



THE RESPECT PODCAST with Mike Domitrz

And Guest

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Mike: Welcome to the respect podcast. I'm your host, Mike Domitrz from mikespeaks.com, where we help organizations of all sizes, educational institutions, and the U.S. military create a culture of respect, and respect is exactly what we discuss on this show. So let's get started. This week's episode, we want to get right into it here 'cause you're going to be incredibly inspired by our guest's journey back to wholeness and reclaiming her voice using creativity as her lifeline. She gratefully discovered the upside of obstacles. Today Amy is a PTSD specialist, artist, author, Tedx, and Rain speaker, award-winning actress, a playwright, and mental health advocate. That is Amy Oestreicher. Thank you, Amy, so much for joining us.

Amy: Thank you for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Mike: Absolutely. And so we want to dive right into this. The show, obviously, is all about respect, but you bring a different perspective in that you talk about PTSD and trauma. And let's get right into that. So when people hear trauma and PTSD, what form, or does it matter, that you're referring to?

Amy: Well, what I'm referring to is, there's trauma that comes from many setbacks and many unexpected twists and turns in my life that I didn't expect, that really didn't come to my realization until years and years later. So for PTSD, something can impact us that can completely change our lives overnight, and we might sit with that for a bit, and slowly we feel that something isn't right. I don't feel the same. And slowly those memories come to surface, and I found my way through piecing together those memories and finding healing through creativity. PTSD, for me, started, with being sexually abused by a teacher that I trusted. And an example of a symptom of PTSD is the freeze response, where you don't think anything has happened, and you kind of wake up and go about your life, and think everything's as you were, and suddenly something is off, disassociation, meaning the world is around you, and you're somewhere apart from it wondering what's going on.

Amy: I did not say no or fight back, although my mind was clearly thinking those things, but I just froze. I saw myself as somewhere separate. And years later it would take a lot of work to kind of bring those memories to light and start to heal through remembering all of that.

Mike: Well, one, I want to thank you for sharing your journey, your strength, your courage as a survivor. And I think this is an important topic because a lot of times when people hear freeze, they think that the natural human response is freeze or flight or fight. They tend to think, oh, most people flight or fight. They think that, and they forget that freeze is actually the most natural human reaction under stress in our DNA system as human beings, because back in the times of cave people, you did not fight the creature there was 20 times larger than you.



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Amy: Right, right.

Mike: You either played dead, freeze, or you ran. Fight was the last thing you did. So a lot of times people hear it and they go, "Why didn't you fight?" Because it's the last innate response that the human body is likely to have because naturally it's to freeze or to run. And in certain situations, running's not an option. Child teacher, you can definitely feel like, I don't have that option. So to freeze is the natural thing to occur, and I think too often people don't realize that.

Amy: Exactly.

Mike: And so I think for anybody listening, thinking that, saying, "Well, why didn't the person fighter? Or what ..." Those are not innately in our DNA. So the body reacts under stress to its most innate natural things that it thinks it should do, that saved it over thousands of years of human being in existence. And that's what can happen in that moment. Is that true?

Amy: It's true, and I love to bring up an amazing resource that I found that, that changed my perspective on the freeze response. It's called ... It's a book called *Waking the Tiger* by Peter Levine. And what caught me, and what you brought up is, Peter Levine spent a lot of time just studying animals in the wild, and he saw that a gazelle when it's kind of running free it ... And a predator attacks it, it just plays dead. And then once the attack is over, it will just get up and just run and run and run and discharge that natural energy and restore its homeostasis and be back to normal. And Peter Levine was like, "Well, why can't humans do that? Why did we get stuck in that?" And, well, we have a brain, and we think ourselves, we overthink ourselves, and we stay frozen in that nestle, that bunches of energy, when really we just need to discharge that energy like the gazelle that is running through the wild. And we need to find a healthy container to get that capsulated energy out and bring it to light.

Amy: Eventually through talking about it and sharing it or whatever feels like a release to you, but he really, Peter Levine really took his cues from these animals in the wild that have this freeze response in them, and they know how to know from it. And I think the community really needs to understand what goes on in the freeze response to really support survivors and understand that this may be all tucked in and it needs to be brought to light.

Mike: Yeah. And one of the problems that communities can put on survivors at times is trying to understand why the survivor did what they did, instead of not understanding, the issue is what the predator did, not with the survivor did or did not do. To focus on whether the survivor fought back or run is missing the point. It's all about what the



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predator did. Now we need to be supportive of the survivor so that they can, like you said, be able to live that life, to be able to live a full life.

