



Conscious Life presents

ANXIETY SUPER CONFERENCE

Anxiety and equality activism

Guest: Jaia Bristow

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Megan Gibson, co-host of the Anxiety Super Conference.

Today I'm thrilled to be speaking with Jaia Bristow, a multiethnic queer content creator and group facilitator who's been working in events and media production since 2010, and hosting groups around social identity since 2016. She's also my co-host here at the Anxiety Super Conference.

She's the creator of *Beyond Boxes with Jaia Bristow*, a podcast and YouTube channel exploring labels and identity. Jaia runs in-person workshops on power, privilege, and prejudice, and works as a diversity and inclusivity consultant.

She's been practicing meditation since childhood, been a student of the Diamond Approach spiritual path since 2016, and training in nonviolent communication since 2018.

Jaia Bristow, thank you for letting me interview you today.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you, Meagen. It's interesting being on the other side.

Meagen Gibson

So people might not know about this other work that you do in addition to co-hosting our conferences, so tell me more about your work and why it's important to you and how it relates back to anxiety.

Jaia Bristow

So I actually do quite a few different things, but they're all very much interrelated. So, like you say, I co-host these events, I also host a YouTube channel and podcast called *Beyond Boxes with Jaia Bristow*, which is an exploration of labels and identity and the ways that so many of us go beyond socially ascribed boxes.

So it's really exploring themes like gender and sexuality, race and ethnicity, class, disability. And the aim is really to try and make those topics accessible, because so often those topics, they're not light, breezy topics, they're the topics that people are like, let's not talk about those at the family dinner party.

[00:01:54]

So it's really about actually, it's not that scary once you get into it and you understand what it really is. It's all just about us being humans. And yes, we have differences and we have similarities as humans, and we are all deserving of the same basic respect and rights. And sadly, that's not the way society currently works.

So, like I say, I do this YouTube channel and podcasts. There's a series of videos defining labels, different labels that I use, and talking about my experiences. There's interviews with other people talking about their experiences.

And then I lead these workshops on power, privilege, and prejudice. So, again, looking at the dynamics of power and systemic and social privilege and around those same kinds of themes. And as you mentioned, I work as a diversity and inclusivity consultant. So again, it's all sort of around the same themes.

And whereas I used to have a career working in production and I've done that for over 10 years, this doesn't feel like a career. It's not trying to climb a ladder and get promoted. It's really just living my values and being authentically me and trying to connect with people. And that's why I love what I do.

Meagen Gibson

I love that.

Jaia Bristow

In terms of connecting to anxiety, like I mentioned, these topics can be very anxiety inducing. And I think they can be anxiety inducing for people, of course, from marginalized and oppressed groups and backgrounds, but also for people from the dominant groups.

And sometimes even it's different types of anxiety, but people from dominant groups don't know how to engage in these topics because there's constantly that fear of, oh my God, I'm going to say the wrong thing. I'm going to be attacked for it. I'm out of my depth. Language is constantly changing. Is this politically correct? Am I offending someone? What's happening?

And so again, my aim is to try and ease that kind of anxiety a little bit. And for me, politically correct isn't really about politics. It just boils down to basic respect of other humans who are different from oneself.

Meagen Gibson

And I can definitely speak to that anxiety, looking back on my life, I'm definitely not the same and don't speak in the same way and don't interact with people in the same way that I did when I was 20.

And so because we grow, hopefully, all of us, we grow, we change, we learn, we do better, there's always moments where, not only we can look at our history and our past individually and collectively, and have cringy anxiety inducing moments when we think about how we've conducted ourselves, but there's also that anxiety moving forward of, even though I know better and I might do better, I'm still scared to do the wrong thing and say the wrong thing. And anxiety around that.

[00:04:42] Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think we all feel, every human experiences anxiety in some way, shape or form, I think, which is why this conference is so important. And I've interviewed a range of experts and each time the conversations are so different and rich because it is such a broad topic. But this topic in particular can bring up a lot of stuff for different people.

Meagen Gibson

So what are some of the common responses that you encounter in conversations around power and privileged dynamics in society?

Jaia Bristow

So I think there's a lot of different things, but in terms of the most common emotional responses to becoming aware of privileged dynamics, for those who have systemic privilege, often it will be anxiety, will be number one. Guilt, shame. And so these are all very paralyzing emotions. They're not emotions that lead to constructive, positive change in the world.

