



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Overcoming Relationship Anxiety

Guest: Amber Benziger

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very, very pleased to be welcoming back the wonderful Amber Benziger. Welcome, Amber.

Amber Benziger

Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be back.

Jaï Bristow

I'm so happy to have you back. So today we're talking about relationship anxiety, which I think a lot of people can relate to, especially in this conference on the themes of toxic relationships and all that kind of thing. So my first question to you, Amber, is why do people get anxious about relationships? Why is it so difficult? Why do we all get so anxious even at the idea of relationships as well as when we're actually in relationships?

Amber Benziger

Very true. I mean, if you think about it, relationships are one of the most important parts of just human beings, right? Like, we are so in tune to wanting to gather and be together. And relationships can mean all things, not just intimate partner relationships, but friendships, family, just having that companionship and that camaraderie and that support, that's really important. So that means that there's a lot at stake.

And when we have a lot at stake, anxiety likes to rear its head by, like, am I doing this right? It makes people question themselves or bring some fear of abandonment or there could be some type of attachment issue. So it's something so important to us, and sometimes because it's so important, we get fearful of losing it, which is where relationship anxiety comes into play.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. And I love that you've named all these different types of relationships. There's partners, there's friends, there's family, there's work, there's life. We're constantly relating with other people. And as human beings, we are naturally very sociable beings. And as you say, we kind of need relationships to survive. And there's always that fear that we're going to lose it. And of

course, like you say, that ups the stakes. And when the stakes are high and there's a fear of losing something, then of course that can bring in some anxiety.

[00:02:30]

You mentioned attachment, so do you want to talk a little bit and introduce for those who are unfamiliar about attachment theory and different types of attachment styles? And then I'm also curious if people, even with secure attachment styles, can also have anxiety in relationships?

Amber Benziger

Yeah, so attachment style is just the way that you relate to another person when you enter any type of relationship. So when I mentioned attachment, I was talking more about the anxious attachment style, which is where there's that fear, that fear of maybe abandonment or that fear of losing that person. So we become anxious in the way that we are interacting with them and we're doing anything that we can to kind of hold on to them.

Then there's that avoidant person, avoidant attachment style, maybe they're trying to avoid becoming part of some type of relationship. Or, again, fear that this person is going to leave. Am I going to get hurt? So that type of thing. And then there's that secure attachment where they feel securely attached to that person. They feel comfortable and safe in that relationship.

And when you ask, can a person in a secure attachment style still have relationship anxiety? Yeah, relationship anxiety at its core is really normal. It's a perfectly normal thing that happens, especially when you're entering something new. And like you said, because you care about it so much. When you're at that place of growth, like, does this person care about me the way that I care about them?

That little bit of anxiety and that little bit of questioning is normal. But it's when we kind of allow the anxiety to impact the way that we're showing up in a relationship, the way that we're reacting in a relationship, the way that we're supporting the other people, or is it keeping us from even entering a relationship? That's where we have to look at it as like, okay, maybe this is something and that we want to focus on. Maybe this is something that we want to have a shift in.

Jaï Bristow

And I'm wondering if you can offer some examples or symptoms of what to look out for, to recognize when we're doing that right? To recognize when we're allowing insecurity or the anxiety to sort of lead our relationships or control our relationships or create that sense of fear or that sense of controlling and leading the relationships.

Amber Benziger

Yeah. So, is there that fear of commitment? Are you seeing yourself maybe really liking this person, but making excuses of why you don't want to commit? Is that maybe convincing yourself that that's not your thing? Or fear of being vulnerable, showing up as yourself, sharing intimate parts of yourself, or sharing really anything? Are you that person where you know a lot about the other person, but you're not really giving anything?

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Are you ending relationships before they become serious or before you feel like that other person is going to leave you? Or are you doing kind of the opposite where you're not expressing your needs or desires so you become kind of intrusive into yourself and not really sharing what you need for fear of that person being mad or that person getting upset. So you kind of just become more of like that people pleaser type of thing and allow other people to kind of take leadership in the relationship and you really take a backseat.

