



## How Attachment and Trauma Form Our Toxic Patterns

**Guest: Dr Ava Pommerenk**

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**[00:00:09] - Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host.

Today I'm speaking with Dr Ava Pommerenk, an empowerment relationship and sexuality coach, and therapist. She shares today based on direct experience around healing her own trauma, having gone through her own deeper healing and spiritual growth journey. She combines what she has learned through experience, with her training and education in transpersonal psychology and attachment psychology, and trauma to share a unique perspective on trauma relationships, attachment, and emotion regulation. Dr Ava Pommerenk, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

It's my pleasure.

**Meagen Gibson**

So I want to start at the very beginning. Let's give people a context. So what is a toxic relationship?

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Okay, so toxic relationships are usually relationships that follow a pattern of earlier trauma from somebody's life. So we tend to replay these same trauma dynamics over and over again. And in these trauma dynamics, there tend to be elements of trauma bonding, dysfunction, or abuse. So trauma bonding meaning, this incredibly inconsistent way of engaging that goes in a cycle, which is usually under the umbrella of abuse.

Where somebody is both very sweet and loving, and we're constantly trying to get back to that way of engaging. We just need to work toward it being good again. And then it eventually goes to criticism, withdrawal, some sort of violence, or some sort of painful disconnection. And then the cycle continues again, the build-up to the good behavior, and then the bad behavior. And usually, in trauma bonding, somebody can be both the source of someone's great pain and dysfunction in their life, and then also the savior for that person, or the person that we run to, to also make us feel better when they were the one who made us feel horrible in the first place.

**[00:02:13]**

Also with toxic relationships, there is usually power imbalance. I love to bring the topic of power into conversations about relationship because I don't think it gets talked about enough. If we're feeling empowered, we're feeling safe, we're feeling regulated. We have this way of focusing on engaging in relationship where we can be generous, we can be caring, we can be empathetic, we trust the other person. They can do that with us too.

But when we're feeling disempowered, when we're feeling unsafe, when there's a power imbalance, it usually means there's a dynamic where one person is the person in power, or usually the less flexible person, which I'll get it more into a little later. And this less flexible person ends up being the person that gets catered to in the relationship. And of course, I'm speaking about this in terms of monogamous relationships, but this can also be created in ethically non monogamous relationships too. But for the sake of simplicity...

### **Meagen Gibson**

Sorry to interrupt, but even work environments, family systems, there's lots of examples of this, right?

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yes, but for instance, in a romantic relationship. Because there's a power imbalance, for instance, between a parent and a child, there's a natural power imbalance. But in this interview, I'm talking specifically about toxic relationships between two adults.

So in the context of romance, or love. So with this inflexible person, the other person in the partnership organizes themselves, and their life, around this inflexible person. And this inflexible person, because they're less flexible, ends up being the one who's in more power, and ends up entraining the other one to basically fully empathize with them, accept their sense of reality. Function in a way where most things that happen in the relationship cater to the feelings of this inflexible person.

And this person who caters has their own patterns, that makes it so they don't want to leave. They're doing whatever they can to make the relationship last, which we'll get into a little bit later. But in these dysfunctional toxic relationships, usually there's a lack of full autonomy, there's a lack of interdependence. These relationships don't tend to promote growth by virtue of both people staying together. In fact, they have a predictable sort of cycle they go through, whether it be an abuse cycle, or just a dysfunctional pattern of, for instance, relapse into whatever behavior and then a period of it being okay again, and then relapse.

So usually one person may grow, if they seek help, and then be able to leave the relationship, they get well enough where they leave. Occasionally, both parties will grow, and it shifts from being a toxic relationship to actually a growthful relationship. So anyways, that's a quick description of what a toxic relationship is.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And I'm glad that you named that sometimes the invitation, hey, I see that we have a dysfunctional relationship dynamic that neither one of us feel are getting satisfied in this relationship. That

invitation is sometimes met and sometimes there's growth. I would say the majority of the time that's unfortunately not the case. But that does in fact, happen.

**[00:06:18] - Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Oh, yeah, in a little bit I'll talk about the inflexibility piece. But again, inflexibility is on a spectrum. You can be extremely inflexible, and from there the chances of accepting an invitation for growth are very slim. Or you can be inflexible based on context. You just haven't had certain experiences, or some things come together and you become more flexible.