And so, again, one of the things I try and do is help people shift that. And we'll get into that later, I think. But because of these emotions, which are very uncomfortable a lot of the time, people go into defensive or dismissive modes or victimization modes.

So rather than, if they hear something, they get uncomfortable, they make it about them. And they either dismiss a person's experience as, you're making a big deal out of it, I'm sure it wasn't that bad, stop being so sensitive, or racism is over or whatever it is, those kind of very dismissive comments, which, of course, is really painful for the people from the marginalized groups.

Or it will be very defensive, like, oh, I didn't mean that. So are you calling me racist? Are you calling me sexist? Are you calling me...? And it's like, whoa, whoa, whoa, we're just talking about something.

And often, it's interesting because often it will be, I've noticed from my own experience that I might say something about my very personal experience, like, actually, I'd rather people not use that word to describe me, for example, or something like that. And immediately those kinds of responses are what I receive.

So then again, that's why people from, one of the reasons people from oppressed and marginalized groups also felt anxiety around engaging in these conversations with people from different groups to them.

And then sometimes there's a victimization as well. The kind of, well, I've suffered, too, argument. Which is interesting because again, in my workshops, one of the things I point out is to try and shift from victimization to pointing out that most people have some form of systemic privilege.

So, yes, I'm a queer person of color, I have disabilities, all these kind of things, and yet there are definitely also areas where I do have systemic privilege.

So it's trying to focus sometimes on what we do have rather than focusing immediately on what we don't have. And again, it's really about connecting with, what I try and do is encourage people to connect with their fellow humans. So to be able to hear what the person is saying without making it all about you.

[00:07:57] Meagen Gibson

And I've had so many conversations just in the last week that have interwoven and been involved in the conversation that we're having right now. And there's not a corner of being a human being that hasn't been touched in some way by all the themes that we're talking about right now.

And one of the things that came up for me that we've talked about in the trauma conference and in the anxiety conference, these topics of shame and guilt and anxiety, all of those emotions go hand in hand.

And the theme that I'm really understanding now, literally as I speak to you, is emotional maturity. And an ability to feel and touch empathy requires an emotional maturity.

And often the response to conversations around privilege or racial identity or marginalized people, those responses come just purely from, sometimes internalized racism and those kinds of things, but also sometimes just emotional immaturity, not being able to subject object yourself and not take something personally.

And one of the things that I'm thinking of while you're talking is just, especially around shame, is white tears. And the emotionality that can come up for people.

I've done this as a television producer and documentarian. I've actually seen this happen when talking about enslaved people in the US. And I used to do a show called *Who Do You Think You Are?* where we would take people through their ancestry.

And one of the episodes that we had had an African American man in conversation with a white woman who is the ancestor of one of his enslaved ancestors' owners. That was a tough conversation. She sobbed through that conversation because there was so much shame and guilt, even though it wasn't her responsibility.

And so being able to, maybe we can just talk through those natural responses, because there's some objectivity to the natural responses that your body is going through, your nervous system is going through to defend you against what you feel is an attack. And then leaning into what you're talking about, which is the discomfort in the effort of empathy and understanding.

Jaia Bristow

Yes. And one of the things which is interesting is, like you said, you talk about that kind of discomfort. And so we talked a lot about, what are some of the common responses from people from the dominant group?

And often it's discomfort. But from the people from the groups that are oppressed and marginalized, it's not uncomfortable, it's unsafe because it's bringing up a lot of, not just trauma where we feel like physiologically unsafe, but in that moment, we don't always know how that person is going to react. And those kinds of defensive, dismissive, victimization, that's the low end.

Meagen Gibson

That's the fawning end.

[00:10:52] Jaia Bristow

Exactly. And then I didn't even talk about, because you asked about the most common responses, but then, of course, there are responses which are much higher, which are much more extreme, which is attack.

And I think this is something that people don't always get, is that difference between uncomfortable and unsafe. Because when you feel unsafe, you feel uncomfortable.

And because people from oppressed groups have been socialized to minimize their feelings, to not be overly emotive, to not make a big deal out of things, to maintain their safety, so often they will describe those feelings as, oh, I feel a bit uncomfortable. But what's really happening is that fight, flight response is being triggered.

And so I'm really glad that you brought in that piece because I think it's really important for people to understand that difference. And like I say, many of us do have areas where we have more systemic privilege and areas where we have less.

So, for example, for you, if you're talking about race, then you're in the dominant group. But if you're talking about, for example, gender, especially around women's rights or something, then you know what that's like in your body. And that's also hard.

