



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Moving Past Our Defenses and Disconnection

Guest: Hilary Jacobs Hendel

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Hi and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your Conference Co-host. Today I'm delighted to be speaking with Hilary Jacobs Hendel. She's the author of the international award winning book *It's Not Always Depression: Working The Change Triangle to Listen to the Body, Discover Core Emotions, and Connect to Your Authentic Self*.

She actually came up with that book after writing an article for the New York Times, which was fantastic as well. She's a certified psychoanalyst and accelerated experiential dynamic psychotherapy or AEDP psychotherapist and supervisor. She's got a fantastic model for The Change Triangle that she's going to refer to a lot in our interview, and it has to do with defenses and inhibitory emotions and really identifying with your core self and your core emotions and your authentic self. So I hope you enjoy it. Hilary Jacobs Hendel, thank you so much for being with us today.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Thank you for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So we're talking about healing toxic relationships today, so I'd love to start by asking you why is it important to understand emotions to navigate conflicts in relationship?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Well, it's so important to understand emotions just because we're human beings and we all have emotions and they're running the show, basically, without conscious awareness, as almost like we're puppets on a string. The reason just quickly for that, because some people probably know my work through this, is to understand that we are all wired for these seven basic core emotions: anger, sadness, fear, disgust, the four so called negative ones which come up when there's relationship conflict and toxicity in relationships all the time and when these emotions are triggered, they're triggered in the middle of the brain, outside of conscious control, so we can't stop emotions.

[00:02:07]

There's some conflict or altercation or our partner or child or parent says something that hurts us and automatically the brain is triggering the emotion because it's there for survival, to protect us and to make us move in ways that are adaptive, like running. Our body moves when we are threatened with danger. And so these core emotions in the middle of relationships are being triggered left and right and they affect the body, and when they affect the body, there's energy that comes up and most of us, because we weren't raised with emotions education or by parents modeling how to really be with emotions in constructive ways, we block our feelings with defenses and anxiety.

And maybe you'll show a picture of the triangle here, or maybe people can Google The Change Triangle, which maps out that whole system of what happens when we get triggered by emotions and we can't deal with them, or we're overwhelmed by them and what happens when we get triggered by emotions and we do know what to do with them and that we can process them and make good use of them. And so if we imagine two people being triggered to emotions, not really being aware of emotions, but being in those states of mind that are defensive, combative, withdrawing, abandoning... All sorts of things, we are in trouble in our relationship and we have no tools to understand what's going on.

And that's why I'm so passionate about sharing The Change Triangle when I work with couples because it is a map so that each person understands, may not be able to do anything about it in the moment, what emotional state they're in with what behaviors they're prone to, and they can understand why there's an impasse at the moment, why there's a conflict, why there's a fight. And if they want to have a new dance step to do something differently that's more constructive than either having a fight and not talking for a couple of days or withdrawing or getting depressed or going into whatever states that we go into, which we all know for ourselves when we get triggered to intensely upset states.

Meagen Gibson

It's so interesting, you said so many things that I want to come back to. And I think the first part that I really don't want to go over too quickly is the validation that regardless of the status and state of your relationship, whether it's healthy or toxic, if you want to label things as healthy but dysfunctional or functional, we'll call it regardless of your relationship, you're going to have conflict. Right? Like conflict is inevitable because of this autonomic nervous system and these survival emotions that we have in order to keep ourselves safe. Is that fair?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes. And because, to say it even more simply, if we're two individual humans, we have different needs, or let's say we can't possibly have needs and wants and desires that coincide perfectly at the right time all the time. That there's going to be a time when I want to lie down and take a nap and my husband is in the mood to go out. Or when even worse, when I'm pissed about not getting enough attention and he's depleted because he has no energy to give towards me from work, so we are constantly navigating differences and those differences cause conflict.

