

167. Defying Expectations to Embrace Human Potential: Amit Chintan Ramlal's Journey Beyond the Label of Autism

Welcome to Lessons from the Playroom. In this podcast, Lisa Dion will help you explore the little things that make a big difference in play therapy. Lisa is the founder of Synergetic Play Therapy.

You know, sometimes therapists get all caught up trying to study big theories, mastering techniques to help children like me. But sometimes it's the little things we show you along the way that make the biggest difference. Join Lisa as she teaches you some of the little lessons that children are trying to communicate to you so that you can help us in the best ways possible and on behalf of all the kids you work with.

Thanks for listening and believing in us. Let's get started.

Lisa Dion

Hi, everyone.

Welcome back to what I know is going to be a pretty inspiring episode in our Lessons of the Playroom podcast series. Today we are joined by two very special guests. However, Amit, who I will introduce you all to here in just a minute, is our main guest today, and he is going to be sharing with us the journey that he has gone through with Autism.

And so, listeners, my hope is that you have a cup of tea, a glass of water, or something, but that you find a cozy place to sit back and listen to. A very important journey that we all need to pay more attention to and understand a bit more deeply. So let me share a little bit about our special guests and then I will begin our conversation together.

So I have with me Amit, and Amit's father, Kumar is also joining him, but a little bit about Amit, Amit has Autism Spectrum Disorder. He possesses a unique gift for helping leaders transform their challenges into sources of strength. He embarked on a journey of self-improvement, studying the works of great thinkers and change-makers, which helped him thrive because of his challenges, not despite them.

A Polymath with a vast knowledge base. From reading over 14,000 nonfiction books since age three, he integrates this knowledge with his unique insights to fulfill his deepest desire to help people discover and manifest their life's purpose. He's the co-founder of the Chintan Project with his father, Dr. Kumar, who I'm going to introduce here. Dr. Kumar Ramlal Amit believes that each person or team has a distinct purpose, enabling them to shine and make a significant impact.

I had the pleasure of meeting Amit when he was eight years old at a conference, and he is now 22 years old, everyone. So let me introduce Kumar, and we're going to get started here. So Kumar is an entrepreneur and medical specialist. He co-founded the Chintan Project, Inspiro Med Clinics, Inspiram Group, and Chinest Group. As a respected consultant and physician, he has a distinguished academic

background and extensive experience. Together, these two aim to help clients leverage their unique purpose and challenges for greater impact.

And welcome.

Kumar Ramlall

Yeah, thank you. Thank you very much for having us, Lisa. So the way this works for your guests is that Amit had Autism. Like you heard that still, one of their residual effects is it still affects his independent speech. So there's this plastic laminated card which has got the Alphabet on it, and Amit types on the card, and I read what he says. So if you hear a tapping song, that's what it is.

And Amit will explain how he uses the card.

Amit Ramlall

Lisa, thank you very much for having me on for your audience. I have Autism, as you heard, that still affects my independent speech.

I type on this card, and my dad reads what I am typing.

Lisa Dion

Thank you for explaining that.

Amit Ramlall

Much as some use glasses to help them see, I use this card to help me speak.

That's all.

Lisa Dion

Thank you, Amit.

Amit Ramlall

When my dad sounds half-human, that's him speaking on his own behalf.

When he sounds like a robot, that's him reading what I am typing.

Lisa Dion

Thank you so much for orienting. Oh, that's fantastic.

So, Amit, I want to share with our listeners that this conversation we're about to have was inspired. Many years ago, you and I were having. I think it was lunch.

We were sharing a meal together, and we were having a conversation about Autism. And you shared that you would love for people to understand your journey with Autism and what it's like to have Autism. I'm so inspired that the day has arrived where we get to have this conversation and we get to share it with everyone. So thank you so much.

Amit Ramlall

It was lunch, Lisa, and I remember it well as we talked about the work you were doing in play therapy.

