

Episode 02- Healing through Embodiment with Nkem Ndefo

Sam: [00:00:00] Welcome to Our Stories Matter. I'm Sam Lazalde and I'm Susie Hess. Our Stories Matter is hosted by Trauma Informed LA and the amazing music by Torrence Brennan-Reese, founding member of the music group Street Corner Renaissance. Our Stories Matter at Lokels Only acknowledges Gabrielino/Tongva peoples as the traditional land caretakers of Tovaangar (the Los Angeles basin and Southern Channel Islands. As a land grant institution, we pay our respects to the Honuukvetam (Ancestors), 'Ahihirom (Elders), and 'Eyoohiinkem(our relatives/relations) past, present, and emerging.

Susie: [00:01:10] I'm super excited to introduce my friend and advisor at Trauma Informed LA and Nkem Ndefo. Nkem Ndefo is the founder and president of Lumos Transforms and creator of the Resilience Toolkit, a model that promotes embodied self-awareness and self regulation in an ecologically sensitive framework and social justice context.

Licensed as a nurse midwife, Nkem also has extensive postgraduate training and complimentary health modalities and emotional therapies. She brings an abundance of experience as a clinician, educator, consultant, and community strategist to innovative programs that address stress and trauma and build resilience for individuals, organizations, and communities across sectors, both in her home country, USA and internationally.

Nkem is particularly interested in working alongside people most impacted by violence and marginalization. Welcome Nkem Ndefo.

Nkem : [00:02:10] Thank you so much for having me.

Susie: [00:02:13] Question number one, which is, can you describe your work related to trauma and healing?

Nkem : [00:02:19] I mean, I think that's the throughline for my personal life and my professional life. I mean, I've always been interested in relief of suffering. Like how do you relieve suffering? And at the same time I've been interested in what's the deepest root, right? Like if you can get to the deepest root, you're going to have the biggest impact with the least amount of effort. And I think. Early on in doing community health work with some pretty marginalized folks. I happen to have my first child with a midwife and I was like, Ooh, that's an amazing time when people are around birth, they're more willing to do something to make a change than at any other point in their life because there's a new life coming. Right. And if you can do work there. The change ripples, right?

It ripples for that child, for the family. So, and being a midwife is it's an empowerment model. And so that was, I think my first moving to a deeper root. And then in doing that work, I realized that stress and trauma. Actually will hijack almost everything. And it was the deeper root. I started to reorient my career there and doing professional work there.

And now it's about 12, 13 years that I've been working around trauma in various ways from, I'm not a mental health clinician, but going and studying and various different programs and

getting certifications and working with people and of all different kinds. And I think they're probably my best teacher.

Being challenged by working with just, you know, a diverse population of folks and not just individually, but also in groups, whether that's organizations or community groups.

Susie: [00:03:55] It's so interesting. What you said in terms of more likely to change. When you're pregnant or going to give birth, I mean, that is actually such a powerful thing. And it makes so much sense in terms of the legacy and just continuing on.

Nkem : [00:04:10] Back then, we didn't even know about epigenetics. We didn't know that that was an epigenetically sensitive time. And so epigenetics is this idea that, um, our genes go on and off all the time. It's not. Necessarily so much what you're born with.

It's what's expressing and what's not. And that certain experiences or exposures can sort of imprint on the genes. And knowing that that time around pregnancy is an epigenetically sensitive time. So if we can make a difference, then it really does have an incredible ripple. So I can think of programs that I've developed and run for, for example, pregnant and parenting teens, like how you build resilience during pregnancy. Um, and I especially think teenagehood is also a really epigenetically or plastic neuroplastic time. So it's almost like, you know, triple what you can do and, and, um, really make a difference in a trajectory for, uh, for, for a family, for, you know, for a lineage.

Susie: [00:05:10] Oh, my gosh. That's so powerful. I never thought about that in terms of the ripple effect and with youth. And at that time of pregnancy.

Sam: [00:05:17] You said you always sought this out, this root of the problem, right? Why?

Nkem : [00:05:22] I mean, I have my own personal trauma for sure. I come from intergenerational trauma. I was born at the tail end of the Biafra war. My father is Nigerian. That was the first post-colonial Sub-Saharan, African war that we were so used to at this point. That's why Doctors Without Borders was founded because of millions of my people were killed. So I was born on the tail end of that. And on the other side of my family, people were refugees as well, but I also think I'm just a sensitive person and seeing like my own suffering and seeing that maybe mirrored and others or others mirrored in me and was always an activist.

