



Conscious Life presents

HEALING TOXIC RELATIONSHIPS

Navigating Queer Love and ADHD

Guest: CJ DeBarra

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide medical or psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow and I'm one of your hosts and today I am delighted to be welcoming CJ DeBarra. Welcome CJ.

CJ DeBarra

Hi, thank you so much for having me.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you so much for joining us today. So CJ is the author of a book called *Neuroqueer: A Neurodivergent Guide to Love, Sex and Everything Inbetween*, which is fantastic. But let's start with, do you want to define the term neuroqueer? What does it mean to you and why is that the title of your book?

CJ DeBarra

Oh right well, so I am a queer nonbinary journalist. I was also diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 10 and to me the two have been interlinked and have been interlinked for pretty much my entire life regardless of the fact that I only came out in my late thirties and then sort of came out again in my late thirties. As nonbinary, I'm very much a work in progress and I think the experiences of queer people with neurodivergence are very different to the straight community and their experiences of neurodiversity.

So for me, the two were so intertwined and the more I kept hearing it being used by different communities, whether it was the trans community or whether it was lesbians or gay men or all of which, we all had the ADHD thing in common, the more I realized, well actually, this really works and this really fits, and because there isn't that much attention being shone on well, I mean, there's very little studies out there outside of the straight men with ADHD. So by using neuroqueer I wanted it to be the focus. I wanted to define straight off the bat this book is about queer people so it pretty much is the largest thing on the front of the cover as well.

So you're under no illusions but that was my major reason for choosing it.

[00:02:27] Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. And I love that intersection of neuro-atypical and queerness and I think that idea of neuroqueer and differentiating from the sort of norm and the mainstream in those two ways which I think intersect a lot I know, at least from my experience also as a queer, nonbinary person with ADHD. And so I'm particularly excited for this conversation and to hear what you have to say about relationships for those of us in that category.

And so I'm curious about how that has impacted you, that combination of ADHD and being queer and this being neuroqueer, how has that impacted your relationships? How do you feel that being neuroqueer impacts relationships in general?

CJ DeBarra

I found that there were good points and there were bad points, ups and downs. I found that there was definitely a real lack of education on this subject and that was - when I came out I didn't know what I was doing. I had no idea. I was so scared and terrified even though I'd been a part of the LGBT community for so long, but I'd been so terrified of it at the same time. And I've very much had a similar experience with my ADHD as well.

You know I knew nothing about it other than the way it had been framed so negatively when I was a child because growing up in rural Catholic Ireland, being queer was not the thing and also being neurodivergent, talking about mental health, any of that stuff, also not the thing.

So it was a real kind of eye opening experience to understand that even coming out and understanding that you can be a - what I use this term for quite frequently around myself - a consistent work in progress and that understanding that labels aren't fixed and they don't ever have to be. Shortly after coming out as queer I came out as nonbinary as well.

I managed to realize I was queer and then think, hang on a second, there's still something. So that was the next thing. I found that with my ADHD, one of the things that I love so much about it is the fact that I'm so creative as a result of having ADHD and I kind of feel like that fits and intersects really nicely with my queerness as well.

And I found that how I applied that to relationships as well. I found that the way that I sort of approached problem solving and the way that I approached date nights and things like that as well could be - that's the thing about dating ADHD people, we are spontaneous with great fun, which makes a fantastic first date. So there were little things like that which were quite lovely to realize.

Then there was the slightly more difficult stuff like you're having a double sort of level of having to advocate for yourself because you're having to consistently come out as queer when you have to tell people whether that's new friends or it's a new workplace or whatever it is, but you're also having to come out as neurodivergent as well so again, new friends, new workplace, and you're also having to stand your ground on two fronts as well.

So for me, that's having to stand my ground in doctors appointments and work meetings and less than ideal circumstances where I'm having to go look, I've got ADHD, please, let's try this a different way. And then I'm also having to stand my ground as a queer person when I'm having abuse shouted at me or I'm in difficult circumstances where people aren't as accepting and that's

exhausting and it's tiring and it's not constant, but it's there and I think it's an extra hurdle that neuroqueer people have to go through.

[00:07:00]

And also I think it's - one thing that I do find actually is there are a lot of us. There are a lot of us and it's something within the last two years, I don't know what it is, there's been this shift where suddenly everyone is okay about talking about this and it has made dating so much easier. You don't have to explain yourself as much now. You don't have to give the walk through what ADHD is or what autism is as well, because autism is also quite discussed as well.

And it's really nice because our dating pools as queer people are smaller especially - I mean I live in Nottingham, we have got a tiny scene in comparison to somewhere like London, you know we all know each other, you know, both a good and a bad thing. It's quite nice that there's been a growing number of people that are looking for a diagnosis or defining themselves as neurodivergent and it just made dating a lot easier.