[00:05:59] Meagen Gibson

Exactly. And the difference between what we're trying to identify here is in the toxic dynamic, you've got two people who are perhaps, or at least one person, who doesn't have enough emotional intelligence, training, self awareness to understand that the cycle that you're talking about where you're having these core emotions, I think one of the things I really wanted to point out about what you said and you named the four core emotions, is that sometimes in the relationship with the toxic person you assume those core emotions are about you, when actually the person that you're sensitive to their responsiveness or their reaction, they might actually be feeling that in themselves and about themselves, but your perception of those four core emotions of disgust or anger or whatever, you assume that's about you when it actually might be about them, but you don't know because that person doesn't know how to communicate, you don't know how to communicate safely to them about what's going on for them, and it's this kind of this cycle where these four core emotions are being triggered, but we actually don't understand what's about us and what's about them, and nobody knows how to communicate that right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah. I think what you're saying is that feeling of is it me? Is this me? Is it them? What's going on here? Why even with the best of intention to get along are we just constantly missing each other? And just to clarify those four emotions, those are the ones that cause people a lot of problems in relationships, the anger, fear, sadness and disgust, but there's also joy and excitement and sexual excitement and love and pride in the self and all these wonderful feelings too, but it's really navigating... I think it's navigating different states at different times, that's really difficult. And then, of course, when we're talking about toxicity what we're really talking about is people...

All of us, I would like to say, have some form of trauma just from surviving our childhoods, that we are wounded even if we had parents, and most of us do have parents that love us and have the best intention, and so, for example, I can use an example from myself, who had a wonderful mother, but she didn't do sadness. She just didn't really want to validate sadness. And so I learned to bury my sadness and kind of be sunny because that's what she liked and we all deeply want to please our parents. It happens automatically because connection trumps everything. When we're children, our connection is our survival, those people feed us and they shelter us, and so we don't want them upset with us.

And so, for example, as a result of for the first 40 years of my life until I got exposed to all this emotion education through becoming a therapist as a third career, I didn't do sadness and instead I would get anxious. And so what that would manifest itself is let's say I'm in a relationship and somebody that I know dies or somebody is sick, I'm feeling anxious and now in my relationship, I'm irritable. I don't know why I'm irritable, I just know everything you, my partner, is doing is bugging me. But it's really because I'm sad and that sadness is blocked, The Change Triangle shows this is blocked by anxiety because anxiety is what we use to push down emotions that we have learned are not acceptable to our parents and caregivers, and then it just becomes generalized, that's just sort of the way we are in life.

So that's just an example of something relatively benign that can happen in childhood, seemingly benign, that will carry through to a grown up adult relationship without any clue unless you've done some work to understand your own triangle and where you are, what causes you to go into anxious and ashamed and guilty and defensive modes on the top of the triangle versus what emotions can I not only bear but talk about, communicate, be vulnerable to share. And through that... And two

people doing that we start to change a toxic dynamic into an authentically, relating, open and honest dynamic. But that can be a long journey for many.

[00:10:38] Meagen Gibson

If I hear you right, it's that we have these unconscious patterns that we develop as a result of being a child and being raised by humans who are imperfect, right? As I know from being a parent I'm definitely an imperfect person and now a parent, and then we carry those relatable or those relating patterns of behavior into our adulthood kind of unconsciously and subconsciously sometimes. And what we want is to be able to have the full range of our emotions and access to the full range of our emotions safely and to be attuned to by our partners or children or extended family.

And oftentimes that just doesn't happen because we have those old patterns that we've carried into those adult relationships, whether it be the way we relate to our children that were just doing what was done with us or the way that we relate to our partner and our partners and our children are reacting to those patterns and so kind of understanding, and I'm so glad that you named irritability because I think people really misunderstand irritability. They think irritability is just purely like overwhelm or stress or something, and it can definitely be one of the telltale signs of anxiety, as you said.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah, and overwhelm and stress are all the same thing. It's all these underlying emotions that have this energy that is coursing through our bodies, because emotions are above all physical, and it creates stress and it creates a sense of overwhelm. And by doing small little maneuvers like learning to slow down, which is very hard emotional stress and overwhelm and conflict and anxiety revs people up just at the moment where they have to slow down and it's hard, it's really pulling back the reins on a nervous system that's going into... A nice way to say it is a survival strategy.

I'm under some sort of stress or danger because there's a conflict and it may just be even because my partner has expressed a different opinion that can be extremely threatening that we are different people, and therefore to the unconscious brain, if you're different, if you have a different opinion or a different want and need that means you're an individual and that means you could leave me one day or that means you could hurt me one day. So that's where the kind of codependency comes in, why people adapt to really needing to be symbiotically meshed, that there's a deep wish that there is no difference between us and no space because then I sort of feel in control that I'm not as vulnerable to you leaving.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Back into childhood. So yeah, it's very complex. And the reason I think that I gravitated towards The Change Triangle and why I like to teach it to couples is because it's something to go to in the moment of the morass of feelings and to at least try to say, okay, I can tell by your posture, body language that you're in a defended strategy. And what that means is I'm not really going to be able to have a productive conversation with you when you're in a defensive strategy, so I may say, hey,

let's just take a time out. I see you're very upset, I see you're very guarded by your posture like this, and I don't think we're going to be able to have a productive conversation, why don't we take a break, do something to take care of yourself so you feel a little bit better, and then we can come back and see if we can tease through what we said that triggered each other.