So my grandfather on my mother's side took me to my first protest when I was 12 at the South African embassy to, um, around, uh, against apartheid. And so just a political awakening through, you know, from then on. So always active. How do you make change? What is, you know, How do you help? It's about liberation, liberation.

I mean, I was that kid don't ask me, right. Sometimes you say where it comes from in fifth grade, they made us stand for the pledge of allegiance. And I was like, I'm not doing that.

Sam: [00:06:38] So would you say then that these acts of liberation, what were they doing for you?

Nkem : [00:06:44] I mean, in healing trauma, right? Healing trauma is about getting free from our past, right?

It's about getting free from our past and, and being able to live in the present, right. To not be hijacked, right. That sure. Our past traumatic experiences have definitely shaped, shaped us for better or worse, but they don't have to completely determine our future. Like, we don't need to keep repeating, I've come to believe that most of us who are trauma survivors, we almost all become perpetrators.

We either perpetrate on other people or we perpetrate on ourselves over and over. Right. You know, and it's like enough.

Susie: [00:07:21] You're healing from being an activist. And then we'll talk about the resilience toolkit.

Nkem : [00:07:27] I mean, there's personal, like interpersonal healing. I'm a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and so there's personal healing along that it's all intertwined to me. You know, it's like a big, giant mess. I mean, I can stand at this side and try to make sense of it, but all along the way, it's like, it's where do I, you know, where do I get free? Where do I help other people get free? Um, in all different kinds of ways.

Susie: [00:07:53] Yeah. And when I think about my healing and we're gonna, we were just talking about this before, you know, for me. Individual therapy was not helpful. And I'm not saying that's not helpful for anyone else, but for me it was not helpful. A lot of body work was helpful and activism was helpful because then I also think, Oh, that was my purpose.

My purpose of going through that is I have a deep sense of empathy for other people who have experienced intimate partner violence with the resilience toolkit. I'm sure. Wanting the world to know what it is in terms of healing through embodiment.

Nkem : [00:08:30] What I realized is most of us have trauma. I don't know how you get out, you know, through the, through this life without some kind of trauma, right.

That's just how it is. And, um, but most people, especially those most seriously impacted and impacted currently can't even talk about it. Like they were like, Oh, I don't have trauma. That's somebody else recognizing that. You can't force somebody like their face into it. They're saying I don't have trauma because they are not strong enough to face it right there, or they're still in it.

And they're just trying to survive. They're hustling. Right. And you can't force them into it. They'll break down and they know they'll break down. And so it really became clear to me in working, you know, how there places in my own healing, how I broke down. Because I was kind of forced into it without being resourced and working with other people with trauma around the same thing in that same period, realizing how slow you have to go and how you have to resource people.

And people need to be stabilized in order. It's like, you have to be enough out of it to look back and say, Oh yeah, that was bad. And so how do you help people get enough out of it?

To be able to say that. And I realized that's this act of slowly embodying because trauma, I mean, yes, it happens in our minds, but the biggest part is it's a defense response.

It's a survival response it's happening in our body. And if we don't address that, it's the body part that keeps hijacking. And so how do we slowly come back to ourselves and make friends with our body, come back into ourselves and feel it as a source of strength. And then we start to have space, to be able to talk about what happened in a way that we're not reliving it.

I mean, it's like anybody in crisis. I often use the analogy, like if you're drowning, Right. You're in crisis and you're drowning. Like what maniac would come up to you and say, just swim deeper. But a lot of times when we like, I don't care if it's talk therapy, I don't care if it's a healing circle, we have people who are drowning and we are literally telling them, tell us your story, which is like being a maniac and telling them to swim deeper.

It's not this way. It's nuts instead of saying, can I help you to shore? Can I teach you how to get to shore? Can I teach you how to swim in rough water? And so that part of is so important because if we see, we know trauma is such a big problem, and people don't want to talk about it and can't talk about it.

Then really it's on us to recognize that people need to be resourced. And so that was the impetus around the creation of the resilience toolkit. And it really actually started in doing organizational work with a lot of social service organizations in crisis around building resilience. And how do you do that?

