



## Healing Toxic Behavior Patterns with the RRC Model

**Guest: David Cooley**

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**[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow**

Hello, and welcome back to this conference all about healing toxic relationships and instead cultivating healthy, happy ones. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am delighted to be welcoming David Cooley. Welcome, David.

**David Cooley**

Thank you, Jaï. Good to see you again.

**Jaï Bristow**

Good to see you too. David Cooley is a professional restorative justice facilitator and the creator of the Restorative Relationship Conversations model. Now, David, do you want to start by telling us what toxic relationships mean to you?

**David Cooley**

Well, for me, I prefer to sort of reframe the question. Instead of focusing on toxic relationships, which for me, can sort of create a problematic diagnosis of a situation, I prefer to focus on the behaviors. I can see behaviors as toxic that then undermine the safety or connection or intimacy of a relationship.

For me, that reframe is important because I think people can start to take on sort of a stigmatization, either as individuals or as a unit, that something is fundamentally wrong with them. What does it mean to be in a toxic relationship? What does that say about you or you as an individual or as a group of people? I think it's really important to focus on what it is that we're changing if we are healing patterns of toxicity. I think it's really about behaviors.

**Jaï Bristow**

Absolutely. I love that reframe, because if we're talking about just toxic relationships or toxic people, like you say, people can become very identified with that. Again, and either point the finger, you're a toxic person. Why do I attract toxic people? I'm a toxic person. Why are all my relationships toxic?

**[00:02:05]**

Instead, if we focus just on the behaviors, then we're looking a bit more at the sort of cause rather than just looking at the outcome. We're looking at the cause rather than the outcome, perhaps. Yes, relationships can become toxic, but they don't become toxic just like that. They become toxic because of the toxic behaviors.

Do you want to introduce a bit more about toxic behaviors and why it's important to focus on them? What are some toxic behaviors that we can recognize in relationships?

### **David Cooley**

For sure. I think there's two kinds of broad strokes we can make at the outset. I think the first category would be out-and-out abuse, mental, psychological, or physical. Again, this is a spectrum of possibilities, but it really deals with extremities in terms of behaviors that people are subjecting themselves or others to. That's one category, and that's a category that I'm not really focused on in my work. It's something that I saw a lot of and dealt with in the context of restorative justice, working in nonprofits.

But now that I'm doing the work that I'm doing in my private practice with clients, I'm more focused on the second category. That second category is really the place where we're hurting each other in conflict, but we're not meaning to potentially. There's a level of intentionality where we feel stuck in patterns that have followed us from the past, whether from childhood or previous relationships.

There's dynamics, there's defensive mechanisms. There's things that we've learned to survive. These things haven't evolved in a vacuum, but unfortunately, they create significant obstacles to intimacy, to closeness, to safety. They undermine emotional attachment in a secure way.

Those are the things I really want to focus on in this conversation. But I do want to make that acknowledgment that there are behaviors out there that are toxic in their essence, in the sense that no one should be subjected to them. But that's not what we're talking about. We're talking about the things in this conversation, what are the things that we can change and need to change if we're really committed to the overall emotional health of our relationship.

There's sort of different ways to think about that, different subsets. One of the ways to contextualize that I love is Gottman's work. John and Julie Gottman and the Four Horsemen, defensiveness, criticism, stonewalling and contempt. I think that's a fantastic model. So anyone that doesn't already know that model, that's a really good model to familiarize yourself with, because that's just such a core predictor of whether or not a relationship is going in a good way or towards really its end.

So those are good. The Gottmans have a really great system of analyzing what is our sort of default way of holding the relationship. Are we extending sort of a projection of good intention towards our partners? Are we assuming that our partners have our wellbeing at heart? Are they looking out for us? Are they taking care of our hearts? Are we taking care of theirs? Do we hold that as true?

When things come up and they're difficult challenges, are we assuming the worst or the best right off the bat? If we're projecting negative intention, that's another thing to really be aware of,

because sometimes we do that without being aware of it, and that can really undermine connection. Those are two really important things, the Four Horsemen, and then sort of the projection of negative intention onto partners.

**[00:05:48]**

Another thing that can be really damaging and toxic in relationships is the pathologization of differences. Differences are inevitable in any relationship. A lot of times they don't surface until later in the relationship. Many relationships tend to go through sort of a cycle of symbiosis where we're focused on the same elements or things that we share, and that's often what brings us together. The glue of the initial attraction is, oh, wow, we have all this in common.

