



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

How to Understand Your (Toxic) Relationships

Guest: Dr Alex Iantaffi and Dr Meg-John Barker

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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 excited to be welcoming not one but two wonderful speakers. We have Dr Alex Iantaffi, who is a family therapist, sex therapist, gender specialist, and award winning author. Hello Alex.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Hi Jaï. Thank you for having me at this conference. I really appreciate it.

Jaï Bristow

Thanks for joining us today. We also have Dr Meg-John Barker an international renowned speaker and writer, with a background in therapy, academics and activism. Welcome MJ.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Hi, good to be here.

Jaï Bristow

Good to have you.

You've both worked together on a number of projects. You've each authored many books yourselves, and co-authored a number of books. Today we're going to be talking about your upcoming book *How To Understand Your Relationships*. This is the third in a trilogy, the first being *How To Understand Your Gender* and *How To Understand Your Sexuality*.

I'm super excited for this conversation. Let's start by talking about talking about toxicity in relationships. Do you guys want to start by letting me know what that evokes for you? What is your definition of toxicity in relationships?

[00:01:32] - Dr Alex Iantaffi

When I think about toxicity I think about things that don't belong, an external extraneous substance that can really do some damage in the wrong place. Toxicity I think it's really contextual as well. When I think about relationship I'm thinking about a lot of layers in terms of toxicity.

There are things in the wider world that are toxic to relationship. There are some ideas of gender, for example, some ideas of sexualities, as well all the different systems that we're embedded in. Culture and so on, that might give us some expectations of relationships that then are a real mismatch in reality.

There are lots of messages that we might be getting growing up. I was brought up in the 70's and 80's, there were a lot of Disney princesses that were not what they are now. I feel like our heroes have come a long way, and heroines, but I was brought up with this idea of princesses were to be rescued by a prince. And that really influenced my expectations and ideas of romantic relationships as a teenager and then in my early twenties.

So there's this layer of toxicity that might be ideas that are actually not supportive of our relationships, whether it's romantic relationships, or parenting, or friendships, or work relationships, and they get into us. All these messages from pop songs and movies and so on.

But then there are also things that within us can turn toxic because of some of our experiences of trauma for example. If we've experienced trauma then there might be some behaviors or habits that we gotten into that got us through and helped us survive, but then they don't help us be in relationship and that don't help us thrive.

It's tricky because I think that sometimes it can be really confusing to even have an idea of what healthy relationships look like, because most of us were not brought up with examples of healthy relationships. I don't think we have examples of healthy community even in the broader world. And so often if we learn how to do relationship just within our family. It's a very small set of relationships that we might be exposed to. Even in an expanded extended family, you are only going to have so many models of relationships.

So I don't know, that's what I'm thinking about when I'm thinking about toxicity in relationships. MJ, I don't know if you want to add anything to that.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, I think that probably throughout this interview we'll talk a lot about cultural trauma, and developmental trauma, and how together they lead to this relational trauma. Which means that we can be super familiar only with traumatic and traumatizing dynamics in relationships.

That's the territory that we're talking about here. How does it feel? How do you know that you're in a toxic relationship? That can be quite hard when the cultural messages around you are of quite traumatic relationships. Maybe it was the norm when you were growing up to have these things.

But I guess I think of it as being the times when I felt like I'm really losing myself in a relationship, like I'm not valued as much as the other person, or I value myself over the other person. Non consent of any kind is creeping in, either having your boundaries crossed, or that you're feeling like you want to control the other person. And feelings of things like terror, and rage, and shame

coming up a lot. And just that a lot of the relationship is spent in this kind of territory, rather than feeling safe enough, and free enough, and like you have enough dignity and belonging.

[00:05:36]

Like Alex says, in all kinds of relationships, and I guess just to acknowledge this is incredibly tender territory. A lot of us have spent a lot of our time in these kinds of relational dynamics. They take so much time and energy, and they can cause so much pain, and they can be incredibly confusing. Like is it my fault? Is it their fault? I spent so much time reflecting myself on these dynamics that I've had, and also supporting friends with them. That's why I think it's so important that we're having these conversations, because I think it saps a lot for people, and it causes a great deal of harm, and a great deal of pain.

