

Re-Thinking Delusions with Victoria Shepherd

Victoria Shepherd: [00:00:00]

One thing that's true about delusions is that that logic will not, we know about this from conspiracy theory, right. For just, you know, very current logic, isn't going to touch the sides with it.

That was Victoria Shepherd on psychologists off the clock

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I'm here with Jill to introduce an episode on rethinking delusions. I had the opportunity to talk with an author, Victoria Shepherd, who had written a book called a history of delusions and it has a great subtitle.

The glass king, a substitute husband, and a walking corpse. What I wanted to kind of share is that after I finished the recording with Victoria, we, we just started talking about how history and mental health are often so siloed, right? That we talk about history, like in a totally different world than we would ever talk about mental health.

And she's sort of bringing together these two topics and in a really helpful way, because it helps us to understand what is the history of how we've understood this presentation and how can history help us [00:03:00] understand it better? And this was also something that I discussed with Carla Eric Fisher in the episode, on the history of addictions, that was episode 2 35.

So I, I think I've gotten really interested in sort of how history of mental health plays into some of the mistakes that we currently make and how we can use history to better our understanding of the different kinds of things that we see in the field of mental health.. So, and One thing that is really striking about this conversation is that delusions are much more common than we might think, right. That we think of it as sort of this very extreme. Event that happens for people who are really sick. And actually most of us can probably identify some form of delusional thinking and delusions are defined as a fixed false belief.

So, Jill, I'm curious what you think about.

Jill Stoddard: Well, I think this, first of all, I found this episode absolutely fascinating. And [00:04:00] that piece you just mentioned is what really, really struck me that, you know, admittedly, I've always thought about delusions as something that floridly psychotic people experience and Victoria really reconceptualize this as something that all of us may have a tendency to experience when we get hooked by a narrative in a really rigid fashion. One of the things I was thinking about personally is I have a brother . I typically refer to him as my bad brother and my other brother is my good brother. This very narrow conceptualization, these unidimensional characters that they are, and my quote unquote, bad brother is currently incarcerated. And, you know, I have a narrative about him being a bad person and a monster and that's that.

But interestingly, my other brother and my father have a very different idea about him, different from me, but also [00:05:00] different from each other. So all three. We have different stories about our beliefs, about this person and all of our beliefs are pretty fixed, you know, pretty rigid. And we all think we're right, but how can we all be right and have three different stories?

And it just really got me thinking like, I guess in some ways, this is kind of a form of delusion. And what you talk about a lot is the function of that. The typically these delusions, even the ones that are, I think I'm Napoleon or I made of glass, are the ones that seem more bizarre that you can trace all of them.

To some sort of function. And of course for me, you know, this is how I feel safe and secure in the world to create a story about this person being bad and being dangerous and therefore deciding to be a stranger and have no contact. And, you know, it just really got me thinking like hot, do I need. Rethink this fixed belief.

Is there some cost here? And I don't have an answer to the question yet, but it just got me thinking about [00:06:00] this in an, in an entirely new way. And you even, you know, a little bit into the episode, you even challenged listeners to do the same. And I just, I found it fascinating.

Yael Schonbrun: Well, I love that. , conducting these interviews and listening to one another's interviews, Jill has such an impact on our own lives. And it's something that we, you and Debbie and I talk about regularly that, you know, the lessons that we learned through the guests that we have in the books that we read really can change the trajectory of how we live our daily lives.

And I love that you're sort of absorbing some of these messages and kind of questioning your own stories about your brother. And so we. Listeners stay tuned all the way to the end for various ideas on how to relate to delusions and others and delusions in ourselves. And Jill I'm, curious to hear, where more reflection on your story about your brother, where it lands you.

So we hope you enjoyed this episode.

I'm here with Victoria Shepherd, who has produced scores of documentaries for BBC, including the [00:07:00] 10 part series with the title, a history of delusions. And today she's here to talk with us about her new book, a history of delusions with a terrifically intriguing subtitle, the glass king, a substitute husband, and a walking corpse.

Welcome Victoria.

Victoria Shepherd: Thank you for having me.

Yael Schonbrun: Thank you. I'm so excited to talk about delusions and the history of delusions, because the importance of context and mental health has become increasingly recognized. But when most people, even those of us in mental health professions don't often recognize is that even our understanding of delusions should be understood within context. And that's where your new book really offers a huge eye-opening opportunity.

Victoria Shepherd: Yeah. I'll, I'll start, you know, I'm, I'm a social historian. Um, and I think that the way I found became a kind of a detective is of delusions historically, which is how I, how I see myself, uh, started. I was researching something completely different for another history of science was the history of the heart.

Um, and I came up. So, this is the [00:08:00] first part of the subtitle. I came across a reference, which jumped off the page to me, which was a reference to king Charles, the sixth of France. He's a 14th, 15th century king who the silver little subtype, this little doodle in the margins of whatever I was reading, jumped out saying that he had thought that he had turned into God.

And I immediately stopped what I was doing. I did finish that series, but a bit slower. Uh, and I thought, Hey, what, what's this the king of medieval king who thought he turned into glass? And I started digging into that. Um, he was, he was. Publicly dealing with the hundred years war with England. Um, so he had a full time full, full job on there, but in his private life, he was, you know,

completely consumed with anxiety that he would, that he would smash if he came into contact with, with any home.

Objects. And he was reported that there were Chronicles by Pope Pius, the second, um, [00:09:00] about his life. And he was a Porter to have wrapped himself in blankets to stop himself, um, from smashing and whilst it's a kind of absurd scenario, it's ridiculous. Um, there was something else in it that was the life and death.