So then again, this is where intersectionality comes in. For me, if I'm talking about race and about gender, I know what that's like. But then if I'm talking about someone who's trans about gender, then suddenly I have more privilege, for example. But then because I can relate, then hopefully I will be more sensitive around that conversation. But again, that's not always the case.

And that's one of the things I find the most heartbreaking about it, is the ways that people don't come together around these topics and forget to empathize when they themselves have been discriminated against. And so rather than trying to discriminate against someone else and, oh, I've been oppressed or I'm going to oppress other people, it's like trying to connect with others.

And so as a white woman, of course, you have no idea what it's like to be non-white and yet you do have some entry point of knowing what it's like having been discriminated against in your life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely and I think that you're hitting on exactly what it is. Often you hear people in situations say something like, "I can't imagine". When the actuality is, you can imagine. You have to dig for it. You have to look for it. And it's important that you do try to imagine what it might be like.

Looking at for references in your own life in which you've been marginalized or oppressed because of the color of your skin or your religion or your ethnicity or your sexual preferences or your gender expression. Those are all ways in which you can look for evidence and use your imagination as a way to point and get to that empathy that you're talking about.

Jaia Bristow

Yes and no. Yes, there are definitely some, but sometimes people, especially, and I'm sorry to name you guys as straight cisgendered white men, for example, especially those who are non-disabled and stuff, they don't actually have much of a reference point of systemic oppression.

[00:14:07] Meagen Gibson

Speaking overall, like generally.

Jaia Bristow

Of course, some of them might come from lower income families or working class families, some of them might have personal things, but when it comes to systemic oppression, especially around visible stuff, there will be less points of reference.

And again, for example, if someone's a cisgendered middle class white woman, for example, they will also have less points of reference than someone with different intersections.

So whilst it is important to try and find that empathy and relate, sometimes we also have to be careful to not mix up the personal stories of trauma and the realities of the systemic dynamics that are at play in the world.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Because we, not intentionally, but I feel like the weight of the centering has been on the white experience and the anxiety of talking through diversity and inclusion with people from marginalized groups. So I want to flip that weight, definitely.

So looking at it from the other side, if you could speak more to being part of an oppressed marginalized group, why that brings up so much anxiety, especially when engaging with people from the dominant group. I know we've talked about definitely the difference between discomfort and safety, what else is there?

Jaia Bristow

Well, in one word, trauma. So we've got a whole Trauma Super Conference where people talk about a lot of these themes.

These messages that we have in society about certain groups of people are superior and certain groups of people are inferior, we are all internalizing those messages. So it's not only the people from the dominant groups internalizing those messages, it's also the people from the marginalized and oppressed groups that are receiving and internalizing those messages.

So for me, I've been doing this work for a long time, but one of the realizations I had when I first started with this work was that I had started to take, as very personal, these sort of messages.

And so when I was being discriminated against because someone had some unconscious or conscious bias against me, whether that was because of my gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, I don't know. And I would just assume that I, Jaia, was the problem. That there was something wrong with me and that that person was speaking down to me because they thought less of me, which in some ways they probably did again, whether that was conscious or not.

And rather than, oh, actually, this is a problem with the system. They've been socialized to believe these things. I've been socialized to believe these things.

[00:17:03]

So this is also why people from marginalized groups, part of the reason that there's so much disproportion in terms of pay and hiring and all these kinds of things, is partly because the people in power don't offer the same opportunities. But also partly because the people from the oppressed groups will be less likely to either go for the opportunities or to ask for more pay or anything like that, because, again, they've internalized the same messages.

So we're all playing out in society these same sort of patterns, the same messages, and then we're teaching our kids the same thing, not intentionally.

Meagen Gibson

Most of the time.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. My mom made a comment today about her body, and I realized she's been making that same comment my whole life. And so, of course, she didn't think, oh, I want to raise my daughter to be self-conscious about cellulite or whatever it is, but because she's received those messages about what a woman should look like and what beautiful is by society standards.

And so she's received them from society, probably from her own mother and the women in her life, because they will receive the same messages. And then she passed those messages down to me, not consciously.

And so, again, all this stuff when people are like, oh, racism is over, for example, it's like, of course not, because history gets passed down and there are still, again, totally biased laws. But it's not just about that, it's also about we're all playing out the same messages.

So that's one of the big things around why it can be so anxious because we feel that internal inferiority. We've internalized those messages of inferiority at times. And of course not everyone, again, I'm making generalizations, but there's of course individuals who have done the work or families where the work's been done earlier on and so the messages passed down are different and people growing up in very different cultures.

