



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Reclaiming Sexuality, Eroticism & Intimacy

Guest: Darshana Avila

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am very pleased to be welcoming the wonderful Darshana Avila, a somatic sex and intimacy educator who you might recognize as one of the experts from the Netflix show Sex, Love and Goop. Welcome, Darshana.

Darshana Avila

Thank you, Jaï. I'm really glad to be back in conversation with you.

Jaï Bristow

Likewise. This conference is a lot about toxic relationships. I'm wondering, in your area of expertise, which is about erotic wholeness, what does this term of toxicity evoke for you?

Darshana Avila

It's a great question, we can jump off in so many different directions from there. But the thing that comes up for me most strongly is the toxicity is in the scripts that we've been handed, that many of us are following in our intimate lives without realizing it. That's the nature of our dominant culture is conditioning, that it's so insidious, it's so woven in that we don't recognize when our own behaviors, our own desires even, the standards we measure by, the norms that we go with.

Many of us have not really ever stopped to question how those do, or do not align with what's authentic for us. And many of us have no idea what's authentic. At the root of toxic relationship is that it's shaped by a culture that is very patriarchal and misogynistic, and many other isms, and so on and so forth, that can be added to this list. We have a really incredible opportunity then to start to get curious about that for ourselves, and shift in a different direction.

Jaï Bristow

100% I love that definition of toxicity as the lack of authenticity, and often an unconscious lack of authenticity, where we don't even know any better. I know for myself, I'm someone who's queer, I'm non-binary, I'm trans, and at the same time, I was socialized as a woman for a long time, for 30 years.

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As part of that, I was socialized that intimacy had to look a certain way, that relationships and partners had to look a certain way, that eroticism had to look a certain way, that sex was a very predefined menu, let's call it, a set order of things right and ways of doing things.

And it was very much the focus was on men, for starters the focus was on pleasuring my partner rather than on receiving pleasure. It was very much what I thought was expected of me, what I thought sex and intimacy were. I didn't even know there was anything other. And then I was grateful that I ended up being able to go on a journey of discovery with people who had unlearned a lot of that kind of thing.

I think these days that's coming into the mainstream collective consciousness, including shows like Netflix's show *Sex, Love, and Goop*, and others which really help that. Of having these conversations about what is intimacy, what is authentic, what are your desires? So maybe we can talk a little bit more about that.

Darshana Avila

As I was listening to you speak, lots of resonance, lots of head nodding happening over here. One of the things that I want to hone in on, is even the word sex. Regardless of your orientation, regardless of your queerness, or your CIS het normativity, or wherever you might exist on the spectrum of gender and sexual orientation. Most of us hear the word sex and automatically translate that into penis and vagina intercourse. That's just what that word has been so deeply indoctrinated in us to mean.

And regardless, I am queer and I partner with a lot of men, I partner with a lot of women, I've had lots of different sexual experiences across the spectrum of non-binary. So I speak both from my own direct experience, as well as what I offer as a coach and as an educator, seeing this with clients and students, that no matter what our location, no matter what our identities, that's what I mean when I say that there's a script that is running. It begins with what is our conception of sex? And then, what is our assigned role within that?

Because the script is based on a very narrowly defined binary, and you said this exactly, that your experience, and this is true of many of us who are assigned female at birth, who are acculturated as girls and women. Though it is not exclusively gendered, there's definitely a bias in the direction of what I'm about to say. What we're taught about our sex is that it's for somebody else. That we are actually showing up to a sexual act for the pleasure of another person, for the satisfaction of another person, to be an accompaniment, if you will, to their experience.

And in accordance with that script that tells us sex equals intercourse. Intercourse then ends when the person with the penis has their orgasm and off we go. That's like the worst of it, but it's also the most typical of it. And so there's incredible opportunity here to even just begin to take that word sex and redefine it for ourselves, expand it.

There is really no limit beyond what your creativity and your desire might be when it comes to defining sex. Any act that gets your sexual energy stirring, any act, or maybe it's not even an act, it could be well, I guess speaking is an act. But any way that you might engage that brings pleasure to your body, that excites and arouses you, that helps you to feel closer to your own sexual

essence to that of another person, whether that's kissing, whether that's touching, whether that involves your genitals or not.

