



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Discover your attachment style to calm your nervous system

Guest: Dr Diane Poole Heller

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[00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Diane Poole Heller.

We're going to be talking about attachment styles. This is really understanding how our early childhood environment, in terms of our relationship with our primary caregivers, really sets up how we relate to ourselves and our loved ones in our lives as adults.

And so much of the anxiety we experience in life is the anxiety about our relationships and our contact with people. Being able to map, not just the suffering we have with that, but also our path to healing those relationships can be incredibly helpful.

To give you a bit of Diane's background, Dr Diane Poole Heller is an established expert in the field of adult attachment theory and models, trauma resolution, and integrative healing techniques.

She is a trainer, presenter, and speaker, offering workshops, tele-seminars, and educational materials on trauma attachment models and their dynamics in childhood and adult relationships.

As a senior faculty member of The Somatic Experience Training Institute, she's worked with Dr Peter Levine for many years, she teaches somatic experiencing based on Dr Peter Levine's groundbreaking work, in the US and worldwide, including Denmark, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, Israel, Germany, and Australia.

Her book *Crash Course*, a guidebook on how to resolve auto accident trauma, is used as a resource for healing general trauma in the US and internationally.

So welcome, Diane. It's always a pleasure to have some time with you.

I think this is a really helpful topic for people to sometimes understand the anxieties they experience in daily life when they're not really clear on some of the narrative and the story and the origins of them.

I think that's a good place for us to start, just to set a bit of context and a bit of frame of why talking about, I guess these two pieces, both relational trauma, but particularly in the context of attachment theory, why that can be so helpful in making sense of the day-to-day anxiety that people can be experiencing.

[00:02:30] Dr Diane Poole Heller

That's a great way to start. That's a wonderful question. And I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

One of the things that happens when we have any kind of trauma, or relational trauma would be like attachment injury, is that one part of it is that our nervous system gets deregulated.

So normally we're kind of modulated, we're able to manage a certain level of stress and take it in stride and move through it and maybe have a little bit of upset, but it resolves.

Sometimes when things are a little bit more intense, like maybe there's a big betrayal in a relationship or there's been an abandonment or neglect or other traumas like car accidents or surgeries, whatever, our nervous system is kind of in that middle range, starts to get, like a zigzag, starts to get out of balance.

And one of the ways it gets out of balance is the sympathetic nervous system, part of the way we regulate ourselves and our bodies biologically, gets overactivated. We also have the parasympathetic that can take a deep dive into depression or shutdown. But sympathetic will tend to take us to panic, anxiety, sometimes anger or rage. It's sort of an extreme of an emotional state.

And then that's one of the things that we want to learn to help ourselves calm down or help our partners calm down or other people in our lives, to calm that. The sympathetic nervous system is something we'll talk about throughout the discussion today in terms of how we self-soothe, how we regulate ourselves, and how we manage stress in general.

And one of the challenges with anxiety in particular, is when we start to feel it, it's not the most comfortable feeling. Anxiety can be a wave that moves through your body and just discharges or releases.

But often when we start to feel panicky or anxiety, we constrict against it, and then it just builds on itself. So that's the other reason it's important to talk about nervous system regulation and self-soothing and how we can calm ourselves.

And most of us have friends that we can call up and say, hey, I'm struggling today. And just sometimes the sound of another person's voice or they come over and have tea with you or whatever. We often regulate through connection, which is really where the healing early attachment injuries comes in, because it's one of the main ways that we as humans all over, whatever gender we are, whatever nationality we are, whatever race we are, whatever group we are, we regulate in connection.

And that's one of the ways that I think that learning a little bit more about our relational template that attachment brings us, even when we're little infants, how people are relating with us, how we absorb, how people are relating with each other around us, like moms and dads or dads and moms and moms, just however that is, the caregivers, we're also absorbing as babies how they're interacting, and then also how they're interacting with us personally.

So we start to create a relational template. And if that's a really healthy one, we win the jackpot, win the lottery. And if it's not a very prosocial family and there's still some traumas that people are working through generationally and that affects our parenting, then sometimes we have attachment injury to manage later on.

[00:05:47] Alex Howard

And as we're going to get into, of course, there are different types of attachment that we can experience in childhood which can have some significant ripples then through our lives in terms of how those play out in our relationships.

I think perhaps a helpful way to give a little bit of context of that is to talk about secure attachment. As you say, that's the yay, if we're fortunate to have that experience.

Say a bit about some of what the characteristics of secure attachment are, both in terms of how we might experience that in childhood, but also how that may then present in our adult life.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

I think that's a great place to start. Secure attachment, first of all, I'll tell you a little bit about what it is and what it isn't. And then also that we can learn it. The hopeful message here I really want to underline five times is that we can learn secure attachment skills even if we didn't start out with secure attachments.

So when I'm describing the insecure attachment, just take all that pressure off your shoulders, be gentle with yourself, and especially listen to what we can do to bring ourselves back to secure attachment if we didn't start there.

But secure attachment is a little bit like winning the lottery for the relationship, a healthy, forward way that we're going to meet and connect with people. It certainly can be disturbed by trauma later on, but usually if you have it as a foundation, it's a little bit easier to get back to.

So secure attachment involves, I'm going to focus mostly on caregiving patterns with the time we have. Your attachment styles are influenced by medical procedures when you're young or your mom had to go to the hospital and she wasn't there for you, you didn't understand that as an infant, your temperament coming in. There's other things that influence attachment besides caregiving, but we're only going to talk about caregiving today just because of the constraints of time.