**Meagen Gibson**

I'm trying to give people some context and concrete examples of what this might look like. So maybe in your partnership, one person's career takes entire priority, usually because they make more money, or there's more prestige or status, or something with that.

Or there could be one person's time is more important, or has more weight, and you have to be flexible around protecting their time, or the way that they spend their time. Or I'm thinking about people who have partners who are like, I leave for weeks at a time, it's hunting season. It's like, I just go off, and then there's not a balance of, and you can also have a reciprocal amount of time to spend however you want.

There can be money issues, just pure finances, rigidity around finances. So there's a lot of different ways that this kind of toxic dynamic can show up.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yes, you're actually reminding me, I want to add a piece with the person who's considered inflexible. The person who is with them is often inflexible in their own ways too, both people. There's an entrainment that happens, so when I say entrainment, I mean an adjusting to another person, and taking on the role of becoming more like this person, or more of a support to this person that's the inflexible one.

But there are inflexible patterns in the other one too that help sustain this dynamic. So for instance, with the situation around my partner leaves, that you brought up, my partner leaves for several weeks at a time. There's a way this relationship works even if it's not working, because the person who is the support person organizing themselves around this person's schedule, there are ways that they've come to not expect a certain amount of support or connection, or there's a normalcy to them around this level of maybe dysfunction. And it's not to say, I want to be very careful, because there are all sorts of relationships out there, and maybe not seeing your partner for several weeks at a time can work very well for the both.

**Meagen Gibson**

Exactly. And I don't mean to infer that it would be that anybody who has a partner that hunts, or goes off for weeks at a time, is automatically in a toxic relationship. So thank you for naming that.

### **[00:09:13] - Dr Ava Pommerenk**

I think what it comes down to is looking at the core of the relationship, like is there actual growthful connection happening? Is there this sense of safety? Is there a sense of interdependence? Is there a sense that both parties can actually be supported in their growth and well-being through the relationship? Are both parties becoming happier, safer, more secure by virtue of being together?

If they're not then there's probably some toxicity there. No matter the context, whether you can have somebody who goes out hunting for two weeks at a time, and they're in a really solid, good relationship because the way they keep in touch while the person's gone, or the way the rituals they have around reunion when the person's there, the intensity of connection, the support, the safety, the love, the care that's there as well as the health solidity of both people as individuals.

Again, toxic relationship, you really have to look at context, and look at these different factors. So it's very important that we're careful about not just seeing things black and white like oh, that's toxic because from the outside it just looks really bad.

Or that's the healthy relationship because they just look very happy. It's like, well, you usually have to look at things a little more deeply in multiple ways from different contexts in order to discern whether there is toxicity.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. I know you mentioned it a little bit earlier, we inferred an understanding of trauma and attachment. So I want to get into, and for the purposes of this conversation, again, we're talking about adult relationships, but a lot of how we conduct ourselves in adult relationships is cemented in childhood, and how we attach to our caregivers. I'd love if you could talk about the ways that trauma and attachment inform the kinds of toxic relationships that we find ourselves in as adults.

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah, I want to start with highlighting first that most of us have toxicity at some point in life, at some point in certain contexts, certain circumstances. Toxicity, here in this context, with looking at a person, involves just ways we have big blind spots, or what you would call defensive exclusion in attachment.

So ways that we truly cannot see or perceive ourselves, what we're doing, the impact we have. We can't see reality as it is based on the fact that we have trauma, early childhood trauma, specifically attachment trauma. So this term toxic gets thrown around a lot, and it's not... I think we're all toxic. We're either, none of us are toxic, or we're all toxic.

So I look at it as more of a spectrum. So on this side of the spectrum, is like normal neurotic toxicity. This side of the spectrum is like, as you move this direction is an increase in attachment trauma, an increase in the ways you use defenses in order to avoid accountability, so denial, projection, manipulation. The way you engage in life with yourself and others, that's more centered around self-protection and trying to deal with feeling unsafe.

**[00:13:16]**

So as you go in this direction, there's more compulsive behaviors like addiction, compulsive behaviors like unconsciously doing things to try to self-regulate because you do not feel safe fundamentally. And you need to engage in these rather inflexible patterns. So there's inflexibility, in order to find a sense of meaning, in order to make sense of the world, in order for you to play out your internal working model.