[00:14:39]

And then you sort of go back. What I teach is when the iron is cold, striking while the iron is cold, so to speak, so that you're not triggered and you can say, okay, what happened when I just said that I didn't feel like making dinner tonight, and all of a sudden you got your back up. What did you hear me say? What did you think I meant? That type of thing.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Because it's so interesting, isn't it? Because often in listening, we hear things the other person doesn't say. And that's not because we're crazy, it's because we're sensing all of these things that aren't being said. And we're sensing the body language and we're sensing these micro movements in people's faces and assigning meaning to that based on our history. So it doesn't necessarily mean what we think it means, but we're deciphering our safety at all times. And like you said, it's often remarkable how quickly you can reregulate and be able to say, wow, I really overreacted there, but it does take some time. It could be five minutes, it could be 15 minutes, it could be overnight, but it doesn't necessarily have to be... Six days.

Oftentimes I know I've developed a skill from talking to experts like you where I can say, wow, I'm super dysregulated right now, I need some time, can we talk about this? And then I actually name a time so that I can commit so the other person knows I'm not just avoiding this because I'm uncomfortable. I'm actually trying to take care of both of us by calming that down right now before we have a conversation about it.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Wonderful. That's very important because when you say, can we come back tomorrow at four and talk about this? It sends a message both consciously and to the nervous system, I'm not going away, I'm not leaving you, I'm just calming down so that I can bring my best self back to you.

Meagen Gibson

And it tells your own nervous system, right, that you can take care of it. That your big ass self can protect it when it gets overwhelmed and can create space and boundaries and all of these tiny things that actually don't sound big but end up feeling really, really big inside to yourself.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

Sorry, the Zoom delay is a little bit strong today, so I don't want to speak over you. What were you just going to say?

[00:17:03] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

No, I was just affirming and saying, yes, that is exactly how I see it. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

So we've been talking kind of around the difference between sensations and feelings and thoughts, but I would love it if you could just describe the difference and how those interact on the model of The Change Triangle.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes. Most of us know our thoughts, right, they come with the language of words and they're the things that come fastest to us. They're on the tip of our mind and we often think a thought and blurt it out at the same time. Most of us are very familiar with our thoughts because we live in a culture, there's a reason for that, that says, I think, therefore I am starting from Descartes that emphasizes mind over matter, which really means like, mind over whatever's emotionally upsetting and pick yourself up by your bootstraps. So we are praised for staying up in our head and for thinking our thoughts.

The problem is, goes back to how we started this, is that the whole other half are emotions and sensations and they're stronger forces in many ways than our thoughts and they can dictate our thoughts. And that's counter, probably, to what a lot of people have heard, because with CBT therapy being the mainstream therapy, which, again, I don't want to get started on why that is, but there's politics in methods and politics in research and all sorts of reasons that people have gotten the idea that I can control my emotions with my thoughts.

But the fact is that we have three separate tracks and it's important in real time in working with yourself and in relationships to realize I can be thinking one thing, I can be feeling another, and emotions we're just going to call our core emotions: anger, fear, sadness, disgust, joy, excitement, sexual excitement. Those are the main core emotions that I work with in my private practice, I get people in trouble, are emotions because they activate the body and get it ready for an adaptive action. Whether it's fighting, whether it's running, whether it's moving towards things that excite us and get us jazzed.

All of these things developed over hundreds of thousands of years because we had an evolutionary advantage when we could move very quickly, automatically, without having to think it. That to think, I have to run from this person chasing me would take longer than these automatic reactions that we just start running before we even know we're afraid or that there's danger, it just happens automatically. And the physical sensations are really when we, for example, if we were in a session together and you said, I'm feeling sad today, one of my questions would be, after I thanked you for sharing that with me, would be how do you know you feel sad?