And so, I mean, I probably do some of my best thinking and is in practice with other people we cocreate, you know what I mean? It's like people ask questions, which. And then how do you integrate their perspective and meet them with what they need? And in that way, over several years, the resilience toolkit was created.

And it was like formally named in like early 2017 and launched. But it had been in various different forms, transformative resilience, various different things, but then we launched it publicly. And the whole point is helping people come back to themselves and find safety in your own body. So that you can do, like when you have safety in your own body and you know how to get yourself to shore when you're in crisis, you're a lot, you're willing to try a lot of different things, including trauma healing.

You're willing to try and learn and do different things because you have a safe anchor. You, you know how to get there. And so giving, uh, working with people with a system, a way to think about that and tools to do that has been really an honor, and to see how it's taken off in different ways.

Like I think about my colleague, Dr. Cheryl Grills, who, um, developed the emotional emancipation circles and they're for black people dealing with anti-black racism. And as she had developed them, she wasn't super happy with the mindfulness component of it, not feeling that it was culturally as sensitive or relevant to black folks. And this is the emotional emancipation circles are done in North America.

The Caribbean, Africa, and Europe. Like 50 cities. And so she was exposed to the resilience toolkit and she says, that's it. And so she got certified and then she took the resilience toolkit and embedded it into the EECS. And front-loaded it. So that people have the skillset to be able to say, Hey, my stress is rising. I'm feeling like a trauma response starting. I need to back off. I need to settle in my body. And what happened is they develop a common language around that and they're able to engage with really heavy. The, the experience of racialized trauma and talk about it without breaking down and really get deeper into the material because they're more resourced.

So there's more healing. Like we, we often think you have to break things down, like that's the healing and I'm like, first you have to build something. Otherwise you have nothing build something first. And then often in the building, some things fall down just by itself. And. If they don't, you have a really strong, um, Oasis to return to when you start deconstructing things.

Susie: [00:13:53] It's amazing because we learned the opposite. You know that you talk and talk and talk to feel better and that the body isn't even necessarily part of it. And what I learned from the resilience toolkit is starting with embodiment first, and that has been life changing.

Nkem : [00:14:11] And it's so simple. It's like staring us in the face. It just doesn't have to be hard. And like I've said it over and over again, like the trauma should be the worst part. The healing should not be any worse. And if it is feeling worse, like we need to really ask ourselves, what are we doing? If there was a woman who in England who recently took a class, I was doing some workshops there.

And she, she said, you know, all of the healing that I've done in the past has been so harsh. Where I've just pushed and broken down and sometimes worse for it. And she goes, I didn't even know that I deserve gentleness. So we need to really think about what our healing is and, and where are we replicating um, patterns of abuse in our healing systems, including like some things that I would, you know, people say, Oh, it's a healing circle. It's really lovely. And I'm like watching people break down, feel worse afterwards. I'm like, I don't work. Did you ask if people were ready to be in the circle? How are they supported afterwards?

Like, you know, there's a time when telling your story and going into it is incredibly healing once your resource, but if no one bothers to check. Yeah. So that's what the, the whole, the toolkit is all about that stabilization and resourcing and not just for individuals, but like you have an organization like this, it's a group of activists, right?

There's a hella trauma, hella hella trauma, right. And then everyone's struggling for whatever they're struggling for, but they're turning it on each other. And that, the way that they're engaging is traumatized. Right. That group also needs resourcing and stabilization to settle so that they can develop more healthy ways of interacting and vision. Like some different ways of being.

Sam: [00:15:54] These groups are addressing trauma in a sense, right? Through that, through their different forms of activism, they're a nonprofit organizations, they're smaller groups, national groups. What does it mean for them to address? Trauma through...

Nkem : [00:16:08] I think a lot of people are not directly. I mean, like if you asked them about the word, they're like, no, they wouldn't say that they're doing it. Um, but I often find if I could say one of the key features of trauma is a sense of being overwhelmed and helpless. Being helpless, whatever happened to you, it's a sense of helplessness. And so often activism is a way to not feel helpless.

