

115 Supporting Nonbinary Folx in Session and In Life with Dara Hoffman-Fox

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Welcome back to the Abundant Practice Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Puryear of AbundanceParty.com and AbundancePracticebuilding.com. Today we're talking about Dara Hoffman-Fox of DaraHoffmanFox.com. We're talking about supporting nonbinary folks in our work as well as by extension in life.

Dara is a gender therapist in Colorado. Dara is the author of *You and Your Gender Identity* and helps therapists do better with the Trans firming Therapist Academy. Dara will be training party members later this month so we can go a bit more in-depth than this podcast. Welcome Dara.

Dara: Hey Allison. I really appreciate the invitation to be on your show.

Allison: Absolutely. I'm so glad you're here. I feel like this is an area that so many of us need some more training in. so many of us want to do well, but we stumble all over ourselves and mess up. And I'm just really glad for the work that you are doing in the world. So, yeah, the pleasure is mine.

Dara: Oh, I've really noticed that there is such a huge increase of interest in this from therapists. And for me, that just makes it all so worth while. And that's why its so important for me to create environments where its safe to stumble and bumble and make mistakes. Because its just going to happen.

Allison: Yeah. Thank you for that. Because, I'll also share that I used the wrong pronoun in the intro, we had to redo. Even though we had just had the conversation. And I was telling you that I was afraid I was going to screw up. So I appreciate your grace with that. and it's a good example of all of us doing our best to do better.

Dara: Yeah, of course.

Allison: Yeah. Can we start with a few definitions for folks who are not necessarily non-binary aware? Or trans competent or those kind of things?

Dara: Sure. Well, one thing that I, and I also like to make sure its known, is that there's a really neat resource out there that therapists can look at. And I can give it to you for your show notes. But there's a colleague of mine in Texas. His name is Adam Sosita. And he made a list, therapists can look at it and say, okay, am I nonbinary and trans friendly? Am I affirming? Am I competent? And competent is the highest level. It means you've been doing this for a long time. You know how to figure out all the nuances of surgery and medical. And it is okay to know that you might not even want to make that your level, to be competent in this area. But being affirming, being friendly, those are okay goals to have. Because there are those of us who specialize in this, who can be in that competent area. But we still need other therapists who aren't necessarily competent, but who are going to be affirming. So its so important that that happens. So I like to clarify that from the start. Because competence is a word a lot of therapists share with me, like I really just want to be competent. And so, you can relax and know that lets go for friendly. Lets go for affirming. And that's what I hope we can do a little bit more of today.

Allison: I love that distinction. I think it also helps keep the people who are truly competent on the side of competent. Instead of some of us who may be affirming, who maybe try to take on the mantel of competent, but we're not quite there yet.

Dara: Sure, just like any other area of expertise. A lot of you out there have that. and so, just think about it for yourself, like, well its okay that there are some therapists that do this, but not to the level I do. And that's where maybe referring out and getting consultation comes into play.

Allison: And I definitely want to dive more into that in a few minutes. Because I think that's going to be an important part of how a lot of us learn and grow for sure.

Dara: And so as for definitions, I use transgender and trans. Interchangeably, there is differences between them. But for the sake of keeping things simple, lets not get into that. we are all assigned a gender at birth. And it is based at this point, solely on the appearance of our external genitalia. So, that gender is even assigned at birth, sometimes before birth. Somebody gets an ultrasound. Which a lot of people do. You are like, this is what I see, therefore, you are a boy. This is what I see, therefore, you are a girl. It is important to know there is a difference between what we are now calling biological sex, which is still a word that is difficult to

accurately portray what's going on. But there's the biological sex of female. Biological sex of male. Based on genitalia. But the gender is separate. So people who, as it turns out, as they grow up, and from what I've heard you say, you are one of these people, you are cisgender. You're the gender that people assigned you at birth. It is a wonderful coincidence it turns out is correct, do align with that assigned gender of birth, of female. Then, you have those who are trans. And trans, transgender, means that assigned gender at birth does not align with their actual gender identity. And their actual gender identity, people are like when is that there? Its there from the start, you just can't verbalize it because you're an infant. And so, when you are old enough to, and for some kids it can be as young as two years old, where there's something that a parent or a teacher or relative is trying to maybe accidentally impose on a child that's gender related. And that child's like, what do you mean I have to stay in the line with the boys? That's weird. Or its just like there are these gender stereotypes that are pushed on a kid. Now, sometimes it could just be that that kid maybe is a female, for instance in this case? And just likes things that are masculine. But its important to know that as a kid keeps getting older and older, especially when they hit puberty, that's when things could get really wrong. Because you start having the puberty of that gender you were assigned at birth. And if it turns out there is a mistake, this is not aligned properly, then that is when the key moments you can ask a person that's trans, what was puberty like for you? And its like, well my body started changing in ways that I was not expecting, that completely were the opposite or somewhat different than what I felt like I should be changing. And that really is one of the best ways to know that there is definitely a difference between this person's biological sex and therefore the puberty that they are going to go through, and their actual gender identity.

