

Episode 8 Transcript: Sex? It's bit complicated right now!

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CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: So I'd like to introduce you to Kat Kova. She's a psychotherapist, and we're so lucky to have her here today. And today we're going to be talking about sex, sexuality, and relationships.

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CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: So, welcome, Kat.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Hi, Constantine. Thank you for your introduction.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: You're welcome. How are you doing today?

KAT KOVACEVIC: I am feeling a couple of different things. I'm feeling a bit uninspired. I would imagine part of it has to do with COVID, and not enough happening outside to help with my energetic needs. And at the same time hopeful. There's a lot of green out today, and I just can feel the May flowers coming from all of these April showers, and just looking forward to brighter days ahead.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah, no, same. I, you know, I felt I've been stuck at home, and I can't wait to get out, but my mind doesn't feel like going out, if that makes sense.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Hopefully.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah. So I, you know, I sleep, eat, and work at home, and it's a big adjustment, and it'll be a big adjustment trying to get out there. So I just wanted to let the audience know how you and I met, because we here at Let's Talk Podcast, we've been mainly having guests in the George Brown College community. And I believe you're the first person from outside of George Brown community. So I'd like them to get to know you a little bit. And how, perhaps how you-well, first I'm going to tell the audience how I contacted you, was through your website. I contacted you that way, but tell the audience how you got into your line of work, psychotherapy, specifically.

KAT KOVACEVIC: So thanks for, you know, allowing me to share a little bit about myself to connect with your audience in this way as a guest. I would want to let, you know, mostly students who are listening to this know that I sort of a big part of my own kind of way that I describe myself is a student. I'm constantly on the hunt for new information, new knowledge, particularly when it comes to mental health, sexuality relationships. Because these are the things I became really passionate about from a very young age, and I think are so important, and yet were missing from my education really early on. So what kind of drove me to become a psychotherapist was really noticing that I was interested in things that were not talked about. And I had a really like strong, negative reaction to that and was able to transform that in the pursuit of knowledge and specialized knowledge around it, so that I could both in intimate kind of psychotherapy settings and more front-facing public speaking settings, be able to connect people to the information that I was missing out on when I was younger, but feel like it's universally really important. So that's a little bit about me. And I'm also really kind of excited to become a student again myself in the fall. And I'll be pursuing the doctoral program and researching sexuality relationships. So I am very much interested in, and very personally

invested in understanding what the needs of students are and how to best support optimal mental health, functioning, and quality of life for students.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Well, first, thank you for letting us know that you are a student. I think what I heard was that your education, your quest for education brought you into your field, and now you're taking it further as a doctoral student. So whoever takes your class, when you do teach sexuality, will be benefiting from your experiences. But I'm just curious, Kat, before psychotherapy, were you doing something before that?

KAT KOVACEVIC: Well, so when I was younger, when I was about 13, I was just walking down the street with my family, with my mom and my sister just down Queen Street having like a girl's day out, that kind of thing. And someone approached me on the street who thought, it was an older man, thought I was cute, and which now looking back, it's a little, you know, that's kind of, there's a questionable kind of nature to that interaction. And he sort of scouted me and said, hey, you should be a model or an actor. And I had always been interested in acting. I was always involved in theatre, so it felt like a natural fit for me to sort of be in front of a camera, just expressing myself and moving. That actually ended up being kind of a nice compliment to very much being defined or defining myself as a student and someone who really loved to learn, but also kind of this creative, fun, dynamic profession where I met kind of creative people. And now, you know, having kind of moved away from that for a while now, I actually really quite miss that element of production. And I really find it's very important to, if you have some kind of a public presence, or if you do, if you are able to express yourself in a public-facing way that you deliver an important message along with that. That it's not just about entertainment, that it's not just about a distraction, that it's not just about vanity, right, or perpetuating, unhelpful, like beauty standards and ideals and things like that, but rather to combine that with something that's meaningful and has substance and purpose. So that actually ended up really lending itself well to what I'm kind of hoping to do now and what we're doing now, which is just having a conversation that will hopefully be helpful.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: And that is my goal for today as well, Kat. And I don't know if you know, but George Brown has a theatre school. We have, you know, we have various programs that draw upon different disciplines. And I think they would benefit from what we're going to talk about today where we lean on relationships and navigating, you know, intimate relationships because they're in school for some, maybe a year or two years or four years. And, you know, they're in the trenches together, and they, inevitably, they form relationships. And sometimes they come into our office, and they don't know how to negotiate boundaries. And, you know, I was listening to you, and you talked about the public face. You know, we present ourselves in one way to our teachers and our friends, right? But then when we are with our roommates, or when we are with family, or with our own partners, we're kind of different. So it's like navigating, you know, the different spheres of our lives, and then, you have to go to school, right?

