**“Mental Health & Relationships”**

**Host: Pauline Vetuna**

**Guests: Gemma Mahadeon, Ana Maria Gomides**

**Transcription by Leilani Fuimaono**

GEMMA: Normally day to day, I really, really struggle to get out of bed and then do all the stuff that you're supposed to do to look like a functional adult. I generally tend to structure my week so that I only have one outdoor commitment, so that I'll have one or two days at home. Which I will literally spend in my pajamas, so whatever.

Meal prep is something I really struggle with. When I come home from the day job that I have, which is only part-time, I'm just more celebrating the fact that I actually got through the day.

LEILANI: You're listening to Mental Health and Relationships on Power from the Margins, 3CR's disability day broadcast. You just heard from writer Gemma, who lives with major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, IBS, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder. This PMDD impacts significantly on Gemma's depressive symptoms.

Here, Gemma speaks up about her experiences of dating as a non-binary queer person of color with mental health disabilities and the power and healing that they are finding in platonic love relationships.

GEMMA: So first dates are always fairly safe. You're just getting to know what the other person is like or what their manners are like, basically. If it happens that you end up going on a second date, that's when the mind starts to go, "Uh, when do I tell this person that I've actually got quite a few major, mental health issues?" This is definitely internalised ableism. I feel like I want them to know as soon as possible because I don't want them to feel like they're lumped in or trapped with me if they decide that they become interested in me, because it would mean a lot of empathy, emotional intelligence and just understanding and possibly education on their part.

In some ways I do actually prefer being with people who already have lived experience of mental illness. But then that also presents its own problems, because you do understand each other, but there'll be times when you know that you won't be able to help them, or they can't help you. It's sort of, what do you do? Sadly, it often ends up with discontinuing the relationships because you've got to the stage where you're just so burnt out trying to care or they're not making the effort to understand just how much you go through. I've had a few partners where they've had no mood disorders whatsoever and they just don't understand, "Why are you still in bed when it's 5:00 PM?" And, "What have you been doing all day?" They just don't understand that it can sometimes be that exhausting, or existing is so exhausting, you'd just rather sleep for as long as you possibly can. Sort of nip off to get your meds and then go back to bed because it's just too overwhelming to be alive.

That's not the case with people I've dated who do have mental illnesses. You've also got to be careful because you don't want to feed each others negative symptoms, but on the whole, it is comforting even though it's also really difficult. I was actually seeing someone. I considered it a serious relationship as in, I didn't expect to take it so seriously, so quickly. Two months in, everything was, I thought great. He seemed to be really, really supportive of my depressive symptoms, but it was mainly I think my PTSD stuff that was more obvious. But then, once a major depressive episode started, two and a half months in, after that he changed completely because when I get depressed, I might avoid things like showering and eating, but I become really active in other ways to distract my head from what can be pretty awful thoughts, I guess. So I start reading more, start practicing my musical instruments more. I start editing all the poetry that I've been neglecting to edit. Then when I have to be outside in the real world, then, that's when I make the effort to scrub up.

It was pretty brutal because this person that I was seeing was neuro atypical, as well as having mental health issues. It was particularly heartbreaking for me because there were things that I'd told him that I'd never, ever, ever told anyone. I've had the same psychiatrist I think since 2000, which is extremely rare. He knows things that I would never tell my immediate family, purely out of protection for them. There were things that I told this person that I'd never told anyone else.

For people who don't have mood disorders, how do you explain to them that it's just going to take so much longer to bounce back from having chosen to be so vulnerable. Overwrite your programming that says, "You should just get the hell away from this person because all people are going to do when they get close to you is use you or drain you or you'll just end up hating each other." It's tricky.

Platonically, I think when friends ask me, how am I doing and it's one of those days where it's super hard to fake, giving even just a neutral answer. I said, "How honest do you want me to be?" And then he said, "You can give as much or as little detail as you want." And then I told him, "Here, it's actually been pretty bad and pretty consistently bad." Then he asked me if I wanted a hug and I said, "Yes, please. That would be really nice." It's my platonic friendships, I feel, that this year have been so unbelievably nurturing.

I think part of my PTSD is that I have a very delayed response to grief. I just burst into tears and could not function. I cried so much that I don't really remember most of the day. I called one of my closest friends. She was at Deakin. She caught a cab from Deakin to my house and then bought us junk food. And you know, I wasn't dressed. I was just sitting on my bed, just either bawling or trying to eat. She was just there for me. I feel like I've never experienced that level of friendship until really recently where someone would actually do that for me. It was so appreciated. Like, "I can't believe she caught a cab, from Deakin." It's ages away from where I live.

This is probably the depression talking, but I'm actually amazed at the fact that I've made friends, made such wonderful friends this year and last year. Sometimes you don't get to see people for ages, but when they catch up with you, they catch up with you properly. I don't really have a regular group of friends that I hang out with. But then recently I started attending pub trivia. I've got a friend, her partner plays Magic: The Gathering. So him and I actually meet before trivia starts to play Magic: The Gathering. I'm just surprised how lovely it's been to learn that not only do people tolerate me, but sometimes they actually like me.

I do feel like I'm stricter now about what I really envision in a healthy, romantic relationship. There's a lot of crap that I would just not put up with. Which, again there's the depressive head going, "Dude, you don't have that much going for you. You really should just take what you're given." Type thing. It's like, "No. No, no, no." The part of me that's trying to override that programming saying, "You have absolutely every bloody right to be picky. You being disabled doesn't make you a burden or a stressor on a relationship. That's just what capitalism is teaching us. It's teaching us that if we're not well, we're not successful. No. It's totally not the case."

*[outro music plays]*

GEMMA: My name is Gemma, and you're listening to 3CR and today is International Day of Disability.