Lisa Dion

And we talked, too, that for so many therapists, what they learn in school, in training is but a sliver of the lessons that they learn from their clients and their clients' lives actually just made me emotional hearing you say that. I think everyone that's listening right now, resonates so unbelievably, deeply.

Amit Ramlall

I think that ongoing learning, Lisa, is critical, that humility, to know that there is an order, lessons are waiting to be discovered if we are humble enough to listen to look for them.

Lisa Dion

You and I are consummate students. I think that is what allows us to discover, then teach, and then leverage the lessons that are before us. So unbelievably true. Amit, take us on a journey.

Take us through parts of your story with Autism and teach us what we need to understand well.

Amit Ramlall

I have said that I have been blessed to have been called stupid. So I learned to think for myself.

I have been blessed to not hear well. So I learned to listen to my inner voice, the callings of my soul, in so many ways. Lisa, I think I have a distinct advantage in understanding how we humans tick and how we relate.

I have been ignored for long enough that I got to observe us humans. And those observations have been key additions to my studies to help inform the work I do now.

I had, in addition to Autism, severe developmental delay, and my parents were hungry to get me help. In fact, along the way, they had good reason to seek the road less traveled. And my dad can share that part of the story.

Kumar Ramlall

Our story is intertwined with psychologists. Quite interestingly, as you can imagine, for someone with a developmental delay and eventually an Autism spectrum label. And a couple of times, Lisa, that I remember well was when as a parent, and I'm also, among other things, I'm a pediatric specialist.

I'm a pediatric allergy and breathing specialist. And so in training, I would have looked after many kids with severe developmental. Lilay and I actually had a great sense of how this movie was going to end if we didn't do something different.

So I had watched this, and I remember explaining to families how, you know, how we hoped that stuff would be different while secretly knowing on the inside how this was likely to turn out. And I think with so many of your therapists, of your audience, that's actually what happens, too. They have a very good sense of how this story would turn out.

And I tell you, along the lines of psychologists, a couple of moments with psychologists that were key to us and might be helpful to your audience, too. One was to access services, you had to have a label. So

my wife and I never had a particular interest in getting a label, but it turned out that a label and an assessment was important for us to even get into services.

Amit Ramlall

So one of our first experiences with a psychologist was going to get an assessment done. And I remember the frustration of the psychologist because I just was not consistent. She had great difficulty with me not falling onto any consistent pattern that she could identify and report what was eventually, she was frustrated enough that I was failing the IQ tests, to use a non-psychological term, and essentially fired us. And either from true shame, guilt, or perhaps even disgust never sent us a bill.

Lisa Dion

Wow. There's so much in that story right there. Can I just unpack a couple of key pieces that I just heard?

Amit Ramlall

Sure.

Lisa Dion

The first, and I think this is so key for our listeners, our expectation of the client versus our curiosity about the client. So that's so key.

And then also, wow, you were so missed because someone thought that you were going to fail an IQ test, Amit. So I'm just curious, what was that like for you to be that missed? Well, I think that she didn't get me right. I was wise enough to know that I could understand.

Amit Ramlall

I just couldn't express in a conventional way with language. You and I, Lisa, share a long journey together. I was your patient, you remember? And we had to find ways other than words and speech to make our work happen.

Lisa Dion

Use play.

Amit Ramlall

Yeah. I remember your astonishment as to how frustrated I must have been and yet persisted with the Lego block.

And that persistence is something that many of your and your audience's patients have when you see them so-called give up, know that their buckets are full and overflowing.

Something else came from that work that led to me remembering when I was training in psychotherapy, and one of my teachers said the following.

We think sometimes that we are the musician playing the instrument. I want you, Amit, I want you to consider the possibility that you are the instrument and that when you have emotions, when you have sensations, exteroception, and interoception, to use Lisa's words, pay attention as they are a clue to

what is going on. And if I can have a message for your audience, it would be to be the musician. All right. But be willing to be. To honor that. You are also the instrument. Thank you for saying that.