Amy: Right. Or, "Why didn't you tell someone right away?" Your words often come last. Again, it's that you think of a kaleidoscope of ... I am an artist, so I've been creatively ... colors coming together, red anxiety or anger or fear, and the person just does not have those words. I mean, it takes time. But the, I think the important first step is the community needs to be so informed of what the freeze response is and be there for their survivors and believe them.

Mike: Yes, well that's essential. And it is interesting because, depending on where PTSD has been discussed, people treat it differently. Military PTSD tends to be treated differently than sexual violence PTSD that's a result of sexual violence, because the military, and I get to work with the military all over the world, we thankfully are grateful from our military. Not everybody is, but a lot of people are. So when they look at the military, they go, "There's a hero who is struggling with something that happened because they sacrificed for our country." And so therefore there's empathy, there's understanding for that person. Yet there's not always the same toward sexual violence survivors. They don't have that same. Why do you think that is?

Amy: Well, you have to remember, too, that it took a long time for those stories to be told as well. My grandmother was a Holocaust survivor, and I think about how she coped just coming right out of the war before PTSD was even a word. I think for survivors of sexual violence the encouraging part is it now is becoming talked about much more than when it happened to me. And I say keep going with that. But there are more blurry lines with that, especially with what's shown to us on the media, with messages we've gotten from the past from culture and things like that. And now we're all trying to kind of make a new game plan. But it is kind of a fuzzy area because things that have seemed okay to other people in the past, well, now these survivors' stories are being told, and we see that, you know when this happened, this was not okay.

Amy: So I think it's our job, to be honest, everyone's job to make those boundaries just as clear that, just as PTSD is an atrocity with certain communities, it is an atrocity with survivors of sexual violence. I'm also a survivor of PTSD from almost 30 surgeries from another unexpected medical-related crisis. And I dealt with the same thing, that once I was done with all my surgeries and stitched up and ready to go, doctors thought, well, the physical part of me was healed, so why couldn't I just move on to the rest of my life? Whenever we encounter any kind of change in our life, where our life seems to just twist overnight, we need that support from those around us to know that it's going to take time for us to process that change, and we need to talk about it.



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Mike: Yeah. And that's so important. And that goes into you ... In your work you talk about sharing your story and why somebody sharing their story's so important. Can you share for our listeners, our viewers, why that is such an important journey?

Amy: Yes. I didn't realize how important it was. My situation was very atypical, I guess. I guess unexpected, like anyone else would, but I was 18, and just a blood clot on caused me to go into many, many surgeries that changed my life overnight. And because of medical circumstances, I was very isolated for almost a decade. And so I didn't really have many people to talk to. I had my doctors, and I had my loving parents, and that's all. But slowly I started to write a little bit, and again, another book that inspired me was Joseph Campbell learning about, uh, the archetypal hero's journey, and I actually found my way through this dark, unanticipated chapter in my life through tracing Joseph Campbell's steps to what makes a hero in society and how they have to go away for a while and then come back transformed. I mean, it's in every Pixar movie, the heroes or in your Star Wars. And so I kind of used that as my own map. And so slowly I was typing.

PART 1 OF 3 ENDS [00:12:04]

Amy: Use that as my own map, and so, slowly, I was typing and typing to kind of uncover what I had been through for myself. That was only a very initial step because this was still all me realizing these things for myself. Then, years later, I finally was able to share it through theater, which I had always loved doing as a kid and which I thought was going to be my life. I ended up making that story arc into a one-woman musical that I've been touring since 2012, but it's very funny. That was the first time I'd ever shared anything about what I had been through, and in the very first opening venue in New York, I said one line about the sexual abuse. And it was very difficult for me. I didn't know whether it fit in with everything else, and then, over the years, as I became more and more comfortable with that, talking about it, more people that came to see my show came up to me and said, you know, "Something similar had happened to me." And I'd started the conversation.

Amy: And now, I've expanded on the show, where I do go into that a lot and the healing that came come from it and the community that can come, so, I guess, writing my show and performing it was an example, for me, of how just planting the seed of just starting your story and getting to share it and share it and talk to other people, it can make you move on or go to the next step that you need to go to.

Mike: And you're a big advocate of using creativity in that process, as you've explained.

Amy: Yeah.



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Mike: So, yeah, you created the show, a one-woman, one-person show, that really has a powerful impact. If somebody's listening, going, "I'm just not creative. I am not an artist. I am not a performer-

Amy: No, no, no-

Mike: -I get-

Amy: -don't say that.

Mike: I know. I know, but that's what people are going to thing, so-

Amy: I know.

Mike: -we need to address that. I think there's a misunderstanding what creativity means, so can you explain what we mean by "creativity" and why-

Amy: Totally.