Jai Bristow

Yeah, no, I really hear that how the intersection of being queer and neurodivergent, which are two things that were very taboo for you growing up, growing up in rural Ireland, have had a huge impact on your relationships. Often feeling othered, feeling like you have to come out and explain yourself not just in new romantic relationships, but also new work relationships, new friends. Like every time you're relating to someone new who's going to be in your life for more than five minutes, then there's that kind of explanation that has to come up and it's not just coming out, but it's also then explaining what that means, so how that can have a real impact.

And I hear as well that it has gotten a bit easier in the last couple of years as people are more aware of these issues and that it's talked about more and that that seems to have had a positive impact on at least less explaining. Maybe there's still some coming out, but at least less explaining what that means.

CJ DeBarra

It gives people a base understanding, I think, of where they sort of go, oh yeah, you know what, I've heard of that. That's okay. Whereas before it was this big thing where you're sort of having to disclose and that's a really terrifying thing and I constantly, whenever I'm doing talks or panel chats or interacting with people through various social media things as well, I get asked constantly like when is the right time to tell my partner? How do you tell your partner? How do you disclose? And it can be really scary, but I like to think it's gotten that little bit easier with things like TikTok and Instagram.

However, I think where it could get better again is more information becoming more readily available as well. Because there's so much about it that floored me when I started researching and writing my book. There was so much that - because the research tends to take you up until the teenage years and then it's all about how do I parent my ADHD child? What medication should they be on? Why is schoolwork difficult? And then there's nothing for ADHD adults. And especially if you're a queer ADHD adult, there's even less. Most books that I read tended to have like one sentence or one paragraph thrown in there, if they even mentioned sex at all.

[00:10:49] Jaï Bristow

Right. This is why I'm very grateful to, A, be having this conversation with you, but also very grateful that you wrote this book as a guide for those people who don't have that kind of guide. Right? And so why would you say that it is important to really learn about ADHD in relationships?

CJ DeBarra

Well, first of all, learning about ADHD means you can recognize your own traits. And if you can recognize your own traits, you can effectively communicate with your partner about what your needs are, because it's an ongoing thing. I'm still discovering traits, even as I said, I've had the knowledge of being ADHD since I was ten, but I'm still finding things that I don't know or that I've just realized yesterday and in order to have that sort of healthy relationship and connection with somebody, you need to have that open conversation with them about what that looks like for you.

And it's very hard to do that when most of the information out there, you've got social media where you're like, is this real? Is this a thing? Is this backed up by some kind of research? Because we have no way of knowing and that gets consistently harder every single year, every single platform that develops.

But also - there were no books and what I found as well was - and a part of the reason I was so determined to write this thing - a lot of the studies that were out there, I work as a journalist at nine to five, and I worked in health care writing for a very long time and one of the things that I found that was part of my job description was to read studies that came from whatever university and try and decipher them and make that into a way where the average person can click on a link and read what the study has found and understand it.

And that in itself is quite the task, but nobody really wants to be doing that at the end of a day where you just want to pick up a nice book and have a cup of coffee and read about something, especially if it's about your condition or your illness or whatever it is, mental health condition, whatever. You want to be able to read that in an easy to take in format. So that's hopefully what I've done in a nice relatable way so that people can relate and understand and go away learning a little bit more about what ADHD is and what it looks like for different people.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. And so what would you say are some of the key takeaways from the book?

CJ DeBarra

There were certain things that surprised me more than others, and there were some that sort of were a little bit harder to take than others. I think my key - the one thing that I really was quite surprised at was the fact that. And it is a stereotype that ADHD people cannot and do not have great focus. And that's all that ADHD is. The amount of times that people, when you describe ADHD go, "oh yeah, I can't focus either."

And I'm like yes but it goes so much deeper than that. For me it was learning that it's not about a lack of focus, it's about a lack of being able to regulate that focus. So for me, I thought oh it's completely and utterly, totally normal that I am up until three in the morning reading about

absolutely everything I can get my hands on about, I don't know, badgers know, for me it's buildings, I love architecture.

[00:14:49]

So reading everything I can get my hands on about random buildings in Nottingham that have absolutely no connection to me whatsoever and then I look up and suddenly realize, oh, I sat down here at six o'clock and now it's three in the morning and I haven't moved, I haven't slept, I haven't eaten anything.

So learning that, okay, I do have a lack of focus, I'm not saying for one minute that I don't struggle with that, because I definitely do, but it was also learning that, hang on, this goes the other way as well, and that my little research rabbit holes are actually part of my ADHD.

Jaï Bristow

And then, how does that example, for example, how would it then impact relationships? What's important about communicating that in relationships?