You know, this here's, this king, the courts of Europe were laughing at him because, you know, because of his belief that he turned into. It got me thinking about, you know, the jeopardy of that. What, what was his delusion? His delusional belief, his fixed false idea, which is the definition I use of delusions, his single fixed, false idea about himself.

What was that doing for him? Because it must've been doing something pretty important to risk ridicule across you. Um, and you know, it's no less than life and death to him, he clung to it. Uh, and, and that seems to be true across many different divisions across centuries. People cling to them, they are serving some kind of protective function.

I argue in the book, um, and I, and it does stand up. So as I, as I kind of [00:10:00] extended my research into other delusions across other centuries, um, Sort of speaking to each other, these individuals, and there seem to be functions in delusions and what they were offering people in terms of protection and help with, with their difficult realities that were repeating again and again.

So helping you to reconcile. Irreconcilable conflict that came up again and again, simply an alternative reality that helps you deal with a really, really wretched reality and so on and so on. So it all started with, with this glass king, um, and of course, gloss, you know, talking about the social context.

Another thing that keeps cropping up as, as technology, new technology of the day. And again, and again, delusions seem to pack themselves to new technology. And at the time, um, gloss was a relatively new substance. Um, it came from heating sand until it became [00:11:00] transparent. And so it's kind of our chemical extraordinary material.

It's transparent, but also breakable. And so you can start to see, you can start to understand what seems completely absurd starts to make some kind of sense. It's a kind of distance regulator, um, potentially, it's a kind of way of telling the

world how to treat you saying, look, I'm, I'm stay away, stay back, uh, sort of social anxiety, expression stay away, but also I'm precious.

I'm, I'm kind of magical. I'm a treasure. Um, so, you know, there's, there's lots of in it. It's both of its time with each of these 10 characters that I talk about in the book, but also again and again, you know, the patterns and the functionality, um, echoes all over the place. And so I do think the context is potentially helpful.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And I think you're pointing something out that most of us don't really, again, even in the field of mental health, don't think too much about, which is the functionality [00:12:00] of beliefs and so I do a lot of couples therapy and this often happens where, you know, one person like really has a strong belief in the other person really can't understand why.

If we sort of get curious about the function, the functionality of that belief, we get much further in connecting and understanding in joining one another than we do by trying to just disprove it. And you make this point in your book, which I think is such an important one that our tendency, our impulse is to want to prove somebody's.

Belief that has evidence contradicting it wrong. And you say that that's kind of the wrong way to go about it. And I wonder if you can talk a little bit about that because you make this point again and again, in your book that we can, we can learn about people about, you know, time and place, but also the individual themselves by really listening deeply to the delusion.

Victoria Shepherd: I think that's, I mean, it's certainly given me a lot more compassion. [00:13:00] Other people, because, you know, as you say, the one thing that's true about delusions is that that logic will not, we know about this from conspiracy theory, right. For just, you know, very current logic, isn't going to touch the sides with it.

Like logic's never going to get anywhere. Um, why is that? Well, what, you know, again, there's the functionality of it. If it seems to be that there's often a kind of scaffolding. Um, that it's offering people a protective scaffolding, this belief, and that's why people will cling to it. And the reason for that, I mean, the, the other very interesting thing about delusions is that they they're always encoded. They have a kind of encoded. Um, meaning they feel like communiques. Um, they're sort of smuggling in hopes and fears and, and, and they're quite performative in that sense.

They're asking for an audience, whether that's from, somebody, you know, a loved one or from the wider public they're asking for interpretation. And, um, and I think that that's what sort of really started to give me [00:14:00] a real sense of compassion for what we're all trying to, to, when we navigate difficulties in our lives.

We all really want to be worthy of that. Don't we to be worthy of interpretation, to be worthy of kind attention, and we don't get much of it. Most of us and some of us get absolutely none of it. Certainly some of the characters from past women in the past, I think probably had even less than most of the men in the past.

And so there's this sense in which you're engaging when, when a delusion is presented to a person I made of block. I'm Napoleon or whatever it is, or my husband's been murdered and swapped for a double or whatever it is. It's it's, it has a con there's a kind of thriller quality to it. There's a inherent mystery.

That's asking for the audience to that belief. Of course, this is all unconscious. I'm not suggesting in any way that people are doing this, um, cynically or consciously. But it's asking for interpretation and I think that's the key to it. But, um, if you look at it like that, and perhaps we could apply that to, to ourselves, um, [00:15:00] if you look at some, a partner or a loved one, or colleagues for fixed false belief, rather than arguing with them, you might consider just sitting with them going a few steps towards them.

I mean, some of the physicians from the past kind of understood this, even if they didn't write it down in these terms, that. The only way really ruses didn't tend to work. The only thing that tended to allow somebody to release a fixed false idea was if somebody stepped maybe a few, just a, a part ways towards it played the game, as it were a little bit, , met them halfway, and then it allowed people to kind of potentially let go.

The only kind of indication I had that people did step away from their delusions or sort of put them down a bit, was by somebody yeah. And engaging with it, you know? To, to listen very simply to give it attention and to interpret, to decode it and to try and find out what the hopes and fears [00:16:00] and what seems completely crazy might be.

And I think you can, you know, I think you can apply that to, to now and to relationships as, you know, live relationships that we're all engaged in.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah. And maybe even on a broader spectrum. And I want to step into this idea of broader conspiracy theories in just a second, but I think what you're offering is a really actionable tip that. Somebody close to you or, or just an acquaintance even shares a belief that seems ludicrous to you rather than getting into a debate about whether there's logic behind it or not to get really curious and join them.

And, really, engaged around the functionality. Like what, what is that belief telling you about them? How is it helping them? How is it helping them make sense of the world? How can you understand them better and approaching it from that perspective, actually loosens the grip. Lands you in a more collaborative position and a less sort of stuck position.