And basically, secure attachment is more than having three meals a day and a roof over your head. That used to be what I remember my mom saying to me, you have a roof over your head, what are you complaining about? I could use a little more than that.

Alex Howard

If only it was as simple as that.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

A couple of things. First of all, is our capacity to be present, just to show up, to be there in our essential selves. Not be distracted, not be stuck on a phone, on a device. To really be present with someone is a huge gift.

So we've been a little challenged with that, with the pandemic and all this being more isolated and having to be on devices more. We were able to do this today because we're on a device, so I'm very grateful for that. It has its uses, for sure. But we want to make sure we're not having more of a

relationship with our devices than we are with human beings, actually in person, when we can have that happen more in a safe way.

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But being present, and then if you were going to give the shortest definition of secure attachment, I would say, attunement. Being able to not only be present but really aware of what's happening in the other person relationally. What's happening in you as you're being with someone, and also what's happening in the relational field between the two of you. The dynamics that are going on, maybe realizing the impact of your behavior or your, hopefully, empathy, or your ability to be present.

The other part of secure attachment that's really highlighted is protection. Feeling safe inside your relationship bubble, whether that's parent-child or partner-partner or colleague at work or friend or even stranger.

How you create a safe space in the relational field. And you're protective of yourself and you're also protective of any other person in that relationship container or bubble. And you're protecting your family or your loved ones from attacks to the outside world or judgments or things that are uncomfortable. But you're also protecting each other even from yourself, that you are going to be a presence of safety and protection.

How you do comings and goings. Like, how do you wake up in the morning with your family? Is there contact? Is there joy? Is there laughter? How do you go to bed at night? Maybe you and your partner have different bedtimes.

I have a friend that has a ritual. I love this. She and her husband love chocolate. So they buy each other these very special truffles. And every night they put a different truffle on their bed pillows. And then as they're enjoying the truffle that they've given each other, they are debriefing the day and cleaning up anything relationally that might have disturbed their equanimity as a couple.

Alex Howard

I was going to say that's very sweet, but of course, that's a bit of a pun, isn't it?

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yes, it is very sweet on all levels.

And just whatever your version of attention to comings and goings in a relationship. Attachment injury has a lot of reaction to either separation or coming back together.

So if you can have rituals, even like a welcome home hug, you can see Stan Tatkin's YouTube on that. But basically, you come together after the work day, if somebody's left the house, you drop what you're doing, you make a point to meet your partner. You don't do a triangle hug that sometimes happens in the United States. You do a full body hug, so that your body is regulating your partner's body or your child's body or your friend's body.

But you have a belly to belly hug and you let yourself, especially in intimate relationship partnerships, you let your body feel the regulation of the other person. And that's one way we can calm ourselves down and reduce anxiety and stress, is just having that physical contact that's safe and then also

feeling the regulation of another person's body. We can do that energetically, too, but this is just one example of a welcome home hug where you're being in it until you feel regulated.

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And that's not just a quick hug. You take time in it. And everybody's body wants to be with somebody else's presence, energetically or physically, that regulates them.

Think for a moment of the people that you're around that have kind of a calming or empowering effect on you. And you want to put more energy into those relationships and spend more time in those relationships because they're really a foundation to help you deal with stress and anxiety, and to really calm, both of you are calming each other. It's called co-regulation. You're calming each other at the same time.

So if you're in a hug like that with your partner and maybe they have a headache, you put your hand on their forehead, not their hand on their forehead. So you're regulating their headache or maybe calming it down. And maybe you have a little back pain and they put their hand on your lower back so that you're feeling the presence of that support.

So it's like this mutual co-regulation that's as simple as having a hug ritual or some kind of appropriate touch, depending on the relationship. And taking time to drop your task, if you can, and actually meet and greet each other, have a formal meeting in greeting, making sure that's a priority.

These are things that we can all do, but they really nourish the attachment bond in a way that we wouldn't even realize. But when you start practicing some of these very simple things, they can really improve your important relationships.

Alex Howard

And I love what's so implicit in what you're saying is that just like our trauma, and we're going to get more into this with the other attachment styles in a moment, but just how our trauma happens in relationship, also our healing can happen in relationship.

And actually, in a sense, what often we're doing is we're recreating the traumas of the past by the way that we relate to people in the present now. And by transforming and changing that, it really can transform all of the content in our lives.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Absolutely. It's a foundational shift. You start to change the foundation, everything else shifts with it. And we naturally project our histories. I mean, we reinvent our histories in our current relationships and our current lives, how we see the world, how we see ourselves, how we see each other.

Bonnie Badenoch calls that, obligatory projection, meaning that you really can't help to not do it. We all are doing it all the time. But when you start to work with healing your attachment injuries or how you relate, really help yourself have the support and the knowledge to have healthier relationships and way of relating, a way of presencing relationship, that makes a huge difference in all of your relationships all the way around.

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And your relationship with yourself too. It brings everything towards more kindness, compassion. You have a deeper and more mature capacity to love. We start to be more of a global citizen. We start to see the world as all of us instead of an us versus them sort of perspective.

And I just wish all the world leaders and all that, it would be great if everybody would make a commitment to move in this direction because I think it could change our societies in a very major way in a few generations.

