



## How Trauma Shapes Toxic Relationships

**Guest: Irene Lyon**

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

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking to my friend Irene Lyon, and we're going to be talking about the role of trauma in toxic relationships and how the dynamics that we normalize to as children often then repeat in our adult relationships. We'll also talk about some practical pieces to help navigate your way out.

To give you a little bit of Irene's background, Irene Lyon, MSC and nervous system expert, teaches people around the world how to work with the nervous system to transform trauma, heal body and mind, and live full, creative lives. To date, her online programs and classes have reached over nine and a half thousand people in 90 countries. Irene has a Master's degree in Biomedical and Health Science and also has a knack for making complex information easy for all of us to understand in our lives.

She has extensively studied and practiced the works of Dr Moshé Feldenkrais, Peter Levine, Kathy Kain, and Irene spends her free time eating delicious food, hiking in the mountains, or walking along the Pacific Ocean in her hometown of Vancouver, British Columbia. So, welcome, Irene, super happy to have some time together. Thank you for joining me.

**Irene Lyon**

Of course. I'm happy to be here again. It's good to talk to you.

**Alex Howard**

Well, we always have some fun and we always go down some rabbit holes so I'm excited to see where we go. So maybe a good starting point is that one of the challenges people can have with toxic relationships is that they find themselves in repetitive cycles, either repetitive cycles in the same relationship or indeed moving from one relationship to another and the same dynamics playing out. And that can, of course, be enormously frustrating for people. And I think a good starting point is maybe to look at how trauma can play a significant role in that. And maybe just to start that, you might just want to unpack briefly what we mean by trauma as well.

**[00:02:27] Irene Lyon**

Yeah, well, I would make a bold statement to say that trauma is the reason for people getting into these toxic, abusive, ongoing, whirling, spiraling relationships. So I would say that that is it, actually. And then for me and for my, I guess you could say, the colleagues that you have worked with and talked to over the years, we would call it the new traumatology, sort of the Peter Levine worlds, and Gabor and Bessel and Deb Dana, Kathy Kain, all those pioneers, we would see trauma as not something that's in the event, so not in the abuse, not in, oddly, the toxic soup that we grew up in, and we can talk about the nuances there, but it's in the actual nervous system and in the physiology.

It's in our relating to the person we're with or how we don't relate. It's how we feel and see the environment. And then, really, Alex, trauma affects our ability to be in our body, to have accurate perception internally and not just of our physiological responses like our digestion, our immune health, our fatigue, our wakefulness, our needs, but also, I like to call it our spidey sense, our sixth sense, our gut sense, our knowing that I should not walk down that path, I should go this way. And that's literal and it's also metaphorical.

So when I think of toxic relationships, bad relationships, abusive relationships, that are just in this perpetual cycle, typically there's something going on where that person is not, we could say, in alignment with themselves. And not just from an energetic, spiritual point of view, because that's true too, but from a biological, animalistic, I need to protect myself, point of view. So that would be my way to open the concept between trauma, toxic relationships and then this physiology of ours, our nervous system, but it's more than the nervous system. The nervous system impacts everything. And then how our nervous system is impacts how we interact with the world.

**Alex Howard**

And of course, one of the real challenges here, I think, is the way that we normalize to whatever becomes our experience, right? We grow up in an early holding environment which is potentially highly dysfunctional, but it's all we knew and it's what we become normalized to. And so that then becomes what we recreate.

**Irene Lyon**

I always like to say imagine the wild and the animals in the wild. And I know I've used this analogy with you before, but for those that haven't listened to us before, if you take a herd of elk or wolves or any mammal out in the natural world, if you have a herd of, do you have wolves in England?

**Alex Howard**

I don't think we have very exciting and dramatic wolves like you probably have where you are but yes, we do have wolves.

**Irene Lyon**

Badgers, things like that. So that would be like our beavers here, right?

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

We have beavers as well.

**Irene Lyon**

Okay, I'm trying to find a similarity because I don't think you have bears.

**Alex Howard**

One thing we don't have is bears.

**Irene Lyon**

Yeah. Okay. So those mammals here in Canada and those mammals there in the UK, they're going to raise their babies the same way. Even though they don't have a manual, even though they don't go to therapy, they mate, they carry, they do their thing, they have their babies and they care for them. In this classic study with Michael Meaney, the rat studies with the licking, a great study that shows that that is how animals attune, it's the touch, it's the care.