KAT KOVACEVIC: Those boundaries aren't so clear when it's with --

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Exactly.

KAT KOVACEVIC: -- family and relationships because when we're asking, like there is a specific defined purpose of what you're doing there, what your teacher is doing there, the roles are a bit more defined.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Exactly.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Aside of that, it all blends in a little bit, particularly now [inaudible].

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Exactly. And then one of the things that sometimes students bring to us is, I can't concentrate. It may touch on the relationship part. In your practice, and then in your own experience, what have you seen as far as how people navigate relationships. And, you know, negotiating boundaries, and maybe if they haven't understood sexuality in a way that could be, you know, fun, or, you know, restrictive, for example. Because we have a very diverse group of students. They come from all over the world, and they're thrown in together.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And then there's a blending of cultures --

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yes.

KAT KOVACEVIC: -- and value systems and beliefs. And all of that plays into what we believe are the rules for social interaction.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Exactly.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And, I mean, in my experience as a therapist, what I often see is that people have a hard time distinguishing what's their responsibility, what's within their control, and what other people are responsible for. And culture has a huge impact on these things, like in the northern hemisphere, in the Americas, we have, you know, a sense of individuality that is kind of almost put on a pedestal. I think we kind of think about the self a lot. And then, if folks are coming in from more collectivist cultures where the main priority is to think about the needs of others, that becomes a huge point of conflict, tension, misunderstanding. And this can also kind of exist on gendered lines as well, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: People are socialized differently depending on what genitals they're born with, and how other people read them, all sorts of things. And so one way that I really see this show up as being a challenge, but also one that people are very eager to take on is when you can reflect back to somebody. You know, it sounds like you're taking responsibility for someone else's feelings to an extent that it's unhelpful for yourself and for your relationship.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: So putting up that boundary often comes as a relief for people. It also comes as a challenge because maybe you don't have experience, or practice, or even a sense of permission to do that, or it goes against some other value that you might have. But sometimes, we treat boundaries as kind of like a dirty word, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Or saying no. I'm not talking about the sexual spirit thing. We can all kind of agree that those things have been well-established as being helpful and positive, but sometimes boundaries can be looked at as, you know, you're putting up walls, right? You're kind of, you're selfish, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: The things that like people come in with. And then, when you can kind of help people shape their definition of the word to mean this is something that helps me actually. To be in contact with you in a way that is healthy, in a way that's helpful for me and for you. It helps me with my current needs. It might help somebody else with their growth, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Mm-hmm.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And then it can become as something to adopt as help your relationship behaviour.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah. It's a difficult concept sometimes for students, especially if they just came from high school, and then they're thrown into the mix. As I said earlier, you know, they have different, you know, generations studying at the same time. And the, you know, the cues that they're picking up from each other are so different, and they mistake an invitation as, you know, as a yes to, you know, more intimacy for example, and yet the person did not intend that, right? And then they thought it was just being friendly. So then they find themselves in a relationship where they have to continue because they've formed an emotional attachment, and they need that support during the course of their program sometimes. And then, what happens is they break up and they come to our office, and then, you know, we realize it's, you know, there's many parts, right? So, because we're talking about sex sometimes, you know, things happen, whether, you know, some have acquired sexually transmitted infections. And for the first time they don't know what to do with that. And then, you know, they have, and then their behaviour has changed whether in class or at home, you know, and then, it just complicates their time in school. So in your private practice, and because I found you, and one of the search words was sex and sexuality, right? You're a therapist that happens to have an expertise in this field. Do most of your clients come in and talk about, you know, sexuality, or how to better their intimacy, for example, and communication? Is that fair to task?