So, in attachment, internal working model is what you learn from your attachment figures early on, either in the first 18 months, or the first six years, usually, is what they say. That's a model for how to be a human that has certain attachment needs, how to deal with emotion, how to deal with relationship, how to deal with communication.

So this is a big deal because actually, when you think about it, we live in a soup of relationship as humans. There's never not a time in life where we're dealing with multiple relationships on many different levels. So our internal working model is always active in us walking around with a very specific type of reality, like a reality bubble. And in this reality bubble, we experience ourselves the further we go on this part of the spectrum, in this reality bubble, we experience ourselves more as a victim, more as a savior, more as someone who's a persecutor.

I'm pointing out the Cartman Triangle right now, which is another thing I don't have time to get into. But we tend to avoid accountability. We tend to view ourselves as somehow being a victim. We tend to be defensive, we tend to focus on... It's more self-centered. We tend to focus on how do I make myself feel better, and help myself avoid being exploited in some way, or abused in some way, the more we head on this part of the spectrum.

So I'd say people on this side are, in most cultures, it'd be easy for the majority of us to say, oh yeah, this is where we've got addiction like addicts, alcoholics, the inflexible behaviors, compulsive, addictive stuff, using a lot of defenses, denial, projection, exploitation, manipulation.

And there's also folks, we'd say now in our culture, it's become a big buzzword to use the word narcissism or narcissist. So people with narcissistic personality disorder, sociopathy, would be on this side, on this extreme part of the spectrum. But what we tend to forget is that the people who are paired with folks like this, and tend to sustain relationships with folks like this, also have toxic patterning too.

And those are folks that tend to identify as co-dependent or empaths. And those are not diagnosable ways of being. But that's a major shadow for a lot of people who are co-dependent, or look at themselves as empaths. They repeat these cycles of being with people who are really toxic, and they don't realize that part of the reason they're doing that is because of their own toxic inflexible internal working models as well. It's their own trauma as well. It's a trauma response to become an empath. It's a trauma response to become co-dependent. You're engaging in traumatic dynamics with these people.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And speaking as a former co-dependent empath, I just want to speak for... I'm like the Lorax to speak for all of us. It's not that you're ever, no matter how much healing you do, not going to be empathetic. Because I hear all the empaths in the audience, well, I don't want to heal, I don't want to not be empathetic because I find that to be a wonderful quality. It's the degree to which

you have no sovereignty, independence, agency, boundaries in your empathic nature that tends to be the problem, right?

**[00:17:49] - Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yes. So remember on this side I was saying people can be very self-centered, and I'm a recovering empath and co-dependent too, so I can name for myself. I used to be like, "oh, well, I'm really selfless, and I focus on all the people. I don't know what people are talking about saying that I'm self-centered or I'm self-absorbed." But as I've unpacked this, I've realized that so much of me being really generous, not having any boundaries, not having any agency, actually came back to it being a strategy.

A strategy to try to feel, originally it was formed in childhood to try to feel safe with my caregivers, to try to have proximity to them, to try to be relevant to them, so I could get my caretaking needs met. They weren't met, frankly, but met to a certain degree. And once I realized how manipulative that was, and how there was a very self-serving, self-absorbed way I existed in these relationships. Because I also was very inflexible with basically expecting, I was like, well, why can't everyone just be like me? I'm the model of how everybody should be. That really got in the way of my own growth.

That was not very accountable. I was more other focused, and more focused on how wrong the other person was, and all the horrible things they were doing to me. But I couldn't come back and go, wait, look at me. Look at the ways I'm really inflexible, look at the ways I'm playing out my own trauma here, look at the ways I'm not able to regulate myself. And I'm compulsively engaging here.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm also thinking about identity, because people who are more co-dependent and empathic are rewarded in society for the ways in which they are selfless, and giving, and accommodating. And that's not something that is frowned upon, frankly, and so it's easy to get really far along in your life. Also I used to identify as ambitious adjacent, and as a co-dependent empath that served me very well. So I could sidle up next to somebody who was very charismatic.