Jai Bristow

Absolutely. I really appreciate both your responses, and that contextualizing the environment that can develop and lead to toxicity in relationships. How that kind of conditioning, social conditioning, expectations, ideals, but also trauma, how often we have a very limited templates for relationships, especially if we grow up in nuclear family. I think it's really important to understand the environment that can lead to that.

And then MJ also, I really appreciated, named some specific things. The boundaries being crossed, the not necessarily feeling safe in relationships, all that kind of thing, is really, really important in this conversation.

I'm curious, once we've established what we're talking about, and we've talked a bit about the environment that allows them to arise in relationships. How do we respond to this toxicity once we've recognized it? What do we do... you said Alex, it is difficult to recognize what a healthy relationship looks like sometimes. So how do we do that? How do we recognize what a healthy relationship is, and how do we respond to toxicity in order to move into health in relationships?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

I love that question. Those are such beautiful yet complex questions. In a way, I think one of the things that's important to do is to separate the behavior from the person. I think it can be really important. Like MJ was saying, we can spend so much time into that right or wrong territory, that dualism, like am I right or am I wrong? Are they right or are they wrong? Am I toxic? Are they toxic? I think that when we separate the behavior from the person, first of all, we can see things more clearly.

That's definitely one of the things I do, okay, what is actually happening? Because trauma can also make us interpret things in certain way. So I like to separate behavior from people, look at the facts. And then another thing that can be really helpful is, is this a one off or is it a pattern? Does this keep happening.

So separating, is this a one off or a pattern, can help us understand am I in a cycle. Am I with somebody who keeps apologizing but then things keep repeating. Maybe they've crossed my boundaries once and we talked about it, and I felt really good, but now it keeps happening. And there isn't a willingness to really acknowledge that there is a pattern. So identifying patterns is another thing that we can do in terms of figuring out what's healthy and what's not healthy.

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Then something else I often talk about with clients, but do for myself as well, is to ask myself, if this behavior was happening in the relationship of somebody I really care about. Like if my child was in this relationship, and she was telling me those things were happening in her life, or if my best friend was in this relationship, how would I respond? Because sometimes one thing that we do, because of developmental trauma, is not treat ourselves with the same kindness and care that we treat other people.

So when we think, okay, if this was going on in a relationship of a beloved person, how would I look at this? Can help us see whether that behavior that's happening, or cycle that's happening, is acceptable or not? Because I think sometimes we accept a lot of things for ourselves that we would never want our loved ones to accept for themselves.

Does that make sense? I think those are just three initial things that we can do to start looking at things more clearly. And then it's always helpful to have outside input as well, and that's what family therapists are for. Family therapists in other countries are also called Systemic Psychotherapists, are really good at working with a system and see what's happening because sometimes we need a little bit of outside support.

Relationships can become very insular and isolated, and so having an outside person that can have more of an observer position, can be really helpful in helping us navigate and discern whether there is healing and repair that can happen in this relationship. Or whether actually what needs to happen is for the relationship to end, or transform, or just become something else.

Jai Bristow

I love that, I love how you bring in those different elements. I think that's so important, that idea of separating between the behavior and the toxicity in the behavior, versus the person. Because if we start labeling people, that's what happens a lot with cancel culture, right? If we start labeling people as toxic rather than this behavior is not acceptable and is harmful, you are not acceptable, and you are harmful, and you are toxic, then that's a lot to take on.

It also creates a very binary society of good and bad, good versus evil, and where certain people then get put on pedestals until they can no longer live up to that, and then they get put in the bin, basically. And so I think it's really important, as you say. And also once you separate that behavior from the person, you can have the difficult conversations because you're not attacking the person, you're saying this behavior is not okay.

I think the pattern thing is super important because if it is a one off, hey, this thing you did the other day, not great, you talk about it, you move on. But if it's like a repeated thing, then it's still not about painting the person as toxic, but it's about being like, hey, hold on a minute, this isn't okay.