Alex Howard

And I think, without going, because I'm tempted to go on a big tangent here, but I guess just a quick point to make is that I think what's really important here is that it's not necessarily about agreeing with people, it's about being able to be in a place of mutual care and respect and relationship. That we can have different ideas and different opinions and different perspectives.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

And thank goodness we do.

Alex Howard

Exactly. But there's something about the place from which we meet those differences.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Absolutely. And one of the signs of a healthy family, back to Murray Bowen, is the more that the family can stay connected, even in the face of differences.

Alex Howard

Yes.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

A lot of people are getting divorced over political differences right now or families are breaking apart, they're not talking to each other because they have different ideas.

I mean, it's like why not just listen to everybody's ideas and see where the logic is in their perspective? And at least learn where somebody's coming from.

But so often it's creating division right now, and that's really not necessary. But how can we stay connected even in the face of difference? That's one of the signs of a functional family. And if people start cutting each other off, my family has a lot of cut off patterns in it, that's a sign of a not so functional or dysfunctional family.

So just see, is there a way. Now, we can't always stay connected, I mean, if somebody has been an outrageous perpetrator or something, sometimes the best thing is to have distance, but there are situations where that's warranted. But so often we cut people off for sometimes relatively minor things. So just seeing if you can be an agent of connection for yourself in your world.

[00:16:28] Alex Howard

It's like a book title, *Become an Agent of Connection*.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yeah, there you go.

Alex Howard

So let's walk through these three other styles of attachment. So we've got avoidant, ambivalent and disorganized.

And we'll say a little bit about some of the key, perhaps, narrative that can set them up, and then some of the characteristics of how it can present.

So let's just start with avoidant attachment. What are some of the key ingredients that are often behind it?

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well, remember, whenever I'm talking about an attachment style, you can have a mix of attachment styles. And also when I'm describing an attachment style, I'm going to talk about it in its more extreme state. And you can have one aspect of what I'm describing, not all of it. So just listen with that kind of gentleness with what you're hearing.

In avoidant attachment, again, we're focusing mostly on caregiving, usually there's been an environment of neglect. The parent hasn't had the capacity to really be present. Sometimes that's a result of unresolved trauma. They just aren't very emotionally attuned to themselves and they aren't reflecting the child's emotional states. They're not aligning with what the child needs. Sometimes they're sort of ignoring needs altogether.

They can be just not present, so there's a vacantness to their present, their way of being with a child. And if you're a baby reaching out for connection, which we're biologically designed to do, and you get the experience of nobody's home, that's terrifying because we're very dependent when we're little ones. So to feel like I'm reaching out to mom or dad and nobody is there, that's a very scary dynamic.

So that then creates a dynamic where the child has to go into themselves and isolate and try to do things themselves, which babies aren't designed to do. They need co-regulation. Of course they're self regulating, even digestion and elimination is a self regulatory function, but they really need the back and forth.

They're learning their world through the reflection of their parents or their caregiver. They're learning their emotional range from how they are reflected in their emotional states and also aware of how the parent is emotionally reacting to things.

So it's a big deficit when somebody's not present. The other thing that can happen with caregivers that created an environment that a child will react to by becoming a little bit disconnected, a little bit more reliant, much more reliant on themselves and not then later very open for deeper relationships sometimes, is that they can be actively hostile or rejecting.

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So there can be this hatred coming through their eyes towards the baby. That can be extreme. And so then eye gaze becomes often an issue for someone that has avoidant attachment. They're afraid to look somebody in the eye and sometimes they do a little bit of a cheat. And when they're talking to you, they're looking at your chin because you can't tell. If you try this later, if you're looking at somebody's chin, they can't really tell that you're not looking at them in the eye.

And so really repairing eye gaze is something that's important for the attachment, for the avoidant attachment.

Another way it can set up, which is interesting, is the parent can be present but only present for left brain activities, meaning task focus, like they show up to teach you how to read or ride your bike or build a castle in the sand or something, but they aren't emotionally available. They're not there in the right brain, which has more to do with emotion and attunement and alignment with relational states. They're just there where there's a productivity or a learning taking place.

Which then often leads to people with avoidant attachment, which is actually the gift of avoidant attachment, is they become really great teachers and they become really great producers. They get the job done. They're not distracted by the relational nuances on the team, like somebody's not getting along with somebody else. They just go ahead and get the job done. So they don't have a distraction with the emotionality that might be going on.

But that can also be a hindrance in a relationship. So, say I'm grieving because I just lost my grandmother or my mother or something, and my partner's avoidant, they might not really get it, why that's so distressing. And they may have a knee jerk reaction to withdraw from emotion instead of leaning in and maybe putting their hand on my arm or giving me a hug or being reassuring.

And that's something they can practice and learn how to do. And it's not going to be comfortable in the beginning. But then they start to experience the mutuality of relationship as nourishing. There's benefits that come from showing up and being present with your partner. Usually a lot of appreciation and love comes out of that, and then they start to experience somebody else can be nourishing. And that starts to challenge their original idea that their parent wasn't present or was rejecting or whatever.

So that's one of the ways we try to help people move towards secure attachment out of avoidant attachment.

Alex Howard

And I think also one of the challenges can sometimes be that if the parent was connecting to them through task oriented, practical things, that sometimes the narrative can be, oh, no, I got all my needs met because the fact they were never given those more emotional needs, there's often not an identification that they were missing them, if that makes sense.

