

Deep Listener

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, suicide, deep, listening, compassion, support, listeners, community, belonging, project, person, feel, ursula, important, badge, part, training, human beings, big, absolutely

SPEAKERS

Jeremy Melder, Ursula Wharton

Jeremy Melder 00:00

Hi listeners. In this episode, I just wanted to say that we will be discussing the subject matter of suicide. Now, if there is any one that is having some issues right now and need someone to talk to, I have listed some numbers for Australia that you can call on our show notes. Thank you. Hello, my name is Jeremy Melder. And I'm the presenter from b Beaming Green. Before we start, I would like to acknowledge that this podcast is being held on the traditional lands of the Bundjalung people and pay our respects to elders both past present and emerging. The Beaming Green podcast is a weekly podcast, which will help you to take out some of the stress and confusion about how to live your life more sustainably. And we do this by introducing people that have first hand experience and expertise in all aspects of sustainability. So you can get some amazing insight on how you can implement the simple and practical solutions to enhance your life and the lives of your family. Today, I'm speaking with Ursula Wharton, from Murwillumbah in Northern New South Wales, about her organization, Deep Listeners, which she set up in late 2018, after losing her son, Josh to suicide in 2017. I wanted to have Ursula on the podcast, as mental health issues are on the rise. And Deep Listeners provides a much needed service that other communities can replicate. Ursula Walton, welcome to Beaming Green.

Ursula Wharton 02:03

Thank you, Jeremy. It's great to be here.

Jeremy Melder 02:05

Now I remember coming to a presentation, which was a thing coordinated by "It Takes a Town and Pitch for Change.

Ursula Wharton 02:16

Yes,

Jeremy Melder 02:17

I think it was in 2019, if I'm not mistaken. And you were doing a presentation about your project that you were about to embark on in 2019. And I must say I was quite moved by this project and actually voted for you. But for our listeners, if you could run us through, you know what Deep Listeners, is and why you started it and so on?

Ursula Wharton 02:48

Well, I'll try and break it down. I'm always afraid of the first question, and I end up my brain goes in 100 different directions. So the big pitch by It Takes a Town. They had mentored us through 12 weeks. And my project Deep Listeners. And I had come into the project 12 odd weeks early on, because I'd done a suicide alertness workshop. And I said to the lady there, look, I'd really like us as a community to be able to let everyone know, I'm here I care. I will listen to you. And she said, Oh, I like this idea. I'm going to introduce you to Carmen from It Takes a Town. And that's really how things started off. And back then my idea was just a video on social media on Murwillumbah matters of people who had perhaps done the training, were committed to listening compassionately to people and weren't afraid to put the face out there. So over the course of this 12 weeks, deep listeners emerged as as the project. And at this point deep listeners is it's about a badge, that we can indicate that we are a person who at this moment in time while I'm wearing the badge, I'm available for you undistracted for up to an hour, no judgement compassionately singing, no advice unless asked for, you know, all of the beautiful things that make us feel heard and validated. Because everyone needs to feel heard and validated. And I feel that in our culture, this is happening. Very seldom and there is a big hole in many people's lives. Where we're not feeling heard and validated and seen. We don't feel that we really belong.

Jeremy Melder 04:55

Yeah, yeah. And why do you think that is?

Ursula Wharton 05:01

Yeah, I was thinking just as I was coming in about social shaping or cultural shaping, and culture is weird beast. And it takes all of us to be part of to shape culture. And our culture is a little misshapen. At this point in time. There's so much focus on the individual. The me culture and leaving everything to the immediate family isn't in our best interest as a community. And I think this is part of where Carmen was coming from. Yeah, It Takes a Town. There's a lot of truth in that old saying that it takes a village to raise a child. And the less our own cups are filled with love and belonging from those around us, the less we have available, I guess, yeah, to be there, for others. And I feel that we're all walking around with a bit of a deficit.

Jeremy Melder 06:09

Yeah, absolutely. So Ursula when I asked you the question that, you know, why did you start this what was really the catalyst for you to get involved in? In this project? I see the shirt that I'm wearing. Obviously, your listeners can't. Well, just for our listeners, I'll just say it's, number one is love. And number two is peace. And number three is help the world.

