

Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 6: Autopsychotherapy and Self-Leadership

Chris Wells, Emma Nicholson, and guest Kate Arms
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Emma: Welcome back, everybody. Thanks for joining us on Positive Disintegration Podcast, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm your host Emma Nicholson from the Adults with Overexcitabilities YouTube channel and Tragic Gift blog. And with me today is co-host and resident expert, Chris Wells, Dąbrowski scholar and researcher. Hey Chris, how are you going today?

Chris: Hi Emma. Everything is great here. It's good to be back. I'm excited to have another episode.

Emma: Absolutely. And this is an interesting topic, this one, because it's something I've seen a lot of questions running around on social media about and it's autopsychotherapy and what it is.

Chris: Yes. We have seen in the Dąbrowski Facebook group that people want to know more about the reality of autopsychotherapy and what it means. So, hopefully this episode will have some insights that are helpful for people.

Emma: I'm sure it will. And we've got Kate Arms on the podcast today and you've worked with Kate before.

Chris: That's right. Kate and I have been friends for well over four years now. I'm very grateful for her because we met at a time when I was really trying to figure out what I was doing with the theory and in my own work. I was still in a PhD program. So, I worked with Kate initially in her role as a coach. She was really a huge help to me as I finished my dissertation and wrapped up my degree program. And we are admins together with a few other people in a parent group on Facebook for gifted and twice-exceptional kids. I'm really excited to have her here because when I thought of doing an episode about autopsychotherapy, she was the first person that came to mind as somebody who could talk from her own experience, and professionally, about how this looks in the real world. So, glad to have you here, Kate.

Kate: Thanks. Really glad to be here, Chris. Thanks so much for having me, and nice to chat with you, Emma.

Emma: Hi Kate, it's great to have you on the show. And for our listeners, Kate Arms has spent the last 35 years studying how creative and sensitive people create successful organizations, the honor, and respect, the inner lives of the diverse people who run them. Along the way she's raised four kids, written four books, started two podcasts, and drank an enormous amount of coffee, apparently. So how's that going for you Kate?

Kate: Well, it's definitely caffeine power. There's no question about it.

Chris: Kate, tell us how you first learned about Dąbrowski's theory.

Kate: So, I've been trying to figure out where I first got the push to read Susan Daniels and Michael Piechowski book, *Living With Intensity* because that was my first introduction to Dąbrowski's theory. The context was I was trying to figure out how to understand my twice-exceptional son and what parenting him was doing to me and for me. And forcing me to grow and forcing me to learn tremendously and to become a different kind of person in order to parent him. And to be honest, I read the whole book and it was so thick and so much detail in it that I went, intensity—okay, not all bad, but definitely real. And then I didn't really do much with the theory until you and I started talking about it probably coming out of the presentation that you did about your autobiographical work at SENG. It was definitely in that parenting conversation that I learned about it.

Chris: I also learned about it along the way because of having a twice-exceptional kid. Interesting how that works.

Kate: Yeah. I think that actually the theory is really, really powerful and resonates so much with twice-exceptional kids and twice-exceptional adults because that combination of intellectual capability and sensitivity and overexcitability, I think that creates the kinds of challenges that result in disintegration. And as parents, we are trying so hard to turn that into something positive and it's so easy to see it as something really awful. So, just the language of positive disintegration is so reassuring.

Chris: Yes, I agree. And I think you're right. That's absolutely true. So tell us a little bit about how the theory of positive disintegration has served you as a framework personally and professionally, because I happen to know since we're friends that both apply in your case.

Kate: Yeah. It's interesting because by the time I came to the theory, I had explored the kind of transformation that you go through the process of positive disintegration and reintegration in a

bunch of different contexts in my late teens and early twenties, I when I was in college was very, very interested in how theater historically functioned as a collective storytelling ritual that could transform communities when it was in a ritual setting. I was really interested in sociological anthropology around rites of passage. I had the language of liminal space and liminal journey from those studies. So the idea of positive disintegration being a liminal space, where you're going through a psychological transformation really resonated and helped me collect this kind of individual psychology world to the more social pieces and more community aspects that I had studied before.

It gave me a real framework for thinking about development that way. I personally had a self-destructive phase in high school where I went through a major crisis and major depression and suicide attempt. I really didn't put myself back together again for another dozen years. I was lost and finding my way through the wilderness. And then I started having experiences where I was helping myself through learning about myself, learning about how going into that depression and understanding where it came from was actually helping me through it more than trying to mask the depression. I was on the other side of that by the time I hit Dąbrowski's theory, but I didn't have a framework to understand the journey that I'd gone through.

