

Therapy Chat Episode 326



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[00:00:00] **Laura Reagan:** Therapy Chat Podcast, Episode 326.

[00:00:04] **Announcer:** This is the Therapy Chat Podcast with Laura Reagan LCSW-C. The information shared in this podcast is not a substitute for seeking help from a licensed mental health professional. And now here's your host, Laura Reagan LCSW-C.

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[00:01:18] **Laura Reagan:** And now for all you prescribers out there, Therapy Notes is proudly introducing e-prescribe. Use coupon code chat, or click the link in the show notes to get two free months at therapynotes.com.

[00:01:31] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat. I'm your host, Laura Reagan. Today I'm speaking with someone I have known for years, my friend and colleague Charlene McPherson, LCSW-C.

[00:01:42] **Laura Reagan:** Self-proclaimed nerd and licensed psychotherapist. Charlene McPherson uses nerd culture to create a safe and fun environment to explore the therapy process. She's also a mother wife, Lutheran podcaster and owner of Nerdy Adventure Therapy 2.0. Charlene's been playing role playing games for 15 years and game mastering for three years, she's been in the mental health field as a licensed certified social worker clinical for 12 years.

[00:02:08] **Laura Reagan:** Charlene offers therapeutically applied role-playing game, social skills, therapy groups for adults 25 and up as part of her therapy services in Linthicum Maryland. She's a certified therapeutic game master in the game to grow method of TTR PG therapy. And she's also in the process of completing certification with geek therapeutics. And she has a podcast called Mental Health Quest, which is about demystifying and de-stigmatizing therapy.

[00:02:35] **Laura Reagan:** I really wanted to talk to Charlene about her work with using therapeutic role-playing games with adults. You know, I think game therapies with kids are, you know, we're familiar with play therapy and, and now there are more ways that people are doing therapeutic gaming that involves video games with kids.

[00:03:01] **Laura Reagan:** But Charlene was one of the first people I heard of who was doing therapeutic role-playing game groups with adults. So I thought this was pretty cool and I wanted to bring it here, but our conversation really kind of turned into a little more than that. It turned into a discussion about embracing neurodiversity as a superpower.

[00:03:23] **Laura Reagan:** How, when we show up as our authentic selves in our therapy, work, clients feel safer to be their authentic selves and to bring that forth. When we're trying so hard to hold back who we really are and create some professional persona, that's not really true to ourselves. Clients feel less comfortable being their true selves.

[00:03:49] **Laura Reagan:** So I've watched Charlene grow and evolve over the years that I've known her. And I think what she's doing is amazing, which is why I invited her to be my guest. So I hope you'll enjoy this conversation as much as I did. Let's dive right into my conversation with Charlene McPherson.

[00:04:11] **Laura Reagan:** Hi, welcome back to Therapy Chat.

[00:04:13] **Laura Reagan:** I'm your host, Laura Reagan. And today I'm so happy to be speaking with my friend and colleague Charlene McPherson, LCSW-C, who is a certified therapeutic game master. And so Charlene, thanks for being my guest on Therapy Chat today.

[00:04:30] **Charlene Macpherson:** I'm so excited to be here. This is so exciting, a long way from Catholic charities, isn't it?.

[00:04:38] **Laura Reagan:** So, yeah, Charlene and I used to work together. I started, I will never forget. And this really like is how I think of you Charlene.

[00:04:48] **Charlene Macpherson:** Oh goodness, sorry.

[00:04:53] **Laura Reagan:** So when I started my first day of my clinical internship, so my final internship of grad school. I was so nervous coming into my agency job at Catholic Charities, Outpatient Clinic, and meeting my supervisor.

[00:05:09] **Laura Reagan:** She's showing me around and I'm like so nervous and hoping I'm going to measure up and, you know, will, will I be accepted and will I be a good therapist? And all of this and suddenly Charlene walks by wearing like a Harry Potter costume. And I'm like, oh, I think it must've been, it was like Harry Potter day.

[00:05:32] **Laura Reagan:** I guess must've been, then I was like, oh, okay. That's different. You know, like I was. I'm trying to be so perfect and professional, and I see you walk by like that. And I was like, oh, but that's what I love about you is how playful you are and how yourself you are. And that's how you've always been. So when you told me that you were becoming a

certified therapeutic game master, I was like, Let's talk about this on Therapy Chat.

[00:06:02] **Laura Reagan:** So I'm glad that you were able to come and spend this time with me.

[00:06:07] **Charlene Macpherson:** Me too, to be honest, that could have been just a regular day, as well.

[00:06:14] **Laura Reagan:** We just call that Monday.

[00:06:16] **Charlene Macpherson:** Just Monday in my world.

[00:06:19] **Laura Reagan:** I know, and that's, what's so cool about you. You really embrace who you are and you're not, you're kind of unapologetically yourself and, you know, I I'm inspired by that. So it feels like what you're doing now is just exactly like the perfect, you know, culmination of you. Bringing yourself to your, your practice.

[00:06:41] **Laura Reagan:** So before you even go into telling us about what you're doing now, let's just start off by you telling our audience a little bit more about who you are and what you do.