And I've grown up in very multicultural environments and across different countries. So again, I have different messages that I've received than some of my peers who have grown up in just one country or whatever. But that is one big piece.

And then trauma because these messages have been being played out for so long and they're just getting reinforced constantly. And so again, then the personal and the systemic all gets confused.

When I was, I think, 10, I just started secondary school because I was a year ahead so I started at 10. And I had a teacher who really bullied me and I never understood why because I was 10 and I'd grown up in a very, I think I was the only person of color in my year all through primary school or maybe even in my entire school.

But because it was small and everyone knew each other and everyone was friendly with each other, I never really noticed my difference because we were all just seen as individuals and we played together. Kids made the odd comment about my skin at times, but I didn't really internalize that.

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And so suddenly I go to this bigger school in this bigger city and this teacher bullied me. And it's only very recently that I, suddenly looking back, realized she was probably racist. And I can't say that for sure. And that's another element, is the constantly questioning ourselves.

Just recently someone said to a friend of mine who is black and queer, "something something, your people". And the person was like, okay, so what do you mean by that? Is it because I'm queer? Is it because I'm black? Is it because I'm a woman? And so she asked them, what do you mean by that? And the person stumbled and was like, oh, I mean your friends. That vague thing.

And so again, it's that constantly questioning oneself is really exhausting and adds a lot of anxiety because as we know, a lot of what anxiety is, is this questioning and uncertainty adds anxiety, racing thoughts, the unsafety also adds anxiety. All these key ingredients of anxiety are heightened for people in marginalized groups.

So I could go on forever on this, but those are some of the key points that I wanted to talk about.

Meagen Gibson

And also I'm aware of the tendency to scan for danger. Constantly assessing a situation, even if it's not, you're walking down the street alone at night.

It's just in interactions with people, as you said, like those, not microaggressions but even micro expressions trying to scan if somebody's saying something that you should take note of because it might indicate that you're going to be in a dangerous situation with them later, or that the conversation might get elevated or that they might get all in their feelings and all of a sudden you're in an aggressive situation with them and you've got to worry about your safety, I imagine.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And so of course, there's the very public area of that. Like, every time I go out in public, every time I'm in a new space, that scanning the room to see if there's anyone who might mirror at least part of my identities.

And then for me, because I have so many intersections of different marginalized identities, it's even harder because I might be in a group where everyone's queer and super great around, like gender inclusive language and very aware of the range of sexual orientations and spectrums and all that kind of thing, but maybe they're all white people.

And so I'm feeling completely at home because we're talking about sexuality and gender and I'm like, great. And then someone makes a gap and says something totally racially insensitive. And then again, it's like I don't think that that person is a bad person in that moment, but it's like, oh, they're not actually my people. I can't actually feel safe and let my guard down.

So this constantly having my guard up. I've talked about just general public, and you did walking down the street, those are new groups. And when I meet friends of friends, I always have to try and assess the situation.

I went to a friend's birthday and they were all white people and they all got drunk and everyone started to touch my hair. And so that's one of the things that I do before going to a new group, is I

have to make that conscious decision of, do I want to have my hair out? And it's a tiny thing. And people might think, who cares? But when that's happening, it's just one tiny extra decision that I have to make. And there's so many of those.

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And again, most of those are totally unconscious because I've never known anything different. And then there's on a much more personal level, so, for example, I date a lot, partly because I'm non-monogamous, partly because I'm single.

And so when I meet a new person, there's not just assessing, are we compatible? Do we want the same thing? Is there chemistry? There's assessing, are they a safe person in terms of that?

And so suddenly my criteria of what I need in a partner, I really think should be everyone's criteria around that kind of being a good person and being aware of all these things, but to me, it's so much more important because I don't want to feel like an educator to my partner.

So it's not just enough that they're broadly open minded. It's like if they're white and a man and straight and CIS, for example, then it's super important to me that they've done some work to acknowledge their privilege and work through this. Because if not, I become either an educator or I'm dealing with all their, what you were calling, emotional immaturity, of their defensiveness or dismissiveness.

And I've lived through it so many times. And not just with straight cisgendered white men. I've also lived through it with white women. I've also lived through it with non binary white people or with straight people of color, like straight men of color, for example, and that kind of thing. So there's a lot to be constantly carrying and it's exhausting.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I can imagine. And I just want to take a breath there and just acknowledge your exhaustion. That's why this is so important, because if we can do any kind of work to make it even 1% less exhausting, we need to. We can.

