



Conscious Life presents

Finding Freedom from Sexual Performance Anxiety

Guest: Rafaella Fiallo

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome back, my name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today, I am very pleased to be welcoming back the fabulous Rafaella Fiallo. Welcome.

Rafaella Fiallo

Thank you so much for having me, it's truly a pleasure to be back with you.

Jaï Bristow

It's truly a pleasure to have you back. Rafaella, you are the creator of Healing Exchange, a mental health, education, and coaching practice to support clients in rekindling their relationships, exploring their sexuality, and healing traumas. Which is wonderful.

Today we're going to be talking about sexual performance anxiety. Now, that term immediately conjures up certain associations, certain types of sex, and certain genders in mind. I want to start by asking you who is this talk aimed at?

Rafaella Fiallo

The bold part of me wants to say for everyone in the whole world, but I know we have to bring it down a little bit. I would say for folks who are exploring what it means to be sexual with others, and how outside societal messages can impact that when they're feeling like that's taking up a lot of space in the way that they can express themselves, or how they can connect with others.

I would say on the other side, maybe folks who... I would love to say folks who are not even exploring sex with other folks yet, because I feel like we usually wait until it's already done, and then we're trying to figure it out retrospectively and after the fact. I would love to have these conversations more before people start experimenting. That's who I would say it's for.

Jaï Bristow

I love that. Why would you say that it's important to include conversations around sex and sexuality in conversations around anxiety?

[00:02:23] Raffaella Fiallo

Well, truly, we don't talk about sex. It's everywhere, it's in our marketing, all of our media, and everything that we like to consume, from music to our favorite movies. But we don't do a solid job when it comes to education, when it comes to even talking about our own experiences with our partners, with our kiddos, within our family networks. It gets missed.

We spend a lot of our energy talking about any mental health struggle, we need to look at the different ways it can show up in our lives, not just at work, not just when we're on stage trying to perform. But how does anxiety impact our relationships with others and with ourselves? That is going to include the intimate parts.

Jai Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. It's interesting, that one of the examples you gave is on stage when we're going to perform because that is a time that anxiety shows up a lot. In today's conversation, when we're talking about performance anxiety, what is it exactly you mean by performing?

Raffaella Fiallo

1. I want to say that I don't even enjoy that that's what it's called, because it puts this pressure on the sexual experience already, that it should be a performance, or you're struggling to perform. I think that in itself brings up anxiety like, Oh, am I supposed to look a certain way? Should my back be arched to a certain degree?

I meet with a lot of folks who talk about struggling so much to even breathe because they're trying to suck in their stomach, or they are sucking in their stomach because they want to look thin. It's so rough and heartbreaking that we can't exist in our bodies when we want to experience so much pleasure.

But the truth is a lot of folks are having sex for the pleasure of the person that they're sleeping with, and not so much because of what they want to experience and feel in their own bodies. So immediately, because of maybe even messages that we've received, I work with a lot of folks who've been told, sex is for your partner, you do it to please them. More specifically, you do it to please a him.

All of these things early on program folks to put themselves second, and they're automatically in this performant state, using pornography and whatever is popular in music to feel like, Oh, this is what sex should be, if I can't do it, then something's wrong with me. It gets us into a lot of trouble, where we have to unpack some of this stuff later. It can be difficult to affirm that we also deserve pleasure, that sex should be silly and fun, and you will mess up, you might fall off the bed.

It's like, how can we go rogue? If we're going to have a performance, how can we change this idea that it's not perfect, but it's improv? Let's have fun with it, let's go with the fly, if we mess up, we can integrate that into whatever we're doing with love, curiosity, and kindness.

That's how I look at the damage and the harm that can be done from even using this performance. But maybe there's a way that we can reclaim it, the way that folks in stage theater do. I also have no experience with that, so everything I'm saying could be wrong. They're like, No, it's you have to have it perfected. But I don't know, whatever, maybe we should change everything in the world. Be more flexible everywhere.

