



Create Healthy Boundaries Using Attachment Styles

Guest: Dr Diane Poole Heller

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[00:00:09] - Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr Diane Poole Heller. We're going to be talking about how attachment styles show up in relationships, and particularly, how do we put in healthy boundaries and navigate the challenges in toxic relationships. In intimate relationships, but also in the context of our wider family.

To give people a little bit of Diane's background. Diane Poole Heller, PhD, is an established expert in the field of adult attachment theory, and models trauma resolution, and integrative healing techniques.

She's a trainer, presenter, and speaker, offering workshops, and tele-seminars, and educational materials on trauma, attachment models, and their dynamics in childhood and adult relationships, as well as many other topics.

As a senior faculty member of SETI, she teaches Somatic Experiencing, based on Dr Peter Levine's groundbreaking work, in the US and worldwide, including Denmark, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, Israel, Germany, and Australia.

Her book, *Crash Course*, a guidebook on how to resolve auto accident trauma is used as a resource for healing general trauma in the US, and internationally.

So, firstly, Diane, welcome. I'm looking forward to getting into this together. I always very much enjoy our conversations. So thank you...

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Me too. I really love talking to you, it's great. Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

You're so welcome. So before we come to this area of boundaries, and self-care, and how one looks after themselves within the challenges of relationship. Let's take a little bit of time to introduce attachment styles, what the different attachment styles are, and then we can talk about them in this context.

[00:02:02] - Dr Diane Poole Heller

Okay, that sounds great. I'll give sort of a brief overview, and then as we go into different things, I'll expand on it depending on each person's attachment adaptation.

Alex Howard

Great.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

First of all, you hit the jackpot when you are born in a pro-social family and relatively secure dynamics, and that's called secure attachment. Basically that means you have a holding environment, you feel relatively safe most of the time.

You have a parent, that's most of the time attuned and available to you, and can understand what's going on with you, can reflect your emotional states, is responsive. Nobody's responsive all of the time, and it's not necessary that we're responsive all of the time, so I take that burden off people. But that you're responsive generally to the child's needs, or you're doing your best effort to make things happen that are supportive.

You're protective, you make sure your kids are as safe as you can possibly have them be safe.

And you are playful. One of the big parts of really enjoying secure attachment is playtime. So I'm always saying to people, have more playtime with your friends, but also with your kids.

You're able to recover from conflict relatively easily, you're able to initiate or receive repair when something goes off. Things go off in relationships, a little bit like sailing a boat, you don't go straight line for healthy relationship. You're tacking one direction, tacking the other direction, to find that middle range of resiliency for secure.

I'm saying a little bit more about secure because everything that we're doing is trying to promote more capacity for people to have secure attachment, and engage in a way that is really attuned and supportive, and that resolves a lot of the everyday life stresses that we're all going to face. We can move into it within a more resourced way.

Alex Howard

And I guess when we experience relationship and friendships in that way that's where friendship and relationship is so nourishing, it actually gives us something and it feeds us.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

When you think about those experience of when you feel like somebody really gets you, they're really there, they're present, they're attuned, they understand what you're saying, you feel seen and met, that's like gold for relationship.

And that helps us move into vulnerabilities, or maybe some healing of wounds that we all carry. That's a really invaluable feeling, felt getting gotten, it's a funny way to say it, but that somebody really resonates and you feel and can tell the difference.

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We have really sophisticated brain systems, brain circuits that allow us to really know most of the time when somebody's being really authentic, or when somebody's feeding us a line, or they're just saying they understand but they don't have a clue.

We usually can tell that, and when we can really feel met by someone, that's amazing. So that has a lot to do with developing secure attachment styles, or healthy relationship things, and this is really across the board with all relationships, your work colleagues, your friends, your kids, your partners.

The more challenging attachment wounds will tend to come up with your intimate partner, or long term relationships, where you've developed a certain level of intimacy and vulnerability. That will sometimes call up unresolved attachment wounds a little bit more deeply than someone you just meet and you know them for a few months or something.

Alex Howard

It's like in a way we save the worst of ourselves for those that we love the most, right?

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well not intentionally...

Alex Howard

I know, but it's what happens.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yeah, exactly, because as you start to identify a friend, or a partner as a primary attachment figure, then that will call up any good things, or any deficits from your original caregiving.

It's a little bit more than just parenting. I mean you could be born in war zone, or poverty, or in a really marginalized and not treated well group of people. You could have experienced racism, there's all sorts of other things that can factor into that, but mostly in these short talks I focus a little bit more on caregiving.

Alex Howard

Yeah. So that's a secure healthy attachment. Walk us through some of the other examples.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

I'm going to give you a brief overview. avoidant attachment tends to set up under certain circumstances, and some of those are severe neglect, just a parent that is vacant, or doesn't know how to respond to needs. Maybe isn't so great with their own needs, but doesn't really reflect the emotional states of the child correctly, because often they aren't so tuned into their own emotional awareness.

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Or they're incongruent with emotion, like they're sad but they're presenting anger. Or the reverse, they're angry but what they're really feeling is sad. So this incongruence tends to interrupt the ability of the right brain to really register a normal range of emotional experience. And then that can follow a person into their adult relationships, where they may have a disregard for emotion. Or even a contempt for emotion.

