



## Book Club: Witnessing and remembering trauma with Judith Herman's 'Trauma and Recovery'

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### Host (00:01):

Hi there. Welcome to Mental Health Professionals' Network podcast series. MHPN's aim is to promote and celebrate interdisciplinary, collaborative mental health care.

### Dr Nivanka De Silva (00:17):

We know this land has history, custodians, and stories spanning tens of thousands of years that endure to this day. We celebrate and acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of this land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations. We pay respect to their elders past and present, and we embrace their continued connections to this place.

### Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (00:44):

We acknowledge that these lands were never ceded, and the effects of colonisation on land, waters and cultures is enduring. We embrace the principle of First Nations first, recentering Australian history with Indigenous histories. We accept the invitation from the Uluru Statement of the Heart to walk alongside the First Nations people, and pledge our support for Voice to Parliament, Makarrata, and truth telling. A very warm welcome to this episode of MHPN Presents: Book Club. My name is Radhika Santhanam-Martin. I'm a clinical psychologist based in Melbourne, Australia, and I'm joined by my colleague Nivanka De Silva, a Melbourne-based psychiatry registrar.

### Dr Nivanka De Silva (01:30):

Hi, Radhika. It's great to be here.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (01:32):**

I'm looking forward to today's conversation. When MHPN asked me whether I have a book in mind, I didn't bat an eyelid, I knew exactly which book. It was Trauma and Recovery, by Judith Lewis Herman. The subtitle of the book is The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror. This was published in 1992. Our listeners can find the link to the book on the landing page of this episode. I selected this book, Nivanka, to discuss today for two reasons. First, this was given to me by my supervisor, Cecile Russo in 1998, and she told me if there was only one book I could read on trauma at that time, then it should be this one. Secondly, it was one of the first books in psychiatry and psychology that brilliantly argued that psychological trauma experiences can only be understood in a sociopolitical context. For me, there were so many aha moments in this book.

(02:37):

A bit like Alice in Wonderland, I got curiouser and curiouser. It gave me such a new language, and a new way of seeing, and a new way of knowing. And the reason I've invited you, Nivanka, to join me, because I'm in my late fifties. I'm migrant, and I'm a woman of colour who has been practicing in the field as a trauma therapist for the last 32 years, and you are in your late twenties, a migrant, and a woman of colour who is starting your practice. I also know that you stood for the Greens Party state elections when you were a lot younger. So, the sociopolitical context is obviously important for you. So, tell me, what did you think when I invited you to join me?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (03:24):**

First of all, thanks so much for having me, Radhika. I consider you a very cherished mentor, so it's a real honour to share this space with you. Initially when you asked me, I was really surprised and a bit nervous. I'm still relatively junior in my career, and worried about what I can contribute, but I'm so happy I accepted the offer, and come to this from a point of wanting to learn and grow. I also thought it would be an amazing advocacy opportunity. This book is quite political, in the sense that it talks about things that society would rather not talk about, about people and issues which are often pushed into the margins and silenced. By talking about this book, we are also centering marginalised people. And that is very important to me.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (04:15):**

Isn't it? That's absolutely, exactly as you said. It's like, if it can bring us a little bit closer to speaking the unspeakable. So, some of the things I want to just talk about to you, Nivanka, is that for me, while I was reading it, Judith Herman's scholarship was so, so impressive, and what came out for me, like I'm just going to highlight two themes that I want to put out. The book was almost like zooming out, and zooming in. By zooming out, I mean it was going, taking you to the sociopolitical and historical context, and then it'll zoom in to the intra psychic, and the individual context. And I can see why it was hailed as groundbreaking, because it shows the astonishing parallels between private horrors and public torture. So, it's a book about saying the commonalities between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between survivors from the concentration camp and the survivors of prolonged childhood abuse in their own homes.