CJ DeBarra

I definitely think it's that I tend to hyper-focus a lot on work and I am so guilty of those rabbit holes being related to articles that I write where I disappear into the world of this property or this cafe is closing, but it's got this whole world and maybe if I just look a little bit into this and that's all fine and well and it feels fantastic. And when you finally as a journalist and also as somebody with ADHD, when you find that little nugget of information, the reward feeling is amazing.

But on the other side of that, if you've got a partner who is neurotypical and could be ADHD as well, everybody's traits are different, and they've clocked off at six o'clock and you've just sat down and you're on a massive, massive research binge where you're just plowing through it and you don't hear, you don't see, you don't communicate, and you don't get that across to someone. It can be really isolating and lonely for them and they can feel really uncared for and really alone in those circumstances.

And I know that I do talk about two relationships that I've had in my book. One with somebody that was neurotypical, and the other person with somebody who was neurodivergent as well, and very much that would have been the experience of my partner, one of the partners in the book, that - I do regret that quite a bit, and I'm quite open about that in the book as well.

And in researching and getting to know that that's one of my traits and that is something that I do need to work on because it is not fair for me to do that to somebody, where they feel uncared for and they feel on their own. I am getting better at it, but it comes back to, again, work in progress. But yeah, that was something I wouldn't have realized if I hadn't researched, if I hadn't well, if I hadn't gone down the rabbit hole of research writing the book.

Jaï Bristow

And I think what's really interesting in what you're saying and something I've noticed myself is that when you get a diagnosis and you research and you understand it, then you can better explain it to the people around you. And in doing so, it helps bring compassion for yourself and from others

about certain behaviors that would be considered annoying, maybe even toxic or difficult if they were from a neurotypical person, right? And so it creates that sort of explanation and compassion and understanding around it.

[00:18:37]

But what's really important in what you're saying is that like you say, it helps you recognize them as well so that you can work on them. And I say this a lot. It's not about excusing the behaviors that are maybe harmful to other people, but it's about explaining them and bringing compassion to oneself and explaining them to others so that there's more understanding and therefore more support in working on them. And so I know from my own experience, people sometimes can help point them out or help break cycles or help create the structures that I need so that I can go to bed at a reasonable time.

One of my things is I use a lot of apps that sort of cut me off at certain times or send a reminder being like you have now been scrolling for 15 minutes, and then I can choose to keep scrolling for another 15 minutes or stop, for example. So I think that that's what's really important, that it's really important to understand behaviors, to explain behaviors and to bring that kind of compassion. But that doesn't mean that it's always an excuse for any kind of behavior that's harmful to yourself or others.

CJ DeBarra

That's exactly it. It's about having not just compassion for your partner, but compassion for yourself as well and understanding your traits and how they manifest. Because I get where it comes from that people say, "oh, ADHD is a superpower" that kind of thing. I get where it comes from, a good place of wanting to unwrite the negativity that a lot of us have grown up with or are experiencing with a diagnosis later in life but it is about balance. It is about balance.

And some of my traits are better than others. Some of them are a superpower, let's be real but I think in doing that, it sort of washes over the ones that are more difficult and it is my responsibility to look at the impact that those have on other people around me, particularly people that I'm in a relationship with. But I also need to have not just compassion for my partner, but compassion for myself in that I need to understand that I can't help it. It's not something that I'm doing on purpose. But I also need to realize that going into a research mode five nights a week when my partner wants to watch a film and have a cuddle on the sofa, it's not great.

Jai Bristow

And I think what I'm hearing and what you're sharing and which I find really important is - before I was talking about how having a diagnosis, whether official or not, and having a better understanding of the traits can offer you sort of self empathy and understanding and helps you explain it to your loved ones, whether that's your partner, family members, work colleagues or whatever and then that gives a structure for understanding and to work on anything that's harmful.

Of course, like you say, there are some great traits with having ADHD or other neurodivergent traits but it also can, by having that research, it also helps bring understanding and compassion of the impact that those harmful traits are having on the people in your life, on the loved ones. So it's not just about having empathy and understanding of oneself, but also of having empathy and understanding of the impact that those of us who are neurodivergent can have on other people.

[00:22:08]

Whether that's difficulty with volume regulation, difficulty with word splurging, difficulty with time management, difficulty with going into these hyper focus zones where we become oblivious to the world around us and whatever it is. So it goes both ways and I think that that's really important to remember. And it can be easy to position oneself either one side or the other, right, to be like, "oh, I have ADHD, so here's all the ways I function. You have to understand that that's just the way I am and sort of take it or leave it or even if I'm working on it, but this is the way I am."

It's like, yes *and* if you have someone with ADHD, you also have to understand the impact you're having on someone else and then vice versa. If you're someone neurotypical who's spending time with someone who's neurodivergent again, whether that's ADHD or other types, I love that you listed them all at the beginning. Then it's having, yes, compassion and understanding of it, but also having compassion and understanding of the impact it's having on you and being able to name that to the person in a kind and honest way, which is something else that I talk about in some of these interviews, the importance of balancing kindness and honesty.

