



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

How to Repair Your Self Image and Self Love

Guest: Dr Shainna Ali

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference Co-host. Today I'm speaking with Dr Shainna Ali, a licensed mental health counselor and mental health advocate, with a strength based approach. She's also a published author with several books on self-love targeted to kids and teens, as well as the host of The Mental Wellness podcast. Dr Shainna Ali, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Shainna Ali

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really grateful for the opportunity to talk about such an important topic.

Meagen Gibson

So we're talking about healing toxic relationships today. So I would love it if you could start by telling me a little bit about your background and how you got into the work of helping people with their self-image and self-love and healing toxic relationship patterns.

Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. So, today, in our present moment, I identify as a mental health counselor, educator, and advocate. And had you asked me decades ago what I'm doing in the future, I think the odds would be 0% that I would possibly say that. And it's because I didn't know a lot about mental health, specifically mental wellness, and a lot of the topics that we're going to talk about today, or even if I was living through them, I didn't realize how much of an impact it was having on my life.

And it wasn't until I was in college and I started to realize that I was struggling with my own mental health and to kind of summarize that quickly, in seeking help, I realized I actually have been living with anxiety my whole life. And a lot of that was impacted by my self-love, my self-image, my lack of boundaries, all these things that I'm really passionate about sharing with others today. When I realized that mental health mattered and my mental health was struggling, it was really obvious to start working on my own mental health.

But it also made me really curious about others. Was this something that I was only struggling with? And how did I miss this? How did I miss this mark? How did I miss the signs? And I realized it

was because it wasn't spoken about, it wasn't talked about. And I had a very stigmatized view of mental health that was offered to me, and I didn't fit that paradigm. And so I was like, okay, something can't be wrong. And boy, that was misleading. And all of the time that passed that I could have been helped and I could have developed in a different way.

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So the rest is kind of history from there. I realized that I wasn't the only one. And unfortunately, there are many, many more people with similar journeys, and that's how I became interested in mental health. And when I was in the mental health realm and working as a counselor, I realized that people are so, so different. I knew that a little bit before, but man, that really opened my eyes more. People are so different in so many ways. Yet there were some consistent things about mental health that when I was working with person after person or even outside of my work, when I was noticing friends and loved ones, that everyone had as consistent and everyone else seemed to be struggling with some level of self-love too.

And that essentially is what made me not just work on my own self-love journey, but realize that self-love is essential for everyone. That's where the Self-Love Workbook came out of. And then from there I realized that, oh, another thing that people struggle with, no matter who they are, are boundaries. And that stemmed from the Self-Love Workbook. And that's where designing healthy boundaries came from. So that is a long story as short as I can possibly make it.

Meagen Gibson

That was very succinct. You did great. And I think it's something that so many people can relate to. And I also want to check in with people because we're talking about toxic relationships and sometimes in talking about self-love and boundaries and mental health, I never want to mislead people to think that only people with mental health issues or problems have issues with self-love or boundaries. Everyone can use self help or mental health support. You don't have to have some sort of diagnosable disorder in order to deserve, be worthy of, and need mental health support, right?

Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. And I'm so glad that you're emphasizing that because it's a big part of my work, trying to help people understand the difference between mental illness, mental health and mental wellness. So really quickly to go over that, because I know a lot of people are probably working with those misconceptions, we think about mental health associated with mental illness, that diagnosable problem, perhaps multiple problems. And many times there's this really challenging image that gets conjured to mind. And mental health can encompass that.

Yet we all have mental health, just like we all have physical health, right? So just like we need sleep, hydration, proper nutrition, we also need certain components of mental health too. We need healthy actions that are aligned with who we are. We need healthy thoughts, we need to regulate our emotions, we need healthy relationships and not toxic ones. So those are just as essential. I know that's hard for people to believe that it's just as essential as food and water and sleep, but I promise you it is.

[00:05:07] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm so glad that you made that distinction between mental illness, mental health and mental wellness. And another thing that I know that we'll talk about, which is you can have no mental illness and no mental illness history in your family and your mental health can suffer under extreme circumstances of stress or traumatic events, right?

