



## How To Repair Toxic Impacts in Relationship

**Guest: Dr Rick Hanson**

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### **[00:00:09] Alex Howard**

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with my friend Dr Rick Hanson. We're going to be talking about repair in relationships. What happens when things get fractious and things go wrong? Either we're the cause, the other person's the cause. It's just the dynamic, it's both of us. How do we navigate through that?

Dr Rick Hanson is a psychologist, senior Fellow at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, and New York Times best-selling author. His six books have been published in 31 languages, and include *Neurodharma*, *Resilient*, *Hardwiring Happiness*, *Just One Thing*, *Buddha's Brain*, and *Mother Nurture*.

With over a million copies in English alone. His free newsletters have quarter of a million subscribers, and his online programs have scholarships available for those with financial needs. He's lectured at NASA, Google, Oxford, and Harvard and taught in meditation centers worldwide. An expert on positive neuroplasticity, his work has been featured on CBS, NPR, the BBC, and other major media. He began Meditating in 1974 and is the founder of Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom.

Firstly, Rick, welcome back. I really appreciate you being here.

### **Dr Rick Hanson**

Alex, I really wanted to talk with you because what you do is great.

### **Alex Howard**

Thank you. Before we started recording, we were talking a little bit, and you were saying that... Well, how I heard what you were saying was, a toxic relationship is in part a relationship that's stuck, where it's not flowing, and it's not changing. And you were talking about the different areas in our life that we can be creating change.

One of the ways that I found myself thinking about the word toxic, in toxic relationships, is the image in my mind, a river that's free-flowing, and a river that gets jammed and stuck, and then the water starts to turn toxic. I was curious as to your thoughts around what causes that stuckness, and that lack of flow and movement within ourselves, but also within relationship.

**[00:02:33] Dr Rick Hanson**

Great question. First, undelivered communications. Second, issues that are not repaired. Relationships are an ongoing process of repair. And then third, either person, frankly, operating in the relationship in toxic ways, with ill will, contempt, disdain, stonewalling, dragging in other issues, dragging in other allies. John and Julie Gottman refer to those as the four horsemen of the relationship apocalypse. And so to me, those are the kinds of things that make relationships toxic.

A lot of research shows that toxic relationships can have serious physical health problems. I could add that one aspect of a toxic relationship that I think is really underestimated, is the impact of being shunned, or rejected, or disappeared in the minds of others, which makes people feel lonely. As the US Surgeon General has pointed out, the chronic experiences of loneliness, distinct from aloneness, which is, 'I'm an introvert, I like going out in wilderness by myself, that's wonderful, that's a happy place for me'. But that's really different from feeling lonely day to day. And the health consequences on the lifespan of chronic loneliness are as great as smoking half a pack of cigarettes a day.

So these are different aspects of toxicity, and we're going to talk about how to heal them.

**Alex Howard**

To take your point of aloneness and loneliness, you can be around other people and still feel lonely. Sometimes the most lonely we can feel is when we feel there's lots of people around but there's no connection, and we don't feel that sense of belonging.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

You know Martin Buber's Model of Relationships, *I-Thou, I-It, It-It*. When we feel like we're an it to others, who are using us as a means to their ends, who are refusing to recognize our own interior, our own feelings or thoughts, our hopes and dreams, and how they're landing on us, that's a terrible thing. That's used as punishment in certain societies where you just shun other people. They may still live among you, but it's as if they disappear. They don't matter inside your mind. We need to matter to other people, including we need to matter to ourselves of course.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. One of the things that's a bit of a running joke between Meagan and I, she's my co-host for the conferences, and we put both of ourselves in this narrative, that when we go to couples therapy, we go so the therapist can change the other person.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Oh, yeah.

**Alex Howard**

We don't walk in and say, "I'm the issue in the relationship."

**[00:05:25] Dr Rick Hanson**

Don't forget, I'm the couple's therapist you're walking into. Yeah, keep going.