After you get to a certain place in a relationship, differentiation becomes important where the differences between us start to emerge. The way that we navigate those differences can be huge because sometimes these can be really big differences. There's differences in values, differences in ways that we approach fundamental sharing of domestic life, parenting. What does love mean?

When those differences start to emerge and they're really related to core elements of our lived experience, if we're prone to pathologize or demonize those differences, we're going to get into a lot of conflict. This is where I see a lot of partners hit a wall. They've internalized a way of being from their past and that feels normal, that feels true, that feels right.

When those differences start to get exposed and rub against the differences of a partner, it really can be difficult if we're not conscious and aware of the need to recognize those differences and honor them and then negotiate how we get our needs met in that context of difference.

**Jaï Bristow**

Thank you. I love that. The first thing that comes to mind when you were differentiating between, in toxic behaviors, abusive behaviors and then more everyday conflict. In the trauma conferences that we do, we often talk about big 'T' trauma and small 't' trauma, and they're not perfect terminology, but it's that same sense that when people hear toxic and toxic relationships, the first thought might be this big major abuse.

Whilst that is definitely something that does happen and something to look at, that's not what we're focusing on in this conversation. We're focusing more on the everyday patterns which can create negativity and conflict in a relationship. I love that you then distinguish that into these three categories. The Gottman's Four Horsemen, was it? Then you were talking about the second one. Can you remind me again? It was projecting.

**David Cooley**

Yes. The projection of negative intent. Assuming the worst when conflict happens. Assuming that our partners are trying to hurt us, essentially.

**Jaï Bristow**

I'm looking forward to digging into that one in a bit. Then again, what you're saying in this third way of the interactions and the differences, and that it's okay to have differences. What I love about everything we're talking about is that it's so true in all types of relationships. We see it, of course,

in early childhood relationships with family and caretakers. But I see so much of what you're talking about coming up for me in different friendships, long-term friendships, when we reach different stages of friendships, as well as intimate relationships and partners, as well as professional relationships.

**[00:09:04]**

I work on different projects with different people, and I can see how those patterns can come up around that as well. When you start something with someone because you think oh, we're the same, and we have the same way of thinking, and this project is going to be great. Then at some point, you realize you have completely different ways of working or whatever it is. I love that we're talking about all this everyday stuff and that we're breaking it down into these really understandable and relatable chunks.

There are a lot of directions we can go with this. I'm wondering if maybe we can start with exploring a bit more about these last two that you were talking about, the intent, the projecting negative intent, and going a bit more deep into detail about that, as well as then going into detail about what you were talking about, the differences. Then maybe after that we can talk about what we can do with that and how to recognize whether a relationship is saveable and how to do that.

**David Cooley**

Perfect. I think in terms of if we're going to start with the second category that I mentioned, which is that projection of negative intention or sort of assuming the worst about our partner's behavior, or rather the intentions underneath that behavior, we see that there are two broad categories, again, of where that comes from. Sometimes, unfortunately, that's just our default. That's the thing that we've learned.

Maybe our parents modeled that, or it's something that we got in early childhood relationships from caregivers or people that were close to us. Sometimes it's something that comes because of the accumulation of something like the Four Horsemen. There's been such a build up of hurt that hasn't been repaired along the way, that now your idea of your partner has really shifted.

It's so difficult to not bring the hurt into the present, especially if we're triggered in any kind of way. If we're in conflict, I get triggered. It's very difficult then, for the infrastructure of hurt, the accumulation of that hurt in our relationship, to not then come immediately to the forefront and create a distorting filter that now makes you look like an enemy or an adversary.

What do they do? What do adversaries or enemies do? They try to hurt us. It's so interesting the ways that these mechanisms of cognition start to create these protective mechanisms that are trying to protect us from more hurt. Their purpose is essentially good. It has a good function. Unfortunately, the way that they go about it ends up perpetuating the same kind of problems that we don't want in our intimacy.

We don't want to keep relating to close people in our lives as adversaries. It often takes a very conscious and deliberate changing of our perception, bringing down and deconstruction of that distorting filter of you're trying to hurt me. Again, it can be a default setting that we've learned, or the accumulation of hurt that has now changed our perception of a partner, someone close to us, where now we're assuming the worst when we get triggered.

