

Dr. Katie Pryal

Bipolar-Autistic Speaker and Author

A Light in the Tower: A New Reckoning with Mental Health in Higher Education

March 27, 2024

[5:00 pm] [Dr. Pam Luster \(@DrPamLuster\)](#)

Welcome to #EquityChat sponsored by @CollegeFutures w/your hosts @equityavengers @lamkeithcurry @DrTammeil & @DrPamLuster. Tonight we are joined by @krprial author of #ALightintheTower, Welcome Dr. Pryal!!!

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krprial](#)

Thank you! [#equitychat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Let's go!

[5:05 pm] [Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson \(@DrTammeil\)](#)

Q1 @krprial. As you engage in equity-focused work, what is your walk-up song or anthem? @DrPamLuster @lamkeithcurry @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krprial](#)

What a fun Q! Some fellow autistic people & I were talking about the difficulty in answering Qs like this: What's your favorite song? or What's your favorite book? It puts a unique kind of pressure on autistic ppt & other neurodivergent (ND) people as well... [#EquityChat](#)

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...So I can answer with *some* of my walk-up songs. 1/3 Arsonist's Lullaby by Hozier. The *slow & dark one*... [#EquityChat](#)

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... 2/3 House of the Rising Sun version by the Heavy Young Heathens (they created for the trailer for the new Magnificent 7—talk about making an entrance)...[#EquityChat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Quite a cover and indeed an entrance! Despite the controversy about who owns the rights to the song, I think it's worth posting, so folxs get your walkup vibe!

<https://youtu.be/j265DpY423c>

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...And 3/3: I Ain't Never Loved a Man by Aretha Franklin, especially where it hits around 0:38.

[#EquityChat](#)

[Dr Pamela Luster #EquityAvengers #RealCollegePrez @DrPamLuster](#)

I feel the heat every time someone asks, so many to choose from, but it does make me pause a minute and think about where I am and what resonates in my world for now...[#EquityChat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Thanks for surfacing this unique pressure. Say more!

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krgpryal](#)

When you were a child, did you ever have this assignment: "If you could have one wish, what would it be?" And then you had to write about it? That assignment can be debilitating for autistic and other ND kids... [#EquityChat](#)

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...(If you were a savvy ND kid (I was not), you would wish for more wishes and then write about all of the wishes.) Today, when someone asks me a direct question like, "What's your favorite...?" or "What do you do for a living?" or even "How are you?" I can struggle. [#EquityChat](#)

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This struggle isn't unusual for [#neurodivergent](#) people. I talk about "social acting," which emphasizes that I'm playing by [#neurotypical](#) norms, but not changing my own self. I come up with canned responses to common questions to get by in a world.... [#EquityChat](#)

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...that frankly doesn't want honesty. If it did, we would say we were "fine" all the time. (LOL but also, seriously) [#neurodiveristy](#) [#autistic](#) [#adhd](#) [#EquityChat](#)

[5:11 pm] [Dr. Keith Curry \(@lamkeithcurry\)](#)

Q2 @krgpryal. Was there a defining moment or experience that catalyzed your journey to engage in this work, particularly your focus on neurodiversity and mental health? @DrPamLuster @DrTammeil @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

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Onto Q2! When I left my full-time job in higher education, I had spent my entire career, including graduate school, hiding that I was ND.... [#EquityChat](#)

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...At that time, I wrote a piece for the [@Chronicle](#) of higher education called "Disclosure Blues" (in 2014) revealing my [#bipolar](#) to the world, and I never looked back. [#EquityChat](#)

[5:18 pm] [Dr. Luster \(@DrPamLuster\)](#)

Q3 @krgpryal. The nature of language is fluid - right now, we understand there is a debate around person-first or identity-first language. What is your approach? @DrTammeil @lamkeithcurry @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

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Q3 For me, there is no debate. Identity-first language is what I believe best represents me, and all of my colleagues agree, however... [#EquityChat](#) [#disability](#) [#Neurodiversity](#)

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...I support those who choose person-first language for themselves. The most important thing to remember is to let the [#disabled](#) person decide. [#EquityChat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Your point is so important. For institutions that struggle with language and identity when centering groups of students this is especially important to consider.

