

Final: Lisa Bilander-Gray

VC: Hello, I'm Vanessa Corwin

KK: And I'm Kathleen Kaan

VC: Interpersonal relationships are under more stress due to Covid. Who's there to help us during this pandemic? We're here with Lisa Bilander-Gray, psychotherapist and licensed clinical social worker. Lisa, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for joining us today.

KK: Welcome, Lisa.

LBG: Thank you very much for having me. Hello!

VC: Lisa, why don't you tell us a bit about your practice and your patient population?

LBS: Okay. I have been in practice for approximately 40 years. I do psychotherapy with individuals, adults and couples. I have a patient population that ranges from people in their late 20s to people in their late 80s and early 90s. I think predominantly people come to therapy to talk about relations issues, career issues, people struggle with depression, with anxiety. I do a good bit of couples counseling as well as individual counseling, dealing with those issues.

KK: Do you feel during Covid, that more of the patients are coming to you because of the depression or anxiety more than before?

LBG: I have found that I'm actually getting clients who are returning, having stopped therapy because they were feeling better. I have a number of clients who have returned because of Covid, because of the isolation. Some of them have lost jobs. Some people who live alone are feeling particularly isolated and they want to connect again to figure out how to deal with those things.

VC: So you're doing your sessions on Zoom. Is that correct?

LBG: That's correct.

VC: So how has that been for you?

LBG: Well, it was a little chaotic to start with. I shut my office down on March 12th and had to get in touch with clients and figure out what to do. Some clients started out wanting phone sessions. And then, I switched to only remote, you know, predominantly remote. And it's been interesting. It's good to be able to see people. It's good to have the visual. It's different from in person. But it's better than having no visual at all. So it's been a transition and I think one that everybody has gotten used to over this, almost a year now.

KK: When you have couples coming in, interpersonal relationships, what is their biggest problem now during Covid that was different than before?

LBG: I would say there are a few different issues that seem to come up repeatedly with different couples. For some couples it's a loss of income because they've lost jobs, and the stress and pressure of how to handle that, that creates tension in a couple or in a family. For some couples it's having children home that they now have to home-school. And, who's working if two parents are working remotely, who watches the kids? When kids are home from school, who takes care of them? Who makes sure they're doing their homework? Who entertains them? How do parents work and watch their children at the same time? It creates a lot of stress and a lot of negotiating about who does what. I think the other issue is that couples without children are spending amounts of time together that they have never spent before. Couples who are already living together, there is no alone time. Then chores get negotiated, they have to figure out workspace, they have to figure out who's making dinner, but a lack of private time very often, a lack of seeing other friends and other people that add to the harmony in their relationship also creates a lot of stress. Not being able to go get a drink. Not being able to go to a restaurant. Not going to the theater. Not going to a movie. Not doing things that nurture and help a relationship thrive. And I think many couples are finding that stressful, there's tension, there's anger, there's having to negotiate chores, or child care in a way they never had to before. So it creates a lot of stress. The other part of couples, are new couples who have to decide whether to quarantine together early on. Some couples broke up because they did split time away and other couples felt more rushed to move in together and what did that mean for the relationship? How did that speed up the relationship? I think for some people that went well. And for others it didn't work out. It was too quick. Too much togetherness too soon.

VC: Your practice includes people from any different generations. Do you find that your younger clients are coping better than your older clients?

LBG: Not necessarily. I think my younger clients have different issues. Their issues are, again, lack of socializing. For younger people, how do they date? I have several younger clients who are despondent. How are they going to meet somebody? How are they going to go to graduate school? How are they going to get jobs? The job situation is very, very stressful for younger folks. And they haven't been through a lot of difficult things necessarily to prepare them to have the resilience to do this. I think for elderly clients it's a mixed bag. I think a number of my older clients, more mature clients, have been through a lot. So they feel like, okay, I've been through the Depression, I've been through World War II, I've been through a lot of stressful things. We will get through this. At the same time, there is the tremendous isolation for older people, especially older people who live alone. And, I think they feel the isolation also very, very keenly, as strongly I think as younger folks but I think this affects older people more because the lack of social stimulation makes their lives even more lonely.

VC: Lisa, do you have any essential workers in your practice? Like teachers or any medical personnel?

I have a couple of teachers in my practice and that's been a very difficult, unique situation. The two that I'm thinking of, one is in the classroom every day working partly remotely, part of a group remotely, part of a group in person, and flipping, and the other is working only remotely. And I think for teachers it's been a unique situation of having to use technology to keep kids engaged. The teachers I work with I think find that they feel they're working a lot harder preparing even more doing video preparation in advance, engaging with having to engage with parents much more as well as worrying about their own safety and their own families.

VC: Is there one kind of overriding big problem you're seeing across the board?

LBG: Well again, I think the lack of social interaction has pretty much affected everybody, obviously in different ways. Those with partners are affected but at least they have somebody to live with. People who live alone are affected. Children are affected. They don't have their social group, and they don't have their peer group in the same way. So I think the isolation, the lack of social interaction, the lack of activities that nurture people and also bring people together, I see affecting all age groups.

KK: I'm curious. You had said some of your clients were way in their 80s. And, we're all so isolated but we find things to do like exercise on Zoom and groups, and I imagine that's got to be different for that age range and how are they faring through this time?