Lisa Dion

That's so beautiful. Like poetry right there. And what you're saying is so true. And I think, particularly with Autism or any individual that presents seemingly different than the norm, whatever that even means, that I think as therapists, we have to suspend our thinking of how things are supposed to be or what communication is supposed to look like or what behavior is supposed to look like, and be deeply curious about who's in front of us and find ways to connect that don't impose the thinking that the client needs to match us. How do we find ways to bridge the gap? Does that make sense? Because, I think there's such an expectation for a client to fit in for the therapist versus the therapist, humbling themselves enough to stay curious and maybe not even know in order to meet the client wherever they're at.

Kumar Ramlall

That leads us to another encounter with a psychologist that changed the trajectory of our family's lives. So Amit was two and a half and another one of these assessments to try and determine how he could access programs. And the psychologist, having done the assessment, called Pratima and me into the room.

This is what both my wife and I, Pratima and I remember of that conversation. He said, that if there were a thousand kids lined end to end, the worst on the left and the most accomplished on the right, Amit would be the third from the left. And then he said the following, which changed our lives.

He said you don't have to worry. He would qualify for a teaching assistant in school. And in that moment, I knew that that was not my dream, for my kid to qualify for a teaching assistant in school.

And Amit talked about this, because I believe, in retrospect, of course, that that psychologist was looking to take the pain off of our plate, to tell us that there was hope, that there was going to be help, that there was going to be resources. But in doing so, he had entirely missed what the family's aims were, what the family's hopes and dreams were, and there was a disconnect there. And so we listened to the rest of the mumblings for the rest of the assessment.

But that is when, in my heart, I knew that we were not going to stay on this road where I knew how the movie would end. And I remember thinking to myself, if you don't like the movie, change the script. If you don't like the movie, change the script.

And I determined that we would change the script. And that's when we started looking at alternative ways of helping Amit. And, oh, that's a long story all by itself, but we started looking at so-called nonconventional ways of helping him, which was very interesting, because I was on faculty, and I was a program director in a pediatrics program. I was on faculty, and I was doing this nonconventional stuff.

Pratima is an organic chemist. She's very sort of geeky, nerdy sciency. And so she was all into this science piece of this, and we were now going to go embark on this. If it works, great.

And if it doesn't, we'd go on to the next. As you know, you saw Amit when he was 17 years old. He's not done cooking yet.

Right. He's still looking for ways to navigate the moving of the needle forward. Right.

But I remember that moment that we determined that we would go looking at different ways. And that statement of not qualifying or for, don't worry, he will qualify for a teaching assistant in school is one of the key reasons that my dad went looking for intellectual programs, more so than walking gross motor or fine motor development programs. Does that make sense?

Lisa Dion

It does.

And what I'm hearing is you're both sharing that as these hard things happened, you didn't just experience the hard thing and then just say, "oh, I guess that's how it's going to go. I guess this is just my life. Oh, I guess this is just our life. Oh, I guess we're just going to sort of stay in this."

What I'm hearing you both describe separately and together is that each one was part of a stepping stone towards almost a little bit of momentum.

Amit Ramlall

They were what created the inflection points in my life.

Lisa Dion

Exactly. And helped you see yourself with more possibilities. That's what I'm hearing, too.

Amit Ramlall

Confirmed that there's more possibility for me, there's more possibility for our family. We're not just going to take this for face value. I remember, Lisa, I got interested for the first time in business because my parents, desperate to find treatments for me and suspected it would take significant financial resources, speculated, as opposed to invested and lost. Buckets of money. Buckets of big numbers.

They, like most who lose money, decided that the only cure was to make more and faster. In that process, they met Bill Bartman, who was teaching self-growth, personal development, and business. The only way my parents could attend because no one could look after me was if he let them bring me.

They promised that if I so much as squeaked, they would be out of there. I didn't speak, but I learned that there are only so many levers that move the world. One was learning, one was business.

Lisa Dion

And how old were you?

Amit Ramlall

I was three and a half by that time.

Lisa Dion

I really hope the listeners right now are just taking this in. I mean, it's just such a beautiful story of where do we stop believing in somebody? Where do we shut down our own opinion about someone's potential? Where do we make judgments? And then it is.