(05:25):

So, for me, that was quite amazing. The second theme was, for the first time in 1998, the book was written in 92. I heard for the first time, Nivanka, this proposed staged recovery model for trauma. So, Judith Herman talks about this three stage model. The first is safety and stabilisation. The second is remembrance and mourning, and the third stage is reconnection and integration. For me, the clarity and the sophistication of this was mind blowing, because you may or may not know that, given your age, Nivanka, most presentations of trauma in the nineties for women were categorised as personality disorders. In general, there was little understanding of complex trauma, let alone the recovery part of it. So, what ideas stood out for you when you read the book?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (06:21):**

Radhika, I just want to kind of build on what you say as well. When you say that it was like in the 1990s, sometimes I worry that we haven't really moved from that, especially in the public mental health system, because as a psychiatry registrar, often we are still very much taught from the DSM-V. There is a big focus on psychopharmacology, and that's really important. But I think, definitely, my journey through my training has been to really think about trauma, and really think about people's life stories and histories, and transgenerational histories as well. So yeah, I think we still have a long way to go. And in terms of what I thought of the book, I actually wanted to read out a quote from the book, because I think Judith Herman has such a poetic and thoughtful way of writing.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (07:12):**

Doesn't she?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (07:14):**

And this particular paragraph has really stayed with me. So it goes,

"When the traumatic events of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator, it is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides. It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering."

And that is so resonant for me. And she goes on to say that for the bystander to stand with the victim, there needs to be a supportive social environment, a political movement that affirms and validates the victim's truth. And without this wider social movement, it is all too easy for the bystander to look the other way. And I think it's so applicable. I think that's what I really love about this book. When I was reading it, all these examples were coming to my mind of what we see day to day, like the Black Lives Matter movement, women's liberation movement.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (08:38):**

#Metoo movement.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (08:39):**

Exactly, exactly.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (08:41):**

So, Nivanka, did you think, I mean, just hearing you read that passage there, do you think by bystanders, Judith Herman is also implicating professionals like us, therapists like us?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (08:53):**

Yeah. Yeah, I think so, because it's about when we are listening, what we almost choose to hear. And sometimes I think when we hear, sometimes we can hear in order to diagnose and to pathologize, versus hearing to really understand where the person in front of us is coming from, and the things that they've been through, and the sociopolitical context in which all these things happened.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (09:24):**

For me, this is so significant, because this book deepened my practice exactly where you've touched upon, which is I realised that testimonial therapy, which is what Judith Herman talks about in the book as a path to recovery, but I realised as a therapist that attentive listening to a testimony is indeed a profound act of witnessing for me. That is a deep, deep practice of solidarity, that I had never understood before. So, for someone who has been silenced or the perpetrator who never wants this to be seen or heard or felt, to do an act of witnessing, even in the confines of a therapy room, became so crucial for me. It became like, the core of my ethics. The other way, also the book deepened my practice is something around this notion, I mean now it's so common to hear this word coercive control, but in 1992 she wrote about coercive control exactly in the same way.

(10:39):

And Judith explains it in great detail, with such thoroughness on coercive control, isolation and helplessness and how soul destroying it is. And here we are in the last five years, this term has taken off in fact, because of course Jess Hill's book, See What You Made Me Do, and also her podcast, The Trap that she did with the Victorian Women's Trust, and it's clear for me that prolonged isolation and helplessness with relentless practices of coercive control are corrosive, doesn't matter whether it's for Julian Assange, or whether it's for Behrouz Boochani, or for the hundreds of women that we see in our rooms. So, I understand that coercive control and isolation are core experiences of psychological trauma, and on the other hand, the experiences, the core experiences of recovery are rooted in empowerment and reconnection. So, how would it impact your practice, do you think, Nivanka, given that you read the book more recently than I have?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (11:49):**

I think it really helped me to understand the stages of recovery, because I guess with my patients, usually, I try to be really present in the moment, but I didn't understand that there was, there's these three stages of recovery. So, I think it helps me to now think about, okay, have we really built enough safety to do the remembering and mourning? Is it safe to do the remembering and mourning, and to be more mindful of that? I think that's a big learning for me. But also, to think about another thing, I always

thought that as a clinician, working on an individual level is not enough. Because often when you are working just on an individual level, there's this, such a sense of, sometimes, powerlessness in the stories, that sometimes I feel like I soak up too. And I think being a part of broader sociopolitical movements is also about empowering myself to kind of work towards systems change, to address those more upstream factors, so that we actually can work towards preventing trauma, rather than all this after trauma happened. Yeah, I think reading it almost reaffirmed that, something that I believed, and also this sense of generational solidarity. Judith Herman is so much older than I am, but this sense that, in 1992 with all the knowledge that she had, she wrote this book that now younger generations of therapists can read and learn from. It kind of connects you to this continuum, that you're not alone.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (13:47):**