**[00:12:20] Jaï Bristow**

I think that's really important to recognize that sometimes, like you say, it comes from either early childhood trauma or it's something that is there when we start the relationship, whoever the relationship is with, and that other times it sort of builds throughout the relationship. I'm sure I've already said this on some conference at some point, but one of the things that I talk about sometimes is how the tone reinforces the dynamic and the dynamic reinforces the tone.

You get caught in this loop where you're expecting the person to be attacking you or to have a response. So you already come in with a certain tone and then that tone that you come in with, that tone of voice, that mannerism, that already defensive approach will immediately activate or trigger the other person. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy and a loop that just continues spiraling and spiraling.

Then, of course, they'll respond in the way that you were expecting them to respond because you've already come in with this way and vice versa. I see it in so many of my own relationships and in a lot of my friends' relationships. I was just visiting some friends the other day and just seeing exactly that. They're a couple. They've been together almost 14 years now. They have a child together. They love each other very much. Whenever I'm solo one-on-one with them, they just talk about their partner. They're both aware of the issues, but in both of their minds, the other is the villain.

The other is not understanding their perspective. The other is the one being unreasonable. I'm just sort of in the middle, like, have you guys tried talking with each other rather than, you know. I think it's really important to recognize that. Let's explore some of the other patterns and then we'll start talking about what people really want to hear, which is how we start working with some of these patterns.

**David Cooley**

For sure. One thing I want to say, though, before we hit the other issue is going back to what you mentioned earlier in the conversation about making distinctions between Big 'T' trauma and now we can say even Big 'T' toxicity. It's interesting because I think previously we've had this idea that trauma is just something, you get in a car wreck or you're physically attacked on the street. It's a terminology that we've reserved for things that are typically extreme and less common. The same thing for toxic.

Whereas I think as we refine our understanding of these terms and expand their purview, we can start to recognize that actually there's a lot of trauma happening on an everyday level. These traumas are disconnections, anything that disconnects us from our intimate relationships with people, whether friends, family, whoever it be.

**Jaï Bristow**

Ourselves as well, primarily.

**David Cooley**

Ourselves, absolutely. That's inherently traumatic. That immediately diminishes our quality of life. We need to recognize that it's so important to be on top of these patterns and deal with them as

soon as we can, not let them accumulate. The accumulation of small traumas, microaggressions, little toxic things. These are the things that really undo us over time. I want to sensitize and really couch our conversation in an awareness of that care that we need to bring to relationships.

### **[00:15:48] Jaï Bristow**

A hundred percent. I'm so glad that you've named that. That's one of the reasons I asked you to go further and talk about that is because you can't change something unless you're aware of it. Because if not, we're all in these automated trauma responses. It takes some time to just, even to hear this conversation we're having now and to be like, oh, okay, that is toxic. It might not be major abuse, but it's not toxic. It doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel good for me. It doesn't feel good for them.

Let's already recognize that. Recognize where it comes from, that it can come from trauma. Recognize that it's not healthy. How do we get to the healthy point? Before we get to the healthy point, let's also talk about, here we were focusing especially on that projection of intent, of vilifying the other one. Let's go into the next category, which I'm already forgetting.

### **David Cooley**

Differences.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Yes, the differences. Exactly. That's a very interesting one.

### **David Cooley**

How do we honor differences in relationships? How do we start with that as our default, recognizing that not only is it probable, it's inevitable, to be honest. It's going to happen, differences are going to emerge in perspective, in value, in want, in need. Those things are a part of human life. Instead of which, I think unfortunately for many is the default, we demonize those or project a wrongness onto those differences because they can feel wrong, just because that's not the way we've done it our whole lives.

How do we actually embrace it? How do we get excited about it? How do we get curious about the differences in the people that are close to us? How do we create a space in which we understand where those differences come from? Now I'm going into how do we change the patterns? The pattern in its essence is recognizing one, do we have this negative default, this projection of pathology or wrongness onto the differences when they emerge in certain relationships?

We need to be honest with ourselves and have enough self-awareness. Okay, am I doing that? Sometimes it's one relationship and not another. Sometimes it can be the degree of the attachment emotionally that you've created with someone. For example, when you're with a partner for whom sort of like you just mentioned, you've got a lot of shared history, you're potentially living in the same space together, you have a child. The stakes can really feel high for that relationship.