**Alex Howard**

One of the challenges within the dynamics in toxic relationships is it's much easier to spot what's maybe not optimum in the other person. It's another thing to recognize that, particularly if we find ourselves in a lot of different toxic relationships, that we're also the common denominator in those relationships. And that's not meant to give people a hard time. It's hopefully meant as an empowering message, that it's much harder to change other people, than it is to work with ourselves.

So I'm curious as to, if we recognize we're in those dynamics, what might be some of the things in ourselves that we start to look at? And we can come to in time then some of the ways we can look to work with those pieces.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Great question. So the way I think about healing is that it's a process of change. Okay, so where is change located? The most important place is between your ears, or more exactly, inside your own heart. That's where you have the greatest influence, and that's where you take the results with you. To some extent you can change the interactions between you and another person. You can step out of familiar scripts and familiar quarrels, even if they're trying to continue to cast you into those roles.

Maybe you can shift what's happening inside the mind of that other person, and maybe you can shift what's happening in key people around you. So I think of those as four areas the person can think about.

First and foremost, inside yourself. I'll just name a couple that I think are really central from much experience. One, is to really see what's going on, see the facts. I'm a longtime wilderness, outdoor rock climber kind of person. If you're trying to walk on a shaky ledge, if everything's fine, you can keep walking in the fog. But if it's dicey, you're on some kind of ridge with a fall off on either side, you need to see clearly.

So in a toxic situation, what are the facts? What did they actually say? What do I actually say? How often does it actually happen? When did it happen? And then, based on the facts sort out in your mind, how much do you care about it? And maybe honestly, when you look closely, it's not a big deal. You can move on. Other times you realize, wow, this is a big deal. I need to stand up for myself. So just those two right there. Honestly, I speak from much experience working with people through toxic relationships. You want to feel like you're on solid footing. Okay, facts and values.

Clarify that and then what's your plan? Sort out in your mind, what's your approach going to be? Relationships can be very turbulent, other people can do stuff that's shocking, comes out of left field, or it's weird, or you just don't know what to do. Make a plan, it doesn't have to be a ten point plan. You can make it in part by talking with others, or reading a good book, like your book on trauma. I have a book on relationships, other sources. Make a plan, ballpark. So that's inside your head right there.

**[00:08:33]**

Fourth, clean up your side of the street. Whatever is your part, which could be zero, or it could be a lot, or usually it's in between. I call it unilateral virtue. That's where you have power. Even if it's so annoying that you're having to clean up your side of the street and they're not, it's your best strategy. Because you'll feel good to clean up your side of the street. It tends to calm things down. Also it puts you in a much stronger moral position. You're now on the moral high ground a day, or a week, or a month later to talk to the other person about their side of the street.

I'll just stop there. Those are things right off the top that I find are really helpful. Of course, along with mindfulness of your own interior, what's going on? Classic strengths like mindfulness and self-compassion.

### **Alex Howard**

That was exactly my next question because part of the challenge in relationships is the way that everything gets amped up. We get triggered, the other person gets triggered. We say things we might not really intend, they react. It strikes me that to really see the facts, and to really organize what's happening, there also has to be some space that comes in as opposed to the intensity that gets created. So it would be helpful to speak a little bit about practices such as meditation, mindfulness... And not just practices for nervous system regulation and spiritual development and so on, but can really help to see clearly what's going on.

### **Dr Rick Hanson**

So getting into that question, I would say that what's striking to me over many years, working with people, working with myself, is that little things can make a huge difference. In terms of just getting your head straight, feeling like you're on solid ground about what's happening, facts and values, and plan, those big three. Reminding yourself that you have the right to see the facts, establish what you care about, and make a plan.

A lot of people feel almost that they're not allowed to, or that it's not their right. It is your right, you can do that. And maybe all it takes, frankly, is you're sitting on the bus and you just say, "okay, I'm just going to try to sort out what the heck is happening here". And you spend a few minutes doing that, maybe you make a few little notes in your book, but in a very short amount of time, often you can really clarify where you're at with the situation, and what you're going to do about it, which is great.