I'm so affirmed by that. Yes, it is multi-generational. It's almost like sitting on ancestors, or on a body of knowledge. But when you said about, it's important for me so that I don't feel powerless in the room, I also think the other end of it, sometimes when we do good work, we think it's all because of just our individual contribution. When it's never that way. We are built on so many shoulders, and such struggle and such, as you say, generosity of sharing and deepening knowledge, practices and skills, and also a kindness and humility that comes without having the arrogance of, oh, the client improved because of me. No, it's a whole range of sociocultural and political determinants.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (14:36):**

And I think that's something else that I loved about this book, because the way she writes, there's a sense of humility that you can sense, that she's so experienced, she has so much knowledge, but she's offering up a perspective for people to think about rather than being dogmatic and saying, this is the way. And it's such a nice book to read, because of that sense of gentleness.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (15:00):**

Yeah, gentleness. I do want our listeners also to know that you and I even watched her, and she is that gentle, and she has this beautiful way of taking the time, she pauses to reflect. And when we watched her Conversations with History interview at the Berkeley Institute, that was such, for me, it was, yeah, it was a masterclass in gentleness. But I also want to take it a bit deeper, Nivanka. We have this three staged model that we are talking about, that Judith Herman says. My question is, what would recovery look for a society that has been traumatised, not an individual. So, like traumatised individuals, traumatised communities and traumatised societies need to remember, grieve and heal. The responsibility to bear witness is a crucial step for healing. But in societies, if there is refusal to see trauma, if there is denial, if there is distancing, and if there is dissociation, what happens? As is often the case, the bystanders, like whether it's us, or the society in general, if we choose to identify with the perpetrators, either by commission or by omission, it creates a deep betrayal of justice, doesn't it?

(16:29):

Whether it's with the institutional abuse, war crimes, stolen generation, detention practices, domestic violence, child sexual assault. So, my larger question, Nivanka, is how would it be if we do remembering and mourning, how would it be if we remember the colonisation history of Australia, and mourn the brutality that occurred with Indigenous people here? How would it be if we do acts of solidarity and witnessing through the Uluru Statement of the Heart, what would acts of reckoning mean for a nation

like ours? What would happen? As Judith Herman said, if we connect psychological insights to political insights, and then to political actions, what if?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (17:19):**

I think we have so much to gain from that, because I think, going back to a personal level, Radhika, I think when I was growing up, I'm migrant, but I went to high school here. I was literally taught that, in history class, I was taught that Captain Cook shook hands with the Indigenous elder, and that's how they just handed over this land. And obviously, that's not what happened, but that's what I was taught. This was like, going back 10 years, and I think it's changing now, but kids are being taught in public classrooms, untruths, falsehoods. I think it sets people up, because then they hold onto this narrative and become very defensive when that's challenged. So, I think in terms of building this society that is ready to go on this healing path, I think people need to have a more curious mindset, always be ready to challenge themselves, and change their mind, and think about what they've been taught. So, I think that's one, to be curious and to be open. But I also think that kind of curious mindset, thinking that you have all the more to gain from that. Because if we live in an Australia where we truly recognise that this is Aboriginal people's land, and really make an effort to learn Indigenous languages, to make an effort to learn about local plants, and their herbal uses, their healing properties, then all of us would feel so much more grounded to the earth.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (19:03):**

And that is certainly the remembering, isn't it, with history, remembering. But even the paragraph that you read of hers, because everybody's reading the book with an individual or a client in mind. If we read it with a country in mind, it'll take a completely different perspective. So, in some ways are you thinking, Nivanka, that academia and activism should go hand in hand?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (19:32):**

Yeah, I think so, because I think it's almost like even though it doesn't really happen that often, I think they sound like natural allies, because one thing compliments the other. The things that you learn in an academic sphere can help you to be a better activist, and vice versa, I think. So, what do you think, Radhika?