Ursula Wharton 06:40

Yeah, so and the hashtag is Joshua's wish, Joshua was my teenage boy. And I lost him three years ago, in September 2017, to suicide. So it was a preventable tragedy. And I've come to understand a lot about society's role in suicide, and how suicide really is a whole of community issue. You know, as much as it takes a village to raise a child, I feel that it takes a village for someone to die by suicide. That's a bit rough, that that's a bit accusatory, I suppose, to anyone listening right now. And I understand that. If I can backtrack a little bit. We had a couple of really tough years after something

quite bad happened to Josh. He was 15 at the time, and there was a lot of trauma and shame and real difficulty in processing that. And not receiving from the people around him. Acceptance and compassion for who he was, and the difficulty he was going through, and how perhaps, it that he behaved as part of it a teenager, in real trouble. As immediate family, you do what you can, and sometimes it's not until later that you understand that as much as you loved and tried your hardest. If you didn't have the skills that love may not have been received by the person hurting. Yeah, in the way you intended it.

Jeremy Melder 08:45

Yeah. And, and so this, this is obviously a sad moment in your life, in losing your, your son, and and what you you're doing now is trying to help other people. And, yeah, so this is you're doing something you know, you're wearing a T shirt that I know that your son wrote those words on a post it note or something and left it there for you. And he's helped you to turn that page and do something positive out of that.

Ursula Wharton 09:25

Absolutely. I

Jeremy Melder 09:27

and I want to say, I am feeling sadness for your loss of your son. And, you know, I'm not wanting to take away from that by asking you the next question. I just want to clarify that. It is just that I think I'd like you to talk to what you're doing about that now.

Ursula Wharton 09:49

Yeah, sure. And you're absolutely right, that Joshua's message that we call Joshua's wish, and I have a website Joshua's wish.com Those words are what set my grief in a positive direction. So it's so easy and so tempting to fall into a grief hole, especially as I mean, the shame of being a parent who has lost a child to suicide. I can't tell you there's no shame in that. That is, you know, that is a shame upon me, and I know a lot of parents who've lost to suicide, who really struggle with, I guess, society's expectation that you'll be forever scarred. But for me, Josh left that message. And I needed to honor him and honor his memory by living to those values that he had given me. I certainly wouldn't say that, you know, that this embodied how I behaved as a person before that. I certainly had a thing for justice.

Jeremy Melder 11:08

Yeah.

Ursula Wharton 11:10

Which is, which is carried me through. But, you know, in those two years, I was so desperate for help. And I saw so many people not able to help in the way that Josh needed acceptance and compassion. And I've come to believe 100% that compassion is the medicine for all that ails us emotionally and spiritually and psychologically. And that anyone can give the medicine of compassion?

Jeremy Melder 11:42

And do you think compassion is something that is just a natural process that people have? Or can they be trained to have compassion? Because we have more I'll speak for myself, I have ideas of what compassion is, but yours might be different as to another person next to me. Absolutely.

Ursula Wharton 12:03

And I was just looking at the Buddhist nuns, pet Penner, Pema, Chodron thank you very much. No good pronunciation. And her definition of compassion was not the same as mine. So I appreciate you bringing attention to the definition. So, for me, compassion is feeling into the other person's pain, you know, really understanding and acknowledging the person's pain, not owning it by any means. Still owning our own stuff, allowing them to own their own story, feeling into the experience that they're having. And all emotions are valid.

Jeremy Melder 12:44

Yeah,

Ursula Wharton 12:44

yeah. And with that, the second part of compassion is being compelled to act to ease that suffering.

Jeremy Melder 12:53

Yeah. Yeah. And when would you say that it's not attached to an outcome? So this coming from a place of compassion? You know, is not I'm doing this because I want x, y and Zed to have absolutely,

Ursula Wharton 13:06

yes. Compassion must be for its own sake, really. And in deep listeners, we've come up with nine ethics. deep listening is not a series of steps. It is an attitude. Yeah. It's an attitude that we take to listening to somebody to accepting where they're at. And that what they're feeling is valid and part of the human condition. It's not being there with any motivation to fix. This is a big pitfall. Yeah, of wanting to help is the drive to fix. We don't need to fix and indeed, it's not our role to fix many of these things.