Or they're out of touch with their own felt sense physically, because we have a physical felt sense underneath our emotional self. So they often then feel because their parents weren't as present and attuned, they often feel like needs aren't okay, or the only person that can meet their needs is them, because they never had a good experience of someone else really supporting them that way.

And that can follow into adult relationships where you don't really even ask for help when you actually really need it. We can get a lot more done if we have a good support system, right? We can flourish that way, but often there's not really an orientation to do that.

And on a nervous system level, if somebody's not present with you when you're growing up, your nervous system is primed to co-regulate with a parent, or somebody that cares about you, and is attuned to you. And if you don't have that most of the time, then your nervous system doesn't really even know how to co-regulate. So you have to teach a person how to co-regulate in a relationship.

And that can create, since we're talking about toxic relationship, that can create dynamics in a partnership, or a friendship, where another person experiences you as not being available for their needs, not being very vulnerable, not having much emotional response when something happens, that would normally create an emotional response.

And people can feel that... Hey, where are you? Are you there for me? It doesn't mean that the avoidantly attached person doesn't want relationship, we're biologically programmed to have relationship, we're social beings, but there's something on top of it, this experience of neglect.

Sometimes it's rejection, sometimes it's a parent who's basically present, but they're only relating to the child with tasks. They're only doing left brain activity with the child, like learning to read, or learning to write, or learning to ride a bicycle. Functional things, do math, that they're not really present emotionally.

And often we have to understand that these things are generational. A lot of times we parent the way we were parented, unless we've done the hard work of really working on ourselves, which a lot of us on this call are doing, thank goodness.

But very often you get a lot of these implicit memories, and implicit experiences, about how you're being parented from really understanding how your parents were also parented.

So it's not about blaming anybody. It's like looking at how do we move the whole family, or how do we move all of our capacities for relationship forward more towards secure.

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And that's why I like defining secure like we just did, because so often people think they know what it is, and they really don't understand exactly what it is. It has a lot to do with safe touch, connection, prosocial family behavior.

There's all sorts of things that feed into that that we'll touch on as we go through.

Alex Howard

I think, in a way, I guess a lot of people's perception of secure is what feels familiar. And so they have dynamics that are actually quite toxic, but they're familiar, therefore there's a comfort in the familiarity, therefore it's like, oh, that must be what healthy relationship is.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

The paradox is that most of us walk around, or we're told in our cultures, that we should just know how to do it. It's just a normal thing, like eating and drinking, or something. But what we know how to do is the familiar, so we tend to have knee jerk reactions. We don't really even know why we withdraw when somebody gets emotional, or we head for the door when there's conflict.

We don't really quite know what causes that. We just go, well, this is the way I am. But there's so much more to it, to really understand that, that can bring us into a much easier and fulfilling situation, if we take the time to look at some of those behaviors, and work with them.

I know we have the attachment quiz on my website traumasolutions.com, or you can get to it from dianepooleheller.com. It's an interesting thing to take, it's free, anybody can take it. You want to take it when you're not on your best, think about a time when you're not on your best day, and you want to focus on one relationship at a time.

But even in asking the questions that we ask you, it'll highlight what might be working pretty well for you, and what might not be working so well for you. And it brings it to awareness, because so often we're not even aware of certain relational patterns, that we would even question them. Might just say, okay, I refuel in my alone time. Which might be true, but it also might be a knee jerk reaction to avoid contact that might go along with the avoidance style.

Alex Howard

Yeah. And in that situation, it may not be actually that it's what you most need, it's just what you've got habituated towards doing.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

And also if you didn't have nourishing contact with someone who's present and obviously loving as a kid, you almost don't know what to do with it. It's like even when that good stuff comes to you from maybe a future partner or friend, it makes you uncomfortable.

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I had a little bit of that in my own history. I didn't grow up in a particularly loving family. Aspects of it were loving, but it was challenging. And so when I got married, my partner would say to me, I love you and I tell you that, and it's like you sort of deflect it, it's like it falls off of you. And at first, I was really mad at him. I'm like, what do you mean? I don't do that. I woke up in the middle of the night and I went, oh dear, busted.

But I didn't know I was doing that until he mentioned it, and then I thought I'm really hurting him by not taking in his love. So then I really worked on how do I be present when good things are happening, and tolerate it in the beginning, it's tolerating it, and then eventually it becomes really yummy. But I wouldn't have even known that if I didn't know my own dynamic, and what he was pointing out to me, which was really important to know.

Alex Howard

In a way that's the gift of loving intimate relationship, right? We get help to see things about ourselves that we might otherwise not see. I mean, my wife, it took her about a decade to get me to own my defensiveness, because every time she'd called it out, I'd get very defensive about my defensiveness. I wasn't very good at seeing it.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

And a predictable, in the beginning my first reaction was defensive too. I do not do that.

Alex Howard

Right? It's like I've never known someone who's so defensive about the fact they're not defensive.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

You have to have a little bit of a playful, compassionate, accepting, sense of humor, and curiosity to dive into this, because it goes to really tender territory.

I really need to have a moment for everyone that's listening, and everybody who's going to listen to it on replay. Just to be gentle with yourself when we're talking about this, because these wounds often happen very early.

