to feel for the character as well and you get involved and you're maybe starting crying as well.

[00:05:43] But do we really spend that time to offer the same compassion and empathy to ourselves? If we would be able to do that, would we really need therapy? That's the fundamental question. And why people go to therapy is to experience [00:06:00] potentially those qualities. If someone else can offer them to you, you might be eventually able to kind of start and offer them to yourself. And again, that's, that's one big component of the person-centred therapy.

[00:06:12] **Tamsin:** So tell us more about person-centred therapy. What does that actually mean? How do you teach it as well? Because that must be really hard.

[00:06:21] **Liga Sparite:** It is quite hard. And I would say that once you kind of go through the day of teaching both the theory and doing all the exercises and self-reflection and engaging with, with the students in the same authentic way, you are quite drained at the end of that. But it's absolutely possible because again, the core principles of the therapy is that we will learn how to establish

and maintain a relationship that is based on us being able to provide empathy in a genuine way, full acceptance and no judgment to the client.

[00:06:52] And also that we would absolutely believe in their own ability to heal and grow and develop. [00:07:00] So we're kind of, we're there holding, creating the space for magic to happen. And hopefully through this relationship, the client will notice that they can make that magic happen for themselves, because really in life, no one can do it for you. You have to get to that awareness of I'm able to change my life yourself.

[00:07:21] **Swathi:** I love it when Liga says the therapist is creating space for the magic to happen. It's like they're kind of helping the client to help themselves.

[00:07:37] So Tamsin, do you know people who are in therapy or have been in therapy in the past?

[00:07:42] **Tamsin:** I do know a few in therapy at the moment and a few that are considering it in the future, especially when issues come up.

[00:07:48] So how is the, sort of industry of therapy doing nowadays? Because people are becoming more open, especially with social media and people talking more openly about being in therapy. How have you experienced [00:08:00] that?

[00:08:00] **Liga Sparite:** I think it's always good when we know more about things. You know, I think in the past what happened, therapy was kind of a little bit clouded in mystery, you know, there was that expert or someone who knew and they were doing something and you had no idea actually what was happening there.

[00:08:16] Nowadays, the therapy is being, is being made more accessible. It's being brought more closer to the user experience as well. So I think that's, that's quite a big shift and it really kind of involves the client and the user in it. It's like, let's make it happen together because I don't know what's best for you, but you do.

[00:08:35] So let's start that dialogue and let's try to, um, work towards the goals that you want to reach. I think that's kind of today's perspective and take on it, and the current directions where the therapy is going as well. We are aware that no one solution fits everyone. Everyone is different. Everyone comes

from different backgrounds, their life experiences, and they need something that would be very personalised [00:09:00] to them.

[00:09:06] **Swathi:** Just like lots of things in today's world, the way we receive therapy is also changing, thanks to advancement in technology like AI.

[00:09:13] **Tamsin:** With artificial intelligence, we've seen it in other sort of professions growing. What ways is it involved in therapy?

[00:09:20] **Liga Sparite:** Well, I would say again, to respond to that question, we have to see it in different contexts as well.

[00:09:25] Because if you would look at generally in a health systems of mental health, on a more kind of organisational, governmental levels, of course, that would be more about how can I provide the service, uh, to more people and kind of make it more cost-effective, more accessible, and also leave the human resources unburdened from, you know, doing the paperwork or doing the things that an AI could do, or help us identify maybe high risk factors quicker and target, you know, whatever support needs to be done.

[00:09:56] Whereas on a different level, we all have smartphones, [00:10:00] right? So what we usually tend to do is we have a lot of apps which can help us with daily tasks or entertainment or different things. So again, the app development, to have someone to talk to whenever you need to, that's a great resource because you know, therapy has its limitations.

[00:10:17] If you're a human therapist, you're limited to working hours, but usually, especially with young people as well, the greatest need to have someone to talk to is probably the late hours or, you know, even during the night, where you can't really contact your therapist, so if you have at least something to help you, someone to talk to, or give you some tools on how to manage the intense feelings you're, you're feeling, that's a great resource.