But also with patterns, it's not just looking at the patterns in other people, but recognizing, do I have the same patterns coming up in myself in all my relationships? And then again, it links back to what you were saying earlier about the trauma, about trauma responses, about the limited relationship models we had growing up, and maybe we've learned an unhealthy pattern from that, and maybe that involves some work, and that kind of thing.

[00:12:33]

I also, of course, really appreciate what you were saying about sometimes when we're in it, it's really hard to see. So if we question how would we feel if a loved one was in this situation, was being treated this way? I think that's a really good way of getting some clarity. And also vice versa having loved ones to help support us by saying, hey, this is maybe not the healthiest dynamic right now. Because again, once again, if you're not in it, it's a lot easier to see clearly, than when you're in it and you have all the hormones, and the attachment, and the history. And again, that's true, I think, of all different relationship types.

MJ, did you want to add anything to that?

Dr Meg-John Barker

I just think you're spot on. Yeah, and I was thinking a lot about this dominant white western culture, policing and punishing response that is the tendency to go to. To police the behavior particularly of people we're in close relationship with, and then to punish what we see as bad behavior, or being bad.

It's not really about the behavior, we instantly say, that's you being a bad person to have done things that way. And that right wrong binary, like we've just got to figure out, which of us was right and which of us was wrong. And either way we lose, because it's either they were wrong, and then we spend all our time blaming and angry with them, and can we even bring it up? Or we're wrong and then we're collapsing in shame.

And to move to different models, and one kind of reframing that I really like is towards, fit and misfit. Let's really understand our way of relating. Let's understand how that's impacted by neurodivergence. Let's understand how it's impacted by our trauma patterns, by our cultural norms that we learned about relating in different cultures, our normative or non normative relationship styles, right?

And instead of trying to figure out which is right and wrong, we can think about where's our fit and misfit here. So for example, as someone autistic, I've been shamed in relationships sometimes for my need for a lot of solitude and slowness. But again, if we move to like, okay, what's your neurodiversity? What's my neurodiversity? Where's the fit, where's the misfit? We can have much better conversations. Instead of like oh, you should do things at my speed or in my way.

And same with trauma styles, we might have different trauma needs around conflict, for example, because we might get triggered by certain behaviors. Instead of like oh, it's right that you should be up for a massively angry conversation, or it's right that you should always do things really calmly.

Alex and I have had lots of these conversations. Like, where are we both at, and can we find a way of doing conflict that meets both people's needs in this relationship? And the same around culturally normative ways of expressing emotion, or communication styles, or whether someone's monogamous and someone's non monogamous. Again that appreciates that all those things are valid. But then for this relationship, what level of relationship can we have if we're quite in quite different places in some of those things? Or where are we more overlapping, where are we more distant? I think with going to that model of fit and misfit.

[00:15:42]

And then, as you were both saying, the more we can be aware of our relationship patterns, the more we can be working on those in ourselves. Like noticing when they show up, being really open about what they are, which all goes just so much against the cultural norms.

People are not going to put on their dating app profile, well, I've got a formed trauma pattern. I'm quite likely to people please with you and then disappear. And here's my neuro divergence, and here's how that works. And here's all the cultural baggage that I hold about relationships. Means I'm looking for this that and the other. I wish...

And I wish that we could also offer people slower models of relating with people. So it's not like I've got to find someone and then I've got to be at a million miles an hour straight away, and override everything. If we could have models where we could slowly build trust with people, and learn at what level works for that particular relationship. Rather than having this idea that romantic partnership where you move in straight away is the ideal, and everything else is kind of lesser. It's more like no, if we're brilliant acquaintances, we can really enjoy being acquaintances rather than trying to push it into a different model.

Or we're a comet relationship where it really works if we see each other once a year, but we love that time together. Again opening up this field of relationship diversity, so we're not trying to push relationships into forms that might become quite toxic. But rather finding what is the fit and misfit here, what is the distance that really works for us, where are the similarities and differences, all of that stuff.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Whatever model we use. I think one of the things that's so important to stay away from is, all or nothing thinking patterns. So even with fitting and misfitting, which I love as a model and we do talk about in the book, it's the nuance. I think sometimes we're like, is this a fit or is it not a fit? And actually, there is like a whole landscape of possibility between a fit and not a fit, right?