What in your body lets you know that you're having the experience of sadness? And that's a question that I would say 99% of people on Earth have not been asked. How do they know that they're experiencing an emotion? And when you start the practice of... Instead of going up into your head when you feel something, right, to block it or to go churn in anxiety, you go down and you scan your body, you might be able to say, what? Meagen, do you know how you experience sadness in your body?

[00:21:07] Meagen Gibson

I was thinking as you were, yeah, like, for me, it all starts to turn down, right? Like, my shoulders turn down. It feels like somebody's got something weighted around my neck. Or sometimes my stomach will get involved, right. It's this 1000lb wet blanket sort of feeling that occurs sometimes when you get sadness. Now, if there's like, grief involved, that might have more chest involved in it for me, but yeah, the sensations we bypass sensations so quickly that we don't identify, and I'm sure this has happened to you, by the way, please let me know where you say, how do you know you're sad? What does that feel like? And then they start talking about things like, well, I wasn't supported in this, right? They start telling you thoughts and you're like, no. How does it feel? Where do you feel it? What's the sensation?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes, exactly. Because that's what we're all trained to do. And as you can see in your description, it's highly physical. If you didn't have a physical sensation, you probably wouldn't know what you're feeling. There's those three tracks that we can, as a human being, track in ourselves and track in another person. And the reason why it's so important to know whether... In the triangle right, we've got on the top left, defenses, and a defense is not a pejorative or a bad thing, we need defenses. They are the brilliant and creative ways that we protect ourself from emotional discomfort. And the thing about defenses is we don't want to get rid of defenses. We need them. We just want to be able to use them flexibly.

So that in a fight, for example, if my partner points out to me, wow, you look really tense, I'll be able to say, take a moment to tune in and say, you know what? I am really tense. Let me take a break and try to relax. And when we can work our way from the defense corner of The Change Triangle through the inhibitory emotions, which are a special class of emotions, they're anxiety, guilt and shame that all have this great ability to block the core emotions which are in the bottom of the triangle, which are in the body.

So that instead of getting angry because as a little girl I was told, it's not nice to be angry. Mommy doesn't like when you're angry. I'm like, okay, note to self my nervous system stops displaying anger, holds down that angry energy and instead I may feel anxious for the rest of my life until I know that this anxiety is really a signal that I have anger and I can come back to it anytime in my life and make space and forge a new relationship with my anger. Not so that I can beat somebody up and not so that I can destroy my elderly mother's mind with all the things she did, but for me, so that I don't have to carry that in my body, I can learn safe ways to release it, and...

Counterintuitively, perhaps, when people process anger at their loved ones, they feel more loving afterwards because it leaves room for all the positive things or even the few positive things that may have happened in a childhood or in a particular relationship. And one more thing about the triangle, when we go through defenses, through the inhibitory emotions of anxiety, guilt and shame and we identify and name the core emotions, then we can experience our core emotions one at a time because they all have different programs for action, for adaptive actions. When we can release that energy that has been blocked, we drop down into this authentic self state that on the change triangle, it's called the open hearted state of the authentic self.

And in that state, which we can't be in all the time, but we can work the triangle to spend more and more time in, from a relationship standpoint, it gets us closer to be able to, in a moment of conflict or arguing or something that's not good, be able to think, feel and connect all at the same time.

[00:25:46]

That we no longer have to resort to these defenses that we developed when we were younger, that we have much more of an adult capacity to manage the emotions than we did because... When we were kids, one, our brains get easily overwhelmed, we're emotional beings, and we need our parents to help us with emotions and if our parents can't do that because they themselves didn't get any emotion education or didn't have any therapy and even worse, suffered abuse under their parents, they're going to be compromised and therefore, they're going to not be able to help us calm our own emotions so we are going to be left to resorting to defensive strategies that, thank goodness, help us get through.

But then they don't serve us so much when we have adult relationships because we really want to relate from an authentic open hearted state to another person in that same authentic open hearted state where we can say, hey, that really hurt my feelings. Really made me mad at you and I don't want you to talk to me that way anymore. And then the other person, instead of saying you're the problem, it's you, you're always doing this, will be able to say, yeah, I can recognize that I did hurt your feelings, I'm so, so sorry and I'm going to work hard not to do that anymore. But that takes a lot of work for most people. Sadly.