I think sometimes the trouble is their narrative. I had a happy, loving, attentive, supportive childhood because all of my practical needs were met. So I think it's going to be quite tricky to unpack it.

[00:21:47] Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yes. And one of the ways we can really help people feel comfortable exploring their attachment style is just by becoming the empathetic other or being a presence with your partner or your friend or your child, that's understanding and caring and really listening.

And you tend to reflect to someone that has avoidant attachment. It just seems like emotions are a little bit tricky for you, and are a little scary. And I just want you to know I am going to be feeling grief about the loss of my mother and these are normal emotions, and I really do need your support.

You might even say, and I get it that I'm strongly emotional right now and I might be overwhelming you, so, hey, why don't we take a break? Why don't you go walk the dog for whatever you need, 15-30 minutes, an hour, and then let's come back and maybe you can be there for me while I'm feeling these emotions.

Or the avoidant person themselves can say, I really want to be here for you, but this is really overwhelming for me. I just need to take a quick break. I'll be back. I promise, in 30 minutes. And you've got to keep that promise. And I just need to get myself a little grounded before I really move into this emotional space with you.

And if you understand each other's attachment styles, instead of attacking or blaming the other person, like, you're never here for me when I need support. You can understand the dynamic and where it's a struggle. And you can be kind about coming back together or kind about giving somebody a break when emotions are high. Realizing that for you, that's not a problem, that intensity is manageable, but for your partner, that might be really challenging.

And they're not doing something to you. They're not being abandoning. They're just managing their own distress. And there are ways you can manage that together as a couple or as a parent-child or as friends.

Alex Howard

What you're saying I think is really important there, that we can get so quick to be in our own projections and our own reactivity that their behavior is about us, what you're saying is often actually their behavior is about them, and we need to be able to separate that from our own triggers and our own reactivity in that moment.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

That's when I think it's one of the most valuable things about really learning attachment styles is that you move out of blame or into compassion. And you understand that probably, I mean, some researchers say 95% of your original attachment style is imported into your adult relationships, and some people say none.

Alex Howard

Somewhere on that spectrum.

[00:24:13] Dr Diane Poole Heller

I'm like, let's say 50% then. Even if it's just 50%, a lot of what's happening in your adult relationships is not about you, and it's about the person's relational template from the past.

So when we understand that, then hopefully it's an invitation to not take things so personally and to really come into this situation with compassion, like, wow, emotions are really tough for you. I get it. So let's just take breaks. I need you to be here for me. You're not giving up on the person or the support, but you need to manage it in a different way.

Another thing that happens with avoidant is they go so deep into their own kind of parallel self-focus, so into the computer or into a video game or sometimes it's pornography, something that involves just them. They get really entranced into a singular focus, that even if you're the partner and you say, hey, honey, I want to take you out to celebrate your birthday, and I want to take you to your favorite restaurant, for them to shift. It's kind of like scuba diving, they're deep in the singular, they're deep in self, and for them to surface, to connect, is a process, and it takes some time.

So better than saying, let's go, is like, hey, how much time do you need to finish up what you're doing and move into going to the restaurant with me? And they'll say, okay, I need 20 minutes or whatever. If you don't give them that transition time, they often are brusque like, I'm busy. Instead of like, here you are inviting them to this wonderful celebration, and they react with an abruptness that might start an argument, actually. I was just inviting you out to dinner and you're being so mean. It can just go there really quickly.

But if you understand it's like scuba diving, you don't want to come up from the depths too fast when you're scuba diving, you get the bends. You can kill yourself. You need to give an avoidant time to shift from singular to self-focus to including another person. They just need a little time. And if you give them that time, you'll have much, much better results.

Alex Howard

I think there's something really important that you're saying here, which is a specific example, but it's also a broader point around learning ourselves and learning our partner. And that awareness allowing us not to get sucked into those triggers or those defaults, but to actually be able to go, hang on, this is what's needed in this moment. It's not about me. It's not about shaming them. And then actually, that gives a lot more space for things then to be able to move in healthier ways.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

That's absolutely true. You said that's so beautiful. That's absolutely true.

Alex Howard

So let's then explore a little bit the ambivalent attachment style.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Okay. Ambivalent attachment. Again, we're looking predominantly at caregiving styles.

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Often they had parents that were loving, but they were very inconsistent. So when the child, when kids are really secure and a parent's holding them and they kind of melt like a noodle over their shoulder. They're just like great. They're almost blissed out. So imagine that that's secure attachment.

When there's just enough, you just feel like you can totally trust, you can totally let go, you can just relax, discharge any stress or anxiety that's been happening on the playground or at school or whatever.

When there's ambivalent attachment, very often before the child really relaxes or somewhere in the middle of that, they're disrupted, like the parent's internal attachment wounds get triggered and they just sort of energetically drop the child. So they don't drop them physically, hopefully, but there's this inconsistency.

So there can be this meeting of needs, and then all of a sudden, no meeting of needs. There can be this love and support, and then all of a sudden, no love and support.

So that irregularity or that inconsistency creates anxiety. This is where, actually, a lot of anxiety comes from, it creates an anxiety so when the child's going to bond with the parent, they're already worried about when the next shoe is going to drop. They're worried about when they're energetically going to get dropped, because it happens so much, it becomes a pattern.