So what are some tips to manage these interactions on both sides of the equation that won't exacerbate anxious feelings? How do we cope with that anxiety on both sides of that interaction? Because we probably can't avoid it to the degree that we would like to. Everybody's default anxiety coping mechanism is avoidance, which doesn't work.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

How do we not avoid and cope with anxiety?

[00:26:10] Jaia Bristow

So a lot of what I'm going to say is the same things that are being said throughout this whole conference around anxiety in general. It's that developing the skills of what you're calling emotional maturity.

So that ability to take a breath, to slow everything down and to sense one's own responses, like physiological and mental, to separate so that we're not immediately reactive. Because that's one of the most dangerous things, is when we're reacting from a place of history and patterning and reactivity to what's been said.

So if we can just slow things down, which is why, I always find it crazy that people think that social equity and spiritual personal development as totally two separate issues, because actually it's very similar to what's happening in both of them. It's breaking the patterns and getting to know oneself better and connecting with humans and with oneself.

So one of the things is things like meditation and mindfulness and all those kinds of practices which enable us to slow down and to not be so identified with our feelings, but to be able to notice them and have that extra, even if it's a microsecond or a second, to notice them and to not react. And/or if we do react, knowing how to take responsibility and apologize.

And so I've done a ton of this work. I've been doing this work for years, and I've been doing personal development, meditation kind of work for even longer. But of course, I'm also human and so there are moments where I am reactive and my blood does boil when someone says something, and I do just say the wrong thing or whatever it is. And so that's okay.

So I think one of the things from, so I'm going to separate out now a little bit, people from the dominant group and people from more marginalized groups.

For people in the dominant group, one of the main things is knowing that you're going to fuck up, and that's okay. And again, it's people who are like, yeah, but I get attacked if I use the wrong pronoun for someone. It's like maybe that person that you used the wrong pronoun for was also reactive.

And I feel like people from marginalized groups are allowed to have less tolerance than people, because, again, it's sort of more to do with safety than comfort.

But most of the time, in my experience, is that people are actually very receptive. If they don't feel like that you're actively trying to be offensive and that you're making an effort, then people are very receptive to that. Because ultimately people from marginalized groups want allies from people from the more dominant groups.

So knowing that you're going to make mistakes and that that's okay. And yes, you might feel anxious about it, but if I tell you it really is okay, hopefully that will alleviate some of the anxiety. And it's much better to be trying and doing the wrong thing, but if you're trying, you have to be open to being called out or called in about doing the wrong thing.

So if someone points out, because sometimes it's the whole intention versus impact kind of thing. So people are like, well, I didn't mean to hurt the person. And it's like, okay, but you did. So what are you going to do about it?

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And so, again, that knowing how to apologize and take responsibility and repair is super important. And sometimes it's as simple as, if you're using the wrong pronoun, not making a huge deal, but just being like, oh, sorry, I meant, 'they' or something like that. Or if you use the wrong pronoun, someone corrects you, not being like, oh, it's too complicated these days. Just being like, oh, thank you. Not making a big deal out of it because it's not really about you.

So that's one of the things. And using these opportunities and these conversations to learn and to progress. I know that I've been caught out a lot of times by these conversations and sometimes using the wrong language of terminology.

So this is the other, and this is, I think, one of the main things, not having so much of an us versus them approach. But also not going to the other extreme and being like, we're all human, we're all equal. It's like, yes, that is the ideal. And yes, we are all human, but we are not all treated equally.

So it's really staying rooted in the reality of the world we live in whilst also connecting to the other humans.

I was in the UK recently and I was listening to the news, and I didn't follow it fully, but some MP or something was talking about how poor people basically need to budget better. And they don't need more benefits, they just need to budget better or whatever.

It was very much like, they this and they that, and I don't think for a single second this person ever considered putting themselves in the shoes of, what would it actually be like for me if I was working 60 hours a week or more, was on minimum wage, could barely afford to feed myself, had family members I needed to support?

And so again, it's what we were talking about, that empathy and trying to find areas. So sometimes we can't fully relate. Sometimes we can't, but we can imagine to some degree. Especially sometimes we don't have to imagine, we just have to listen because people are sharing their experiences. So it's not so much about imagining, it's listening and empathizing and not being like, they.