[00:06:14] Jaï Bristow

As someone who's done improv, I can promise you it doesn't need to be perfect straight away. For those who couldn't see you, I like to point out that you were using quote marks, air quotes, when you were talking about messing up. I'm struck by, you use the phrase, existing in one's body whilst experiencing pleasure. Put like that, it sounds so simple.

And yet, all this messaging from society complicates it, and we feel like we have to perform. We feel like we have to focus on the other person's pleasure, that we have to behave in certain ways, and take on a certain persona. I love the way that you're given permission to be real, to be silly, to be goofy, to fall off the bed, to laugh. I think that those are not often words that are associated with sex and sex life.

Rafaella Fiallo

If we're being honest, we are usually in some degree of showing up for other people in general. We're performing gender, we're performing race, we're performing whatever our role is at our job. There are so many outside things that are like, this is how you receive acceptance, this is how you get to be part of the in-club, this is how you receive safety and resources, this is how you are seen.

If we can expand it a little bit more outside of sex, then it makes even more sense how it seeps into sex as well. We're all walking around anxious to make sure that we're showing up properly, so that we don't get harmed at the least, and at the most, we're accepted to spaces.

How do we challenge this idea so we can show up more fully and authentically with ourselves, and then find a community that's also invested.

Going into the sexual piece, how do we have these conversations with partners? So that way we can all minimize this pressure to perform a certain way and say, Hey, this is something that is impacting me, and I'm trying to work through it, so I need some reassurance from you. I think it's so vulnerable to admit that to someone, let's get that out of the way so we can find out if that's the person that we even want to take it there with.

Jaï Bristow

I'm struck by how much you're talking about how this performance anxiety is a part of all aspects of our lives. You talk about performing gender and race, performing at work. We see how, therefore, it's going to impact our intimate relationships, our sexual relationships, and how it's difficult when it's seeped into every aspect of our lives to pinpoint what's happening specifically there.

That's why I'm curious, what are ways that we can notice that it's seeped in? What are ways that we can notice that this performance anxiety is manifesting in our sex lives and our sexuality?

Rafaella Fiallo

I want to say that the first big clue is noticing how you are speaking to yourself. A lot of times I get this question about what's the difference between anxiety and excitement. When do you know if it's healthy or unhealthy? When do you know it's toxic or permissive? My first clue is the tone in which I'm speaking to myself.

[00:10:07] Raffaella Fiallo

There's a difference between going into a space and feeling like, Okay, I'm feeling a little nervous, but I'm also feeling like I practice... Going back to the stage, I practice my lines, I've run it through, I'm feeling good, and if I mess up, that's okay.

Versus if I mess up, I'm terrible, I'm shit, I don't know what I'm doing, I'm not worth it. It's this trail of thoughts that is damaging about oneself versus one that's more permissive, compassionate, and flexible. When you're in these sexual experiences with partners, listen to that. Are you saying I'm not worth pleasure, only my partner's pleasure is worth it, I need to do this because that's what they're expecting. Versus, I want to do this because it's also going to make me feel good.

We can perform in a way that makes us feel good, versus if it's coming from a place of ought to, should. Being mindful of the tone, the language, and ultimately how it makes you feel. I can get on this roller coaster and be so excited and nervous, versus yelling at the top, get me off, get me off, get me off, this was a mistake, I'm so dumb, why did I even think I could do this? Looking at the verbiage there can be insightful to determining, is this exactly something that's helping me, or is it challenging me on a deeper level?

Jaï Bristow

I love that. What are some other ways that it can show up, as well as the ways in which we're talking to ourselves?

Raffaella Fiallo

The next one will be projection, if we haven't done that internal work, then we may be putting that pressure on our partners. Setting these expectations that are also rooted in all of the isms, and not giving them space to experience sex the way their body wants to, in the way that makes them feel seen throughout all the experiences.