They're often happening in utero. When we're infants, we don't even have an ego structure to tell us a story about it. It's just implanted implicitly in our body responses and our emotional responses.

So the first step is having awareness. Either somebody points it out, like your wife and my husband did, or you bump into it over and over again in relationships. Or even the questionnaires, wow, I didn't even think about that. I do do that.

We're just trying to bring awareness, and then some kind of corrective healing experience, that can move a person beyond that wound, back into secure attachment. And the thing I really want to say, that I think is so hopeful, that I really want to underline, is secure attachment is fundamental to our biology.

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It's fundamental to being a human being. John Bowlby, way back was talking about that, I love his work. We have secure attachment, you don't have to create it, sometimes we have to practice it. We have to go through some wounds to get to it. But it's like we have this foundation, in my opinion.

This foundation of secure attachment, then it has these things dumped on top of it, that might not have really supported a secure attachment orientation. And then we unpeel that, like you working with defensiveness, me working with receptivity to loving behavior. Then the secure attachments, they're waiting to take over. And I think that's really important for people to understand, that it's rooting for you. It's in there, we just sometimes have to uncover it and excavate it.

Alex Howard

Yeah, I guess it's like our physical body has a natural capacity to heal, right? So we get a cut, or we break a bone, it's like there's no medical science that makes that heal. We just have to create an environment that allows that healing to happen.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Perfect metaphor. That's fantastic. Yeah.

Alex Howard

So we've got secure, we've got avoidance. Do you want to just walk us through a bit further and then we can come back?

Dr Diane Poole Heller

ambivalent is like each of these styles. You can have a mix of them because you have different relationships with different people. Your mother might have treated you very differently than your father, or your stepfather, stepmother, both fathers, both mothers. However it worked. They have different things they're bringing into the relational field. So first of all, you can have a mix.

I think I have a little bit of all of them myself. But ambivalent really has to do with a parent that was sometimes available, and sometimes actually very loving, but very inconsistent. So if you imagine you're holding kids when they're really relaxed, they kind of melt on your shoulders like spaghetti, wet spaghetti. They mold into you. That's a good bonding.

But something will happen too much of the time when there's ambivalent parenting, where they get interrupted, they get dropped. They start to relax, and then all of a sudden, the parent gets rejecting, or the parent gets tangled up in their own internal unresolved attachment wounds, gets triggered by the age of the kid, or what's going on. And so there's this inconsistency.

And if you really understand intermittent reward, as a psychological term, that's really what makes people gamblers. You spin the wheel, or whatever you do in Las Vegas, and pull the lever, and nothing happens, nothing happens, nothing happens, and something happens. You get all excited and you get some quarters, or maybe a bunch of money, and then you go back to this nothing,

nothing, nothing. It keeps you locked in because, oh, there's going to be something good eventually, right? And you get really focused out externally.

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So what will happen for someone that tilts towards ambivalent adaptation. And I like to say adaptation because there is nothing wrong with these styles. You're not pathological. These are not diagnoses. They're just patterns that if we understand them, we can work to bring ourselves back to more secure functioning. And that's a win-win for everybody. All the people that we're in a relationship with, our kids, our partners, our colleagues. And it's also a big win for us.

So what will happen when you're so over focused on another person, you tend to under focus, or in a way self abandon, because it's like, what are they doing? Are they in a place where they can be like, is mom okay, so she can be loving right now? Or can I twist myself into a pretzel in a certain way, to be a certain way that I think I'll have a better chance of being loved?

So there's always this orientation to try to shift the situation, to make ourselves better, even though there's nothing wrong with us, or to make our parent more loving, or more consistent, or more stable. So a lot of the behaviors that will show up, or the experiences that will show up for ambivalent, is based on trying to stabilize the other relationship.

Now sometimes, because that's such a focus, and there is a sense of self abandonment, they will, you could say, I don't like the word manipulate, but I'm trying to think of a different word. They can try to massage the relationship the way they want it to be, but it can feel to the other person, like there's a lot of pressure. And they can have the internal experience that I can't regulate, I can't self soothe, I can't take care of myself, unless you do it for me.

So wow, that sets up a lot of pressure on the other person that they can't ever live up to, because it's a never enough situation. And the thing is, even if you, Alex, we are good friends, but say I was depending on you for a lot and then you aren't available so much, then it's like this person experiences the desperation of I'm not going to be regulate, I can't do it.

The problem is if I've already abandoned myself, even if you do picture perfect attunement, and affirming words, and loving acts, and everything else. If I've already abandoned myself, there's nobody here to receive it, so I can't take it in anyway, right?

So a big focus in healing ambivalent is to help a person recognize that they aren't able. That's really what my husband was pointing out to me, you aren't able to take in and receive the loving behaviors. And then you're always feeling like the other person isn't doing enough, because you're not getting the love, but you're actually blocking it.

And that's what most ambivalent folks don't understand, is that they are actively, even though it's unconscious, they're blocking what they want the most, and then they're putting more and more pressure on other people.