CJ DeBarra

Well, this is it like people can't work with you if you don't tell them what's going on. They can't meet you halfway, they can't have compassion for you if they do not understand what's happening. So as painful as sometimes these conversations can be, as difficult as they can be, it comes back to communication and just talking to people about what your ADHD looks like for you. And again, that's going to be an ongoing thing. It takes a while to get to know what your neurodivergence looks like for you and then it becomes even more complex as well because many of us have more than one diagnosis.

I know I have oppositional defiance disorder, which is referred to as ODD. I also have generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). So that's a really lovely mix of acronym things there and it becomes difficult to figure out where my ADHD ends and my ODD starts and my GAD gets involved along the line. I constantly feel like I'm having those conversations with my partner. We've been together, we'll be coming up to two years soon and I'm still having those conversations where I'm figuring out what things look like. But in doing that it's been really eye opening to - because this is sort of my first relationship since I wrote the book and I started to look at what my traits were and look at what it looked like for me.

And it's actually been such a blessing to be able to have those conversations freely and openly with somebody about what my needs are and I don't have to mask. I'm not tired from forcing myself to jump through hoops and it's as simple as my balance is extremely bad as part of my ADHD. It's also related to my hearing and my perimenopause as well. Sorry, I just realized I'm giving you my medical history here.

But basically going downstairs, being up high, I really struggle with it. It's getting progressively worse so in being able to communicate with my partners, a simple thing that we do is my partner will go on one side of me and offer their arm up whenever we have to go downstairs and I can hold their arm and hold a railing and that's it. I know I'm going to get down the stairs safely. Whereas before I would have gone "I'm fine, I am absolutely fine" and by the time I reach the bottom of the stairs, I'm shaking and I'm in a cold sweat. So that's just a small example of it but to me it's massive.

[00:26:32] Jaï Bristow

Of course. And what I'm really hearing is like that intersection of different, whether it's mental health conditions, medical conditions whether it's queerness whether whatever it is we all have our own unique intersections and whether we're neurodivergent or not, communicating in relationships and being really honest with ourselves first so that then we can communicate our needs to our partner or loved ones or partners is super important.

And so once again, I think this is often what people from the sort of mainstream can learn from people from what alternative or fringe or marginalized groups is that thing of: it's not about following a rulebook. It's about figuring out who you are. And sometimes having diagnoses and labels can support that. Sometimes those labels change, sometimes they don't. But it's really about figuring out being really honest with who you are, what you need, and learning to communicate that in relationships.

CJ DeBarra

Absolutely. It makes a huge difference being able to have those honest conversations, especially with your partner, but across the board, being able to have those conversations with friends as well with your family, because, yeah, I can definitely see the improvement in the last year that I've had with being able to be honest about what my needs look like and it's different for every single person.

That's one of the many ways in which ADHD is really difficult to get diagnosed with, is because my ADHD looks very different from your ADHD, looks very different from the next person's ADHD. We have some kind of core traits that run throughout, but the way it can manifest and look and present and feel is so different for absolutely everybody. So it is really vital to get to know yourself, get to know your diagnosis or your neurodivergence, or get to know what it looks like for you.

Jaï Bristow

One hundred percent. So, CJ, what is it that you're working on at the moment after publishing this book?

CJ DeBarra

So I took a giant step because this was a three year labor of love. And, I mean, I wrote this over lockdown where there wasn't a whole bunch happening, and I was very much immersed in - everything was about my research. So I decided to take a giant step away from that sort of world, the healthcare world, and move into queer history. So I started the Notts Queer History Project here in Nottingham, and I have started writing what was meant to be one book is now two books. I've started writing a history of the LGBT community here from 1960 to 2022.

So, a nice, light hearted task. I'm interviewing loads and loads of community members. The oldest is 93. The youngest so far has been about 18-19. Everything from what the venues were like to what were people's experiences of Section 28 or the HIV AIDS crisis. All of these amazing memories. I've actually lost count of how many interviews now. I lost count when it hit about 55, and I'm booked solid up until about halfway through September with an interview every day. So that's exciting and exhausting. And also I can't wait.

[00:30:29] Jaï Bristow

Brilliant.

CJ DeBarra

It's very different.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. So how can people find out more about you and your work?

CJ DeBarra

Well, I'm on pretty much every social media platform, so [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#), you can find me if you look for CJ DeBarra on Instagram. Same on Twitter as well. I also have my website as well, which is carobarry.com. And the book is available through any bookshop, so you can go in and order/ demand, and you can also order on Amazon or if you like, a lot of people dislike Amazon. You can also head to my website as well. And it's on there, available to buy.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today.

CJ DeBarra

Thank you. It's been really good fun.