I've worked with couples where we're both trying to unpack these messages that are teaching us that sex should be a specific thing. When we look at misogyny, patriarchy, and all the isms, it's not just impacting me, it's also going to be internalized sometimes, and then therefore, projected onto other people.

Even if we say, you can see this a lot, even if we're talking about body shaming and genitalia. We're really good in the community when it comes to fem-folks, and folks with bobas to be permissive, and reclaim your body, and being anti-fat-phobic and things like that.

But when it comes to male bodies, there's so much shame around penis size and dad bods, and all this other stuff. It's like that liberation hasn't gotten that far, and in the worst case scenario, it's used to degrade them further, like calling them names. Like, Oh, this size of someone's body part is indicative of their overall manhood. Or they don't know what they're doing with it versus, Oh, if you're experiencing vaginal dryness, just use a lube.

It's like this different language, tone, and energy that comes with different sexes and genders. I think it oddly comes from this place of wanting to be empowered and strong, but we start to oppress other people, and we know that to be true.

[00:13:39] Raffaella Fiallo

I want to be intentional as we're doing this work, we have to be mindful of the ways that we can also perpetuate these things, even when we are working on our own self-esteem and confidence, and that we're not doing it mindlessly. We're being very intentional and aware of how easy it is to put other people down.

When I work with couples, there's been this dance we have to do with helping one person better understand how these same messages that they are coming, they're trying to unshackle, they're also putting on their partner. That would be the second way, how are we internalizing it? Then how does it in turn form a pathway or projection towards the folks that we're interacting with?

I also don't even want to limit it to our partners. We can do it with our friends, our family members. I remember a story I was hearing about some younger folks who are learning about sex aids and sex toys. When it comes to solo sex and masturbation, there can be this idea, Oh, if you have to use a toy, then what does that mean about you? You can't get the "real thing," or you're just a lonely person.

Where did we hear that from? That can also go into recognizing how we just vomit these things out. Especially if we have any type of insecurity, that becomes a place where we're trying to show, Oh, I have it all together, I'm desired, I'm desirable, I don't have to use sex toys.

Then when we are with partners, that insecurity is going to come out as anxiety as well. All right, so how do I need to moan? What does my face look like? Is it attractive? There's this trend going on where people were putting the camera underneath their faces to see what would be their view of me at this level.

I'm like, Y'all are creating so many additional things to be anxious and insecure about. Instead of focusing on, Oh, this is a face of pleasure, it doesn't need to look perfect, and I don't need to slim my chin, and all this other stuff. But we're good at pointing out our perceived flaws and worrying about things that usually our partner also is not worrying about.

Because if anything, we're both in our own anxious bubbles, stressed out about are we doing a good job? Are they liking this? Am I taking too long? Am I going to take long enough? Whatever the case is. But we're like, Oh, no, they think these bad things. We're all trying to figure it out. Those would be the three points I see show up in terms of our minds.

Then when we start looking at the body, I know we've already spoken about what does our partner think about our body. But what about folks who are navigating bodies in a way society says that they shouldn't? Specifically, looking at folks who are trans, non-binary, gender-queer, and how that also impacts the way we show up with our partners.

If we are sensitive about, or voided about our chest, then we're dealing with this fear of them being caressed or paid attention to in some way. When everyone in the world assumes everyone loves breasts and chests, and everyone wants them stimulated, and that is not the case. We need to have these conversations with folks to let them know, Hey, this is something that I'm working on, or, This is a no-touch area. That's completely okay, and it's okay for that person to want to not engage in that way.

[00:17:50] Raffaella Fiallo

Because I think there are so many questions I'm trying to figure out, Is something wrong with me? Why don't I like this thing? Because, again, we're taught that sex should include certain types of acts and stimulation. I think there are so many different things that can come to light as we're continuing to have this conversation, and do this unpacking work, and giving folks permission, 1, to just exist, and 2, encourage them to have these conversations with folks so that we can all create the sexual experiences that feel good to us.

