



Transcript Episode 9 Me-Topia

Clare

Hello and welcome to the sex and relationships podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. This is the podcast where we draw on our years of experience as sex and relationship therapists. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi Janet.

Janet: Hello, Clare.

Clare: Today we're talking about Me-Topia. Possibly something you haven't heard of before, but I'm hoping as you listen to us, it'll all start to make sense. Me-Topia the relationship I have with myself. So, Janet, where should we start with this gritty topic, of our relationships with ourselves?

Janet

Gritty?

Clare

I mean, that might say more about the kind of fortnight I've had. I'm facing the loss of a very dear, beloved relative. And I also had a computer crisis a couple of weeks back where I lost all my data. And I'm still navigating that. And I think I call it gritty because it's been very interesting to me how I have been in relationship with me through this difficult time. So yeah, that's why I think I'm defining it as gritty.

Janet

Well, yeah, I mean, I guess what you're saying and what, what you've experienced the last couple of weeks is that our relationship with ourselves can be as difficult and fluctuating as it as it can be with, with anybody else, whether it's an intimate partner or a friend or our boss or whoever. I don't know about you, but certainly in the work that I do, you know, lots of people who want to sort of improve sort of relationship and, and sexual difficulties. And you say, what do you do now that's nice for yourself every week? And often it's, you know, self comes at the bottom of the list. Yes. And that's why I think when we were talking about what are we going to talk about, we felt that the importance with oneself was a priority to talk about because it so often gets forgotten. And yet it is so important not just for our own wellbeing, but for our relationships, our families, our work, our jobs, our friendships. You know, it is like that, um, when you're on an aeroplane and they, you know, they say the oxygen masks will fall down. And please put your own on first before you look after anybody else. And that's exactly what self-care needs to be like.

Clare

I love that example of the oxygen mask. It's such a shortcut way to illustrate how if I'm not thriving, breathing in that case, how can I possibly help you? And now when you go to the library or the bookshop, you'll see endless rows of books about self-care. It is in the zeitgeist. And yet when I raise it with clients, when I raise it with family members, when I try and speak to it, I often get back that making time for me, listening into me, it's like, I can't possibly do that because it would be so selfish.

Janet

Yeah, and you know what you've experienced when people say, are you being self-indulgent or you're being selfish, you know, you're putting yourself first, that's not a good thing. Not only is it a good thing and it's essential, but when I'm sort of talking about this, this area, I really like the phrase be selfish for the team. As long as you're not being overly selfish and mean and ungenerous and not nice to other people around you. But just selfish enough so that you, like you say, it's just about getting those needs met. And you're absolutely right. There are a million self-care books on personal well-being. And, and it's like everybody's got an opinion and that can get a bit overwhelming at times. You know, I certainly feel like I'm being lectured every time I open the paper in the

morning about what I should be doing, what should I be doing now and what am I doing wrong the last six months. And that's difficult sometimes. And actually, which is what I think you were sort of alluding to, Clare, is let's trust ourselves. We know what we need. And as long as we do enough things in our life that make us feel good or happy or joyful or give us a sense of achievement or pleasure, then that's what we need.

Clare

Yeah, I'm struck by that sort of confidence with which you say we know what we need, because I think there are a tranche of us who really struggle with that, who really struggle to know what I need. And I think this is why the market in self-help books is so successful, because I think it's very tempting to look outside ourselves for that sort of magic bullet of what it is. What it is I need, what it is that's going to make the difference that's going to make me feel good. And by all means, I think we can look at these resources for inspiration or for ideas. And some of us, like you will feel kind of bullied or lectured or told off by that, but others of us will get ideas. But I think, by all means, let yourself get inspired. But ultimately you are only going to discover what works for you.

Clare

You know, my sister, she goes circuit training, you know. She likes her gym. She's a member of a gym, but she doesn't go in the building. They train outside in the yard, whatever the weather. And she showed me photographs. And I tell you, Janet, I can't think of anything worse than doing what she does 2 or 3 times a week and gets such a buzz off and loves. But me with my restorative yoga, my gentle swimming, my bit of meditation, my nice slow amble through the park. You know, my idea of self-care is her idea of hell. So, self-care is very personal.