Beyond that, a long time ago, gosh, 20 plus years, a teacher of mine said that she invited people to commit to doing something contemplative a minute or more a day. And that's a good baseline for many people. A minute a day, one is infinitely more than zero mathematically... That's true. Something is infinitely more than nothing.

So a minute or more a day, where you just slow down and you deliberately stay present for a minute straight. Not trying to solve any problems, not worrying about things that may occur, but focus on something simple like your breathing. 1 minute, and then maybe two minutes, maybe five, or ten, or 20, maybe more, if you like. That alone is a huge reset for people.

And then in that, just what you were getting at with self-compassion. I think it's really important to be the kind of friend to yourself that you are to others. The first chapter of my book, Making Great

Relationships, is be loyal to yourself, it's be loyal to you. And I used to think when I first started out as a therapist that that was obvious. But I realized that about half the people I was seeing, particularly women who are socialized to be for others, but not for themselves, but also men in various ways too, and also different groups, including transcending gender. That is the pilot light. If the pilot light is not a flame, you can add all the gas you want, nothing will happen, right?

**[00:12:37]**

So starting there, to internalize a sense of being sweet to yourself, kind to yourself, encouraging. Also telling yourself how to do better next time. This is not about self-pity, or being arrogant and conceited, and so forth. It's actually just bringing a supportiveness to yourself that you would do to others. And that supportiveness sometimes includes correcting, pointing out things you can do better next time, but not with that harsh toxic criticism. I mean, often the toxic relationship that people really have is with the critic inside their head. And what you and I are talking about is building up resources inside that can stand up against that critic.

### **Alex Howard**

It's interesting. I was just reflecting as you're talking, Rick, that it's an interesting balance. Because what I notice is people can often not be owning their stuff. It's externalized onto others, in a way as a self-protection from that inner critic. Because it's almost like, if I'm responsible for this, it's now my fault. And so it's easier to not be responsible and put it outside. It's quite a tricky balance for people initially to go, I own my part, but I'm not going to let this then become ammunition for that inner critic to then pile in. And I'm interested. What you find helps people navigate that territory of taking ownership, but then not collapsing into a pile of self-judgment around it?

### **Dr Rick Hanson**

That's an incredibly good question. I think there's a primal, almost feral muscular commitment that's available to us as human beings, that's actually really important. It might be that you are going to get your kids out of that burning building no matter what, or you are going to figure out how to get out of this abusive relationship, which may take months, but this is day one of your six month plan to get out the door. And that core is really important.

People have experiences of it sometimes, doing that last repetition of a weight, or holding that yoga pose, the last 10 seconds where you want to kill the teacher, or in wilderness, or something, or standing up for others. Knowing what that feels like inside yourself is really important, because on the basis of that, that's your pilot light, that's one of your major pilot lights. Then you can realize, wait a second here. I want to be fair. Fair means I do cop to myself, I do admit my fault. One of the most useful things I've learned in 41 plus years of marriage. Admit fault and move on. Yeah, you're in! Good brother.

As fast as you can zero in on what my part is, and then implement the correction in a trustworthy way that you can be counted on, and then move on. And then other people, over time will see that you've done that. So for me, the foundation of what we're talking about is this sense of, wait a second I want to be for myself. I also want to be fair, and I have the right to sort out what's my part, and what's their part, and then take action. I think what you're saying is really useful.

I find myself three things. So other people have complaints, have you ever noticed that? They have things they want, they have grievances, they have their needs. Great stuff, okay. Does it always

come perfectly packaged with proper nonviolent communication form, and wise speech from the Buddha? It's usually a mess. It's this big pile of stuff coming over the net, what are you going to do? Instead of reacting to the worst part of that pile, what I find is it's helpful to sort it into three little piles.

### **[00:16:40]**

First, what, if anything, deserves healthy remorse? What, if anything, was genuinely a moral fault? Maybe you really crossed a line. You'd been drinking too much, you lost your temper, you started yelling, you embarrassed yourself. You never want to do that again, whatever it might be. Is there anything that really deserves shame or remorse? Sometimes there is, often there's not.