Jeremy Melder 13:57

And there's a lot of studies that say that not to be put this on as men, but apparently men like to fix more than women. Do you know what I'm I don't know if that's true or not

Ursula Wharton 14:10

100%? Correct, that it is gendered in different ways. Young men are more practical in their fixing. Women still want to fix? Yeah, but it might be done in a more social way.

Jeremy Melder 14:22

Yeah. I think in terms of the the fixing or not fixing the listening. What's your experience like? So for example, in Josh's situation, when he said that he was calling out for help. Did you feel like that was something that you could have attended better to or do you feel like there was more in a community because you mentioned the community, the village weren't hearing Josh's call?

Ursula Wharton 14:52

I'd like to put us all in that moment of what do we need as human beings we all need love and belonging. And if something really bad has happened to you, you know, you're not feeling a sense of worth, and you're not feeling of belonging, to feel love and belonging in our village, in our society, we need more than one person to believe in us to care about us to validate and see and hear us. If every person you walk past treats you as invisible, if every person you walk past thinks you are a bad person, if every person you walk past doesn't want to hear you doesn't want to validate you, then your world becomes smaller and more alienated. And that leaves people very vulnerable. I feel that many of the things that happened to us many of the things that we have done, can be repaired with the compassion of those around us. And it does take the reflection of a number of people. If you we, as human beings, I think we may use a mirror to see what we look like, we may use a recording, to hear what we sound like. But in terms of who we are, as a being, we require other human beings to reflect back upon us. And if you're seeing 1000 mirrors, and only one of those is showing that you are here and you are worthy. The message isn't very strong. Know that you belong in this world.

Jeremy Melder 16:41

Yeah. This seems to be my observation. And you probably got some statistics on this is that it's on the rise, this feeling of, you know, being alone, not cared about? not heard.

Ursula Wharton 16:58

loneliness, isolation? Yeah, alienation. They are absolutely and many of us who are used to social connection, and I suppose if you are so used to a lot of social support, it's like, you know, when you injure a part of your body, and you suddenly realize just how important that is. If you are someone who has always had a lot of great social connection around you always had people who believe in you, who see the good in you, who will hear your shame and respond with compassion, then you might not understand because you haven't lost that.

Jeremy Melder 17:35

Yeah, yeah. What can we do about that? Knowing that there is there is an issue now you've obviously got this great project that it's now in its second year. Is that right now? 2021? Yeah.

Ursula Wharton 17:51

It was November 2019. When when I put the invitation out there. And more and more people have joined all the time, and it's still very young. You know, we still spent six months developing wall. What are our ethics? What does deep listening really look like? And how will we do it? Exactly. So yes, still beginning. But you'll start to see those badges out there. We've got a few people who've earned them. Yeah. Look, the vision of Deep Listeners is that deep compassionate listening is just part of what we do. Yeah, in our community. And to embody deep listening in it to be someone who contributes to that vision of a more compassionate community. We go through those ethics. Yeah. Am I when when someone's telling me something deep, something painful, something vulnerable? Am I flicking the switch and turning off my judgment to the best of my ability? Am I setting my judgment aside? And just seeing that we're all human, we all make mistakes, we're all vulnerable. And the vulnerability connects us more. Yeah. So we're suspending judgment. We're not giving advice. We're withholding the fix it mode. Yeah. Fix it mode is a real danger. Really, what people what we all really need, if we ask

ourselves is to feel heard and validated about where we're at, to get a reflection from someone about where we're at, and whether it's, you know, normal for for a human being to experience? Yeah.

Jeremy Melder 19:25

And how are you finding people? You know, I know that you have made it, your specific locations that you say that you're going to be available at? Is that correct?

Ursula Wharton 19:37

Deep Listeners, is ideally organic and authentic. So you're bumping into someone with a badge. Yep. And saying, hey, you want a deep conversation? You're asking you're inviting me to get deep with you and connect with you and you're promising. You're going to respect my privacy, you're going to be non judgmental. You're going to give me that hours attention. Great. I'm in for it, let's have a deep conversation. Yeah, here's a cafe or here's the park. Let's do a do a circuit. And you'll notice as I am a bench now in the middle of Knox Park sort of right in the middle,

Jeremy Melder 20:12

that's what I was alluding to. So there is a bench, right? Yeah.