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Different positions, different durations, different you name it. You can define sex on your own terms, but even that the notion that that's possible is really foreign for a lot of us. And it can take some time to get used to, even if intellectually you might be listening to me, having your own head nods, like, cool, yeah, I'm going to define sex on my own terms. There's a gap to close between wanting the thing and actually embodying the thing, because that's the nature of this really deeply entrenched conditioning. I've forgotten exactly what your entire question was, but I hope by now that spoke to some of it. So many directions we can go in.

Jai Bristow

It's so fantastic. I think one of the things I really take away from what you're saying is how in society women in particular are objectified sexually. There's all the advertising, all the films, all the male gaze, and then women, or those of us who were signed female at birth, and were socialized as girls or women for a while, end up internalizing those messages and objectifying ourselves as well.

I think it's really important what you're saying, that there's a script and we can just throw that script away and redefine what sex is, what intimacy is. Whether it's through acts, through words, through fantasy and imagination. And like you say, it's easier to be, okay, I get the theory, but putting it into practice is a lot harder. I'd like to talk about that, the putting it into practice.

But first I'm curious about defining, or redefining perhaps, what is intimacy versus sex? What is eroticism versus sex or intimacy? What are these words? What do they mean? What are some of the ways? We'll get into that afterwards, what are some of the ways, practically, that we can redefine these?

Darshana Avila

I love it, you're reading my mind, literally, I was like, we need to talk about what intimacy is. We need to talk about what eroticism is separate from sex. Fantastic. Because in the same way that we hear the word sex, and we think intercourse, we hear the words sex, intimacy, and eroticism. And for many of us, it maybe is blurry and murky at best, how those might be distinct from one another. Certainly they're also related to one another and can be, but each of those three is independent.

So sex, any act we've spoken about this, I'm just going to recap like, sex, any act, any way of engaging with your body, with another's body, with your fantasies, with your thoughts, with your words that really evokes your sexual energy. I'm going to start, then I'm going to go to eroticism from here because eroticism includes sexuality, but it's not limited to that.

And this is where a lot of people get really tripped up because, again, the dominant culture has stripped away everything else that I'm about to list for you from our eroticism. And the interesting thing about the control, and the commodification of our sexuality is what has done that. It has taken the broad spectrum of all that eros is, and basically caged it into this very, very narrow scope of what is erotic.

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But erotic and eroticism to me, it evokes not just sexuality, but sensuality. It has to do with our creativity, whether that is manifest as artistic creativity, or the ideas that are churning in your head, the things that would propel you forward toward activism, toward whatever manifestation of your passions in the world.

I use the word erotic as a synonym for life force energy, it's our vitality. So with that in mind, if you're approaching it that way, there's no facet of our lives that our erotic energy is not permeating. There's no aspect of who we are, how we do relationship, how we move in the world, whether it's expressly sexual, wholly platonic, family, community, business, you name it, there's actually a place for our eroticism there.

But because we have conflated it so narrowly with sex, and sex is something that is shameful and it needs to be contained. And it only happens in these places, in these ways, so on and so forth. The presence of eros has over time just been stripped away from so many aspects of our lives.

Then to talk about intimacy as the third related but distinct concept here. Intimacy can involve sex, sex can involve intimacy. But again, they're very distinct. And intimacy has more to do with a quality of presence than anything else. There's a play on the word intimacy which is, into me see. And that can be self-intimacy. So by which I'm referencing a form of self-knowledge, self-knowing, self-seeing, self-connecting.

And then there's the intimacy that can be shared with another person where we're really deeply present with them. And this can show up as emotional intimacy. It can show up as, again, like platonic or familial intimacy. I experience in my life some of the deepest, deepest moments of intimacy with people who I'll never be sexual partners with. And whether that's because we have a platonic friendship, or I experience it with my clients, intimacy transcends sex. Sex and intimacy absolutely can co-arise.

But many of us know we've had sex or sexual encounters that have not involved intimacy. So when we actually tease these three apart, sex, intimacy and eroticism understand them for what they are, this too becomes then a path to that, basically the ditching the script and finding out what's authentic that we spoke of at the beginning.