And I think that that is [00:17:00] just such a useful tip. And I will point out that I think that that is one of the major, uh, super powers of therapy, right? That most of the ways that most of the kinds of therapies that you find on the market that is the general thrust, is that the. Is there to listen and to understand the function of what's going on with the patient and the client, um, to join them, to understand, you know, why it is that they believe what they do not to fight with them.

And there is something incredibly healing about that, you know, from depression where you sort of have these over overly negative beliefs to, um, a straight, you know, delete delusional belief that joining with somebody and being curious and, and sort of empathically. Being with them is much more powerful than arguing with them or trying to prove them wrong.

Victoria Shepherd: I really, I really have come to believe that if you pardon the pun I have, I have, I mean,

Yael Schonbrun: it's not delusional.

Victoria Shepherd: I know it all gets very matter if you don't, if you're not careful with this, I was very pleased to go to my first book event, [00:18:00] you know, to make sure it was, it was all real. It was all true. I hadn't, I hadn't drank the whole whole bookstore.

I mean, I really key. I started making a series for BBC radio, um, which the book became a kind of, you know, the history, a history version of it. Um, and one of the key pieces of research. Which keeps you humble in this topic came out of Baltimore in 1991, which was the first time that they'd ever asked the general population about delusional thinking.

Um, they're just never, also the only people who've ever been categorized or diagnosed. Um, Well people with very, very extreme beliefs. People, you know, uh, who thought they were Napoleon or who thought king George, the third was, was, had stolen the throne from them, or, but when they asked the general population, um, a random sample in 1991, they found, well, I suppose we all know if we're, if we're really honest with ourselves, they found that we're all, we're all delusional.

We [00:19:00] all have at least one fixed false idea about ourselves. That if we asked our loved ones, they'd ask.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, it kind of brings to mind beliefs, like imposter ism. Like I'm not good enough that everybody around you, you know, might say, what are you talking about? You've achieved this and that. And the other thing, or, or. It was me when you're in close relationships, you know, that there's these sort of common beliefs that many of us get trapped in and nobody else buys them, but we hold them lightly enough and they're not interfering too much with our day-to-day lives.

So they don't sort of count. But what you're saying is, and the study shows is that, you know, most of us have something like that, like a belief that really doesn't go along with how other people see the world or CS.

Victoria Shepherd: I think we all do. I took me a long time for the penny to drop about what mine was, but, uh,

Yael Schonbrun: , what are, what are

Victoria Shepherd: minus a phobia, which is interesting because phobias operate very SIM. They are delusions in a sense. So I had a longstanding phobia of going into. [00:20:00] Uh, elevators

Yael Schonbrun: to the American?

Victoria Shepherd: So again, it's a kind of the similarity there.

I mean, I suppose it gives you knowing that we're, we all have skin in the game, right? That's the point where we can't look at it as a kind of cabinet of curiosities. As we go through these, these 10 stories that I have in the book, they are all kind of stranger than fiction. They all have a kind of thriller mystery element to them and they're extreme.

But when you know that you're on that, you're on that scale, you have a humility. And we will, you know, that we all have to sort of accept. Um, and that these are just stories with the kind of contrast turned up there, like technical versions of things that we all have. And when you start to realize that it's unnerving, but it also gives you so much, it's very comforting because you can look at somebody.

I think Robert Burton from the 15 hundreds or these people from hundreds of years ago, and there's a real sense of kind of handholding and. Of seeing how ingenious people are imaginatively and creating these [00:21:00] alternative realities, uh, alternative. Yeah. I mean, it may not be healthy in the long run. Um, but they certainly survived sort of psychological survival strategies in the short term and they're kind of ingenious.

And so I was sort of after spending so much time, a lot of it in lockdown with these 10 characters, I'm really, you know, I'm really kind of humbled and impressed by the ingenuity of their imagination and therefore in all of us that we can find these strange ways of, as I say, sometimes it's, it's, it's not healthy.

Yael Schonbrun: , what you're saying right now is that delusions sometimes help people out with their complicated wretched realities, but what's notable is that for many of those stories that you describe in your book, and certainly this is true in modern life. Delusions can really cause a lot of problems.

It landed folks into. Insane asylums, where they were locked down for life and made them the laughing stock of their kingdom. And so, in what [00:22:00] ways do you understand that delusions really help people who are in, dire straits in some way or another.

Victoria Shepherd: Very crudely and , three very clear functionalities that have continued to repeat. So the, the kind of the primer, the simplest mechanic example of that is. It's a spate of people who thought that they were Napoleon the Empress Napoleon, um, in the 18 hundreds in France. And that there were, I mean, literally tens of them.

And this is the ones that were recorded. And this is after he died, he turned up at the biggest silence in France saying that they were Napoleon, uh, France had been through, uh, being a catastrophic, , political and social century. If not more, uh, It's pretty, it's pretty clear what, what that delusion is doing.

It's giving people a low status, , people with no feeling of agency about their life or a desperate, yeah, it was feelings of impotence, [00:23:00] you know, they're,

they're, they, they take on the costume, , of the most sort of powerful at the time I con of kind of self-made, um, power and autonomy. So that's the sort of simple.

Way in which it's clear that it was serving a protective function. It was just giving yourself brilliantly, rather simply power that you didn't have in, in, uh, in, in the common sense, reality that everybody else accepts. The other very clear one, um, is. Allowing, I mean, what, it's, what it shows the second sort of category, which is helping you to deal with irreconcilable conflict.

It seems as though, and I'm sure you, you must be. To this every day, but that we all seem to find it incredibly difficult to live with with conflicting feelings, , nebulous threats, but, but particularly conflicting feelings. And so I have, a [00:24:00] character in my book called James Tilly Matthews, who was a, a T broker in 18th century, London who taught himself.