That can feel very different than a friendship. Friendships can still have a lot of weight and a lot of importance and a lot of consequences to our hearts. But it's different. There's degrees of

difference there. When those relationships feel like they're high stakes, that's when those differences can really feel hard to navigate and even scary or dangerous.

**[00:18:44]**

Oh, you want to parent differently than I do, or oh, you're wanting to have love manifested now in a different way than what I'm understanding we were doing? What's going to happen to all of this thing that we've created together?

Being able to recognize that, okay, that doesn't necessarily mean one, the end of the relationship or that there's something inherently wrong. Simply that, okay, yeah here we're at a crossroads where we need to really understand each other, where these differences are coming from, what are the values and needs that they're anchored in? Then how do we start to negotiate those as co-creators of the relationship?

### **Jaï Bristow**

I think it's really interesting, like you say, the issue isn't the differences. The issue is pathologizing the differences. The issue is the idea that having differences of opinion, having differences in the way that we want something, or even having differences of reality, which I'm having a whole conversation with Roxy Manning about soon. Those kinds of differences are normal. Life would be very boring if we were all clones and we all thought exactly the same way and there was just one way to do everything.

Instead, what's exciting, or can be exciting, is the fact that we're all different, that we can learn from each other, we can grow, we can evolve. But those differences can also be really scary. There is that sense of when you love someone, you want to be reassured or you want your views and your opinions to be reinforced. That kind of, oh my God, danger, danger.

The person wants something different to me. What does this mean? Does this mean conflict? Does it mean the end of the relationship? We have all these alarm bells go off and like you say, depending, I think it's not so much, even for me, the relationship type, but maybe the intensity of the relationship or the relationship pattern or how differences have been navigated in the past.

Is this the first time that people are coming into contact with a major difference? How long have the people known each other? How have they navigated that difference in other relationships? There are all these things that come up. I have one friend in particular that is her biggest phobia, her biggest trauma that she's working with is what happens when she comes into contact with someone who has a difference of opinion. We live in a very polarized world. With everything that happened, for example, for her the big thing was around COVID and the vaccine and all of that which I don't want to rehash, but it was a moment among many where that was very polarizing for people.

People had a lot of close, loving relationships where suddenly they realized they had very different views and opinions and values than the people they loved. That was scary. It did create conflict and rupture and division. All the things that people were afraid of did happen to some degree and other relationships managed much better. Let's talk about that. What do we do when that happens and how do we know if it's a sign of the end, or how do we know if the relationship is able to be saved or able to be continued?

**[00:22:03] David Cooley**

It's a great question and I want to re-emphasize something that I think you were hitting on. I don't want to come off sounding romantic or partner-centric in terms of putting value on relationships, or that those are the relationships that have higher stakes inherently. But I think you're right in that we can have more precision in talking about attachment. Emotional attachment.

Any kind of relationship can have a powerful, seemingly high-stakes emotional attachment. A bond that feels so important that it can often create a symbolic life or death response in us because the loss would be so devastating.

**Jaï Bristow**

It does. End of relationships often do feel like death.

**David Cooley**

Absolutely. Our nervous systems take them as such, I think, in many instances. I really want to make sure that our purview is broad enough to include any relationship, that someone may be listening to this program and says yes, I identify with this but my relationship looks like this. I think that's really important. For me, it's also a good segue into what I want to talk about in terms of how do we start changing the way that we relate to these potentially, inherently upsetting or agitating experiences around difference.

It is recognizing first what is it that's most important to us in a relationship. I think the concept of emotional attachment is really important for anchoring and orienting and organizing a lot of people's understanding of what it is that they want in a relationship. Emotional attachment can look very different to a lot of different people in a lot of different contexts.

I think underlying all of those differences, there's really an evaluation of emotional experience. Evaluating mine, holding mine with a lot of care and respect and holding yours, really prioritizing the emotional content of the relationship. Recognizing that your emotional experience is really important. It's not always rational. I don't always agree with it, but I recognize that it's valid, it's subjective. It doesn't need to adhere to or use other concepts like truth in order to validate itself.