Are you really worried and constantly questioning maybe a partner or a friend or a family member, kind of having trouble trusting their motives? Are you constantly overthinking maybe people's words or actions? Are you getting off the phone with a friend and then replaying the entire phone call saying, like, well, she said that? Does she actually mean that? Or they said this, do they actually mean that? And kind of trying to dissect everything and kind of overthink.

And then are you just spending more time worrying than enjoying the people in your life? And like I said, all the relationships, are we spending so much time worrying about how I am going to show up, what do other people think? Am I enough? Am I doing all these things in these relationships instead of just like being in the relationships?

Jai Bristow

100%. I think they're all such fantastic examples you gave. Sadly, I can relate to far too many of them, but I really love how you summed it up with, basically, if you're spending more time worrying about the relationship than sort of being in the relationship and enjoying the relationship and living the relationship, then that's a major red flag that maybe some work needs to be done and that maybe, wherever it's coming from, there's maybe some anxiety that's ruling the connection and that's maybe providing a bit of a toxic atmosphere in the relationship.

So I'm curious, first to know, where does all this come from? Why do we have so much anxiety in relationships? Why do some people have more than others? And then we can talk about what to do with this anxiety and how to have healthier relationships.

Amber Benziger

Well, going back to attachment, like we talked about before, I mean, that stems all the way back from those first relationships that you have. So with your caregivers or those first people that were in your life, did you feel some type of secure attachment to them or was there a lot of anxiety? Were they going to be there? Were they not going to be there? Was there fear that we were making people mad or we had to show up a certain way? So then are we carrying that into new relationships as we get older?

And then just your history of relationships as you came along. What did you see? What did you see, maybe, like I said, in your caregivers and your parents, the people that were around you, teachers, people that you saw, people that you interacted with, maybe at friend's homes and things like that. So what did you see in relationships and what did you take away? Sometimes we kind of mimic those things that we see. And sometimes because of things we see, we try to do the opposite, right?

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If we saw a lot of fighting and a lot of relationships where people weren't getting along well, then maybe I'm just going to avoid relationships altogether. So that is kind of where a lot builds from, from what we see and what we've kind of taken away and then our own sense of safety and security in relationships.

Jai Bristow

And I think it's so interesting what you're talking about because, A, you're talking about our initial relationships with other people from childhood, with caregivers, with anyone who we had early relationships with, are, of course, going to inform the patterns and the relationships we have later on in life. But also and I think it's super interesting what you were talking about, about what you're seeing, what kind of relationships are being modeled to you. So if you grew up, for example, with two parents, what was their relationship with each other like?

But also, how did they speak to other people around them? How did the teachers speak to each other or speak to the other kids? All that kind of thing. I think we sometimes underestimate how much we're sponges when we're young and how much we take on everything that we sort of see, as well as the ways that we're being treated ourselves directly.

Amber Benziger

100%. I feel like a lot of times in sessions with my clients, they'll bring up something like, okay, but I never saw that. I never knew how to do that. When I'm saying, okay, well, did you communicate your feelings to your partner or your friend? Well, no, because I don't know how to do that. And I think we forget that that might not just be our innate nature to know how to effectively communicate in those relationships. That might cause a lot of anxiety.

We might have not seen that, or we might have seen something that we know is not how we want to do it. So now we feel stuck, and we feel really anxious about how to do it. So I think we kind of forget that what we see, even from an early age and even as adults in having past relationships, how that can affect and we have to pay attention to what we're bringing into our current relationships and how we're reacting and treating the other people in our lives.

Jai Bristow

Absolutely. And it explains a lot why unhealthy relationship patterns and even toxic cycles get repeated so much because you're witnessing and then you're replaying what you've learned and what you've witnessed. And like you say, we're not born necessarily with an innate skill of how to have healthy communication. It's something that we learn, and some people don't get the opportunity to learn that.

Which is why I think it's so wonderful to have these conferences and things like that where there can be a sharing of skills and a coming together of what works and what doesn't and even recognizing what is a healthy relationship versus what isn't. Because if we've only seen one or two relationship models play out our whole lives, and we've only played out certain types of relationships, it can be hard sometimes to recognize what is unhealthy, what is toxic. So that is my next question to you. How do you define a toxic relationship?