And often for ambivalent, it comes out in kind of a negative complaining. So the partner, or friend, can always feel like they're never doing enough. They're never getting it right. And that gets hard after a while. That gets like, okay, nothing I do works, so why bother? And very often a person with ambivalent will be pushing away the person they most want to be intimate with and not even realizing how much they're contributing to pushing away.

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And then they'll feel abandoned, and then they'll blame them for this. It's like a self fulfilling prophecy. See, I'm abandoned again, this person isn't available now, the relationship isn't stable. But you have to have so much compassion because whether it's avoidant or ambivalent, it's wired into our survival system.

An avoidant feels like they're risking their autonomy, that they've fought so hard for, and it's the only way they've survived, if they allow another person in. That they're going to lose something really valuable to them if they really let themselves have somebody in that primary attachment spot, like a deep intimacy with a partner, or a friend, or whatever.

And an ambivalent feels like if I stop complaining, I'm never going to get what I want, which doesn't actually work very well, right? And if I stop asking, it's like the signal cry for the baby is to cry, and scream, and everything. Or sometimes get ill, and then they get more attention from the caregiver, at least for a short period of time.

But often when we resort to that strategy where we're always sending, you never do this, and you're always late, and you always come home when dinner is cold, and I've spent all this time making dinner. There's a way to resay that, like, oh, I just love it when you're here on time, because I love giving you your favorite meal, and I love sharing it with you in person.

That's a very different message than, why are you always late for dinner? You know what I mean? So often trying to get your needs met. First of all, the avoidant doesn't have needs, or they feel like they only can meet them themselves, because they never had a satisfying experience of someone else doing it.

But the ambivalent will tend to say, I have all these needs, and you're supposed to meet them. And if you don't, then the relationship is a failure, and part of that is their own incapacity to receive.

Alex Howard

It really strikes me, Diane, as you're talking, that one of the things, which I'm going to put in personal narrative, because I think it's a helpful way into it, is that one of the things I can struggle with, is where that balance is between meeting my own needs, and asking for help, and opening to connection.

And so there's a place, there's two extremes, neither of which are helpful. One extreme is not asking for help, do it all myself. I can have the narrative, I can see my wife is overloaded with three kids, doesn't have a lot of resourcefulness in that moment. So I'm going to be a grown up and take care of myself, and figure out what's needed.

But that can go to an extreme, but then being, in a way, ambivalent and avoidant, in a sense of being disconnected. But then there's also a place of, I'm feeling this, and my wife needs to know everything I'm feeling and fix it, and go in a sort of needy, complainy, small childlike way, to which she's going to reasonably respond, I got three kids already can you be grown up and deal with yourself. In a way, that there's an interesting balance of where that place is, of meeting one's own needs, but also staying in a connected, healthy relationship?

I'm curious, as yeah, it was a live issue for me last night, so I'm curious.

[00:23:29] - Dr Diane Poole Heller

Okay, well, we'll dive into that. What's great about really understanding secure, is secure has a pretty good feel of balance, right? They know they have self efficacy, but it's not based on a wound of no one ever being there. They just have developed their own capacity for autonomy, and it's not reactive to a wound where nobody was there or they've healed into that.

Whether we start secure, or we heal into secure, either way we get the advantage of secure, and they have an attunement to their partners, or their friends. Hey, I'm really needing some help here, are you available? Or, do you have anybody else that you know that might has a skill set that could be helpful, or what can we do to alleviate this pressure in our relationship?

There's just a lot going on, like, in your case with three kids, and all the needs that each of the kids have, because your kids are at ages where they're active, they're doing all sorts of different directions, and they're developing their hobbies, and interests, and skills. So I think, really, this balancing act, and it's a good discussion to have in your relationship, too, where are there areas that you feel like I could support you more?

And maybe there's five things that you have on your wish list. Okay. I think I can really do number two, number four and number five. I'm not so sure I have the space, or the energy, or know how even, to do one and three, or whatever it was. If you have an experience where you're kind of moving towards a better balance, I think that's really helpful to communicate.

And not everybody can do everything. We really want to get rid of that idea that somebody's going to be everything for us. But the more we can see ourselves as a team, and whatever we do for our partner is also feeding the relationship, which feeds us. It's in our own best interest to be as available as we can.

It doesn't mean we can always be available, but the way you communicate, that can be really different. It's like, gosh, I'm really overloaded. I've got this crazy deadline schedule this week and I'm going to have a hard time showing up. I might be late. Is there anything I can do to kind of balance that out? Maybe the following week I'll take on a little bit more of something else.

There's a way to let people know in a kind way rather than an abrupt, I don't have time for you. That's a very different actually.

Alex Howard

I haven't seen it, but about five people have told me about it. There's a Brene Brown clip that apparently has gone viral on social media in the last few weeks, which was around her and her husband saying, I think maybe it was a podcast interview or something, where she was saying that on a scale of zero to 100. Sometimes we're at 80 resources, other times we're at ten, and coming home from work and saying, today I'm at 50, or I'm at 70, or I'm at 20. You got two people at 20, you ain't going to be able to do shit for each other. And so that transparency of communication.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yes, I think that really helps. And the other thing is, that I could underline a million times, is not taking things so personally. One of the things that happens in relationships is that we tend to

make up our stories about them, like, oh, that person didn't smile, or they didn't really welcome me when I came in the door after work. That means you make up your story.