First, really establishing yourself and understanding what these three are lets you then get more curious about what do they mean to me? How do I want to experience these? How do I want them to relate, and intersect, and interact with one another? Because, again, I want to be really clear. If you are satisfied by sexual acts that aren't intimate because that's what's working for you, where you are in your life, and it's happening in a safe and sane way. More power to you. I'm not sitting here trying to act like there's a hierarchy, that there's a right way.

What I am inviting is that most of us have never even really questioned how and why we do what we do. And this is an invitation into that, to figure out what is each of us, what is right for me in this moment in my life, what is right for me in relation to this other person, or group of people. Lots of opportunity there, lots of it.

[00:14:11] Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. I really appreciate you defining these different things as interconnected, but also very independent, and that they don't have to go hand in hand. I could really relate when you were saying so many of us have had sex without intimacy, and so many of us have had intimacy without sex. I think it's so important to distinguish. And as you say, there is nothing wrong with the script if that's what we choose, but it's about regaining choice, and we can only do that if we become aware that we are following a script, and that there are other options out there.

I feel like whilst we're talking about these themes, we can't talk about these themes without also bringing in the topic of vulnerability. Because vulnerability, whether it's to do with sex, whether it's to do with intimacy, perhaps less so with your definition of eroticism. But vulnerability has a huge part to play in relationships, and I think especially if we're talking about toxic relationships, or harmful relationships, that relationship to vulnerability, that fear to show up, or feeling exposed when we show up. So maybe you could say a little bit about vulnerability in relation to this.

Darshana Avila

What I can say is that vulnerability is sexy, I can say that vulnerability is courageous. Vulnerability is a game changer on so many levels. Invulnerability is part of that script we've all been handed, denying our needs, denying our truth, conforming, just like, all right, buck up and do the thing. That is so indoctrinated into the dominant cultural scripts that most of us have been established in.

So it's funny, I would argue that, not that I need to argue, that eroticism includes vulnerability too, because it's actually a really vulnerable thing. Particularly the way I see eroticism as one and the same as activism. I'm going to draw from a broad stroke from the queer community here. It's an incredibly vulnerable thing in a world that says this is the binary, this is the right way, this is the wrong way, you can be this, not that. It's an incredibly vulnerable thing to stake your claim of saying, no, it's not like that for me. This is how I see myself, this is how I want my sex to be, this is what intimacy looks like. And one of the most incredible gifts that I believe the queer community is offering to our collective.

And I mean that. Whether you are the straightest arrow out there, or the queerest person on the planet, not that it's a competition. If we talk about the word querying as a verb, what it means to be querying, our idea of sexuality then is to be vulnerable enough and courageous enough to defy these narrow options that we've been given, and actually be more expansive. And the vulnerability that it takes to do that is tremendous.

Again, I'm speaking to everybody who's listening, regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, this applies because we all have an opportunity then, we all have an invitation to figure out, okay, what would be the vulnerable edge that moves me closer to my authentic truth.

The other thing that's really incredible about vulnerability in relationship is what a permission giving force it is. Your vulnerability invites my own, my vulnerability invites yours. Are there exceptions to that rule? 100% when we're relating with people who are navigating their own complexities of life experience, of trauma, of defense structures, their own mental, emotional, psychospiritual health. Not everybody is going to be in a position to receive our vulnerable truth and just match us in that.

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So again, I want to be conscientious to not talk about this all through the rose-colored glasses lens of things. But in a best case scenario, when we're actually relating with somebody who we have a baseline of trust, and presence, and intimacy with, and we bring our vulnerability into that.

It's establishing a tone, if you will, it's supporting a culture in this particular dynamic that we get to bring our truth forward. And it might not be a fully formed truth. It might be a little bit messy and misshapen at times. But if it's coming from that deep heart of, here's what matters to me, here's how I'm really seeing things, here's what I'm daring, here's what I'm risking.

That's such a powerful way to be in relationship and encourage people to relate with us. And it really sets us up then to be incredibly creative and expansive in what we want, and how we want to do intimate relationship in all of its forms. So I'll pause with that.

Jaï Bristow

I love that. Thank you so much. And what I particularly love is because what I'm hearing you say is that vulnerability is beautiful, it's sexy, it's brave, it's wonderful, especially if all parties can show up in their vulnerability. But even if you can just show up in your vulnerability with yourself, how it's linked to eroticism and sexuality and intimacy.