Dr Shainna Ali

Yes. And what we're learning more and more with time, the statistics right now, it's the idea that one in three people will have a diagnosable mental health disorder at some time. And something that I always think about when I hear this statistic is that means that we know that by people who have gotten help, reached out for help. I'm still thinking about where we stand today, still a substantial amount of stigma that people can be living with mental health problems and not going to seek help.

And I have to tell you honestly where I stand. I believe we will all have at least one mental health problem over our lifespan, many of us, multiple mental health problems and oftentimes a diagnosable mental health problem. I'm not sharing this to be the bearer of bad news for anyone. I'm not trying to scare anyone. I'm actually trying to do the opposite. I'm trying to normalize how common it is to have concerns with our mental health, just like our physical health. We get colds, and I'd like to think no one's shaming you for getting a cold.

Now, there might be more conditions like, you never brush your teeth and you have just a mouthful of cavities, maybe you have some level of accountability there. Sure. But lots of health conditions in the physical realm, we don't blame folks for, even serious conditions, like cancer. And it's really not fair to have so much blame, shame and judgment placed on the mental health aspect either.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm so glad we're talking about this because people might feel like we've gotten off topic a little bit, but when we're talking about toxic relationships, the relationship that you have with yourself is where you have to start. And the things that inform your ability to be introspective and look at that and seek support are all of the messages that you get from your family system and your culture or your religion or these sorts of things are really going to inform your ability to even find it acceptable to seek help and support, right?

Dr Shainna Ali

Yes, absolutely. And I totally understand why people would think we're off topic because we don't draw this connection between mental wellness and toxic relationships. Without mental wellness and without valuing mental wellness and investing in it, we're more likely to be susceptible to falling into toxic relationships. We don't draw that bridge as often as we need to. So if anyone's thinking, man, what are we doing talking about mental health? That's exactly why we're talking about it.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And mental health support, even if you get a diagnosis, does not mean permanence. This is not a condition or an identity that you have to assume for the rest of your life.

[00:08:19] Dr Shainna Ali

No, not necessarily. Yet I also would say that for some people, it's been very freeing to say, yes, I have this for the rest of my life and now I can work around it. Sometimes there's still that stigma of, oh, I have it now and I need to get rid of it and get past it. And that's when we're trying to push something through instead of just understanding what that means for us.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Dr Shainna Ali

So, yes, and sometimes it's temporary and sometimes it's long term, and we won't know unless we're working on it.

Meagen Gibson

And speaking of relationships, yeah, it's a relationship that you get to have with that part of yourself, like, I'm a fellow anxiety person, but my relationship with that anxiety and my anxiety are not a permanent fixture. It ebbs and flows based, I mean, on stresses in life and life circumstances. And the support that I get also changes based on that.

Dr Shainna Ali

Yes. It's just an aspect of our identity, and especially when we start to destigmatize it, it can be just that. I'm a person who lives with anxiety, just like you. I have a past history of generalized anxiety disorder and postpartum anxiety disorder. Don't have those now, but I'm still a person who lives with anxiety. I'm also a person who loves leopard print and orchids and bold lipstick. So these are just aspects of who I am in some areas of my life. One of those details is more prominent than the other, but none of them defines me and is my only label.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Okay, so let's turn to toxic relationships and I would love it if you'd start talking about how our self-image and self-love is impacted by toxic relationships.

Dr Shainna Ali

Sure. Well, toxic relationships are toxic, right? So they permeate out of the relationship and into the individual. It is hand in hand. So something I think about is when folks are talking about toxic relationships, we're often thinking about adulthood for some reason. And the reality is that toxic relationships can start from the moment we're born. So it's possible to have toxic dynamics in your family system, in your society, in your community, in your culture. That can start from birth.

And I know that sometimes that's daunting to think about because many of us, when we learn about toxic relationships, we're looking at the here and now and thinking, oh, man, I've probably been in toxic relationships my whole life. It seems like a lot. But it is important that we take that

overall perspective. So thinking about the fact that it doesn't necessarily start at birth, as in, like, we're not born with toxic, the framework for toxic relationships, but you know what?