I want to be able to just say your emotional experience is important simply because it is. Even when there's differences between our experiences emotionally, I still want to hold space for it. I still want to understand why it is the way it is. I want you to feel like I understand and care, that to understand the way it is has historical precedent. It's not coming from nowhere. It's not a vacuum. It's not you trying to hurt me or be contrary.

It's you have your own unique history personally and so do I. That's brought us to this moment. We both have the right to have that honored and held in the context of our relationship. It's really starting with what is attachment? I'm positing now that a core principle of healthy attachment is a care and concern and willingness to hold space for our own and others' emotional experience as it is, without trying to change it or fix it.

That would also be a big part of my definition of intimacy. Being able to share our own experience and receive someone else's experience as it is, without trying to change it in any way or fix it as if it was something problematic.



### **[00:25:37] Jaï Bristow**

I think that's such a beautiful definition of attachment and intimacy. The idea that, like you say, truth is such a complicated word and can be so subjective. It's not about the truth. It's not about a right or wrong response to a situation. It's like, okay, this is your response. I accept your response because you can't have any other response in this moment because this is the response you're having and vice versa.

It's doing that for other people, but also really learning to do that for ourselves. That kind of just, okay, not like criticizing ourselves or feeling wrong or adding layers of judgment onto our experience and our emotional responses, but just, this is the emotional response I'm having.

It feels out of proportion to the situation. I wonder why that is? Bringing curiosity rather than immediate judgment and shutting down and I shouldn't behave like this and I should change. I shouldn't let anyone see me behave like this. All the very familiar responses people can have to that.

### **David Cooley**

A hundred percent. You're moving into an extension of what are the tools that we can use? What is the paradigm, or the larger infrastructure of the paradigm, that we need to integrate in order to be able to move towards conflict in a new way? That curiosity that you're talking about.

But what I'm talking about in this moment is really anchoring in what is our starting point for change? In terms of changing the way that we, even on a cellular level, feel moving towards someone else's difference or feeling them responding to our differences? When we disagree, what does that inherently feel like? Instead of feeling like, okay, this is an inevitable problem or this is going to erupt into something worse, getting amped up, getting dysregulated before a word has been spoken. Then having that energy flow into the dialogue, changing the course of it for the worse.

How do we relax? Because we can't be curious about something if we're tense. We can't be curious if we're afraid. It's interesting the ways in which fear and curiosity become mutually exclusive. We have to have a certain level of relaxation. We have to have a certain level of tranquility and emotional regulation to be able to even do what you're talking about.

We need to be able to change the way that conflict feels on a very base level to be able to handle it differently. Part of that is recognizing, okay, there's discovery here. This is not inherently bad. This is an opportunity that can sound semantic and intellectual initially. I understand that. But through time and practice, it can literally start to feel different.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Absolutely. As someone who's done a lot of practice on that, I can vouch for what you're saying. When we become less identified with the emotional reaction and that we can just recognize it almost like an alarm bell. When we hear the alarm, rather than just panic, it's taking the time, okay, there's an alarm ringing and then go from there.

### **[00:28:49] David Cooley**

Absolutely. There's an interesting irony there because I think a lot of people think when they hear someone like me say, we need to put so much priority and emphasis on holding space for our emotions. They can think, well, emotions are irrational, they can lead us astray, they can be extreme, they can be intense. We shouldn't trust emotions so much. There's that idea that emotions are something to not be trusted.

The interesting thing for me is that actually, it's by creating space for them that they don't become overwhelming. They don't start to derail a process. It's something that we have to give air to, like releasing the pressure valve on a pressure cooker. It's tension that we hold naturally as beings. We have to create space for that tension, because tension is always looking for escape. It's always looking for a place to release.

If we don't consciously create that, then it finds sideways and backwards ways to enter into the interactions that we have because we are carrying it. If we don't release it, we carry it. It's an interesting thing around our psychobiological reality as human beings. We need to create these spaces intentionally for the emotions to be, honor them for what they are, and that way they're not running the show. But often that feels counterintuitive to a lot of people.

### **Jaï Bristow**

I think that's so important. I think when people feel like their emotions are irrational and controlling and too much, it's often the reaction they have to their emotions rather than the emotions themselves. It's possible to feel a huge amount of anger and not start yelling at someone, for example. The emotion itself is the anger. What's harmful, the toxic behavior, isn't the anger. It's how the anger is expressed.

