

Fee & Leslie

Transcript

Podcraft Productions

Varnya (intro):

Social connection can be challenging for all of us - chasing those elusive, meaningful friendships. It's hard for anyone. But when you're a person who has a different way of relating to the world, it can make things tougher. Maybe you have a disability or a mental health issue, maybe you have a condition that is not "neurotypical", like autism. When you view the world through a different lens, the world can sometimes be harder to relate to.

Recently I chatted with Felicity - or Fee as she's known. Fee has autism and a mild intellectual disability. As you'll hear, Fee has an unusually optimistic and resilient approach to navigating social connections - whether at work, or in her community. One of the important social connections in Fee's life has been Leslie, her carer. I spoke with both Fee and Leslie about Fee's unique approach to social connections and her very philosophical way of dealing with challenges that come up.

I hope you enjoy our chat as much as I did.

Fee:


I have a disability that it's an intellectual disability. It impairs some of the math abilities, and some comprehension, like English.

The math stuff would be something like banking and stuff like that, but it also impairs some of the remembering information, and knowing where to go. If someone gives me about 10 directions, I can't follow them all because there's 10, and not three.

Varnya:

OK, so processing information is a bit tricky.

Fee:



Yeah. However, it depends what the instructions are. My disability is quite complex, and I think sometimes it's complex for people to understand. I think through tutoring and stuff like that, you can do it.

I understood it so I'm guessing that other people will understand but maybe not. Some people have tried and maybe they just can't.

Varnya:

It's hard for someone who's not in your position to understand what life is like through your eyes.

Fee:

Yeah. It also affects the way I feel towards things. I'm a very emotional person. Some people I really like, like celebrities, like Noel Fielding or whatever. Mike Patton, as I said before, from "Faith No More." Some people I don't like, as in Donald Trump and those people.

[laughter]

Varnya:

I don't think any of us like him.

[laughter]

Great, thanks, Fee. And we're here with Leslie, and Leslie has been working with you for...how long is it, Leslie?

Leslie:

It would probably be coming up close to six years.

Varnya:

Wow, that's a long time.

Leslie:

Yes, it is.

Varnya:

Can you give listeners an idea of the kind of assistance or kind of support that you would give Fee. How often do you see Fee?

Leslie:

I see Felicity for six hours per week. I see her on a Monday and a Wednesday evening. When we first started this support, it was very much get-to-know-you. That takes a little bit of time. As Felicity said, some of her traits are complex. We don't want to rush and try and come into someone's home and organize their life.

It takes a little while to settle in and get to know each other. That's been a joy for both of us because we both absolutely adore music. We both have so many interesting and wonderful conversations about music, past, present, artists. If we mentioned somebody's name, we immediately google to get as much information on that person as we can and have some very interesting discussions.

Varnya:

Nearly six years is a very long time. You guys must really like each other.

[laughter]

Leslie:

We've got to the point where...We do, don't we?

[crosstalk]

We have shared a lot of personal things over the years. We've developed a friendship...

Fee:

It's a bond between us.

Varnya:

What would you say, Fee, that you get out of your relationship with Leslie? What does Leslie bring to you?

Fee:

I get a lot of happiness. I feel comfortable with her. I feel like that I can tell her my innermost thoughts or things like that, and she just makes me feel comfortable.

Varnya:

That's big, isn't it? That's really big to feel comfortable with someone. If I can ask you the same question, Leslie. You see Fee a couple of times a week. What does your relationship with Fee bring to your life?

Leslie:

Likewise, the fact that we trust each other. Over the years, little by little, we've revealed things about each other's lives, sort of personal. We both trust that what we say doesn't leave us. I think that's very important in this role. That the person we're supporting totally feels as though they have the confidence to speak in confidence to us.

Sometimes, me being an older worker, it's been helpful for Fee, especially when she was struggling so much in her last couple of years at work. That was extremely upsetting and difficult for her, and I was here for her.

That was really good because I would be here straight after Fee got home from work, so I would catch the full impact of what this was doing to her. That was really good because we used to make a cuppa and just sit out the back, and we'd talk things through.

Part of my role in looking after or working with Fee is that I do have these motherly concerns as well and sometimes things have been said and I've gone [gasps] .


[laughter]

Sometimes, I have said a few things and Fee's gone...

[laughter]

Fee:

There are some things that I know people especially with autism, they do have a temper. I don't know if it's actually true with people with autism but definitely with me, I've



unfortunately caught the temper. I don't know what gets into me. Sometimes, I start bashing things about. It's just it's not me.