Instead of trying to fit into this very specific mold that, surprise, surprise, isn't even working via the things that we're watching it on. I've talked to folks in the film who are like, "That's not even a good position, we just do it because of the camera angles." Or, "We just do it because that's what we think the audience wants to see, it's not pleasurable."

But on the outside, looking in, we're like, Oh, so we should move like this, and we should do this position. And it's like, our bodies don't work like that. So how do we reduce the shame and the embarrassment, so we can reclaim it and say, Oh, sex for me doesn't even include this body part at all, and you have every right to do that.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you so much for all of what you've just shared. I think it's so important to include all of these aspects in the conversation. And that often these conversations don't happen very much in the mainstream, it's really important.

It's going to impact different genders differently. You were talking about how female body acceptance and empowerment are coming more into mainstream consciousness, though I'd say only in certain circles and not in others.

But things like how long it takes to climax, or if you do climax at all, again, it can be very gendered, in one, with some genders, it's seen as a really good thing. Or to last longer, or less long, and vice versa with other genders. Then for gender non-conforming people, it's other types of anxiety that can arise.

I think that's also true for people who are disabled, for people who have a body shape that doesn't fit society's beauty norms and ideals, people who... Not just a body shape, who have bodies basically who don't fit society's norms and beauty ideals. It can immediately be a lot more confronting and anxiety-producing to be in an intimate situation with someone new, or with someone full stop.

Raffaella Fiallo

Absolutely, and going more... I want to say an additional thing when you're talking about disability and chronic pain, there is so much restriction in what is perceived to be accessible sex or standard sex, if you will. Being able to figure out what works for your body, if that means adding a pillow, or getting a wedge, having some type of furniture, or releasing the idea and pressure that sex should include something specific can be so liberating, and increases access to folks.

I'm thinking about times when people share, I can't believe I suffered for so long because I didn't know that I could add this thing, I didn't think about putting a pillow under my knees, under my back, or lying on my side in a certain way. Because, again, sex is supposed to be this way, lying

back, legs spread, standing up, or whatever the case is, it can be heartbreaking when you learn of that.

[00:21:53] Rafaella Fiallo

But it can be also so affirming and happy when you're like, Okay, we're getting there, we are learning more, we're having these conversations with so much less shame and embarrassment, so that people can get exactly what they need to make sex more accessible and pleasurable, instead of pain.

Because that's another thing that we're taught, sex hurts for certain people, it should hurt, and there's nothing you can do about it, suck it up. I'm like, Oh, there's so much pain that we're taught to tolerate in life, in sex and otherwise, literally in life, and it does not have to be that way.

How can we also advocate for that to be a point of change in our society? How can we start teaching folks that we can have less pain and suffering? We don't have to put up with these things, it's a whole other talk.

Jai Bristow

I'm glad you're bringing that into the conversation. We talked about, at the beginning, the importance of having these conversations. You're busting through a lot of myths around sex, the fact that it's meant to be painful, whilst also recognizing the reality that for a lot of people it's painful because of chronic pain, for example. That doesn't mean that all sex has to be painful.

Or talking about what is sex, which parts are involved, and which parts are not involved. Or talking about how sex is different for both different genders, across the gender spectrum, but also depending on the genders you're engaging with. Most ideas of sex are very cis-heteronormative. If you come out of that and have any queer sex, then that also has a huge impact. I'm so grateful to you for bringing in all these elements.

Rafaella Fiallo

Speaking of queer sex, there's another place of a lot of anxiety, because who's teaching that? You're sitting in... If you're even getting Sex Ed it's probably not going to be the best. But even in those situations, you're sitting there, I don't see myself, my desires, my fantasies, my biggest hopes represented in what I'm learning.

So when you do start to explore, there can be so much anxiety, shame, and embarrassment. Am I doing it right? Are they going to think I'm a newbie? It's like, Can we all be newbies? Can we all claim that? Each time is new. We're going with it, with curiosity and consent, and checking in with one another. I think that's a really big thing we don't talk about.