And so the weird thing with humans is we have that natural instinct in us. We do. It is in us. But we have been so conditioned and so programmed and so traumatized and we haven't healed these traumas that we have lost the script for how to care for not only ourselves, but our young. And so we have our young and then they're brought up in this world of, we could say, dysregulation, it doesn't have to be abuse. It could just be this classic repression of emotion which is so common, especially in the Aristocracies and the monarchy, my country, Canada, you, Australia, New Zealand, like this, I'm all fine.

We're not going to express, we're not going to grieve the death of a loved one. We're just going to pretend there's no problem. And that poses a problem for the human system because we also have connection. We have memory, we feel loss, and mammals do too, not to the same degree, but because we're just so complex, we create situations that are so complex and then those little ones grow up to be adults and then they find relationship because that is in our innate capacity to still find and seek relationship, even when our relationships were maybe not the best.

I always say, and my mentors have said this, a child who's being abused will stay in that relationship, especially if they can't leave and literally run away if they're four, five, six, even twelve, because that abuse at least is some form of connection versus being alone on the street, not knowing how to fend for oneself. And so we put little humans into this situation where they have to be in a toxic environment and then typically they don't know any different. They grow up, they do the things that we do, and then they only know relationship from that lens.

And so what occurs is a person might know something's not right. They might know this fighting, I don't think this is right, being beaten, not right, being ignored, not right, but they don't have any other map. And so the map is written for them. And so the thing that's interesting and this kind of then funnels into how a person might heal this is let's just say they're like, this isn't good, I know this isn't good for all the reasons, but then let's say they find something that's more wholesome, more good, it will feel wrong, right?

**[00:09:42]**

And I'm sure you've seen this, it will feel even gross to have someone care for you in a way that's actually accurately safe and good and then enters the dance of the deep, somatic nervous system work, where you have to work with those physiological responses that are actually saying run away from this, run away from this, when really this is exactly where you should stay. And then often people, if they don't have the tools and they don't know, they will then run away and find what's more comfortable, which is actually, technically, unsafe.

**Alex Howard**

Yes. I also think one of the challenges is that if it's all that we've known and it's what we've normalized to, what often we then take on is the idea that, well, it must be our fault, this must be what we deserve, or we've done something wrong, or this is because of what our place is in the world and maybe it's not normal for other people, but it is what's normal for us. And so it, in a way, becomes part of our identity.

**Irene Lyon**

It's our identity. And like you said, that's a perfect example, it's my fault. And children whom are brought up in, say, homes that there's divorce, right, even if it's an amicable split and I didn't have parents that split but I know many people who do, and I'm actually finding, not always, but there's more of this conscious, I think the buzzword is conscious, uncoupling, is that the one?

**Alex Howard**

I'm not sure how much I buy that but anyway, carry on.

**Irene Lyon**

Well, it's a term, but it is like, how can we separate because we know this isn't working and we're not meant to be together and we're actually going to do it in a very civil way? And I've actually seen couples do that. But inevitably the child, no matter how good that is, they still think it's their fault, they still think they've done something wrong. And that shows how much that little person, it goes back to the cubs, they need connection and the moment their system breaks, it's like, well, it must be me. And then that can be healed but it takes a lot of introspection work, somatic work, healing and realizing the bigger picture of human relationship, which is very tricky because of all these complexities.

**Alex Howard**

Yes. And so for someone who's watching or listening to this interview and they recognize themselves in what you're saying and maybe, particularly, I think the point that may have really struck some people is that their nervous system has normalized to this sort of dynamic and then, as you said, that they're exposed to something different and actually it's repulsive to them, but they also realize the suffering of the dynamic they're in. So if there's that moment of insight and awareness of what's happening, where does someone move with that? What's the possible next steps from that place?

**[00:12:55] Irene Lyon**

Well, I think there's a few things that we have to contextualize. So, for example, I'll use myself as an example, I was married prior to my current marriage for about eight years, and in that time I was just starting to learn about the mind body. That's when I was doing my Feldenkrais training. And I knew, Alex, at the beginning that something wasn't right, but I was having fun. Definitely there was love and definitely there was connection and clearly we were meant to be together for the time, for all the reasons, but there was that little nagging.

I just couldn't express, I couldn't feel, I couldn't do the things that I probably unconsciously knew because I wasn't conscious of it. And this is where it gets tricky. It's like you have this little itch, you know when you think there's like a fly on your back and it's just a sensation and you're like, what is that? So I know that I had that, but I didn't have the, we could say the, maturity to know what it really was and to even consider leaving. It's like, why would I leave this amazing, adventurous relationship? It's great.

But what started to occur were these little signs. I would feel kind of deflated when I would come home. It's when I was doing a lot of my training. I looked forward to leaving, but I didn't look forward to coming back. That's a sign. I would hear the door open and I would feel dread. Now, with my current husband, who some people know because he's also a colleague, Seth, while sometimes he drives me crazy, not replacing the toilet paper roll and not closing his drawers and I bang into them in the middle of the night, petty stuff, when I hear him come home, I get excited.