Varnya:

You're just venting frustration, do you think?

Fee:

Yeah.

Varnya:

Yeah.

Fee:

But that is normally what happens. I think it is to do with being autistic, but not a temper type, that kind of thing. For listeners at home, it's like if you've got an autistic child or something like that, or aunt, or uncle, cousin, that's why they're having a tantrum because they feel very strongly and they feel it's...

I know it's a little bit selfish to say but sometimes it's like, "What do I...Where am I in this?" You know? Yeah.

Varnya:

Do you feel comfortable, Fee, talking about...Leslie alluded to the last two years at work, and I noted that you're no longer working at the same place. Is that right?

Fee:

Yeah.

Varnya:

Do you feel comfortable telling us about what happened in the last couple of years and why it was tough?

Fee:

I guess it was a fixation. Why it was tough was because that girl was getting married and having a baby. She was basically doing all the things that I wanted to be doing, and that wasn't happening for me at that time.

It was tougher for me because I was autistic. I think that really the schools need to do more to accommodate that kind of thing towards autistic people and how they feel and see things.

We often find ourselves having to deal with all these personalities and that kind of thing. We try not to upset people, but just to try...I think it's good sometimes if people take a backseat and say, "What about how she feels?"

Varnya:

You were working at a school as a teacher's aide, is that right?

Fee:

Yeah.

Varnya:

Would you say that, it sounds to me like you're describing a situation where you didn't feel very included all the time?

Fee:

Yeah, because a lot of the people, the women they clicked and they got on. I was originally told that you had to agree with some things even though you didn't really want to or thought that that was wrong.

I wasn't going to lie to the people and say, "Oh, I think this," when I don't really think it because I didn't want to be dishonest at work. You want the people to be honest at work, and you want to be able to fit in, but then I couldn't find the words to say that.

Leslie:

Even when you tried though?

Fee:

Even when I tried to say the word...when I tried to say that, the people would say, "Oh, well, such and such," and they would give me their point of view. That's OK but you also have to recognize that you have to learn about the autistic people's point of view and what they think as well.

Varnya:

I can hear you agreeing, murmuring in agreement, Leslie.

Leslie:

Yeah.

Varnya:

For that period, for you, can you expand on what Fee is saying from your perspective when she would come home from work?

Leslie:


My perspective was -- this was very consistently said to me, it wasn't a one-off -- that Fee had an issue with the fact that she wasn't or she didn't feel as though the other staff trusted her.

Even though she was employed successfully for 20 years, with all the new rules and regulations came in about touching children and all of this sort of thing, that was very difficult for Felicity to manage because she's such a sweetheart and loves those children so much. It's very natural for her to want to comfort a child who's crying.

Felicity found that while she was working within the perimeters of her job, she was still unable to give the children the time they needed because other people took that responsibility off her.

Fee:

They physically took it off me; took the child off me. That's when I felt like, "Hang on. Surely they would have seen my body language?" But then they said, "No, no. It's OK, Fee. I'll deal with..."



It's the trust. People who haven't got autism, who are trying to understand or studying or something like that, they need to be able to trust people with autism. In a nutshell, like autistic people, you need to tell them things in a nutshell, and not like, "This, this, and this, and this, and this," because they can't remember all of that.

Having said that, they sometimes like things to be clear. That's what my disability is about. It's complex. It really is.

Leslie:

I think the hardest part for Fee was dealing with the challenges of, "You're not allowed to touch that child."

Felicity got very upset -- it's like 20 years ago when she started work -- if you've got a little three-year-old child who's crying because they're wanting their mother. Well, aides were able to take that little child away and take care of them in a kind way. That was a trusted position.

Now, unfortunately, with the new rulings that came in, Fee found it really upsetting that there are children here crying. I'm not allowed to pick them up. I'm not allowed to comfort them. They have to do as they're told. Sit down. Behave yourself. Fee found it really distressing.

Fee:

Forgive me for being old fashioned. It might have been 1993 when I went to kindy. That wasn't the way that I was taught. I really believe that you don't treat a child like that. In years to come, they might say that that is actually abuse.

Leslie:

You know what, my dear? You're absolutely right. The other aides that were working at the school had been to TAFE and had completed a certificate three. Now, because Fee didn't complete the certificate, Fee always felt as though she wasn't quite up to scratch with the other workers even though her heart ruled the school.

That was the biggest frustration. The fact that the other women would not allow her to be herself, which is kind, and gentle, and reassuring.