Janet

Well, exactly. And I guess what you've just described there with you and your sister is two different people who enjoy two different activities, but both of you get a real sort of feel-good buzz from the things that you've chosen to do. And I realised, you know, I just sort of said, oh, I open the paper in the morning, and I feel bullied and overwhelmed by all these things that I should be doing and haven't done yet. And actually, you know, I'm not such a dinosaur that I don't go on Instagram as well. But I suppose when I go on Instagram and I look at beautiful body after beautiful body after beautiful body, doing all of these things, and I don't look like that, I have no hope of looking like that. I just feel

terrible. And it makes me, you know, think of some of the people that I'm around where going to the gym 4 or 5 times a week is non-negotiable. And does that about because it's enjoyable or is that because I need to have an Instagrammable body and if I don't go to the gym, umty times a week, then I'm not going to look like that. And how much then does something that is supposed to be good for us turn into something that is actually a pressure and an anxiety and a keeping up with everybody else, because otherwise I'm not a good person, or I'm not beautiful or I'm not doing what I should be doing. And then self-care becomes something else entirely, which feels a bit toxic, actually.

Clare

Yeah. So, it's a complicated subject.

Music

Janet

I think often the way that we care for ourselves, you know, as adults, is, is often influenced or even based on what we learned in our families of origin, in the system that we grew up in, the people around us who, you know, either modelled to us about, you know, it's really important to look after yourself and do things that give you pleasure. Or, you know, lots of people have martyr parents and grow up with martyr parents who are no fun at all. And, you know, and who make a big thing about, oh, I've never got any time for me. And you know, and that can then be a very learned behaviour. And then doing anything for yourself is like, you know, its utterly guilt ridden. But it's also quite a manipulative way of making other people feel bad because we refuse to self-care, and we sort of quite victimise ourselves in that sort of martyrdom. And that's, you know, it's really unhealthy. And if you grew up with a parent like that, then you know, that's not a great place to start in terms of learning how to self-care. And I suppose something like that means that you become very reliant on other people to do it for you and give you permission and say, oh, you know, take it easy or do that, or let me do that. And that's not a good way to be. It's a very needy and dependent way of being rather than being able to look after ourselves.

Clare

And I guess on that, the good news is, even if we had appalling role models and didn't learn this when we were children. We can learn it as adults. You know the only

difference that brings to the mix is that some of us find this easy, and some of us find this is a real stretch for some of us. We need to relearn and retrain ourselves to recognise the value of this. And I think, I don't know if this is the right time to raise this, but one of the things that I've been mindful of is, all the different selves that reside inside Clare. Do you know, there's a critical parent, there's a loving parent, there's a kind of tyrant. There's a compassionate, kind friend. There's an inner teenager. There's an inner toddler. There's a inner rebel. You know, there's lots and lots of selves that reside within Clare. And Janet, I've just got a concern that listeners, you know, some of you listening to us are going to think, oh, my God, Clare's a schizophrenic. You know, there's all these different people in her. I'm not talking about mental illness at all. I'm talking about this community of selves that reside within us, who at different times are really helpful, and it's knowing which self to bring forward at any given time.

Janet

Yeah, yeah. And I think we all identify with that. I mean in victims and villains when we were talking about conflict, you know, we were constantly referring weren't we, to how old are we, which of our selves are we bringing into this conflict. And I think this is very similar in that do we need to be 7 to do something that we enjoy? Do you know what I mean? Because the 45 year old us is far too sensible to do anything frivolous or fun, and we have to be serious and work hard. So, it is very interesting, that idea of different selves. We've all got a, you know, a critical parent or a bully or, or a mean best friend, you know, sitting on our shoulder saying, 'you know, should I be doing this or you shouldn't be doing that, or are you doing it wrong or that, you know, that's ridiculous. What? Who do you think you are?' We've all got that. But we've also hopefully got a much nicer friend and a loving parent who say, no, go on, you give it a go. It doesn't matter if you fall flat on your face, you know, just give it a go.

Music

Janet

Have you ever come across a chap called Damien Hughes? He's like a motivational speaker and, you know, and he's done, like, business stuff and he's sort of very inspirational for young people. He's got a few books out now. Have you ever come across him at all?

Clare

No, no.

Janet

I heard him speak once and I thought he was really good. But the one thing that I took away from that presentation was you know Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. You know, where at the bottom. You've got like shelter and water and food and air. And then as we go up the triangle, the hierarchy, the pyramid, that our needs are sort of prioritised. And he sort of was influenced by that Hierarchy of Needs. And he came up with this idea of, you know, sort of four corners of well-being. And the four things that he cited as being really important were a sense of safety, a sense of control, a sense of value and a sense of belonging. And I think it's a really useful exercise to ask ourselves to score out of 10. How safe do you feel right now? And if you think, oh, actually, yeah, it's about a 3. Well that immediately you've got okay, what do I need to look at to, to make myself feel safer. And then value I guess is something that we talk about a lot, isn't it? Because there are different sorts of value. That there is a sense of being valued by the world, valued by work, or valued by family and friends, or valued on social media or whatever it might be. You know, that external sense of value can be so important and sometimes far outweighs actually our own sense of value, our internal sense of how much we value ourselves.