Which, if you don't know anything about narcissists, and this is your first foray, they're very charismatic. They don't have the evil faces, and they don't look like bad guys, or girls. They're very charismatic, and they really hold a room. So it's easy to want to be near them, and to just get power by association if you're one of those co-dependent empaths, it's easy to saddle up. So we're getting something out of this arrangement, which I think is what you're kind of inferring to, is that we're all subconsciously getting something out of our arrangements. And it's only when we decide to take that really critical, honest look at our own habits and behaviors that we can really start to unpack our patterns of relationship.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Absolutely. Yeah, even on this side of the spectrum, people can still benefit from doing this same unpacking and accountability work. But on this side of the spectrum, it's more like people are more securely attached over here.

On this side, it's like more extreme insecure attachment patterning.

**[00:21:23]**

On this side, it's like people might go through periods of extreme stress, or confusion, or dealing with compatibility issues, or differences in personality and needing to grow, and getting stuck in certain ways for certain periods. And on this side, it's like people can still benefit from going, wait, hold on, how am I contributing to this here? What am I doing here? But I would say on this side, people tend to come to that place of accountability much faster. These cycles aren't these horribly traumatic, difficult circles that they go in with their partner for years, and years, and years.

Whereas over here, it's like the more you move in this direction, you can get caught in this for a long time.

### **Meagen Gibson**

And on what you named as the typical neurotic side, I think is what you named it. I'm thinking about people who are just going through different stages of life in relationship. I'm thinking about if you decide to start a family with someone, that's going to upend and cause perhaps patterns of relationship that you weren't ready for, that you didn't anticipate. And then you wake up three years later and you're like, wow, there's a dynamic here that isn't working for me anymore, and we need to reassess how we can both get our needs met and tweak.

Or I've been seeing this a lot now because I know a lot of people in their sixties and seventies, parents friends, these people transitioning out of work and into retirement, and being at each other because they don't know how to relate in this new way of being. We're home together all the time and how do we actually peacefully co-exist when one of us isn't leaving. Or when we both have different identity, different purpose, different... There are going to be things, grief, loss, that are going to shake up our dynamic and will end up in patterns we did not see coming necessarily.

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly, yeah. I would say the word toxic has such a strong meaning to it, or a feeling to it, but in the transition periods you're talking about, people can get caught in circling on something and going like, how do I even deal with this loss or this grief? I think the word here that hasn't been brought to the forefront is how life can actually be traumatic, or overwhelming.

I've only talked about attachment trauma and I'm going in that direction. But also life is tragic, and traumatic, and disappointing, and there are all these ways we deal with really unfortunate circumstances, or very oppressive systems, and as a result that can be traumatic, and that can contribute to us getting stuck in this very disempowered place where we're feeling unsafe. We're going through that little toxicity there, but it's very context based, very circumstance specific, and it's transition based.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. I'm thinking of all the different ways just as you inferred it's your culture, your neighborhood could be unsafe. And that's not on childhood trauma, that's on I'm in a currently unsafe situation that is chipping away at my sense of security.

**[00:24:54] - Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. So I'm glad this piece is coming through in our talk right now, because there can be a way that the field of psychology and self-help tends to really make it very individual. And make individuals feel like there's something very wrong with them. When in fact, we are largely creatures of habit. We are creatures of our environment, we are creatures of circumstance and context, and one person can act in very, extremely, different ways based on all these different contexts.

And it's actually understandable, when you remove that person from context and they come to sit in the therapy office, and somebody's like, oh, well, you just have this issue. It can be sort of dehumanizing, because trying to be safe, a toxic looking behavior that comes from trying to be safe in a really unsafe environment isn't necessarily a personal problem. I mean, it becomes a personal problem because we all have to take accountability for the fact that we live our own life, and we have to choose how we want to be.

But it's very unfortunate when you're repeatedly exposed to a toxic environment, you develop these strategies to stay safe, and those tend to get in the way of being in a relationship where you can feel safe and well. They disrupt your capacity to function.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

And for many people, when you've got an overactive nervous system, that's traumatized, that's reacting to the fact that gang violence is very real in your neighborhood. If a therapist tells you, like, oh, just soften with your partner. Just be soft, why can't you be softer and sweeter? And it's like we haven't got into the neurological elements of this, or looking at the neuroscience of trauma and attachment, but that's really hard for a nervous system that is constantly in fight mode to do.