So instead of, they really want the connection, they want the love that's there, absolutely. In fact, they crave that. And sometimes they can be a little clingy around trying to get it. But there's also, built into their survival system and their nervous system and their bones and their cells and everything, is this belief and expectation based on real experience that they're going to be dropped.

So there's a huge desire for connection coupled with, it comes as a package deal, a fear of abandonment or a fear of being dropped.

And so very often in their projecting onto adult relationship, they're sure they're going to be disappointed. So if you have a little bit of ambivalent, attachment disorientation or adaptation, they will feel like they're always going to be disappointed in relationships. So they're disappointed before even a disappointment happens. They go into the relationship knowing that they're going to be disappointed.

If they're on the extreme end of ambivalent, they're angry. They're angry before anything caused them to be angry. Because in their head, they've already been betrayed and they project that on their partner. So, of course, that's a recipe for suffering for both people.

And that's why it's so important that we compassionately, kindly understand our own pattern, and we can work with that and realize sometimes that's not what's going on.

There was a story I read in a book on attachment that I really liked by that Amir Levine and Rachel Heller wrote called *Attached*. They had a couple that they were doing couples work with, and the husband had some major, they just got married, they're really in love. That was not a question. They were very much in love. And he had got, I can't remember some kind of taxing job, like an attorney or a surgeon or something where you really couldn't be interrupted in the middle of a trial case or surgery.

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And the wife was staying at home and she had more of an ambivalent attachment and so she kept texting her husband every day just to check in on the connection, which is often, there's often a lot of wanting to verify and get reassured by connection.

And in the beginning, he could answer those, but then, of course, when he was occupied in surgery or something, he couldn't respond. So when he wasn't responding, she made up this whole story in her head which was really based on her history, that he wasn't there for her, he didn't care about her.

So he'd come home at 5pm or 6pm and she'd answer the door and she'd be mad at him already. And she'd start a fight. And what she really wanted was to be hugged and nurtured, but she would start a fight.

He was like, but I do think about you. I just can't answer all the time. I do love you. And she couldn't hear that. She could only see that he wasn't answering every text.

And so it was a very simple thing in couples counseling, they had them work out what would work for them. And she said, I don't really care if he writes a different text every time, but I want to know he's thinking about me. So they wrote a text together, like, I don't know what it said, I love you, I'm here for you, you're my girl, you're my guy, you're my girl. And he just had to hit send. He didn't have to rewrite it.

Alex Howard

So you can automate that these days.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

I know. This just calmed her overactivated attachment system. In avoiding attachment, they respond to the pain of the relationship not being quite right by shutting the attachment system down. So they don't notice relational cues. They often miss relational cues.

But in ambivalent, they heighten their attachment system, it's like on steroids. It's like looking for every little signal that either you're okay or you're not okay.

And the thing that you need to understand if you have a little bit of an ambivalent attachment, I think I have a little bit of all of them, so I can relate really well, but they're scanning all the time. They're seeing all these relational queues, like people's faces.

I had a friend that walked into a restaurant and was back lit because it was all glass in the front, and I couldn't see her. And I was sitting there with other friends and I didn't see her. I just saw this blast of light with a silhouette. So I didn't react. I didn't get up and go over like I normally would. I didn't say, hi, come on, join us. I didn't do any of that because I didn't know it was her.

And it took us three times to clear that because of her ambivalent attachment, just feeling so rejected that I didn't respond. I kept saying, but I didn't recognize it was you. But that didn't matter. It took three different conversations for us to get past that.

And it's just that this hypersensitivity will serve you later as being really attuned in your relationships as that calms down, as you move to secure attachment. All that hypersensitivity becomes a really

beautiful, precise attunement in relationships with your partner, your friends, your coworkers, strangers, your kids.

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It really pays off, but when it's overactivated, it's really painful because you tend to see everything in the negative. You tend to see everything as a slight. Everything as, people don't like me or people don't want to be in a relationship with me, or people are betraying me or people are abandoning me. Of course, that's an awful thing to be carrying as a way to see yourself and others. And the world feels very unsafe.

So in the beginning, when you're with someone who's struggling with ambivalent, it's really important to give them a lot of reassurance. Just like hitting the cell phone, I love you, like 25 times a day. But eventually, as the person trusts the relationship and trust the bond that you have, it doesn't mean you can stop watering the plant, but they relax into secure attachment and they don't need so much reassurance.

But in the beginning, it's really important to underscore the relationship. If you're going away on business or you're going even out the door to go to work, you need to realize that for the ambivalent person, separation is very stressful. The connection is very stressful and anxiety producing. To move for the ambivalent, whenever anybody that they care about leaves, that's very anxiety producing, you're going to get a fountain of anxiety.

And so if you can just say, hey, I'm going to be back at five, we'll go to a movie tonight. Or if you're flying to France or something, when you say, hey, I'm at the airport, I'm getting on a plane, oh, I just landed, now I'm on my way to the hotel. You just stay tethered through connection. That really helps reduce the anxiety of separation stress.

Because very often people with ambivalent, until they move to secure, just like avoidants are moving to secure, we're trying to move everybody back to secure, there is a lot of stress on any kind of separation.

So of course, losing someone, like when I mentioned earlier, like losing my mother or losing someone, losing your grandmother, that's the ultimate separation. So it's a very stressful time.

And there's been so many losses the last few years with illness and just what's been going on in the world all over the place, that we really need to understand that that's something that will be a very big trigger. And as much as we can to be there to support, to be present, to help people in those times of stress.

