



**Louisa Smith, Griefline CMO:**

Welcome, Cherie. In our prelude to this conversation we emphasize the diverse manifestations of grief, and recognizing that it extends beyond the loss of a loved one

As a business owner, we who actively advocates for accessibility in content, delivery, and consumption. We recognize you would have witnessed firsthand, the complexities, I guess, of the neurodiversity journey. And as part of this the presence of both waves of grief and moments of joy.

So, we are very aware that digital picnic have been advocating for greater accessibility and workplaces for years, and most recently, investing in neuro diversity testing for all employees. Go you! How do we encourage more workplaces to support neuro diverse employees, ensuring inclusivity is genuinely top of mind in the workplace.

**Cherie Clonan, The Digital Picnic Founding Director and CEO:**

Yeah, it's a great question. And it's something that all of us could collectively ponder. The reality is.

I think sometimes you need to know better in order to do better. So I think honestly, organizations just have to commit to diversity within the workplace so that they can. You know, obviously hear from different people across so many different backgrounds and have that opportunity to recognize.

I didn't know that. So now I can do better, you know, with that information? I'm obviously really lucky because I'm heading up our company. And I do have the experience of or lived experience of neurodivergency. Really proud, autistic woman. And I speak that language, you know really? Well, I understand it well, and it does cultivate a lot of psychological safety right from honestly, before we hire team. I'm talking hiring and recruitment, you

know. So I've seen situations where I just know a candidate probably would have missed out on a particular opportunity. For reasons relating to.

I'm gonna say, discrimination. But it sometimes isn't the way that you think it's it's that typical case of, you know, not knowing better. So not able to do better. And yeah, having lived experience, you know, at the helm. I can create those really safe sort of spaces before someone even joins our company. So hiring. And you know, recruitment. And to be really honest, I can think of so many interviews that I've interviewed candidates within who are neurodivergent and they do honestly.

I guess other people would call it like, dump a lot of information around previous workplaces. And there's a lot of trauma, you know. With that, because, you know, there's a reason why the starts are, you know what? They are? Something like 36% of newer, divergent adults, remaining unemployed throughout their adult lifetime, and even more who are under employed so going for roles so far below what they should be doing, you know. Just anyway, it's a conversation for another day. But when I hear that dump. I know what recruiters would think in that moment know what people leaders might think. I know what Hr folk would think, and they would pretty much go for anyway, moving right along. But you know again coming back to lived experience, I understand, you know, and I'm trauma informed, and it makes a really big difference, and I do hold a safe place. I understand that the discrimination is filled with so much grief, and I just allow a little more time within that interview, setting just for them to be able to verbalize it and then bring it back to talking about themselves and the role, and you know, so on. So I'm really proud of that, I guess. Overall I think it has to start, you know, before you even employ a human being, and you really have to consider inclusive approaches a lot more at the hiring and recruitment phase. And then, yeah, as you said, when they when they come on board, we're doing what I understand from other people telling me, and I can never make sense of it. In my own mind I'm a really logical solutions, oriented human. But these focus, describing us as being radical and radically progressive and inclusive, and I honestly think just you know.

Honouring the human experience, however, that presents, and holding a safe space accordingly. So we build inclusion and champion it you know, at as many touch points as we can. I don't think we'd be getting it perfect across

every stream. You know, but I'll come back to that case of once. We know better, we do better, so that's our commitment. As soon as we know better we'll do better, and as a small business we do our very best to, you know, keep learning, investing, and learning and development, and trying to do better for the folks that we employ, and what I understand now is hopefully, positively influencing folks beyond just our small business, you know. Thanks to some of that influence that we have online.

**Louisa Smith:**

Absolutely. I mean, I definitely see you as a pioneer in this space, and we can only hope that more people will follow suit and understand? You know the the opportunities. That lay ahead for so many people. If you just give them the chance and and listen and make space for them.

**Cherie Clonan:**

I couldn't agree more.

**Louisa Smith:**

So thinking back to a time when inclusion wasn't a priority. And there was that time, and it wasn't that long ago. But that's you were feeling a sense of loss and isolation yourself. Where did you turn to, and what resources did you use to support yourself?

**Cherie Clonan:**

Sure.

I'm lucky I'm surrounded by great human beings in my life. So just well, resource from you know the people my life. But honestly, the conversation I'm having with you today is a really beautiful 360, because your organization has played a big role twice in my life when I can think of 2 occasions, just levels of grief I didn't even know what to do with. And it's probably not the grief that people think when they here of your company, and you know it's commitment. I think it extends so much more beyond like we were sort of discussing before today's conversation kicked off. It seems to always be that people think death of a loved one, or you know something to that effect. But for me. The first interactions I had with your organization were actually directly after being diagnosed as an autistic woman.

It was later on. It was, you know, an adult diagnosis following my son, which is a really typical route for autistic women. And look yes, there was celebration eventually.