[00:10:50]

It's pretty close, because what we hear around us and that may be something that's directly said to us or said to someone else or even behaviorally, it may not be said, it could be more indirect, we pick that up, and between the age of zero and five, we are sponges. And that creates the framework for our mind forever. Things can be changed. Sure. But it really is the framework. As we live through our lives, our mind is trying to match, right, what feels familiar? Okay. I'm used to being spoken that way.

So when someone speaks to me in this toxic way that is deleterious to my mental health, to my self-image, to my overall self-love, I'm used to that. I don't realize then that that's unhealthy because normal starts to become my version of healthy, and that's when that gets distorted. So if I'm used to being spoken to in a really deprecating way in my home, in my family, at school, then as I grow up, I'm used to that.

And again, that swap happens, and healthy and normal actually becomes unhealthy and normal. And it's very easy to magnetize that, even when it is beyond our intention. So all in all, toxic relationships have a deleterious effect on our image and therefore our ability to see our worth and love ourselves.

Meagen Gibson

And you touched on a couple of things that I want to circle back to. First is the idea of neuroception, which I think is from Dr Dan Siegel, about how even if you're protected from conflict in your early childhood, if you're a baby in a crib, I think they did a study that if you're a baby in a crib and if your parents are fighting in a room, two rooms away, you will feel it via neuroception, and you will perceive the conflict, even if it isn't in your immediate area and you're not impacted by it.

So stress and things like this are felt even before we can identify our feelings. And then the other thing that I wanted to talk about was that intention is what you mentioned. And so many of our parents are well intentioned and unintentionally become our first bullies in the effort to make us tough or to make us humble or to make us respectful. All of these virtues that their intentions are great, but the way that they're delivering those intentions and the way that they're speaking to us as children backfire in our self-image and our self-criticism.

Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. And I'm so glad that you mentioned that concept about the study with the child in the room and the parents in an opposite room and fighting, because sometimes I get asked, how early can we be affected by toxic relationships? And I say, okay, well, not born with it. And I've actually started to shift this because while not my field, there's some amazing research coming out of Epigenetics that actually talks about in the womb. So if a mother is experiencing a substantial amount of stress while pregnant, that actually changes the baby in utero as well. So I'm like, man.

[00:14:04] Meagen Gibson

As if we didn't have enough to blame mothers for.

Dr Shainna Ali

Well, it's not the mother's fault. Right. The mother could be experiencing toxic relationships. No blame on the mother. I'm tired of that. We're not blaming her. But with that being said, it can go back generations. So when we're thinking about when toxic relationships begin, they can begin generations ago. And because we're conditioned to and so used to that, it's really hard to break that cycle. Coming back to that example that you shared of well intended parents saying, I want my children to be strong, I want them to be resilient, I want them to be hearty, then this is what I'm going to do.

That often comes from what they were told and how they were treated. So many times there's like, well, I made it through okay. Questionable. Right? Maybe okay ish, but could it have been better? And many times we just don't know better. And I don't mean that at all from a condescending place. I say that from a place of true compassion is how can we blame ourselves if we just don't know better? We aren't given another opportunity. That the idea of a well intended toxic relationship is our best case scenario. And that's why I'm glad I'm having this conversation with you today because we can do better if we know better.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And turning toward kind of that inner critic, many of us are battling one, but we're not born with that internal dialog. So where does it come from and what can we do about it?

Dr Shainna Ali

The inner critic is one example of how the toxic relationship starts to permeate into us. So earlier I mentioned that we are influenced by our environment, and that can happen really early. Many times we think the child is not verbal yet, so they can't pick up on these things. Absolutely not. It can be tone, and it can be something that's being indirectly said to someone else, that all gets absorbed. So it can be something that's really terrible that's being said directly to a child that starts to form the basis of that inner dialog and, therefore, inner critic.