Allison: Yeah. you laid that out so clearly.

Dara; Oh, good. I've been working on it!

Allison: I bet! I bet!

Dara: Let me explain this...

Allison: You probably explain this about a thousand times at this point. Should we go to nonbinary now? So how does nonbinary relate to gender identity?

Dara: So, in that example where I said, somebody who's assigned a gender at birth? It turns out that their gender identity does not align with that. it means that that person also does not necessarily feel like they are male. Or that they feel like they are female. And there's so many different words for it. But its an umbrella of nonbinary. In which it's a gender that has no word. I, myself, am nonbinary, and I call my gender Dara. Because I don't know what else to say. And its because there is still a lot of terminology and language that is being developed around the nonbinary experience. And its going to take another good generation or so to get that cleared up and figured out. we're all creating it as we go along. So the best way I can describe it is that there's male, there's female, and then there's those of us, we just sense it. We just don't feel like we are either male or female. And its really hard to describe for those who don't

experience that. for me, people ask me how do I know that? and its all the times in which, this is my own individual experience, there's an option of a bathroom that's either male or female. Especially with the little triangle shaped dress on the picture of the female restroom. You know, I'm just like, you know, I wish there was a third option bathroom I could go in, instead of having to go to this one. Or if somebody says ladies over here and gentlemen over here. I'm like, neither of those connect with me. Those are like just really small examples of this, but it happens. Even with pronouns. Where for me, at this point, even she and her, those are female pronouns. And I just feel like its not accurate for me.

Allison: What are some common mistakes therapists make at various levels of their understanding, especially cisgender, I'm assuming? Cisgendered therapists. Make it various levels of their understanding, around nonbinary and trans-issues. How do those of us who are cis-gendered, sometimes mess this up in session?

Dara: Well, and I will add a caveat to that, is that even people who are transgender but they are binary. Meaning that they are male and female. There are things about nonbinary that, anybody who lives a binary life, meaning male or female, man or woman, there's things about nonbinary that they are not going to get. So, besides even just those who are cis-gender, can apply to those who are transgender as well. Who are on that binary spectrum. So there's a lot that is involved with knowing that people who are nonbinary as I mentioned, there is still such a newness of discovery of this being something that has existed for a very long time, but the wording being put to it. It means that your clients are probably going to be confused about it. And so the more that you can know as a therapist, even just in general, to know, hey, guess what? Non binary can mean all sorts of things. There's no one way. You are very valid in terms of the fact that you are not sure if you are male or female. Even just validating the nebulousness of it, it really can be very affirming for somebody that's nonbinary. It really lets them know, you know what, this is something kind of new for us to be exploring. And lets do this together. But you showing that confidence in them. So, I think that's where therapists can kind of get thrown off is where, they are like, wow, my client doesn't really know what's going on here about being nonbinary, so maybe they are not. Or, as long as you have that base information of knowing there's so many different ways to be nonbinary. There are so many ways, it could take lots of time. Its taken me, I've been into this about 4 years now, where I realized I was nonbinary. And there are things I'm learning every few months about my comfort and my discomfort where I think I am at with my gender identity. And that can happen to anybody. But specifically with the nonbinary experience. Giving people a chance to change their mind about lets say, their name. or their pronouns. Or different medical interventions they may or may not want to take. And so it may sound really simple. But it takes a lot of practice to get to that point of letting a nonbinary person know that there is space for them in this world. Even though it may not feel like it right now.

Allison: So it sounds like our being affirming is going to obviously involve learning a lot. For those of us who don't personally have a similar experience. When we mess up, what kind of

repair work, aside from just whatever your theoretical orientation says about it, but is there specific repair work that you've seen help more than others?