It's just that I felt so grief stricken that I was so completely missed. And I think my childhood, my schooling years. You know, friendships that I found really challenging with some of the girls. Slash women. I just I didn't say what they meant or mean what they said. And I just used to think I was a genuinely terrible friend, you know and found myself mostly socializing with boys and then men, because I liked their directness, you know. I never felt tricked, or, you know, gaslit to be really honest. So you can only imagine, like all of the grief. But really, it was like a volcano, you know. Kind of eruption. I just I felt a little bit angry at my my dad as much as I love him. I just thought, Dad.

How'd you miss that? It was so blatantly obvious? Not his fault. We just didn't have the education, you know, back then. And just lots of those kind of things. So that was the first interaction. But then to fast track to second interactions I had with your incredible organization was around the time that my son was very severely discriminated within a local school. And I I can't even describe the length of the discrimination. But it created a really unsafe place for him to be in as a child within the school setting. You know. He was very seriously, physically assaulted.

He required emergency surgery, you know, nearly lost an internal organ off the back of that particular assault, and my husband and I just you know I'll never forget honestly sitting bedside at that at the Royal children's in in Melbourne and I. It was a rock bottom for both of us as parents. We never thought our ray of sunshine just our incredible little boy would be subjected to. You know what he was within that particular school setting. And I realized. I'm not angry at the child who was doing that to him. I'm angry at the leadership within that school. Who made that possible took no action. You know, even awarded the child in question, multiple assembly awards and so on. You just couldn't even write, you know. You couldn't even write a book about it.

And we've been such celebrators of the school partners, everything you'd want in parents like we passionately believe in education and teaching. So it was just the most grief I think I've ever experienced as apparent, and I guess during that time you can't do it alone. You can't carry that solo, and you just

have to reach out to the right people, and even anonymous support people who don't know you. And that's what I found. So it's a really beautiful like 3 60 now today to be able to speak with you and we're a long way away from that time, and you know that day and it was a rock bottom moment for our family. But yeah, we got through it. And these days. We're celebrating being on the other side of that. And really beautiful things have come off the back of that, you know, rock bottom, we know what will never we'll never accept again. That's for sure. As a family.

**Louisa Smith:**

Yeah. Yeah. And that is just a harrowing account of what you went through. And I guess there's a really important message there, which is that?

You know you did come out the other side, and while in the midst of it you probably felt how are we ever going to recover from this with the support of each other, you and your partner as well and hopefully. You know, with your community and other resources, that there was a way that you found through it, and I'm really pleased that you were able to achieve that as well, because it can be a very disabling experience, and also paralyzing in a way. When you you may not know where to reach out, to get the support that you need emotionally as well as resourcefully as well. Hmm.

**Cherie Clonan:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Louisa Smith:**

So you're aware that our organization is taking steps to improve the accessibility of access to our programs and services and resources, particularly on our website.

How much of an impact do you think that will? I guess, make to have better digital tools? In the lives of diverse and isolated individuals.

**Cherie Clonan:**

Yeah, I think it's really powerful. Honestly. It's we can't leave people behind, you know. And I really want to see a world that includes all and holds a safe space, you know, for all. And we've touched on parts of this in today's, you

know, beautiful conversation. But you know, going back to that particular time that I was just talking about before.

Obviously, when a little one goes through something like that, they're genuinely traumatized, and I remember at the time we tried everything as parents. We partnered up with specialists who are trauma, informed, trauma informed, and specialize in PTSD, which was. You know what our son was experiencing, but the reality is, he was so traumatized he couldn't even access that support. So we actually ended up partnering up with a professional who allowed him to have virtual sessions with her and do nothing but on screen, back and forth chat, and I never thought I just. I never thought that could be so powerful to help in that particularly early pace. So I guess again, like thinking of someone who's got lived experience of needing additional tools that you would never think about until you know you're in that position yourself and just being able to see finally, someone. Reaching our son. You know, in ways that we needed them to do professionally so that we could remain to be his parents and not psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapist. I just I wanted to be his mom, you know. And yeah, it was incredible. So I'm I'm just so thrilled to hear about the commitment you're making to, you know, accessibility and inclusion and thinking about all of the different ways that people you know speak obviously in neurodegeneracy land communication styles are really different. When I was a young child, and this is again going back to Dad. How didn't you know? But I had an entire year where I was selectively mute. Which is a really typical you know, feature within autistic profiles. I just stopped talking one day. I just couldn't say any words for a full 12 months, and just fills me with hope, thinking that now, this year, 2,024, and beyond. We've come such a long way, you know, and people have the tools that they they need to be able to access the support that they need in any particular moment.

**Louisa Smith:**

Hmm, oh, that's great. I mean, I love the accessibility feature that we've added to our website because it it does allow you to change the colors and the backgrounds and the fonts. It helps with spacing of font as well. And your, it even shapes the font in different ways so that it can be read by people who have different ways of consuming content. And it's it's just. I didn't even know it existed until 6 months ago, and I'm so thrilled that there's a resource in a toolbar that that can do this to make important information accessible to as

many people as possible. So I just wanna sincerely thank you. Very much for sharing your story with us. And you have been super brave because you have been quite raw and real with many of the experiences that you've had and we're just really grateful and and thank you so much for your time.

**Cherie Clonan:**

Thank you so much for having me.