Got in with an intellectual circle who sort of adopted him. And he ended up on a boat going to revolutionary France with priestly, all these public figures. Um, and suddenly there, he was a kind of self-styled diplomat just as the revolution was kicking off. And he was trying to, uh, work with this deputation to, to stop the revolution.

Of course quickly the case. You know, got himself into the hottest water, you can imagine where the English thought he was a spy. The French thought he was a spy. Everybody, everybody had a reason to kill him. It's amazing that he, he didn't, uh, wasn't killed under the guillotine.

And he was kicked back to England where he lived in poverty with his wife and child and Camberwell, which maybe your, your us listeners may not know, but it's, it's, uh, actually it's quite gentrified now, but at the time it [00:25:00] was a very, uh, Poor area of south London. And so that kind of reversal of fortune, as well as the kind of conflicted political scene, that was very, you know, where, who was in the right and who was in the wrong would flip on a sixpence.

Um, and his out of this was born, uh, his extraordinary delusional. Belief that, um, there was a gang kind of Dickensian, ProTech Dickensian gang on the streets of London who were using a contraption called an heirloom when he called an heirloom. And it was, uh, using magnetic forces to influence the government, to bring revolution.

So the magnetic rays would go from the heirloom, um, into parliament and, and, uh, give them revolutionary ideas. And he, he goes into the houses of parliament

at Westminster and such screaming at Lord Liverpool and his government, and he's hauled out and arrested and put [00:26:00] into an asylum. , so again, you have the technology,

lots of physical forces were being discovered. So again, like with glass, you have kind of. The new understanding of, of, uh, invisible forces or, or new tech, new technologies emerging, and his delusion is kind of, pegged onto that. , but anyway, it's a conspiracy theory. He was, he was called the first paranoid schizophrenia. and it's, it's a paranoid conspiracy, but you can see what it's doing. It's he, you know, he's creating this very simple plot whereby you know, these, this gang of villains are trying to do, trying to overturn the British government and they need to be stopped.

And. You know, everybody needs to get on board and he turns, what's an incredible soup of conflicting and messy politics and, and humiliation. And it's the Marcus thing you can possibly imagine. He turns it into a very, very simple conspiracy theory with, with the good and the bad. And so, again, it's [00:27:00] this simplification a dangerous simplification when you can be right with conspiracy theory, but you can see what it's doing for him.

Yael Schonbrun: Right.

I think this comes up so often in close relationships, where, for example, if you have new parents and they're both exhausted and stressed out and overwhelmed with all of the stressors that are new and confusing and chaotic.

And one of the things that's very easy for the mind to do is to just assign all the villainy to the partner. Well, It's better if my partner was helping more. And of course that might be an important part of the complicated story, but it's just one part. And yet the mind goes there almost exclusively in a lot of cases.

And it's an interesting, I think, um, more subtle take on what it is that you're describing, which is, you know, in a time of chaos and pain and overwhelm, our mind wants a simple story and explanation. And so delusions are sort of that taken to a very extreme level.

Victoria Shepherd: I think that's fascinating. That's [00:28:00] fascinating. I think that's absolutely beautiful and true and true because that, that conflict, you know, you can apply it to a very, I mean, it's, it's a seismic moment having a paper. It may not be revolutionary France, but it's, you know, it feels like it, it doesn't, it

Yael Schonbrun: It really does.

Victoria Shepherd: logically. Um, so I think, you know, cognitive dissonance and all of those things, I mean, How How we kind of become more aware in our own lives. What history can kind of show us about? I don't know if it's being able to accommodate ambiguity, ambivalence, um, it's a bit, you it's a bit me. It's, it's hard to say.

How can we kind of train ourselves and our society to be able to. Hold conflicting things and accept, except that it's not simple. Um, I think, I think James silly Matthews kind of daring do it. And then it's a sort of incredible story, but it is [00:29:00] a kind of, um, lesson about that, about the dangers. And he had the dangers of it's.

So it's protective, you know, you can see why you can see how ingenious his mind was and he wasn't kind of raving mad and inverted comments at all. In fact quite the opposite, you know, but he never ever let go of this belief in, in, um, in the conspiracy theory, but he spent his whole time in, in the , Bedlam hospital.

Um, I don't know if there's Bedlam, uh, a term in the U S you know, just

for, for, for chaos. Right? So. That comes from, uh, the, the Bethlehem, the Bedlam hospital, which was this very chaotic, asylum, in south London where he spent the next sort of 40 years of his life. Um, so you can see, but he came to kind of, he was sort of the father there, you know, people came to him and he was a brilliant draftsman.

He, he, um, he drew his conspiracies, um, And these characters and this other world, and you can look at them. Anyone can look at them online, actually the welcome collection [00:30:00] to ELLs, um, which is a great big kind of medical, uh, repository of medical writing and drawings. Anyway, they're all online. They're, they're worth a look because that you can really travel into his, might see what he was seeing and he draws the allium it's on, but you can see.

That he'd simplified to threat. He'd organized his enemy. He'd organized his enemy. That's how I spoke. I think that's the key phrase that you can apply to yourself as a warning. Am I, am I just, is this neater than it is accurate? Am I just organizing my enemy here

and you

Yael Schonbrun: that. as a tip to sort of, you know, check your own story, like when it gets too simple, uh, in a complicated situation, it's an important time to maybe zoom out and look for the more nuanced version of this story. And so what's the third kind. So there's sort of the first, uh, the first way that delusions can be helpful is to help us feel more important when we've been made invisible and sort of been [00:31:00] confronting major injustice and have no way to sort of stand up for ourselves, that delusions can help give us a sense of greater importance in the world that they can organize us organized chaos.