Varnya:

How would you describe this social environment to me, Fee? With the other teachers, did you feel like they were inclusive of you as a person with disability? Or did you feel that that was a bit of a barrier there? How did that go?

Fee:

I sometimes felt like that was a little bit of a barrier. I felt like they tried to include me. I was having recess with them. Sometimes there'd be times when they wouldn't even...They'd have their back to me.

I think that's another thing, too. That if you notice that there's someone that's autistic in your workplace, or at school or whatever, things like that, you need to say to them, "The people that are autistic that are sitting behind that person would find that a bit rude." If you notice that you're doing it, try and stop doing it because the people around you do notice.

Varnya:

Let's follow that train of thought for a minute. If you could say to people in the world, in general, how you would like to be treated, what would you say to them?

Fee:

I would say to them that I'm very sensitive. There are some things that you think that maybe other people think that I don't know about that I actually do. Things like personal things like sex and what goes on and that kind of stuff.

It's not as if I'm going to go to the front door and yell it out down the street or anything like that.

[laughter]

We know about that stuff. We know all the jokes and all that. We realized what the things are. We know what the finger sign means and all of that kind of thing.

Varnya:

You think people sometimes treat you as if you don't know.

Fee:

As if I don't know or as if I'm a bit kind of dumb or I'm trying to...Like I'm a bit young for that kind of thing. I know I've got a young voice, but I know all about this, sex and that kind of thing. We're not silly, you know?

Varnya:

It's good advice. You've been doing a lot of social stuff through Meetup and through Befriend. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Fee:

It's had its challenges for me. Most of the time, there have been people that have been really nice to talk to. At the same time you can't get along with everybody.

I know that there's a woman that she finds it a bit intimidating if I stand right over her, so when I'm facing her sometimes when we're in company with each other, I try and stand back from her because she's a short person.

I feel sorry for [laughs] those people who are short because us tall people can be a little bit intimidating. Then the short people need to have some patience as well.

[laughter]

Varnya:

What kind of people are involved in the groups? Are they people from all walks of life, all different situations?

Fee:

There's all sorts of things. There's knitting and crocheting, there's yoga, there's a walking group, there's an art group, there's some bars, pubs, and clubs. Like, Women with Wine and Wisdom, both of those I belong to.

There are people from all walks of life. Some of them with happy stories, and some of them with not so happy stories, sad stories. That's why we have to be a little bit careful because we just don't know who's going to come into the group tomorrow.

Varnya:

And what their experience has been, I guess?

Fee:

Yeah, what their experience of life has been.

Leslie:

What they're wanting out of this meeting. What they're looking for when they go out.

Varnya:

How do you judge the balance between promoting someone's independence and giving them the room to do what they want to do? At the same time, you obviously feel very loving and maternal towards Fee, a little bit protective. Is that a tricky balance? How does it work?

Leslie:

I really don't think there's any strategy involved. It's just the way I feel. It's that simple. I have my training. That's my common sense, that's my grounding, that's my boundary. I also am a mother and a grandmother. Through life's experience, sometimes things may get said to me that I think, "OK, we need to talk about that for safety aspects."


As I've said to Fee on many occasions when she's come to me with a couple of little problems, I can't tell you what to do. If you were my daughter coming to me with this problem, this is the advice I'd give you.

Sometimes I say to Fee, "Forgive me if I'm getting a little bit outspoken." If I had to get a little bit firm or something, I say, "Forgive me. That's the mother coming out in me." That's where we get on really well. We have this trust that basically we just look out for each other, don't we?

Fee:

Yeah.

Leslie:



Fee's asked me to come once. I've dropped her off on a few occasions to these Meet-up night gatherings. The old mother instinct comes out when Fee's at the front of the hotel and it's 7:30 at night and lots of people milling around. I'll say, "I'll park the car and walk in with you."

Varnya: [laughs]

Leslie:

"We will check it out, and see if your friends are here and then I'll go." "No, no, no. I'm OK." Those instincts, I think are just within you. That's where people who don't really have these instincts shouldn't really be doing this work because you really do have to feel it.

Fee:

Some people don't always say the things, but they mean well. Their heart is there.

Varnya:

You sound like you have a very optimistic view of human nature, Felicity, which is lovely.

Leslie:

Absolutely, 100 percent.

Varnya (extro):

I hope you enjoyed the story of Leslie and Fee. I'm Varnya Bromilow, thanks for joining me. The full Stories of Connection series is available on the befriended website - that's befriended.org.au - or itunes or wherever you get your favourite podcast. See you next time.



Transcription by CastingWords