It's the whole, like, what you see is not often what is actually there. And, Amit, do you think that that's true for most Autistic individuals, that they're just deeply misunderstood?

Amit Ramlall

I'm certain that is true for all of us, not just the autistic ones.

Lisa Dion

Yes, fair point.

Kumar Ramlall

So, if I may, I'll tell you a little bit more about this. So Amit learned to read very quickly, and then we moved cities, thinking that we would access conventional Autism care. And in the process, we really needed a label because he still had no label.

This is a big problem. So one of the docs said, well, it's obvious he's got Autism Spectrum Disorder. And then he could check off all the boxes.

And yes, he's got Autism Spectrum Disorder. So we were going to fill in a disability tax credit. There's the equivalent in the US where you get tax deductions for expenses which up till then we had not claimed.

And so when we were filling out this form, Amit was well aware he could read. He knew what we were filling out. We had just gone through learning how to teach him to read, and he just started using this card to type what he was thinking, and he started typing.

Life isn't worth living. I want to die. And I remember as a dad thinking, I think this is not quite a PG show, but I remember having some thoughts, as in bloody hell.

Like, we are working our butts off, your mom and I, to try and get you better. Where the hell is this going with I want to die? And then, so we asked him,

Amit Ramlall

And I said the following. I don't want to be a charity case. I don't want anyone's sympathy if my mommy and daddy can't look after me. I'd write ebooks and sell them to look after me. Ebooks were just becoming a thing. I would write ebooks to pay for my care.

Kumar Ramlall

So, needless to say, we did not fill out the disability tax credit form.

Both parents found a corner behind the chair and cried and proceeded to help our kid do what he wanted to do. So I think that that presumption that so many of us have when we first meet, or perhaps even first find out about another individual, can be so utterly misleading. The case for humility, I think, has been made absolutely.

Lisa Dion

Kamara, I have a question for you, because a lot of our therapists, obviously, are supporting parents as well. What do the parents need in the journey?

Kumar Ramlall

I think parents need different things, and sometimes those things change as time goes on. So I tell a little story of how we found the institutes which taught Amit to read, and how we are in different places at different times.

So I'm a physician, I'm in the cafeteria, which is in the main lobby, the central area of the hospital where I was working at the time. And Amit's neurologist is a very proper British guy, very supreme proper British. So we were sitting and I said to him, his name is Manny Moodley.

And I said to him, I said, manny, what would you do if you're a desperate daddy? And therapists. Listen, this is what's going on in the minds and hearts of so many of your parents. Said, Manny, what would you do if you're a desperate daddy? And Manny said he said, oh, Kumar, you and Pratima are just amazing parents.

You're doing A, B, C. And he started to list all the things you did. I said, Manny, you didn't hear me.

What would you do if you were a desperate daddy? And Manny said, oh, you're doing all of this stuff, you know, we are doing Manny, you didn't hear me. And as the tears came to my eyes, this proper British man just would have had a horrible time if I started wailing in the cafeteria, in public. So they took the third try.

And then he said, you know, when I was in South Africa, there were families who went to this place called the Dominant Institute, now called Institute for Achievement of Human Potential, because nobody else could help them and nobody helped them. You know, they went and nothing happened. And he proceeded to tell me how useless it was.

But here's this guy who had worked at Great Armond Street in the UK, who had worked at the children's hospital in Boston, who had worked all over the world, and he had picked this one name to tell me, and that's how hungry your parents are, to latch onto something. And so that turned out, was what we latched onto. And that is where Emmett learned to read and then got further therapy.

Amit Ramlall

My dad tells the story of watching a young girl, three years old herself, read faster than he had ever seen anyone before, live-read. And in that moment, knew he was going to get a piece of that for his son. So know your parents that wherever they are, in their own form, are hungry for something and they're looking.

Kumar Ramlall

And so what might be a casual comment on your part as a therapist is their lifeline. And they will latch on and cling to it. Like that was what was going to keep them alive.