Could be something they're overhearing or something they're observing through behavior. A lot of passive aggressive toxic relationships can be with very little words said. So that's that connection.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And it's so funny because I'm thinking of my nephew right now, and oftentimes I think just because children aren't externalizers about the way that they're relating to the world, that we assume they don't understand adult things or that things are going over their head and they're not picking up on it. And my nephew Tom has completely squashed that assumption for me because he hears everything, but he's an externalizer, so he's going to pick up everything all the adults are saying in the room, and then he's going to feed them back to them. So what I understand is going on is blah blah, and he's like five. I'm like, Dude, wow, you're processing way up here. But at the same time, I have to remind myself that they're all processing it. They're just maybe not verbalizing it and talking about it.

[00:17:07] Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. And they're sitting with and making sense with it. And I appreciate that you mentioned this processing aspect because our minds are just meant to do that. So it's not something that we have to pay attention to and reflect on and make decisions about. That inner dialog and, therefore, the possible inner critic could be the inner friend too. But all of that gets formed in a passive way. A child is not sitting and observing, like your nephew, and observing and saying, that sounds like the healthiest form of communication. I am now going to select that and I'm going to download this programming. That would be amazing if we could.

That's just not how the brain works. It takes all these little pieces, absorbs it. And that's why I say that it could be a really wonderful home life for a child. But yet when they're out in the community, out in the school system, they're out and wider culture is saying something that's demeaning to them, all of that gets absorbed too.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm glad you brought two things up, inner friend, because we haven't mentioned that yet. And I just want to highlight that as the reason we do the work, right, because inside every inner critic is a purpose, which is to protect you and to keep you safe. That's what it thinks it's doing. And so once you first just validate its existence, like, oh, hey, I hear you, I know what your intentions are, then as you're doing the work around that critical voice and kind of disentangling all of these relationships that informed your adult self, you can turn that inner critic into an inner friend.

Dr Shainna Ali

You absolutely can. And I'm glad that you mentioned this, because there are a variety of ways to start to reframe your inner dialog when you realize it's been influenced by toxic relationships and it can be improved. And those ways, usually, how we absorb them and what works for us often depends on developmental level for one. So something that works for a twelve year old is going to look a little bit different for someone in their twenties, thirties, et cetera and also just our preferences, who we are, our personality styles.

One way is to just create the counter for that inner critic, right? So that's a mean bully. I want a friend instead. So these are the things I want to be able to say to myself and others. Sometimes it's just that flipped over method. I love what you mentioned, usually it takes a little bit more of a deepened cognitive development to understand, oh, these things have good intentions that my inner critic is saying. My inner critic is actually not my worst enemy. It's been trying to help me as best as possible. Sometimes that takes a lot to sit with.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, that's definitely something I came up with when I was well into my forties. My adolescent brain.

Dr Shainna Ali

And I mentioned that because usually that former way, we see it as rudimentary and it's too simplistic. And I don't find that fair because it depends on where our brains are. So if your brain

does not have the space, it can sound like actually toxic positivity to say your inner critic is actually your guardian angel. Especially when inner critics are informed by trauma, that can just not work for some folks. And that's okay. So finding what fits for you.

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And that other approach is, yes, this inner critic is actually trying to help me. Just like how people who were unintentionally toxic to me, very different, by the way, from people who are like maliciously toxic, but the same way you might be able to offer that extension of grace, compassion, forgiveness to others who you realize, oh, they meant the best, they just happened to convey some toxic thoughts, behaviors, values. So even thinking about that, that our inner toxicity, we can extrapolate some good from that and sift away the negative, but even from others, and I don't believe this work is possible, personally, in the interpersonal realm unless we do that work personally first.

Meagen Gibson

Right, like, how are you supposed to, and we'll get to the boundary conversation in a second, but how are you supposed to convey to someone else the way that you just spoke to me, made me feel this way? And I will not carry on a conversation with you if you speak to me that way, if you're not doing that first in here.

Dr Shainna Ali

Exactly, and there is that tendency to overemphasize the relationships because it's easy to pinpoint, especially when the relationship is so overtly toxic, so dangerous, violent, it's easy to pinpoint this person is the problem in my life. And it's not that that's wrong, it's just that over time, that also becomes internalized and it's hard to make the distinction between what's that person's voice and your voice and the voice that you're perpetuating and unintentionally choosing to perpetuate.

