



Conscious Life presents  
**HEALING TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**

## **Breathwork for Healing Relationships**

**Guest: Anthony Abbagnano**

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### **[00:00:10] Alex Howard**

Welcome everyone, to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking to my good friend, Anthony Abbagnano. We're going to be exploring the role of breath and breathwork, in a way in relationship with ourselves, but of course, the relationship we have with ourselves is what determines the relationships we have with everyone around us.

To give people a bit of background, Anthony Abbagnano is a visionary thought leader, breath expert, and founder of the internationally accredited breathwork school, Alchemy of Breath, which is a 100,000 person online community dedicated to evolving collective consciousness.

He currently lives in Italy where he co-founded Alchemy School of Healing Arts, or ASHA, with his wife Amy. ASHA supports breathwork, holistic practices, sustainability and growing food and building community. Firstly, welcome Anthony. I'm really happy to have some time together again.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Thanks, Alex. These are always enjoyable moments for me.

### **Alex Howard**

Great. I think a good starting point is, from your perspective, what are the signs of a toxic relationship? How can someone identify that the relationship they're in has become toxic?

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Well, there are so many different signs, I would say. One is if you feel like you're walking a little bit on eggshells. Another one might be if you find your partner is disdainful to you or contemptuous, especially in front of other people. Another one might be obvious things like out-and-out psychological or physical abuse. If you notice your partner is behaving differently in front of you when you're on your own than when you're with other people, that would be an alert for me to be questioning, becoming more aware.

Gaslighting of course, when someone is talking to you and you feel like you're being forced into questioning your own point of view or shift your own sense of purpose, perhaps. We get more general ones, like if you just feel your energy drops when you're around them. Or what does it feel

like to know that your partner is coming home? What is it you feel on a more delicate level inside you?

**[00:03:03]**

We're going to get to that in a minute, I think, because I think the body is extremely relevant and useful here. Another one might be if you feel like you're scared of leaving the relationship, if you don't feel like you're in your autonomy. Well, let me end it by saying this. I think the whole point is we've never been taught how to be in relationship. When in school were we taught how to be in relationship? We're pretty clueless.

Actually the introduction that we have into relationship in medieval times, you would be courting and you'd be overseen by a chaperone of some kind. You'd actually not even be allowed to be on your own. Curiously enough, I think there was purpose to that, and sound purpose, in that you got to know each other without sexuality being the first thing you think of, and also capping the possibilities of your human expression in that time because someone was watching.

In a sense, we do it now when things go wrong and we go see a counselor as a couple. But the whole point I think of that courting period was to discover things about each other that we could respond to and reflect on and have time to consider. We don't really have that anymore. It's like we feel attracted to someone and sometimes people will go to bed together the same day that they meet. That whole concept of introduction and courting and understanding each other on a more friendly level before a sexual level has practically disappeared.

### **Alex Howard**

Also, one of the things you said is that one of the signs can be that we feel drained and depleted being around someone, or the anticipation of someone coming home, for example, impacts us in that way. For those that have more empath type qualities or are more sensitive, of course this can be all the more impactful, that they can find themselves around many different types of people, becoming drained and depleted by being in relationship. I'm curious as to how we can notice that's happening, but also what helps us to navigate that?

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Well, yeah, of course. There are all kinds of stock answers to that about setting boundaries and obviously getting professional help, self-care, learning how to say no. They're all very valid. But as I own a breathwork school and all our facilitators that come out of it are trained to be empathic, but at the same time remain sovereign. One of the fundamental ways that we do that is for them to learn how to embody every moment.

That means to learn, and this is a process, of course, and also a practice, because it never really ends, but it's about understanding how my outer environment affects me, not just with my brain, but noticing where I'm feeling certain feelings in the body too. Perhaps if we get a moment to do a practice today, we could do that as an example.

The whole thesis behind that is that the body sends 20% of the messages down - sorry, the brain sends 20% to the body and the body sends 80% to the brain. But our ego and our brains want to know that we're in control, so we tend to appropriate our entire intelligence to our brain. The importance of using the body is that it's not just where we've stored every human experience

we've had on a cellular level, it's also an information system, it's a database that we can access. It's actually also an early warning system.