A lot of folks are wondering, Okay, I am coming into a new version of myself. I am exploring different types of bodies, and I am so anxious because I want to make sure that I know what I'm doing and that they are experiencing pleasure.

Versus, Hey, Sex Ed is trash, I don't know what I'm doing, also don't know your body. Can we enter into a space of learning and curiosity? It can be so hot and fun, instead of mortifying. I wanted to put that out there because I know that's a big thing I've worked with, and even in my own

experience, What am I supposed to do? This is a lot different than everything else that I've seen and experienced.

[00:25:23] Jaï Bristow

Absolutely, there's so much shame often associated with sex and even more with queer sex. There are so many taboos around sex, and those taboos, and that shame is often passed down from generation to generation.

When you see kids, or for myself, when I was a child and touching different parts of my body, including my genitals, because children are curious, then immediately adults being like, What are you doing? That's shameful, don't touch that, not in public, or things like that. Then that immediately teaches our nervous system to freeze or to feel uncomfortable in situations to do with anything to do with genitals. Then as we grow older, that's going to have an impact on our sex life as well.

Rafaella Fiallo

Or to feel guilt, imagine being taught that touching your own body is bad, now you feel out of control, I can't resist it, I keep doing it, I'm doing something bad, I feel so guilty, now I have to hide it because I can't stop it, and I was told I shouldn't do it. It just spirals into this thing that is so much more shameful, and it's not, because we have the right to do everything, anything that we want with our body.

But it easily goes into that space where people are spending years trying to unpack this pattern of hiding and doing things in secrecy, because from very early on, from a very early stage, their hand was slapped, or there was some type of aggressive message about them touching their own bodies.

I don't think parents are thinking that deep into it, they're just like, Oh, we're in the store, oh, I'm uncomfortable with it, or, I'm sexualizing my child, or, I'm fearful that someone else is going to sexualize my child. I want to stop this behavior instead of, 1, allowing your child to explore their body, and 2, checking the adults in this space, we're not sexualizing children, what they're doing is getting to know their body. How can we create a safe space that allows the children to be children without putting on this heavier weight of what we think is happening through an adult lens?

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. We talked about different social conditioning, and if there's religious conditioning that plays a huge role, the intergenerational trauma and conditioning. There's a lot that explains why we can feel so anxious about sex.

So, my dear, how do we start to address some of this anxiety? How do we start to have some of those conversations to work through the shame, the guilt, and the taboo-ness of sex?

Rafaella Fiallo

We're going to do a little repetition here because I already said how important it is to name things. But I believe, and I think there's pretty much consensus, that silence is acceptance, and that silence is shame. Even if we can't say it to another person, maybe if we are writing it down, and we're able to verbalize our stuck points, the areas that we struggle with, to ourselves as a beginner, can help mute that a little bit, take that bite out of it.

[00:28:48] Rafaella Fiallo

Because when we're doing these things, the best-case scenario that society wants for us, is that we never speak of it, never do the same, never talk about it. But what if I had the audacity to say, You know what? I'm experiencing some shame every time I look in the mirror, or I can't even engage in solo sex because my stomach starts to get butterflies in it as if I was standing on the top of the Eiffel Tower, or something. This anxiety is swarming over me and through me.

Being able to identify what those body sensations are. We talk a lot about the importance of somatic work and being able to tune in to the physiological experience of anxiety. That way we can start to, 1, acknowledge it as, I understand why you're here is to keep me safe. You want to make me uncomfortable, so I stop doing the thing, or so that I do arch my back a little bit deeply. Whatever it is that I'm trying to fend off, being able to own it, and admit it so that we can release it.

We can say, You know what, this is not my thought, this didn't come from me. This came from all the romance movies that I've seen, the lyrics to love songs that I've listened to, the rumors that I heard while I was in school, or messages that previous partners shared with me that didn't relate, but taught me, Oh, this is what I should be in bed. That can be helpful.