And so I'm doing something I feel powerful and whatever the topic is, may be related to your personal trauma or not. But it's just a way about reclaiming power. So that may not be surfaced. It may not be explicit. And for a lot of folks that it is around trauma, but often it is a sense of how, how do I, you know, I think about like the climate crisis, for example, people feel really overwhelmed and really helpless and hopeless, right?

And so how getting active helps them unfreeze and, and do some healing around that. And if they have personal trauma that can also help in that way, but being careful is what happens is you'll see a lot of activist burnout because they're so terrified of the feeling of helplessness was related to their original traumas and they're terrified of it, but they, it hasn't been surfaced.

It hasn't been named, so they'll do anything to not feel helpless and they will work themselves to the bone. She's still burn, burn, right? Push, hustle, hustle, hustle, and what they're running from is the feeling of helplessness. And so. They then burn out. Right. And so, because not recognizing that, that might have been a motivator.

Right. And so how do we do healthy activism? Right. What does that look like? Right. Is because when we were working in our trauma healing, nobody likes to feel helpless, but our ability to tolerate difficult sensations. Difficult experiences is much higher when we've done healing work. Right. And especially when we have sort of that embodied sense of safety that we can return to, we can tolerate some of that discomfort more and not have to drive ourselves so hard.

Susie: [00:18:20] You know, I know we talked about this yesterday in the last class is we aren't meant to grind. Culturally, we're grinding, grinding, grinding. And I think people feel like it's a luxury to be able to do something on the side. And I think with the Resilience Toolkit, what I saw too, was that it's one it's so accessible to everyone.

I know you're so humble, but you know, you offer scholarships in every class. I think a lot of what you're doing is just, I mean, obviously it's incredible and it goes sort of, it's different than what a lot of folks are used to because they're used to paying a lot of money or... The privilege of having time of having a baby, you know, all of this stuff.

Um, so how do you see community healing as political?

Nkem : [00:19:06] In general, like if you frame trauma as interpersonal trauma, which it generally is. And so trauma healing is people think of therapy, whether it's bodywork,

semantic, body work or it's, um, uh, talk therapy or some combination thereof. And I'm sorry, but that's only one kind of trauma.

We have structural trauma, you know, systemic racism, oppression, like multiple oppressions, um, historical trauma, cultural trauma, et cetera, violence. Okay. And that kind of trauma, like one-on-one therapy, doesn't heal racism. Let's just like, say, okay. That's not the venue to heal it. Right. And so recognizing that, that is where arts production, that's where community organizing. That's where political activism is healing around the structural issues. But the thing is, it's pretty rare to find someone. Who only has structural issues. We have interpersonal and structural issues. So where can we do both? Right. Like it's not an either or, and most of the trauma healing systems, even what we consider the holistic and alternative ones in this country, in the, in the U.S. And um, our North America are, and I would say Western Europe too. Cause it's pretty similar in terms of trauma, healing culture. They really only address interpersonal there's very few that address structural. Right. And there's really even fewer that I can think of that even do both

Sam: [00:20:39] Being that you're addressing structural and systemic the systems that are in places that how, how it envelops a community?

Nkem : [00:20:48] Well, the thing is, is what I say is I. Yeah. Like, for example, in the Resilience Toolkit, we acknowledged like a big thing is to acknowledge your own stress or trauma responses and not pathologize them. If you're actually responding to a current situation, like if I'm being stopped, but pulled over by the police.

Right. And I am feeling super traumatized by that situation, super stressed out. That's like probably an appropriate response as a black person. Right. That's an appropriate response. It's not, it's actually protecting me by shutting down and freezing up a little bit. That's protective. So I wouldn't ever blame a person for their response because they were what that response was needed in survival in that moment.

Okay. That was needed in that moment. However, the system, right. So we're not holding people. We're not individualizing systems trauma. We're not saying like you're responsible for structural trauma, but. Or structural oppression, but the structures aren't going to change themselves. Who's going to change them.

We are. So if we don't do enough of our work, we can't do the change work, right? So that's where it's both us doing our personal healing, right? So that when in our groups and our organizations, we're not cannibalizing each other and going after each other, we're not recreating structures of oppression between us, right.

That we know we can rest, not always being in grind, grind, grind. Right. We know how to take care of ourselves and each other. So we are not only struggling against systems. We are actually creating the systems we want to live in within our organizations. Right? So it goes back and forth between the individual and the sort of community or structural level.