**[00:07:21]**

If you start to think now of a troublesome situation, a moment in your life perhaps that's happening right now, a relationship that you're perhaps understanding as a result of this summit is dysfunctional or toxic. You'll notice that even as I speak, I feel it right here in my upper belly, a little tingling going on. Now, that's one way of noticing, that's noticing through the brain to the body. But after practicing this for a little while, it turns the other way around, and you get this feeling in your body, and you go, hang on, I'm getting a sign here there's something that needs to be understood.

Of course, I do breathwork, so a lot of what I pitch during a breathwork is about listening to your body, because your body's got millions of messages for you that you're not getting. I remember my wife, who the first time I met her was my therapist. She said to me in my first session, she said, listen to your body because God speaks to you through your body.

I've actually found that to be true, that the God of your understanding, whatever that might be for you, whatever entity that might be. The way to communicate with a bigger space, with a higher power, something that is bigger than I am, is, first of all, to accept it's there and then secondly, of course, to listen.

### **Alex Howard**

That learning to listen to our bodies, I think, for some people, and I think the way you articulate it is really helpful that we think we're in control of what's happening. We like the sense of safety that comes from thinking we're in control of what's happening. But of course, there's a lot of wisdom and there's a lot of information that's happening there.

I think a lot of people have learned to not trust that, or they've learned to try to override that. I'm sure this comes up a lot as people are learning to work with their breath, that there's, in a way, a step out of that controlling place of their mind and into a place of some surrender and a place of some opening. I'm curious as to what helps that?

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Well, I think physiologically, what happens when you breathe a conscious, connected breath is that the frontal lobe slows down. So our thought processes, those 60,000 thoughts a day that the Buddhists say that we have actually become less. And then we get to be curious about what is there in the gaps between them, and we begin to notice something else.

I think the shamans call it second attention, which in many ways, I think should be primary attention, is to start noticing what's going on that you don't normally notice. That way we become more sensitive and more alert and more conversive with the body. We're used to pushing it through the gym and winning the race and climbing the mountain, but we know that proper athletes are very good at monitoring their resourcing as they output.

For example, with breathing, when you're using a lot of stamina it's better to breathe through the nose than through the mouth so you can contain yourself. You'll last much longer if you're exerting

yourself and you breathe through the nose. Next time you climb five flights of stairs, bear that in mind and see what happens for you.

**[00:10:55]**

But really, that physiological slowing down of the brain gives us a chance to open to what I call the 'other', or something else, something that we're not ordinarily used to paying attention to. Then we open the space for new data, new information to become available.

**Alex Howard**

What I'm hearing you say, which I think is a really helpful point, is that in a way, we can't necessarily think our way out of all of this stuff. We actually have to move to practices. In a way, this is the power of breathwork that we're not trying to do lots of cognitive restructuring and shifts. We're using a practice which actually brings us into that felt sense.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, it does. I love how you use the word practice, because so much of our reality is about process rather than practice, that we think there's an end. Once we've found our inner child, or once we've, in an empowered way, stepped out of a toxic relationship or transformed it, that we won't have one again. I think it's really important to use practice, and of course, the breath is my chosen practice to keep renewing and resourcing, not only in response to situations that arise, but as a preventative too, because that breath awareness changes everything.

It's 50 percent of the job. I was just teaching an inner child class just this morning at ASHA, my retreat center, and one person said to me, I've done all my homework. I know about my inner child. I've been a psychotherapist for 25 years. Why would I ever need to go back there again? I looked at her and I said, well, why would you want to put her in the cupboard and close the door? I mean, this is a new relationship. This isn't a process. This is a practice. It's from now on that you get to greet this inner child because it's probably the best friend you got if you make friends with it. I think the same with the breath. So these tools, I think, are really important to work with, not just reactively or responsively, but also preventatively.