Like you say, if we create that space to be with our emotions, to befriend our emotions, to understand our emotions, and to learn to release that pressure, like you say, in a healthy way. I've spent some time with my seven-year-old godson just recently, and I was exactly helping him with that. I could see he was getting very riled up and reactive every time his parents would say anything to him, because he had all this pent up emotion that he wasn't allowed to express.

I took him aside and I took some time with him and was like, okay, what are you feeling? All right, let's release that. We did some lying down on a mattress and sort of yelling and hitting the mattress or whatever it was. Afterwards, his behavior completely changed because he'd had that time and space to release the pressure, and wasn't releasing it in an unhealthy way.

Now, whilst that's a seven-year-old boy, I know a lot of adults who could also benefit from that, releasing the pressure and recognizing that the emotions aren't the problem. The emotions are just the alarm bell. It's like the steam on the pressure cooker. Like you say, that noise. It's not actually the explosion itself. That's the reaction that can happen when we don't have a healthy relationship to our emotions.

### **David Cooley**

Absolutely. Keeping that in mind, we can build and extend on this model of, okay, what is it then that we need to do with these emotions? What is this space that we're creating for emotions? What are we moving towards? That's where we can segue into a restorative approach. This space

that we're creating for each other when we feel tension between us is a space where we're unconditionally listening to each other as we share.

**[00:32:25]**

You're going to be a speaker, I'm going to be a listener, and we're going to trade those roles. What I'm wanting is to understand why you feel the way you feel, understand the impacts of my behavior on you. I want to listen to you with the intention of reflecting back after you speak to me. What have been the impacts of my behavior?

That can be scary because often it feels like if I acknowledge that I've hurt you, then I'm acknowledging, I'm essentially saying that I'm wrong. A wrongdoer. That can trigger shame in me. It can start to undermine my sense of identity and sense of being a quote, unquote good person.

We have to really tease apart acknowledgment from the shame that comes through this projection or this idea of wrongdoing. I can hurt you and not intend to, so I can validate your experience when my behavior or words have an impact on you without even agreeing with you. It doesn't mean now that my perspective or my experience is invalid. When I say, wow, I recognize that what I did or what I said to you hurt you. It had an emotional impact.

Those two things can happen simultaneously. Impact and lack of negative intention. That's the interesting thing about this. The restorative approach recognizes that this kind of space-holding for acknowledgment of impact is fundamental to repair. I argue that there can't be repair without it. Often people talk about forgiveness. I think forgiveness has its place and it's beautiful, but I wouldn't recommend it before there's been some process of acknowledgment of impact.

Unless there's recognition, then how will you know that this person is going to be conscious of what happened, why it happened, and then endeavor to do it differently? I don't want to skip the step of restorative repair, i.e. through acknowledgment of your experience and incurred through my actions, because that's then going to cut us off from a much-needed understanding. Okay, you recognize that didn't work for me, that made an impact and now we're committing to doing something different.

### **Jai Bristow**

I think that's so important that acknowledging hurt doesn't mean pleading guilty to being a villain. That relationship between intention and impact is so important. I've heard various people talk about it in different ways. One of my favorite anecdotes around that is, for example, if you're chopping vegetables with a child in the kitchen and you accidentally cut their finger and they start bleeding and crying. Your intention, of course, was never to harm the child, but the impact is that they're harmed.

The important thing is to take care of that harm, to acknowledge that you hurt them, to apologize, and then of course, you let them know that you really didn't intend to harm them as well. But it doesn't make you a bad person to cause harm. We're all human. We're all constantly doing our best and messing up, and all constantly harming each other. It's not so much the harm, it's that recognizing and being able to learn from it and acknowledge it. Again, just like we were talking about the emotions before and taking a moment to recognize the emotions, without being reactive and controlled by the emotions.

**[00:35:57]**

It's that same thing of being able to recognize we've caused harm without going into the role of villain or victim or being identified with the harm and trying to focus on the intention. But instead just acknowledging, because so often we're causing harm without meaning to. We can't learn. We can't learn to not cause harm unless we acknowledge when we have. I really appreciate you naming that and bringing that piece in. There's the emotions, the acknowledging of the impact.