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (19:54):**

This is such an interesting area, isn't it? Because the training is all about, you are not an activist. You're not going to be doing the marches, you're not going to do the campaign. You are a therapist, you are an academic. You just read the data, you just do the stats. And I kind think people of Judith's generation, who came from political movements, whether it was anti-Vietnam protests or feminist movements, or even the activists now from the LGBTIQ movement or the NDIS movement, where people said nothing for us without us kind of movement, psychology and psychotherapy has been distanced from this kind of activism. I kind of sometimes think we have become so polite, whereas somebody like Judith Herman and her colleagues took on the entire field by saying, something doesn't match here. This just doesn't agree with what the last hundred years of knowledge and the body of literature is speaking to. We have completely missed what is happening here, kind of a thing.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (21:10):**

And I think maybe what you just said just reminded me of working in a professional setting. You are often told to be very objective, and to almost try to leave yourself aside and just do your job, to leave the personal aside. And I think maybe that's the problem, because when you leave the personal aside, you almost leave that sense of advocacy, that sense of personal fire behind. And I think that's a huge loss.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (21:41):**

That's a nice word, personal fire, because it's also around, we bring so much passion and ideology to our work, but slowly we all just become, everybody becomes a psychologist, the same.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (21:53):**

The same.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (21:53):**

And Radhika goes away.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (21:55):**

Yeah, we are all trying to be the same, when we all need to be different.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (21:59):**

One size fits all. So, one of the things maybe we have to think about is how do we do as a collective, in the field I mean? As practitioners, how do we do solidarity? How do we do acts of witnessing? How do we do acts of remembering? And more importantly, how do we grieve for our historical wrongs in order to heal? It's not to whip ourselves, not as an act of flagellation, but as an act of liberation. How do we do this? And those were those ethical core questions for me, that continues to both haunt and enrich me, from Judith's book. I could love to continue talking about this with you the whole time, but it's been such a great conversation. For me, I have to say, listening to you, two things that I listened immediately touched my heart. One was this thing that you talked about, personal fire.

(23:13):

Because I kind of think in the last 32 years, I have heard so much about this concept of neutrality. We are all neutral, la la la, when none of us are neutral. Inside of us, nobody's neutral. So, we have to find a way to embrace our positionings, moral positionings, but at the same time not to be consumed by it so that we don't collaborate, and we are not able to reach out or open our hearts and our hands for holding and cooperation. So, that personal fire stood out for me. The other thing is, you mentioned around your own migrant growing up and history lessons, and those two things, I'm going to think more deeply. So, what was a penny-dropping moment for you?

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (24:06):**

I think Radhika, when at the very start, I think you mentioned this, zooming in and zooming out. I guess I didn't really think about it that way, but it really helps me conceptualise it, because I think it is, I think looking at an individual level, but also at a collective level, and being able to do those things all at the same time, to hold those points of view simultaneously in your mind is really important. And that's something that, yeah, I'm going to think more about. And I guess I want to really thank you, as well. Like I said, I am very thankful for you, not just for this podcast, but for mentoring me, for giving me all these book recommendations. And as you said, your supervisor handed down this book for you. And in the same way, you have handed down this book for me, so someday, maybe I can do the same for someone younger.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (25:06):**

Isn't it? Yeah. I'm not sure who it is, probably it's Robert McFarlane who said, what kind of an ancestor are we going to be? And that is a question that's important for me. What kind of an ancestor am I going to be? So, it's not just about today. It's not just about tomorrow. It's about 50 years, and a hundred years to come. What kind of an ancestor will I be? So, I think we'll have to bid farewell to our listeners, Nivanka. Thank you all for joining us on this episode of MHPN Presents: Book Club. You've been listening to me, Radhika.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (25:50):**

And me, Nivanka.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (25:51):**

We hope you have enjoyed this conversation about the book Trauma and Recovery by Judith Lewis Herman as much as we have. If you want to learn more about myself or Nivanka, our bios can be found on the landing page of this episode, where you'll also find the link to the book we have discussed and MHPN's feedback survey. MHPN values your feedback, please follow the link and let us know whether you found this episode helpful. Provide comments or suggestions to help shape the future of MHPN podcasts.

**Dr Nivanka De Silva (26:26):**

To stay up to date with future Book Club episodes and other MHPN podcasts, don't forget to subscribe to MHPN Presents. Thank you for your commitment and engagement with interdisciplinary, person-centered mental health care. It's goodbye from me.

**Dr Radhika Santhanam-Martin (26:41):**

And me.

**Host (26:42):**

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