**Alex Howard**

As you're talking, Anthony, one of the things that is in my mind is, of course, this conference is about exploring toxic relationships, but in a way, to be in healthy relationship with other, we have to be in healthy relationship with ourselves. You talk about the inner child and that shutting away in the cupboard one's younger, more tender self, and yet just how important that inner relationship is.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

It really is. I think that, of course, that's where it all begins. For all those times and this may be the first time that some of you folks hear this, but for all of those times that we've been shocked or damaged or abused or traumatized as children, especially in that first seven years of life, there are fragments of ourselves that we've turned away from because it's just too painful to remember.

They still lie there alone and unintegrated. I just had a question in class this morning from someone who said, well, what if you're with someone who says they're not traumatized? I said, well, you

have to be really delicate because sometimes those are the most traumatized people of all, that they can't even look at the title or consider the word without going into immediate disassociation and distancing.

**[00:14:54] Alex Howard**

Well, in a way, I think particularly in certain cultures and in some older generations, there's a very strong pressure to present oneself as being together and sorted and perfect or whatever that may be. It takes a lot of courage to be able to question that narrative. As you say, almost the more rigid and defensive one is, the more that's a clue of there's something or somewhere inside of themselves they're trying to protect.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Exactly. It just calls for greater compassion, of course. I mean, there are parts of myself I don't want to visit too. I think all of us have that, and we all have that shadow space. Shadow work and inner child work are almost twins, or very close cousins at least. It's to do with those times that we felt that we couldn't be who we naturally are in order to get the love that we needed. That was really our currency as youngsters, as little babies, was to get the love that we needed. We would comply in order to do that. Of course we would.

I think the other risk that we run if we don't look at these things is that you know what it's like when you get activated. You know what it's like when you feel that adrenaline. That's really perhaps the greatest gauge of all if you're in a toxic relationship. When you feel that adrenaline coming up, don't ignore it. Pay attention to it. Take the time to go into exploring it and understanding what's behind it, because that adrenaline is probably a part of yourself that has been awakened or activated and is going to control you.

You know what it's like when you're in a relationship and things are going pear-shaped and you don't want to say it, but you just can't hold back from saying it. You know it's going to escalate and make things worse. That's not your adult self that's speaking. That's a part of you that's pulling your puppet strings. So the stakes are really very high. If you don't become the master of your own being, that something else is going to master you and it's going to be an unresolved part of your own psyche that's going to come out and make you behave in those ways that get you into more trouble.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, what comes to my mind as you're talking is it's something around being able to really hold and make space for those places inside of ourselves, or someone else is going to have to do so because they're going to come leaking out.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, exactly. They do leak out when we go into blame or gossip or all of those superficial things that we wouldn't even appropriate to this as a source, but they all come from something inside us that's not happy with ourselves. What is it they say when you point the finger, look at the other three that are pointing back at you. There's a lot of opportunity for introspection instead of reaction.

**[00:18:23] Alex Howard**

Let's talk a little bit about breathwork. So we've been alluding to it as we go through, but I'm also mindful there'll be people watching this that may be hearing the term breathwork for the first time. Maybe you can say a few words around what we actually mean when we talk of breathwork and then we'll come into an experiential piece to give people more of a felt experience.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, thank you. I think breathwork, I keep looking for a better word, honestly, because I think there's more to it. It's such a tiny word and it covers such a massive scope. I think the first and most important thing about breathwork is breath awareness and that's 50 percent of what it means. Breath awareness means to begin to notice that you don't notice that you're breathing, first of all, and then to craft your noticing towards the way you breathe in different kinds of circumstances.

So those will be the first two things to look at. Then the next thing to examine, or to know, is that the breath is a symptom of the way you feel. If you feel agitated, you'll be breathing a short choppy breath. If you feel calm and settled, you'll probably be breathing a very slow breath. You might even stop breathing sometimes until you feel the need. Those are two primary things on your gauge, let's say.

By changing your breath consciously, you can actually - I call it reverse manipulating, which is a bit complicated, but you can change your mood. If you're stressed you can become calm, if you're calm but you have to wake up for an interview like this or something like that, there's a different breath pattern you can use to energize. There are ways to breathe to become more alert, but stay calm. There's a special breath for people who are on patrol or people who are on watch, for example. That is a breath that's designed to stay calm but also keep you hyper alert, without alertness meaning stress to be able to separate the two.