And in this a way that helps us manage overwhelm and uncertainty. And then what's the third way.

Victoria Shepherd: so, so that again comes back to the king, the, when it's a metaphor. So you sort of melt into the object. So becoming glass again. Uh, you'll use glasses. Just, it's still, I mean, you know, I have had a few people contact me, a producer who, you know, who said, oh, I actually, it's funny. I thought my legs are loss at one point, even though of course glass isn't new, it still has.

Um, and again, we go back to the con the kind of, um, ambivalence it's, it's amazing. It has amazing qualities. I can't think of any other material that has them. That can, that is both fragile, but brittle, um, beautiful, but [00:32:00] breakable and it can embody and hold contradictory, um, qualities. And so it's still even hundreds of years later, something that.

That speaks to us. It's certainly spoke to me. It made the hair on the back of my neck. That's what got me into the whole sort of topic in the first place. Cause I just knew I could just feel from fairytale slippers, you know, the gloss slippers and it still has a charge to. Um, so they overlap, you know, I think, I think what blue glass, essentially, that you use, you become, you become something your delusion is that is a bodily one that you have become, you know, a Wolf for you, but you've become some, it's a somatic idea and it's

Yael Schonbrun: and it's almost like offering a metaphor to explain to the world what's going on internally at an emotional or a sort of more gut level. That it's a way to communicate.

Victoria Shepherd: And that one, you know, the kind of social anxiety that I feel it's [00:33:00] even more, um, potent as a, as a, as a disorder, if you like now, because it's, it's, you know, w population, but we all live in smaller and smaller spaces. Um, and the idea of it being a distance regulator and delusional,

like. And I think that would not just be glass, but glass is a very kind of easy way to, into that.

You can sort of see it's telling people to, as I said, to sort of stay back, but also asking for admiration to an extent asking to be, to be treated well and to be seen as precious. Um, and I mean, the other thing that came out of it and it's part of the first element, the, the kind of, uh, dealing with just a really wretched existence, I came across again and again, how.

Powerful humiliation and reversal, fortune people who humiliated delusions come out of humiliation again. And again, and again, I'd say probably that word would be at the back of [00:34:00] more than any other, as a, as a kind of trigger for delusion. And it's really set me thinking about just how strong. That is when it happens to you, that being humiliated and I'm sure there's kind of evolutionary, real reasons for that, , terms of being part of society and so on.

although it's interesting because delusions do challenge that cause you would think that we all want, nobody wants to be embarrassed. Nobody wants to go against, you know, we have this drive to kind of not go. The craft not being humiliated. And yet a delusion often comes out of humiliation, but it involves making these kind of public declarations that go

against the public,

Yael Schonbrun: Um, and maybe the, the function of that is to regain some agency because often the initial humiliation is done without our consent, without our control, without [00:35:00] any influence from us. But the delusion is maybe in a sense, a way to regain some of that agency. Even if the humiliation is sustained, at least you have more control over it.

And there's something I think very inherently. Human about that desire to have some agency over how things go.

Victoria Shepherd: That's really interesting that you're kind of replaying it, but would you in charge of it? So you're kind of rerunning the humiliation. Yeah, I hadn't thought of it like that, but I think that's right. I think that's right. There's a, cause they seem to be at odds. They seem to, it seems to go against this drive that everyone talks about to, to, um, to stay with the common sense.

Reality. It's enormously brave, reckless, hard to understand why you would break that while you put your head above the parapet. Uh, and, and that, that, that I think, I think there's, I think there's a lot in that. That powerlessness again

is a really toxic sensei. We don't want to feel, [00:36:00] but we'll feel anything rather than feel humiliated or powerless.

Right.

Yael Schonbrun: Yeah, but it does get to this question. I mean, the, the whole conversation about delusions is a fixed false belief. Supposes. Somebody is writing somebody who's wrong about whether a belief is false. And so it gets there's this question, and I think it's inherent throughout your book and, and various points.

You make it explicit, but like who gets to decide what is a delusion versus what is not? And I think that really does get to some controversy that is very timely, which is, um, like for example, I don't know if you've heard of the term mass formation. Uh, and if listeners haven't heard of it, it's defined as when mob influence leaves an individual with disturbed thoughts and perception and unable to fully distinguish what's real from what's not.

And this idea. Even the existence of mass formation is pretty controversial. There have been some prominent voices that have been in the news lately with regard to COVID [00:37:00] and folks believing that the pandemic is more of a psychosis. That's the result of this mass formation.

Then it is a reality. And I don't necessarily want to get into that per se, but I do think it gets to this underlying question of who gets to decide whether a belief is false or not. And you can look back in history,, for example, you know, when are you considered a profit versus a mad person? So this comes up in religion all the time.

Victoria Shepherd: I think certainly. You know, I have one character in my book, Francis Spira, who was put up in the counter reformation, um, in Italy, um, Italian lawyer, you can look at his delusion that he's delusional, that he was damned for all eternity, that he, God had kind of come to him and told him that he was damned to hell fire.

Um, and he's, he starved, reported to have starved himself to death, to kind of negate it himself and, and just refused food. Um, Because it's his belief that he was damned and you very quickly get to the, [00:38:00] with, you know, with any, what you can't help. You can't help. But see that with one person's religious belief is another person's delusion and that, and it's inquiry it's, you know, that one's been fought out.

I know the reformation, the Counter-Reformation. People burning on, on pyres all over Europe, um, is an extremely violent, um, dramatization of that. But it's still true, isn't it? And it's the one area that, you know, we can't, you know, you can't say with any clarity that, well, some people would say that all religion is delusional.