It's very hard. I don't want to say impossible because that's an absolute, and I like to stay away from absolutes, but I would say, it's very hard to find somebody who fits with us 100%. And so we also have to accept that there is like a range, that not all our relationship needs are going to be met by the one person. And even if we were to find the person that meets all our needs, they're not going to have the capacity to do that all the time. Relying on just one person is a lot of stress to put on somebody, and on that relationship, even if it is a perfect fit, whatever a perfect fit means. Which is not going to be the same for everybody.

So another thing to watch out for is, am I stuck? Are we stuck? If it's a relationship in this all or nothing thinking pattern, like, this is good, this is bad. This is the right person for me, this is the wrong person for me. It could also be, this is the right person for me right now, because I need to learn this lesson. Or because, actually I don't even want to say that because that sounds like there is some bigger will in the multiverse. But it's more like maybe this is just what's happening right now, and can I accept it, and look at it and see whether it serves me and my life right now, and you and your life. Because it's also not just me over here and you over there, right?

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In relationship, it's this dance that MJ was describing, and that is so hard, because often in relationships, we want to have certain needs and expectations met. And I think a lot of toxic patterns emerge, like MJ said, when we're trying to meet our relationship needs and expectations in a very specific way, where there isn't a lot of room for the other people, if that makes sense.

Jaï Bristow

It does. You've both given everyone listening a lot to think about. I think it's really important that what you were saying at the beginning, MJ, how easy it is to get into that binary thinking of like, either I'm right, therefore the other is wrong, or the other must be right, therefore I'm wrong. And instead to move out of that into, okay, how can we make this work? How can we bring in different people's needs, and ways of operating, and diversity of all different types, whether it's neurodiversity, whether it's relationship diversity, and all these different things.

I lead these courses on power, privilege and prejudice. And one of the things I sometimes talk about is equitable equality. And so what I mean by that is the equitable part is factoring in each individual's needs. And how we are all unique individuals, and we're all going around in our own bubble, with our own history, with our own identities, with our own traumas, with all that stuff. And yet we're all deserving of equal opportunities to have our needs met. And that's where that comes in. I talk more on a global scale in my courses, but I really hear how that's coming out, even in relationships, whether it's to do with two, or more people.

I love everything that you brought in Alex around all of that. And I'm wondering if we can define a little bit more what we mean by relationships. Because you both mentioned relationship diversity a little bit, and MJ you mentioned some specific types of relationships, like comets, and other things which some people might not be familiar with. What is a relationship here? How should we be, or maybe should isn't the right word. How are people defining relationships, and how can we define relationships which would be healthier?

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, well, I think it stems from what you were just saying, it really follows on nicely, because a lot of my work has been about how this very rigid, tight understanding of what a relationship is causes so much damage. When we're talking about having that full spectrum, like Alex was saying, from staying together in exactly the same way we are, to completely breaking up and never being with each other again. It's like the more we can get flexible, the more we can find that.

But if we've got this idea of a relationship is where you date, and then it works, and you move in together, you make a commitment to each other, it's romantic forever, you love each other forever, you have sex with each other forever, you share all your finances, you stay living together, you co-parent together. It's this model, they're happily ever after, et cetera, that we're sold. And it makes it really difficult for people to do that flexible bit of like, do you know what, it might just be that living together doesn't really work for us, but the rest of it's awesome. But we could live separately like a load of people.

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Maybe we don't co-parent, but we do that other stuff. Or maybe we co-parent in a different way than we were doing before. I think so many relationships get into huge struggles because people are trying to tick all those boxes, and prove to the world that they tick all those boxes. So first of all, it's expanding that out and incorporating that. It might be non monogamous, it might be asexual, it might be aromantic, it might be living separately. We might not share all our finances, if that doesn't work.