Some of us have that just from our attachment environments and childhood, but some of us also have that from not having control over the home environment we're in, or the neighborhood that we're in. And it takes a considerable amount of work to be loving, and caring, and drop that defensive shell, or that fight response in the context of a relationship, or in the context of work, even.

I can get into the justice piece of this, which will take us in a completely different direction. But this is really important to highlight, as whoever's watching this, to look at the context you're in, and what is contributing to you feeling unsafe. And what toxic or dysfunctional responses you might have in a certain context that are actually really appropriate for the context it comes out of.

Because that's really all that trauma is in all areas, we're talking about attachment trauma, or trauma in general, anywhere in life. We form these strategies to try to approach a way to feel safe, and to deal with the fact that we feel very unsafe. And it makes perfect sense that we did all of these things, and we formed that internal working model.



**[00:28:42]**

We formed these different ways of viewing the world from within the context that they were formed. It's only when we enter other contexts, specifically like this one trying to have a romantic relationship in adulthood, where it's considered toxic, and it's considered dysfunctional, or unhelpful.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Anecdotally here in Florida, because of climate change and an increase in storms, and flooding, and things like that, here in Florida, I have several people that I know who have had multiple floods in their home. And the individuals in that relationship respond to those emergencies differently, depending on the way they were raised, and how much previous stress and trauma they might have experienced. And that doesn't mean that they are not working hard enough. It doesn't mean that they're not personally responsible enough for their nervous system and psychology. It means that their biology for their particular makeup and experiences is having an appropriate response to a very stressful situation that's out of their control.

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah, exactly, speaking of that, this is a good segue into specifically talking about the attachment styles, with attachment trauma, and internal working models, because this can be what you just said, the reflection there can be applied in that context too. So for instance, in looking at attachment where there's secure attachment and insecure attachment.

So secure attachment are the people over here. Remember the spectrum, normal neurotic toxicity.

On this side as you go over here, it's like extreme insecure attachment. And so with the trauma that we all experience, even people with secure attachment had some trauma usually in childhood, just not a lot. But with all of our trauma that we come from childhood with, so that can be a caregiver that was depressed, or a caregiver that was in a fight or flight mode because of them existing in a very unsafe neighborhood.

Or that can be a mother who's breastfeeding, who can't regulate herself, she's got severe anxiety, can't be very present. The baby picks up on that, baby can't be regulated. There's a response there of also baby becoming overwhelmed, not knowing how to regulate itself. So you get to see caregivers interactions with each other, or if it's a single caregiver, the way the caregiver interacts with other people outside of the home, or just all these different dynamics.

So you form a sense of 1. How do I become close to somebody? How do I deal with separation? How do I deal with the real possibility that this person may engulf me, this person may overtake me, overtake my boundaries, invade my boundaries. Or this person might abandon me whether emotionally or physically. This person may neglect me. This person may abuse me, or exploit me. How do I deal with those situations? How do I notice what's going on, or not notice in order to maintain proximity to my caregiver? How do I view myself in all of this? Am I bad? And is that the reason why mom can't tend to me and give me what I need.

**[00:32:31]**

Or I shouldn't have needs because if I have needs, I get really frustrated and I'm really in a lot of pain, because my caregiver never shows up to actually meet those emotional needs. Or I'm only allowed to have positive emotions, or it's not safe to depend on anyone, because when I try they all disappoint me. Or nobody... I don't really matter to another person because when I'm distressed, they make fun of me, or they're only there inconsistently.

So all of these experiences form the way that we go, okay, well, this is how I'm going to view relationships. This is how I'm going to navigate relationships. I'm going to notice... I brought up defensive exclusion earlier. I'm going to notice certain things and not notice other things. I'm going to immediately perceive threat in places that remind me of where there was threat in my original environment. And given all of these things, this is how I'm going to relate to myself, and relationships, and the world.

And when you go further on this part of the spectrum and you're very insecurely attached, you're either preoccupied, or sometimes they call it anxious. You're fearful, avoidant or disorganized, or you're dismissive avoidance.

So those three attachments, two types of avoidant, one anxious. You end up with a completely different type of internal working model. And within that, you have certain ways that you're going to perceive certain things are happening or not, respond in certain ways. When you go further along this way, there's going to be a real inconsistency.