[00:11:55] Amber Benziger

I feel like that word can kind of sometimes get overused when we just don't like something but I kind of always go back to the feeling of, not even just the feeling of, just like actual safety. Are we feeling safe in an emotional and mental way in this relationship? Do I feel like I can speak up and talk for myself and share my needs and desires?

And then there's a sense of physical safety, which is obvious, obviously feeling physically safe in relationship, but just being able to feel secure that you can show up and feel like somebody is respecting you and your needs without the fear of being hurt or the fear of them holding that against you or using that as a way to keep you or a way of you keeping them. So it's like just having that sense of safety of yourself and of that other person.

Jaï Bristow

And I really appreciate that you've talked about both emotional and physical safety because I think maybe it seems obvious to some but sometimes when we talk about safety, it's not made explicit that it's also about emotional safety, right? And I remember having a light bulb moment myself not that long ago where I was in a situation, I was on a date with someone new and suddenly I could feel I was having all these sort of trauma responses, the getting ready to fight, flight, freeze kind of responses.

And I was thinking to myself but I'm perfectly physically safe. I was in a well lit public space in a cafe or a restaurant or something, I was near the exits. There was no reason for me to be physically afraid. But then shortly afterwards the person started verbally attacking me, right? And in that moment there was that thing of like, okay, I intuitively knew there were enough red flags that I had that same response of getting ready for an attack and it was my emotional safety that was at risk rather than my physical safety.

And I think it's really important as well you distinguish there's both, there's actually making sure you are safe both physically and emotionally, right? Making sure that you're not with someone who is going to physically attack you or verbally attack you or emotionally manipulate you. All these very toxic behaviors. But then there's also feeling like you can and that's a really interesting one. Sometimes the other person doesn't seem to be exhibiting any danger signals and yet we feel like we can't express ourselves.

We feel like if I open up and share my needs or share how I really feel, there's a blockage. I can't do that. And then I think that's really interesting in those moments, and I'd love to go into that next, about recognizing, is that my history? Is it my insecurities, am I patterning and my trauma that's coming up? Or is it my intuition? Is the person actually doing very subtle things that I don't necessarily notice but that's going on? Or is it a combination of both and does it even matter which one it is? And then we'll go into how to manage that situation because of course that's what people are looking for. But I'm really curious about that first.

Amber Benziger

Yeah, I think that's one of the biggest questions I get, especially if you're an anxious person, how do I know is it my anxiety or is it my intuition? And it's like, how can I trust my gut feeling? But when it's your anxiety, it's usually coming from a place of fear, right? Am I scared of this? It's coming from a place of fear or worry, where when it's more of like an intuition, it's like, no, this is it. This is not

coming from a place of fear. This is coming from patterns of behavior that I've seen or I've been a part of. You know what I mean?

[00:16:11]

We need to start getting curious, where is this coming from? And I think once we start to walk and talk ourselves through that, we can kind of see, okay, no, I'm just scared that this person may think I'm weird if I talk about, I don't even know, what I did in childhood versus, no, I feel like this person is trying to trap me or trying to get me to say something or do something that I'm not comfortable with. And I also think it takes practice of having that introspection for yourself and that self awareness of your own anxiety.

And I think that is something that, again, not one of those innate things that we're taught or talked about, so I think having these conferences is important so we can have a platform to really showcase, okay, it's okay if I'm not exactly sure, or if I'm kind of questioning things like, yeah, that is normal, but now what do we do with that? So I think that is really important when you're trying to figure out, is this my intuition or is this my anxiety? Really ask yourself, where is this coming from? Is this fear based?

Jaï Bristow

Yeah. And I think also in what you're sharing what I'm hearing, we'll talk about what to do with it, but it can be different approaches, right? Because if it's fear based and sort of anxiety, then maybe that's some work I need to do on myself. Whereas if it's intuition, that's more work that needs to be done on the relationship. Or maybe the other person has some work to do. And of course, in all cases, there's maybe the opportunity to do the work together or support each other in the work.