[00:06:49] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I'm an LCSW-C, so that's a licensed clinical social worker. I've been in the field for two, I think it's 12 years now. Something like that.

[00:06:58] **Charlene Macpherson:** If you count my time at the residence, which is where I started in Catholic Charities, working as a direct care worker, and I've always done individual therapy, I thought I was going to do individual therapy with real young ones. But then I figured out that that just wasn't my spot. And so I started working with teens and older teens and college, and now I'm working with older teens and adults, and I'm really, really having a lot of fun doing that, you know, working on the normal stuff, anxiety, depression, ADHD, you know, trauma, all that, all those things.

[00:07:31] **Charlene Macpherson:** But I needed to spice things up a bit kind of, uh, distinguish myself. So when I, uh, interviewed with my college job that I, I still have right now, I said in my interview, straight up, looks at my boss and my coworker and was like, I want to run Dungeons and Dragons therapeutic groups. And they were like, okay.

[00:07:55] **Laura Reagan:** Now, granted you're at an a you're at a college. That is also very unusual and different too. I don't know if you want to say anything about what their thing is.

[00:08:05] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah, St. John's college is, I always say li-i-iberal arts. They don't have majors and things like that. They study all each year. Everybody studies the same things. So they're studying Socrates, they're studying, you know, apparently they're reading Freud now in some of their classes, but it's to the point where they're like learning Greek so that they can learn, they can read the Bible in Greek.

[00:08:29] **Charlene Macpherson:** So it's very much a Classics type of place. I even joked too, like they have discussions about what a number means. Like how would you define a number super?

[00:08:42] **Laura Reagan:** Super philosophical place

[00:08:44] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yes very philosophical. I was like, $2+2=2?$ I mean $2+2=4?$ I don't know, whatever, I can't even do math!

[00:08:51] **Charlene Macpherson:** But they're great. They're great students. They're very, very smart, a lot of existential crises and therapy more than, than out in the community. Just because they are thinking so much, which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but yeah, they are. They're great. Great students.

[00:09:07] **Laura Reagan:** Did you find that the therapeutic Dungeons and Dragons games were something that the students resonated with?

[00:09:16] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah. And that's why my, my boss was like, you will fit here. Like really, really well, because they knew that the kids were playing or the students were playing Dungeons and Dragons anyway, and other RPGs, and it just kind of fit the aesthetic college kids of the college. So they were really excited to be like, oh yeah, no, this totally sounds like a thing.

[00:09:38] **Charlene Macpherson:** The only problem was that was back in the Fall of 2019. And there was not a lot of resources, no trainings no, you know, or not readily available or none that I had found yet. So it was a bit of a trial and error. I did find a few resources that I used in my first couple groups. And I'll remember when I finally was like, oh my God.

[00:10:03] **Charlene Macpherson:** This actually works. When I had a client, you know, make a realization about their, their personal life, about their, how

they can use their faith as a strength and as a support and things like that through the game, because they were playing a cleric, which we'll go a little bit more into what Dungeons and Dragons is, but a cleric is a holy healer.

[00:10:26] **Charlene Macpherson:** So they were playing this character that modeled some of these faith aspects. And it really, really helped them realize. And in a few scenes that they were in, in count, we call them encounters that faith can be something that brings you up, that, that build you up that helps you gain strength to get through hard things.

[00:10:47] **Charlene Macpherson:** Whereas up until that point, it had had kind of been a really judgemental place for this person. So it was like, it was like, as soon as my client was like, oh yeah, I learned today that I could use my as a strength, I was like, "Oh my god it actually worked I can't believe this!"

[00:11:06] **Laura Reagan:** Uh, it's so cool. And I do want to, I do think it would be helpful if you could tell people a little bit more about Dungeons and dragons. My experiences, mainly from when I was a kid and I had a friend who was into it and I always sort of felt kind of intimidated by it. I think maybe because the word Dungeons, I thought.

[00:11:25] **Laura Reagan:** Ooh, scary or something, you know, that's kind of like as far as I went with it and I think it was too abstract for me, maybe just, you know, my kid friend being a kid too, just didn't explain it in a way that I could understand, but I would love for you to give us some background about really what is Dungeons and Dragons and, and then how it fits into a therapeutic frame.

[00:11:48] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah. So Dungeons and Dragons. You know, heard of during the Satanic panic in the eighties, like,

[00:11:56] **Laura Reagan:** Oh yeah. That time was, yeah. That's right. Thank you for saying that you just jogged my memory, that there was maybe some talk that it was like a satanic thing, which is a little confusing as a kid.

[00:12:08] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah. And if you know the game and actually have played the game. You're like, well, the bad guys are always the like demons and devils, so it doesn't matter. It doesn't make any sense. But anyway, that's beside the point. So Dungeons and Dragons is a role-playing game. So in a role playing game, You create a character, right?

[00:12:26] **Charlene Macpherson:** And you play this game. Someone runs it called the, the dungeon master or the game master dungeon master is specifically for DnD, the game masters is for all other RPGs. Cause there's other systems out there as well. Let's talk a little bit about those later, but you create a character and you play that character, right?