### **David Cooley**

Again, like you said, the way that this process is done, every element is so important. There are certain skill sets that we have to have. These skill sets are really built on certain self-awarenesses. We have to understand our own triggers as individuals. We have to understand how that shows up in our body on a somatic level. We have to understand emotionally what our triggers look like and what are the stories that we start telling ourselves as a result of these triggers? What do we tell the story about ourselves? What's the story about the other person?

We have to see these fundamental components of triggers in ourselves and understand when we're escalating and starting to go up into this state of dysregulation emotionally. Knowing that and then being able to communicate that while it's happening, making that process of dysregulation transparent to the person that we're communicating with is so critical. But it's not something that I've seen many of us grow up learning how to do, unfortunately. Where do we learn that?

It's in a process like this, like restorative relationship conversations, where you're getting the training to one, recognize what's happening for you on a physiological, emotional level. Then having the communication skills to name that, because like you said, it's fine I want you to be as angry as you need to be with me. But the way that you communicate that anger is paramount. It's absolutely important. You can't just fire off and start blaming me for your anger and expect things to go well and expect me to just hold that unconditional space of listening and acknowledgment for you.

That's a really key component. The way that we share and communicate our hurt is really important. That's where a system like NVC, nonviolent communication, is really important. How do we take ownership for the fact that, yes, your behavior caused a reaction in me, but my reaction is mine, and my interpretation of your behavior is mine?

This is my internal experience that's being triggered by your actions, but it's because it's connected to things that are important in me, but it stays in you. That's an important thing. How do we stay grounded in this process in our own experience and not make other people responsible for it? That's how you can safely step into a process of acknowledgment back and forth.

### **Jai Bristow**

That's one of the things I love about the Restorative Relationship Conversations model, is that it brings in all these different tools together and it incorporates things like nonviolent communication, whatever kind of sensing or mindfulness practice people do to have that self-awareness to be able to do it. I think it's really wonderful. I'm mindful of time, so I want to make sure that we have enough time to name some of the other elements and tools before we end.

**[00:39:15] David Cooley**

Absolutely. There's a lot of different tools that we can use. Another one is internal family systems. What are the ways that we can recognize these parts of ourselves? Because human experience is often multiplied in different dimensions. We have different ways of experiencing ourselves based on previous experiences. We have parts of ourselves that identify with certain ages in which we lived, certain places. We're not these encapsulated coherent entities in a way that we often like to think of ourselves.

These parts of ourselves that play roles in our thinking and our feeling and especially in our reacting to conflict, we have to be aware of those. In a similar way of our triggers, what are the parts of us that carry hurt from the past into our present that influence the way that we experience someone else's behavior?

Recognizing oh, I've got this angry part. When you say this, I'm feeling righteous indignation. When you're saying I don't take out the trash, I'm feeling like all of a sudden you're my mother scolding me for something that I didn't do in the past. Instead of coming with my mature adult self and saying, oh, I hear that that was hard for you. I'm sorry I forgot to take out the trash. I'll do it next time or I'll do it later.

We want to be aware of what are these little parts of ourselves that flare up and start to override a more core, more central, more integrated part of ourself that can actually respond to people in a way that feels connective as opposed to inherently contentious. Internal family systems is another amazing tool that we can integrate into our toolkit.

Narrative therapy, I mentioned before. What are the stories that our minds tell? This is one of my favorite tools to recognize that the mind is constantly telling stories. What are our minds saying about ourselves and someone else when we're in conflict? He's never going to get this right. Or I knew she didn't care about me, or this relationship has no possible future. I'll never get the love I want here.

These stories that just become reality. Creating distance between those stories, ourselves and those stories is really important. So narrative therapy also gives us another context, another angle from which we can really look at some of these things in ourselves that we need to be aware of and change in moments of conflict.

**Jaï Bristow**

Brilliant. What I love about IFS or anything that focuses on multiple parts or multiple selves is really noticing how we're complex multi-dimensional beings. Just because in one moment we might behave in a very childish way or in a very strict way or in a very traumatized way, it doesn't mean that's who we are. It doesn't mean that's our entire personality.

It just means that in that moment, that's the part of us or the one of us that has been activated, but that we actually have lots of other parts that can be activated in other moments. That ties in very well with what you were saying about the stories. Not getting identified and reinforcing the story of this is who we are, but instead allowing ourselves to be these complex beings.

**[00:42:41] David Cooley**

Absolutely.