But I think that's also something that isn't always made explicit. That in every relationship, again, whether it's intimate romantic relationships, whether it's friendships, whether it's relationships with multiple people, the one person, whether it's at work, when we start having that fear, that anxiety, it's worth sometimes questioning, is this me? Is this the other person or other people? Am I just sensing some dynamics? Because especially when it's in group dynamics, sometimes there's something going on between two people and you can sort of feel the undertones, makes you feel uncomfortable, and you can't quite put your finger on it, or is it a combination?

And so what do we do in those situations? So, first of all, you said it's a practice of trying to tune in and suss out whether it's fear based or whether there are some real red flags. So maybe we can offer some tools both to practice recognizing that and then also what to do once we've established which one it is.

Amber Benziger

Yeah, I feel like one of the two main things is really gathering that self awareness for you. How am I feeling in these moments? What's coming up for me? Where do I feel like this is coming from? Is this maybe something that I've experienced before? Something that I'm fearful of experiencing? Something that I've watched from afar, maybe, like I said, with my caregivers or parental figures or something like that? And what does that really feel like for me? What am I really worried about? Am I worried that I'm not good enough? Am I worried about getting hurt? Am I worried about getting abandoned? Am I worried about getting left?

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Because that's going to help you figure out, okay, what do I need to work on? What do I need to focus on? What is keeping me stuck at this point in my relationship anxiety? And then being really honest. Honest with yourself and honest with your partner. And if you don't feel like you can be honest or vulnerable, what's that about? Is that, again, going back to am I fearful that this person's going to leave? Or do I not feel safe? And why is that?

And then start to set boundaries. Setting boundaries, I think, is one of the most important things in relationships, especially for relationship anxiety. So set boundaries with yourself. I'm not going to do such and such because I don't feel safe. No matter what this person wants. I'm not ready to go there at this point. I'm not ready to be in this committed relationship right now, or I'm not ready to make the next step and move in together, whatever that is.

Making sure that you're clear about it with yourself and then being able to share it with the person that you're having the relationship with. So being really clear and honest about your boundaries and setting them and then being consistent with them, showing up consistently for yourself and showing up consistently for your partner or the other person in the relationship.

Jaï Bristow

I think it's so interesting what you're talking about, trying to pinpoint the root cause of the anxiety, that sense of what is it I'm actually afraid of? Why am I feeling unsafe or uncomfortable or insecure or whatever it is? Is it, again, to do with them? Is it to do with me? What am I afraid of? Am I afraid I'm going to be rejected? Am I afraid I'm going to be abandoned? Am I afraid I'm going to be shut down like all the things you listed, right? It's figuring out what is actually the root.

Because anxiety is more often an alarm bell about some other emotion that wants to be felt, something else going on. Anxiety on its own is giving us information more than it is its own feeling, I guess. And so using that as, okay, I'm feeling anxious, what's actually going on here? And being genuinely curious to work that out. Because we can be surprised sometimes, right? Sometimes we think we have these stories and these ideas of this is how I am in relationships. I'm no good at relationships, other people always reject me.

But if we get really curious about what's going on, then we can learn about ourselves, we can learn about the relationship. And then, as you said, the next step is using that information, once we have it, to then communicate with the person or persons involved, and to say, hey, I don't know, whatever it is, I'm feeling anxious right now about going to this party with you because I'm worried that your friends aren't going to like me, or whatever it is.

And then, again, understanding often we get to know the patterns or the history of what's influencing this decision and communicating that. And then, like you said, if we feel like once we've understood the root cause or what's the emotion behind the anxiety, if we feel like we can't communicate that to the people involved, questioning, oh, that's super interesting, why can't we communicate that? And we do that cycle, again, of pinpointing, is it anxiety or intuition? Is the other person not making me feel safe?

Or is it my own history that's not making me feel safe and something I need to work on, on my own? And then there's all the Trauma Super Conferences and the Anxiety Super Conference, which you're on both, where there's a lot of tools of how to work with that and question for ourselves.

[00:23:19] Amber Benziger

Yeah. You can really start to challenge those things that come up because when you are starting to have those questions like am I enough? Am I not what this person needs? Or is that true? Is that actually factual or is that my anxiety? And then you can start to process and break it down that way. So it's really just starting to get curious and having that awareness.