People boink, boink, boink, you're bad, you're bad, you're the blame, you're the blame. And unless they slow down and can visualize this Change Triangle for a moment, which helps in that moment when everything is escalating, if it just occurs to you that, okay, we're on this Change Triangle and one of us is in an anxious state, another is in a defensive state, another one or one of us is feeling this core emotion. It tells you how to handle each other in a way that maybe could be a little more constructive instead of destructive.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, and as you were talking I was thinking about... You were talking about kind of integrating these emotions and the forgiveness or grief and kind of things as you're relating to your childhood and your caregivers and things like that, and... I think what you're saying is that even if it goes nowhere outside of yourself, you're healing that within yourself. You're saying like these are the things that happened, here's how it made me feel and I can heal that and it doesn't actually have to go any farther. Ideally it would, right? Ideally you would go to your parent and you would be able to say, gosh, this was really hard for me. I'm not asking for anything from you. I'm just this is really far from me. And they're like gosh, I can see how that might be hard for you.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

If you're lucky.

Meagen Gibson

If you're extremely lucky, right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

I was just going to say if your parent hasn't done any work on themselves, you were open as a kid and you got slammed, if you're open again as a grown up with the same person you might be hurt

again. And so a lot of work can be done without involving another person in the way that we work in AEDP where we use fantasy portrayals, it's called because the mind doesn't really know the difference between fantasy and reality in some very helpful areas, like for example with the researches they would hook someone up with an FMRI and ask them to imagine running and the same activation in the muscles and the nerves of the muscles light up as if somebody was really running.

[00:29:31]

That imagination is really a powerful use for healing, and so, just this week, I've done several fantasy portrayals of imagining what someone wishes their parent would have said and articulating exactly what they needed to hear, and then imagining what that felt like and then tapping it in. With a little EMDR or something like that to really because... In the therapy that was processing childhood trauma, that ship has sailed for our childhood we can never get those needs met again because there's no other relationship where there is the need for 24/7 attunement and care. And that's part of the problem where I think we get into toxic relationships with adults is that often people who were neglected as children have a part of them that is forever longing for that symbiotic 100% attunement and they're vigilant for when they don't get it. And that's what keeps triggering.

And so to be able to somehow heal that part so that the expectations shift from the childhood expectations to the adult expectations makes a big difference. And in that type of work, what ends up happening is that the adult part of me, for example, would take care of the six year old part of me that forever felt denied attention and, this is true about me, and that when I know that that part gets upset when I don't get the attention in the moment that I need it, I can get this kind of what I call my angry tightness. And it's my signal, I know it's my little six year old, and then what I've done and what I've learned to do through therapy and then out is I can feel her in me and I give her a hug and I give her the attention she wants and I say, we can be patient and wait till someone has some time and it's a whole new world. It's the difference between having fights and not having fights when you understand that it's coming from you.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. And I love that in order to heal all of that and be taking care of your six year old self, that you don't need anybody else other than maybe the help of an incredibly capable professional to kind of guide you along the way and get you through the tough parts of that. I was thinking while you were talking about the defenses and then inhibitory emotions of anxiety and guilt and shame and then core emotions and how those, especially when we're talking about toxic relationships, might feel really confusing at times, of course they do, but I'm talking about like... If you're in a relationship where we're talking about a romantic relationship and you feel fundamentally unsafe and threatened and then you get anxiety and then incredible attraction to your partner, right? It's so confusing and so contradictory, what seems to be contradictory. And so if you could take me through kind of like that kind of a relationship and why it makes sense and then how we kind of interrupt that pattern.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

So you're talking about something pretty specific, which is when you would think that there would be something that would repel you, attracts you.

[00:33:16] Meagen Gibson

Yes, in general terms, yeah, I'm kind of thinking through that where thankfully, I don't have this experience, but where you can have a really volatile relationship with somebody and then be still like... People often refer to it as like makeup sex or something like that, where really there's a lot of conflict, it's not necessarily very productive or emotionally intelligent conflict. It's not just fiery and passionate. It's like this is not the way we want to see people communicating in the world and then the way that that concludes is either sexual activity or some sort of connection that can feel like a pattern, where you're just moving through this pattern and you don't know how to break it. From what you said before, those core emotions, and it all makes sense, it's all inter-protective and to keep you safe. So how do you identify things like that and then break those patterns without necessarily having your partner's participation?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah. Well, in an AEDP type of therapy, from a broad conceptualization, we would help the patient or the client get to know in particular specific examples how it sort of works for them, right? So it's like you wouldn't make any assumptions of it being bad or good unless someone was overtly self destructive, cutting, planning suicide. But you're saying somebody may be curious that why is it when my partner rejects me that I get turned on?