That leaves the second category, I call skillful correction. From now on, yeah, looking back, now that I understand it, I realize that that particular word. I wasn't angry at you when I said it, but I was a little clueless. Okay, I understand. Given your history, your background, who you are, that word lands hard. I'm just not going to use it going forward. I'm going to implement that correction.

Or I realized, yeah, I was a little late here. It's not that I'm a bad person because I was late, but I'm going to make more of an effort to be on time. I'm going to implement that correction, skillful correction.

And then there's a third category, where it's not really a fault or a correction, but it's like a gracious gift. You realize our daughter hates the smell of bananas and mayonnaise. So she's now an adult when we see her, we do not bring bananas. And if we're sitting at the table, we do not pop the top off mayonnaise, because she has a sniffer like a world class chef.

### **Alex Howard**

Particularly not banana and mayonnaise sandwiches, then.

### **Dr Rick Hanson**

Yeah, banana, what a disgusting combination. So my point is that I find it really helpful, and often people will come at you with moral accusations and inside your mind you can just say, "Nah. But you know what? I'm going to change. I'm going to implement a correction going forward". Which puts you on the moral high ground again, and it gives you what the proverb calls the bliss of blamelessness. So I find this simple method, those three piles to be really useful when dealing with the complaints of other people.

### **Alex Howard**

I really like what you're saying Rick, and I also want to amplify the place from which you're describing it as well, because what I don't hear there is a, I'm going to take the moral high ground by taking this position. What I really hear is a humility, sincerity, and a caringness which is, I'm going to take my place in this relationship, and I'm going to own my part in that. But I'm also not hearing a collapse, or a surrender... Maybe you speak a little bit more to the quality of what you're saying, not just the categories.

## **[00:19:20] Dr Rick Hanson**

You are really great, Alex, period. And you are zeroing in here, you're exactly right. There was a breakthrough for me, I grew up in a fault finding home. My parents were loving and decent, but they were very old school, authoritarian parents with a good heart. They were very controlling and anxious, they grew up in the Depression. My dad grew up on a ranch, a lot of people got injured, he was very concerned about safety.

I'm by nature a very stubborn, independent person. So when I finally left home, went to college, and moved into adulthood, there was a tendency in me to relate to anything from other people as attempts to control me. So I would interpret their wish for me to, I don't know what, load the dishwasher in a different way, as trying to control me. Then I finally realized it was like an aikido move, a jujitsu move, where I realized that the best thing for my self-interests, and the best long-term strategy to get out of the field of control of other people, was to give them the maximum reasonable amount of whatever they were asking for.

Take maximum reasonable responsibility myself unilaterally, not because they're controlling me, but because I see for myself, oh, that's virtuous, or that's how I want to be, or that's skillful, or that's walking the higher road, that's walking my talk, that's living in the light, whatever you want to call it. That's being lived by love, ultimately, truly, as a current flowing through oneself. And that's why I'm doing it, not because I'm knuckling under to them. While realizing that that way of being is your best odds strategy for getting good treatment from everyone around you.

When a person is acting in that way, we can think of examples in our lives of the people we know who are like that. They're stand up characters, they operate with integrity, they don't get pushed around, but they're very quick to see what their part was. They're very quick to commit to being different in some ways going forward, and they're trustworthy generally about it. We want to hire them, we want to marry them. We want our kids to be that way. We want to be that way ourselves. So for me, that's the feeling of it.

And what I see so much about, there's this languaging and psychology of different terminology, whether you're inner-directed, or outer-directed, or other-directed. There's a place we're taking people into account, but if we are navigating through the choppy waters of life, always contingently on what other people are doing. Then we're going to be knocked this way and that.

On the other hand, if we move through life taking others into account with our own compass, our own north star, our own hand on the tiller, knowing what our values are, and how we want to be, then the locus of control, that's another psychological term, moves inward which is full of lots of value, including documented by lots of good research.