The first thing the framework did was it gave me a lens to look at my own story through that honored both the incredible difficulty that I'd had as a teenager, and the incredible amount of work that I had done on myself, and with myself to try and make a better version of me living in the world for. So, that's where the autopsychotherapy piece really lives in my own story. Personally it gave me a lens to look at myself. It also professionally gave me a lens to look at my clients because I was coaching and starting as an early career coach at the time that I found the theory. In coaching, we talk about horizontal coaching and vertical coaching. And horizontal coaching is coaching about getting better at something.

The work that you and I did when you were working on your thesis, for instance, was just about breaking down the pieces of how do you get this thesis done? Because the thesis is a long project and that's very much horizontal coaching. That's a trajectory of, let's just get this project done and I will help you through the process of getting it done. And in the Dąbrowski world, that feels to me very unilevel work. But a lot of the coaching that I do, somebody comes to me, and they're stuck. In order to accomplish the thing that they want to accomplish, they actually have to become a more capable, more expansive, more creative, kinder version of themselves. They actually have to go through an identity transformation in order to step into being the kind of person who's capable of achieving the kinds of things that they want to achieve. It's a vertical transformation. The levels work in Dąbrowski helps me make sense of that identity shift. So, that's where the framework lives for me in terms of theoretical understanding of people's journeys.

Chris: That's great. Thank you. Thanks so much for sharing your personal journey with us. I believe that really, the most helpful thing we can do for people with this podcast in some ways is to bring stories of disintegration as a major part of what we can offer people. It's so important to actually share these journeys and say, Hey, you can get to the other side of this and it's not all just theory.

Kate: I think it's really, really powerful to talk from your perspective and my perspective as professionals who are trained and helping others. At this point in our lives, we may look like we have it all together, because we're reintegrating or reasonably well integrating in terms of our functionality at this point, but both you and I went through this integration. So we're actually living proof of the fact that this isn't just theoretical, that this is actually lived journeys that people can go through. In that moment where you're really lost, when you're really disintegrated and you don't have hope to hear that other people have gone through this in ways that actually weren't just a Band-Aid, that really going into the disintegration and understanding it is helpful.

I know when I was really struggling with trying to figure out how to do a better job handling depression than some of the meds that I was prescribed. There were a couple books that I read that were autobiographies of people, both religious people who had used their depression as a contemplative path. And it was massively inspiring to me.

Chris: I understand. I do. Interestingly, in early 2020, I read Marsha Linehan's memoir *Building a Life Worth Living*, and it was her book that really inspired me to pursue my social work license and start working with clients again. There was something about reading her story about being a patient for quite a bit of time when she was young. I want to say almost two years of her life in the hospital. I resonated with her story so much, it helped propel me into working with people again. I mean, you just never know what inspiration you can get from reading the biographical work or autobiographical work from other people.

Kate: Yeah, for me, it was St. John of the Cross *Dark Night of the Soul*, and Parker Palmer's autobiographical work. I don't remember which of his books, he spoke about it most. And there was a book—I no longer remember the name of the person who wrote it—called *The Zen Path Through Depression*. And between them, the three of those normalized this as something you could get through. Something that wasn't just me being really, really, really broken.

Chris: Yes. I know it's wonderful to find connections in literature.

Emma: Kate, I just wanted to pick up something that you said before. You were talking about using the framework after your difficulties have passed to have it as a lens to look back at yourself. That's very similar to my experience. I came to this theory quite late, but even in the last couple of years since knowing about it, and even though my difficult times are well behind me, I've found personally it's helped me go back and reflect on all those things and how traumas are still impacting my life and my behaviors. It's been really useful even after the storm has passed. Although some people might say it is maybe just a lifeline in a time of crisis, it's still handy for me in the aftermath, I guess, to make sense of what has happened and come to peace with it. Do you find personally or in your profession that there's still a great use for Dąbrowski's theory even after the storm has passed?