And yet I'm also hearing you say, it's okay if you're not, it's okay if you're not able to bring that. It's not like, oh, you have to be vulnerable to be able to have successful relationships, which sometimes I do hear similar things like that. And that can be a lot of pressure. As you say, if you have a lot of trauma, if you struggle to trust, if you struggle with all that kind of stuff, then being vulnerable can be really scary. So I really appreciate that it's something you can bring, but it's not like an obligation either.

Darshana Avila

Yeah, I would say it's nonlinear. We are by our very nature as humans, as mammals, we're relational. We cannot, literally cannot survive if we're not in relationship with others. It's not what we are built for. And many of us have experienced very real and significant harm in relationship with other people.

The paradox there is our healing then is also most likely to come in relationship with other people. Will it be a linear, easy, straightforward journey to getting there for most of us? No, that's not how that works.

And I'll speak now through my lens as a trauma therapist, that this is a big place where, as a practitioner, when I'm working with someone and we're actively attending to parts of their formation, and their history that are rooted in and shaped by trauma. What I'm doing is serving then as a safe person, or safe enough person, for them to practice being in relationship with. And anytime that I'm working with a client, I orient toward the dynamic that we get to create with one another as a relationship laboratory. Which is to say with me, we get to practice some things that might feel really edgy to do with someone that you're invested in a personal relationship with.

So I offer this as an example to let people know wherever you're at in your healing journey, please, I'll hold a thread of compassion for you, even if you can't for yourself. We all are walking our own

path. We're all going to need different inputs and different supports at different moments. Some of us might find that the best scenario to become vulnerable is with the people that we're deeply invested in intimate relationship with.

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And deeply invested intimate relationship might be the scariest thing for others, and getting support from someone who's more of a practitioner, where there's clear boundaries, so on and so forth, could be the way in. And those are not your only options. Again, we're skewing the binary across the board here. There's always many ways to go. It's all to say that bringing this back to intimacy and particularly self-intimacy here, this is a form of self-intimacy.

If we define self-intimacy as self-knowing, knowing enough about your own self, your needs, the things that are most likely to trigger and activate you, getting some insight into your patterns, growing that self-awareness. And then the vulnerability that it would take to say, for instance, if it's me and you Jaï, and all of a sudden we're relating and you say something that is one of my big triggers. And I start to get hijacked, by which I mean my protective parts come on. And for me, it's often I'm a fighter. So you see my body move, I activate, and I move toward, and I might start to get louder, or speak faster, or there's anger and there's heat in my words.

My self-intimacy in that moment might look something like, hey, Jaï, I'm hijacked, I've got to go for a few minutes. And that might feel really abrupt to you, or that might feel really okay for you. I'm actually less concerned about your instantaneous reaction, and more concerned about intercepting what could amount to a lot more harm.

Because I know myself and I know I need to step away and simmer down for a few minutes, and it won't happen if I'm face to face with you. That's actually vulnerable because I'm showing you, I have this way of behaving that's really unattractive and unsavory. Even if I have compassion for why I do what I do. It's actually a really vulnerable thing when we know ourselves in that way, can include that in relationship.

Just staying with this example, if it's me and you, if I do that and let's say your way of navigating when conflict or such arises, maybe you withdraw, maybe you freeze and you shut down. You seeing me be in ownership and accountability of my own, might be an invitation for you to step into a little more ownership and accountability of your protective parts.

And then we actually get to relate with each other across that divide and be like, hey, okay, here we are being these perfectly imperfect humans. We've been shaped by certain lived experiences. It's not pretty all the time. In fact, it can be quite messy. And we choose intimacy with one another, and we ultimately do want to lean into this connection. That's vulnerability in action right there in such an incredible way. And it opens up again, just so much possibility, so much opportunity.

Jaï Bristow

Wonderful. I think that's such a beautiful tool to bring in, and a beautiful way of describing the role of vulnerability in intimacy in relationship. How it can be this really beautiful connecting tool by helping in part by being connected with oneself, and being able to name that, for example, in setting boundaries, or in preserving the relationship.