## **Alex Howard**

So going back to those three categories. That first category where we have regret and remorse, we recognize that for whatever reason, maybe emotions got too, whatever reason, but we need to repair. I'm curious as to how we do that in a skillful way, because I can paint those examples of unskillful ways. But I'm interested in what you see as the, these aren't quite the right words, the Gold standards in relationship.

**[00:23:21] Dr Rick Hanson**

I have a little list, and I'm not here to pitch books, and almost all my material is available for free online. In the last chapter of my book, *Resilient*, which is about twelve strengths. And the last one is generosity, which includes forgiveness, the giving of forgiving, forgiving of others, forgiving of self. There's some good material there, a little checklist that actually works, because this is the tough territory. How do you work it out?

First of all, it's often complex. They had their part, they blew it themselves. And you blew it. Okay, now we can get fixated on what they did. I think of loosely what I call the 80/20 rule, where you put 20% of your attention on trying to influence them to be better, there's a place for that. But put 80% of your attention on yourself. Partly to break out of these log jams where they're finger pointing at you, and you're finger pointing at them, and it's not going anywhere, it's just a standoff that often will escalate. And you can see that, we are currently seeing that in the world today, in October 2023 in the Middle East. That escalating spiral. So part one.

Part two, it really helps to acknowledge what you've done. Encounter intuitively, open to the experience of remorse, and guilt, and shame sometimes. It's important here to be able to do it with inner resources of compassion for yourself. That kindness for yourself. That pilot light that I talked about, other capacities to tolerate these painful experiences.

If you have a trauma history that involves other material, layers of feeling worthless, or unwanted, or bad that can get into mix and amplify everything, like a preamp in a stereo system, especially back in the old days in our college dormitories, in my case it was the 70's.

**Alex Howard**

It's like a whole separate rack, wasn't it the preamp.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Oh, yeah. The rack, the preamp. So there's a turbocharger, I think in us from our history. So there are ways to resource yourself so you can tolerate. I think of myself emptying my bucket of tears one spoonful at a time.

**Alex Howard**

Beautiful.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Think of the language of Peter Levine, pendulation. We pendulum swing in, we touch the pain for maybe a second, or 10 seconds, or a minute, and then we swing out again. This process of release, and openness, and flow can often be helped in conversation with others, ranging from a good friend to a very skillful psychotherapist. We have to get in touch, we have to let ourselves feel it, but not over feel it. Feel it on the way out, feel it as it flows, very important.

Second is to take the whole picture, the big picture into account. I have a little thing on my arm, you might have noticed it, I just came off a meditation retreat, came home a few days ago. In the Contemplative traditions, particularly Buddhism there's a pointing to the ways in which everything occurs in relationship. That's also ecology and quantum physics right now. So that whatever



happened with you and that other person was the local expression of a dozen factors, maybe ten dozen factors. And without letting yourself off the hook for what's appropriate, you start realizing, wow, I did that for all these reasons.

**[00:27:18]**

All these currents were flowing through me at that time to make that moment, and that larger understanding of the situation, what other people did, how I learned to act in my childhood, the inner turbochargers that were installed in me against my wishes, it was done to me. But my nervous system internalized the impact. When you take that big picture into account, it helps you lighten up. It puts it in perspective. You can see it in a more complex way. You don't need to get a philosophy degree in cosmic emptiness.

**Alex Howard**

I didn't know you could get one. Sounds quite good.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

You just tease it apart. And then suddenly what can feel so knotted and brick like experientially starts feeling more like a fabric with a lot of gauze. A lot of air and light can flow through, that's another thing. If you want, I can keep going a little.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, keep going.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

So that's internal. Then there's the process of making amends with the other person, attempting to repair moving forward. The fact is, sometimes you can't, sometimes you made a catastrophic mistake. Who among us has not made a catastrophic mistake? In the upper bound, maybe somebody died, that's the extreme version. I have a friend who's a physician at Harvard, deals with medical ethics, and one of the key issues is medical error. And how do you acknowledge a medical error? Your intent was not bad, but boy, somebody died. And facing that, and other kinds of mistakes.