And so again, I once was at a discussion group. And I used to be a pole dancer, this was over 10 years ago. And at the time, pole dancing was emerging as this new sport and was very associated with stripping and was still seen as kind of risqué. And so to legitimize our pole dance club, we very much have to separate ourselves from that and show that we're a sport, we're not strippers.

And I never thought there was anything wrong with that. And I was always very much like, I don't have anything against sex workers, but I'm not one of them.

And so I was at this discussion group, and I can't remember what happened, but something came up and I must have made a comment. And I don't think it was a negative comment about sex workers, but it was very much a, they... And of course, I'm not one of them, so I'm not going to be like 'we' either. But the way I was talking was very much an obvious kind of separation.

And then I later found out that one of the people in this discussion group was a sex worker. And they pointed out some of the comments I made and how it was jarring from them. And my initial thought was oh my God, well, they should have told me. If I'd known that they were a sex worker, then I would have behaved differently.

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And that is such an obvious alarm of, oh, actually. And I noticed that thought straight away and I didn't express that thought. And I apologized. And then I went home and I did my homework and I educated myself. I didn't ask that person to educate me. I educated myself and then really understood that sex work is a job like many others, for example, and that sex workers are humans, too.

And that's where the 'we' comes in. It's like, I'm not going to say 'we' when I talk about it, but there's not a separation. They're not a whole different species of people, for example. We're all human.

Meagen Gibson

And it's not a moral delineation. In the other end, the distinction is not, I'm better or superior than them because I don't do sex work.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. And I think that's the negative side of the othering. Is the idea that, not just othering, but pushing down. And I think that's what I was trying to get to and was expressing clearly. So thank you for that.

And so then for the people who are oppressed and marginalized, I think there's a few different things. One, is actually learning to set boundaries because, I've said it can be exhausting, so sometimes it's okay to not engage in these conversations if we feel like we don't want to.

And for the people, again, from the dominant groups, if someone is engaging in this conversation, thank them, because that's really a gift. And if they're doing it, it's probably because they care.

Because if someone's being overtly racist, I don't engage in a conversation with them. I engage in conversations with friends and family members who say the wrong thing. Because I know that they want to learn and they want to better themselves, and they're ultimately good people, and I want to maintain the connection with them.

So if someone is engaging, it's a gift. So thank them rather than getting defensive and dismissive.

And then so, people from oppressed groups, it's A) learning to set boundaries when you need to, but there's also, most of us do have some form of privilege. And so trying not to victimize ourselves too much either. And again, seeing the human, that if they're fucking up and they're trying, to also be gentle with them and to not necessarily attack too much.

And I know some people are going to not respond super well to this piece of advice, I think, because these conversations can be so divisive. And that's one of the things I really wish and hope will shift in society, where people can actually engage in these conversations and that these topics create less division rather than more division.

And so as someone who bridges so many different social groups, both in terms of being queer and a person of color, but also the in-betweenness, I'm multiethnic, half my family is white, I have black family, I have Asian family, I'm pansexual so sometimes I'm dating a man and people read me as straight, and then sometimes I'm dating other genders and people read me as queer. And so through all these different elements, having an invisible disability, all these things, I bridge these things.

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So I really hope people learn to sometimes put themselves in other people's shoes, which wherever you fall on the social identity and power privilege spectrum. But there's also safety first, so boundaries, making sure you're safe, looking for support.

And again, if you're from the dominant group, learning to be an ally if you have some marginalized identities but also some social privilege, all of that.

And I know we're probably coming to an end soon, but there's a couple of points that I forgot to say which are really important around skills people can have to create positive change. So I'm just going to take a breather. I don't know if you want to feedback.

Meagen Gibson

Let me give you some time while you take a breather.

One of the things that I want to say as I'm listening that's coming up for me is, listening to understand someone does not imply agreement.

And I think sometimes that's where the defensiveness comes in. Like if I listen to this argument, that will immediately make me in agreement with this person that I disagree with.

And while that may result, in some cases, that's what I would hope would result, is that just listening to understand someone, letting them explain themselves, getting curious about their perspective and their experience, doesn't mean that you have to agree with them in any way, shape or form. It just doesn't.

And so that's definitely helped me when I'm trying to get curious. And most of the time, I am not necessarily persuaded, that's the wrong word, but I am...

Jaia Bristow

Consciousness.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. But I can't get there if I can't engage the curiosity and the openness to understanding, and the ability to set aside any of my agendas or predisposed notions or defensiveness. I just cannot. That shift in consciousness can't happen without that desire to understand, without the assumption that I will agree.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. I think that's an important point as well. Understanding and agreeing aren't the same thing.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly.