[00:10:45] And also another thing what AI can do, it can provide more solutions, like source for way more approaches or techniques or methodologies that work and give you, you know, exactly that, that personalisation of what, what do you [00:11:00] need, and change direction really quickly. So there are definitely strengths in that.

[00:11:04] And I would say as everything new, we will need time to get used to it. We'll need time to discover what works, what doesn't work. Yeah, discover the limitations as well, because it can be seen as a miracle tool, but it does have

its limitations, at least in a current state, pretty much to do with ethics most of the time, because you're providing service for vulnerable people.

[00:11:26] Where do we know where that information is going? How do we know that, that responses or advice that is given is not biased or that decision is not made by a prediction or a guess, which might not have anything to do with, you know, the real issues and whether a true empathy can be provided. So that's another factor.

[00:11:46] So yeah, I'm kind of opening a conversation, but there are more aspects that we could kind of uncover and talk about.

[00:11:52] **Swathi:** So Tamsin, how do you feel about the idea of talking to an AI therapist?

[00:11:56] **Tamsin:** I think it would be quite useful actually, because there'd be somebody there all [00:12:00] the time, you wouldn't feel like you're bothering somebody. Like the aspect of them being human makes them human. So maybe AI would be better for that.

[00:12:08] **Swathi:** It was quite interesting for me when Liga said that technology could help young people to access therapy when they need it, like late at night.

[00:12:16] **Tamsin:** There's been quite a lot of talk over the last few years about young people's mental health and especially the impact that school or uni can have on their wellbeing.

[00:12:23] **Swathi:** It feels to me like the issue is getting a lot more attention than it used to.

[00:12:27] **Tamsin:** With young people in mind, what support do you think would be valuable to have out there for them?

[00:12:32] **Liga Sparite:** I think we're already doing quite a good job in providing variety of support. You know, there's, there are specific helplines that young people can access when they need it.

[00:12:40] And just to have a very open conversation and ask for the young person, what help would be beneficial for you? Because again, often we, doing what's best for the young people, the parents might just unconsciously assume that, okay, I need to fix this for them, but let's, the same as in a, in a therapy

with adults, let's involve them in that decision-making [00:13:00] because that would be empowering.

[00:13:02] **Tamsin:** Talking of therapy for adults, what adults would benefit from receiving therapy?

[00:13:07] **Liga Sparite:** I believe that's a very, very wide question because again, I would ask you, do you believe, would you benefit from a therapy?

[00:13:13] **Tamsin:** Yeah, potentially.

[00:13:16] **Liga Sparite:** Right. I think it's, it's kind of, probably the question we can ask is what the therapy is for. Because mental health is still based a lot in the stigma that, you know, you have to have a mental illness or a disorder to receive mental health support. But actually I would say it's more about the wellbeing. And being aware whenever you start to feel that perhaps you're not, you're not feeling fully engaged or empowered in your life and making the decisions.

[00:13:44] So it can be really... It's an individual choice. Someone might need support with anxiety or, or depression. Someone might need support with grief. Someone might need support with, uh, friendships and ruptures in, in, in friendships. Someone might need support [00:14:00] with stress before the exams. I wouldn't have the authority to tell you, you need the therapy.

[00:14:05] That would be unethical. Um, but again, sometimes in life we do, we do feel that I would need some help. And I think that's a very good, also a very empowering decision for anyone to say, okay, that's, you know, that's my choice. I look for that.

[00:14:23] **Tamsin:** So is person-centred therapy every type of therapy, or is it quite specific? What's the difference?

[00:14:30] **Liga Sparite:** It is quite specific. It's a modality in its own, as to say. Uh, it was, uh, developed by Carl Rogers and it's kind of a part of, um, more recognised humanistic therapies, which are all based on the healing relationship. That, that's that therapeutic relationship. And um, it's very popular in Scotland and in north east of Scotland and actually University of Aberdeen has a very longstanding tradition in teaching and providing, [00:15:00] uh, learning opportunities and practice opportunities for this type of therapy.

[00:15:05] But it really specialises on that nonjudgmental and empathic human connection. And through that connection, how we can facilitate the individual to reflect on their experiences, gain deeper understanding and find their own solutions. So it's kind of, yeah, it's a very non-directive, which means we don't tell, you know, clients what to do.