KAT KOVACEVIC: Yeah, that's a huge, huge, huge part of what, you know, I see come in. What we see. You know, what you just described, it sort of, it makes a lot of sense as to those students not being able to concentrate. Like, how are you going to concentrate if, you know, maybe you're feeling itchy and scratchy, or you're feeling worried about your health, or your contracted something that you might feel earth shattering or life-changing, and that can happen.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yes.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And so that becomes a point at which, if you're really struggling with something, that's when you go into a therapist office. So that's when you go and get some kind of support, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And along with that often comes with an anxiety that I think is so what's going to happen in my future? Am I going to be okay? And going from high school to university, now, it's like you go from kind of being a kid and having many things decided for you and other people, parents, guardians dictating what you should think, how you should dress. You know, just varying extents. Going into university, all of a sudden, you're asked to make your own decisions.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And that comes with a lot of pressure, particularly if you don't have support and you're thinking, okay, I have to make decisions about my future, that I'm the only one responsible here. There might be some anger and resentment that you're doing it all on your own. And then there's a great freedom in it as well. This is a time when people are really understanding, they're kind of individuating from their family, right? They're individuating from even their peers where, you know, you go to school and all of your courses are decided for you to all of a sudden I'm choosing what I want to study, what interests me, what I like. Maybe I'm meeting people who I am actually choosing to be friends with and to deepen relationships with

versus I was just in the same class as this person. And we looked at each other and we kind of clung on to each other for dear life because we were terrified.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Now it's a different kind of terror. Now it's the terror of I my own person, which means great power in getting to know yourself and what you like, and put to you, and going from that place versus what do other people want from me. That's where, you know, that's where boundaries kind of come in because all of a sudden now I have a better sense of me, and what I want, and what I need. And then there's another person who also is more decided on what they want and what they need. And how do you sort of navigate those two things. How do you still stay an individual while forming a relationship for a sexual relationship with somebody else? Like, how do you maintain boundaries and how do you respect somebody else's boundaries as well?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: I love that, Kat. It's a very complex subject, and that's why I brought you in. And we can go in many directions. And one thing what I picked up there was the fact that you, right now if you are coming from high school, it's hard to know what you want and what you need, and that'll come with experience. That's what I'm getting at. And once you know what you want and need, then you can negotiate that with your partner, right? Because you may be with a partner that's more experienced perhaps, and they may suggest certain activities, let's say, and you're not ready for that, right? And then getting to know yourself and your own pleasure, for example, that's what I'm hearing, but let's start with ourselves and see what we like. Yeah? Okay. [Laughs]

KAT KOVACEVIC: It's like a double-sided sort of-there's many different parts of this conversation. There's an attunement that you need to develop to others.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: I like the same, you know, in order to be able to, you know, help to meet the needs of another person without --

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: -- compromising at the same time your own boundaries, your own integrity, your own values, whatever it is. But in order to dance that dance, you have to start with you. And so many people will come into my office and say, you know, sex is not so good. There's been times when boundaries have been blurry. There's been a lot of feelings that have come up, a lot of difficult feelings that have come up because situations have been undefined --

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: -- non-negotiated, non-discussed, non-communicated. So in order to develop those skills to be able to more successfully navigate those situations or prevent those situations, it takes you getting to know your own body.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: This is very different from saying, you know, you caused that situation to happen because you didn't say something, right? I didn't say no or weren't so clear, or weren't using verbal kind of indications that you didn't want to do something, right?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: It's really different.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right. And what it touched on is that the communication piece is important. And that I need to know what you're trying to say to me, and I understand what you're trying to convey to me, or is it what I'm trying to convey to you, right?