Ursula Wharton 20:15

Yeah. So I'm very excited about that it's under a tree. And there's enough kind of privacy around it, people don't really generally stop unless it's a busy weekend, and they're picnicking on the hill beside there. And you can pop into the markets, nine till 11 on Wednesdays and things and we'll be in the library soon as well to wonderful. The idea what I'm really hoping is that as a community, we'll be seeing each other around, we listen to badges. And, you know, I would love to see in five years time, we don't even need them, because this community believes in and is part of compassionate listening. And we know what it takes to listen compassionately to each other, you know, and when we listen compassionately to each other, we both benefit. We are both connecting, and we've our own cup is filled. And this is one of the strange things about compassion. And you know, the whole sort of talk around compassion, fatigue and burnout. I understand where people come from, in perhaps having more need come at them than they are ready to take on or not having the time or the capacity to do that. And Daniel Goldman is wonderful. He says, yes, you can teach empathy. Of course you can. Yeah. And if we take away things like the lack of time, we are naturally going to be more empathetic.

Jeremy Melder 21:46

Yeah, it's important, isn't it?

Ursula Wharton 21:47

Yes. And yes, this is tough. We're also busy. But one of the kinds of things to do is to say, I really value you. And at this moment, I only have 10 minutes, five minutes at this moment. I actually can't. But I really do want to connect with you. Yeah. And I have this time available at this point. Yeah. Yeah. So we need to fill our own cup. And how do we do that when it's such a catch 22. And the whole of our community? Just about? Yeah, maybe I'm being dramatic. Is, is feeling a deficit?

Jeremy Melder 22:23

Yeah. Look, speaks I speak to a few psychologists who say that their books are full. Oh, yes, absolutely. So there's obviously a need for someone to speak to and fill this huge, huge need. And in terms of training, if I want to become a listener, which I'm keen to learn about, even if it's just for my own family, just to listen to my own family. I might not want to go out in the community, but don't know as yet. But if I wanted to, what sort of training would I need to do?

Ursula Wharton 22:54

Oh, that's a perfect question. We have three different levels of you know, coming in and being involved in the Deep Listener idea. Yeah. At the first level, you just come in, do the training, use it for your own purposes. Perfect. Yeah. That's great. That's what it's for. At the second level, you're part of the collective and you can access, ongoing training, ongoing support, ongoing meetups, things like that. And at the, you know, the top level, it's quite stringent, you have to go through a lot of checks, you have to meet a big list of competencies. But we need that, we need to make sure that those those people who are wearing a badge can be trusted with our darkest secrets, can be trusted to be beautiful, compassionate people wherever they go with the badge. So we offer the training, and I've actually got some training coming up. Safe talk is a suicide alertness for everyone. And it is really important that we all begin to open our eyes to suicide, because actually, the, you're going to be blown away by this statistic. I certainly was. One in 20 people in any given fortnight has thoughts of suicide.

Jeremy Melder 24:03

One in twenty

Ursula Wharton 24:04

It's huge. It is so much a part of the human condition. And for so long, we have hidden it under the carpet. We've pretended that it means that we're broken, or that it's not happening. And this is dangerous, because not talking about suicide. kills people. Yeah, once we let it out into the open once we start talking, we're beginning to heal. A beautiful quote, people start to heal the moment they are heard.

Jeremy Melder 24:30

Yeah, it's really important to be heard and feel validated, validated in what you're feeling. Yes. You know, it's such an important thing. Now is that statistic I'm sorry. Is that Australia? Yes. It's 21. Yes. Wow. Yeah. So

Ursula Wharton 24:44

Robert Goldman. I think his name is has been doing this since the 80. So it's a general health questionnaire and it includes three different questions around suicidal thoughts. Yeah. So golden is the person you want to look up if you don't check that stuff. mistake. So I have safe talk coming up on the 21st of January, I have assist, which is the full, if you want to be able to intervene properly when someone has thoughts of suicide, and this is the training that Lifeline counselors do. Assist is the way to go, I've got the weekend of the sixth and seventh of February Murwillumbah. And then Deep Listening, gatekeeper training is coming up as well. So that's, if you're a hairdresser or a barista, or a bartender or a coach, or if your role means that you are an incidental listener, an incidental counselor, but you wanting a few more skills to help you in that. That's what the gatekeeper workshop is for. It's

only a four hour workshop. And it really helps with things like you know, keeping your own energies up, and what are the real do's and don'ts and pitfalls and, and things like that. So that's on the 28th of January. So all of those can be accessed on deeplisters.org.