But in terms of anxiety, the biggest one is, someone, first of all, not keeping agreements, not being consistent because they had this inconsistency as a child. So as much as you can, you're not going to be perfect, you're going to screw up sometimes, but just to have the intention and pretty much have a track record of being as consistent as possible, but also giving reassurance generously.

Sometimes if you're, this happens a lot, that avoidant and ambivalent get together. And in the beginning it's a match made in heaven. And later it's a disaster. Because in the beginning the ambivalent is kind of pulling the avoidant out, and they're enjoying this, and the love supports the coming out, gives a lot of support. And then the avoidant is coming out and being there more for the ambivalent.

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And then later, as time goes on, then sometimes the avoidant goes back into their withdrawal pattern, and of course, that feels like separation to the ambivalent so they get really triggered and then they pursue, which then makes the avoidant want to retreat more. And they don't understand what's going on.

And it's hard, it hurts. And so just if we can bring some understanding. I think a lot of people get divorced or lose important relationships because they don't understand these dynamics. One of the reasons I'm maniacally focused on it, I just, I'm a bit of a romantic.

Alex Howard

I think also one of the challenges can be, that for an ambivalent to be in contact in an argument is preferable to being out of contact. So what you can find is you can find these quite fiery dynamics which are actually an attempt to create connection but actually create the opposite.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well, they very often push away the people they want to be close to the most because of that.

And that's sad because if they can understand their behavior in a way and they can learn to self-regulate a little bit, because in the ambivalent, remember, this is wired into survival. This isn't like somebody deciding, okay, I'm going to be manipulative or I'm going to trigger fights. It's not coming from that. It's coming from the survival. For me to live and for me to have the love I need in my life, I have to do these things.

Until we can help a person unpack that and see that it's not always working and what could happen instead, we teach them secure attachment skills, then they're going to be prone to doing it and they really can't help themselves.

It's not like, at some point it's almost, eventually as they get a little bit more healed, they have a little bit of a decision point about it like, oh, I can feel my old pattern. Do I really want to go there? Is there something else I can do? But in the beginning it's just a knee jerk. You're just going with what your body is telling you needs to happen to try to save the relationship, even if you're pushing it away and creating an argument.

So we need to really understand how that works. For the ambivalent, one of the things that it would be helpful for people to know is, because avoidant over tilts to the positive, they make their history okay, even though it was full of wounds and they just ignore them. They just move into the future. For the ambivalent, they stay in the past and they remember every little slight that ever happened to them.

You're in an argument with them, if you've been married a long time or something, and it's like, back in 1982, you did the same thing, and you're like, what? So you need to try to, if you're ambivalent, try to focus on what's happening now, that would be really helpful.

And there tends to be, because it tilts to the negative, instead of just asking for your needs, like, oh, honey, we've both been so busy. I really need to have more time with you. I just feel like we haven't had enough time together. They might start out with, you're never here for me, which is a very different message. Same idea, but it's...

[00:39:01] Alex Howard

Pushing away rather than drawing in.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Very often, they don't mean to, but they're triggering the reaction they don't want, which is a withdrawal.

So often we have to learn, if we are struggling with ambivalent, how to ask for our needs in a positive way.

And that usually is, you can talk to your friends about it, or if you're in therapy, you can talk to therapist about it, but just how to just say something like, oh, I know you don't know what time you're coming home from work, but if you text me on the way, I'll have your dinner warm for you. Instead of, you're always late, and then you ruin dinner. I spent all this time making dinner, and now it's cold and I should just throw it out. It's a very different message.

Alex Howard

It's like inviting what you want rather than criticizing what you don't have.

I'm also, Diane, we haven't come into disorganized attachments, so let's just also bring that into the party here as well.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Okay, that sounds great. Disorganized is the most complicated. It's where the attachment system is trying to connect. It's going out to connect, and the trauma is stopping the attachment system and moving into defense, which is fight, flight, freeze, whatever we're doing when we're related to trauma.

That sets up because one of the parents is either scary, they're yelling a lot, or maybe they get drunk and they get angry or they're, the worst case scenario, abusive, sexually, emotionally, physically. Or they're extremely chaotic. The family is seen it's really chaotic and dysregulated.

And usually that indicates the parent has unresolved trauma. And actually, disorganized attachment, when we think about it as the adult version of it, is called unresolved trauma. Ambivalent is called preoccupied because you're preoccupied with the past and old wounds, and we need to help people heal those. And then avoidant is called dismissive because they tend to dismiss relationships as if they're not important and you feel like you're not that significant.

But in disorganized, it has a lot of trauma entangled with the attachment system, and we need to untangle that so that the attachment system can create a connection that's important to us.

We all deserve love. One of the reasons I teach this is because I think love is so important, it's fundamental to who we are as human beings. I think the whole fabric of the universe is made of love if we really pay attention to it. But it gets interrupted so much by these kinds of dynamics that just become wired into our survival system.

So a big part of working with disorganized, is untangling threat from our desire to love.

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So very often, if you have a disorganized attachment, sometimes it's just situational, like you hear yelling, because somebody in your family yelled a lot, and that just triggers you into this dissociation of fragmentation or trauma reaction of fight, flight, or freeze.

Other times it's chronic like if you were raised in an abusive situation, very often that becomes a chronic pattern. Not everybody that has those dynamics ends up with the trauma. Some people are able to manage it and move through it.

