Be Known, the Podcast

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Episode 95: Felt Safety vs Actual Safety

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This is Be Known, and I’m Kerrah Fabacher. You’re listening to episode \_\_\_95\_\_\_. We were made for relationship, but so often our relationships are broken. And when our relationships are broken, we are broken. One of our deepest human desires is to be known, but we often have lost ourselves along the way. This is a podcast to help you get your relationships back to a place of wholeness. A place of authentic connection, where you feel truly known.

So come on in and sit a while. Let’s exchange fear for love and finally see what good relationships are made of.

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We don’t get a lot of tornadoes in South Louisiana. We’re more scared of hurricanes and flooding than anything. But a few months ago, we had some tornadoes that came through near where we live that were pretty scary. Because we don’t have basements or storm cellars down here, we have to find a room on the lowest floor we have that’s in the innermost part of the house with no windows or outside doors. I’m honestly not well-versed in tornado safety, so that’s all I know.

And when we got all snuggled up in a tiny space, my littlest wanted to come snuggle up to her mom or dad. We knew there was a threat, a serious threat. And we knew what we needed to do in order to be safe (for the most part). But being in that space didn’t help my littlest feel safe. She needed touch of one of her safe people in order to feel safe. Outside wasn’t safe. There was actual danger outside. But inside in that space space with pillows and blankets and the touch of a safe person, in there we *felt* safe.

In Aundi Kolber’s new book, *Strong Like Water,* she quotes Dr. Stephen Porges at the beginning of chapter 3 (61). He said, “Feeling safe is the treatment, and creating safety is the work.”

There is a difference between *felt* safety and *actual* safety. Honestly, there’s a lot of interesting research on this subject that I don’t have time to get into here, but I’d encourage you to read books like *Strong like Water* to start for a more in-depth discussion and understanding.

But in general, *felt* safety is the subjective experience we have emotionally, physically, spiritually, mentally, environmentally, and relationally— in which our nervous systems are able to regulate our bodies normally and we do not sense a threat and the need to fight, flight, or freeze in order to protect. It’s the experience of feeling connected, regulated, and ultimately safe.

*Actual* safety is when there is no external threat. We are not presently in danger. Physical danger. Emotional danger. Spiritual danger. Environmental danger. Etc.

I’ve heard therapists often try to get clients to distinguish between felt safety and actual safety in order to help them stay grounded and present. For example, say a client is triggered and reminded of a past traumatic memory because of something that’s happened in the present. There is value to helping them ground themselves to the present by showing them they aren’t currently in danger. They just *felt* like they were because something triggered them.

I, again, do see a lot of value in this. Helping them stay grounded in the truth of their actual safety rather than getting dysregulated by *feeling* unsafe.

I’ve used this with my clients, too.

But in that scenario I gave earlier, there’s wasn’t complete actual safety. There was a real and dangerous tornado moving through our parish. (For those not in Louisiana, that’s what we call a county. I know, we have to be special like that.) But if we’d have gone outside, we wouldn’t have actually been completely safe, even though the tornado (thankfully) didn’t hit our house. We were more safe inside, but the threat was actual. It was real.

There are times when we feel unsafe but in reality, we are actually safe. Like this weekend when I heard thunder and lightning and felt anxious about my kids outside, but the storm was actually miles away and never hit us. I felt unsafe. I wasn’t unsafe.

And there are times when safety is threatened and the threat is real. Aundi Kolber also says, “It is important to remember that our experience of safety is perceived and not necessarily literal. This is why, even when the world is tumultuous, it’s hard.” (65) It’s then we need to focus on *feeling* safe as much as possible in order to stay regulated and grounded. Feeling safe is first step to being able to heal. Creating actual safety then becomes the work, but we need to FEEL it first. Because if we don’t feel safe, remember, our nervous systems aren’t able to regulate and are constantly in fight, flight, or freeze mode. We’ll be constantly in a state of protection from potential threats.

Recently I saw a person in public I hadn’t seen in a while and wasn’t expecting to see that particular day in public. That person didn’t interact with me or anything, but my body immediately interpreted them as a threat to my safety because of something very harmful they did to me at an earlier time.

I had a panic attack, and couldn’t get regulated to a sense of felt safety until I left the public place and called one of my best friends. It was only then I began to breathe more regularly. Stop crying. It was only then my muscle tension began to ease and my heart rate slowed. Though I wasn’t actually in danger, I didn’t feel safe in the presence of a person who’d harmed me, and I needed to get out there to feel safe again.

There is so much work that goes into feeling safe. SO much work.

From boundary work to grounding skills to connecting to your body through various things like breath work. There are a lot of things that can help you feel safe.

But I’ll simply ask you that question:

When you don’t feel safe, what do you need in order to feel safe again?

Are there people, places, things, and situations in which you feel most unsafe?

If some of those are unavoidable, how can you help yourself (or how can someone around you) help you feel safe? If you are the one helping another feel safe, ask them that. Or just be attuned to them to know what helps them when they feel unsafe. Like a gentle touch or your presence. Or words to validate their experience. Whatever.

After that panic attack, I’ve seen that person in public a lot more. I can’t always avoid it, but one thing I’ve learned to do is invite a friend to come with me if they’re able. That helps me feel connected, safe, and calm. And it helps take my mind off that other person.

In bad storms, I know what my kids need in order to feel safe now, so I’ll do that for them as much as I’m able.

What about you? What do you need in order to feel safe when you aren’t in a safe situation? Or maybe when you ARE in a safe situation, but it still feels unsafe. What do you need emotionally? Physically? Spiritually? Relationally? Environmentally?

Do you need space? Order? Touch? Presence? Boundaries? A slower pace? Do you need prayer? What do you need?

If you’re unsure, I hope you’d consider working with a therapist on it. A trauma-informed and trauma-trained therapist, specifically.

This is the work, friend. I know it’s hard because I struggled with it, too. But it’s possible. It’s possible to work toward felt (and actual in many cases) safety.

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Thanks for sitting a while with me. I trust that working toward felt safety will help you take a step toward wholeness so you can finally see what good relationships are made of.

To finish up, the transcript for this episode will be on the podcast page on my website, kerrahfabacher.com.

A big thanks to my friend Robert Hargrove for creating the music for the show, and the team at Wildfire Creative Co for editing.

Until next time friend, I’ll see you soon.