Jaï Bristow

Exactly. And like you say, what's true about this? What is actually fact and what is my own storytelling, my own projections?

Amber Benziger

Exactly.

Jaï Bristow

And I love what you were saying about that, again, communicating, questioning, if you can't communicate, but then also setting boundaries. And I like the way you were talking about setting boundaries as a way of establishing safety as well.

And so I'm curious, boundaries is another buzzword we hear about and something that's sometimes hard to define. And I've had different chats throughout this conference with different people about this topic of boundaries. But I'm curious, how do you define boundaries and what's the best way of setting and maintaining healthy boundaries in a relationship to maintain safety?

Amber Benziger

Yeah, I think it's very basic, boundaries are like the limitations that you are willing to go to. This is a limit that I'm not going to pass. And I think a lot of times there are a lot of sayings, I think boundaries are teaching people how to treat you but it's really, boundaries are you having the self awareness to know that this is my limitation. It is for you to help you know how you want to interact with other people and help the people that you interact with know that this is your limitation.

Because there's no boundary without a consequence. So it's like, I am willing to do this interview with you as long as it's within this certain amount of time because I have something else to do, you know what I mean? So yeah, I'm going to do this, you know my boundary, then there's a limitation or there's a consequence. So I think that's the most important part, really being upfront and concise and clear for yourself and then being able to communicate that effectively to the other people in your space.

And as somebody that has anxiety, that can be scary, to take up space, to say like, hey, this is my boundary, are you okay with that? And then if they try to push back or if they're not okay with that, being able to hold tight to it. So, again, I think that takes skill and time and practice. So I think I always say, start small and be really clear with yourself. What's the one thing that you know, that's not it for me? I'm not willing to do that or I don't want to engage in that type of behavior and start there because it's going to be something that is really important to you and to who you are and your safety.

[00:26:32] Jaï Bristow

I think that's a really great definition of boundaries, that communicating your limits and your limitations and then letting the person know the consequences of that. So for like in the example you were giving, your limit is, okay, we can do this interview up to this certain time because then I have another meeting, for example, and then the consequences would be if we're not finished by that time, I'm going to just have to sign off or whatever it might be, right? And I think that that's important to name the consequence.

And I think, like you say, it can be really hard for people to set boundaries, especially if people grew up in environments where boundaries weren't really an option or weren't really respected and where there were toxic power dynamics. And I talk about that in some of my other interviews, navigating sort of asymmetrical relationships and power dynamics and toxic power dynamics, which can happen a lot, for example, in parent child relationships, right?

Amber Benziger

Yeah.

Jaï Bristow

And I think you and I are going to talk more about that on the Trauma Super Conference so people can check that interview out as well. And so, yeah, I think it's really important to, like you say, practice small and be clear going into the conversation. What is it you want? What is your hard limit? What is your soft limit? Because when we're not used to it, it's easy to say, okay, I'm going in, I know what my boundary is. And then we come out of the conversation and we're like, oh, that didn't go as planned.

Maybe you can give some advice for those moments where, for example, people get clear, they've done the process we've talked about, they've established, okay, I'm feeling anxious and fearful and it's not my intuition, it's my own stuff. I've figured out that I'm actually fearful of rejection. I'm going to go in and set a boundary and say or express my needs and say my limitations, make my request, give my limitations and the consequence. And then they come out of the conversation and suddenly their boundaries have been completely bombarded. They've given away everything they didn't want to give. They've completely changed their limitations. What to do in those moments?

Amber Benziger

I think the first thing is to have compassion for yourself. Sometimes it doesn't go the way that we planned and that is okay. That doesn't mean you failed or anything like that. So, be really compassionate with yourself. Show yourself some love that you would show a friend or somebody else if they were in that situation. And then take a step back and say like, okay, well, my boundary got crossed or whatever happens there, am I okay with that? And then if I'm not okay with that, what does that mean for that relationship?

Does that mean that maybe that relationship dynamic needs to shift and change? Maybe my interaction with that person needs to be less or needs to be limited or needs to be supported? I see this a lot especially in family systems and family dynamics with adult children and parents, like parents maybe not respecting adult children's limitations. So then they have to decide, okay, well,

maybe I'm only going to call my mom once a month or I'm only going to call her on her birthday because she's asking me for things that I'm not comfortable with or saying things that are inappropriate to me after I've told her multitude of times she's crossing my boundaries.