These are the first stages of what I would call breathwork. What breathwork has come to mean today, because of this mushrooming exponential growth of interest, is something that we call the conscious connected breath. The conscious connected breath, or CCB a lot of people will call it, is something that's different than just breath awareness. It's where we activate ourselves in a very particular way to be able to, as I said before, start to close down the frontal lobe and the thinking process, the normal thinking processes we have, and to open to a higher power.

So when I say that, if you consider the word inspire means to bring in spirit, we're actually opening to something, a force that's greater than we are. As we do that, we gain obviously a hugely enhanced perspective on life. Many people who come to do conscious connected breath with me, with Alchemy, are stuck in some way. In fact, I would always ask before a breathwork, what is it that you feel stuck in in your life? What would you like to shift? It could be something like a toxic relationship or it could be suicidal feelings or it could be I'm a creative and I'm not writing or painting anymore. It could be anything at all.

But bringing in this extra perspective, especially one that I would posit is divine, is supernatural, from the infinite. It's a bit like the opposite of artificial intelligence really. It's a bit like that exponential quality can arrive, but it's not because of human record. This is not human. This is the other that we're able to visit, something outside our consciousness. That to me is what is most powerful about the word breathwork is that kind of practice.

**[00:22:47] Alex Howard**

I think one of the things that has been my experience is that practices like meditation obviously are very helpful, and I personally found incredibly helpful. But there's something around working with the breath that allows the experience to be more fully integrated, and in a way it's not just a practice of trying to calm, settle one's mind and become more spacious. It's also a practice of really bringing the body in which I think sometimes, both in therapeutic schools but also other schools, can get very head focused and lose that piece.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, absolutely. Like you said, the felt sense before that sensation that I've got in the body in response to what's going on becomes really important too, the embodiment opportunity. In workshops, and those of you that are facilitators or practitioners or teachers of any kind, they say for example, don't talk for more than 15 minutes without making people get up and do something because people's attention starts to drop. Some of the subjects that I teach which are really to do with emerging consciousness and relationship, there is a lot of heady stuff out there. There's a lot of information to convey.

So what we do as a practice and every Sunday, the breathes that I do on the internet, we do something called 'Breathe the World' every Sunday and we run a theme, but then we breathe. Actually they're short breathworks because they're samples for people who've not met breathwork before. But we take a theme, like the last one was 'Opening the Door to My Shadow', for example. We would give maybe 10 to 15 minutes of something to think about, but then a 30 or 40 minute breathwork afterwards, stop thinking that way and start thinking with the whole body.

That way people can receive data, information, content, whatever you want to call it, concepts, in a much more embodied way. To me, for anybody who is teaching anything, it's of paramount importance. My niece used to work in a charter school. She's a breathworker in a charter school in Oakland, California. She started to bring in a conscious, connected breath for her children every time they came in. So that would be first thing in the morning and then after every break, after lunch and tea breaks and everything.

This was a charter school that had some very disadvantaged children, like gangster parents, drug dealer parents, absent parents, abandoned, abused. All kinds of awful things had happened to those little kids. Joy was the only teacher that had everybody show up for class. She had the highest attendance record, the lowest illness record, or non-attendance record. Everybody came into class on time. She was the only teacher that did that, so that of course, they all started to do that with their children. It just took three minutes, but I think those three minutes are enough to make people realize or sorry, become more focused and more open and just more efficient and willing and receptive. So even just three minutes is enough to make a difference.

**Alex Howard**

There's also something about being in a room of people that are all breathing in a way that's in sync. That builds a sense of connection and a sense of that longing that we all have to belong and to feel connected to other people. I think it's also a powerful - think about a class full of kids that are a bit fractious and sort of different, sort of whatever, but then actually being brought into harmony in that way.