Kate: Yeah. I do this much more in terms of my own self-reflection than I do talking with other people, but for me, the thing that's been really, really valuable recently is thinking about the levels and thinking about particularly the growth from spontaneous multilevel disintegration through to secondary integration, that period of getting to organized disintegration is really, really awful. And then once you get to organized, you start—you've made the decisions about what are the values that are going to lead you to this personality ideal. Once you've made the commitment, or once I have made the commitment to the values, which I articulate as very much grounded in simultaneously having well-being and accomplishment for me, that's the languaging that sort of defines how I think we get to my best self or how I think I get to my personality ideal. But it's very much something I've chosen and I've worked towards and I'm constantly striving for, and to see that piece of the journey, that piece of, okay, I've got a framework to organize the next level of my development.

I might still have pieces that haven't been organized into that, where there's still this piece of disorganization and that comes from the trauma, but I'm actually in a place now where I see myself as striving for integration. I see myself striving for that level five and being in this place of, okay, I think I've got it organized around what will take me there. I'm not sure, I'm still kind of questioning, are there other values that I need to shift to that would be even better and even more aligned to get me there? So, because we're all works in progress, and because this doesn't get done. I mean the exemplars of level five are our saints, and there are so few of them that I use different parts of the theory now that I'm further along in my journey.

Emma: So, it's not just about the looking back, I guess, and the past examination, it's also about using it to aim for that “ought to be” state and sort of direct you on how to move forward.

Kate: Yeah, that sense of, okay, it's still about moving towards that ideal and that it's not a done thing because then the closer you get to it, even if you reach it, you have to live that way. I just think about it differently now that I feel less disorganized.

Chris: Well, I think this is a perfect segue into talking about autopsychotherapy because that is a dynamism that is at the interface of spontaneous multilevel disintegration and organized multilevel disintegration. So, better known as levels three and four to people who are aware. And before I ask you about your experience of autopsychotherapy, I'm going to read a definition from Dąbrowski so that our listeners can know a definition because I think it's helpful to have the canon view of what it means, and our interpretation of it. What I'm about to read is from Dąbrowski's (1996) *Multilevelness of Emotional and Instinctive Functions*.

“Autopsychotherapy is the process of education-of-oneself under conditions of increased stress, as in developmental crises, in critical moments of life, in neuroses and psychoneuroses. It is an off-shoot of education-of-oneself operating at the borderline of levels III and IV. As development advances through spontaneous to organized multilevel disintegration, the conflicts,

disturbances, depressions, and anxieties are handled consciously by the individual himself. Because of the great rise and differentiation of autonomous factors the individual has available to him the means not only to contain areas of conflict and tension but even more so to transform them into processes enriching and strengthening his development. Conscious self-healing is an example of this process at work; it is, however, more crucial in the mental and emotional than in the physical realm. Solitude and concentration play a very important role in this process.” (p. 40)

So, that is the canon definition of autopsychotherapy from Dąbrowski. And now I am wondering what your experience of autopsychotherapy has been.

Kate: The really interesting thing for me in terms of this is the education of one's self element of it. And the looking at one's self and through processing these things really for oneself. My experience when I was a teenager was that there was actually nobody around who was prepared or capable, or I don't know what else, to go into the mental piece of helping me through my difficult times. I was treated by a psychiatrist who was heavy into the chemical fixing of mood disorders. I was heavily medicated with a medicine that changed the way I felt about myself. It didn't just change my moods. It changed how I felt about myself and I was given no talk therapy to work through it. And I was a teenager and this is not a good match. I was not compliant. I decided I was just going to not take the meds.

So, I was going to deal with the mood disorder rather than accept help, because I didn't like the help that was being offered. But I was a suicide survivor, and I was committed to never falling onto that path again. I made this commitment to educate myself about how to be happy. And I was about 17 when I did this, and I did this in several ways. I was reading all the self-help books I could get my hands on and tried all sorts of things. Most of which seems totally ridiculous and very few of which seemed helpful. I got into academic study of the neurobiology of feelings and at the time, the best neuroscience that I could get my hands on, around neuroscience and moods, was in addiction. I did some studying in that area, and I had a roommate in college who had been raised in a yoga ashram.

So, she had this very rich understanding of yoga, not just as a set of physical practices, but as a set of physical, mental and spiritual practices. And she introduced me into the yoga path. So, I'm playing around in all of these different areas, just trying, and seeing what works. And it took a very long time to see progress, but slowly, I found progress. Eventually I went back to getting some help from some particular professional guides in somatic practices and in therapy, I went back on different meds for a while on and off them as I needed them. Continuing my self study, continuing to try journaling practices and embodied exercises through theater and dance. And self-awareness through authentic movement and an improvisational form of self discovery and self-awareness called InterPlay.