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So then we have to kind of again shift because we can only control ourselves in how we show up and how we react. So do I need to have a shift in that relationship dynamic for myself or do I feel comfortable and confident that I can go back and communicate and that person will receive it? So it's kind of just taking a look at perspective and seeing if we need to shift the perspective of that relationship.

Jai Bristow

I think that's really great advice and, again, I think it's similar to what you were saying earlier about that anxiety or intuition piece. And again, that thing of recognizing, does the relationship need a shift or is it me that needs to figure out how to keep and maintain my boundaries? Now, I feel like we can't talk about this topic without talking about guilt tripping, manipulation, gaslighting, stonewalling, all these things which make it really hard to name, set and maintain boundaries.

And so again, we've talked about if people don't respect your boundaries, maybe it's time for a shift of the relationship or shifting how much you're in relationship with that person. But do you have any advice for people who are trying to set boundaries but who are being manipulated or gaslighted, gaslit, gaslighted, I'm not sure, into believing that they're somehow in the wrong or that they're somehow the problem and that their boundaries are somehow invalid.

Amber Benziger

Yeah, it can be really difficult, especially when you're in that situation, to see it in there. So then when you do, there's a lot of shame and guilt because how did I let that happen to me? How did I not know? And that's not a reflection of you. That's a reflection of that person. Because when we're entering relationships, we're hopeful that we can trust and feel safe in these relationships. We're not entering relationships thinking, like, oh, when's this person going to manipulate me? So at that point, have compassion for yourself.

And then there's also some grief that happens. A feeling of sadness and how could this person do this to me? Whether a family friend, intimate partner, whatever, and feeling like you're losing that relationship, even if it was not the healthiest or toxic or whatever we want to call it. So I think allow yourself to feel those feelings and process those feelings, and then how can we kind of learn from that and see, like, okay, because I feel like it's always easier to look when we're on the outside of it, right?

When we're on the outside and we see that this has happened, we can kind of see, were there some red flags? Were there some things that I noticed? So maybe you can kind of keep those in mind when you're entering new relationships without using them as a way to avoid. So there's that very gray area of how can I learn from these things without kind of carrying them along in a baggage way and projecting them onto the new person?

So, again, I think one of the biggest things about entering any relationship, whether you have extreme anxiety or not, is having self awareness, right? So to know, what am I bringing in? What

patterns am I seeing? What things am I not liking? And then how can I show up for myself with so much compassion and love and allowance to be a little messy.

[00:34:01] Jaï Bristow

I love that. I love that sense that, yeah, it's about self awareness, it's about compassion. It's about communicating and using relationships to learn. We don't always have to carry the baggage, quote unquote, from one relationship to another. We can use the relationship to learn about ourselves, to learn what we do and don't want, what works for us, what doesn't, to recognize, oh, I'm in that pattern again, and maybe I can do something different this time.

Maybe I can step back earlier, maybe I can set boundaries more easily and then have support systems, I think you mentioned this, but it can be hard to recognize it when you're in it, and it's a lot easier to see it from the outside sometimes. So rely on your friendship groups, your therapist, your coach, your family members who you're close to. Rely on your support networks to help you see and work with these different patterns that come up.

Amber Benziger

Yeah, no, I think that's really important to have that support, people, the people that you can go to, the people that you feel most... You're able to be vulnerable and just honest with and leaning on them and allowing yourself to feel supported because I know it can be hard and it can feel like, I can't believe I did this. I can't believe I let this happen to myself. And I see people all the time feeling embarrassed or feeling shameful about themselves, but again, that's not a representation of you. That's somebody that took advantage of you and allowing yourself to separate the two.

Jaï Bristow

Amber, thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Amber Benziger

Yeah, you can find me on my website. It's ambervsanxiety.com. And you can also find my Instagram, which is also [@amber_vs_anxiety](https://www.instagram.com/amber_vs_anxiety).

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so, so much.

Amber Benziger

Thank you.