[00:15:31] We don't give advice. We don't provide solutions. But we, we, we recognise how distressing it might be, and we are available to stay in that place of uncertainty and, and, um, you know, feel those feelings together. But then we also see where that takes us, without necessarily telling this is what you need to do.

[00:15:54] Because remember, that's always stuck with me. You know, that, um, I'm not sure if it's a [00:16:00] metaphor or just a story. You know, if you give someone a fish, they will be fed for a day or for a meal. But if you teach someone how to fish, they'll be fed for life. So that's kind of, uh, for me, almost underlines a bit this philosophy that if someone can understand themselves fully, They'll know what they need and they'll have that agency to, to meet their needs in a way that's empowering, that's contributing to their growth and development.

[00:16:27] **Tamsin:** Sounds like such an empowering career choice as well, to go into therapy and counselling.

[00:16:36] What do you see the future of therapy being? Do you think it'll change much? If it's already branching into things like artificial intelligence, do you think it's going to develop even further? Or is two people sat in a room talking really always going to be the, you know, creme-de-la-creme of therapy?

[00:16:52] **Liga Sparite:** I think it will definitely evolve because anything that stops growing, you know, it becomes obsolete, really. I think there will always [00:17:00] be potentially a choice. I think the choices will increase on what kind of therapy you want to receive, what you want to experience. And maybe, you know, it will be quicker to provide you that solution rather than now. You won't need to look, you know, in different places, but there might be one common database and, and, you know, the AI could help facilitate and get access quicker to those services and match you with a therapist that is more suitable, or operates with the same values, or has an expertise that you're particularly looking at.

[00:17:29] So I think it's, it's really kind of having those connections made quicker and more effectively that could be, could be the area for development.



But again, there's definitely more areas which I'm not aware of even now, because, you know, artificial intelligence and things are just developing so quickly that we can't really predict where that can lead and what, what it could bring up as new potential opportunities as well. So it's exciting times.

[00:17:57] **Tamsin:** So for potential students, how can they get into [00:18:00] doing this themselves?

[00:18:01] **Liga Sparite:** Well, there are quite a lot of career paths actually, um, available through University of Aberdeen. You can start your journey from the undergraduate level and bring it all the way to the doctorate level. Many entry points.

[00:18:13] You can, for example, on an undergraduate level, we offer four modules of counselling skills, which can be done either as electives, from a different programme, or they can be done as standalone. You don't even have to be like, you know, a full time student. You can come and, and just do those modules and learn more about communication skills and listening skills and gain a better understanding of that.

[00:18:37] You can also use that as a stepping stone then to go into the postgraduate programmes like person-centred counselling or just recently-opened pluralistic counselling as well that we offer now. We have programmes that have the counselling skills and practice embedded within them. We have the master's degree in Psychology and Counselling and also a very new programme that's Counselling, Psychology and Education.

[00:18:59] So they [00:19:00] kind of offer that opportunity to, to have the full, full experience from undergrad to, to post grad and practice as well.

[00:19:08] **Tamsin:** This might sound like a daft question, but if you study counselling, are you definitely going to become a therapist or can this help build different careers as well?

[00:19:15] **Liga Sparite:** That, that is a very good question because ultimately, you know, my belief is the future is quite uncertain. Things can change even by, you know, studying something, you might realise that that's not, you know, the best match for you. And yes, you can change your mind. At the same time, I feel that counselling, because it's such an experiential thing and you learn by doing, and by being, within that environment that even if you would change your mind, those skill sets are not lost because you have just work on how to be a more fully-functioning human being. You will work on your communication

skills, you will work on your relationship skills, you will work on your self knowledge and personal development, and no one can [00:20:00] take that away from you. And no matter what career, whether that's to be therapy or whether that's something else you would choose, you will be just more confident in who you are and bring that forward.

[00:20:11] So again, I love to leave from my philosophy as a person centred counselling. I really trust the people's choice and I want them to be experts in their life. So whatever kind of direction you would like to take, that is an experience that will be very valuable. And of course, if you want to be a therapist, well, that's, that's it. That's kind of the basic training that you need to, to get, and you can build on that later on as well.