Meagen Gibson

Or when my partner belittles me and then I'm seeking connection and then after we connect, then now I feel shame because I allowed myself to be put down or belittled. I allowed someone to talk to me the way I would never let anybody talk to any of my friends or family, and then I'm trying to seek connection and it's just kind of this pattern of behavior that you get into and you don't understand how it keeps happening.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yes, I think I'm understanding it a little bit better now. And I think the way to understand these things goes back to this idea that if we have various emotions, if you think of it as a software program, that they're all very different, but they can happen at the same time. So we are, as humans, wired for connection. So if we are not defended we're always going to have an impulse towards the person that we care about, our attachment figure, our primary as an adult, if when we were younger, growing up, our primary attachment figure that we had this drive to be close to because they help us feel safe, is mean or humiliating to us, what we now have and why it is so deleterious and harmful to be abused or neglected is because when we are humiliated, we're going to feel rage as a child, the first thing that's going to come up is rage, sadness, fear, all these different emotions.

Rage is going to want us to hurt the object that we love and care about. Fear is going to make us want to run away. Sadness is going to make us want to go forward, to get comfort. Shame is going to make us want to withdraw. And you've got all these different energetic experiences, like not energetic in the woo woo sense, but biological impulses, right? So that if I was humiliated as a child, this sort of constellation of the love that a child has for a parent mixed in with being humiliation and being wired, like humiliation is loving because my parent is humiliating me and I don't have any other experience of love so that wires get crossed, almost get wired in backwards

or sideways, and it becomes very confusing until in a therapy or a really great coaching someone can parse out the different feelings that happen in a particular moment.

[00:38:13]

So that, okay, when your partner treats you harshly, let's name all the feelings one by one, imagining them with lots of air and space in between each one that you notice to a large degree and even the subtle ones. So someone might say, well, when my partner humiliates me, I feel shame. Okay. And if we were to move that shame aside, what's underneath it? If you didn't go to shame but you felt confident in yourself and strong, I'd be enraged. I'd want to punch him in the nose and say, don't talk to me that way. Okay, so now we've got shame, we've got anger. And I also get frightened, and I feel trembly. And actually, I also feel titillated by the experience, and sexuality is so infinitely complex, it's a way to, again, it's a defense unless it's pure sexuality like that we're attracted, but any of these core emotions can be enlisted as defenses.

And why do we have one defense as opposed to another? It has to do with the age that our trauma and abuse happens, right, so if we're zero to three, it's a very sensual age and so we may get fixated on, we may develop a kink or a sexual proclivity, and again, no judgment. We just want to get curious and be compassionate and if it's not serving us, try to untangle all of it by being with the emotions in the body, naming them, being with them, being compassionate and processing them as much as possible so that the brain rewires and reintegrates in a way that's more adaptive for being a grown up.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I know that I threw that at you from left fields.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

Completely theoretical situation, I was like, yeah...

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

But it happens, in fact, one of the stories, it's not always depression, or maybe it was in an article I wrote on touch because I write about hugging and in therapy, too, and the importance of physical touch and I was working with somebody who I would care for a child part, but in that same body was a teenage part that was worried they were going to feel sexually attracted to me and they were gay as well, and it was two women. So the way we handled that is just by explaining that's okay, that there's just two tracks. The little part of you wants the comfort, and if you feel a sexual attraction, that's fine, we're not going to have sex, so it's like...

With emotions, what's really important to understand about emotions is that having an emotion is a purely internal experience. So I may feel sexually excited or I may feel angry, and because I'm angry, I may feel an impulse to punch you in the nose or call you a name. But there's a big difference between knowing I want to do it and doing it. Just like there's a big difference between being sexually attracted to something or someone that's taboo, not acting on it, which is good, but

acting on it that hurts someone else or is destructive is not good. So we want to make a distinction between experiencing core emotions part one, and part two is the thoughtful, logical decision going up into our head. What do we want to do with this emotion? Do we want to say something to our partner? Do we want to act? Do we want to take action?

[00:42:12]

And if we do, let's think it through all the way to the end, if I say this thing and do this thing, what are the ramifications? What will this other person feel? How will that be for me? Then what happens? Then what happens? So that we're always acting the actions we take are commensurate with our goals and values for ourselves. But that requires thought. It requires slowing down. It requires knowing what we're feeling, knowing our impulses, and then thinking through the healthiest and most constructive ways.