[00:12:46] **Charlene Macpherson:** So it's a mix of acting improv war games. Um, you know, kind of all rolled up into one and

[00:12:56] **Laura Reagan:** Renfest?

[00:12:59] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yes, Yes. Renfest? Yes.

[00:13:00] **Laura Reagan:** I don't know if

[00:13:01] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yes I can guarantee you if the person's dressed up at Ren Fest, more than likely they have a few people around them that play Dungeons and dragons or some sort of RPG. Um, cause that's live action role-playing that's going into the world and acting it out. This is just sitting down at a table and playing it out, you know, with, with your team.

[00:13:22] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right? So the person who's running the game actually comes up with the storyline. They come up with the encounters. So you may, you know, the joke in dungeons and dragons is all parties start off in a Tavern. Okay. You meet in a Tavern. And you sit at the table and you introduce each person's character, what they look like.

[00:13:43] **Charlene Macpherson:** You can play Elves, Dwarves, if you know anything about Lord of the rings? The whole system was based off of the Lord of the Rings world. So there's Elves there's Dwarves. There's Halflings. You know, all of those things in there, right. Or just Humans. And it's in that kind of fantasy world that you set the stage, right?

[00:14:04] **Charlene Macpherson:** So you're in a Tavern, you meet your, what are going to be, your teammates are what we call your party. And so the way I run it, it can go, I know some people can run one-on-one games where it's just the dungeon master and one person. Two critical role that has one game master dungeon master and eight players.

[00:14:25] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. I limit mine for obvious reasons, like for therapy, types reasons, but eight is a lot to play with. Uh, you're going to be waiting for your turn a lot, but so what happens is I say, okay, you're in the

Tavern. All of a sudden, a skeleton pops through the wall and then another one and another one and another one. And so you take the character that you've built, they have certain skills, right?

[00:14:49] **Charlene Macpherson:** So you can have a person who's a fighter who just goes up and smashes things. Right. That's who I usually play when I'm playing an RPG for that first time. It's like, I hit it

[00:15:01] **Charlene Macpherson:** and I do damage.

[00:15:05] **Laura Reagan:** It's easy. To know what to do with your skills

[00:15:06] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. I'm like, I hit it again, but there's different ones. You could play a magic user that could be holy magic. That could be Druid magic.

[00:15:15] **Charlene Macpherson:** That could be all sorts of types of magic, which is a lot of fun. Obviously, a lot of escapism kind of in here.

[00:15:23] **Laura Reagan:** Thinking about Harry Potter, again, like spells and potions and stuff.

[00:15:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** Exactly, exactly like that. And so you will actually use what your characters good at to fight the enemy and there is calm and that's what combat is in the dungeons and dragons.

[00:15:40] **Charlene Macpherson:** So combat encounter is where you're up against a monster. Whatever that monster looks like, or it could be another, you know, non-player character. We call them NPCs. Like the big bag guy. We have the BB EEG, big, bad evil guy. Um, that's like, you know, the big, bad guy that you're going to fight at the end. You know, the reason behind all this stuff that's been happening.

[00:16:02] **Charlene Macpherson:** So you use your. The thing is, is you're not doing it alone. You're doing it with your team, right? So you have somebody who might be a range fighter. You have somebody that might be a melee fighter, which is the, in the face type of thing. You have magic users, you have healers, you have, so you actually have.

[00:16:20] **Charlene Macpherson:** To work very well as a team to be able to beat these monsters. Right. Cause if I just go off and run off on my own, I can get hit, lose all my hit points and then I'm down. Right. And in Dungeons and

Dragons, you do have the risk of losing your character. Your character can die in Dungeons and Dragons. Now, there are many ways to bring a character back to life in Dungeons and Dragons as well.

[00:16:47] **Charlene Macpherson:** But it's a danger. It's something that you always have in the back of your mind, you know, oh, I don't want to lose my character. I spent so much time making them and you know, all this stuff. So, and the other type of encounter that you can have. A role-playing encounter. So you're in the Tavern and you're sitting across from your new partners.

[00:17:09] **Charlene Macpherson:** You all got hired by some guy that you should go kill the org that's out, you know, in the bad lands, that's taken all of his crops, whatever you have to get in there.

[00:17:19] **Laura Reagan:** Band of mercenaries.

[00:17:20] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. Exactly. A band of mercenaries. Exactly. So you actually can ask questions of the person who's giving you the quest. So if you play video games, it's the little like exclamation mark above their head and you click on it and it goes, this is what I need you to do, but it's in real time, it's in real life and you can ask questions.

[00:17:40] **Charlene Macpherson:** You can interact, you can play your character. My always myself, because I've been playing for awhile. I always like using voices for my characters. Just because it makes it easier for people, especially as the DM, to know who I'm playing, who I'm talking as. So I might go into a nice little accent like that or British accent or something and just ask people, well, where are you from?

[00:18:05] **Charlene Macpherson:** You know, you ask your other teammates, where are they from? What do they do? You know, that type of stuff, there really is a social gain.

[00:18:13] **Laura Reagan:** And so the DM is like the facilitator teaching. Or facilitating the interaction with each player, with the other teammates ok.