And then it's not about just romantic relationships. In the book that Alex and I have just written, it's like from the word go, we're saying we're not just talking about those relationships, we're talking about relationships with friends, family, colleagues, parenting, child relationships. But we're also talking about relationships with ourselves, really importantly. We're talking about relationships with other beings beyond humans, we're talking about relationships with land, with water, all of these are relationships. And actually our way of relating tends to come out in all those different places.

While we put a lot of pressure on romantic relationships, it can often be that they seem like the place where our relationship trauma plays out, because we put so much pressure on them to be all the things we want. But actually our patterns in how we relate to others will be how we also relate to ourselves in workplace environments, and with the wider world.

So it seems like we're just talking about interpersonal relationships, but it's actually the stuff that's integral to social justice, climate justice, and mental health, how we relate to ourselves. It's all about looking at what those patterns are for us, and trying to gently shift them to something more compassionate, healthy, or whatever word you want to use for that.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah, and I think that's the thing, we are relational beings, we exist in a web of interdependence. And that's why it's so hard to define relationships, because sometimes when we talk about relationship, people immediately think romantic partners, or life partners. But actually, if we think about ourselves just like, humans exist relationally, we are a species that exists relationally, and that we are interdependent not just with each other, but we're also interdependent with the ecosystem that we're in, in terms of water, and food, and light, and rest, and all those kind of things.

So if we see ourselves as constantly being in relationship in this web, then I think that our thinking shifts a little bit, because all of a sudden we don't have to tend to just this one, or two, or three relationships that are really important in our life. Actually, we are constantly invited, and inviting, into relationship. And so when we look at our imprint of relationship in this broader sense, first of all, there's less loneliness, which in our western white supremacist world is something that a lot of people experience, is loneliness and anxiety.

Existential anxiety makes a lot of sense, and also grief around climate change. But when we see this web of relationship, I think it shifts a little bit how we perceive ourselves, and what we focus our attention on.

[00:26:32] - Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And I really appreciate the way you both described the relational field that we're all constantly in. Not many people, at least no one watching this, is living as a hermit on their own in a cave, in a mountain, without internet or connection to anyone. If you have internet, you already are in a relational field, right? And then if you go to the shops, you're relating to people. And then all the other more intense human relationships we have with family, with friends, with housemates, with neighbors, with lovers, partners, co-parents, children, et cetera.

It's such an important thing to remember that there are so many different types of relationships, even intimate, romantic relationship, there's many different ways of doing that. It's wild how often I have to say, oh, I'm talking about relationships in the broad sense of the term. That when people hear the word relationship, they immediately assume I'm talking specifically about romantic, intimate relationship, rather than relationship as this broad word, that encompasses all the ways that we relate to each other, to the world, to ourselves.

Toxicity can appear in all relationships. And toxicity in the ways that you both described at the beginning, in terms of different traumas, different expectations. The ways that we categorize on our relationship, this is friendship, this is romantic, this is sexual, sometimes there's some overlap, this is family.

Even toxic in the more extreme abuse form can also appear in different types of relationships. I think it's really important to ask ourselves when this toxicity is arriving in relationships, in the broad sense of the term, in all these ways of relating, like how and when is it time to leave the relationship, to de-escalate, or transition, or transform the relationship, and when is it a good time to stay?

Again, I'm not talking just about romantic relationships. And I think it can be even harder sometimes to know when to leave a long standing friendship, to know when to come out off a very close bond with a family member, to come out, when to leave a living situation, all those different relational scenarios. So I'm wondering if you could both say a little about that.

Dr Meg-John Barker

To pick up on that last point before Alex takes that one. We were thinking about that in the book... Part of the focus on romantic relationships means there's very little script for how to do that in any other relationship. I was writing this bit and I was thinking, oh, it's funny isn't it, because in work and friend relationships, it's almost like there's no script, therefore people will probably just not talk about it at all, and just go.

Whereas with family relationships, the script is that you stay in no matter what. So that puts a different kind of pressure on those two different kinds of other relationships. That they might be treated as very disposable because they're not real relationships, not like a romantic relationship, or in the case of family relationships. In a lot of cultural contexts anyway, it's just unheard of to put boundaries, or even extricate. And obviously some people really do need to do that, either for a short time, or forever. And so I think it'd be great if culturally we could move towards seeing all of these as relationships.