[00:38:38]

Ready?

Jaia Bristow

I'm ready.

In terms of some of the very practical skills people can do. One is, when we feel, so we talked about those paralyzing emotions earlier around guilt, shame, anxiety. And so, for example, if someone's feeling guilt about their privilege, one of the things is to try and shift that to gratitude.

So I noticed that in myself. I was having a conversation with someone and we were talking about financial situations. I'm very broke at the moment because I've just come back from traveling and stuff. And so they were saying something about how they admire my lifestyle or something. And I was like, don't put me on a pedestal too much. I'm broke. And then we had a conversation.

But for me, when I'm broke, I can still rely on the fact that I have a family who can support me. And so that's like what I think sometimes is known as generational wealth. And without going too much into my own family history, I did grow up with basically a family who had no money, but there was still, one side of my family, my grandparents were able to support. And then that in turn helped them set up until they were financially stable and they've been able to support me.

And so having that kind of safety net means that I can take risks. I can have an unconventional career, I can travel, I can do things. And I'm not relying on them. It's not like I'm sponging off them either. I am financially as independent as I can be, but again, there's not that fear, that kind of unsafety of, if I come down to my last bit. Then I can borrow or I can just stay at home for a bit. I'm not going to be...

And I spent a few years where I was totally bed bound and disabled. And the benefits in the UK are awful. So I really struggled financially during that time. But again, I would probably have been on the streets if I didn't have the support of my family.

And so this person has a very different financial situation and comes from a very different family. And so when they shared their financial situation and the fact that they currently have more money in their bank account than I do, but they have to because they have to have a job that they don't necessarily enjoy, that they have to work certain hours. They can't take the risk of upsetting their boss in case they get fired, because they need this and they need the benefits that go with it.

Whereas if I don't like a job, I leave because I'm like, I'll find another job kind of thing. They don't have that. And when they shared that, I could feel in myself, and again, this is where one of the practices I talked about, about really knowing yourself is really important.

And I could feel the kind of incredibly uncomfortable, the kind of shame, the, oh my God, I wish I could go back in time and take away the joke I made about my financials. And it was all really uncomfortable.

And then I took a second and I allowed those feelings to be there. I thought, how lucky am I to have the family that I have? How lucky am I? It's not because I did anything good. This is systemic privilege. It's just that's the family I was born into. And sure, there are lots of ways that I have a lack of privilege as well, but in that moment...

[00:42:05]

And as soon as I started feeling that, it sort of melted the other feelings, and I went from feeling paralyzed and not knowing how to engage with this person and how to respond, to feeling really incredibly grateful for life.

And once I was in a place of gratitude, then suddenly there was the desire and the thoughts of, what can I do with this privilege? Because it does feel like a privilege.

Because again, people talk often about the word privilege and not liking it. But when you cultivate that gratitude, it does feel like privilege. It's like, what can I do? How can I support people who don't have that? How can I talk out about this? What can I do?

And suddenly, I might not have all the answers of what I can do, but the state of mind shifted from, I don't even want to engage in this conversation. Can I just delete this message and pretend it never happened? And then I expressed to that person, I thanked them. It was like, thank you for sharing with me. Of course, I'm aware of financial and wealth differences. But it really brought it into the current in that moment.

And I admitted it made me a little bit uncomfortable, but I'm aware of how grateful I am and how lucky I am. And if there's anything I can ever do to support you, let me know, and things like that.

And suddenly that person felt really heard and seen and felt safe as well with what they shared. And it created a totally different dynamic. And it brought us closer because there was that connection, there was that mirroring, and that's really important.

And you were just talking about curiosity. That's one of the other things. When you're feeling dismissive or defensive or reactive, try and cultivate curiosity and ask questions.

And this goes again from both sides of the coin, whether you're someone with privilege or someone from a marginalized group.

So I was with someone recently who made a comment about how he hoped his son wouldn't turn out gay or something like that. It wasn't, he hoped his son wouldn't turn out gay, it was he hoped his son would be straight. And his son is 10/11 so it's at that age where he'll probably find out soon.

Now, aside from the fact that he completely dismissed bisexuality, which is an issue I have in general, I obviously was very triggered by that comment. This is someone I love very much. This is someone I'm close to and it was really uncomfortable for me. And again, I felt all the reactivity.