It all came together in terms of something that I could use and develop as a system to apply to myself when I started coaching, which I didn't start until my forties. So it was a very, very long process of just looking for every piece of help that I could find. And just constantly like, try something, see what happens, experiment, explore.

Chris: I appreciate that. You're making clear that it's not linear and easy or quick—that it's a process that can take decades.

Kate: Yeah. I was so skeptical, my experience as a teenager in terms of trying to get help was so bad that I didn't want to go anywhere near anybody who had therapy in their name. And like, I did not want to see psychiatrists. I didn't want to see anyone in professional psychology because I was not impressed by the experience that I had, it was so bad.

Chris: It sounds like you had to figure out your own self-healing from that experience itself.

Emma: From listening to that story, one thing that jumps out at me is, well, there's a couple of things actually. First of all, is that each person's journey with trying to understand themselves and heal themselves is going to take different forms. But the essential things that I got from your description that you read out, Chris, was that it's understanding yourself and educating yourself, and also doing it under times of stress. So, being able to self-correct in the moment because I've noticed on social media, that one question that keeps popping up is, well, how do you autopsychotherapy basically? And it's going to look different for everybody.

Everybody's going to find a different mode of doing it. So, personally for me, it involves a lot of meditating, and a lot of journaling, and also doing things like creative writing, and drawing, and that sort of stuff. The actual mode is going to be different for everybody. But as long as you've got those crucial elements of trying to educate yourself about yourself and trying to work on yourself in the moment, I think that's the important elements, but you can correct me if I'm wrong.

Kate: I would absolutely agree. I think that one of the things that I'm really interested in right now is, there are a bunch of different neurotransmitters in our brain that impact all of the different mood systems that are typically involved when people are trying to do this work on themselves. And one of the people that I read recently, the book was called the *Upward Spiral*, matched different self-help techniques to the different neurotransmitter pathways. There were so many neurotransmitters, and the self-help techniques were—some of them really only worked on one pathway and some of them had impact across several. So, each of us, our neurobiology is unique. So, of course, the mix of these techniques that's going to help any one person is going to be different because they don't all function the same way, literally, physically in our brains.

Chris: That's a great point.

Kate: The other thing that you said, Emma, that I think is really interesting is this piece about increasing levels of stress. As a coach, one of the things that I think my job is, is actually to teach my clients to do this work for themselves. I offer the coaching modality as a path for self-

reflection, and a process to go through for this kind of look at myself a little bit, learn a little something, try a little something, learn a little more from it, try something different based on what I've learned. And as a cyclical feedback loop for doing this kind of development. My goal is to model and explicitly teach a process that people can then take with them, and do for themselves everywhere in their world, because they can't take me with them into every moment of their lives.

They'll often come to me with a really big problem, and I'll say, okay, we might not want to practice there to begin with. We might want to pull it apart, find one element of the problem, and find a way to practice in a low stress environment. So that when you're in a higher stress environment, you can have more likelihood of having access to this, having succeeded in a low stress environment. And it's absolutely been my personal experience that the more work I do in low to medium stress environments, about figuring out how to cope and handle and respond well, the easier it is for me to have those skills when I'm under greater stress. So that pattern is one I've recognized in myself and in my clients.

Emma: As an example of that, working on yourself under low stress, I had a little incident the other day where I opened the dishwasher and my other half had packed it. And when he packs the dishwasher, he just throws everything in everywhere. And when I pack the dishwasher, everything goes in its place, but I opened the dishwasher and I had a minor freak out. And I'm like, why am I freaking out over the dishes? So, I use the old Socratic method of asking why—why do I feel like this? And figured out it's because I don't like that feeling of being lost. I'm one of those people that—even if the house is a little bit messy, I know where everything is. I need that feeling of control because I hate the unknown and I hate being lost.

But I made that little discovery about myself, of why does this irritate me so much? It's like, because I don't like not knowing where things are, and I don't like the feeling of being lost. And if you can practice in those little moments of figuring out why does this piss me off rather than me just yelling at him and saying, can't you pack the dishwasher properly? It was a moment for me to do that little reflection that wasn't under the pressure cooker, so to speak.

Chris: I like that example because the fact that you have this self-reflection is so important, and the ability to be self-aware and to reflect is significant in this theory. I have been thinking while Kate was talking about her experience of autopsychotherapy about the fact that it's a very multilevel dynamism.