Yeah. Beautiful. I hope that's helpful to your audience.

Lisa Dion

Well, it is. I mean, this whole conversation is, I think, an invitation to think differently, consider differently, be mindful, be curious, very helpful, very helpful.

Kumar Ramlall

At different times and different moments, there have been times when I've been in that state of desperation.

I think that's an authentic word for those moments. And there are times when we wanted to be left alone. There were times when there was frustration.

There were times when we were worried we would get jailed because Amit, who by this time was reading 20 books a day, and we were worried that we would be jailed because we didn't have him registered in school, which is illegal. I'm sure it is where you are. It is definitely illegal where we are.

And so we ended up having to register him in a. Turns out we didn't notice at the time, and it wasn't particularly relevant to what we wanted to do. But it was called a traditional homeschooling system because they let us run a curriculum that we wanted to run and not the provinces or the state's equivalent of the school curriculum.

Right. And so, yeah, that's how we kept ourselves out of jail.

Lisa Dion

So thank you, Kumar, truly. I want to switch back over to Amit here. I'm going to have another question for you. I want you to talk a little bit about sensory compensation and neuroplasticity, particularly as it relates to Autism.

Amit Ramlall

Well, I think that your audience will be very familiar with neuroplasticity, and plasticity. And so what I would love to highlight here is how that might mislead you. One of our teachers was discussing neuroplasticity, and particularly he was describing situations where someone might be visually impaired, sometimes legally blind.

And correctly, he described how there might then be other senses that become more acute. So we have all seen that the difference here is that our teacher started talking about when there is a problem with vision. Your hearing and your auditory senses might, for instance, take prominence.

And I believe you were in the audience when I said the following. I might have. I do have difficulties with my eyes, with my sight, you might say, but I have never considered myself to have a deficit in vision.

Lisa Dion

Wow. Yes.

Amit Ramlall

And I would argue that neuroplasticity is alive and well but don't assume what your patients need from it.

Lisa Dion

So, good. Exactly.

Amit Ramlall

So for me, I think that my hunger to crack the Autism code, to navigate this maze that was Autism, is what cultivated the hunger for learning, is what cultivated this insatiable yearning to figure out what makes us humans tick, what makes us relate.

What is it that is tied to this thing we call human achievement because of that hunger and because, too, frankly, of my parents' financial losses in their search to help me and Mr. Bill Bartman, those are some of the seeds for what I do today as a career. Because you see, Lisa, we humans follow the same laws as every other natural body.

One night, I was watching a show called "Science of Stupid" with my dad, and I remember them recounting that if you had a vessel with a fluid in it, the pressure was the same throughout the vessel and that the vessel was most likely to burst where it was most weak. And immediately I thought that is exactly how we humans break. We break at our weakest point in our vessel.

That explained why we were seeing, even within business, so much more challenge around times of exit, of sale of businesses, and around the time of acquisitions, their weakest points. Yeah, it's when the bucket is full and overflowing.

Kumar Ramlall

From my days in medicine, I once tried to write an article for a medical journal, but it didn't have any references. They never accepted it. And a newspaper somewhere in New York ended up publishing this, and they called it Ramlall Bucket Theory.

And it goes like this. Is that in order for you to have any symptoms at all, your bucket must be full and overflowing, and it's the overflow that we see as a symptom, right?

And so into that bucket goes the fact that you have got a sore leg and a headache and that you're tired and that you've fought with your spouse. And if you see as those "ands" add up, you're more likely to snap at the guy who cuts you off on the road. Right.

And so what happens is that around the time of sale, the buckets are full of the owners. Around the time of acquisition, the buckets are full of these people who've just put out money to acquire businesses or resources to acquire businesses.

Amit Ramlall

And today, we almost have no room for the consultation work we previously did in human behavior, because we are full-time.

At least I am full-time helping sellers and buying businesses ourselves.