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And like you say, so that people can notice that there are problems, that there is toxicity in those kind of relationships. We can't even notice it often because it's so unspoken of, whereas at least in romantic relationships there's some idea that they can become toxic, or they can become abusive. What do you think, Alex?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah, I agree 100%. And I think what's complicated is how do you know where that line is between that can be a repair, that can be growth, or actually I need to leave. I don't think that can be an answer that's the same for everybody, quite frankly, or even the same for ourselves because things change across our lifespan.

There are relationships that I would absolutely now not even start, probably, with people in the world, not just romantic relationship, but even friendship. And there are, where 20 years ago I might have tolerated different behaviors in my life. So, first of all, having some self-compassion, that there is no right or wrong about this, and that we're all doing our best, and that we're making the best decisions that we can with the information we have at that point in time.

I think it's so important not to punish ourselves or self-flagellate ourselves that we're doing it wrong. There is a lot of looking for what is the right way to do relationships, what are the right boundaries, what is the right way to deal with trauma.

I don't think there is a right or wrong way, but what is the kind way, what is the self-compassionate way. And compassion is different than niceness. Kindness and compassion can actually be quite hard, because compassion includes being able to unflinchingly accept that things are the way they are. Like unflinchingly accept reality is a part of compassion. And that's pretty hard sometimes.

It might be like, I love my parent with all my being and also, this is a really unhealthy relationship. Or my parent is actually quite verbally abusive to my child, and I need to protect my child, first, because they're a minor, and that's my job, right? And at a piece that when it's an adult to child, like a parent caregiver relationship, that's very different because children developmentally work differently than adults, and that could be its own kind of topic.

But going back to this idea of how do you know when you need to leave. I think there are a few things that we might want to watch out for. First and foremost, do I feel safe? And if I don't feel safe, is it because of something that's happening in the relationship? Or maybe it's my own trauma. And it's not that it's an either or either, but sometimes it's good to have awareness.

It could be, I love you with all my being and this is great, and you really remind me of an abusive parent, and this keeps coming up, and this is not a fit. Going back to that fitting and misfeeding. So I'm not ending this relationship because it's bad, because you are unsafe, going back to that separating behavior from person, but because I just cannot feel, my nervous system just cannot feel settled in this relationship. And that's valid as well.

Sometimes we also don't feel safe because of behavior, and wherever the behavior stems from. Sometimes abusive behavior can stem from somebody's having experience abuse, and we can have compassion for that. But if there is this repeated pattern, and this lack of willingness to take responsibility for behavior and work on it, the compassionate thing to do is actually to leave. Like

the compassionate thing to do for ourselves, but also for the other person, so this pattern doesn't keep repeating. And so safety is something that I think we really need to pay attention to.

[00:34:26]

Is there consent? Do I feel like my boundaries are respected, my autonomy? Do I feel like I can exist as a human being, and a person, and have sovereignty over my own self? One of the things, especially in romantic and or sexual relationship that can be, this expectation of merging. Actually differentiation is so important. Recognizing that I'm a different person from you, it's actually part of our development. I am separate from this person who just stated me and brought me to life. And now I can see that we're two separate human beings and that develops.

So differentiation is actually quite important between gestational parent and child, for example, once that child is out in the world. And similarly in romantic relationship, we're often looking to have those very core needs, that sometimes were not met growing up, by a romantic partner. And that can lead to a lot of trouble. Is there a type of merging that doesn't allow for differentiation, that doesn't allow for boundaries, doesn't allow for space of any kind?

And also are we loving the person for what they bring to us, or are we loving them for who they are? And I think that goes across not just romantic relationship but even parent to child. Am I loving this child because of who they are, with all their beauty and complexity in the world, or am I loving them because I have certain expectations of who they should be, just like my parents had expectations of who I should be. And now I'm passing on this model.