Then if you have those safe spaces, be it with friends, partners, therapists, a coach, or anyone like that, start doing this unpacking work, because we can do it with ourselves going through that experience of saying the thing out loud with another person, that then gives our body time to regulate. Or we go through the experience and take the time to try to regulate and self-soothe our nervous system can be helpful.

Ultimately, what's important is to have this conversation with a partner. Get yourself a partner who, even if they're going through the same thing, we are committing to challenging this anxiety together. If I'm saying, I feel so much pressure to show up as a certain sexual being, and my partner is like, That is not my idea of sex. But if we're not communicating, we're missing one another, we're in our own thought bubbles of what we think our partners want.

If we can say it out loud and end up being corrected, Oh, you don't think that's what sex is? Okay, let's create it together. Or if they do, I was taught that this is bad, maybe we can both challenge that, or I'm not the partner for you, and that's okay.

Because I think going even deeper into it if we're looking at this anxiety. What are some of the things that we're fearing? Is it the loss of a partner, loss of acceptance, or not being desirable? Then what does that mean? Being able to dig into it a little bit more deeply is really, really impactful.

Then find you some sex-positive friends who have done this work already, it's lifelong work, folks who are starting to also dip their toe in this work. You can hear a little bit more about their journey and get some additional resources.

I do think that some of our standard treatments for anxiety, when it comes to the bottom-up approach and more somatic-based therapies will be extremely helpful. We have to be intentional and mindful of including the psychosexual part in the work. That's the biggest message, is include the whole body, include the whole experience, include my entire life into whatever therapy or coaching experience that I'm having. It's not one-sided because it impacts everything.

[00:32:46] Raffaella Fiallo

It's very rare that someone is confident in every realm of their life, or that they're anxious in only one realm of their life. We could be mindful of like, Oh, okay, I have some anxiety, where does it show up? Those would be some of the things to sit with.

As you're doing the body-based work be patient because our body is so invested, lovingly, and I love this for us, so invested in our safety and our protection that it can appear like it's getting in the way. But actually, we have to learn how we want to work with our bodies to create new ideas of safety.

Shutting down, showing up in ways that we think society wants that to, we get it, it wants to protect us, it wants to create a safer environment. But we have to get in there and say we have some additional ideas of what safety looks like in a community. How can we work with you and not like this, "Oh, got to change, I'm so anxious and I hate it." That's not going to help, I'm going to tell you, you're going to be more anxious, and your body might shut down.

We want to be kind and loving to our body as a model of what we know we deserve and what we want. Definitely incorporating some body-based experiences and we have to talk about the thoughts. I know some folks are like, Oh, we don't want to do too much top-down. But at the end of the day, these thoughts came into our head from somewhere, and then they caused these bodily reactions, or we had a bodily reaction, and then someone said something that then became a thought.

We have to do both, and that's part of it, those are the ways that I would say would be steps 1 through 3, if you will, for working on anxiety as it relates to sex/everything you know.

Jai Bristow

I love the way that you talk about taking such a holistic approach. We're talking specifically about sexual anxiety today, but sexual anxiety is impacted by all other aspects of one's life and vice versa. It's all interconnected.

I think it's so crucial what you're saying about the importance of having conversations and naming. I remember an experience I had with a partner where not going to lie, I was performing a certain sexual act because of my conditioning, and I thought that that's what they wanted. It didn't feel great for either of us because energetically we could feel that I wasn't enjoying it. I was doing it more out of a sense of duty than out of a sense of desire.

We talked about it afterward, and they were, I don't want you to do that, I don't want you to feel that pressure, what I enjoy is when we're both enjoying... Et cetera, et cetera. We had a whole debrief, and then after that, things were fantastic between us.

Some of the conditioning can come from, for example, previous partners, or sometimes we try and have that conversation, and it's not received because the other person is also conditioned by the same thoughts. What do we do in those situations?