LEILANI: You're listening to Mental Health and Relationships on Power from the Margins, 3CR's disability day broadcast. Now here's Afro-Latino writer, Ana Maria Gomides, speaking about relationships with therapists. Ana discusses empowering herself in her relationship with her white, male therapist of 6 years by laying down the ground rules of what she needed him to do in order for their sessions to be a safe space for her, as a person of color.

ANA MARIA: My name is Ana Maria Gomides. I am an Afro-Latina and I like to make clear, especially on the radio, because people come see me, that I'm a very light skinned black person as well. I have a lot of privilege from that. I don't cop the branch of racism.

When people ask me what I do for a living, I tell them that I'm a writer but I'm also chronically ill because my main job at the moment is to take care of my health. I will never know when I will be able to work because you can't really schedule flair ups. I'm learning to listen to my body more and to respect it and work when I can.

My disabilities come from a number of mental illnesses that take their toll on my body as well. I have a very long list of diagnoses. Recently I've been having these heart problems, for example where I had to go see a specialist cardiologist, because my heart rate is quite high. When it starts, my heart starts beating very fast and I get palpitations. I get very dizzy and I can't walk. I get very nauseous and shaky.

I'm on a lot of medication. I have meds to treat the side effects of the meds I'm on in the first place. Also a lot of therapy. I've been in therapy, on and off since I was 16 and then on, consistently since the start of 2014.

For a period of time, I saw a couple different therapists. They were helpful for what I needed in that moment. It wasn't until I started doing trauma exposure therapy that I decided to address it with the therapist that I'm still seeing today. I think it's going to go on six years since I've been seeing this person.

A little bit about him is that he's a cis-het middle aged, white dude. He's quite kind and softly spoken. A lot of people are surprised that this is the person that I see because of the things that I talk about and the things that I fight for. I was referred to him because one of my diagnoses is borderline personality disorder and he works at a center that specializes in DBT, which is the treatment to treat borderline personality disorder. So for a year, I went to group therapy and individual therapy, still seeing him. Then after that, I've kept seeing him. I had a lot of realisations about trauma. Conversations with family and things like that. Like a lot of, I remembered a lot of things that I hadn't, at that point. So I'd already built a set of skills with him. I already trusted him at that point, because it was maybe two years in of me seeing him.

When we, I think we did one trauma exposure session. It is very helpful because you end up remembering more things than you thought you remembered, which is really powerful. Upsetting at the same time, but it solidifies that memory and the confidence that it was true, what happened. We did one session and then we're talking about doing another one. I said to him, "Okay, before we do that, I need to have a conversation with you about race and the fact that my trauma is informed by my racial experience, the fact that my trauma is not just mine. It's intergenerational. It's been going on for centuries, if not millennia in my family and we also need to address the fact that you are a white man and I'm a brown woman and we're having this exchange." And he said, "Okay. I'm going to go and talk to my supervisor about this."

The next session, he came back to me and he said he had pretty much all these wishy washy white stuff that was like, "What about the human race?" And, you know, "Can't we just pretend that there is no divide here." And stuff. I was like, "No. That's not an actual thing. Put all of that in the bin and sit down and let me explain it to you." He had these ideas like, there's a whiteboard in the room and he was like, "Okay, let's make a list. What do you think is the stereotype of the cis heterosexual, middle aged white man?" I was like, "First of all, that is the type. Everything apart from that is the other and it's the stereotype." He was just kind of like, "What?" It was really cool and we went way over time. He didn't charge me the extra time because he was like, "You've taught me a lot today."

Basically what I asked him, I said, "I need you to trust me when I tell you things. Like if I tell you that I'm experiencing racism, if I tell you that my anxiety levels are high because of something, if I try to explain to you that my experience, and the experience of the women in my family before me informs the way that I am today because of race, you need to take my word on that and just not question me about it."

He has stuck to that consistently. It's probably like four years now since that conversation. Every time I bring something up to do with race, he would just agree with me. Like, we often joke about how I get quite, I can't deal with crowds very well. Especially I have this thing about going to see brown and black people performing and having, like in crowded spaces already and having white people be completely disrespectful to the black and brown people around them, but idolize the person on stage.

That makes me very anxious and angry. Very sad and very angry. I was telling him about this. He was like, he's like, "You know, that sucks. That sounds really hard. What are some things that you could do to cope with those things?" I was like, "Well, white people just need to stop being racist. What am I going to do about that racism? I don't know. Just be more respectful." He had a laugh about that and was like, "Yeah, okay, but you know, let's try to think of something that's within your body, physical things, what can we do?"

So yeah. He's been very validating and reassuring of those experiences. I know, I've been really lucky. I also have taken the time to educate him, which I shouldn't have to do. I only did it because I trusted this person and I wanted to keep seeing them as their patient. I'm very glad that he was respectful of it, because maybe other psychiatrists and psychologists wouldn't have been as respectful. He kept and open mind, which you can't say about a lot of mental health professionals, especially because they have a certain amount of power to tell you if this isn't real or if it is. A lot of other people of colour haven't had that chance to sort of connect with their therapist because of their whiteness as well.

I think when you're looking for a mental health professional, if you're a person of color or a black and brown person, talk to your community and see if people know of mental health professionals who are safe and understanding. Also, if you find a mental health professional who is safe and understanding, then pass the word forward.

LEILANI: You just heard from Afro-Latina writer, Ana Maria Gomides, speaking about relationships with therapists, and from writer Gemma Mahadeo about her experiences of dating as a non-binary person of colour with mental health disabilities. That's all for Mental Health and Relationship on Power from the Margins.

GEMMA: You're listening to Power from the Margins on International Day of People with a Disability. If you've just tuned in and want to know more about today's special broadcast, go to 3CR.org.au/disabilityday2019.

*[“Weary” - Solange plays]*