Janet

And we know, Clare, don't we, that those scales can be weighted very much. You know the wrong way that we put far too much weight on what the rest of the world thinks about us and often don't value ourselves enough and pay attention to ourselves enough. And then, of course, what goes in with that as well is that self-actualisation. You know, are we being the people that we want to be, that we thought we would be? So, all of that feeds into this sense of value in our lives. And then lastly as well, and something else which I think is really important is to have a sense of belonging. As human beings, we can be quite tribal, whether it's football teams or music. That often we like to find our group. I very much identify as a manc, and I've pulled your leg many times in the past for being posh, which I know you've rejected utterly and completely. But I suppose that's, uh, you know, part of part of me and how I see myself. But all of those things, I just think, you know, it's a really good way if we feel not Okay. Safety,

control, value, belonging. What's depleted, what's missing? And then, you know, it sort of gives you a framework to figure out what needs a bit of work here.

Clare

I've not come across that particular tool, but I can really see the value of that lens. You know, it's just as you say, the four pillars. It's you can just go through them one by one and see is that need being met. And I love where you ended the need to feel a sense of belonging. And I think for lots of you listening and certainly for me, I mean, there are often times when I don't experience a sense of belonging, I do feel kind of on the edge. I do feel alone or lonely even, and that is erosive for your wellbeing. You know, I'm not talking about solitude, which is something I deeply, deeply value and need large swathes of it and nourish myself through solitude, which is one of my go to ways of resourcing myself is compromised when I don't have that sense of belonging. I don't feel I'm yes; I don't know my place within my community, but when that's in place, my capacity to delight in solitude is just there.

Music

Janet

We said right at the beginning about, you know, being selfish for the team that everybody benefits. And when I was thinking about how I use this in my profession, when I'm working with people. And I think pretty much almost and, and I'm really sticking my neck out here. Clare, every woman that I've ever worked with who's come to see me because they're struggling with a loss of or lack of desire for sex, I cannot think of one person that I've worked with who has had great self-care in place. So that's one of the very real, tangible, practical responses to having nothing for us. You know, I'll have a conversation with a woman and she could be 30 or she could be 55, or she could be 70. But it's like, what do you keep back for you? And if the answer is very little, then it's a bit like, well, that's where we start.

Clare

Yes.

Janet

Because sexual desire, interest, energy for sex is one of the first things to go if we're not looking after ourselves properly. And it's a really good indicator. So that's a very practical way of understanding, you know, one way of understanding why self-care is really important. But also, when we're working with couples and there's a lot of conflict. And again, you ask that same question, what do you do for yourselves? Not each other. What do you do each for yourselves? What are you putting back in? How much capacity have you got to cope with do you know, when life throws a curve ball, or your partner irritates you or they let you down in some way. How much capacity have you got to deal with that? If there is no capacity to deal with it, you have no tolerance and you have no way of sorting it out. And then it'll just be like, you know, tops blown. It's catastrophe and high conflict and everybody loses and all because, you know, you give, give, give, give, give and spend all of your energy and keep nothing back. And so yeah, you lose out. Your partner loses out. Your kids lose out, your friends lose out, your work loses out. But most of all you lose out.

Clare

You described yourself as sticking your neck out there, Janet, when you were referring to women. But I think you're making a really valid point. I think this difficulty with prioritising self and relationship with self is really, really at epidemic levels within the female population. I think women are particularly conditioned to give their attention out, to give to others in a way, men. I think it's different. And it's rare for me to kind of want to put a gendered lens on it. But I think this is an area where I think it is, you know, for you women listeners, you know, yes, we are talking to you. It's not exclusively women. There are men who are poor at this as well. But.....

Janet

It really isn't because I've worked with lots of men as well who also have a problem with self-care and give too much.

Clare

Definitely, so that's why I wanted to include men in this. But equally speak to that thousands of years of patriarchy, one of its legacies is: women shouldn't put themselves first. And whilst I don't think my relationship with me is about me putting myself first, it is about me attending to that relationship And it's, you know, it's a bit like you can't expect

a car to go if you don't put fuel in it. You know, whether it's electric or petrol, it's like it needs to be, it needs to be fuelled. But around sexuality, sexual desire, sexual expression, you know, sex is, one of the literally one of the pleasures in life. One of the glorious things about it is that it's free. And recent research has illuminated that for women, an orgasm a week can put five years on your life. Well, that is a significant piece of health, you know. Will the NHS start doing nice little handouts for that, you know, an orgasm a week adds 5 years to your life, you know, things that take 5 years off your life, like smoking or alcohol consumption. You know, they'll tell us about that. But you know, could you tell us about orgasms? These are such valuable activities to engage in and they extend your lifespan. And we can have them by ourselves. So, this relationship with myself is like, how much am I attending to my sexual pleasure, to my ability to experience sexual pleasure? And if I'm burnt out, knackered, giving, giving, giving, giving, giving, it's like it's not just having desire for sex with other people. I'm going to lose an interest in having desire for sex with myself.