**Jaï Bristow**

I'm curious with this model, who is this kind of work for? Is it the sort of work where all parties need to be involved to have the conversation? Or is it the sort of work where one person can go through some kind of training and then be able to use that in their relationships, even if the other people haven't done the work?

**David Cooley**

That's a great question. Ideally, everyone that's involved in a conflict situation is there. That's the way to get the best results, no question. Yet I've worked with a lot of people that have family members or friends or intimate partners, romantic partners, that aren't willing or wanting or ready to participate in a process like this. Working alone is the only option, and that helps them. That gets them to a greater sense of clarity around what are their needs, what are their wants, what is it that they're struggling to make happen in the context of their particular relationship.

That's going to benefit them. A lot of times, if you have another part of the equation that's not capable or willing to step into the process, it means there can be an imbalance then in the commitment to it. The wellbeing of the relationship can suffer and one person can grow beyond the relationship because they are doing that work. In that work and in that clarity that they're getting about their own personal needs, they may decide I need a different kind of relationship.

I've heard partners say that sometimes to other people. Okay, this is toxic for me now because I'm not getting my needs met. When before, up to that point, that realization and then the subsequent work, everything seemed fine. It changes as people start to do the work. It's ideal that everyone in a conflictual dynamic is getting help, even if it's not this process, therapy, something, some kind of intervention. But it is possible to work and have results.

I've seen some people come to me. I had a mother come to me recently who was estranged from her daughter for 30 years and she worked with me. The daughter wasn't going to come and work with me, but she worked with me. She started to change her behavior. She started to change the way she was interpreting what had been happening throughout these 30 years. It changed the way that she showed up with her daughter. Her daughter ended up being able to move towards her again. It was beautiful and so it was enough. That's what she needed and that's what the relationship needed.

It's really a smorgasbord in terms of who this is for. But really it's for anyone that's in any kind of relationship that's struggling to get their needs met or communicate their feelings in a way that feels connective and reinforcing of the intimacy versus destructive. It's for anyone that knows they need help, wants help, and is committed to making those important changes.

**Jaï Bristow**

Fantastic. Do people have to be at a certain point in their path? Like you talked about, if people are just realizing now that actually they have some toxic small 't' or big 'T' tendencies, or that the relationship has some toxic behaviors from their partners or themselves. What happens if it is a

full-on abusive relationship or someone's just come out of an abusive relationship? At what point do people have to be able to come to you and work with you?

**[00:46:16] David Cooley**

If it's the big 'T' trauma or the big 'A' abuse in this case, like a domestic violence situation, for example, this isn't the method for that. This isn't going to work. Those situations are too extreme. I wouldn't ask someone who's just been in a situation of extreme abuse to then sit down and hold space for their partner, for the person that's been abusing them. That wouldn't be right, that wouldn't be ethical. They need a different kind of process at that point.

This is more for people who are in that second category that I mentioned at the beginning of the program or the conversation, rather. Where do we have daily misattunements? They can be relatively large traumas. They can be ruptures, big ruptures. I've worked with infidelity. I've worked through loss of a child. I've worked through lots of big hard things.

But you can kind of hear the difference in the sense that it's not straight up abuse, but it's more circumstantial stuff or things that happened that for whatever reason, people were able to survive and stay in the relationship and want the relationship to continue. Everyone's there committed to making something be different in terms of that dynamic. The bigger the rupture, the more important it is. The commitment to change that rupture.

**Jai Bristow**

Brilliant. I know you work with lots of different relationship styles, whether family relationships, romantic relationships, whether monogamous or non-monogamous. You work a lot with the LGBT community, so I think that's wonderful. For people who are inspired by this conversation, I know I am and I wish we had more time to talk more about it, but how can people find out more about you and your work?

**David Cooley**

The best way to get in touch with me is via my website, [www.restorativerelationship.com](http://www.restorativerelationship.com). There you can make contact with me through the contact form, send me an email and just express interest. You can either sign up for an initial consultation, a first session, or we can have a free conversation. Get to know me, talk about your particular issues and see if the work is a good fit. I can really explain the details, the point by point details, of the protocol and what you'd expect, just to make sure it feels like, yeah, this is a place I want to be to work on my particular challenge or challenges.

**Jai Bristow**

Wonderful. Thank you so much for your time, David. I really enjoyed this conversation.

**David Cooley**

Thank you, Jai. I appreciate it.