When we think about helping other people with autopsychotherapy, this is a theory where—the majority of people in the world are in a unilevel reality. So, I have a lot a lot of questions as a researcher around, when is autopsychotherapy possible? How does it look as an early dynamism in its precursor form compared to when somebody is at a higher level of development? I think that there's a lot of interesting questions around the dynamisms and how they'd look over time.

I could relate to a lot of what you said, Kate. I also started as a teenager kind of in the self-help literature to figure out my problems, and how to fix them, and ended up in a long journey

through the mental health system. I think that the key part is the subject-object process. So, what I wanted to get into for just a moment is that a lot of these dynamisms work together.

You can't have autopsychotherapy and self-education without also having an active third factor and subject-object in oneself, and inner psychic transformation—all of these dynamisms work together. And of course, all of the dynamisms I just listed are in organized multilevel disintegration, which is Level IV in this theory. There's a lot to talk about when it comes to how the dynamisms from levels three and four work side by side for a long time, I think. I know that that's been my experience of them. It's not quick, it's not easy. It's years and years of inner work. I'm glad that we're having this conversation, I guess, is what I wanted to say.

Kate: It's really interesting. There are a couple of things that you said in there that, if I can remember them both long enough, to address them both. First is this piece of the theory that is that only some people get through this process and the overexcitabilities being related to developmental potential. One of the things that I find really interesting is that I find myself doing the same things with my kids that I do with my leadership coaching clients. And that actually developing the self-awareness, and the habit of looking at oneself to then apply these techniques of self-education and autopsychotherapy. Both at these really successful people, these people who are already leaders, who didn't many of them go through the kind of disintegration that we're talking about, or if they did, they were often very unilevel.

They often didn't have that piece of rejecting the social conditioning that happens when you go into the multilevel. They very often get to these leadership positions having not had that kind of challenge. And then they find themselves doing all the things that got them into the leadership position, and it not working. That's where they have this question about what's happening. And quite often, this is where you get a place where people have gotten to the top through narcissistic behaviors. Then they look at the way that their employees and their followers are responding to them. And they're like, wait a minute, I'm a jerk. Like, how did this happen? And then you get this point of positive maladjustment in people in their like forties, fifties. That is the same as I see in some of these hypersensitive children who struggle way earlier in life.

I think part of who has what developmental potential is, actually, this does take a lot of time. The more time you have left in your life, when you have this disintegration, the more potential there is for actually getting through the whole process. I find that really, really interesting. But the flip side of it is it's much easier to teach someone in their fifties how to observe themselves as an object than it is to teach a child how to observe themselves. So, when I work with parents, I would often find—I'm not currently working with any parents, really. So, past tense, but when I would work with parents, having the parents be patient with how long it took kids to actually learn to be able to see themselves from the outside, in order to be able to do some of this work on themselves has been enormous because there are parts of normal human biological development that make it easier to do this a little bit later in life.

Chris: It makes sense that it's easier to teach adults the process of doing that. But it's interesting to me—well because I do my research in the field of gifted education. It's interesting to me how,

when we're talking about gifted kids, that they, because of their advanced cognitive abilities can often experience the subject-object process spontaneously at a very young age. And it's interesting because even in Dąbrowski's writing, he gives examples of children who have the budding subject-object process. It may not reach the level of a dynamism, but it's there. There's one girl, in one of his books, who he gives an example where she's saying, "I'm not dancing. My legs are dancing." She has this ability to imagine these things about herself.

Emma: Can we define that though quickly? Just in case people are going, what the hell is subject-object?

Kate: Good call. Chris, you want to give us the definition?

Chris: I can. Subject-object in oneself is—it's complicated. I am not sure that we should try and define it. I mean, I guess we can. I can define it. It's more than just seeing yourself from outside. It's also being able to look not only at ourselves from outside and be reflective of ourselves, but to be able to see ourselves from the eyes of other people as well. To be able to see ourselves as not only subjects, but as objects. I think it's great when we see a teenager who can realize how other people are seeing them. That's a huge deal to be able to do that. I think that's the real crux of what Dąbrowski wanted us to do is to not be able to just introspect or see ourselves, but to see ourselves from the eyes of other people and to see our transgressions that way and correct them.