Right.

Yael Schonbrun: Right. Th that might be like a mass, a mob belief. Some people might say that, But, but.

We're not medicating. We're not medicating those delusions where we're allowing them to be in and supporting.

Victoria Shepherd: right. And so, you know, that's not even close to have been. We haven't unpacked and maybe we shouldn't. I mean, that's the, that's the other [00:39:00] element, you know, the, should it be cured question mark that's that runs through all these stories all the way back to ancient Greece, you know, and I think.

Like I mentioned ruse, there's this idea that you can kind of trick people that physicians would sort of say, well, you think you've already died. I have a really another French woman who thought she'd already died. A lot of it's important to say the load of these, um, case studies come from France just after the revolution, because that's when delusions as a kind of discrete subject were being categorized and research for the first time, there were these new, great big asylums that, that grew up in Paris.

Um, and that's when they were. You know, trying to create a taxonomy of, of delusions. And they wrote down, they listened to these, um, men and women, uh, and they made copious notes, people at cap crab, uh, and, and they created the w there's still a still kind of principle delusion types, like delusions of doubles, um, erotomania, the delusion that somebody of higher status [00:40:00] is in love with you.

It's kind

Yael Schonbrun: That's my favorite one.

Victoria Shepherd: Right. I mean, that's yeah. That's um, Madame, they will have these pseudonyms because of course they have their poster goals. Uh, usually post to girls, sometimes poster boys for, for these doctors papers, which

announced these delusion types to the world. And so they suddenly become Madam X or Madam, Madam M who thought her husband had been sport for a double.

And you kind of, my, my job has been to try and find the right. The real story, what traumas or events had happened to them behind these kinds of pseudonyms? Um, you know, you find their real name and it's quite exciting. Louise madman was really called to is, but yes, the, the erotomania is a particularly dangerous and kind of, um, timely or rather kind of, of, of this sort of modern era, uh, disorder.

Um, because it's like stalking, it manifests like stalking. Um, So, [00:41:00] um, layer and a bay, who's the character she's in the 19, in the 1920s, but she becomes convinced from Paris theater. George, the fifth of England is in love with her and she travels. If I found out that she'd actually been dumped by her lover.

So she, her she'd really seriously experienced some humiliation, um, and her delusion Springs up that, that he's in love with her. So it's an interesting one because it's. It says it kind of denies all the responsibility for your behaviors, George, the fifth he's he's, you know, he's the one who's in love with me.

I'm not stalking him, but of course she, she goes to Buckingham palace and stands outside and looks waiting for the curtains to Twitch to give her a message to say, come and meet me, you know, Victoria station. Um, so it's, it's kind of, you can see what, what, what, what the mind is doing is it's it's disowning agency and responsibility, and also.

But it's also, you know, [00:42:00] creating love for yourself, speaking you the heroine of your story, but of course it's potentially extremely dangerous because it won't take any responsibility for your actions. It, um, and so, so many of these delusions stories are kind of compelling and fascinating, but it's yeah, they have to be.

Very seriously. You know, I, I was very, I'm very aware and I hope that I have, um, treated them all that, not kind of, um, whimsical, weird curios stories, this at the heart of them. They're, they're understandable. I have come to believe that they're all understandable from a psychological level, but some of them are real.

Um, There's a real warning and there's real menace, uh, as well that they can be a danger to the person than to others. So I take them seriously and as much as I'm fascinated by them,

Yael Schonbrun: Well, and I think you really do. I think more than we have [00:43:00] in history, take them seriously, because you're so curious about the function and, and sort of the, the cause and sort of how they're serving the person. Um, and you're really understanding it in, in context, which I think is so important. And I think just to get back to this question of like, who gets to decide, what's a delusion and what's not, I think you throw some question into that, which is, you know, that what looks like a straight delusion and, you know, kind of crazy, uh, On the superficial level can really be understood in context is making a lot of sense.

And so again, I think this is acute to us in the mental health field and just in the world at large, that when somebody says something that feels or seems crazy to them, Just engage that curiosity. And I think that that can be a very actionable thing that we can do that is very healing and more positive in the world too.

I also wanted to kind of follow up with this question of the [00:44:00] neurological causes of delusions, because the way that we're talking about it, it seems very like, you know, psychologically driven, but you. And I'll quote from your book that delusions sit at the intersection between neurology and psychology and different causes frequently coexist within the same individual overlap and fuse.

And so I think an important point that you make in the book is not. Delusions are simply, uh, uh, know manifestation of something that helps us in a chaotic, difficult time in our lives, but also that it can co-exist with biological causes. And because you're drawing from way back in history, we often don't have any strong evidence for the biological causes, but certainly we know.

Today, um, that when brain scans are done of folks with, you know, major psychosis that we often can see some brain damage. And yet that doesn't negate the fact that those false beliefs can, can make sense. If we listen [00:45:00] deeply.

Victoria Shepherd: Yeah. And it's a real challenge as a historian, but I've, I've turned it. I've T I've come to see it as, as probably the most interesting. Uh, grit in the book. Uh, and the most, the most potentially kind of the thing that I can learn from most, or we can all learn from most, which I think is best exemplified in Madame M.

So she's a woman in, in 1920s, France, what she was during the first world war. She becomes a case study in the, in the twenties, but during the first world war,

she, she turns up at a police station saying that her husband's been murdered in exchange for double.

So, so she. She develops a delusion of doubles that her husband's been substituted and her children have been substituted and, doctored and substituted. Um, and it's, it's an extremely kind of like an Negro and post short story. , of course. People being, yeah. Having their identity stolen kind of Frankenstein lake and being operated on to change the identity and so on.