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I'm wondering if we can go into some more other practical strategies that we can take into account to... We talked about, we've redefined sex, intimacy, eros, vulnerability. You've talked a lot about how it's very much an individual approach. It's not so much, let's go from one script to another script, here's a new template to follow of this is how you redefine sex.

But perhaps there are some practical tools, some questions, some guidance you can offer on how to find out, how to connect with one's own self, with one's own intimacy, with one's own desires. It took me a really long time to figure out what it was that I actually liked, because even to this day, and I've been on this journey for a long time now, sometimes I feel like, wait, I'm still doing that thing. Am I actually enjoying that? And sometimes even with myself. This isn't necessarily with partners. Like when I'm practicing sex with myself, whether that's masturbation, or other forms of self-intimacy, sometimes I'm like, hold on a minute, is this actually what I want? So could you offer some guidance?

Darshana Avila

Yeah, well, first I'll celebrate that you have any amount of moments when you're pausing to ask yourself, wait, do I really like this? Kudos, cheers, well done. Because masturbation is actually one of the hardest places for many of us. Most of us have formed a very succinct path from the A to B of masturbation. The A being impulse arises, B being I satisfy that impulse. And it might have been established very, very young, or wherever in the arc of things our brains are wired for efficiency and repetition.

So when I've learned, for instance, I put my body in a particular position and I use a particular toy, and I like to have either this music on, or this kind of porn, or whatever it is, all of those cues stack up to that shortest path from A to B. So we keep following it.

It's actually quite challenging to incentivize ourselves to deviate from that path. And I offer that as a starting response to your question because it's important to understand a little bit about what's going on in our brains when we talk about things like, how do we get more expansive in understanding our desire and our pleasure?

Because you are going to actually have to put some effort into that. It's going to go against that wiring for repetition and efficiency that is just coded into our brains. Please don't hear those words as it's never going to happen, because it can absolutely happen and be incredibly satisfying.

I just want people to understand that it's not just as easy as snapping our fingers and saying, okay, I'd like to try to have different kinds of sex now, to your point, it actually can take quite a lot of exploration and persistence to really learn what it is that might work.

In the same way that the example I gave just a few minutes ago talking about how our defense structures might show up in relationship and the vulnerability it takes to presence those and incorporate them. The same holds true for navigating and including more expansive desire, curiosity, things we're interested in sexually speaking. So I'm talking about a situation where it might be you in relationship with another person, but this could apply solo too. Simply naming, I want more than what I'm having, and I don't know what that is.

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That's a fabulously vulnerable place to begin, because it's all about opening up possibility, it's all about widening the aperture. However much we might, to say if I always do it this way, what if we introduce XYZ variable? And I really want to emphasize treating this as an experiment, because when we experiment, the nature of an experiment means we actually do not know what the outcome is going to be. And that's the whole point.

We are experimenting to see where we end up on the other side. And no matter where it is, it's going to have value. Because either we're going to come away learning something that actually works for us, we like it, it has a positive effect, it does something good for us, or conversely, it doesn't. And if it doesn't, we might say, I never want to do that again. Or we might say, okay, I want to try that again, but this time I'm going to do blah, blah, blah, blah.

So experimentation is a really wonderful way to orient exploring your sexuality. To bring it back to some practical stuff or down to some practical stuff. The place that I always encourage people to begin, is to really deemphasize it needing to be something expressly sexual, and instead place the emphasis on pleasure, delight, joy, and to do that through your senses.

So when we were getting started, and you were having to figure out, I don't even know if this made it onto the interview, but there was a lot of sunlight streaming through your window, and you're trying to figure out how do I place myself in relationship to this light that's streaming in.

In a different context the light streaming through the window, and the way that that makes you feel, and the warmth that might bring to your skin, that could be a jumping off point for learning something new about what gives you pleasure, what is delightful to you, something you might want to incorporate into your sexual play. You're starting with your senses. Does it feel good on my skin? Is it a pleasing sound, taste, smell? Does it invite some fun sensation to move through my body? If yes, try that out. Bring more of that in.

If for instance, the way you masturbate is always to go directly for rubbing your clit, or rubbing the shaft of your cock, or whatever your anatomy is. And it's a very friction focused approach. What would it be like to lightly let your fingers graze across the surface of your genitals, or maybe even use your nails lightly?