So making that distinction is really important. And if you can offer yourself self-compassion, self-forgiveness, it gives you the opportunity to potentially offer that to people too. Even when that means boundary, goodbye, there can still be grace, compassion and kindness in that for at least yourself.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So as people are learning to heal their relationship with their self, they may not have any models for what a healthy relationship looks like. So whether that be as an individual or with other people, what are some of the ways that we can identify nurturing relationships in the people we meet? Because I think the thing people misunderstand the most about people with a lot of red flags is you don't see them, they're not like waving them overtly when you get into relationship with them, they're keeping them hidden behind their back and then they slowly bring one out at a time. So, what does a healthy, nurturing relationship look like?

Dr Shainna Ali

So it's so funny. I love this image because it gives me such a comical someone just terrible being like, look at all my red flags and doing some sort of dance for the person. And you're right, a lot of

people are really covert and they don't even realize how toxic they are, so they're not waving it. And also, I find it more empowering to realize it is our responsibility as we continue to heal, to find and seek red flags, not to wait for someone to wave them for us, because the average person is not going to wave and be like, look how toxic I am. I'm owning it.

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It takes a lot of accountability and responsibility that many times someone who is detrimentally toxic can't do. So if we're waiting for that, we're going to be waiting for a long time and staying entangled in that toxicity in the meantime. So something I would encourage people to think about is it is our responsibility once we're adults and in the process of healing, to look for and know what those red flags are. With all of that being said, I am so used to hearing folks say, I don't have any healthy models, so how am I going to see them? How am I going to know a green flag? How am I going to know what that even looks like to even look for it, the same way I look for a red flag?

And I have a lot of compassion for this framework. And with all due respect, that mindset is so unhealthy to me. It comes from that toxicity. The idea of thinking we don't have a model means I was not directly given a model. But boy, you were given a model. You absolutely were, if you flip things around, so you may have learned that being spoken to a certain way, having someone put hands on you, having someone not make space for you or respect for you or honor your needs, you've learned how toxic that is.

So maybe you have not had the privilege of having that direct experience, and that is really unfortunate, and I honor that, but please don't say you don't have examples of healthy relationships because you may not have had experiences, but you do have those examples in your mind, because as you realize how these things are toxic, you're also realizing how the opposite is very healthy, right?

So this is like a self-efficacy component, which is within self-esteem and within self-love, sometimes when we don't have direct experience with, we're very intimidated, it could be very discouraging, there's a lot of valid emotion in that. However, I don't want us to put on our blinders and say, without these experiences, I can't find any. Not true at all. Your experiences have actually taught you a lot. They've taught you a lot about what you need, what you're deserving of, and what you can find in a healthy relationship, too.

So I offer people the opportunity to look for the opposite. When someone treats me with kindness, when someone makes space for me, when someone's respectful for me, when someone lets me speak without cutting me off, when someone lets me speak without gaslighting me and manipulating me. I'm sure you have a lot of signs if you let yourself think about what you've learned.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm so glad you said it that way. And also, I think people often don't get to the place where they're trying to seek support until they are honestly at a loss. They're like, I just keep getting into the same situation over and over and over again, and I don't know how to stop it. Is it me? Is it the other people? How do I keep ending up in the same relationship? And let's just speak to the fact that we gravitate toward what's familiar until it becomes into our awareness of, like, oh, your last four partners were severely critical. Who else in your life, it's the big trope of, like, everything always ends up being about your parents, but who in your life was super critical of you?

And did that serve you? Is that something you want to continue? But until you become conscious of it, of those factors and those patterns, you can't do anything to stop it, right?

[00:26:48] Dr Shainna Ali

Yes. It's that pattern that I mentioned that our brains are just designed to do. Familiarity feels normal, and then normal is where our mind draws the conclusion of what's healthy. So if we are familiar with people speaking in many types of ways, whether it's to others, to us directly, that feels familiar and then therefore normal, we're not stopping and thinking whether it's healthy or not. It's just this is familiar, this is familiar. That goes to a nervous system place. We almost gravitate towards what feels familiar.