Jeremy Melder 25:53

Okay, that sounds great. Yeah, listening is such an important element. But I also think it's important in the workplace. Yes. Right. When you're, you know, you work for organizations, you know, you talked about baristas, and so on. But there are some bigger companies that, you know, some people feel hemmed in, in their own businesses that they work with, they got no one to talk to, is there a plan for you know, sort of doing deep listening in corporations?

Ursula Wharton 26:23

Oh, that'd be amazing. Yeah, and I guess it's a very much start small and absolutely spread to wherever we can, you know, we, human beings, no matter whether we are at home, no matter where at play, or at work, we're still human beings with those same irreducible needs for love and belonging, and feeling heard, offers both of those things, it fills our spiritual cup fills that emotional cup. And yes, in all of those environments, and for me, I worked in a big place as well, I've worked for government departments, and it's siloed away as the, what's the name for it? I'm familiar with it. There's, there's a specific name. So these companies have paid psychologists, the employee assistance program, EAP, there you go. You know, and, and I was at a point once, and it's entirely human, that we all go through challenges and troubles and stresses. And not all of those are of our own making, either quite often they're not, it's just a human thing. And I remember needing to use the EAP and thinking, I feel rejected by my workplace that I can't have this conversation in my workplace, actually. And there's some really wonderful research about just how beneficial peer listening is, it is actually more beneficial than a professional than a psychologist. And I believe that a lot of that is about the authenticity. It's, it's a two way street between human beings. And when we place those workplace barriers in front, it doesn't allow us to get the full value, you know, when we know that someone is obliged to hear us and to nod, it doesn't quite have the same values, either as you work mate, or your friend or your deep listener, who has no obligation whatsoever to listen to you. But does it?

Jeremy Melder 28:27

Yeah, look, I I totally relate to what you're saying. Because it is siloed away, I've had to use EAP as well. And I felt like this is, you know, non non engaging, you know, feels like I've been parked off to the side. And no one in my office knows what's going on for me. And it feels like, okay, sometimes you don't want to share your darkest secrets with people that you don't know that well. But your manager needs to be trained in this to that they understand empathy, like we were just talking about you were just talking about, and how to support someone because someone in the organization needs to know what's going on with Ursula or Jeremy so that they can be supported. Because you know, if their work rates go down, there's a reason behind it. And it's not just about, you know, putting on this mask that goes into an office and you do your job. And then you've parked your emotions outside before you walked in.

Ursula Wharton 29:27

We're not robots, and you know what, we have robots to do robot jobs. We need humans to do jobs, and we need to own the whole human. That is part of our workplace

Jeremy Melder 29:37

Yeah. And I think that's so important. That's why I brought up because I think organizations are an extension of the community. Right? Even in Murwillumbah way we live, you know, there's a community with bigger businesses and it's like, how do we get that empathy happening across those businesses,

Ursula Wharton 29:52

is part of you know, your workplace or your club is a big part of how you belong. And if you're just fitting in, if you're just wearing the mask, if you're just doing what it takes to fit in, you're not belonging. Yeah, you know, real belonging that really enriches us, is who we really are being accepted for who we really are.

Jeremy Melder 30:19

Yeah, I think it's really important.

Ursula Wharton 30:21

And that word, I really want to bring back that word support. Because it's a, it's a itchy topic for me the word support, because so often, support comes hand in hand with that feeling of hierarchy. You're needy, we'll help you were better than you, you know, and for all I have found equality is 100%. The way to go when we are offering support, you know, the other thing about support in the workplace, just this sentence that you said about, we need to know how to support people. Do you have ridiculous that is, yeah, that we, as human beings, have somehow lost the the understanding of what are the do's and don'ts of supporting people?

Jeremy Melder 31:05

They don't know. I don't feel some people don't know. Oh,

Ursula Wharton 31:09

look, I absolutely didn't know. And I've, I've been on this learning journey, looking up all of these academic papers and a whole bunch of things, you know, for for a while trying to answer that question. Well, what are the wrong and right ways and oh, I see where I went wrong. And just owning that I did the best I could with what I knew at the time, the tools, the resources that I had at the time, and we are all doing the best we can with the tools and resources that we have. Unfortunately, for most of us, they're not sufficient.