[00:18:24] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. And so what'll happen is that you say, okay, I want to do this thing.

[00:18:29] **Charlene Macpherson:** I want to attack that monster. And I say, okay, you can attack that monster roll a D 20. So there's some, there's a 20 sided dice. Believe it or not. I don't know. You know, how many people have seen

twenty-sided dice, but you roll a D 20 and that tells you that simulates chance. In this world. So that tells you whether you succeed at something or you fail, right.

[00:18:53] **Charlene Macpherson:** You add your skills to it and things like that, but it definitely simulates chance. In that encounter. So you may be the greatest fighter of all time, but if you roll a natural one on a 20-sided dice, which goes from one to 20, that's really bad.

[00:19:10] **Laura Reagan:** Your fighting skills are low.

[00:19:12] **Charlene Macpherson:** You're fighting. You'll miss the monsters. Some DMS actually be like you miss the monster and you drop your sword.

[00:19:19] **Charlene Macpherson:** Oh no. You know, I think that rolling up a natural one is bad enough and devastating enough that I don't need to add anything else.

[00:19:29] **Laura Reagan:** You're a compassionate DM.

[00:19:33] **Charlene Macpherson:** You plan your turn for so long and then it doesn't hit. So that simulates whether you succeed or not. Right. And the DM is the one who decides whether it succeeds or not.

[00:19:45] **Charlene Macpherson:** So sometimes you have a monster will have an armor class. So if you think about the type of armor that they're wearing, if you, if you fail, you hit the armor and not the person, right. Uh, or the monster. If you succeed, you hit the person, not the armor. So you actually cause some damage and things like that.

[00:20:04] **Laura Reagan:** So depending on how high, your number is.

[00:20:07] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. And with role-playing. This is one of my favorite things to do in a session is to do what I call a skill challenge. That's the role-playing side. So your character will be really good. So if they're a sneaky rogue, like there's somebody who is really like, you know, kind of like a ninja in the, in the, you know, in the shadows, If you wanted to go, like, say like pick somebody's pocket or something like that, a rogue is going to be really good at that thing.

[00:20:39] **Charlene Macpherson:** And so you'll roll the dice, see whether you succeed or not. Right. And it'll be easier for that person to pick someone's

pocket than say a giant going up behind somebody and trying to pick the pocket. Right. So your, your characters have skills and things that they're good at things that they're not good at.

[00:20:58] **Charlene Macpherson:** You can use all of the skills, but again, whether you're good at them or not helps you kind of succeed more or, or less, right. So obviously this kind of mimics life a lot.

[00:21:14] **Laura Reagan:** I'm curious. Is it all like fighting or are there times where they're just trying to get something like find some quest, you know, I know that's not all games have quests and some do.

[00:21:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** There's definitely motivators for people in D and D that's something that the DM will come up with. Right. So yeah, your request could be, Hey, sorry. I'm going Monty Python. You've got to go find the Holy Grail. Yeah. Right. And you have to go questing around in different Dungeons, different castles, talking to different people like doing those types of things, to find your way to the eventual, you know, kind of a goal that you're going to.

[00:21:56] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I'm trying to think the one that I'm running now, the main goal for at least one of my players. Is to take back their throne because they were deposed. And so their characters motivation is to get that throne back and to rule the, you know, the kingdom or whatever. Right? So each person is also going to have different motivators.

[00:22:21] **Charlene Macpherson:** As well as the group. Right. Which makes for great therapy to decide between, do you do what the best for the group or do you do what's best for your character? So, uh, yeah, there's also anything. And that's the thing with Dungeons and Dragons. Any storyline you can think of, that's a game, right? Any movie that you've watched, any quest, any conflict.

[00:22:49] **Charlene Macpherson:** Any, whatever it's all about. It's collective storytelling. So instead of me reading a book and knowing that it has a beginning and an end, I, as the dungeon master know where the major beats are, the major arc, but I have no idea how they're going to get there. And that all depends on the players and what they want to do and what they decide.

[00:23:10] **Charlene Macpherson:** And I have to adapt along with that. So that's the hard part about being a Dungeon Master, like, yes, there are set rules. But your party can be like, no, we don't want to go over there. We want to go over here and you haven't prepared for that. And you just have to kind of roll

with it. Right. Or I know some people who play Dungeons and Dragons like to collect animal companions.

[00:23:33] **Charlene Macpherson:** They get excited when I come across an animal. So instead of fighting the animal, they befriend it and then get their animal companion, same thing with people that they meet randomly, because as the dungeon master, you play all of the other characters, right? So I play the Tavern keeper, the guy who's bringing you your drinks, I'm playing the, the monsters that you're fighting.

[00:23:58] **Charlene Macpherson:** I'm playing all the big, bad guy. I'm playing all of those people. Right? So it's, it's definitely a lot of fun, but it is very, very stressful sometimes, especially as a new VM when I was in new dam and I was like, oh, I have no idea where they're gonna go, or what they're gonna do!

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[00:25:20] **Laura Reagan:** The therapist has to have a lot of confidence and I would think like flexibility and willingness to be just to make mistakes, you know, to not like try to control everything that's happening because.