Other times people will not talk with you, they will not make a repair. I think because we're so social, it's important to communicate in some way what happened. So if you can communicate with the other person, that's great. Maybe all you can do is write a letter that you'll never send, because they're no longer alive, or they won't receive your communications. Maybe you tell the truth, you speak the truth. There's a confessional aspect to this, that's not about beating yourself up.

It's that middle place you said so well, where you just cop to it. You name it, you acknowledge it, you admit it. It's really important. And also you admit it to yourself, maybe you write a letter to yourself, that's from a kind perspective but does not pull any punches about what you actually did. Names it, there's an honesty to it.

In Alcoholics Anonymous, they use the phrase of fearless and searching inventory. Now, in that inventory, it's important to acknowledge what else was in the mix. Your own hurts, your own

woundedness, the burdens you're carrying. And acknowledging what's good in you, your sincerity, the love within you, your aspirations to walk a higher road. All those things are part of the fearless and searching inventory, that you can acknowledge and name, and so forth.

### **[00:30:32]**

So now let's say you've done that, and sometimes it's helpful to do that in preparation, speaking finally with that other person already. You can finally feel it, I feel it in my body right now, Alex, there's a calming. There's a human process, including in primates, where we acknowledge fault and we seek forgiveness, and we move to a repair. We bridge to the future. And then if you can, you actually talk about it with the other person.

Sometimes with other people, they still are at war with you, they don't want to repair. They fear that if you get to talk about forgiveness that somehow they won't be able to punish you anymore, or you won't keep punishing yourself. So they're going to disrupt the repair process. Sometimes it's helpful to have other people, like peacekeepers. I think about, in a nuclear reactor, the graphite rods that soak up stray neutrons, those are the third parties, sometimes even if they're just bearing witness to what's happening between you, you could do that.

What I find though often, is that if a person is sincere in the repair process, they're acknowledging their fault, they've made amends as best they can. They've cleaned up the mess as best they can. At a minimum, they're clear about acting differently going forward. Then other people often soften, they often soften, generally, over time.

Then what do you do when another person is trying to repair with you? That's the other side of it. Here we've been talking about your misdeed, as it were, your perpetration, and cleaning up your mess. What happens when they're trying to clean it up with you? Can you forgive them? And what does it take to forgive them?

And here, it's very interesting, I think of two levels of forgiveness. The classic full pardon is where there's a complete restoration of relationship. You don't pursue justice anymore, you move on. But then there's a more intermediate forgiveness, where, if you think about it, you're still mad about it, what they did. You don't maybe want to have a relationship with them anymore, but you're not invaded by resentment, you're not caught up in vengeful fantasies, you're not ruminating about it. You've disentangled. This is what I call disentangled forgiveness.

And there too, you can realize that... I have people in my life, frankly, in my family system who there's been a breach. Often in family systems, including after parents die, there's a disruption where people separate from each other. Sometimes with a lot of grenades thrown through the door on the way out. And what do you do then? And what do you do if they just won't talk with you about it? And sometimes you have to come to a place where, for me, I'm never free in an upset with another person until I've taken... I'm not free until three things happen, myself.

One, that I'm naturally not in touch with, and in flow with all the ways I have felt, and it's landed on me. You know, if I'm suppressing things, or disowning things, they don't go away. The mind and brain is not like a flush toilet, it's like a septic tank, the stuff sticks around. You have to let it flow.

Second, I have to take responsibility for whatever my part was, which sometimes is zero. But the willingness to take responsibility for 1% of what happened, or even 99% of what happened, means that you're on the solid ground if you just go, no, honestly, that was all on them. I was walking on a

green light in through the crosswalk... Mind your step, I was in London there, and I learned to look in the correct direction oncoming traffic in London. I'm an American. What?

**[00:35:06] Alex Howard**

The cars have to stop in America. They only stop on certain crossings in this country.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Yeah, that's right. That drunk driver was coming through and hit me, and that was nothing to do with me, you know what I mean? But sometimes I take responsibility for, okay, there was my part in the matter, and then I get free, when I can find some compassion for the other person. Not to let them off the moral hook, but to realize they're a suffering soul, they're suffering too. Maybe I'd want nothing to do with them in the future, but I don't wish them ill. I'm not trying to harm them.