KAT KOVACEVIC: Exactly.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: And you said something about anxiety. And, you know, anxiety when we're worried about something, you know, we miss certain things, don't we? And so when we're with our partners, our partner, you know, we're focussed on one or two things, and then our partner may be focussed on a singular thing, for example. And then our lines of communication cross, and then there's a misunderstanding. And then they come to our office and they go, I just broke up with my partner, and I don't know why they left me, or why we broke up. And then that takes up a whole, you know, a semester, for example, and they can't concentrate. But for the more ingrained relationships, and I would suggest this to the listeners that if you are going through relationship issues, you know, our office is a brief model. And so we can't possibly address, you know, deeper relationship issues. And that's why I brought Kat in because, you know, her team specializes in exploring, you know, the complexities of relationships, right, Kat? And, yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: We do. I mean, it's our passion really. Our passion is to make sure that people get really, really good care when it comes to their sexuality or their relationships, their overall wellness, their self-esteem, really take great care. And I think we're all students, right? That's something I really love about my team is that they're just always learning, always trying to make sure that we're delivering the best kind of tools, the best information, the best kind of strategies to work with people on some of these really important issues.

[unknown noise, music]

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: I have a question for you, Kat. You know, we're in the tail end hopefully, of COVID. And last year, you know, we in the context of George Brown, it's the question was, you know, how or what do I do? I'm lonely. I want to engage in, you know, sexual activity, and it's hard, and, you know, my partner and I are separated. You know, these are all the things that are coming up. What have you seen or observed, or, you know, if you've been helping clients navigate that, what can you offer now as far as handling isolation and maybe starting a new relationship, for example, in the age of COVID? That's [laughs] too much?

KAT KOVACEVIC: No, that's --

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Okay.

KAT KOVACEVIC: You're hitting the nail on the head when it comes to, like, what are the particular challenges of dating and relationships right now, isolation. and, I mean, it's interesting, like how relationships may have evolved as a result of COVID. Where the rules are, like, we have all these rules and poles down this and all these restrictions, but people always find a way to work with the rules to make them work for themselves. So one of the, I mean, one of the things, okay, a few things. First, if you're feeling lonely, if you're feeling isolated right now, just know that you're not alone. Like, that's a given, but the colour of loneliness makes you sometimes feel as though it is something wrong with you that, you know, you're lonely because, right, because, I don't know, other people don't want to hang out with you or [inaudible] that come in. And then you might think everyone else is having a good time experiencing FOMO and all of these things. There is a necessity and need for you to be really kind to yourself and

recognize that some of your loneliness is coming from a place of not feeling connected to other people, not having, even just the kind of interactions at the, you know, retail store or the grocery store, whatever that you typically would have where you can see somebody's face and share a nice interaction. For some people, that can meet a need for social interaction. And then for others, you know, who are experiencing skin hunger, who haven't touched someone in a while who haven't connected.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: I love that, skin hunger.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Right. It's so real, right? It's like, ah, it feels like you want to swarm out of this skin that's not being touched. If there is some possibility to connect with someone, I would imagine that the way the relationships are evolving and can evolve and you can be a part of that is to call those things out and to recognize them in other people, and see if there is some kind of arrangement, really. Some kind of invitation, some kind of a suggestion that you can make to another person that's coming from these needs that you're experiencing that you feel really isolated in that I'm willing to bet there are others who are experiencing the same thing. And if it can look like, you know, we get together and we cuddle. What's wrong with that? If they're in your bubble, what's wrong with that? Nothing. Right? And I think back to the conversation about negotiation of boundaries and needs, this is a really good opportunity that we have because the wider discussion in our lives is about restrictions, and boundaries, and rules, and things like that.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Right.

KAT KOVACEVIC: I have a good opportunity here to learn and to practice that in our intimate sexual relationships.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: That is beautiful, Kat. Like, you just encapsulated everything that I'm hoping that the audience hears. And, you know, sometimes when it comes from outside of George Brown, there's a relevance, and it seems more legit as the kids would say, because --

KAT KOVACEVIC: Oops.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah because it's outside of George Brown, right? And so when it comes from another therapist out there, they say, oh, yeah, that makes sense. You know, and what did we learn today? We learnt skin hunger. I love that. I'm going to use that, if you're okay with that?