[00:25:34] **Charlene Macpherson:** Lord knows I make em. And, you know, but the one thing, you know, we talked about how is a Certified Therapy Game Master? I actually got that through nonprofit called Game To Grow. And I'm currently in the program for Geek Therapeutics, the other big company, that's

kind of training people for the Therapeutic Game Master. I'm just this close to finishing that one they talk about.

[00:25:59] **Laura Reagan:** I'll put links to those in the show notes.

[00:26:01] **Charlene Macpherson:** Okay. Yeah, they're great. Both of them are super awesome. I actually got to do a panel with Dr. Bean who started Geek Therapeutics and I got to meet the founders of Game To Grow at, you know, at, uh, PAX unplugged last year I was so I was like star struck.

[00:26:17] **Laura Reagan:** That's so cool.

[00:26:18] **Charlene Macpherson:** But part of what you have to be able to do, not only is the, you'll find this, you know this as a therapist, you don't know where your clients are gonna go either. You walk into their session and they bring up something that happened that week that you had no idea was going to happen, how it was going to affect them, you know, those types of things. And you just adapt. You just go with it.

[00:26:39] **Charlene Macpherson:** You have to roll with it. Right. It's the same thing

[00:26:42] **Laura Reagan:** It's what we do all day long every day.

[00:26:44] **Charlene Macpherson:** Exactly. It's the same thing. Only. You're adapting. Not only to. Therapeutic goals, but you're adapting to the storyline and you're adapting to the group dynamics. So it's a lot going on at once. But the one thing that I've heard through both the trainings from Game To Grow and Geek Therapeutics is that as long as the dungeon master the game master is having fun along with the players.

[00:27:11] **Charlene Macpherson:** Then it will be okay, then it will go, well, you have to be willing to play as an adult. And I don't think we mentioned this. I'm not doing this game with, you know, five year olds. These are

[00:27:24] **Laura Reagan:** Surprise, listeners. This is adults.

[00:27:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** This is adults! I don't think we mentioned that. I'm literally the group I have now are right now that signed up last year and they're still with me.

[00:27:37] **Charlene Macpherson:** They keep signing up, which I'm, you know, that's great. They're in their thirties and they're playing this game to be able to work on some, some social skills and goals that they have, that they want to practice in a safe environment. Right. Cause that's what I'm creating is a safe environment for these people to be like, okay, let me try this persona out.

[00:27:59] **Charlene Macpherson:** Let me try this. You know, just as an example, like when you're, it's really hard for some people with anxiety to set boundaries, Right. Healthy boundaries. Well, if you're bad at setting boundaries, make your character good at it. And your character is going to have to set healthy boundaries throughout the game saying, no, this is what I want versus you know what the party wants, or you can make your character not good at boundary setting either, but that's one of their goals that they're working on.

[00:28:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** You know, and so they have to play that out in the role, play in the game. And so you're literally practicing these cognitive behavioral skills in a safe space, in a safe social setting without any really real world consequences. Right. Which I always felt was the frustrating thing when, as a therapist, right.

[00:28:53] **Charlene Macpherson:** And Laura, you may, you know, may have come to the same conclusion that it's really, really hard to teach someone social skills. One-on-one right. You can teach them. Yes. Like you can help them practice it one-on-one. But a lot of the times the problem isn't, one-on-one, it's a group of people. Right. And I am not a group of people when I'm an individual therapist.

[00:29:15] **Charlene Macpherson:** And so it would be really frustrating to try and like, get these people to practice those goals or tell me what's really going on. And I didn't really know what was going on in the situation or the environment here. I literally run the environment. I'm right there.

[00:29:33] **Laura Reagan:** You're creating it.

[00:29:34] **Charlene Macpherson:** I'm creating it. And I'm watching the interactions.

[00:29:37] **Charlene Macpherson:** So if somebody comes back to me, Oh, that person. I know they hate me because I did X, Y, and Z. And I can literally say, no, I was right there. I heard what you said. I didn't feel that way. And it didn't look like anybody else did either, maybe that's something that we need to work on anxiety wise, internally wise.

[00:29:57] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I can literally fact check people because I am right there.

[00:30:03] **Laura Reagan:** That's an important thing for our listeners to hear too, is that I think you told me that you require each group member to also be in individual therapy with you as part of the intervention.

[00:30:15] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah, I highly recommend it. Some people just can't. Because that's two and a half hours a week.

[00:30:21] **Charlene Macpherson:** I can understand that. Um, but I highly recommend it because we're just, we're just playing the game. We're practicing the social skills in the game. When we're playing the game, the games are 90 minutes long. And in that time, again, as a therapist, I'm looking at group dynamics, I'm looking at goals, I'm looking at all those different kinds of things.

[00:30:41] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I feel like processing in that amount of time too is just too much at once. So I learned this the hard way, you know, when I started my first group that people weren't getting as much out of it without having that process time and individual therapy with me. Cause again, I, there I'm seeing what's happening.