Raffaella Fiallo

When the whole world is conditioned by... What do we do to become fully liberated in our society?

[00:36:14] Jaï Bristow

What do we do when we try and have a conversation with a partner and they're not able to meet us where we're at? Because through their own conditioning, whatever it is, that they're reinforcing the messaging, Oh, no, you should be quote, unquote, performing, or you should behave in certain ways, or I expect you to do these things for me, or whatever it is. How do we navigate? It's great when someone can meet us where we're at, can be open, can have a wonderful conversation, it can be a very healing moment, but sometimes the opposite happens as well.

Rafaella Fiallo

I'm going to share that it depends on your capacity and your boundaries on what your next steps could be, because you have some options. You can open yourself up to wanting to help this person on that journey, it may take a lot of labor, energy, and time. It may be helpful or unhelpful because ultimately it's up to that person.

A lot of folks are steeped for a long time into these beliefs, and they may not be able to see it in another way. Likely because of their own sense of safety and acceptance that is tied to it. If I don't do it like this and I'm not X, Y, Z enough, and they're holding on to that. They may not be ready, and that doesn't reflect on you.

But if you feel like, Okay, this is someone that care about and I want to explore it with them, I would definitely say set up some additional boundaries for yourself. That way you're not taking on more work than this person is willing to take on. That you're doing it from a place of love and care, but have some boundaries because you're not their therapist, or their coach, or anything like that.

But it could be like, Hey, watch this interview that I checked out, read this book, if you'd like to talk about it, I'm definitely down to it.

I would recommend that you consider not being sexually intimate with that person, especially if they're using that language because that's one to reinforce something within yourself that can be damaging. Even with your best intentions, like, Well, I know I don't believe it. There's still going to be something there that may feel like a betrayal, because a part of you is going to recognize and remember, Oh, this person said that this is what they expect from you, and you're doing it anyway. You're putting us in this potentially unsafe encounter with this person who's really vulnerable, and that can boss them into something else.

Ultimately, I would say, don't sleep with this person, don't feel obligated to do a lot of labor, and that it's okay to end relationships. Especially ones that you've already maybe had a certain degree of sexual intimacy with.

But I think that sometimes folks want to hold on to people. How can I say it? Because there's also this belief about the number of partners and what that means. Some folks want to limit that, they feel like, Oh, let me stick with this person because we've already had sex, and we need to figure it out, we need to make it work. There are so many things in there, I'm like, Throw that away.

But additionally, I know folks are working through those types of beliefs. I advocate and encourage folks to not engage in sexual experiences with folks where they're not in full alignment of where you want to go, and how you want to grow individually. You're not missing out on anything. I promise you, it'll be fine.

[00:40:19] Raffaella Fiallo

Maybe pivot that relationship to more of a platonic relationship, friendship, or even associate. Don't feel tied in, or tied to this person because you've already gone so far. Ideally, I would love for folks to not feel like it's taboo to have these conversations in advance. I know that sometimes that feels hard because it is, 1, vulnerable, but the shame, Am I supposed to talk with this person? Or, If I talk about it are they assuming that I want to have sex with them, or that it's something that's on the table?

It's like, That's what this conversation is for, having this conversation is not a prelude to potential sex, it is trying to figure out if we are in alignment with one another. Then gaging folks mental flexibility to see how open they are to the fact that we are going to change.

Our bodies are going to change, our minds are going to change. Our personalities, our bodies, and gender may change throughout this relationship. Are they on that wavelength? Are they going to be someone that's like, You switch it up and you used to be a different person. Or they're going to say, How can we continue to get to know the different facets of one another?

I think that is so beautiful and helps with our sense of connection with one another if we can be in relationships with folks like that. Versus more shame coming because I'm having a thought of people feeling tricked, if you will. Like, Oh, you changed, you tricked me, this is your real self, you should have been authentic. It's so outdated that we're going to be one person for the rest of our lives. Knowing that so many people have forced themselves to appear to be one person for their entire lives.