Our minds are just trying to match, to no fault of their own. It's because we already have that toxic system laid, that framework, just works like a magnet and pulls and pulls and pulls and pulls. So it's important to recognize that when we're trying to give ourselves some space to step back, externalize and offer grace, because many times people say, well, I didn't choose, you mentioned the parental trope, I didn't choose my parents, but I chose that ex and that ex and that ex. Kinda, you did, but you didn't know what was healthy. You just knew what was normal. And sometimes just making that distinction between what's normal for me and what I want and am deserving of in terms of what's healthy for me, that's a wonderful mental exercise in and of itself.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And everybody has a different definition for them personally of what it means to be safe, seen, and soothed. And so we often mistake what's been normalized for us as what it means to be safe just because of that familiarity and being able to identify, like, just because that was normalized for me doesn't make me feel safe, seen or soothed, and then intentionally trying to create something different.

Dr Shainna Ali

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

Well, there's been a lot of talk about boundaries lately, and I'm glad people are learning about them, but there's a lot of misunderstanding as well. And so you spent a lot of time outlining boundaries in your latest book. So I'd love it if you could describe what boundaries are and also what they aren't.

Dr Shainna Ali

Okay, yes, absolutely. I'm so glad, just like you, that people are talking about boundaries a lot more, yet I think there's so many misconceptions and a lot of the book is actually dealing with those misconceptions and helping us to decondition them.

Simply put, I see boundaries as the limits that we have to support our wellness. Those can be limits we have with ourselves and limits we have with others. Sometimes I think we overemphasize the external aspect and it can become disempowering because we're only seeing limits or lack of limits

with others. And it feels like I can't do anything about that, that's this person, how they're pushing on my boundary or how they're setting their own boundary and it's not about me.

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But in my approach, working with others, I found that actually coming back to the self again, exploring some of the things we've actually talked about, but also sitting with what are my limits for me, what are the boundaries that I have with me and how does that extend interpersonally? So an example I will give for this is I have many times people who realize it's overt, the example with someone else, this is the boundary I need to make.

A common one I hear is when someone's setting limits around how they want to be spoken with or to. So I would appreciate it if you don't speak to me that way. I'm using something really simple on purpose here, so there's that, that's given. And then yet the person, whether speaking with other people or directly with that person they set the limit with, will say something really self-deprecating and horrendous about themselves. And over time, they're confused as to why the other person started to say these types of things, yet again, I set the boundary. Why aren't you doing it?

Well, because you set the boundary, but were you even adhering to it? And this isn't always the case. There are, speaking of toxic relationships, toxic people just want to bum-rush through your boundaries no matter what. But it's not always the case. Just because toxic people exist and toxic relationships exist and many of us have lived through them, does not mean that every scenario is toxic. And that generalization is really important to catch. So we have these opportunities to design healthier boundaries for ourselves and with others, too.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah and I think at the beginning of anybody's kind of personal healing journey, you're in a vulnerable, raw, kind of delicate state. And the orientation sometimes is to try to make everyone around you behave safe enough for you. And that includes your relationships, your society, culture, your workplace. And we don't get to control other people, do we? And so I love that reorienting towards yourself. Like, am I even holding this boundary with myself?

And the example that you gave about saying something self-deprecating about yourself, like, if you've asked someone not to criticize you and then you open the gate by saying something critical about yourself, you're sending mixed messages, and it's confusing for the other person. They're like, oh, we're doing that again. I guess you're not sensitive to that.

Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. What we say about our boundaries need to match how we uphold our boundaries. It may be stuff that no one else is seeing, but definitely if it's an interpersonal boundary that we're establishing with someone else, we want to make sure that we're walking the walk too. Otherwise, it's a pretty hypocritical ask.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. And this is such an individual process that gets determined especially between a mental health practitioner and an individual on a kind of case by case basis. Because there's no

way that, I think you do actually do some great work around how to formulate boundaries in your book, but it's really hard without a specific example to say, here's how we write a boundary and convey it to another person. It's such an individualized experience, given the context. Right?