**[00:26:51] Anthony Abbagnano**

Exactly. Yeah, exactly. I love the word harmony because that's exactly what it's doing. It is bringing people into harmony. When we slow down, especially if we breathe at the same pace, we do harmonize. We're actually resonating. It's the vibration of our breath that is meeting the vibration of someone else's breath, and that's when we really do resonate. You can play with sound to make that even more obvious for people too.

That said, on Sunday evenings now, we're breathing about 500 people. Even though they're in their own bedrooms at home in different parts of - we cover the southern hemisphere in the morning and the northern hemisphere in the afternoon. Just knowing that someone is breathing in another place in the world at the same time as you has the same effect. The transformation that can occur in 30 minutes is just extraordinary. I've been doing this for a long time. I'm still, every time I give a breathwork, amazed, refreshed and amazed, by the power of what this can do to us and these really challenging human lives we get to live.

**Alex Howard**

Ain't that the truth? Anthony, should we come to a practice? You mentioned earlier about maybe having a practice just to allow us to come a little bit closer to those parts and to our experience?

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah. Okay. It's very simple. It's a very humble, simple little practice. I want to give you something you can take away, but something also that you could expand upon. I just ask you to perhaps close your eyes, settle in the seat or whatever surface you're sitting or lying on. Take one big breath and make a sound on the way out. And then take another breath and see how you can settle a little bit more. Now, before you get too settled, I'm going to ask you to remember an occasion, a moment or a situation that causes you concern, and maybe a relationship that you're in that is toxic.

This is just a gentle breath through your nose, but I want you to focus on the sensation that that situation brings in your body, whether it's a tingling or a tightness or whatever way you would describe it. Maybe it has a color, maybe someone was shouting at you, it has a sound. And breathe. Breathe at the same time. What you're seeking to do is to repair the breath with a part of you that really isn't aware of it at all, with a moment in your life that you forget about the breath altogether.

If you can hold that physical sensation, you can let go of the reasons behind it, just the physical sensation. We're going to just give it ten easy, silent breaths. So we're going to keep the breath and the sensation in our awareness. Nice gentle breaths. One and two and three and four and five and six and seven, slowing down, and eight, nine and ten. Know that this change is achievable in just ten breaths.

We'll come back to your full awareness with your eyes open at your own speed. Maybe take a couple of breaths. Maybe you could rub your hands together and gain some heat and then cover your eyes and explore opening your eyes behind your hands. And then slowly opening your hands and letting the light back in.



**[00:33:21]**

What I would really give as a takeaway here is that the most important thing you can do when you realize you're in a toxic situation is to take a breath and turn inside, and see if during that breath you can see inside or not. If you can't, make a choice, make a choice to take another few breaths, as many breaths as you need. You can take a whole hour of breaths if you want.

You can just let your partner in this dysfunction know that that's what you need to do. Just to say, wow, I really want to feel this moment completely and I'm going to need to take a few breaths to do that. So just excuse me because I want to be present with what's going on. Many times in that silence, the person who has abused you or spoken to you badly will have the chance to hear the echo of what they said. Many times you'll find that is enough. You don't have to say anything back at all, but you're revealing something about yourself that really gives them the information they need to reconsider what they just said.

### **Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. I'm just going to share a little bit of my experience doing that because I think maybe it's helpful. I was thinking of a situation that as I was thinking of it, I noticed that my breath was quite constricted and there was a tightness and a discomfort around it. And then as we did the practice, how I felt in my body changed. I felt more spacious and easier and settled.

And then as I was thinking about the situation, the situation still needs some attention and to be addressed, but it's like my inner space was unhooked from the situation, if that makes sense. It's like I could feel easy and spacious in myself, even though this situation still exists and still requires attention. Of course that then means that as I think about addressing it, I feel non-defensive and nonreactive and clear of what I need to communicate and say within it.

### **Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, thank you. What's happening there, of course, is the adrenaline is starting to drop a little bit, that tension that we feel. It takes longer for it to drop than it takes for it to rise. All of a sudden we're just lurching forwards and being propelled into saying things that perhaps are not the wisest things to say in that moment. I don't know if you noticed, but I kept on extending the time of each breath. That's a little trick that you can do yourself if you find that you're still agitated, just extend your exhale a little bit longer each breath and create that space. Create that space to be nonreactive, just like you said.