**Alex Howard**

As you were talking, Rick, one of the things that was in my mind is when we have to repair in a relationship, who is that repair for? Because it's partly, particularly if we've done wrong, there's a healing that has to happen in that dynamic. But also, as you were talking, it really struck me that if we've done wrong, repair is also for us. There's something around right action, and something around our own integrity as a person, whether or not it's received. And I'd be sort of curious as to your thoughts on that.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Well, as usual, you get right to the heart of the matter. I'm so glad you brought that up. You're exactly right and knowing that can help us do the repair. Guilt is a terrible burden to carry. You can keep it at arm's length every day, but then you have to put your arm on it every day, and it keeps pushing forward. It's a terrible burden.

Shame is in many ways perhaps the most toxic emotion, negative emotion as it were. I mean, anger, sadness and anxiety, the other three major negative emotion categories, they wear us down too. But shame is very invasive. It's not so much that I did bad, but that I am bad. That's very burdensome for people. It's important to realize that, as you say, I think it's really good for you to admit what a schmo you were, and remind yourself that it's not easy. Start with small things and build up to the big ones.

I think you're also getting at Alex, what's the point? The point is to feel good in ourselves. The point is to be able to move through life with less friction. I think of the phrase frictionless contentment. So we're not resisting, we feel there's enough, and enoughness, in our inner being along the way. Even if there's some shortages around us inside our being, we feel enough for ourselves.

We want that, and we also want harmony in our relationships, and we also want to be the kind of person who moves through life benevolently. For both self-interested reasons, and also for the sake of other people. You want to move through life with a radiant face, with love in your heart, with the recognition of goodness in other people.

I find for myself one of the little practices I'll sometimes do with people, total strangers walking down the street, not in some creepy California goo goo-eyed way. But simply to see this person

walking toward me, and spending a few seconds to look at their face. And fairly quickly, because we're extremely empathic social primates getting a read on what it's like to be them. And you can usually see the fatigue in their face. You can see the wear and tear of life. You can see it in my face over time, right.

**[00:39:10]**

You're going to see it and feel it, and you can get a quick read on that person, can you find compassion for? Can you wish that they would not be so burdened? Can you wish them well? A simple goodwill, good wishes. And this is an important point, too. Can you do it in a way that's not contingent on them? But it's more that, over time, you get in touch with a stand or approach in life in which you intend, that's another pilot light, you intend to operate on the basis of a good wishing, a benevolence.

There's a proverb, give no person cause to fear you. There's a place for people expecting consequences, like, no kid, you won't get your dessert unless you eat your vegetables. No person you won't get a paycheck unless you actually come to work. Gosh, who knew? There's a place for that, too. But it's not that you're trying to be intimidating. You're moving through life in this more peaceful, you're strong in yourself.

I think of the time I saw the Dalai Lama's ninja. This was his bodyguard at a public event, who was just radiating bodhicitta. He was radiating good wishes, with his hands at his side and eyes that never stopped scanning the room. He had that centered capacity. Both were true in part because he was so centered in himself, and so rested in his own capabilities. He felt safe enough to really wish other people well. To me, that's that sweet spot of calm strength with a loving heart.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, it's a beautiful image. I love that. We're nearly out of time. I've got two final questions. One I want to come to in a minute, where people can find out more about your work. But the thing that really struck me as you were talking is when we live in a world where we take responsibility, we treat people carefully, we're kindly, we repair when things go wrong. Also, I think we construct our relationships, and our life in such a way, which is so much more nourishing and satisfying, it's like what we put out also comes back.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Right.

**Alex Howard**

Maybe you want to say a few words about how we're actually creating our world. I know a big part of your work with the global compassion is on the grander level of that, but also just in our close friendships and communities, how we're creating something that's special.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

I think two things are true about that. The first is a yes, the second is a no. What I mean, and the hard part is how to deal with the no. Here's what I mean. You are completely right, we live in a

relational field. I think of it as like a fabric, a net, if you will. And what we gradually put into that net builds up in that net, to some extent imperfectly, but it's true.