[00:33:08] Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. And I'm so glad you said that, because while I wanted to create that book to offer people the ability to catch their misconceptions and understand how boundaries first need to be established at that interpersonal level and how that influences the interpersonal level and how it's an ongoing journey, these are really important tenets of healthy boundary design that I wanted to convey, I know that when we are in that vulnerable state that you mentioned, it's just human nature, tell me what to do, give me the plugin, tell me, give me the sentence, fill in the blank that will work with me, tell me how to say it.

And I have no luck with this because I don't think that that's fair. And especially if we say, this is what you're supposed to say and that doesn't match the context, it doesn't match the history, it doesn't match the meaning of that boundary, can actually be more misleading than not. So that's why there's no fill in the blank, this is what you're supposed to say scenarios. It is such a case by case. So the need for boundaries is pretty ubiquitous at the individual level and interpersonal, but how boundaries sound and the nuances of them and what they look like today versus last year and in ten years from now, all of that is so layered that giving one sentence for this is what you're supposed to say is actually misleading. That's not just how boundaries work.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I'm really glad that you mentioned the, I can't remember how you phrased it, but I call it the Kool-Aid Man phenomenon, where you will build your boundaries and then they're just going to bust through a wall and make a mess, instantaneous, the moment you even think you might want to create a boundary, that person is going to bust through and make a mess. And so I really want to spend some time talking about how we deal with our own feelings and what kinds of things we can expect to feel when we're first designing and holding boundaries in our relationships.

Dr Shainna Ali

Yeah, I think the most important thing we need to know about when we start to recognize toxic relationships and realize the importance of investing in ourselves by designing healthy boundaries for ourselves and with others, this seems like such an obvious healthy choice, and because it's healthy, we think it's going to feel easy and effortless and stress free. And I wish that were the case. Many times I'm working with clients who are ready to go, like, let's work on this boundary stuff for me and for others.

And there is this frustration, like, we come up with a boundary and it's in place and it's like, well, why isn't it working yet? I'm still falling back into my own patterns. I'm being really hard on myself. I'm having a hard time enforcing my boundary, not just for me or with others. I'm faltering. I don't know how to hold myself accountable. Why is it so hard? Because I know I've decided I want to do this. This is good for me. It is hard.

I think what's important to realize, because we have this long withstanding history, most of us, of poor boundaries and toxic relationships, I like to tell people, however long you were living with that, until you give yourself that amount of time and work on the other end, you cannot dare to give

yourself a hard time. I wish it was something that we just download some new programming. That old programming is fully erased and there's no remnants, there's no triggers. I hope we get there one day, just like some sort of technological advancement, that would be great, to a certain extent, but that's just not how the human mind works, right?

[00:36:52]

We were talking about anxiety earlier. The mind is programmed to think about those other case scenarios, those exceptions, those outliers, and remind you, okay, well, this is actually not going to be safe if you speak up to this person, this is not going to be safe if you walk away, you're actually going to have more trouble in the long run.

The mind is always going to do that to you because it's part of that old programming. So you might move in that direction and you might get really discouraged thinking a healthy boundary means I'm supposed to feel good, right? And it does. But it also is challenging and it takes time and you might become doubtful in the process. And that's why, even if it seems so clear that the boundary that you're working on is interpersonal, that is why it requires that personal work because to get you through that challenge, to be resilient enough to come back to that sound foundation, requires that personal work and self-love.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I also just want to validate something you kind of touched on, which is that we're wired for connection. We are genetically, biologically wired to stay in relationship with our centers of family or the people that we want to be the closest to. And so when we start to create boundaries, that gets us all flustered around safety and security because to be in relationship with our family system is to be safe or to be secure in the deepest part of our being, then you're going to get flak from the rest of your family or the cultural systems around us.

Like what do you mean you don't talk to your XYZ anymore? Talk about shame. Family estrangement affects a lot of people and yet nobody talks about it because nobody wants to face the judgment that comes with what do you mean you don't talk to your parent or sibling or whoever it is anymore? How could you not? They're your insert relational word here. And so there's a lot of that, again, shame and stigma there around being able to not only hold our own boundaries, communicate them and then take the feedback that we didn't solicit from the world around us afterward.