The thing is, with disorganized, it's very easy to have sudden shifts of state because of the dysregulation. And it's also marked by having episodes of severe dysregulation.

And so we talk about regulations as this middle zone, and when it goes to a zigzag pattern, that's dysregulation. You can have a disorganized attachment style, remember, of threat over coupled with your attachment system. That comes as a package deal. But you can have disorganized, it goes more just to avoidant.

So when you get upset or all this dysregulation happens, your reaction is to just severely isolate. My mom was good at this. She would give us the cold shoulder, not for like an hour, she would do it for days. That's a long time when you're a kid.

Alex Howard

It's a lifetime when you're a child.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

It's a lifetime. That was really hard for us when she would go into that space. So if I would look at it through the lens now, I would see that it's disorganized avoidant. She just said no to any contact from any of us.

And then you can also have disorganized that goes heavily towards ambivalent. So you get desperate, you feel so needy, you feel like you have to have the other person. You just feel like you'll do anything to get that connection in a way that's really overwhelming and probably not a healthy way to interengage. You're going to freak the other person out to some extent. And really that they can never do enough, they get the feeling I can never do enough to fill this giant hole.

And so we need to understand where we go. And then some people will flip between the extremes of avoidant and the extremes of ambivalent. So when you really understand avoidant and ambivalent and you just add some intensity to it, you'll probably see which way the disorganized attachment is going.

And so, of course, because it got wired into the nervous system with threat response, helping people separate those things, like having a safe place for their attachment system to land and also be able to deal with the defenses that need to be dealt with, you can start to untangle that.

And the more we bring in safety, like we talk about bringing in an experience of a competent protector. You can take a moment now just to think about who do you feel safe around, who is actively good at being a protector? There's whole professions that do that. Social work, police, firefighters, soldiers. People do know how to move into protection, but who is that for you?

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And for some of my clients, they're like, I don't know. And I say, well, think about, even the Marvel characters or some people talk about Arnold Schwarzenegger or, I don't know, the giant green Hulk or whoever, Xena the Wonder Woman, or Wonder Woman, actually.

Alex Howard

Xena the Warrior Princess, I think you're referring to.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yeah, the Warrior Princess and the Wonder Woman. A lot of people like Wonder Woman because of the Lasso of Truth. She would lasso somebody and they'd have to tell the truth. People that have perpetrators in their history that are denying what they did, they love that.

And I just encourage people, print pictures out from the Internet and plaster them in your bathroom, in your car. Just have those protectors with you. And just to notice, maybe even right now, you can do this in just a little bit of time we have, just to notice what happens when you remember maybe a family member that knew how to be protective or a teacher at school.

I had a doctor that I went to, an osteopath. When I was a child my feet were going like this. I had a lot of growing things, and he helped me a lot. But when he was working on me, my mother was in the room and he told her to stop hitting me. He could feel it in my nervous system. And she was like, what? And I thought she'd kill him, because of course she would have killed me if I said something like that, but she was like, oh. And because doctors were so, at that time, especially like gods, she really took it in.

So that one sentence took 10 seconds, changed the dynamic in my childhood. So you can be a protector. People that have had this in their history, they often become really great protectors. That's the gift, if we resolve these things. They become people that really understand the importance of safety, and they can become very effectively protective. That can be one of the outcomes of moving through disorganized attachment.

But it's the most complicated one. And I think, really it's helpful to have some support of someone that's trauma informed and attachment informed, whether that's a friend or a colleague or a therapist or spiritual teacher or somebody that can be helpful.

Because it takes us into a deep trauma reaction and we can really be enacting, fight, flight and freeze a lot in our relationships. We tend to see the world as dangerous. We tend to see ourselves as very scared, especially when it's triggered. We tend to see relationships as dangerous or maybe they're fine until they hit a certain level of intimacy, and then it triggers that history. And that can be very confusing.

I had a, she was actually a naturopath, a very highly educated, wonderful, very competent person. But she was engaged to this wonderful person and she goes, and the closer we get to the wedding, the more freaked out I get, the more scared I get. And when we really looked into it, she had a disorganized attachment, partly at least, relationship with her mother.

And we worked with that. And then she was really able to see her fiancé clearly without the projection of her mother on top of him. That's not the total end of the story, but she was able to move

into it with a lot more relaxation and ease and feel the love that was there and really recognize what a wonderful man he was.

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And sometimes these histories cloud how we see people that are actually really there for us, or we get caught in blaming them for things that they're struggling with, when really we could help them heal.

And if you're in a significant relationship, whether it's a friendship or whether it's a partnership, there's so much that can happen in the context of the relationship if you start to understand these things and move into learning secure attachment skills and practicing them.

Think of it as an emotional health practice or a spiritual practice in a way of just how can you try things that are a little uncomfortable. If you're an avoidant, leaning in or maybe striking up a conversation at the grocery store over, how do you pick a good cantaloupe? It doesn't matter what it is, but just to try to move into approach, because that's challenging if you're avoidant. Or try to stay present or lean in when someone's being emotional to the degree that you can, and to take breaks when you need them.

For the ambivalent, to learn how to self-soothe. Because the ambivalent, over focus is on the other. They feel like the only way they can regulate is if somebody regulates them. Well, that's not true. It's nice when that happens, but it's not true. You can self-regulate. You can go listen to your favorite music, you can walk the dog, you can be in nature, you can do art. There's all sorts of things that could be self-regulatory.