We all change, and finding folks who can welcome that will greatly reduce the sense of anxiety that we're experiencing in the relationship, and when it comes to sexual experiences. If someone has not responded well, if you have the bandwidth and enough compassion to have more conversations. But don't feel obligated to do that work because you have to put yourself first so you can be mentally and emotionally well.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely.

Raffaella Fiallo

That's what I would say, it depends on where you are in that work. You have some options.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And a reminder that sometimes it will also go really, really well, like the anecdote I gave before, and then be a healing moment.

And that conversations don't necessarily have to be a prelude to sex, but they can be a really fun part of foreplay as well, especially with new or existing partners. What is it you'd like to explore right now? And especially factoring in all the changes, desires, libidos, fantasies, and all of that can change and evolve over time. If we lean into that, it can be a really fun exploration, and continuously getting to know ourselves, getting to know our partners.

[00:43:46] Rafaella Fiallo

I know we've essentially... I guess we've talked about a lot of things with anxiety, performance anxiety, and general anxiety.

I also wanted to talk about sex and relationship anxiety. I'll say a little bit more, what you said made me think of it. When we are still dealing with these beliefs and values about sex, that force us to feel like if it's not happening that means something bad. If it's not happening enough, then my partner doesn't like me. Or if they are struggling with their own performance anxiety, they're dealing with vaginal dryness or erectile concerns, then there's something wrong with me. If they're not sleeping with me, quote, unquote, enough, then they're sleeping with someone else.

Being mindful of how these things are coming from other places, and it can also be contributing to your partner's performance anxiety because you're making it... You're making them prove to you that through sex they love you enough, they want you enough.

And then their body is just like shutting down because that is not working for my system, but now I feel like I have to prove something to you. I wanted to touch on that because we hadn't really, and that's also really common.

Going back to the gender stereotypes of what it means to be a sexual person. We have this idea that men, and specifically cis men, always want to have sex. So if they don't want to have sex, what does that mean? Oh, maybe they're closeted, or they don't like you, or they're sleeping with someone else.

Imagine the weight pressure that takes up in your relationship. Now I'm worrying, are you being faithful to me? The other person is feeling like my partner doesn't think I'm man enough, because maybe I'm okay with not having that much sex, I don't need it three times a day.

I wanted to put that out because that's another way that it can manifest in relationships that we want to be mindful of, and we don't even think about how deeply these tropes and this performance pressure can show up for us, and how we may project it on to others.

Jaï Bristow

It reminds me of what you said earlier about how a lot of the time, all parties, whether it's two or more, are caught in their own anxiety bubble. We stress in our corner, anxious about what they're thinking about us, how we feel, and all that thing. Meanwhile, the other person, or people, are doing the exact same thing.

Often we can sense that anxiety, can create a certain energy in the field, and that by having those conversations that you've been encouraging, it allows... To relax the field and be like, Oh, I'm feeling like you're not attracted to me because I notice that you don't seem to be initiating sex that often. And it can be like, Oh, no, I'm very attracted to you, I don't have a super high libido, or I'm a bit stressed at work because, like you say, everything's interconnected, and that's having an impact.

[00:46:58] Jaï Bristow

You and I have had wonderful conversations about sexual trauma, and other conversations around anxiety and performance, and all these themes that people can access on the Conscious Life platform if they'd like to delve deeper into topics.

Sadly, we're running out of time, as there are so many more things I wanted to ask you, but how can people find out more about you and your work?

Rafaella Fiallo

You can check us out at healingxchg.com, as well as rafaellafiallo.com. On those websites, you can find all the socials, and join the newsletters for additional training. We also have a group practice where most of us specialize in sex relationships, trauma work, and trauma therapy. If you're looking for that, or coaching, we have that available as well. That's where I live on the internet.

Jaï Bristow

Amazing, thank you so much for this conversation.

Rafaella Fiallo

Thank you for the opportunity.