[00:31:01] **Charlene Macpherson:** I can help you kind of figure out where you want your character to go, how it helps reflect you and things like that. Right. So I worked, I definitely learned that the hard way, the first session and the client was like um, do you have room for another individual client? I was like, yes, actually I do, because that's going to make this program even better.

[00:31:23] **Charlene Macpherson:** You know, so it definitely is great to be able to just have them practice, have their goals in mind, play a game, have their goals in mind and then do the processing in individual therapy. Yeah.

[00:31:37] **Laura Reagan:** You know, what's interesting as you're talking about this to me, cause I think like this, the characters, it sounds like for D and D at least it's kind of like, they almost represent like archetypes.

[00:31:49] **Laura Reagan:** You know, and the whole, like hero's journey idea, um, which mirrors so much of the way life is and the challenges that we come up against in our lives. And, um, do you want to say anything about that?

[00:32:04] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah. No, it's, it's amazing cause anybody who plays D and D and who's really big into D and D and the gaming community.

[00:32:13] **Charlene Macpherson:** Can tell you that DnD is therapeutic to play. It's not therapy, but it's therapeutic because you can work through stressors because you can work through those things. And that's because you're playing as a character, right? Like, no, you can't do magic in real life. However, you're the person who's playing who built that character and who's playing the character.

[00:32:35] **Charlene Macpherson:** So inevitably some of you is going to be in that character. And, you know, with trainings and things like that, they talk about how like, okay, there's a few different types of characters that people tend to play and you play the character you need in the moment. Right. You play the character. That's exactly like you, you play the character.

[00:32:54] **Charlene Macpherson:** That's the exact opposite of you. You play it, you could play a character that is you at your best, right? So you're your ideal self, right? Or you could just play a plain old chaotic character just to see how things happen. Right. But each one of those things has it's own value, right? Because you're trying out different things to see what sticks, what doesn't right?

[00:33:18] **Charlene Macpherson:** What's comfortable, what's not? What works, what doesn't, right?

[00:33:22] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah. And there's like a way there is a way that you're like embodying what you're, you know, it's sort of like when you're practicing, working on boundaries here, like, you know, you're talking with the therapist and the therapist is saying, just tell the person no or whatever.

[00:33:38] **Laura Reagan:** And you're like, yeah, I'm just going to tell them no. And then when the time comes, you're like in the words can't come out. But when you actually. Practice it from an embodiment like right now, it has that, it's like more experiential.

[00:33:54] **Charlene Macpherson:** And it has a Game to Grow talks about that as a aesthetic distance. One, one half of the Adams who started Game to Grow is acting a drama therapist. So I think that comes from, yeah, I think that comes from that. Cause he does a lot of improv stuff and that, that type of thing as well, but that aesthetic distance me as the, the DM, I can also control that aesthetic distance if someone is getting too close to their character.

[00:34:21] **Charlene Macpherson:** So if their character is getting angry because something's happening, I see the person also getting angry. I can say, oh man, your character looks really angry. What are they going to do? And that kind of gives them the cue to say, oh yeah, it is my character. Whereas if I'm trying to kind of work with a goal or something like that, and the character isn't really into it, but I know that it's a goal for the person.

[00:34:50] **Charlene Macpherson:** Oh, man. I know you like that, you know, that was hard for you a little bit, or I'll have a character respond in a certain way or something like that. Kind of, kind of like egg them on. Right. And it's really, really great to see that. Okay. You can help people control that distance between themselves and the character.

[00:35:13] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. And again, what do we do in everyday life, but control our aesthetic distance between our roles, between who we are, who we're talking to, you know, all those things, right? So again, it's, it's practicing. And I've always been like, I love cognitive behavioral therapy. I know it is like a huge umbrella term, you know?

[00:35:33] **Charlene Macpherson:** And there's lots of things under it, but I definitely have always been more of an applied, pragmatic. Okay. What are we going to do next time this thing happens. Let's come up with a plan. Let's let's practice something. Let's, you know,

[00:35:47] **Laura Reagan:** Something tangible. Concrete.

[00:35:49] **Charlene Macpherson:** Something concrete because you know, it's great to know where things come from and that, yes, that is important.

[00:35:55] **Charlene Macpherson:** However, you're still living your life. My, my therapy office, isn't the real world, so we need to be able to apply it to real world situations. Right. And I know I'm talking about applying it to a real fantasy world that then can be applied to real life. Right. Um, you know, working with a boss, working with, you know, teammates, working with, uh, people, when you have a conflict of interest, all of those things happen in D and D on a constant basis.

[00:36:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** And I don't even have to build it in that's just the game as a whole, right.

[00:36:32] **Laura Reagan:** Charlene, you should start doing therapists consultation groups using this too. You should do it for therapists, like some kind of burnout prevention or something.

[00:36:43] **Charlene Macpherson:** Yeah, i, I, so, okay. I've got lots of plans. Okay. Believe it or not.

[00:36:49] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I know I said that I started in 2019, but I just like rebranded my private practice last June to Nerd Adventure Therapy 20 it's an LLC now, that's exciting. And I got all sorts of plans, but that was like literally 2021. The pandemic was going on. So like all that stuff. So I got plans cause I'm like I've had people consult me and say, Hey look, can you run this for our therapist?