Let us remember that reacting means we're creating a reenactment. It's not necessary for us to create a reenactment. That's not a good investment. It's not really what we want to do. If we consider that wonderful connection between the word responsibility and the ability to respond when we make that choice to give the breath the priority, we're actually reclaiming our ability to respond. That process that you're going through is that one of becoming more inward and more unattached. The reactivity settling is exactly that process of that responsibility happening. That ability to reclaim our right to breathe under almost any circumstance and to use that time as a way to heal.

**[00:37:24] Alex Howard**

Yeah, it's interesting. As you were talking, I was just reflecting as well that I'm not going to share the details of the situation but part of the essence of it is needing to manage a complex conversation. My tendency is to inflate and puff up and become harder in what needs to be communicated. As I find myself thinking about it, there's more compassion and empathy that comes in. There's still that like I need to say this thing and how I feel is still true, but there's not that sense of trying to attack or be very defensive. There's a spaciousness around it which still allows me to have my truth and what needs to be said.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, that's so wonderful. I think in that spaciousness maybe we can consider that the behavior that we're receiving is actually from the inner child of the person that's giving it to us. They're bruised and they're wounded and a victim hurts and then hurts and then hurts. So if we remember when we reengage that we can have a certain amount of compassion for the difficulty that that person must have been carrying their whole lives because they are separated from a part of themselves.

Not idiot compassion, not if it's not deserved. Certainly if someone's got a knife in their hand, there are higher priorities than giving them compassion. But I think if we can start to use this practice to create this inner space and remind ourselves that when we behave badly it's because something is dominating us. It's a part of ourselves that we have not made peace with or given resolution to and that's happening to us as well.

My hope would be that we can do this in two ways. One is to create practice of breath so we raise the bar on the way we engage with the world, and then the other way would be in our responsiveness that when situations occur that we turn to our breath. Part of me feels shy to say this but to me the breath is my god and I don't want to make apology about that. The breath is my greatest teacher. If you create the space for the breath to be with you, you'll be extraordinarily surprised by what quantum learnings and what pivotal moments you can create.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. That's really beautiful. Anthony, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, obviously we can put the website on screen below, but maybe say out loud. Also you mentioned your Sunday practice sessions and retreats. Just say a little bit about the ways people can engage with you.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

Yeah, there are two ways. We are one company, but we have ASHA, which is Alchemy School of Healing Arts which is our land-based community center for our online community on land in southern Tuscany, in Italy. You can find out more about us there at [ASHA.global](https://www.asha.global). And [alchemyofbreath.com](https://www.alchemyofbreath.com) is our training institution and where we do workshops online, most of our online outreaches on [alchemyofbreath.com](https://www.alchemyofbreath.com).

You're welcome to join us there. You get pop ups saying join us for a Sunday Breathe. We have a Tuesday ceremonial breathe in the evening. Sunday Breathes are morning and evening, so we cover all time zones. I'm speaking of UK time now when I say this. One last little tidbit for

relationships, I'd love you to go to [ASHA.global](https://www.asha.global). You'll see the twelve co-commitments written there, which you can scroll down to. I really recommend you read those. Those are ones that have been informed by my studies with Gay and Katie Hendricks, to whom I bow for their amazing guidance on relationships.

**[00:41:38]**

I've also added a few of my own that have come up as a result of starting community, then you really find out about what's toxic, what isn't. It's like a hall of mirrors because everything is reflecting about me. Please take advantage of that. I believe you can print those out and you can click on the headline and it comes up with a little explanation. Please use those as a way to maybe question your partner or whoever it is that you're having issues with. Would you be willing to work on this together because I'm not at peace? These to me, they became my wedding vows. They're so powerful. I think they're just absolutely perfectly positioned to create a safe relationship for everybody, with yourself and with everybody outside you.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. Anthony, I always enjoy our time. Thank you. Thank you so much.

**Anthony Abbagnano**

It's great to be with you again, Alex. We need you to do more summits so we hang out more.

**Alex Howard**

That sounds great.