So for me, it goes back to what do we mean by love? What do we mean? And love, not just in terms of romantic love, but this feeling of connection with another, and intimacy, and closeness with another human. And so do I love them for who they are and all their brilliance, which sometimes might mean that I love you so much and I can see you're not thriving in this relationship. There are so many things to consider, which I think is so difficult to know when to stay or when to leave. And then if we're talking about abusive dynamics, it gets even more confusing.

Because with abuse, then our own thinking can get really jumbled, and we're like, what if I can't even untangle what's happening? It's like a messed up ball of yarn that you just can't pull... You can't find the beginning or the end of this ball of yarn, and you can't untangle it.

I wish I had a more like, this is when you leave a relationship. Of course, there are times where it's like, for example, if you're in a relationship where your kids are not safe, there's verbal, physical, emotional abuse. I always encourage, no matter, it can be hard, I understand it can be hard. But no matter how you feel as an adult, your first duty is to children who don't have the agency to leave a relationship.

And that's another thing that we need to think about, is children don't have agency to leave relationships by themselves, but adults do. So it's quite complicated, and it can look a lot of different ways. And as MJ said, I think we need to give ourselves permission to consider all our adult to adult relationships, and see are they still serving us or not.

But then again, I think when there is abuse, there can be that layer of complication. And so I don't want people to feel, oh, I've done the wrong things, I stayed in this relationship too long. It's okay, you did the best you could with what you had at the time. And if you decide to leave a relationship,

and that was the right decision, it's not too late, you didn't stay too long. You did what you could with what you had, and it's okay to give yourself that self compassion.

[00:38:35] - Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And I think it's really beautiful the way you talk about love, and how you can really love someone and still the relationship is not serving you or them, and it might be a time to leave.

You were talking at the beginning about how we don't often have many templates for what relationships can look like. We also don't have many templates for love. We have this very infatuated definition of love. I think even understanding what does love mean for oneself is a whole journey. Like understanding what relationships serve you, what relationships allow you to grow, and evolve, and feel love in a very healthy way. As opposed to very toxic definitions of love, which can happen often.

I'm really grateful for all these different elements you brought in. And as you say, it's complex. I think it's complex once you're in a relationship. And it's also complex when you're trying to figure out whether to enter a relationship again of any kind. But if you're dating and you're trying to spot people's red flags and figure out is this going to be a healthy, consensual, safe, loving relationship or not?

And it can be really hard to know, which is, again, when some of the things you said earlier really come into play. How would you feel if a loved one was in this situation? And what are your support people saying? What are the other people in your life saying about this new person in your life?

It can be true as well in different, like you say, friendships, in work situations. And again, it can be really hard to leave a job if it's not serving you. But you have to ask these questions, and sometimes you really love your job, but the people that you work with aren't making you feel safe, aren't making you feel valued, aren't bringing in all these positive qualities.

It's a complex issue. And like you said, you brought in a lot of different elements for people to think about from the safety, the consent. There's a lot of other talks, of course, on this topic as well. And I really appreciate you both, and everything you've brought to this conversation.

How can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr Meg-John Barker

For both of us, check out the books that we've written together, which cover a lot of these themes, and coming soon, *How to Understand Your Relationships*, which really digs into all of this in a lot more depth.

For me, the website rewriting-the-rules.com has a lot of free resources, including a free book about love and relationships, and another one about consent. So those would be good places to go and find out more. And quite a lot of Zines as well about relationship struggles, and how to deal with them.

[00:41:28] - Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah, and for myself, you can look at my website, alexiantaffi.com the books are on there, an increasing number of resources. I'm about to upload the *Loving Beyond Binaries* little Zine with some guided exercises that I made some time ago for another symposium. And then on social media, on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com) mostly, you can follow me @xtaffi. And then, maybe I'll start doing TikToks, I don't know, I feel quite old for TikTok, but people keep saying you should do a TikTok.

Oh, and I have a podcast called Gender Stories. So check out my podcast.

Jai Bristow

Amazing. Thank you both so, so much for your time today. I've really enjoyed this conversation. I wish we had more time.