[5:25 pm] [Dr. Gilkerson \(@DrTammeil\)](#)

Q4 @krgpryal. In #ALightInTheTower you coin the term "rigor angst" to discuss the fear that rigor is declining. Can you tell us more about this idea and its connection to supporting student mental health? @DrPamLuster @lamkeithcurry @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

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Q4 Yes please! One of my favorite topics. As I write in my latest book [#alightinthetower](#), "rigor angst" arises from a deep well of mistrust toward students, particularly students struggling with [#mentalhealth](#) & [#neurodivergent](#) & other disabled students... [#EquityChat](#)

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...From the view of a rigor angster, empathetic course policies coddle students, and an empathetic teaching style lets them off the so-called hook. (All nonsense, of course)... [#EquityChat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Such nonsense!

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krgpryal](#)

Complete nonsense!

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krgpryal](#)

...Rigor angsters are ableist because they believe accommodating a [#disabled](#) student means giving that student a leg up over others. They're suspicious of students asking for accommodations. They fear that [#disability](#) [#accommodations](#) will "water down" their courses. [#EquityChat](#)

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*If for some reason you might suspect whether these things are true, check out Chapter 11 in my book, Toxic Rigor is Ableist. There is a lot of rigor. ;) [#EquityChat](#)

[5:32 pm] [Dr. Curry \(@iamkeithcurry\)](#)

Q5 @krgpryal. From your perspective, how do you see the findings in your research on neurodiversity and mental health having an impact on racial equity in #highered? @DrPamLuster @DrTammeil @CollegeFutures [#EquityChat](#)

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So. much. One big equity problem is the lack of access to mental health *diagnoses* for students of color. For ex, one study shows white college students are dx'd with [#anxiety](#) and [#depression](#) at a rate double or greater than black, Latin@, and APA students... [#EquityChat](#)

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...But the same study shows that suicidal ideation and attempts of black, Latin@, and APA students are similar or *higher* than white students. **In other words, the rates of mental health struggles are similar; the access to dx is the difference. [#EquityChat](#)

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The access problem for students of color, based on my research, is multifarious. There are financial barriers and familial ones. Then there are struggles finding a care provider who can relate to a student's background.... [#EquityChat](#) [#mentalhealth](#) [#highered](#)

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...Which is important because of another, massive problem: Many students of color are dismissed out of hand by racist care providers as not having *real* problems. One APA person interviewed was told "just go do Tai Chi" when she really had anxiety. [#EquityChat](#) [#mentalhealth](#)

[5:39 pm] [Dr. Luster \(@DrPamLuster\)](#)

Q6 @krgpryal. To do this work, we must continue learning and partnering with others. How do you educate yourself and who is informing your practice? @DrTammeil @lamkeithcurry @CollegeFutures [#EquityChat](#) [#EquityAvengers](#)

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This is SUCH an important question. It always surprises me to meet people who DON'T continuing learning. There's a saying that goes, "Accessibility is a process" about disability accessibility, and the same goes with LEARNING about our work... [#EquityChat](#)

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I never stop writing, reading, and listening to others. When I give keynote talks, for example, I always have a meeting beforehand and ask, "What in particular would your group want to learn about?" and other questions of that nature... [#EquityChat](#) [#neurodiversity](#)

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... Asking these questions AND implementing the answers means that every time I give a keynote, I learn something new. It's more work than other speakers do, yes, but it means I'm always learning. [#EquityChat](#) [#neurodiversity](#) [#autistic](#)

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Also, I stay engaged on social media and follow or connect with new people every day, reading their ideas and sharing them. LinkedIn has become a new place for sharing ideas and connecting with people. (Find me there!), And... [#EquityChat](#) .