Lisa Dion

So, two more things, Amit. One is, would you just take a minute here and share a little bit more about what you're currently doing? And then I have a final question for you, something I want to ask you on behalf of the therapists who are listening.

Amit Ramlall

So we help solve people's problems in business, essentially, and we suck at solving typical HR problems. We shine at solving challenges at the ownership or C-suite level. So between partners within families, as most American businesses are family-owned, and those that pretend they are not, forget that even the president of the United States is subject to spousal pressures.

Lisa Dion

And listeners, I can just share and vouch for the work because Amit has coached me in business, and we've had a number of consultations where you have offered business insight and support and been spot on.

Amit Ramlall

Yeah. So you remember, Lisa, how your business can be like a baby.

Lisa Dion

Pretty much what you told me. You helped remind me that my business was another child, and you helped me look at my business through the lens of having another child, which was incredibly helpful, and shifted my perspective. So we have been helping each other in our journey on it.

Amit Ramlall

I like to say sometimes it is helpful to have an order to help you stress test your thinking.

Lisa Dion

Exactly.

So, Kumar, will you go ahead and name the websites that people can come in?

Kumar Ramlall

So actually, for those on the screen, it's Chintanproject.com.

Or you can connect with either Amit or I on LinkedIn. But a website is probably the best way to find us. And there is no shortage of Amit trying to stress test your thinking, even if it's from the writing in our articles.

Lisa Dion

Beautiful. So, my final question.

What do you think a therapist can do? And let's just keep going. I know this is really with any client, but particularly their autistic clients or kids on the spectrum, what do you think they could do to lose their engagement? What do you think is probably the most important thing for them to do?

Amit Ramlall

May I share a story?

So let's think of a patient, Mr. Smith, who had a stroke that effects Broca's area, so, problem speaking. A well meaning therapist comes to see Mr. Smith, shows him a picture of a cat. Mr. Smith. This is a cat. Say cat. Mr. Smith. Cat. C a t. Cat. Mr. Smith. And the very attentive therapist notices the frustration rising within Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith is, of course, frustrated that he can't raise his arm enough to punch the therapist. But the therapist notices the frustration.

Very attentive they are. And what then happens the therapist thinks, whoa, he's much more affected than we think. He doesn't even know "hat."

How about we show him a picture of his wife? Oh, no. He might be mad at her. How about we show him a picture of his kids? Then he for sure knows them. Here's your son, Jonathan. Mr. Smith.

Here's where I am going with this, is that when you judge on the basis of expression and assume that that is representative of comprehension, you are almost certainly wrong, especially in the case of Autism and developmental delay.

And it is a very safe bet that so many of your patients who have other neurologic difficulties that affect gross motor or fine motor function have expressive difficulties affecting their language, particularly speech. You are missing out on dear brilliance when you act as the therapist showing Mr. Smith a picture of a hat. I feel my plea is to assume competence. It will serve you very well.

Lisa Dion

I think that's like the theme of this entire podcast, is assume competence. Assume that there's more there than what seems to be.

My heart feels very full right now. I'm so grateful for the two of you.

Kumar Ramlall

We are very grateful for this opportunity to speak with your group.

Amit Ramlall

It is our hope that we can help them see what might be living on the other side of the wall because so many are apparently behind the wall, aren't we? Aren't they?

Lisa Dion

Listeners, I hope you listen to this many, many times. I hope you listen to it on many levels and let there were just so many components in this that were just so important to stop and not rush through and consider and reflect on.

So once again, Amit and Kumar, thank you so much for your time.

Kumar & Amit Ramlall

Thank you very much, Lisa.

Lisa Dion

Yeah. Listeners, wherever you are in the world, I'm going to change the language up here just a little bit to go off of what Amit said.

But as you know, I always say you're the most important toy in the playroom. And today what I'm going to say is you're the most important instrument in the playroom. So take care of yourselves until next time.

For more information on our courses and our classes, please go to our website [@synergetictherapy.com](mailto:synergetictherapy.com), and check out what we have available to you. And as always, remember that you're the most important toy in that playroom.