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A lot of times that story is not even close to accurate. So not taking things personally. One thing I like about attachment is really understanding how to be alive with attachment theory, not just know it, but actually live it, is that you understand that a lot of the reactions are coming from way early times, that probably have very little to do with what's going on in your relationship.

So it's easier to bring curiosity to it. Like my husband did. He said, I'm saying I love you, and I'm hugging you, and you just deflect it. You start talking about work, or I do something like that. He was just asking me in a curious way, and of course, I got offended, that was my defensiveness.

But then later I saw the truth in it, and of course I said to him, you know what you're absolutely right. I need to work on this. I'm going to make this a practice, like a spiritual practice. I think it took me about a year to really stay present when people were being loving, or kind to me, and I didn't even know I needed to do that right, but I did need to do that.

So I think having a way to talk about, or even if, so you have an argument, okay, this went off the rails. That happens, it's going to happen. When you come back to it, you go when that was going on, I think if I could have explained this to you, or I could have been vulnerable about this to you, it might have gone a different way, or you kind of go back and rework it a little bit, like, okay, what could I have done differently? And what is it triggering in me? Because sometimes it's triggering some very deep unconscious pain that you haven't been aware of, and you need to spend some time working on.

Even having the intention to go, look, I know I kind of screwed up in that communication last night. I was blaming, and maybe it moved into shaming, and that is not what I want to do to my beloved partner. But I think it was triggering this for me, and I need to take some time to sort that out for myself.

Alex Howard

I'm also wanting, Diane, to move to family relationships, particularly relationship with siblings, parents, and so on. One of the challenges can be that as we do our inner work, and we grow more awareness and more capacity, and we hopefully start to build healthier relationships in our immediate life, of course, those relationships of origin don't necessarily change with us.

It can be, I think, particularly difficult for people where they can see where they didn't get healthy, secure attachment, and they are now working on that in themselves. But they still are in some sort of relationship dynamic, and they probably want to be in some kind of relationship dynamic with parents, or siblings, and so on.

And so I'm interested in how we develop the capacity to navigate that, but also where we need boundaries, how to be able to not necessarily, unless it's the most helpful things to do, to completely exclude that relationship. But I think a lot of folks find that territory really tricky.

[00:29:43] - Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well, I could think of one example in my own life which is definitely going to be relevant. I remember there was a dynamic in my family where one sibling and my mother would always put me in the middle. They would get in a conflict. And then it was always me, I was always supposed to fix it somehow. And I'd have to talk to them and I realized this is just not really helping them develop a better relationship.

And it's really stressful for me because I'm in the middle of this mess. And I finally just said whenever they called about, oh, mom did this, or oh, she did that, I would just say, hey, you know what, you need to talk to that other person, you need to talk to mom, or you need to talk to each other. And that was a boundary I set against being triangulated, and at first people are a little miffed at me, but then it worked out much better. They ended up having a much richer relationship because they could actually resolve something. I was just in the middle of it, and it wasn't really helpful.

And I think what happens when you mature, and you really get rooted in secure attachment, and you're not taking things so personally, and you're able to see things like a step back, more objectively what's going on.

Family dynamics are often very complicated. You can see where you might bring in an aspect of secure attachment that could be helpful, but you're not relying on them reciprocating it as much, because you have this other, I don't know, chosen family, or people that you've had these healthy relationships with.

So you're not as dependent on them responding as much as you'd like them to in a secure attachment way. And I notice in some family dynamics there might be some people that just really need a lot of attention, and that often comes with the reassurance needed for the ambivalent attachment.

So what I was practicing was, okay, how can I be really present with this person, and really reflect them, and really just be with them? And you could just see their whole self just relax, and then because they're not so in the wound, they kind of shift into this calm, a little bit more access to secure attachment, and then we could actually have a more nourishing conversation that might even include me.

But it wasn't like I was starting the relationship with, god this person really needs a lot of attention and they're just exhausting. To try to not enter the field of family of origin from that space. Now, just to give you the extreme, there's certain families that carry a lot of trauma, abusiveness, violence, I mean, there's a lot of trauma being acted out all the time.

And when I have clients that are having to go home for Thanksgiving, or Christmas, or whatever, or some holiday, that are entering in a really challenging situation, sometimes I would say, okay, I want you to pick a TV show, or a sitcom that is like the dynamic in your family. And I just want you to pretend you're walking into this sitcom you remember.

I don't know, because you're in UK, if you ever remember Archie Bunker, but Archie Bunker used to be this very, as politically incorrect as you could get. Horrible, just no communication skills, he was just nasty to his wife. It was considered a comedy. But I think they have that kind of humor in UK, too.

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It's sort of this nastiness, but it's supposed to be funny. And I mean, it is for its comedic deal, but some people have families like that. Sometimes in parts of my family, I would go, okay, I just have to prep I'm going on the stage for Archie Bunker, and then I'd be on there and go, wow, they really did a great Archie Bunker.

It gave me a little bit more resiliency to deal with the somewhat overt craziness, and then I could stay a little bit more... Have a little more equanimity. And then not have huge reactions because a lot of times historically, and this doesn't happen so much now. But when my family get together, there'd be these meltdowns, that were just pretty dramatic. And I could usually time them. Okay, these two people get together, it's going to be 20 minutes before there's ahhhh and I thought, okay, it's about 15 minutes. Get ready.