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...I also write a monthly column for [@PsychToday](#), which forces me to keep my writing practice on a schedule. My favorite thing to do for these columns is to interview someone get a new perspective to share with the world... [#EquityChat](#)

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LASTLY (I swear), I keep writing books, which means I keep researching and learning from my community. What's wonderful about the [#disability](#) and [#neurodiversity](#) communities is that we are constantly evolving. I love that. [#EquityChat](#)

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

YESSSSSSSS!!!!

[5:46pm] [Dr. Gilkerson \(@DrTammeil\)](#)

Q7 @krgpryal. We all have a vision of the future we want to live in. What is your freedom dream for higher education and what gives you hope for its future? @DrPamLuster @iamkeithcurry @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

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All I can say is, you asked! *buckles in* I'm a pipe dreamer. I want: No grades. No attendance penalties. Free learning support for every student who needs it, without them having to ask for it, for as long as they need it... [#EquityChat](#) [#highered](#) [@joshua_r_eyler](#)

[Joshua Eyler @joshua_r_eyler](#)

Yes!!

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... Free [#mentalhealth](#) care with no waiting times. Free diagnostics for [#neurodivergences](#) if students want or need them. But students would rarely *need* diagnoses because there would be no barriers to [#accommodations](#)... [#EquityChat](#) [#neurodiversity](#) [#highered](#)

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And [#accommodations](#) would be rare because every course would be taught as [#accessibly](#) as possible. Did u know that the [#ADA](#) and the Rehab Act do not require medical documentation of [#disability](#) in order for a person to get accommodations? The law merely permits it... [#EquityChat](#)

[5:53 pm] [Dr. Curry \(@iamkeithcurry\)](#)

Q8 @krgpryal. The road to racial equity is long. How are you sustaining yourself? What practice would you recommend to other #EquityAvengers? @DrPamLuster @DrTammeil @CollegeFutures #EquityChat #EquityAvengers

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Like many who fight the fight, I'm not very good at saying no. Anyone else know what I mean? *Virtual hands raise across the land.* So what do we do? [#EquityChat](#)

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I have working very hard on setting [#boundaries](#). It is hard for me to do. Here's a small example, but maybe it isn't so small considering we're all on our computers... [#EquityChat](#) [#mentalhealth](#)

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I'm reading in a book called "Four Thousand Weeks" by [@oliverburkeman](#). He mentions that when he reached Inbox Zero, it didn't mean he had less email, it meant he had more. I sat with that for a while... [#EquityChat](#)

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I enjoy an empty inbox. I'm a fan of not using my inbox as a to-do list. But it's true, furiously replying to every email means that everyone knows that you...furiously reply to emails. That's not good boundaries. [#EquityChat](#)

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Then I got this completely outrageous idea. What would happen if I just started *deleting* emails instead of replying or taking action? Just...deleted them? What if *I* got to choose what to let into my life? Who got to ask for my time? Even a "no thank you"? ... [#EquityChat](#)

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The part of me that was trained to be a polite little [#autistic](#) girl freaks OUT when I type what I just typed above, and I also know some readers will judge me for it. But IS it impolite? I'm sitting with it. I just know I need more space for the good work. [#EquityChat](#)

[\[6:00 pm\] Dr. Luster \(@DrPamLuster\)](#)

TY @krgpryal for this insightful, engaging and important [#EquityChat](#) tonight! SO much to take in and actionable ways to support our colleagues & students. Next week we turn it over to students, stay tuned for details...@lamkeithcurry @DrTammeil @DrPamLuster @equityavengers OUT!

[Katie Rose Guest Pryal \(rhymes with Trial\) she/her @krgpryal](#)

Thank you for having me! What an honor and a privilege!

[Dr. Tammeil Gilkerson @DrTammeil](#)

Whan an honor and privilege for us! Thank you, thank you!