So [00:46:00] it's a very clear kind of psychological. , yeah, I mean, I interpret, I put a psychodynamic lens on it. Very kind of hands up. I kind of, I do do that, um, throughout, throughout the book and you can see perfectly well why it turns out that her children have. She's unhappy married, probably the inferences.

She's very unhappy married. Uh, her children have died in infancy. She's had several children die in infancy, obviously. Well, there's the first world war. So you can start to understand on a psychological level very clearly why it would be easier to deal with the idea that they're not dead that they've been substituted.

Um, or that not that you really don't like your husband, um, it's that he's not your husband. He's been. He's been substituted, right? , the psychodynamic lens makes sense. And, and, uh, I, I think it stands up. Um, but then, you know, you learn that, uh, dementia with Lewy bodies or it's the [00:47:00] clearest delusion of doubles has the kind of clearest relationship to front cortex, neurological brain damage of any of the delusions that I found.

And, uh, I know somebody in front of the family who had this particular form of dementia and, and essentially it disrupts the recognition part of your, of your brain. Um, and you, so you, somebody is familiar, but you don't know who they are and your left brain, uh, I believe anyway, not neurologists, but. Steps in with, with the kind of exp ex explicable narration that says, oh, well, they've been swapped, they've been substituted.

They're a double. Um, and you can see, as you say, you can see that on brain scans. So how do I, you know, I have to then set with these two truths. Um, and so. I do believe, you know, we'll never know whether the ma'am also had some kind of right front recognition center, February damage. We can't know. Um, I said it will always [00:48:00] be mysterious.

What the was, was there any brain damage, um, or was it all psychological or what what's or is it both? Um, and there's something for me, there's a con there's a kind of ambivalence or ambiguity that I have to sit with, but I actually, I think

that's right. I think it should be unconscious. We can't know these people on the serious, um, we can find little fragments.

We can start to get insights into understanding what their reality was like. And therefore whether created an alternative bond, but we can't solve it. We can't call it one way or the other. And so in a way, it's a good regulator for me to know that. The neurology and the psychology are kind of dancing with each other and it's, it's, it's mysterious.

Right? We won't, we won't solve it.

Yael Schonbrun: I think we, we often can't solve it even. I mean, the brain is so mysterious, even with modern technology. There's still so many things that we don't understand, but what I'll say [00:49:00] is, and this is just a hypothesis, but I do think that neurology plays a huge part for many people who, who have brain disorders, um, or traumas in.

You know, perceptions that are not linked up with reality where I think it turns into delusion is that the story that we make about it, it's sort of like, Have a visual hallucination, cause you've, haven't slept for days and days that can happen. but I wouldn't call that a delusion, but when it becomes a more fixed story that we hold on to, then it becomes a delusion.

And then I think there's something often to interpret there about why that story is helping to either make sense of the world to re-empower you to. Help you feel some, you know, some sense of, coherence in a chaotic world. And so I think again, you know, that neurology plays a role, plays a huge, [00:50:00] important role in delusions and that we can sort of.

Help people more. If we look for the story that the brain then makes from a perception and understand how it's serving an individual. And again, you know, there's sort of like such a range of severity of this, but I think, you know, my new couple example is, you know, at one end and then somebody who feels that they're being persecuted in this way, that.

You know, fit with the reality that the rest of the people around them see as is sort of like a different level entirely, but in both cases, the story that gets made by the brain based on, you know, a perception that's had in, in a difficult time is it's helpful to sort of disentangle that and understand the function that it serves.

Victoria Shepherd: Yeah, absolutely. And I, you know, I think it's interesting, cause I've tried to track trace the very broadly, you know, how they've been

seen, [00:51:00] you know, over the centuries. So delusions were seen as an imbalance of humor's part of melancholy, which kind of what we'd call depression sortof. Then it became demonic possession pretty much.

That was it for hundreds of years. And then it became. I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but it feels as though it did swing very far into saying it was all, it was organic brain. Uh, the, the explanation would, would be in, you know, brain damage, a malformation of the brain, so on and so forth. And

I feel it was swinging a bit back, you know, to, to say , we've thrown a lot of the psychological stuff away and we need to, you know, we need to readdress the battery.

Yael Schonbrun: I totally agree. And what I'll add in there is like, for example, if I have a couple of, I've had a couple of patients with bipolar disorder and when there's a manic episode and there's manic style delusions, Those individuals can, can really be dismissed for what they're [00:52:00] feeling or thinking or believing in ways that are entirely unhelpful, because there is a kernel of truth.

It just has gotten blown up a bit, but by invalidating what that kernel of truth. Is really painful for the person gets the more entrenched because they're defending it even more strongly and really disconnect them from the people who love them and are concerned about them. And so I think dropping into that really strong belief.

All delusions are simply organic manifestations of something that's gone wrong in the brain can just from a very functional perspective, be really unhelpful. And really understanding and sort of bringing in like, yes, there is a brain piece that is important here that we need to. Integrate, but there's also something more there's, there's, there's the psychological piece, the functionality piece.

That's really important. And to be curious about that and not to kind of throw the baby out with the bath water and to really sort of embrace [00:53:00] it, like from a compassionate stance is really helpful.

Victoria Shepherd: Yeah. And to, and to enter into this. Into the game of it. I don't mean a game in a trivialize. It, but it does strike me that as it is it people want. I mean, it's interesting to look about it and to look at it in terms of children, you know, we'll get down on our knees and play with a five-year-old child.

You know, my five-year-old child that they engage in delusions all the time. Don't they acting out. An alternative reality. And we know that that's good and expanding of, we know that we'll get to some trees and will, you know, that that's an important thing for children to do, to play with reality. And yet we somehow go, I know you're over 18.