And I think we all come from sometimes pretty complicated dynamics, and not that that's an end all solution. But I think there's also the thing of meeting your family on neutral ground in a restaurant where there's not going to be as much... There's those kinds of things you can do if it's really strong.

But I think in general, what I've noticed for myself over the years really struggling with this, is I have a lot more equanimity and a lot more... I don't take things so personally. I just normally say, wow, that's really like watching the suffering movie in action.

I could tell a story about that. I actually was at a family reunion. My mother said, why are you doing a family reunion? You know it's going to be a disaster. And I was like, yeah, well, I want to do one. And not all my family came, but my grandmother had just died. And my mother told all the siblings, all the kids, her kids, grandchildren, not to come to the funeral, which I don't know why she didn't want anybody to come. And then she was really upset that people didn't come. So it was like, okay, well.

I was at a spiritual retreat. I didn't even know my grandmother had passed. So she was really upset about that, back then you didn't have cell phones, I didn't have any idea.

But I started this dinner with... I just read this question that they used to ask Einstein. If you could ask God or the Universe one question, you'd get the actual true answer. What question would you ask? It's an interesting question. My family does a lot about food. Pass the corn. Oh, you want some corn? It's really good corn. Have some more corn, put some butter in your corn. It's all about corn and it drives me nuts, because I have a little bit more of a depth and need than sometimes happens.

Alex Howard

I also have a corn allergy, so it wouldn't be good for me either.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

That wouldn't be good for you, so I said, oh well, I had this interesting letter and this person asked this question, and I said, I wonder what you guys would ask if you had one question. And one sibling immediately said I'd want to know the winning lottery ticket number. Okay, well great.

[00:35:52]

And finally people ask different things. But my dad gets around, he goes, I'd want to know what happens at death. Which is a definite deeper level thing. And that triggered my mom before he even got to finish the sentence to, mom just died and nobody came to the funeral. And even though she told everyone they couldn't come to the funeral, and so she's really escalated.

And then that ping pongs into looking at my one sibling saying, you don't take your kids to church, you're ruining them in the eyes of God, or whatever. And then he gets triggered and says, well the judge gave them to their mother, and then them going, but you're my daddy, you're my daddy.

And I'm like watching this symphony of suffering just unfold, oh my God, all this reactivity, like really intense, and then this goes on for a while, I won't bore you with the details. But all of a sudden my mother turns to me and looks at me with these really mean eyes, look what you started. Because I asked this question, and I went, oh, could you pass the corn?

Oh, my brother also said, when she said the thing about you're not taking the kids to church, he goes, yeah, you think I'm a Nazi I'm like, where the hell did that come from? That's just the stuff that's waiting to surface that hasn't been resolved.

Alex Howard

I can imagine the vast majority of people watching this are probably laughing, thinking that sounds like my family. Not necessarily about the corn, but like the sort of the bouncing off...

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Oh yeah, right. That one thing just triggers some crazy thing and then they're not even related.

Alex Howard

Everyone just does their thing, they play their parts in the narrative.

I was reflecting as you were talking as well, Diane. It's really interesting what you said a bit earlier around the importance of how we show up in those dynamics. And I was reflecting as you were talking, it's funny, you and I are self referencing quite a lot in this interview, which I like because I think it makes it more personal.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Yeah, I don't mind.

Alex Howard

But apologies, I'm going to do the same again. My mom was very ill in hospital actually last year, and this year, and she's doing a bit better now. But I went and visited her a lot, and each time I went and saw her it was like this might be the last time I see her. It was quite serious. It was really important to me to show up, and be as deeply present as I could in those interactions, because it was like if this is the last time we're together, it feels really important to me that I'm really there, and I meet her from a place of truth, and love, and holding.

[00:38:24] - Dr Diane Poole Heller

And even if you do that for like 5 seconds, that is such a huge gift on a soul level. That's huge.

Alex Howard

Yeah. And also, in a way was a way of showing up for myself, because it was upsetting what was happening. And so I also wanted to hold myself in that, and therefore to be able to be present. And we had some, although she was in actually significant suffering a lot of that time, we had some sweetness and some depth in our connection.

And then I noticed that the last couple of times that I'd seen her, she's doing much better. I'd gone in much less landed, and rushing around, and walked or stormed in with three kids and dogs running around, and had these really scratchy interactions because it's like that lack of depth and presence.

And part of our dynamic is she's very neurotic. And so when I'm grounded, she feels safety in that, and so she settles. And when I'm not, or if something's going on in my life that is not totally perfect, she completely flips out, and panics. But it was just really interesting as you were talking, that I was thinking that the importance of when we have those difficult dynamics, that the more that we show up to ourselves, in a way it's for us, but it also builds a space that allows all of it to feel easier.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

That's exactly, I couldn't have said it more perfectly. That is so beautiful. And kudos to you for telling that story, because it's so central to what's so important about our learning and healing into, and emphasizing secure attachment dynamics in all of our relationships. I mean, if everybody made a commitment to do that, and even take a generation to heal everything, that would change the world in really significant way, in a very short period of time.