[00:37:16] **Charlene Macpherson:** You would love that because we would love them to be able to use it. Or again, like you said, just as a self care type of, of situation, if you're a nerd and there are plenty of us therapists out there, there are nerds. There's an entire like Facebook group that I'm part of. Yeah. Yeah. We're everywhere. And, you know, using that self care for the therapist, I, you know, I I'm open to that.

[00:37:46] **Charlene Macpherson:** I am just one person right now. So I'm running a group. I'm doing individual. I would love to do, you know, groups of therapists. For self care or to teach them how to use this type of stuff or just introduce them to it. But also I would love to do research on this stuff too, because there is, there's no research on adult social groups, like social skills groups.

[00:38:12] **Charlene Macpherson:** There's no research on socialization, isolation, like all of those things at all. For people, 20 age, 25 and up, um, at least not that I found, if you all find anything, please send it my way. I'd be more than happy to read it. But you know, you have things about adult learning when they go back to like college or something like that.

[00:38:32] **Charlene Macpherson:** But you have nothing about community, about, you know, isolation, all of these things that are really important. They don't, that just doesn't stop once you graduate college, you need a community, you know, all those things. So. I got all sorts of plans.

[00:38:51] **Laura Reagan:** I know. And I'm so excited to see how this is going to grow.

[00:38:55] **Laura Reagan:** And, um, so we're nearly out of time and I have so many questions for you, but one question, I guess, as a sort of a wrap up is what would you say to people who think that this is just that this isn't real therapy? It's just play. Or it's just playing Dungeons and dragons?

[00:39:15] **Charlene Macpherson:** Right. And, and that is a very legitimate questions to ask, right.

[00:39:20] **Charlene Macpherson:** Because like I just said, there's not a lot of research right now. However research is being done and it's like, uh, I imagine it's okay. I might be putting myself too much up on the pedestal, but I imagine it's like when Albert Ellis and all the original CBT therapists were like, this works, you know, you have to do research, you have to do it to find out whether it works or not.

[00:39:43] **Charlene Macpherson:** And so that's a big part of what I want to do, right. Is, is contribute to the validity and the reliability that this is actually something that helps. Right. And we already know that play therapy helps play therapy, helps kids. And we accept that because they're kids. But when then you try and go apply play therapy to adults.

[00:40:05] **Charlene Macpherson:** That kind of stigma comes in, right? Like you're an adult. Get over it, stop being a kid, like, you know, all those things. And it's one thing that I can tell you when I was 10 years old. I remember the moment promising myself that I would never, ever be an old grumpy person. I was always going to play. I was always going to be engaged, you know, and having fun because it's just, that's how you get through the day-to-day.

[00:40:34] **Laura Reagan:** That's what life...that's the joy of life.

[00:40:37] **Charlene Macpherson:** And that's how you learn. Like we're social beings. That's how we learn. We can't learn in a vacuum. Even when you're 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, I'm talking like I will run games for 70 year olds. If there's people out there that really, really want to play, like I'll do it because there's so many applications, even in, it's just, everybody's sitting down at the table and playing a game together.

[00:41:02] **Charlene Macpherson:** That happens very rarely nowadays, especially with the pandemic going on. Right. So it's really, really important, especially, you know, one other point I know we're getting to the end here. One other point is, you know, I, myself was late diagnosed ADHD, right at 35.

Right. So I'm a mother, a wife, I have my own house. I have my own business, you know, all these things.

[00:41:26] **Charlene Macpherson:** And I got diagnosed with ADHD. There are no social skills groups. No, there may be some therapy groups out there, but not many, not many for my age. Right. And so there are a lot of people who are getting late diagnoses right now, and they have no resources except for individual therapy. If they have good insurance or have the money to pay out of pocket.

[00:41:50] **Charlene Macpherson:** So it's like, yeah, I really want to hone in on that, that lack of services.

[00:41:55] **Laura Reagan:** Yeah.

[00:41:56] **Laura Reagan:** I hear you. And the what's ahead or what's beginning to grow is very hopeful. I think in terms of, you know, it's, I think it's kind of like the neurodiversity movement is taking away the idea of, you know, people being different and trying to make them be the same, but instead embracing.

[00:42:19] **Laura Reagan:** The diversity of ways that brains can work and offerings match up.

[00:42:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** That's one way you could describe me, Laura, different, complete nerdy you said like, I am myself unapologetically. Like this is me. I've got blue hair. I'm 35 years. I'm going to be 36 in June, but you know, there are people out there like me. That that just want to be themselves, right?

[00:42:45] **Charlene Macpherson:** Who are ADHD, you know, on the autism spectrum, neurodiverse, you know, things like that. And we have superpowers, you know, along with the, these things and we can use them. And that's part of what D and D does as well is give you an opportunity to use your super power when you have ADHD and you're the most creative in the room.

[00:43:07] **Charlene Macpherson:** You can think out of the box. You're the one who's going to be keeping the game really interesting. Cause you're going to be jumping off walls and fighting monsters and doing all sorts of stuff. And in the normal world, you'll get chastised for that. In DnD, you're the best player.