LBG: Well, I think from the older clients I see are very vibrant, active seniors. The ones I'm seeing are artists, a number of them photography, painting, art, and very vital and involved, traveled. Even more recently, I have been encouraging people to, and this is all ages, but particularly my senior clients, to go out everyday that they can to get sun, to get a little bit of walking. I think before the winter it was easier because somebody could take a walk with a friend outside, socially distanced with a mask on and even more recently, before it got very cold, sit outside in a park or in a café. I think the weather more recently has brought everybody inside. The older clients, they exercise on Zoom. Yeah, they try but I think their lack of activity has made them feel more tired and weaker and the isolation, more depressed.

VC: That's certainly understandable. As a therapist, how are you coping yourself?

LBG: I'm feeling a lot of the things my clients are feeling. You know, it's an interesting phenomenon to go through a circumstance, a situation that affects me as much as it affects all of my clients. So I think it helps me be empathetic. It helps me figure out, okay, how am I coping? What are the ways that I can use the way I'm coping to help my clients cope? But it's also something that's been difficult for all of us and I think that's important to acknowledge to people, that they are not the only ones who are feeling this. We all are.

KK: Has this changed your relationship with your clients, with your patients, since you are going through the same thing at the same time, in different ways?

LBG: I think it has. I think somehow, even with the remote meetings, it feels like there is a stronger connection. I feel like people are really grateful to be able to talk. I think when I do share a little about the way this is affecting me and my struggles with Covid, with the pandemic and the effects of it. I think people are appreciative and feel closer. And, I think it does help the isolation.

VC: Do you get maybe a slightly different perspective on your clients working remotely because maybe they're sitting in their house and you can kind of see their environment?

LBG: Yes, absolutely. And there have actually been several clients over the years who would sort of joke about wanting me to come to their apartments and see where they lived, to see what it looks like. And now, I do a little bit. A few of them have taken me on tours, remote tours, this is a piece of art I feel good about, and this is something that's important to me. So in a way, it's opened some things up that I hadn't gotten to see before. And I think that also creates a stronger bond. At the same time, they are also seeing my workspace and might ask me a question about a painting I have, or am I in the same room I was before? So yeah, there's a sharing and commonality because we're all going through this incredible difficult time that I think has established deeper relationships.

VC: So you have any advice for listeners out there coping with the Covid stress?

LBG: Yes. I think I have found myself giving a little more advice in general to my clients because it's such a concrete and difficult situation. The big piece is to talk to people. Yes a number of people complain "well it's not the same over the phone" or "it's not the same on Zoom." "I'm so sick of Zoom, I'm so sick of not seeing people in person." But I encourage people to do it anyway because it always does feel better after. Always. I encourage people to go outside if at all possible. I think particularly as winter has hit, we had a snowstorm recently, I know I bundle up, I look like a little kid in a snowsuit, and I encourage my clients, "don't worry about how you look, put on a hat, gloves, pretend you're in Sweden or Finland, and let's get used to being out in the bad weather, in the cold weather.

KK: I would imagine that this experience doing therapy during Covid, do you think when this is all over; will it affect how you do it again when everything is fine?

LBG: I can't imagine that it wouldn't change in some way. I think this has changed all of us. In the same way, I think the only experience that's a little bit akin to how this was on 9/11. When I was in my office with a client, as we found out that the towers came down and we had to share some things that we would not have shared before. And it deepened that relationship as well. So yeah, I think it will make me look at how much of myself is okay to share, how much of my own experiences, therapists are always thinking

about those things. But I do think it has really changed how we all feel and how we view each other.

VC: So Lisa, is there anything else that we have not addressed today that you would like to cover?

LBG: People ask me, “why am I more depressed or anxious,” and I think often its well, let’s look at the isolation, let’s look at the things you’re worried about. Another thing I feel strongly about is the way the pandemic was handled. The lack of a coordinated leadership I think led people to even more anxiety and more despondence, that who’s in charge, who’s going to make this better. I also think that the lack of acknowledgment of the losses that people have had, the deaths from the virus, and the lack of empathy. I think that, on a larger scale, has also affected people. And right now, I think people are feeling it about the vaccine. There’s tremendous hope that, oh my God, it could be better, we could come out of it, but because there hasn’t been up till now, I hope, a very centralized focused distribution of the vaccine, people are incredibly stressed again.

VC: Right, and then there’s a lot of folks out there who are resistant to taking the vaccine.

LBG: I do think that if there’s a consistent centralized message coming from experts which really wasn’t the case for a while, I think it will begin to have impact. I also want to say that everything I’ve been saying has been the negatives about how the pandemic has affected everyone and that’s very real. But as a therapist, as a social worker, I am always amazed at the strength people have to learn how to cope with new situations, and figure out how to surmount obstacles. That is really awe-inspiring. And that also is across all ages, how people are struggling, but they’re struggling to figure out how to feel better, and what they need to do to feel better. And I have tremendous respect for people’s ability to do that.

VC: So Lisa, this has been terrific. Thank you so much for being with us today.

LBG: And thank you for giving me the opportunity to do this. And, it’s been good for me to think about this and really reflect on the questions you’ve asked me. That’s been helpful to me in my work and personally as well.