But that's fundamental when you understand how you can ground yourself. And actually it's kind of good feedback that when your mom gets a little neurotic, right, you go, okay instead of going, wow, she's getting into blame and shame about that, towards her. You can look to go, okay, is there something I can do to settle, to ground, to create a space that maybe something can shift?

And it's powerful. You become very powerful, and it's fulfilling to realize that you can have that kind of impact on a person when they're kind of having a hard time. And hopefully other people can do that for you sometimes too, right? It could be a nice reciprocal.

Alex Howard

And again, that's the challenge, right? And that's why I also noticed after these last couple of interactions like, well, I should have gone in in a more present way, and then a part of me is like I'm the fucking child, she's the adult.

And I'm like, I'm not going to adult the whole time. And again that's part of this challenge, it goes back to my former question, around that place of where we position ourselves in that, because there's the place where if we show up with a lot of presence, and a lot of spaciousness, we know that relationships work better in that way.

[00:41:15]

But in a way that can risk us always having to be in our adult seats. And then where's that place of us letting ourselves be held, and letting us be in that place that we're also nurtured in relationship?

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Well, hopefully we start to build other people that can really be there for us, like our partners, our friends, maybe one or two of our family members that get us, and they're also stabilizing and nourishing for us. I'm sure if everybody listening, including us, think about certain people in your life. They just are really nourishing to be around.

I mean, certainly spiritual teachers and certain specialized things, but just even people that you feel really that they understand you, they love you, whether you're screwed up, or whether you're doing okay, I mean, they're there for you. One of the things I think is nice about understanding secure attachment, and then these different adaptations, is that you can start to select.

Around 2001, this is funny to say, but I did sort of a garage sale on my relationships. I really looked at, I mean, it's a weird thing to say, but I kind of looked at every relationship and I went, okay, I'm going to put more energy into this one because it's really nourishing, because sometimes I was putting a lot of energy into the ones that were really hard on me, the really toxic ones.

And I was putting a lot of energy, because I was trying to make it better and trying to be something that was never going to work. It just was self defeating. And I thought I could just put less energy in that direction, and more energy to where I'm actually being nourished, and empowered, and I'm able to be who I like to be in this relationship a lot more.

And I had to think about a lot of different situations and relationships, or to see where I could improve them. Like have a conversation with somebody and say, you're always on your cell phone when we're talking. And I get it that you've got a lot going on, but maybe if we could just turn it off during lunch, that would be great.

Whatever it is, I think that's a really wonderful way to look at relationships, like how do I support, or how do I presence, or how do I navigate? And how do we both navigate ideally towards more secure capacity. More ability to presence ourselves in the world. And that includes protection, playfulness, being confidential when it needs to be confidential.

Protecting your kind of coupledness, being forgiving. And then the other thing that I think that we haven't really stressed maybe enough, is entering a family dynamic, or even a conflictual dynamic, with as much as you can.

This takes work to suspend judgment, to just, okay, I'm just going to be curious about this dynamic, and be open as much as I can be, going to try to suspend my defensiveness, although I know it'd probably get triggered here and there, but just to see, okay, I'm moving into judgment now. I'm really getting judgmental inside myself. Is there a way that I can move out of that critical rejecting, as sometimes we had a critical rejecting parent. I had my mom was sort of fell in that category. So you have that conditioning to approach things that way.

[00:44:10]

This is kind of interesting because if you notice the more work you've done on yourself, the less you tend to knee jerk into judgment towards yourself, thank God, more self loving. But also what you export out into the world, that you tend to recover from that critical voice a lot faster. And I think that's as we let our ego structure, our defensive ego structure, not the functional ego structure, but the defensive ego structure starts to dissolve, then the true nature of us, which I don't think is judgmental, it's discerning, but not judgmental, starts to take more predominance.

So I think it's a really worthwhile thing to think about. What do you judge yourself on? Like your ten top judgments, and they're probably the same. They just recycle in different contexts, and see if you can heal those. And then we tend to project what we judge ourselves about. But what do you tend to judge other people about and then see, well, is there some aspect of me that's really struggling with that? And how might I move to a more balanced internal space about that.

Alex Howard

I'm mindful we're pretty much out of time, but I just think a good little closing piece is, I love what you shared around, I think you called it a garage sale, we call it a car boot sale here in the UK, around relationships. Because as we grow and we develop, as you spoke to, of course we outgrow some of those dynamics.

And I really like this giving permission to people to say, actually, does this relationship reflect who I am, and what nurtures me in my life at this point? And if not, it's okay. And I like the way you described it, where you put your energy. It's not like we necessarily have to go to that person and say, you're a terrible friend. I never want to see you again. Just like where we invest our heart and time. And maybe any practical words you can share about that, just as we come towards the end.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

I just think when you're in the space with someone else, just to really be present for them, you're being as much authentic and vulnerable as you feel comfortable being. But just to notice, because first of all, you have to make sure you're in a receiving space. If you're an ambivalent, you're not receiving. It doesn't matter how great they are, right?