Dara: Yeah. I would say, when it comes to, and a lot of therapists know what micro-aggressions are. And they apply for, not only those who are trans and nonbinary. And so, take whatever you already know about microaggressions. Its when you accidentally say something or do something that indicates to that person that you do not get it. Where it is that they are at. Where they are coming from. And thinking about how you have handled those situations in the past. But it requires for sure, paying attention if there's an energy shift in the room. Or if your client has shown visible mis comfort. Because your client may not let you know that its happened. And, that's going to happen a lot of the times, especially if its earlier on in your relationship. But lets say, whether the client says it or not, allowing the space to say, I'm so sorry. You are right. That is something that I missed. Or misspoke. And clearly, I need to look more into this. Don't ask your client, what's a good resource for me to do that? you check with myself. Or look on the internet. Find out what it is that you did. And it may be something where you just didn't know a term. And you messed that up. It could be something that is in your experience as a binary person, that you just realized, oh my gosh, I just never thought what it could be like for a nonbinary person in this situation. And having to really dismantle your own, I guess it would be binary privilege in this case? And so, when, depending on the client, you can do some repair work right then during session. You don't want to like, necessarily hyper-focus on it. But definitely return back to it again, maybe in between session. Just to check in. or at your next session. And let them know that based on what happened last time, I just wanted you to know I've done some exploration and research on this. And, I'm going to really work on not letting that happen again, and I apologize again. And I think those are the main suggestions I would offer.

Allison: I think about how I am very protective of my client population. I'm an eating disorder therapist. I believe pretty strongly that if somebody has an eating disorder, they need to see somebody that's trained in eating disorders. Do you feel similarly, that if someone is struggling in either coming to terms with or identifying issues around gender or identity, do you feel like they need to see a gender therapist? Or do you think those of us who are striving to be affirming can do a good enough job?

Dara; I think this is such a great question. Because I know its one that comes up a lot. I would say that when I do my trainings, I have broken it down into where its like, okay, if you're working with somebody who, lets say that they want to be able to talk about the fact that they are questioning their gender. But they are not ready to do it yet. It is okay that you are not on that high level of trans competent. You just want to create an environment in which that person knows that you are a friendly person. And maybe you've created that environment, by asking on your intake paperwork, what are your pronouns? What name do you like to use? That person, that gives them almost like this unconscious cue for later on, to know this is a person I can safely talk to. So as you kind of ease into gender exploration, and you have a client who

wants to explore their gender, I would say that's a point where you might want to check in with yourself. How much do I know about his process? I would really love it at that point, then, if therapists would then take on the charge of educating themselves more. So that they can help that client through that. Because then it means, even though, we all have had it before. I definitely have had it. That those first few clients where you are helping them out with this, it might not feel the smoothest. But you have to start somewhere. And so, that's where I would say, go into that discomfort by seeking out consultation and education. Once that client is wanting to transition, lets say they want to medically transition or legally change their name, and gender marker. I would say that's definitely the point where you need to be able to seek out somebody who is an expert at helping somebody with that. unless you, yourself, want to become that competent. Then, again, seek out that training and consultation so you can get to that point. On the other side of things, if you have a client who has already figured out their trans, they've already transitioned. They are just coming to you because they know you are a friendly person. Someone who's going to understand it to a certain level. But you don't have to help them through those nuances. You can kind of return back to that place of being trans affirming and trans friendly. And not necessarily have to be trans competent or an expert.

Allison: Okay, that's good to hear. And I've actually, the first trans client I ever worked with came to me because I wasn't a specialist. And he was like, like I'm good. I need to work on my anxiety. And didn't want it to focus heavily on some of these other things. So, you might have someone show up in your office that is seeing you because they don't want it to be the primary focus of therapy. And they are afraid if they go to a gender therapist, it will be. That might be a way that some of us cut our teeth, really.

Dara: Right.

Allison: And screw up and make repairs. And do our best. We spoke briefly before about how there may be some things within different specialties that could be micro-aggressions or very invalidating for nonbinary or trans clients. I'm thinking about, as an eating disorder therapist, one of our phrases that we use a lot is all bodies are good bodies. And how that can feel really bad for somebody who's trans and feels like this is an incongruent body. And that doesn't feel good. are there other specialties where you see something like that come up?