That's the thing, is that subject-object is about self-evaluation, it's not only about that awareness, at least when it's a dynamism. So, the early subject object process is kind of incipient and lacks, I would say, the aspect of self-evaluation or being able to see yourself from other people's perspectives.

Emma: Chris, isn't there also a part about then flipping that over and seeing other people not as objects or numbers or shape, but seeing them as unique individuals? So, viewing other people subjectively, and that's the building blocks of empathy, I guess.

Chris: Yeah. Seeing the other as subject and not as an object is critical. I mean, we were just talking about narcissists earlier, before we started recording, and narcissistic people see others as objects. That's an essential problem for them. So, being able to see other people subjectively as unique individuals is really critical.

Kate: Yeah. I think this is one of the places where the dynamisms in level III and IV play together because the feelings of shame being a really powerful dynamism in level III are often the block I experience with clients that I'm working with. To transition into seeing other people as subjects not objects. Because quite often what happens in that transition is we have this moment, and I know I went through this, where in order to make the jump from seeing other people, as objects to seeing them as subject, we actually have to come face to face with the fact

that we've been jerks, that we have been unkind to people that we haven't cared about, the impact that we had.

So, the part of us that wants to see ourselves as good people actually has to wrestle with the shame of having been objectively unkind. The unintended negative impact that we had when we realized that other people's pain gets experienced by them, the way that our pain gets experienced by us. And that shame piece can be a huge blocker that keeps people from making the next step.

Chris: Yeah. This is interesting to me because I've written a journal for so many years. More than 30 years now. And it's very clear to me over the years when I became—I think that as a kid, I definitely had the ability to see outside of myself and take a perspective of what I was doing, how other people saw me, but there was a disconnect where it wasn't until I was in my forties really, that I was able to kind of breakthrough. And it's exactly what you're saying Kate, you have to be able to recognize that what you're doing is difficult for other people, that you have harmed them in some way. Seeing that on paper, recognizing it—it was a huge part of my self-education, and much more to that than autopsychotherapy.

It's interesting to me, too, the distinction between self-education and autopsychotherapy. One being like more of a process of treating oneself during times of crisis and the other—all of the preparation that goes into being able to do that. But yeah, I have really clear times in my journals where I was making these realizations as a researcher when I was like 40ish or 41. Finally recognizing harm that I did when I was young to these people who had been so important in my life. And now, I was going back and asking them to talk with me about it, and all of the ethical implications of that and how they were seeing me. Being able to see that sometimes my need to know as a researcher is not as important as letting other people move on with their lives, and not asking them to rehash these same traumas again.

So, it was in my mind that that was an important thing to finally figure out. Thanks to my writing and revisiting stuff.

Kate: Yeah. There's actually some pretty sophisticated thinking about this in the atonement, making amends step in the 12-step programs and work that from the autopsychotherapy perspective was really, really powerful for me making this transition. I still use these tools every time I realize that I have slipped up and not been living according to the dictates of my personality ideal. Kristen Neff's work in self-compassion and the Buddhist teachings around loving-kindness as practices for actually changing who I am.

Chris: Those are great recommendations actually. Yeah. Neff and her work around self-compassion, that's so important. I was just suggesting to someone today that they consider loving-kindness meditation as a way to learn how to deal with the fact that—especially on social media—it's so easy to get caught up in people who are not on your same side, ideologically, and it's easy to dehumanize people. Using loving-kindness meditation is a great way to kind of

overcome that, and remember that people are human and to still treat them with kindness, even though they don't agree with you on some issue.

Kate: Yeah. One of the things I love about loving-kindness meditation, as opposed to a more mindfulness practice is that the mindfulness practice is like training and awareness, and training in presence, and training in self-awareness. The loving-kindness practice is actually training in empathy and training in compassion. And it's actually putting in stuff that is more in alignment with the person you want to be.

Chris: Exactly. That's right. So, the next place that I would like to shift to in our conversation—and this is something that I love about your work—is that not only have you done autopsychotherapy with yourself, but you have produced books that can be really helpful for other people who need to do their own self-education autopsychotherapy. I know that one of your books, *L.I.F.T.: A Coach Approach to Parenting*, I've seen recommended many times in our Facebook group, but your *Extreme Resilience Workbook* is one that I personally have gone to multiple times over the past year. I think it's great. I love the way that you put it together with useful exercises and stuff. But anyway, I wanted to give you a chance to talk about how you've produced these books that are clearly the product of your own work to understand yourself and live more effectively, but you've made them available to other people as well. So, please, tell us about your work.