You do that. That stops or you're, or you're not mature. You're not, you know, and maybe there's something in that I don't. So, you know, Engaging with what people are trying to tell you [00:54:00] in a, in code, in a kind of play code. Um, there, there are, they are sneaky. They're trying to tell you things that you need to interpret and you will, if you go halfway or you play, you play that game a little bit, you will allow them to, um, be less vigilant or less, as you say, less strident.

, And there will be much more to understand than you could ever believe. I mean, it surprised me, you know, I didn't know, as I was researching how that every, in every single case, they were understandable, as you say, to a degree and in every single case they had, they had a very, very clear and rather ingenious.

Uh, way of operating that was either temporarily or even quite long-term helping them, um, like a life raft or sort of scaffolding for their existence. And I met, I met people, the series I made, I interviewed some contemporary people who'd experienced delusions. [00:55:00] Um, but they were through, they, they, it was difficult to cost that because obviously people could only talk about them once they were not.

Within them. Uh, and there was a lot of safeguarding issues to do with that, but we found some extraordinary people who were generous enough to, to talk about it. And, you know, again, all of them said, I mean, some of them had very, it was very frightening if it were the way it came on, but generally speaking, they talked about it like a life or after like, you know, they found the same metaphors, so scaffolding and.

The idea that you just rip that down and go that's, that's not true. , became more and more clear that that was, that wasn't the right approach. It was, it was true. It was doing something, it was holding them up, and telling you something really important about what they were dealing with and who, what they worried about, what their hopes and fears and possibilities and so on.

, and it wasn't about just dismantling that.[00:56:00]

Yael Schonbrun: Totally well, so it sort of leaves me with an idea for an exercise that people listening in and that.

I'm, I'm sort of, as you're talking kind of. Dipping a toe into, which is to get curious about your own beliefs, your own delusions in the sort of delusion light sentence, to ask yourself Yes. Your own everyday delusions, and get curious about them and ask yourself. You know, what are, what function are they serving and you know, why do you hold on to them even in the face of contradictory evidence? How might they be helping you, even if it's just to understand yourself better or to communicate something important about yourself, to the world, around you, to people that are close to you, or to. Maybe, how are they helping to give you more of a sense of agency in a way that you feel really, , lacking in agency to really ask that broad question about like, how are your everyday delusions serving you in end?

In what ways? And I think getting curious about that can [00:57:00] give you compassion for yourself and maybe also give you compassion towards others, other people. Well,

Victoria Shepherd: I really, I really believe that's true. It's certainly happened to me. Um, and as, maybe more compassionate about myself, definitely, as I mentioned, you know, nobody, nobody can. B to stand back from this topic. And, um, if you know what enemy you're organizing, then maybe you can, you can deal with your enemy.

Whether that's trauma, whatever it is that you can do therapeutically, or just

to understand it, or your spouse or your spouse, um, yeah. Fill in the blanks. Um, but, but you know, you can actually do something about it, but you, if you want, you know, we're all organizing our enemy to just work out who the real enemy is because we all have, we all want a job to do as well.

That's the thing about delusions, they kind of give you a job to do, or I think quite naturally studios and we all kind of want. [00:58:00] Get on and sort stuff out somewhere deep in us. Don't we, and, you know, having a delusion is a full-time job. He got, he got, you've got to really work hard to do that. It's not, it doesn't, you know, it's, it's, it's complicated mental gymnastics and it, and you have to stick at it.

and so if you can kind of put all of that industry and analysis and kind of doggedness in the right direction with slightly more selfless, Then, you know, I think that could, could be really, really helpful.

Yael Schonbrun: Totally.

Victoria Shepherd: go into my own journey too deeply, but yeah, no, I think, I think, I think that, you

know,

Yael Schonbrun: if we had

Victoria Shepherd: that's true.

Yael Schonbrun: hear more about it, but when, one final thing that I'll say is that in the kind of therapy that I offer acceptance and commitment therapy, one of the skills is to unhook from self stories. And that's exactly what you're talking about is to like unhook this practice of getting curious about.

Is a practice of unhooking from that story, and asking yourself, you know, is that, whatever the function is that you're looking [00:59:00] to serve? Is that the best way, or is there another way that might even be more useful, right? That is not necessarily through that story, but in a more flexible way, you know, or into differently.

And so I think This book and this idea that delusions are something to listen to, to be curious about, to have compassion towards, um, is really a very helpful stance to be taking, you know, not just with your, five-year-old, not just with your partner, but with yourself.

Victoria Shepherd: Yeah, I'm glad. I'm glad you think so. I do. I do think it is. I think, and I, you know, you can see it on a global, not to go too far into that, but you can see with, with, with the internet. You know, misinformation, disinformation, uh, being so easy now and, and conspiracy theory being so widespread and so easily disseminated having that voice in your head telling, you know, unhooking from store, or [01:00:00] just, just trying to think. And you, even if it's only about your own, your own fixed false beliefs, I think that could have a knock on effect in terms of how you relate to somebody in your family you know, has fallen deep into a conspiracy theory. You know, I think, I think it could have big, uh, it could, it could kind of go from, from domestic into something quite quite powerful.

If none of us did that in our, in our own with our own fixtures.

Yeah. Could you practice it?

Yael Schonbrun: Thank you so much, Victoria, for sharing your wisdom and your time with us. Where can people go to find out more about you and your work?

Victoria Shepherd: Oh, well I have, I have a website, Victoria, shepherd.org. Um, and, um, I'm doing various online. Um, but yeah, I love that conversation. Thank you so much. It's so interesting to, to hear your expertise kind of within, the historical stories, how they sit in relation to your [01:01:00] practice is fascinating for me.

So

Yael Schonbrun: Um, thank you.

Thank you. for saying that.

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