Dara; Yes. This was such a good question that you posed. And I think it's a little tricky, because ideally, for a client, even a client that's trans, to be able to still get to that point of feeling that way about their body, that their body is a good body. But it doesn't mean that there couldn't be changes that could be made to help improve it. And I think that's probably the same perspective of working with your clients. Its about self-acceptance. And not feeling ashamed of themselves. So it can be a fine line. And I would definitely say earlier on, finding what language is most comfortable with your clients. And as for other areas, yeah, I was thinking about this. And I think that one area it might come up in, again, could be when doing trauma work. And because I'm not a trauma therapist, I don't know exactly what some of those phrases would be, but I have had some clients say that they've tried to work with some non trans-aware therapists

who were experts at trauma. And when they couldn't understand that part of this trauma that the person was going through, they might not have even had any physical trauma or emotional or mental, that could be more, but its far more complex. Just not feeling at home in their bodies. Not knowing what was happening. Trying to be somebody who they truly aren't. there has to be that level of understanding. And there has to be that level of gendering the person correctly in the past. And not mis-gendering them as a little person, as the gender they were assigned at birth and not the gender that they transitioned to. So, its definitely important to pay attention to. And there are some small things to note. But they can make a really big difference. And so, the key is to, as you're working with your clients, really start feeling out that individual person. To see where it is, what kind of language might they be comfortable with, and not comfortable with. There are some clients who are further along in terms of their self-acceptance. Where maybe you can just say certain things that you normally would say. And certain clients where their internalized transphobia against themselves that dislike for the very fact that they are transgender, is so present that you have to work on that first. And foremost.

Allison: Got it. And you have some trainings for us that I'd love to talk about it. You have some trainings for us in the trans-affirming therapist academy, that you're offering a coupon code, which is awesome. Which we're going to put in the show notes. Can you tell us about, I know you have two new courses coming out soon in there. Can you tell us about those courses?

Dara: Sure. So, right now, there's only one course int here. and it does have to do with specifically working with nonbinary clients. And like you mentioned, there will be a coupon code offered for that. and it is a, one of those go at your own pace courses. It's a little over two hours long. But you can do a little bit here, a little bit there. There are worksheets that are available for it. The two other courses that I'm going to have put up there by the end of May, one of them is kind of taking a step back and its specifically to help those who are sis-gender therapists be able to go from feeling uncertain and nervous with working with clients to feeling more compassion. And more readiness to work with clients. And its not even going from beginner to expert. Really, its just about becoming less nervous about working with these clients. And it takes a bit of compassion, of understanding, what is it that they go through? And then there's always the trans 101 kind of stuff thrown in there. The second one has to do with creating inclusive and affirming environments for your trans clients. And it is amazingly simple, and yet can be difficult to implement when it comes to some of these suggestions such as, I mentioned before, changing certain things in your paperwork. Adding your pronouns to your business cards and your email signature. What are some different things you have in your office? Is there any sort of, whether its queer or trans affirming, something visually for people to see. What are the signs on the bathroom at your place of business. This particular training goes through the different things you can do to try and create an environment that is going to right away let clients know that you are a person who is aware of this.

Allison: Awesome. That sounds so good.

Dara: Cool.

Allison: And you also have a book. You and your gender identity. And you have a coupon code for us there, too. And we'll put that in our show notes. So, is that primarily for folks who are exploring their own gender identity? Or is it equally helpful and important for a therapist to read this if they are working with clients who are exploring?

Dara: Yeah, I have found it to be useful for both audiences you are describing. Obviously it is written for those who are answering questions about their gender identity. The ways that I have found therapists have been able to really utilize this book, for one, just even reading the book cover to cover gives them an idea as to like what are all the different questions that somebody needs to ask themselves, in this situation that I would never have to ask myself. Because this isn't me. What are the challenges? What are the fears? What are the different ways they can get support? So, that will put you in the shoes of the clients who are going through this. The other cool thing is, especially if you order it through my website, through which the coupon code is offered is that I am able to send a free pdf of the book. Which means, and I have a publisher. But I don't mind permission granted, for you to be able to go into this pdf. And there's going to be exercises that you can print out for your clients and say, here, take this home for homework. Bring it back. If the client isn't able to purchase the book for themselves. Or maybe they have the book, but it would just be nice for you to be able to have that printed out to work with one another. So that can be really helpful for those who are still new at working with trans clients. You're still going to have a lot of information that maybe other therapists wouldn't have just by having those resources at your fingertips.

Allison: that's awesome. Thank you so much, Dara, for being here. I really, really appreciate it.

Dara: You bet, Allison. I mean, anytime I'm able to talk about all of this, this is definitely my life passion. And I just am so excited that there are so many therapists that are wanting to learn more about it.

Allison: I'm looking forward to our training later this month. And yeah, I'll see you then!

Dara: Yeah. thank you.

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