**[00:42:30]**

Recently there's been a wave of research on the impact of just one person being a little friendlier on a bus, to the strangers on the bus, or to the driver, for example. Or in a hospital system, the intake person just being a little warmer. When people come in on the worst day of their life, dragging their bleeding child with them, let's say. And then those benefits, this called social contagion. You may know the phrase, they ripple through the systems. It's really true. It really is true. That's the yes.

And then we get to the no, which is that it's also true that sometimes other people are impervious to your goodwill, and they actually are on a mission to blow up your goodwill, or to deny you the possibility of knowing that they've received your goodwill because that's their program.

And as a longtime therapist and a longtime meditator person and teacher, two things have happened for me over life, that are not just two but two of the two of the many, there you go. Is that I really have become more loving, compassionate, so forth. I've also become clearer-eyed about what other people are in the room for, what their agenda is, what their intentions are, what their capabilities are.

And so then how do we live with, in radiating, or investing, or being a stand up person ourselves when other people are not? How do we put those two together? And I find that it's relatively straightforward. If you're loving and suddenly the whole world is smiling back at you, yay, that's right. But what happens if it's not? And in fact, they're actually trying to move against your position in the world of being a generous and large hearted person.

And then I think it's helpful to go back to what you and I talked about, where you just realize, hey, I'm doing this for me. I'm also doing it for you, but it's good for me to do it, and I'm going to keep doing it. I'm not going to let you mistreat me, I'm not going to let you mistreat other people. I'm really clear I'm the Dalai Lama's ninja. I'm prepared to draw that boundary and take action, and bring in other people, and put my hand up here if I have to, without getting violent and crazy about it.

And also to realize that other people, they're suffering over there, and also they are the source of their own karmas. They are the source of their own lives to some extent. They have choices that they can make no matter what has happened in their past, which they were victimized by often, actually.

They don't have to keep being that way, and they're choosing to keep being that way. And maybe they're choosing to keep being that way in the face of you attempting to nudge them toward a better way, or naming other ways of being, or modeling and demonstrating other ways of being. And no, they're just going to keep doing it. And then you see that, and you feel more and more at peace. Like, that's not me. That's you. That's you.

There are these two deep truths in reality. Maybe I'll finish there. Like the waves in the ocean. Like you're a wave, I'm a wave in the ocean of reality. And there are two truths. One is that each wave is the result of an independent set of causes and conditions because they're distinct. They're meaningfully, distinct. So their mindstream is not your mindstream. Their choices are not your

choices. What they inherit from their actions is not what you inherit from your actions. They're distinct. And the other truth is that you're both made of water. You are both local expressions of one single sea. And to be able to hold both those truths in your awareness is the work of a lifetime.

**[00:46:37] Alex Howard**

Yeah, it sure is, that's beautiful. Rick for people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best place to go and what's some of what they can find?

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Oh, thanks, my website's a good place, [rickhanson.net](http://rickhanson.net) also check out the Global Compassion Coalition.

The idea is, the grand vision, the audacious idea is to create a global network that's big enough, to be strong enough, to actually start to drive long overdue systemic change that's bottlenecked in corporations and governments, when it is. And to recreate what worked in our evolution in our small bands, in which the many came together to regulate the few, on a foundation of what anthropologists truly have called caring and sharing. Compassion and justice as the foundation of social life, which we can see out in the world is happily growing in certain areas, but is still in short supply for probably 80% of the people living on this planet. So that's the grand vision. And then meanwhile, develop resources for training and compassion, the science of compassion, the application of compassion in different systems, and the advocacy of compassion in our culture, and our politics. So [globalcompassioncoalition.org](http://globalcompassioncoalition.org).

**Alex Howard**

Beautiful. Dr Rick Hanson, thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

**Dr Rick Hanson**

Oh, thank you.