I was like, how could you say that? That's totally homophobic. You know I'm queer. And of course, that started an argument because I was attacking, he got this defensive. But then I was able to, rather than continuing in the argument, because again, I've done a lot of this work, I was able to take a breather and just put a timeout. That's another skill that I forgot to say. Timeouts are totally okay.

So, we had a timeout where we didn't engage and we just each did our thing for a few minutes. And then suddenly I started asking myself, he's someone I know is a caring person. I know that he's not actually homophobic. Why would he say something like that?

[00:45:05]

Because my immediate assumption, and this is again an issue, is we all make a lot of assumptions. So if we get to question these things, then it's great. So my immediate assumption was, oh, he doesn't want his son to be gay because he's homophobic and he doesn't like gay people or whatever.

And then I was like, maybe he doesn't want his son to be gay because he knows that the country he lives in, gay rights are not very advanced. Maybe he's worried.

And so I asked him, why don't you want that? And it turned out that his answer, whilst clumsy, was actually that he wanted to be able to relate to his son. And because he's a straight man, he felt that if his son was gay, that they wouldn't be as connected. And so even though it was clumsily expressed, what I saw was that it all boiled down to connection.

And then once I saw that, I was able to be like, I can hear that. And it was really painful for me because I want to feel connected to you. And when you said that, and you know about my sexual orientation and identity, that was painful.

And then suddenly I expressed in a way that he could hear it as well. And then again, we actually grew closer. What started off as an argument and could easily have degenerated and ended a relationship, actually ended up bringing us together because there was curiosity.

And so, of course, that's from my side, but that really goes with what you were talking about, the curiosity as well, from the point of view of the person with more privilege. Of being curious, being open minded, listening, connecting with each other.

So those are a few of the things.

And then finally, I just want to talk briefly about mirrors and windows, which is a term that Dr Sophia Graham, who is the speaker on this conference, first mentioned to me on the Trauma Super Conference.

And it's about how we all need mirrors of our own experience to be reflected to us and windows into the experiences of people who are different to us.

And so often people in dominant groups, they have a lot of mirrors and not so many windows. And people from oppressed groups have a lot of windows and not so many mirrors. And that's why it's not always about equally listening.

I've had conversations about race, and the white person will be like, well, I want you to hear my point of view, for example. And it's like, but I know your point of view. I have your point of view broadcast at me all day long. I hear it from so many places. Have you actually listened to my point of view? Do you know what I'm saying right now?

And so whilst I talk about curiosity and connecting as humans, sometimes we have to still remember that we're not all on equal footing and that we're not all treated the same and we don't have the same, not just opportunities, but the messaging that we receive and all of that kind of thing.

So I think that covers most of what I wanted to say today.

[00:47:54] Meagen Gibson

That's so great. You said so much and I have so many things I want to go back to, but I think we're almost out of time.

Gratitude, mirrors and windows, that curiosity. And I love how, and I don't know if it felt vulnerable for you, but how many personal examples you gave from your own life, and what a demonstration that you're like, I do this work, I take people through this work, and I also screw up this work all the time. Here are examples where I came up short and had to reflect and pivot and repair.

I love that you had so many examples of that, that you could share with people, because I think coming from you, it means even more.

So where can people find out more about you and your work, Jaia Bristow?

Jaia Bristow

Well, thank you. And I think one of the things I do is share personal examples because I want people to know that no one is perfect, but also to make it relatable.

So again, in my [YouTube channel](#), I share lots of personal anecdotes there again. And the conversations on my podcast are all about these personal conversations with people.

So none of it is preachy. It's really so people can listen in and get an understanding by just listening to the experience of people having, rather than being again, it creates less division, less, there's those groups of people and there's us. It's like, no, we're all humans, and to really be able to hear that.

As for my work, the best place is my website, jaiabristow.com. You can sign up to my mailing list and I will do my best to keep people updated. I'm not one of those mailing lists where you get emails from me all the time. I need to start emailing more, in fact, to keep you updated with all the events.

I will also let people know when the online workshops on power, privilege and prejudice are available.

There's links to my podcast, there's links to everything there. My Instagram is [@beyond_boxes](#). My podcast and YouTube channel are [Beyond Boxes with Jaia Bristow](#).

And then of course I also host these conferences so people can see those.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks again.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you. I've really enjoyed getting to be on the other side and having these conversations with you.

Meagen Gibson

Important conversations to be had. Thanks again, Jaia.

[00:50:10] Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. Thank you.