So on this side, people seem pretty solid, steady, resilient. They might have disruptions, but they come back to their main way of existing or functioning.

This direction with internal working model, there's usually the trauma perception of self. The trauma triggered internal working model, and then the more regulated internal working model that are grouped together.

And the reason I'm saying this is because this is how people end up in very addictive dynamics with each other, where they just keep going with each other despite making each other miserable, and feeling like they can't leave. Because there's intermittent reinforcement, which is a behavioral term that talks about operant conditioning.

So the easiest way to describe it is, we are all wired for reward and punishment. And when there's intermittent reinforcement, that means that we're only getting a reward every once in a while. We're essentially exposed to inconsistency, and we might get punished intermittently too, it's unpredictable there.

When we have extremely insecure attachment, or insecure attachment in general, our way of engaging in the world is, "I love you, I hate you, I love you, you don't matter to me, I love you, oh, maybe I'm apathetic towards you, I want you. Do I want you?" So when somebody is relating to that, they get extremely focused on you, they get drawn in. They get addicted to this cycle. And chances are they have their own way, they're also playing that game too. They're also engaging in intermittent reinforcement.

**[00:36:40]**

Look at a lot of the literature around abuse, and they talk about this intermittent reinforcement as being a part of trauma bonding, and just in general, how somebody has power and control in a relationship. But I've actually come to see that it happens in both directions. Yes, the person with more power in the relationship tends to usually have a less strong reaction to the intermittent reinforcement patterns of the person entrained to them.

So, for instance, I see this commonly with somebody who's dismissive avoidant being with somebody who's anxious or preoccupied.

### **Meagen Gibson**

They always find each other.

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

I know they do.

So dismissive avoidant people are people that you would consider, they tend to be less emotional, they tend to be more rational, they tend to be focused more on their careers, or other things in life, than their relationships. They tend to be very busy, they keep themselves pretty busy, they tend to have a very high perception of self, and a lower perception of other people. Many of them believe that they don't really have needs of other people, and they've sufficiently convinced themselves that they can take care of their own needs, and that's how it should be for everyone else.

And on a neurological level, there's been research in the past five years, in particular, that's really trying to map the differences in what's wired and firing in the different types of insecure attachment styles, as well as comparing it to securely attached individuals.

And people with dismissive avoidant attachment tend to have hypoactivation, so less activation than is appropriate in certain brain areas, which can signal dissociation or repression. In particular, there's this research around areas in the prefrontal cortex not being properly activated. And the prefrontal cortex is all about having empathy, being able to problem solve and mediate an emotional experience, to basically form an understanding, or a mentalization of what's going on emotionally, and to be able to calibrate what's going on.

Instead, there will just be very little activation and other parts of the brain that take over. As a result, there's another part of the brain that has to do with the reward system also not being activated. So it's like they don't respond to rewards, they just don't really get motivated by them.

So you've got somebody like this, with somebody on the other side who's got a ton of activation actually in the prefrontal cortex, who also has a ton of activation in other areas too, who has a very hard time mentalizing and working with their process, and tends to get overridden with their emotions, and searches to others for regulation.

And you have them paired together. And you've got oh, over here, this person also the preoccupied another thing I want to mention, their reward system is overactive, there's research showing that. So they're actually even more readily impressionable with whoever is going to come into their life and give them a reward. They're able to fall into these patterns of addiction.

**[00:41:07]**

So you pair these two. Who's going to end up in control and in power? The person who's less emotionally stirred, when actually they should be more emotionally stirred, while this person needs to work on down regulation, so they can meet in a healthier space together.

But still there are things that this person does that do still get the dismissive person hooked into, on some level they do get a reward for continuing this. And it might just be a reward of continuing to be able to project onto this person and not face their own stuff, because the louder this person becomes, the more they can point the finger that they're the problem.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. And I'm also thinking about benefiting from the increased prefrontal cortex activity of that person, because that's organization, and execution, and anticipating people's needs, and all of that. They benefit from it even though they don't know they are, even though they think they're totally independent, and they have needless, and that they have complete and total autonomy and need no one. They're benefiting from all of the background organization and execution that's happening on their behalf.