Mike: -it's so important and can be such a great resource in the process?

Amy: Yes. Creativity is really just a mindset. I couldn't talk for many months after my surgeries because I had all these things going on, tubes in and out of me, and then I couldn't talk at times where I felt too shocked at everything going around me to even say a word. And I missed singing, and I wanted to go back to that. But that's when I started ... I picked up a paint brush by accident in one of the hospitals, started just painting, but by creativity is really just a way to see things differently. So, it means just taking a walk outside, taking a breath, looking at the tree and finding grounding by a tree in a new way. It means cooking a recipe you've always loved. It means putting a little bit of that locked-up energy that you'll ... that passion that was always there before all this that can never be taken away by any kind of trauma. It just gets frozen like a gazelle. You're playing dead.

Amy: Creativity is a way to unlock that clenched-up energy and just bring it forward, and don't worry about the final steps of "Well, how am I gonna tell about what happened to me?" Just focus on that, those uncomfortable feelings you might feel in the freeze response, which is the anxiety, the pain, the fear. Feel that energy and see if there's a color. Start with that and see it in the sky or something and really just ... I got to say one more time, before you start working about how we're gonna show it to the community, just focus on getting out that energy for yourself and seeing that you were in there all along. You just got bring it to life somehow.



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- Mike: Yeah. And you can choose to never share it with the community. It could be your process for your own journey.
- Amy: Exactly.
- Mike: And that's what I love about how you're describing creativity. I have always remembered. I was speaking to a doctor, and I work with a doctor who's both general practitioner and also holistic, so both sides of the equation.
- Mike: And he was once saying to me, "Hey, Mike, on a scale of one to three in how you feel the world [inaudible 00:16:49] the world, you're a three, very high, like, off-the-charts three. You feel everything in the world, which means you're a high creative," and I jumped back and went "Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. I don't do art. I don't write music. I love to sing, but I'm horrible at it. Like, I do not have artistic traits." And he went, "What? You get on stage and you share with people your thoughts and ideas. That's a very creative process in how that works and how you put the thoughts together and how you connect, and you're a massive problem-solver. That's what you love to do." So, that's all creativity, so I think-
- Amy: Oh, yeah.
- Mike: -for people listening, pause and go, "Are you a problem-solver? Because if you are, that's a high-level form of creativity. You're trying to creatively come up with a solution when you're problem-solving."
- Amy: Exactly. Yeah. It just means taking an unexpected turn and saying, "All right. I'll go with it and see what happens." And we never know what's coming next, so if you have creativity, that is your best resource because then you can just say, "Okay, unexpected twist, I'm gonna just follow you and use my magic reassembling creativity problem-solving skills to figure out whatever comes next."
- Mike: Yeah. And it's very natural, as a Buddhist approach, that we let go of the outcome, right, that we be present in the journey, let go of the outcome because when you're outcome-focused, it actually kills your creativity because-
- Amy: And [inaudible 00:18:11] the outcome.
- Mike: -you're creating pressure. Right. You're saying there has to be this end result versus actually just being free to the possibilities. That's creativity.
- Amy: Exactly.



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Mike: It is freedom of possibility, so I love that conversation.

Amy: Open mind.

Mike: Yes. Yeah, exactly. How do you think we help society as a whole have a universal empathy when we can't relate to what somebody else has been through? Somebody hears that and goes, "Well, why didn't they do this?" Or "Why didn't they do that?" And what's happening is they're watching through their lenses. They're thinking through their lenses and thinking, "I would've done this. At least, I think I would've. So, how in the world did they do that?" How do we help people understand that empathy means, "I don't think about it how I would've done it. I think about what they must have been going through, and I will never-

Amy: Right.

Mike: -fully understand it 'cause I wasn't there, but at least I'm trying to be compassionate from that viewpoint?"

Amy: Right. I mean, I come from an acting background, and the first thing I remember learning is awareness without judgment. We're aware of everyone else around us, of everything else around us, but we don't judge. But, with these circumstances, I think, honestly, having been through it and now supporting other survivors of violence, I really think we all need to up our game and, again, be educated on PTSD and the various responses that can only not ... not only affect the survivors themselves, but the people that care about them. It can affect other communities and things they're going through. I mean, trauma both a universal and historical and ... we'll keep going because life changes. So, I think we're all better off if we understand what can happen, and we're ... as humans, we're all always going to think, "Well, I would've done this," or "I would've said 'No,'" or "I would've"

Amy: I think, again, we can have those thoughts, but at the end of the day, we really have to understand that this is trauma. And I want to be open to whatever this person is sharing with me or chooses to share.