And so people need to learn how to do that. It's just learning a skill, and then they won't be approaching someone that's close to them like that person has to be everything. That's a bit too much pressure for anybody. And that they can also practice noticing caring behaviors.

Because the ironic thing, when you're struggling with ambivalent, and I have been guilty of this myself, is you want all this love and attention, but then you ignore it when it comes. It's like, wait a minute, that's a recipe for suffering.

I remember when I was married, my husband would say, I love you so much, but when I say something or I do something, you just deflect it. And I'm like, I do not, I do not do that. You're terrible. And I do not do that. And I went on my whole thing. And then in the middle of the night, I woke up and I went, oh, geez, I do do that. Oh my God, he's right.

And then I realized how painful it was to him that I wasn't recognizing all these things he was doing and feeling. And so I made it a practice. It took about a year and a half or maybe 2 years of just really staying present, really trying to see anything he did that I could interpret as caring. And he did a lot of stuff that I wasn't seeing before.

And then to really appreciate it, to say, oh, I really appreciate it when you call the financial guys and took care of that, or you do the taxes. I really appreciate it when you manage the, whatever, or when you help me with this or when you say this to me or when you acknowledge that I did this or whatever. I just started making it much more overt. And at the beginning, that did not come natural. I just felt like, oh, I'm a fish out of water.

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And then I really worked on staying present when he did something or when anybody did anything that was kind for me, and I realized it was happening all the time. But before that I was always feeling like, nobody cares about me, kind of thing.

So it is something, being willing to take a little challenge. You don't do it all at once. Maybe you do one thing. Okay, let's do the welcome home hug for the next 3 months. Or let's figure out a ritual for getting up and going to bed or when we separate, when we come back together.

Or how do I be more protective in a way that's not intrusive, but I'm age appropriate protective? I'm not hovering over my child or my partner, but I'm there when they need me. How do I use more empowering language instead of blame and shame? How do I frame my needs in a positive way? That's a huge one.

All of these are so helpful, and you don't have to do it all at once. You just check out, okay, I think I'm doing that one pretty good, but I really need to work on this one.

And I can tell you from doing this journey myself, I have a lot of work to do, but it does help a lot. You can move quite thoroughly more and more towards secure attachment, and then you can become a beacon for it in the world, which I think if we all took up that mission, wow, I think we would be changing dynamics in a really major way.

Alex Howard

And also, I think what's so important in really everything you're saying is that the power of that awareness, and so much of the anxiety we experience is a lack of safety and a lack of knowing of what's happening. And the more we can, in a sense, use that thinking, curious mind to really hone in and understand what's happening.

And then, I want to remind people what you said right back at the beginning, which is that we can learn secure attachment. Because I think sometimes people can discover models like this and think it's just a map of their suffering and not realizing that it's actually a map to their healing as well.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Absolutely. That's the most important message I want people to hear. So thank you for summing it up so beautifully, Alex. You're so articulate. I love it.

But really that is a very helpful message. Secure attachment is not a mystery. When we know what it is, then we can build a practice around moving in that direction. And it pays off in such big ways because it will affect every single relationship in your life and especially the most beloved, but all of your relationships universally.

Alex Howard

Wonderful. There's so much more I could ask you, but I'm mindful of time. For people who want to find out more about you and your work, where's the best place to go and what's some of what they can find?

[00:53:25] Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well, we have a website. It's just, dianepooleheller.com. Very English. That's my English part of me. I'm happily partly English. My dad was English.

And dianepooleheller.com, and we have a new website coming in about a month, but we have one that works really well right now. And we have an attachment quiz on there that you can take for free.

I just want you to remember to take it one relationship at a time because our attachment system is very fluid, depending on the relational field we're thinking about. And then also answer how you respond to different situations when you're not having your best day, like when you're a little tired or a little sick or not so present, because that will show your default attachment system more accurately.

And then there's some additional information on there about attachment.

I also wrote for the public a book called, *The Power of Attachment*. Sounds True published that, and you can get it on Amazon if you're interested.

And then I also have a CD set called *Healing Your Attachment Wounds*, also written for all of us walking around as humans. And it's also available on Amazon or from Sounds True in the United States, in Louisville, here in Colorado.

And we do a lot of online programs. We have different things that we've done specifically for the public, but also for professionals, around this topic. Because really our mission is to help healthy relationships move forward. And we're really, in our world, trying to support anybody that's doing life affirming work. It's one of the reasons we're hanging out with Alex Howard and all the wonderful work that he does.

So we just are trying to help people move back to secure attachment, especially by designing specific skills that you'll see in the books and the recordings and what we did today. These are things that you can practice and they take some time.

I just really want you to understand that when you're stirring the pot for attachment, we're going all the way back into the uterus so it can be very sensitive and a bit unconscious because we don't have an ego structure that's already worked out to understand our story even, but our reactions today can tell a lot about our story, what it was originally.

Even if you don't know the whole story, it doesn't matter. You can still practice the secure attachment skills and move deeper and deeper into secure attachments.

So it's a very positive message. There's a lot you can do. Even if you practice one secure attachment skill, it'll start to make a difference.

Alex Howard

Wonderful, Diane, thank you so much. I always appreciate our time together. I think this is such an important piece of this bigger jigsaw and understanding anxiety.

Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

[00:56:00] Dr Diane Poole Heller

It's a privilege to be here. Thank you, everybody. Bye for now.