Again, incorporating that same thing in a partnered connection. Most of us have default ways that we touch, and it's happening quite unconsciously. So let's bring a little consciousness, aka presence, to how am I touching my lover's body right now? Can I try something different? If I usually use a flat hand, can I bring my fingers in? If my touch is normally really firm, can I soften it up, or vice versa? If I never play with their hair, or touch their face, or the crook of their elbow, might I pay attention to a part of their anatomy that is not normally the focus and see what happens there?

So it's going to be a series of experiments, really, that never stops, there's no end to this. As I said earlier, it's really just down to how creative and willing you are to introduce all sorts of new elements. And I'm speaking about things that are quite physical in nature and sense based, but this also extends to different energetics, different dynamics of power exchange, role play, fantasy. There's so many ways to get innovative with how we are being sexual, and it all just comes down to a willingness to experiment with the things that you're curious about, and keep going from there.

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I'll just say one little trauma informed nugget around everything that just came out of my mouth. Is it's okay to both want to experiment, and expand and introduce novelty, and be more expansive in that definition of sex for you. It's okay to do that, and also sometimes just stick with what's familiar.

You're not failing if you go back to, okay, I just had really super creative sex the other day with my partner and it was all sorts of expansive. And today let's just do it the way we normally do it because there's actually something comforting about that. And that resource that we receive from the familiar is ultimately going to help us keep expanding, keep growing, keep getting more creative over time.

This is a concept in somatics and trauma speak called titration, which is to say that we expand in the direction of a growth edge, of introducing something new, and then we come back for a period of time to the quote-unquote safe zone, to where it's familiar, to where we know what's what and we can rest into that. And the next time we experiment, we might go a little bit further, and then we come back to home base, and we experiment again.

And so you swing back and forth in that way and orient to it as thus, it's like a long arc, it's a marathon, it's not a sprint. And it's okay to sometimes rest into, yeah, let's just go with what works today, whether that's in your masturbation, in your partnered sex, or the wider scope of any expression of your eroticism.

Jaï Bristow

I love that invitation to explore and experiment, and that permission that it doesn't have to be linear, or it doesn't have to be all at once, it doesn't have to be all the time. There's the invitation to do it, whether maybe on your own, or with a partner, exploring all the different senses. It doesn't have to be physical, and it's okay to have the familiar, to have that holding as well.

Now I feel like it's really important in this conversation to talk about the relationship between pleasure, which you were just talking about, and pain. I want to talk about it from two different angles. There's the kinky angle where it's pleasure and pain can intersect. And then there's also the trauma angle where the relationship can be a bit confusing sometimes with pleasure and pain.

Especially if you have a medical condition, like I for example have endometriosis, and I have an allergy to latex, which I didn't find out until quite a few years into being sexually active. So these two things for example, mean that there's a lot of association for me between pleasure and pain, but more from the trauma perspective than the kink side of things.

Then there's also an exploration in the kink side of things, of what do I enjoy when it comes to pain? What type of sensations, or pain, or closeness, proximity to pain does give me pleasure? I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about that relationship and dynamic from both those angles.

Darshana Avila

Sure, it's a really fantastic topic. Yes, some of us derive a lot of pleasure from pain, or a lot of pleasure from intense sensation. A lot of pleasure from pushing our edges and understanding just how far we can go. Also some people derive pleasure from facilitating, or we can even use the word inflicting that on others. And when that's done consensually, it's a beautiful thing, and spoken

from direct experience. As someone who really gets off on it, I have found incredibly expanded states of consciousness and expansion in my own sexuality and eroticism, I'm using both of those terms, by exploring with BDSM dynamics that include pain. So that's real.

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And then there is the trauma side of the spectrum, and what you're speaking to through the lens of your own experience, where some of us have known so much pain that was not consensual, that was not chosen, and yet has been coupled with sex. Particularly when you speak about endometriosis, which needs way more attention on the wider stage because that is a horrible condition to live with, that goes under diagnosed and undiagnosed. Many females suffer through intense pain, couple that with sex and sexual acts, and then what that amounts to is that coupling leaves us very reticent, or even fearful to engage sexually, because it signals pain that we are not up for.