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Totally, yeah. This is a piece that I was forgetting to bring in, thank you. It's almost like they're functioning as two halves to a nervous system that needs to come together, like a brain and body that need this side, could benefit from this side, and vice versa. And they do benefit, usually we're drawn to that. The insecurely attached folks are drawn to each other because the other person is a model of what they need to cultivate in themselves.

But yeah, dismissive avoidant people benefit greatly from the immense amounts of empathy, and anticipation, and emotional labor that somebody with preoccupied attachment does.

And we've got fearful avoidant over here, which is a combination of dismissive and anxious in a lot of ways, and they have some very disorganized ways of existing in relationship, and they basically will adjust according to the attachment style of the other person. So if the other person they're with is more avoidant, they'll usually become more anxious, and then vice versa.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I want to check something with you because I haven't heard anybody say this, but I just thought of it, so let me know what you think. You've got the intermittent reinforcement normally of the avoidant, which looks like somebody who's super charismatic and thoughtful a couple of times, or very kind and speaks really glowingly of you in public, and then when you're in private, never has anything nice to say to you, or this is how these things can look.

And then on the opposite side, I've come to understand that the anxious, more insecurely attached anxious person, what that looks like for them is selflessness and resentment. And that's that intermittent reinforcement, the way that they're displaying that other half of the whole.

**[00:44:20]**

Yeah, they can take that route, or they can take getting very angry, and demanding, and critical as a way to try to get close. But they're the ones who supply the fight for the relationship. And actually people who are dismissive avoidant depend on that, because for them it feels, in their defensive exclusion, it's unsafe for them to even share vulnerably, or even identify that they have those needs. And to speak them would just be... It would go against their whole identity, or sense of what creates internal cohesion. So the fact that the preoccupied person does all these things, great... Doing it for them, they fit together like puzzle pieces.

So Ava, how do we specifically avoid being toxic? What are some of the things that we can do in order to foundationally support ourselves in not being toxic?

### **Dr Ava Pommerenk**

All right, so we need to recognize that toxicity is not just this will based, personality based thing, it goes very, very deep. It goes into the nervous system. It goes into the brain and the body. It's completely entwined with trauma stored in the brain and the body. Because of this, we need to approach healing toxicity not just through talking about it, and through gaining intellectual awareness, which is part of the process.

But we need to create an environment for ourselves, in our lives, where we can regulate our nervous system, we can create a safe space, we can support our brain's neuroplasticity. We need to support ourselves, our whole system, in being able to grow and heal, and where some part of the brain is hyper-functioning or hypo-functioning, not functioning well enough.

You need to support yourself in all these different ways in order to create new neural connections, and to help yourself start to fire in certain places in your brain where it's appropriate at the right amount. And also working with the vagus nerve, there's so many pieces here. So what I would suggest is actually working also with the body.

So getting enough sleep, exercise, making sure that you're also doing embodiment practices, so it's not just exercise where you go into a trance and you're running, but like really slowing down and feeling your body. Breathing, breath work, really being present with yourself in the moment. Making sure you're getting enough sleep, working on your nutrition, and I don't mean nutrition in the sense of you must be vegan, but nutrition in the sense of, all the research points generally to less processed foods, more whole foods. Things in moderation.

Rest is another piece. We tend to consume so much caffeine, and so many stimulants in order to try to get more energy. Or we consume different substances in order to calm ourselves down that we can't read the natural signals of being tired, or needing rest. And our cultures and societies are set up in such a way where we're not resting adequately, we're just going, going, and we're programmed to do that too. So getting adequate rest can actually help your whole nervous system, help your brain, help create a circumstance, or an environment where you are able to rewire, where you are able to actually stop being more toxic, where you can receive all the support you're trying to give yourself.

**[00:48:23]**

Because if you're getting therapy but you're not working on any of these other areas, it's going to be really difficult to actually integrate the therapy work you're doing, even if it's somatic trauma based therapy. You have to support your body in these ways too, that also includes meditation. Mindfulness practices, and meditation.

And then also we've got the level of interpersonal. This is why it's really important to work with a therapist or a coach, someone who's trauma informed, where you work with really understanding boundaries, building your capacity to have interception, so sensing your own emotions and sensations, and what's coming up in your body as a part of being in relationship, with another person who can help you track that.

Waking up to interception is actually you rewiring different parts of your brain, and getting it to fire in different ways. Working with boundaries, getting some coaching on how to actually set boundaries and keep them.