KAT KOVACEVIC: No bonding.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Skin hunger. Getting out of your skin. And, you know, and that we're not alone, right? And we've been trying to tell students that you're not alone in your situation, but sometimes it's hard for them to conceptualize that. And so I think hearing another perspective is great. I love how, you know, you say your team and yourself, you are perpetual students. That's what I'm hearing. And it's important to always grow. And that's what I'm hearing too, you know, about things in yourself that perhaps needs growth, right? And that sometimes you come into conflict, and that's how you grow, right?

KAT KOVACEVIC: That's how you grow. Yes.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: What a challenge it is that, you know, folks are having right now. It could be potentially their biggest opportunity for growth. You may not see it right now, especially, if you're

really struggling and you're really suffering, and you think, wow, this is such a me-problem. I'm going through, something no one's ever gone through it before, but believe me, if I've learnt anything as a therapist is that the most, and this is a Carl, not Carl Young, Carl Rogers.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Carl Rogers, yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: He says the most personal is the most general. That when we're isolated, when we're not talking to other people, when we lack information and resources and community, we just think that this experience that we're going through called being a human being and going through life is just simply unique and individual. And it is to some extent, but to a large extent, we're all going through very similar things. The darkest things that you can think of within yourself is the shared fabric that you have with everybody else.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: I love that. I love that.

KAT KOVACEVIC: So, you know, go easy [laughs].

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Go easy. Hear it from Kat, everyone. Go easy on yourself. Any final thoughts, Kat? I, you know, we could talk forever, and perhaps I will invite you in another segment to talk about other things, but this is like an introduction to the George Brown community. But what final thoughts do you have for our audience as far as a takeaway for them?

KAT KOVACEVIC: Yeah. I'd love to come back, Constantine. Thank you. It's been such a pleasure talking to you. And if there's one thing that I, now that, you know we're here and I do hope this makes an end to the podcast, is that students make up probably a pretty, like a pretty heterogeneous, generous?

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah, yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Like, there are students of many ages, but the population that you're talking to, the population that you help is usually like 18 to 22 or something like that, 23.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: It's actually expanded now. I'd say 18 to 30, yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: Eighteen to 30.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: My, one of the things that I noticed in my work and personal experiences in people that I've known in my life is that this is a really vulnerable time for the brain.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: No this yourself, but there are so many changes that are physically happening in the brain, as you're approaching is 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, that can cause all kinds of weird stuff to happen and for you to experience, and you might think that you're really losing it.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Yeah.

KAT KOVACEVIC: And then, you might think that you're, you know, again, the only one, and they maybe a lot of [inaudible] associated with having mental health challenges at this time, or relationship challenges. Because guess what? You probably really new to relationships, and they're all whole whirlwind, and a lot to learn about. But if you are going through something that

feels really disturbing, like really just know that it passes, and that there is help, and that there is support, and to not act impulsively on some disturbing thoughts that you might be having, and to always reach out for help, always.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Love it.

KAT KOVACEVIC: It shouldn't be that way, right? And it won't be that way forever.

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: Exactly. Oh, okay. I can just have you talk forever, Kat. But if you're interested in checking out Kat, she's at www.katkovatherapy.com. And she has all kinds of resources there, videos, and she's been interviewed by a whole bunch of people, and she's cool. Okay? So check her out. And we're hoping to have her back again at some point, you know, as the months go by. But thank you so much, Kat, and we'll see you soon, okay? And take care and keep safe.

KAT KOVACEVIC: You too. All the best.

[music]

CONSTANTINE CABARIOS: So this concludes today's episode. Thank you for joining us. If you have any questions, feedback on our episodes, suggestions for future topics, or wish to book an appointment with our counsellors, please send us an email at letstalk@georgebrown.ca . Come by again, and let's talk.

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