So you need to allow their loving behaviors, to be aware of acts of kindness, like Chapman's five different loving relationship signals, or whatever affirming words. Does the person kick you when you're down? Are they there? Even when you're screwing up, do they still love you? There's like, different things to think about. Are they playful? Not that everybody's everything, but is the relationship moving in a growing nourishing way for you?

And then are there some things that maybe you're not sharing, or you're not being transparent about, or you're not nourishing that relationship, it kind of goes both ways. Like, what am I giving to this? And what am I also able to receive? And is it moving in a secured attachment direction? And what can we both do to have that happen? But fundamentally, is there potential there?

Not everybody's interested. When my brother was accusing us of thinking he was a Nazi, he ran out into the parking lot, he was fuming. And I went out and he says, you think I'm just this horrible whatever. And his kids are running around going, you're my daddy, you're my daddy. Because he's saying the judge gave them to their mother. It was just a disaster. And I said, no, I see somebody

who's really hurting. For a minute, he relaxed and he made real contact with me. And then he went, don't you do that to me. And I was like, okay. So it couldn't really land because it just took him into vulnerability that he couldn't tolerate to be compassionate, he couldn't tolerate it, so he went back to anger, and you just do the best you can, but then I don't invest a lot of energy in that so much, because it doesn't feel like there's really an opening. I mean, I've tried repetitive times...

[00:48:07] - Alex Howard

I was just going to say I also really appreciate your vulnerability and sharing around it because I think often people can think, oh, well, if I was the expert and I knew all about this stuff and did all of my inner work, then everything would be fine. And I think there's something that's very important about people realizing that we can do a huge amount of inner work, and we can grow and change in all kinds of ways. But those relationships can still be tricky, and it still hurts when people we love are not... We don't have the closeness that part of us longs for with them.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Absolutely true. We're all a work in progress. The human journey is not an easy one, it's very messy. So we're just trying to see if we can bring a little relief to the mess. What I like about defining it, though, is that when I think about all the hallmarks of secure attachment, there's more I could even say, but it gives me an orientation, like, well, am I playful enough? Am I protective? Am I really clear about boundaries, about being confidential?

That's easy for me because I'm a therapist, we're trained to do that. But it's just a way to kind of orient to what healthy relationship really is, and gradually do what we can to move in that direction.

The one that I didn't get to say much about, Disorganized attachment can have a little bit of ambivalent or avoidant, can be a mix. But the main thing about it is that you grew up with a lot of threat, or severe neglect, and so there was a lot of your threat response really entangled with your attachment system. So trying to find a way to separate those out, and heal the actual original trauma, and then also giving the attachment system a really safe place to land as you're working through. That is really important because a lot of times intimacy in Disorganized attachment will trigger fear and terror, because the internalized experience is that the relationships, especially intimate relationships, are dangerous.

And that's a physiological reaction that until we unpack it, that can wreak a lot of havoc in our love lives, and our connections. So just wanted to throw that in.

Alex Howard

Yeah. And people obviously can find out more. You can give your website again a minute and also say a bit more about the quiz that you mentioned because that's a great way for people to bring more clarity to this.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Okay, we have a free attachment quiz on our website. You can either get to it through my name, dianepooleheller.com or traumasolutions.com. It goes to the same place. And you can take that, or have your partners take it, or your kids take it, or you can have anybody take it. But you want to take it from the perspective of one person at a time. So if you start focusing on mom, and then

you're focusing on dad, and then you're focusing on your marriage, partner, or whatever, it'll get kind of confusing. It's easier to get accurate results, and you can take it more than one time you can take it for mom, for dad, for my partner, for my friend.

[00:50:55]

But the way to take it is to think about even your own experience, of how you are, because that's some things about yourself. How you are not on your best day, maybe you're a little tired, or sick, or stressed out, because that'll show you a little bit more of the default that you go to in attachment when things are more stressful. And that usually gives you a little bit more accurate read of what was happening earlier on.

Now, attachment is very fluid. It can change over time, and as we heal, it makes a huge difference. And sometimes you've got a pretty strong attachment and then a big trauma hits you and that puts you into maybe situational Disorganized where you're still dealing with the trauma. You feel kind of fragmented, or dissociated, or emotional flooding. But if you have that core of secure attachment, it's much easier to recover.

And like they did this study with soldiers coming back from war, that those that had secure attachment, even though they were exposed to really difficult things, they recovered much more quickly. And those that had really difficult attachment histories, often got much more severe PTSD and it was a lot harder to recover from. So whether we had secure in the beginning, or we learn it now, we earn it, we learn it, then we have that way to mitigate stressors as we go forward. So it's definitely well doing. But I think you have to be with a trauma informed and attachment informed therapist if you're wanting to work on it that way. But very often we work out a lot of these things in our relationships, our current relationships, especially with our intimate partner, if they're willing to go on the journey with us.

Alex Howard

And of course, at those websites or that website, people can also find your books and programs and so on as well.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Right, we have lots of different ways to learn more, if that's in your interest. And I have a book called *The Power of Attachment* and CDs called *Healing Your Attachment Wounds*. There's all sorts of possibilities. We're trying to make a lot of resources available for people, that's sort of our mission.

Alex Howard

That's awesome, Diane, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Dr Diane Poole Heller

Thank you, Alex. And it's wonderful to be with you again and everybody here that's listening.