Sam: [00:22:38] I mean, it's about healing and about rests, but what you're doing essentially is you're, you're arming all of us.

Nkem : [00:22:45] One things I say is knowing when it's safe to rest. Rest effectively and knowing when you need to push and push effectively. If you carry the right amount of stress for that situation and not too much more stress actually sharpens your vision.

It like, you know what I mean? Like it helps you perform or push, defend, whatever it is you need to do. If you carry too much, it tends to make things more difficult and slow us down and drain the crap out of us. And so like I'm interested in the results, you know, get free, get free.

Susie: [00:23:21] I love that. And, you know, I sort of go back to what you were saying, Sam, in terms of, you know, arming us and empowering us as activists to not be exhausted and give up or...

Nkem : [00:23:35] Or go after each other or go after each other.

Right. Like who has time for that?

Susie: [00:23:42] What I loved and the in the Resilience Toolkit was the result piece, because just for all the listeners, there are concrete tools that we were given. And I was telling Sam, I'm like, Oh my God, session two was amazing. It's like a life changer because there's so much that we have been like encouraged to try.

But what I loved about the Resilience Toolkit was that it's through a lens of biology. And so for me, especially coming from. You know, like a history of scientists, you know, my family, it's, it all made sense. And when it makes sense, I'm motivated.

Nkem : [00:24:19] It's, it's, it's more than the biology because. I mean, yeah. We use like very brief mindfulness and movement tools. What's most important is, is empowering people with the knowledge and the safe space to explore what works for them and what doesn't, because there's, again, a lot of things out there, but not a lot of times where people asking you, how is that working for you?

Right. They're just like, meditation's good. Do it. Yeah. Talking here is good. Do it. No, one's asking you, how is that impacting you? Are you feeling better or worse? So how do we restore self agency in this journey? Because one thing scientifically may, you know, technically work, but you have a particular history where that is associated with something terrifying.

It is not going to work for you. That's right. And so the ability to, you know, say, Nope, that doesn't work for me. Yes. I like that. That is, you know, arming people with that self knowledge. Like this is where my system is, this is what I need now. And this is what works for me. That's really powerful to me. Um, and so almost that framework, you can apply to all different kinds of things.

Susie: [00:25:25] That's so true, right?

Nkem : [00:25:26] Whether it's the tool is officially in the toolkit or not, like you can say, you know what, when I go to the gym, And I work out, I feel stronger in my body. I feel

connected. I feel connected to myself and people and my purpose and energized great. Someone else could go to the gym and feel spacey and checked out.

Right? Like. Let's be clear, right? Like, and so going to the gym is good. Right. So instead of asking, you know, what works for people and restoring that is, is really important to me, because again, I don't think a lot of us have a lot of time and I want something that's going to work quickly for me.

Susie: [00:26:08] So the three classes, each was an hour and 45 minutes. I'm like, Oh, I could do that. But if it was like, Oh three hours, four hours, and like, yeah, now I probably can't card that much time. And it was effective. It was. Effective in the time it was effective because you were so individualized in the class. We were all coming from different walks of life. I mean, it really was the most powerful experience for sure.

Nkem : [00:26:33] I'm glad it was really supportive. I mean, for me, it's super fun to facilitate because every group is different. People need different things. They have different issues and we have used multiple models of stress because if you look at the models of stress they're developed out of. You know, whatever culture science comes from culture, it's not separate.

Right. And so different models of understanding your stress or trauma response depends on who developed that and what their culture is. And it may or may not apply like a lot of the models don't include. Issues of gender and sex or social hierarchy. And so we talk about which, you know, how to understand your experience and give some science around it, but also what are the limitations?

And, and it's been exciting. One of the things that's really, um, for me is to talk about appeasement has been huge, um, to recognize how little it's...It's actually talked about in the scientific literature, how little it's recognized in the trauma space and how, you know, for the last particularly three years I've taught and facilitated and been in discussions in multiple countries with all different kinds of folks, folks, straight out of prison.

Teachers, teenagers. I mean, doctors like all over the map and folks, refugees, people are like, that's my experience appeasing. It's this idea of, you know, somebody has more power than me and I want to fight. I want to run away. I'm having a stress response, but it's not safe to express it. So I got to freeze it in place.