Kate: Oh, well, thank you. Part of the thing is that I have a hard time knowing what I know until I teach somebody else. And so in many ways, the part of my work that shows up as memes on social media, and in my books, and in conversations like this is actually me articulating what I know to myself. So, it's a part of my learning process, as well as a gift that I offer to other people. One of the things that people find interesting about *L.I.F.T.*, that is not true about the *Extreme Resilience Workbook*, is that *L.I.F.T.* doesn't actually have instructions about how to do anything.

It's about frameworks for thinking about how to parent in a way that really empowers your child to be who they are. That came from my realizing that I had to teach myself how to understand people, have a framework to look at my children through, and then make it up as I went along and that each of my children was different. So that none of the parenting books that actually had step-by-step exercises, none of them were applicable. I would look at these exercises, and I read a lot of Stuart Shanker's work, and Ross Greene's work, which I absolutely loved. And it made me really, really, really see my children as subjects. That was the huge thing for me because so many parenting models, and certainly the model that I was raised under, is the child is an object to be civilized. And my kids responded really badly to that.

Chris: Mine, too.

Kate: So, I needed to make the shift to seeing my children as subjects of their own lives when they didn't know anything about their own lives. When they were nine months, like 10, 11 months, my children were exerting their subject-ness and exerting that with so much force. I had to accept it. I had to develop an approach to parenting that was based in the personality ideal of the parent that I want to be. And then, what are the tools that I need to bring into each parenting moment that will help me be that kind of parent? The book is very much the philosophies and the practices and the lenses that I use to greet the parenting moments. It makes it a very, very different parenting book from one that tells you what to do in various situations because it assumes that my reader is going to have to figure out a lot of this on their own in the context of their own lives.

I just hope that I can give them some tools that are helpful. The *Extreme Resilience Workbook* is slightly different because it has a lot of actual exercises in it. That book was originally written as a 40-day email series where each day it was a little bit of theory. And then an exercise about using that theory, and looking at yourself, and giving you a tool to look at yourself—observe yourself—that tied into the theory about psychological development. So, the *Extreme Resilience Workbook* is absolutely a tool for autopsychotherapy and education of one's self. The exercises are about self-awareness in some extent. And also about, here are some things to try and to practice. And maybe pick one thing to actually act out in your life and see if you learn from yourself through a practice. It absolutely delights me that you go back to it.

Chris: Well, I do. Sometimes I just appreciate your wisdom, and I love that there's all these quotes and stuff in it, too. And honestly, I have definitely gotten to the point where I'd like to make some scans of pages because I know that my clients can use it, too. Ideally, I would just have everybody that I work with go out and buy it. But I work with some people who it's harder to buy books than others. So, it'd be nice to have worksheets or something.

Kate: Yeah. One of the things that I'm curious—because I wrote the book—that I can't read my book from the lens of someone who hasn't gone through my process of creating the book. The theory of positive disintegration is part of how I think about what I describe as—so, it's called the *Extreme Resilience Workbook*, and the extreme resilience piece is actually about taking setbacks, things that happen to us, challenges in our lives, as the jumping off spot for reintegration on a higher level. It really is about that multilevel kind of change. I made up the extreme resilience because I wanted languaging that was not quite as obscure as anti-fragile, which is language I got from Nassim Nicholas Taleb. But he distinguishes between robustness, resilience, and extreme resilience.

Robustness is never being challenged. Robustness is like, things just bounce off me. It's that place of unilevel integration where things are like, I'm just here and I'm happy and I'm integrated. And then resilience is, something hits me. I have a bit of struggle. Then I go back to where I was, I bounce back to where I was, and that's a challenge within that unilevel place that doesn't actually get to multilevel transformation. But then the extreme piece is in the land of posttraumatic growth, and is in that place of, okay, here's this thing that I'm struggling with. How

do I use this to make me a better version of myself? Not just the same as I was before, but better. Does that come across in the book?

Chris: Definitely. Yeah. And posttraumatic growth is something I think of a lot when I'm looking at it, but it does come across that—this is about becoming a better version of yourself. Not just a recovery back to who you used to be, but getting to a higher level. So, I do think that it comes across.

Emma: To both of you who have dealt a lot with this in both your personal and professional lives—if you could give people, I guess, one hint or one exercise or one thing that they could do to start their autopsychotherapy journey what would that one thing be? What would that one piece of advice or one action that they could take? What would it be?