Mike: Yeah.

Amy: It's having respect.

Mike: That's just it. It's treating everybody with respect and dignity, and in the wake of sexual violence, sometimes there's destructive coping strategies that show themselves-

Amy: Exactly.



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Mike: -for a survivor and that can amplify symptoms of PTSD. And you used the word "victimization." Couple things. Those listening, when we say "destructive," what do we mean by that 'cause they might understand what that means and how do you help somebody who's experiencing that?

Amy: So, destructive coping mechanisms. I'm gonna go back to that energy that survivors feel that has not been discharged. When we carry a secret, [inaudible 00:21:14] are like poison. They burdensome. They weigh down, and so those can often be coped with in anything from drugs and alcohol to other symptoms to any other way that we can find to become numb, whether it's scrolling up and down on Facebook all day. It's any way that we are trying to ignore that energy and kind of just close off and not deal with those things, and it takes a lot of bravery and a lot of courage to really look at that energy for what it is and maybe even remember a bit of what happened and how you felt. But it's a very important part of the process because all those destructive coping mechanisms ... really, it's about energy. Think of that energy that the gazelle wishes they could be running off and around with. It's that energy we need to get out, that we feel like we have to close down.

Mike: Well, and I want to step in there because I, in this line of work ... and I'm sure you run into the same thing. People come up to me and go, "I have someone close to me in my life who either I know or I highly suspect is a survivor of sexual violence, but they have not told anyone. And I can see the destructive coping strategies in their life. How do I help them?" And what happens when they ask that question is there's two approaches. There's the "How do I help them? How do I support them?" And there's the "How do I fix them?" Which are two very different approaches.

Amy: Yeah. [inaudible 00:23:02] true.

Mike: Help and support is what people need. Being fixed is never gonna work with a human being. You don't fix people. I've made that mistake of trying to be a fixer in my life over [inaudible 00:23:12]. There were times, where I looked back, when I was trying to fix the person versus be supportive of the person, so how do we, instead of trying to fix them, how do we provide support when it's ... they're not asking for it? They have not come forward. I mean, verbally, asking for it. They're not outwardly saying, "Will you support me? Will you help me?" They haven't even told anyone that they are struggling with this. How do you help and support that person?

Amy: And, honestly, they're role is very, very different because I think it's human instinct to want to fix people. When we see people struggling, we want to reach out, and we want to help them so badly. Surprisingly, the best way to help and support is not such a hands-on, fixing approach as you might have wanted. It's to really just ... being there as-



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Amy: It's really just being there as a listener, as a gentle, compassionate listener. And if you need to say, "I believe you" ... It's taking in the words they're saying or whatever they're giving you.

Mike: Yeah, because they might not tell you. They might not be in a believe you moment, because they might not tell you. And that's why saying that I'm here for you. If anything ever has happened or ever does, that's the language we teach our audiences. If anybody ever has or does. That way you're opening the door to possibilities of what could've already happened or what could happen in the future. It's so important for the person to understand, I'm here for you. And then the tough part is, you have to be patient.

Amy: Right.

Mike: Because they may not want to tell you for ten years, and that's their journey. It's not your right to invade and change their journey on them. Or ever. Or maybe they want to tell you right then, but it's their journey which means you have to be patient and understand this isn't about me finding out, or me being told. It's about them and being present for them.

Amy: Yeah. And for those of you that are listening going, "That's it?" I get it, it's so simple and it's so difficult to just leave it at that, just be there. But it's that support. I always go back to theater and military veterans that the Greek plays of Sophocles about war and all those things. Those were originally meant for veterans of the war to come in and share their story to the community to get that community compassion, to have people know what they were going through. And there are other rituals that we still do today like dancing and group singing and all those things that show that our need for community is so important. So, survivors of sexual violence, if you feel kind of that no one in the community understands you, please know that coming back to the community is just such an important part of healing, even if it's scary. And for those that see these people struggling, just welcome them in and don't ask questions, don't demand answers. Just, we need to stay welcome with open arms.

Mike: I love that you pointed out "Don't ask questions." Because that sounds like you're prying and you're investigating, which can very quickly turn into ... whether intentional or not, unintended victim-blaming is what can happen there.

Amy: Right.

Mike: So just listening is so important. Now, a great resource out there that you speak for, you're a RAINN speaker, is RAINN. Which for anybody listening is Rape Abuse and Incest



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National Network, RAINN.org. They also have an eight hundred number on their website, and you can call them and it's actually 656-HOPE, I think, is the eight hundred number. But you can call, you can email, and they'll hook you up with resources locally that are confidential and twenty-four seven. They can tell you what those are, but they can also just start by being there for you. It's a great organization. What are some additional resources that you feel are vital for survivors to know if somebody's listening right now and is experiencing PTSD?