How to tolerate the emotions that come up when you set boundaries. How to tolerate shame and fear. How to regulate shame and fear. And then also learning how having it modeled to you from this figure you're working with, about how to be more vulnerable, how to be more authentic, how to show up in a way where you're safe and you're regulated.

Because being in relationship with another person who is regulated, we actually start to attune to that. When someone is regulated, they're existing in a state of peace and safety. If they can hold that presence with you, you actually start to internalize that too. It helps you start to build the capacity to feel safe and regulated as well.

And then also working with within all of this, identifying specifically what fight responses look like. Fight flight responses, dissociation, fawning responses, and again, noticing in your body, being able to work with it. Having someone who can reflect back to you, hey, what's going on here? Can you feel this? Can you work with this? Cycling through the response the way you need to, and generating a more constructive, or a healthier response to find a sense of regulation.

And then the final thing I would say in regard to toxic relationships is do not become physically or sexually intimate with somebody too quickly. I cannot express this loud enough and clear enough, and I've been guilty. We all do this because of dating culture.

When you get physically intimate with somebody too quickly, it engages the attachment system in your brain. It's creating oxytocin, it's creating all these hormones that help you bond. It's wiring your brain in a way to associate that person with your attachment figure. It brings up all of that attachment material very quickly. It can feel very overwhelming for people who are insecurely attached. And it can also cloud your ability to have proper judgment about reading whether someone has toxic traits.

It stops you from noticing what we call red flags, which really a red flag is just areas where you're noticing inconsistency, where you're noticing their words don't match their actions, places where you're noticing someone doesn't have integrity, or isn't being honest, and maybe isn't even aware of that. They lack self-awareness, they lack accountability, maybe they don't have values that align with yours, and that can be very destructive, and signals that they're going to give you... That they'll play out these traumatic patterns with you from your childhood.

**[00:52:14]**

It's hard to read that if you're filled with oxytocin and dopamine, and you're like, oh, this feels so good, I love this person. So try to practice some restraint around quick physical intimacy, and try to meter how quickly you get to know somebody, in order to have a clear sense about how to engage from a healthier place in yourself, as well as how to suss out who this person is.

**Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic, gosh, I feel like now we have all of the cognitive understanding and also the integrated plan of action of, what does support look like, what does practicing this look like, what are all the factors that are involved? And then obviously the one that you didn't necessarily name explicitly, but it's time. Give yourself a lot of time to do this work.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Yes, it takes time. And I can speak for myself, as somebody who's been doing a ton of healing work my whole life. Who's had a lot of toxic patterns due to extreme insecure attachment and a lot of childhood trauma. I can tell you that even with all the immense amount of work I've done, and all the different modes of healing that I've drawn on as a resource, I still find that there's contexts where I fall into toxicity. Or contexts where I get locked into something with somebody.

But as you get healthier, you come out of the dream, or the internal working model bubble, and you go, wait, hold on, I see what I'm doing, I can experience greater self-compassion, I can experience greater patience and empathy for the other person, and I can also solidly walk away if I need to.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. That unconscious pattern behavior cycle gets shorter, and tighter, and smaller. It's not, I am absolved from all of my childhood patterns. It's I recognize it quicker, I take action where I need to faster, and I feel much more secure about what I'm doing and recognize as a result.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Absolutely, yeah. So just be really gentle with yourself, let's just all say we're toxic because we are to some degree, and we're all working on it, some of us more than others. And we're just trying to find a way to feel safe, and well, and break out of the limits, or the distortions that were created very early in life, before we had any conscious control or awareness of them being created.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, and obviously, that's going to take some support from somebody like you. So how can people find out more about you and your work?

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

You can visit my website, [avapommerenkphd.com](http://avapommerenkphd.com), you can also visit my [Instagram](#), or my [medium.com](#) account, there I post different things. You can reach out through my website, you can reach out through any of them, actually through messages, and I'd be happy to respond to you. I

can either provide resources, or I could also possibly do a consult with you to see if we'd be a good fit, and I can support you on your journey.

**[00:55:31] - Meagen Gibson**

Fantastic. Dr Ava Pommerenk, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Dr Ava Pommerenk**

Thank you. It was amazing.