[00:43:22] **Laura Reagan:** Exactly, exactly. Yeah. If I were playing a game like that, I'd much rather have someone like you leading the game than someone like me, because I'd be like, uh, um, you know, like let's like, and I don't want to be in a box, but you know, it's the way you are and the way you live your life.

[00:43:44] **Laura Reagan:** It's so exuberant and so playful. And that translates perfectly, which is again, just to come full circle. Exactly why both personally and professionally, I support so much what you're doing and why I wanted to have you talk about it on Therapy Chat, because I just love seeing it's like you embodying who you are as a therapist, instead of saying, I have to hide who I am.

[00:44:09] **Laura Reagan:** So I can be quote, professional and be a therapist, you know, again, going back to you wearing the Harry Potter outfit, you know, it's like, I know that, you know, we both know that there were some raised eyebrows, of course, in our agency, but the kids loved it.

[00:44:27] **Charlene Macpherson:** Exactly. I'm working with kids. I'm going to connect with them on that level.

[00:44:33] **Charlene Macpherson:** That's the fun part about this Nerd Adventure Therapy stuff is like someone who reads your profiling goes, oh, that person's like super unapologetically nerdy and the complete nerd, like I'm going to get along with them. You automatically have that connection in the way. Neuro diverse people tend to like really magnet to each other, like.

[00:44:54] **Charlene Macpherson:** When it comes to those type of things, if that's your specific brand of, nerdism like, it's an automatic connection, like, oh, have you played this?

[00:45:06] **Charlene Macpherson:** And it makes it easy, that rapport, right? That's something that therapists are always trying to create that trust and that rapport in the first part of a professional relationship with your therapist is that rapport getting to, you know, trust that therapist trusts their reactions. Trust. What they're going to say is not going to be something, you know, that's going to judge you or whatever.

[00:45:29] **Charlene Macpherson:** Like I get that halfway done before you even walked into my office because you know who I am right off the page.

[00:45:38] **Laura Reagan:** I love it. So Charlene, I know this isn't the only thing you do, but where can people find you and your practice?

[00:45:46] **Charlene Macpherson:** So they would find me everywhere. I'm all over the place. I'm at nat20 therapy on Facebook and Twitter.

[00:45:55] **Charlene Macpherson:** I am currently building my website, so I don't know if it might, it might be out by the time this releases at nat20therapy.com know pretty easy to remember. I am also on Tik TOK. As true form unseen, Lord of the rings reference.

[00:46:16] **Laura Reagan:** She's also the world's biggest Queen fan.

[00:46:23] **Laura Reagan:** I love that.

[00:46:23] **Charlene Macpherson:** I actually had Freddie Mercury pops in my office. I need all of them. I only have two and there's like four of them, but yes, I love Queen. They're amazing. And then you can find me. I have a physical practice as well. You know, here in Linthicum Maryland, you will find me all over the place.

[00:46:43] **Charlene Macpherson:** Oh. Also

[00:46:47] **Charlene Macpherson:** you're like get to the Podcast, Charlene.

[00:46:52] **Charlene Macpherson:** I have a podcast called Mental Health Quest. And I have a co-host Benjamin Tights. He's amazing. We actually go through like how to access care, what you're looking for questions to ask your new therapist. Right now, we're in, um, a diagnosis kind of series or we're talking about what does it actually look like?

[00:47:16] **Charlene Macpherson:** Not, you know, this, this therapist, mumbo jumbo, like we're going to talk about what it actually looks like, what it feels like, what clients have told us that feels like those types of things so that maybe it can help somebody kind of identify if something is going on. Right. And then we're bringing this to

[00:47:32] **Laura Reagan:** Demystifying therapy. That's important.

[00:47:32] **Charlene Macpherson:** Correct. Correct. And we are bringing in experts on those diagnoses, and then we're going to do another series on the actual therapies themselves, bringing in experts for, for those as well. So we've got a lot planned, I think we're on episode six or seven. Right now we've released six or seven episodes.

[00:47:52] **Charlene Macpherson:** And I'm very excited to get it going and keep it going. Just to get that information out there. Again, I, I'm not the therapist. That's going to have the suit on. I'm going to be the one that tells you exactly how it is and how, how to get the best care you can. Like, you know, I'm going to be honest with you, and I'm going to tell you where to go, how to go and look out for X, Y, Z.

[00:48:12] **Charlene Macpherson:** You know, cause I think that's important again, like you said, demystifying and de-stigmatizing mental health care. And also that's the same thing with my D and D games. Like how else better to de-stigmatize exactly. Mental health care and then to play a game, right? They have people play a game together.

[00:48:32] **Charlene Macpherson:** So I, you know, hopefully it's a good access point.

[00:48:35] **Laura Reagan:** Well Charlene. I'm so glad that you were able to be my guest on Therapy Chat today. Thank you so much.

[00:48:41] **Charlene Macpherson:** Thank you for inviting me. This was, I been looking forward to this, like I scheduled it like three months ago.

[00:48:50] **Charlene Macpherson:** I really appreciate you having me on.

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