Amy: Right. So, first of all, I can't say enough good things about RAINN. They will connect you to anything ... and anonymously. I know a lot of people who are worried about saying who they are or saying who they feel the perpetrator was. You don't have to worry about that. They will take you wherever you are right now. Some books that really helped me again were Waking the Tiger by Peter Levine. He started this whole kind of therapy with the body called somatic experiencing, which is all about using breath work to really feel your body again. And another book that helped me understand is called The Body Keeps the Score by Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk. But in terms of online resources, PTSD.org, there are so many resources there.

Mike: So you just said that's PTSD.org?

Amy: Yes.

Mike: Okay, I just want to make sure we have all that on our show notes, for anybody who's listening so they can find that there.

Amy: Right. And again, any of these places will connect you to someone ... Oh, no, that's not even there anymore. Oh my God. I will have to send you a new link for that. I'm sorry about that.

Mike: Which link are you referring to?

Amy: I was actually referring to PTS-

Mike: Oh, yes, you're right, I see that now. There's nothing there. So that's okay, we'll have the link to RAINN-

Amy: I will get you-

Mike: -and we'll have links to all the books you've brought up, we'll have that in the show notes. Let's get into some more books here that you recommend for people. One is your own, your book, My Beautiful Detour. Another one is New World Theater Solitary Voice: A collection of epic monologues. And then you have Nevertheless We Persisted by



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Tanya Eby and others. If you want to dive in, why those three books? Obviously we'll start with yours, My Beautiful Detour.

Amy: That's on pre-order now, I'm very excited for that because it is the whole story of a long-winded detour and lots of PTSD, where I felt very isolated and felt like no one understands me, I can't reach out for help, who would get this? But then how all this creativity ... and I say "creativity" in this general term of a mindset, kind of figuring this out as I went along ... how that really helped me along my journey. And eventually how I was able to reach out. I talk about being a detourist, where you see a detour in the path and you find a little creativity and find your way through. So besides talking about my story and how I healed, I also have a lot of really good plans for when life crashes over night and you need to find a way out again. So, I hope it's helpful.

Mike: Absolutely. Well, I appreciate that. It's in a pre-order so it's still on its way, but people can get it now, so as soon as it comes out. And then, New World Theater Solitary Voice: A collection of epic monologues. What about that one?

Amy: Well, again, I listed these because, again, the monologue that I wrote for this is actually how I originally discovered I was sexually abused, by picking up a book on a bookshelf, which is really the important resource that I wanted to bring up called The Courage to Heal, Laura Davis, and I'll have to ... The Courage to Heal really saved my life. It's a workbook for survivors of sexual violence and since then there have been editions for their caretakers to fill out with the survivors. There have been many recent versions, but I can't say enough about the book, The Courage to Heal. So, this book that just came out has a monologue where I talk about that first time that I take that up.

Amy: And then this last, Nevertheless We Persisted, is actually a collection. It was nominated for an Audie Award this spring of monologues and stories about finding a voice in total darkness. So I hope those performances are very inspiring, as well.

Mike: No, I appreciate that. And your book and your stories, you're getting the messages out there. Now, the one book that you just mentioned, The Courage to Heal, if somebody's looking for that, there's two different versions by completely different authors. There's How to Overcome Sexual Abuse and Childhood Trauma. There's also A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse. Which one were you referencing?

Amy: Right. So I was referencing the one that originally changed my life by Laura Davis and Ellen Bass.

Mike: Got it, the Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse, okay.

Amy: Right.



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Mike: Just so our listeners are hearing, I want to make sure we give them the right one. And we'll have that in the show notes, we're going to have all these in the show notes.

Amy: Yes.

Mike: So I want to thank you so much, Amy.

Amy: Thank you.

Mike: For everyone listening, this is Amy Oestrieher.

Amy: Hi.

Mike: Our show notes will have all of the links to Amy, 'cause she gave us a lot for social media. All these books, I'm going to have it all there so you can find it all there. Remember you can also jump in this discussion on Facebook, we have a discussion group called The RESPECT Podcast discussion group, jump in there on the conversation, subscribe on iTunes. We love it if you leave a review, too, that always helps. So, Amy, thank you so much for joining us.

Amy: Thank you. Thank you.

Mike: Thank you for joining us for this episode of The RESPECT Podcast, which was sponsored by The DATE SAFE Project at datesafeproject.org. And remember, you can always find me at mikespeaks.com.

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