Meagen Gibson

That's exactly where I was hoping you were going to get with it, and I knew you would. But also, it also validates, and I know that you would say this as well that that whole process and learning it and repeating it and practicing it takes a lot of time, right? And a lot of people, they get into kind of stages in the development of learning a new way of relating to their sensations and feelings and thought, in that once you learn that you may have had a trauma history or experienced some trauma, you're like, well, that's why I'm like how I am and that's why I can't stay in a committed relationship. And it serves as kind of a stage excuse for you until you're ready to take responsibility for the next part of it, and it doesn't determine anything, I'm also still responsible for my actions and behaviors even though there's no judgment about all of this that's happening in the background, I still have to be responsible, right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Right. No, that's absolutely true. And it doesn't have to take that long, it really depends on how much nourishment we have as children and how emotionally savvy and attuned our parents were. And the more trauma and the more neglect the roots of the tree are affected, and it does take more work. The other thing that's the hardest part is the awareness. I had a very psychologically aware household. You may remember my dad was...

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say your dad was a psychiatrist, right?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

And my mother was a guidance counselor and we talked a lot about our thoughts, right, our insights. We didn't talk about emotions. Emotions were woo woo California BS. And I'm sure my father had no emotions education because it wasn't really accessible and I was so lucky to get that because it's still not mainstream. So what happened in my first marriage, I knew enough about psychology that our childhoods affected each other, but I didn't really see my defenses, I just thought, this is me. And it wasn't until I saw The Change Triangle, which is why I'm so gaga over it, that it's like a light bulb went off.

[00:45:11]

And now, although I'm still great friends with my first husband and we have children together, grown children now with my second husband, where we both had this information, we both worked The Change Triangle, I was now aware, for example, of my people pleasing. So this is probably typical in a marriage, and I laugh, so when I met this new husband of mine that's already almost 20 years, in the beginning of the relationship when we were dating, I said, I'm all giving. I just love taking care of my man. I'm all giving. And he literally said to me, that is so fantastic because I am all taking. And I laughed. I thought it was so charming. But it turned out he was all taking and I was all giving and I felt that resentment that I had in my first marriage where I couldn't really talk about why I felt resentful and couldn't satisfy conflicts.

Anyway, I went back to therapy to work on, we went to couples therapy, I went to individual therapy to work on my... To not be so giving. And I had to face painful, painful shame and guilt if I wasn't giving because I had learned from my mother to take care of my man and that meant doing everything and never saying no. And it was excruciatingly painful, but it was a game changer for the relationship. Now I learned to say no and then I had to learn to tolerate the emotions that he had, which of course were anger and sadness that I stopped being all giving. He had to learn to deal with those emotions without pouting and punishing me by withdrawing, and so the whole thing was a process that had many layers to it, and then 20 years later, we have a really good relationship, but it takes work. So that's what I mean the awareness sometimes doesn't come until something happens and a light bulb goes off and we see that this behavior that we have where we think we are just so great and it's always somebody else is really a big fat defense against being flawed.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I think you point out such a good one because it's easier to identify maladaptive defensives, right? Because those negatively impact your life. But things like perfectionism or giving too much and not having any boundaries and being entirely too accommodating, those are rewarded in all relationships and in all work environments and it's not until you literally are so depleted and your cup is so empty that you resent everyone around you and no one understands why you're so irritable that you're like, oh, wow, and then you see a professional and they're like, have you heard about boundaries? Have you ever learned about codependency?

And you're right. And then you just start to untangle this kind of foil ball and every single peel you take off makes you feel a different sort of shame or guilt about the fact that you actually have a boundary. Like I don't work after 7pm or something. And then you've got to sit with it and you're like, why is this very innocuous thing? I don't work after 7pm or I don't work the weekends, or whatever the boundary might be making me feel so horrible?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Exactly. And The Change Triangle explains it all. Because one, the good news is we can predict when we give up a defense that's been working for us The Change Triangle shows us that we're going to have to feel an inhibitory emotion, anxiety, guilt or shame, likely, and then under that the core emotions, so that's the good news and the bad news. We know that we're on the right track when we're actually feeling and it takes great courage and fortitude and a really good therapist or a really good other, whether it's a counselor or coach, to help guide somebody through those feelings because those feelings that had to be buried in that accommodation was the same

scenario that happened in childhood where we were so overwhelmed and alone that it makes sense that to go back and process that we are going to have to have someone that can, as we say in AEDP, undo our aloneness and make it okay to be with a feeling, really, where the therapist knows a lot about mediating and transforming shame and all the things that make us pull away from that kind of thing, to draw us in and feel celebrated when we do that.