Janet

Because that makes me think about, I don't know whether you've heard it, but for years I've heard, you know, golf, play golf. It'll put 5 years on your life. And I'm like, yeah, why have we heard about golf? And we haven't heard about, you know, the quickest free thing that can also put five years on your life. Imagine having an orgasm on a golf course, Clare. (laugh)

Janet

But yeah, you're absolutely right. Self-care whether it's sexual, whether it's physical, sensual. Just having a better time of it, that having that capacity it is not only life, enhancing, but actually probably life prolonging.

Music

Clare

I just think it's useful to, to sort of summarise that, that in terms of my relationship with myself, you know, some of the, um, activities are really it's not rocket science. It's making sure I have enough rest, making sure I have enough of the right food, making sure I have enough exercise. And over the course of my life, and we've talked before about things changing at different life stages but having a sense of activities and things

that make me feel joyful but make me feel good about myself and my life and um, within a relationship. Sometimes this is, this is really, really important that I, even though I'm in a relationship, that I have time where I go and do the things that I like. So, I might go and do things without my partner. And I have a life independent of my partner and vice versa. My partner also has their own activities and interests and things that they do without me. You know that we are two individual selves as well as being part of a couple.

Janet

Yeah. And I think it's very common, isn't it, that very often one person will be much better at looking after their own needs than the other person. And then sometimes resentments can build up because 'you're always off doing this, that and the other. And I'm the one left at home' and then because, you know, the other person feels, you know, maybe they're not great at making time for themselves or don't give themselves permission. You know, then conflicts can build up and one person is being billed as the selfish person, and the other person is the all giving, you know, a bit of a martyr complex thing going on. Or, you know, maybe they're not being martyrs and maybe actually they're just full of good intentions, but just never can quite get round to prioritising it enough. That actually learning and helping to support each other, to look after ourselves can be extremely important. Certainly, my thing getting in the bath with a book is absolutely number one self-care for me. I love it. And it's so easy for the day to run away and then, you know, just not got time to do it. But if you have a partner who is saying 'no 8:00 Wednesday night, your time, go and take it, you know, it's fine. We'll be fine. Just go and do it'. Then sometimes people just it's really helpful to do that for your partner.

Clare

And if you're the one whose drive is to give, whose drive is to serve, if you know if it's not your strength, give yourself permission to try a few things before you find something that suits you. You know, go and look at our website, talk to other people, pick other people's brains, you know, get support to help you learn how to do this better.

Janet

And of course, it doesn't have to just be the big stuff either, does it? You know, 5 minutes inserted in the day to put some music on and dance around for a bit or grab

your hairbrush and do a bit of singing in the kitchen, a bit of hairbrush karaoke in the kitchen. Or doing a few yoga stretches. Just fit them in because it makes you feel better and it gets rid of the tension in your shoulders. You know, it doesn't have to be the big stuff. It can be just putting in the little things.

Clare

I'm so glad you've said that, because when I was thinking around, what's the thing that I've found to be the biggest difference that makes a difference, and it is to punctuate your day with pauses. Just to have a moment of 'haaaa!' Rather than getting, you know, onto the next thing, onto the next thing, onto the next thing, just affords me that chance to come back to Clare and be home before I go into my next and my next and my next.

Janet

So, I mean, I guess what we've been talking about is self-care is not just what people on TikTok or Instagram are telling us. It can be so many different things. As long as we get a sense of pleasure or mastery, you know, some sort of sense of achievement out of it, and we're doing it for us. And I suppose that's the key. Learning to be selfish is not necessarily an easy thing to master.

Clare

And I do want to challenge the word selfish. Maybe learning to be self-aware. Learning to be self-attentive. I mean, you talked about control earlier when you were talking about that dude with his pillars, and you use the word control. I prefer the word agency, being able to notice where I can have agency and where I can't. And in all our relationships, the one we have the most agency in is the relationship with ourselves. And yet it's often the relationship that we drop out on and we miss. And yet, if we can attend to that relationship, our capacity to be awake and present and able to be in healthy, life-giving relationships with others will be enhanced exponentially.

Clare

Oh, Janet I think we're coming to the end of this episode and oh my word it's also the end of this current series. Gosh yes, series one, this is the final one.

If you'd like to read more about what we've been talking about then please do visit our website: thesexandrelationships podcast.com, yep that's it:

thesexandrelationships podcast.com. Thanks so, so much for being with us. And until the next series bye, bye.

Janet: Bye, Clare. Till next time.