The path to how we might shift our relationship to pain is going to look different for different people, in base of the particulars of their circumstance. I would be remiss to not say that point blank. There is not just one way here, and I honestly don't think that this conversation is going to do nearly enough justice to what the possibilities are.

But we'll put a little inspiration out there for folks who are curious to go further on their own with it. I see this as an invitation too into self-intimacy, getting to know what is my relationship to pain. What's the origin story here? Is the way that I react to pain rooted in the fact that, and consent dynamics have to be spoken of here.

A medical situation such as, or a condition, like endometriosis is non-consensual. While that might be a little strange to wrap your head around, because it's like, wait, it's me and my body. Does consent even apply here? But yes. I'm using consent to signify that that is not something that you opted into. It is not something you chose for yourself, which is very very different than somebody who has tendencies towards masochism saying, I'm going to choose to be spanked, or flogged, or whipped, or whatever the thing is, because I actually want to intentionally and consensually invite pain into my experience of pleasure.

We get to be more intimate with understanding what is the origin story of our own relationship to pain and pleasure. And then understanding the origins of it decide how do we want to write future chapters? Do I want to actually lean into finding the pleasure in my pain? Do I want to focus instead on how I remediate and mitigate my pain? Do I need to make different requests, whether of my own sweet self, or whomever I'm dealing with, dealing is not the word, interacting with, lovers and partners? Do I need to make different requests about how to engage when pain is present?

There's a lot of opportunity here for inquiring more deeply into the particulars of your situation, and using that as yet another jumping off point for more creativity, more experimentation, more defining sex on your own terms. In base of whatever you're working with around pain and pleasure. And a little cherry on top is to say, I love that we're getting to speak about kink and trauma adjacent in the same conversation here, because I'm a really big believer as a kinky person. I'm all for normalizing conversations and stripping away the sensationalized taboo.

Not all kink is trauma informed, emphatic statement that I want to make here, not everybody who engages with kink practices knows anything about trauma. So be judicious, be mindful. And there

is trauma informed kink. And trauma informed kink is an incredible healing path for certain people. So I just want to presence that that exists in the world.

[00:43:03]

And there are people, whether they're trained practitioners, or folks you might encounter in community, or form personal relationships with, who can facilitate significant healing through this lens, particularly around the intersection of pain and pleasure. Or exploring power dynamics, or making non-consensual imprints like using those to create consent based ways of working through our material. So there's a lot of opportunity there.

Jaï Bristow

I'm so glad you brought that piece in because I think we've touched upon it a bit throughout this conversation. Sadly, we don't have that much time to go into it much more. But really, when we are on a conference about toxic relationships, and we're talking about sex and intimacy, I'm so glad we brought in this trauma piece.

Because there are a lot of toxic sexual relationships, more than just the script that we spoke about at the beginning. There's also abuse, there's a lot of trauma, there's a lot of assault, that kind of thing that can come up. And many people have suffered from that, struggle with that, survived that kind of thing, and then need to relearn and heal from that trauma.

Part of that can be through sexual practices with oneself, or with a supportive trauma informed practitioner or partner, not necessarily in the same way. Part of it can be through practices like trauma informed kink. And again, all the tools, the strategies you've been giving today around exploration, around experimenting, around using your senses, around redefining what sex and intimacy and eroticism are, around allowing vulnerability to come up, around having a trauma informed approach, I think, are all really supportive for people who have had very toxic, abusive sexual relationships.

Darshana Avila

Yeah, I certainly hope so, I believe so. This is wonderful conversation, we've covered so much ground and it's also the tip of the iceberg. So for those listening, if something really resonated with you, or sparked your curiosity, go deeper. There is so much resource out there, and the sky's the limit with your creativity and your experimentation.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. Thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Darshana Avila

The best way to connect with me is to head over to my website, darshanaavila.com, and you can get onto my newsletter. You can join the Erotic Wholeness community, which is hosted on the Mighty Networks platform. I am transitioning my relationship to social media, so you will not find me any longer on Instagram, because Instagram has not been a very hospitable place for a lot of sex educators.

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I invite you to connect with me directly, and let's lean in and explore together, lots of different ways that could happen. I have a membership, I lead group programs, I have a private practice. And so whatever your curiosity may be, I welcome the chance to connect with you.

Jaï Bristow

Wonderful. Thank you so, so much.