Dr Shainna Ali

Yes, it comes with a cost. And again, I think we see things sometimes oversimplified, too concrete, too binary, of healthy boundaries look like this and they feel amazing and unhealthy boundaries look like this and they feel terrible. Again, there's that normalcy and familiarity aspect of well, this boundary is faltering and it's because this relationship is toxic. But I also have the safety of a family system or a social support network and what if I don't have that at all? It's often a big gamble and I think it's important for us to call out that gamble and acknowledge it as truth.

It is, oh, you're worried that if you stand up to the primary manipulator that you might lose the people who are hiding like this behind the manipulator. That's fair. That is many times the way systems are formed and it's unfair for us to be like, well that's not a healthy boundary so just go

ahead and drop it. It's not as simple as that. That is so, so narrow minded, way too individualistic and it just denies our humanity.

[00:40:16] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And you said something earlier about getting a bunch of programming to help you instantaneously apply boundaries. And it reminded me of something I was thinking about a few weeks ago, which was this epiphany I'd had around personal development. And for so long I was like, I'm going to make a Matrix reference here, so forgive me, but I felt like Neil. I was like, download kung fu, but it was like personal development stuff. Teach me about attachment and then I would plug in and learn about attachment, teach me about boundaries. And I thought I could do all of the emotional labor to fix all of the relationships in my life.

And two revelations came to me in the last few years, which was that, A, I can't control other people, so my hopes there were dashed. But even though I couldn't control or fix all of the relationships in my life through working through self-love, through books and experts like yours, through discovering and creating boundaries, all of a sudden, people who had done that work started gravitating into my life, and I could recognize them, right? So it wasn't like I could change, fix, repair, or drastically adapt the relationships that I wanted and deeply wanted to be different.

But all of a sudden, all of these relationships that did feel good and did have green flags and did match my own personal development started coming into my life. And so I just wanted to reflect that to people who are in the trenches.

Dr Shainna Ali

Absolutely. And that's a really common experience I hear. Also, as a side note, I can't tell you the amount of times I get the Matrix reference when it comes to mental health work. Yes. More often than not, it is like the go to, and I love it, as one of my favorite movies, so I'm very biased. But with that being said, you're talking about seeing the shift happen, right? So, yes, it may not be as concrete as I have downloaded the programming and now I'm using this, but there are other ways that the shift happens that we don't know to look out for.

And it's the same way that we gravitate to those toxic relationships before we make the change. People will also gravitate to us when we are making that change. And it's because we are making the change, not just the interpersonal boundary, it's because we're doing that work intrapersonally and that starts to exude out as well. When people are in the trenches, something that I implant that I think is really helpful to hear, there can come a time that someone asks you, what are your boundaries? That encourages you to share what those are.

They're not asking you that so they can be the Kool-Aid man, they're asking you that to say, tell me how I can best love you, see you, support you. That is possible. It's definitely happened for lots of my clients. I know it was life changing the first time someone said, thank you for sharing that boundary with me. I really appreciate the opportunity to better care for you. Whoa, that is possible? When we're so used to the toxic relationships and boundaries just being bum-rush, bum-rush by ourselves and others, we don't realize that the opposite is possible. But it sure is.

Meagen Gibson

Awesome. This has been a fantastic talk.

[00:43:27] Dr Shainna Ali

Thank you so much for talking with me. I love talking about boundaries. I could talk about this for eight more hours.

Meagen Gibson

I know, right? How can people find out more about you and your book and how to connect with you?

Dr Shainna Ali

Thanks so much for asking. So, generally, you can find everything on my website, drshainna.com. The books are linked there as well. I would say if anyone is trying to look into the books, my strong encouragement would be to look first at *The Self-Love Workbook*, because it is the foundational layer. Maybe you're already gathering that from our chat. And then move into *Designing Healthy Boundaries*. Also, if you want to connect on social media, I'm on Instagram [@drshainna](https://www.instagram.com/drshainna). And if you want to learn more about mental health, free, accessible mental health, you can listen to the Mental Wellness Practice podcast.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thanks again for being with us today.

Dr Shainna Ali

Thank you so much for having me.