[00:20:41] **Tamsin:** For people thinking about going to study therapy and to do counselling, what advice would you give them?

[00:20:48] **Liga Sparite:** I would say prepare for a very exciting experience, a hard experience as well. And again, that will depend on the approach or type of therapy that you would select because [00:21:00] therapy is that provide a more kind of active and solution focused way of doing things.

[00:21:05] It's more about knowing your tool set and how to use that. But if you're interested in working in this relational way, there is a very huge component of that is personal development, is that building that relationship with yourself. And that is quite difficult. And as we know it, because otherwise people would do it easily and they wouldn't need therapy.

[00:21:27] But I'm kind of taking a laugh here, but that personal development and working with yourself and acknowledging your own limitations, that's quite hard work. Yeah, I would say probably, at least from my experience, that was the most intense part of the learning because you're, you're really learning what it means to be yourself.

[00:21:50] And it's, it's a process. That's the best way to describe that. And assessments. Of course, you know, there's quite a lot of, [00:22:00] um, written assessments as well, and they might be different from what you're used to because they are, they are really self reflective and they ask you to reflect on your experiences and, and bridge your experiences with the theory, kind of get, get those two things together, so...

[00:22:14] **Tamsin:** So you get the theory and the practical to learn from.

[00:22:16] **Liga Sparite:** You have the theory, you have the practical that you're actually practicing as a listener, and then you have your life experiences. It's almost like a triangle and you have to navigate through that and to get your answers and identify your path forward as well.

[00:22:30] **Tamsin:** How has pursuing therapy changed your life personally?

[00:22:34] **Liga Sparite:** Oh, it has definitely changed my life. And I think I have grown in my confidence very much. I came from a place where I didn't really trust my judgment.

[00:22:44] I was kind of more doing what others expected me to do. Whereas since I was learning more about myself, I really started to accept different parts of myself and also empathise with myself [00:23:00] and I just had that ability to be there, feel it, not run away from those feelings and kind of notice, okay, we can go through that.

[00:23:10] It's me and me in this together. It's almost like that internal dialogue, but I have definitely changed. If I look back on myself, what, 10 years ago, I would absolutely want to hug that girl, but yeah, I've become more confident also in the work that I'm doing. I never thought I could become a lecturer. But, you know, that personal development, also that knowledge of the theory and of the practice itself, it came together and it allowed me to be present and engage and, and, and share my thoughts and feelings and, and knowledge.

[00:23:44] So yeah, I never thought I would be actually talking in front of the people if I, um, thought of 10 years, 10 years ago.

[00:23:54] **Tamsin:** Yeah, being a therapist and helping people with their relationships and then to, to teach the next generation of therapists, that must be pretty [00:24:00] incredible for you.

[00:24:01] **Liga Sparite:** It is, absolutely.

[00:24:02] **Tamsin:** And before we finish up today, I do believe that Liga was one of your own tutors, Swathi? Is that right?

[00:24:07] **Swathi:** Yeah, she was one of my supervisors. So just hearing Liga speak makes me remember how much I have also changed as well with the course. So the main thing that stuck out was, uh, the more you accept yourself, the more you'll be able to live an authentic life. So for me, this course has been

a liberating experience and especially with amazing support I received from my tutors.

[00:24:27] So they showed me compassion and that helped me be more compassionate towards myself. So I am so grateful that I had this opportunity at University of Aberdeen and that's been a life-changing experience for me, as well.

[00:24:39] **Tamsin:** That's incredible.

[00:24:43] Thank you Swathi for sharing that with us, and thank you so much to Liga Sparite for sharing her expertise and her experiences so openly with us.

[00:24:51] **Swathi:** If you'd like to join the Boundary Breakers at University of Aberdeen, come to one of our open days and see our historic campus. You can also download our [00:25:00] digital prospectus at [www.abdn.ac.uk](http://www.abdn.ac.uk)

[00:25:04] **Tamsin:** And to hear more, check out the rest of the Beyond Boundaries podcast. Each episode discusses the groundbreaking research of one of Aberdeen's academics.