Chris: That's a good question.

Kate: Yeah, that is a really great question.

Chris: For me, I guess my one thing would be journaling. I guess that was the one thing that helped me most. But I guess for other people that might not be as productive. The thing that I always start with everybody is the thing that I did personally, which is know where you've been, and know who you are. You have to have self-knowledge before you can really take up autopsychotherapy. You need to know where you've been. So, the one thing that I love asking clients to do—and not everybody can do this. I've only done this with a few people, I would say effectively, thus far, is to do an autobiography. Write out your autobiography. So, some people it's very complicated, it can take more than a hundred pages. Some people, it's fewer pages, but it's a hugely important exercise in self-knowledge, and knowing where you've been and when you've done it.

You have a document that you can actually read, and even share with someone else if you want to. You have there, on paper, the events that you perceive as most important, the relationships that are most important. You really can get a sense of somebody based on how they choose to present an autobiography about themselves. I find that to be a useful tool of self-knowledge.

Kate: I think I have two places that I would go. The first is if you've got something that intrigues you, or interests you, that is in any of these self-awareness, self-growth, seeker kinds of worlds, follow that and see what you learn. Let your inclinations about where you're interested to go be a guide—trust those and see where they take you. Because you're going to get in the habit to do autopsychotherapy. You're going to have to get in the habit of not taking any expert's word as anything more than a suggestion you might take up. Start where you're interested.

The other thing that I like to do quite a lot early on in this kind of exploration is the total opposite of where Chris went, in terms of people's past, which is an exercise in looking at the future. And the exercise is—so, as far in your future as you can imagine, think about, you've solved the problem that you're dealing with now. Think about how you know that you've solved that problem, and then treat that not as a literal goal, but as an image that is your brain's best guess of what external circumstances will make you feel a certain way. And then the key question here is, so how is it that you would feel if all of that was true and what can you do today that will increase your likelihood of feeling that way later today or tomorrow?

Chris: I like that I do that with my clients, too. I try to get them to use their imaginations to have an image of the future and who they can be. So, it's kind of similar.

Kate: This switch between thinking of that future goal, literally as an imagination, like I'm going to have this big a house and this kind of job and this many kids and this kind of partner and taking that, not literally and asking the question, how do you want to feel? How do you think that will make you feel to have that, that feeling place often actually taps into something that's connected to our personality ideal. Even if the external manifestation is nothing like what moving in that direction of our personality ideal will actually end up looking like as we get there, but somehow it can tap into that feeling in a way that we can't articulate other ways.

Emma: Kate will probably laugh at this one. Coming from a business background, I skipped the goal part and went for 12 value statements. So, I kind of treated myself as a business. I imagined what my vision for myself was going to be, and wrote it down as 12 values of how I wanted to behave. So, things like acting with love, and speaking the truth, and letting go. Rather than focusing on the outcomes, I went straight for—well, this is the kind of person that I want to be. I actually found looking up how to write a vision and mission statement quite helpful for that.

Kate: People keep asking me—because I'm working in a corporate setting at the moment—and people ask me, what is my vision for my career? And I'm like, I don't know. I want to be someone who gives back to the world out of loving kindness and helps people accomplish interesting things. Maybe dealing with wicked problems because I think that I can actually be helpful in the places where people are dealing with the biggest problems. So, I'm going to keep moving forward going, where can I be useful next? And they're like, that's a career goal? I'm like, totally.

Chris: Totally, it is. Well, thanks so much, Kate, it's been great having you with us.

Kate: Oh, thank you for thinking of me. This has been a really great conversation. And Chris, you know, I'm always happy to dive into this stuff with you because I think you have so much richness and wisdom to share in this. And Emma, it's been a joy. I'm so excited that you and

Chris are working on this podcast. It's going to be such—I mean, it's already a resource that I'm starting to be like, I want to share this with you and you and with you.

Emma: Thank you. And thank you so much for coming on because I found that completely insightful and very interesting. I'm sure everybody listening is going to find it very valuable as well. So, thank you very much, Kate. I really appreciate it.

Kate: You are welcome.

Emma: And thank you, listeners, as always, for coming and joining us on the podcast as well. If you've got any questions, any feedback, please reach out and contact us. You can email us at positive.disintegration.pod@gmail.com or find us on Twitter or Instagram. Until next time, keep walking the path to your authentic self.