Right. So we need to talk about that. And that's been really, um, It's powerful for me and facilitating is noticing like, You know your particular class that didn't come up until the third session. Sometimes it's like right front and center. What people need to talk about. It's really a joy to facilitate and see people start to sort of make friends with their bodies, realize that their body is a source of power and wisdom.

Because as I often say, we can lie to ourselves all the time, but your body can't lie to you, make friends with it or not because biology will win. It will, when, what, it doesn't really care what you think. So might as well make friends with it and use it as like your super power. That's kind of how I'm thinking of it.

And so it's fun to see people it's, it's actually amazing and humbling at the same time to see people make those connections for themselves. And what, where that carries them.

Sam: [00:29:07] What has it been like for you telling you a story today?

Nkem : [00:29:12] Well, as I'm an introvert, like I'd rather be home in bed, but I know, you know what I'm saying?

Like I do enjoy being in conversation. I'm generally a pretty private person, but understanding that it's, um, sharing. I know when other people have shared their story, how that's been powerful for me to hear myself in there and, um, If I can do that for anybody else, I'm there. I'll get out of my bed.

No, I'm at the point where there's a narrative. Like I was talking to my mom a couple of years ago and she's like, I really don't understand your career. How did you go from here to here to here? And then when I explained to her that the through line was. Relieving suffering and finding points of transformation, deep rooted points of transformation.

It all made sense. Right. And so tell him, but it wasn't until telling my story that I started to see what that, what that line was. Yeah. So I appreciate that, you know, at the right time, the storytelling telling my story was, is very healing, man.

Sam: [00:30:27] I'm super honored that that thread led you this way.

Nkem : [00:30:31] Oh, it's my pleasure. My pleasure.

Susie: [00:30:33] When folks want to, um, take the Resilience Toolkit or the Roadmap to Resilience, how can they get the information? Those places, theresiliencetoolkit.co and that's dot co not.com. I thought there was a better use for \$5,000 than that "m". So if somebody owns that domain, you can throw it down to us.

We'll put good use, put it to good use. And it talks about the modality itself. There's a database of, of practitioners primarily in the us and Canada that we're about to be doing some stuff in England and Europe and hopefully South Africa. So we're very excited about that. Yeah. And if, you know, if some folks want to get certified and do that work, most of the people who get certified are actually their jobs pay for it.

So whether it's a school, whether it's a domestic violence shelter, whether it's a, um, university, uh, counseling services, that's how most people, um, using it and they integrate it because it integrates really well with other stuff. My organization, Lumos Transforms, we're really committed to accessibility.

So all of our public classes, at least a third of all spots are two completely free and you don't have to. We, we really, um, there's a thing about for poor folks, or, you know, where we have to try out your story to like, prove you're worthy of like, you have to justify that you deserve a scholarship. And we were so grossed out by that because we originally had just contact us and we'll get, you know, and so then people would send their stories and we're like, we don't need to, we just have a checkbox.

If this would be a hardship for you, just check the box and take the free spot. And I'm so appreciative of your heartbeat and sharing your humanity and yeah, just sharing your heart. I appreciate you so much. And you are an incredible badaa.

Nkem : [00:32:23] Oh, thank you. No, this is like the joy in, if I could say that feeling of helplessness.

Right, right. And so I think of it very acutely when I was, Oh, I don't know, maybe 19, 20, working on a needle exchange and watching, you know, folks using and just the amount of suffering and feeling like I couldn't help enough. And it was terrible feeling. And now I don't feel that. I feel like I have. Um, I feel I can feel and lean into my power and my using it to help, um, like widen that circle of power and like, Hey, let's do this together.

And so it feels full of hope and it feels really good almost too good because when work feels this good, like you don't want to stop, you know what I mean? You don't want to stop. So I got to like draw the line somewhere.

Thank you and Nkem, thank you.

Sam: [00:33:22] Our Stories Matter is brought to you by Trauma Informed LA whose mission is to foster resilient communities that promote healing and wellbeing through collaboration, education, and community engagement.

Check us out on Facebook and Instagram at Trauma Informed LA and our website traumainformedla.org. Please give us five stars on iTunes so more folks can have access. And donate to traumainformedla.org so we can keep recording and healing through our storytelling episodes.