Jeremy Melder 31:43

Yeah, yeah. So thanks for that. Now, one of the things that I wanted to highlight is that you are also supported by the Family Center, or auspiced. By the Family Center. Yes, that's right. Yeah. And how's that going? You what I'm getting alluding to is, are you needing more support in terms of funding?

Ursula Wharton 32:06

Oh, yes. Like that. Okay, so to this point, we've, we've had a couple of lovely, generous donations from members of the community, which got us through the first few months, and we had the Tweed Byron Suicide Prevention Project, which wraps up in June, they've been supporting us through, I became a trainer in safe talk and assist, fully sponsored by Tweed Byron Suicide Prevention Project. And they also supported me in the development of the deep listener concept, which has been amazing. But the project is wrapping up and the Family Center auspices us, they give us a place to put the money where you can have a tax deductible donation receipt, but they don't provide funding for us. So yes, we were certainly looking to the future of, and would like, some support to help us with the bits and pieces. So, you know, providing that training. And as long as I am able to provide that training for free, and the training I mentioned before, is fully subsidized by the Tweed Byron Suicide Prevention Project at this point. But as long as I can keep doing that, then we can keep boosting the level of those skills and resources in the community. Without us as people who no one's got money, I mean, some people do, but so many of us just can't afford to, you know, to do this training, but the training is so valuable for each person, it's a value to the whole community.

Jeremy Melder 33:39

Yeah, yeah. And, and really, Ursula this has come from your passion, or from a, what I would say, a tragedy, but you know, for a loss of Josh, your son, or your turning around and trying to do something for our community, and the people in the community so that we can actually be better listeners and support each other, which is really important. So I would, you know, be saying to that people that are listening to this podcast to support your efforts, my giving a donation, which is on the website as well, I'll be putting up all those details on our, on my show notes. And also, is there anything else in terms of you know, we've we've focused on our local area, but you know, as you know, this is a Australia wide worldwide issue. Absolutely. anyone's having any issues, you know, outside of our area. Who can they contact? Is there anything you can provide me that I can put in Australian in the notes? Yeah, I can talk to

Ursula Wharton 34:49

I'll give you a list. I'm not very good at saying things off the top of my head, but there's a beautiful friends can't remember exactly what it's called. But they have a hotline, and they're peers, which is beautiful and beyond blue. They're all they're all peers. Of course, there's Lifeline, which has online and SMS family support nowadays. And there are different initiatives popping up here and there, I've actually designed deep listeners in a way that is replicable. So that we can begin to have nodes in different communities. And for this to grow, and part of my plan is to make the online the training online, so that no matter where you are, that you'll have to pay if you're, you know, here, there and everywhere to help support that. But no matter where you are, you can still gain those same deep listening skills,

Jeremy Melder 35:38

it's really important that you can replicate what you're, you know, doing. And yeah, look, I want to thank you. And I mean that really, sincerely, I think you're doing a great job, for our community. And at large, hopefully this will replicate throughout the world. And we doing great things for people because I really want to see suicide be a subject that we don't talk about in 20 years time, because it doesn't exist anymore. Yeah. But it'd be lovely to achieve that and have that vision or hold that vision, because I think there are people there that need as support as community.

Ursula Wharton 36:16

Yeah, definitely. And I think it's possible to get very close to eradicating suicide. There are 100 projects out there that have actually done that. So it's really heartening to know that we can, if we've got the will, there is a way Yeah, yeah, yeah. And deep listening is definitely part of that.

Jeremy Melder 36:33

Yep. So I will advertise your courses and so on, that are coming up. And yeah, I might even do a promo for you in the next month, as well, just so that we can, we can just get you know, people more aware of what's available for you. So thank you so much Ursulka for sharing us a part of your life and your project. Thank you for being part of the Beaming Green podcast. The music for this podcast is produced by Dave Weir now we need more people to get onboard and raise awareness about sustainability and climate change. The more of us that are shining the light on these issues, the more governments and business leaders will listen. We would love you to subscribe to our podcast, and share and engage in social media so that we can get some tracktion lets to support one another and envision a brighter future. Thanks for listening. See you next week.