[00:50:23]

It's pretty great, AEDP is just a great modality I can't say enough about. And The Change Triangle, when you work it, is really a helpful tool and that's really why, just for people who had never heard The Change Triangle, I didn't invent it, I adapted it from the academic literature because when I saw it as a person, not just as someone in training, I was like, oh my God, this is so helpful. Why didn't I learn this when I was 18? And then so thrilled that I got to write a self help book for the public about it, and with exercises so you can begin to dip your toe in the water of this completely different way of approaching yourself. Not trying to figure everything out but just trying to be with yourself in a loving way, the way we all needed our feelings responded to from the get go when we were born, and sadly, in our dysfunctional, very sick society, far too many people, far too few people have that type of tenderness and hoping to change that with some solid tools like The Change Triangle that can educate large groups of people just to know that there's something else going on besides what you're...

Meagen Gibson

And a moderately simple, once you learn it. It seems complicated when you first look at it, but it actually isn't at all and is easy to apply in your life, you're on the bus or you're making dinner with your kids and you're getting overwhelmed. I've done it myself after I learned it. It's easy to apply once you understand.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

That's nice of you to say. And some people have the opposite experience where they get it conceptually, right, the left brain, the intellectual education, but then it's a practice, it's like obviously if you take a piano lesson you're not going to go to Carnegie Hall. And sometimes somebody with innate talent or innate skills can practice piano and get very good very fast and sometimes it takes longer. And it's really a combination of how old we are. The younger people are when they start processing emotions, the quicker things go when they start processing wounds and traumas from childhood because the brain is very flexible.

Then as we get older, it's still flexible but not as. And then also the more trauma that we've had, we have to be very patient with ourselves and we want to heal. We want to turn down the volume on behaviors and thoughts that aren't helping us, with trauma they don't totally go away, although sometimes that happens, but when the volume is down and you can now feel your trigger, know what's happening and again, that idea of being able to think, feel and relate all at the same time in a moment is a great goal. So that I'm just not like what into my survival strategies and combative right away, and there you go again, okay, let's slow down. We've been here before, that type of thing. So it's really slowing down with an intention to be kind.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, to ourselves and everyone that we relate with, right?

[00:53:32] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Everyone that we want to have a nice relationship with.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. I like that you qualify that as nice relationship with because we don't want to be kind to everybody, frankly.

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Yeah, well, sometimes... But ideally wouldn't that be a wonderful world? And I always said when people understood emotions it actually helps people be much more empathic because they understand that even if I have this blustery, cranky exterior, it's because inside I'm suffering. And if somebody could just see that and not... And just say, are you okay? I mean, that can be a game changer.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Absolutely. Hilary Jacobs Hendel, thank you so much for being with us. How can people find out more about you, your book, and The Change Triangle?

Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Well, it is my passion to create lots of free resources so that everybody has access to The Change Triangle and emotions education, so I have a [website](#) that's my name, you can just Google The Change Triangle or Hilary Jacobs Hendel with one L and poke around. The blogs never go out of style because they're all just about different topics and different emotions and relationships. And then I'm all over social media. And the book, which you can get at your library, I wrote so that anyone 15 years and older could get it. It's written to be not boring, because I hate boring books and to be a real page turner. And even if you don't ever want to process an emotion or go inside your body, just the intellectual knowledge will give you great insight into yourself and other human beings.

And then from then on, for people that want to start to practice this, there's exercises in the book. I run classes. I have a new emotions education 1-on-1 8 week class happening in September. My partner Heather and I made an extensive curriculum, which we teach, but we also sell the curriculum so for schools and agencies and hospitals and organizations that want to teach a basic emotion education that gets people out of their head. It's really cutting edge stuff and where the science is, we just can't just tune into our thoughts it doesn't heal in as efficient a way as working in the body. There's plenty of resources out there, and I hope people will take a look at the book and see what they think and let me know, because I love to hear feedback.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thanks again, Hilary.

[00:56:21] Hilary Jacobs Hendel

Thank you so much. Great to see you again, Meagen.