It's like, that's good, I want to move into that. So I want to start with that. Because some people might be like, how do I know? This person has a great job. So I'm saying this in the context of a situation where both people are, we could say, financially independent, because this is another problem, is when we have a relationship and there's a dependence financially, I hate to say it, but that's the truth. A mom might not be able to just take her kids and leave because she can't.

**Alex Howard**

Well, particularly if that imbalance has been weaponized. I think often what can happen when there's a financial imbalance like that is actually, legally, that individual probably has far more rights than they actually realize. And if they were to divorce that person, they would be taken care of. But in a way, that imbalance is being weaponized and used, in a way, as a form of abuse. And often we don't always see that for what it is.

**Irene Lyon**

Exactly. And I'm not a marriage and licensed family therapist or anything like that, this is my own personal experience, but there's a lot of factors to consider when we are to go back to your question, which I think was, how do we break from this? What do we do? And if I am bold in my statement...

**Alex Howard**

I would invite you to be bold. Yes.

## **[00:16:52] Irene Lyon**

You, as the person, you have to be so selfish. You have to be, I think, sovereign, and this is my life, and maybe these are my babies, because this is very biased towards the female, I understand but, hey, if it's the mother, they're hers. Sorry, guys, but that's true. That bond is very like, the mama bear is going to take the cubs, the papa's probably not even there, right? So we gotta factor that in.

So there is something important about the individual, no matter who you are, what sex, you have to be like, I matter more than this relationship. And from experience and from us, probably, if we were to look at the research, if we stay in that toxic environment, even if it's not abusive by definition, but it's just enough such that you can't be yourself, you can't express, you can't be crazy, you can't be silly, you can't eat the food that you want to eat, that will eventually make a person unwell.

There is this low level stress, this low level stress, it's like you're putting just a little bit of poison in the water every single day and over time the system becomes used to it, but it's actually becoming toxic inside and then the system will start to break down. Don't even worry about the relationship. What about your own physiology? We know when the system is under constant threat, fight flight and then freeze, if someone wants to fight and flight and leave, but they're staying, they're going to put themselves into this biological shutdown, the freeze response, the collapse response.

And we know that that creates disharmony in the organ system, in the circulation, in the immune system. And eventually you will become unwell, whether it's through the mental capacities, the physical capacities. Some of the clients I worked with, Alex, back when I was working privately, those that struggled the most from healing their chronic illnesses would not leave their abusive relationships. And I often wondered, is this doing anything? Because we do great work, they get some emotion out, they get their anger out, they tell me how much they... And then they just go right back into the toxic soup.

## **Alex Howard**

It's like one of the challenges seems to be that the longer we stay in a relationship like that, I guess the more normalized we get, but also the more depleted one becomes. And so I think often in those dynamics, one's like, well, I now can't survive on my own because I don't have my own source of income, I can't physically take care of myself. It's not that the situations necessarily are hopeless, they're not, there's always a path, but that's the challenge, that one gets more and more worn down by the dynamic.

## **Irene Lyon**

It reminds me of that example of you put a frog in a pot of water that's cold and you slowly warm it up and they don't realize that they're being cooked versus you throw them in boiling water and I don't know if that's actually true, but my sense is that's true. And so that's what's happening. And you're right about the longer you're in it, the harder it is to leave. And the energy piece is real. So if someone is in that autoimmune chronic illness, low energy, adrenal fatigue state, they're sympathetic.

So we need sympathetic energy, we need fight flight energy to set boundaries, let alone, it's not even about leaving, to say I don't like that. But the trouble is that and this is where someone will say, well, can I start healing myself when I'm in this relationship? And I would say you can start, but

if it is not safe for you to start healing and expressing your true sovereign nature, your spunk, your energy, that actually might make the situation trickier because let's just say it's a partner, a spouse, they're not going to like that.

**[00:21:23]**

They're going to be like, ooh, Irene's starting to put up some boundaries. She's starting to play music, that's not like her, I don't like that. And so this ability to also recognize how you have to be careful and strategic and how you might start to heal in relationships so that you don't create more drama and more harm, that's tricky because you're essentially living two lives. You're having to keep the relationship somewhat civil, but then you're also trying to work on yourself.

And it's like a multiple personality, but it's multiple relationships going on. I have seen it happen. I've heard of stories where folks have worked so hard to figure this out, and then they're finally to the point where, okay, now I can go. Here's a true story. I don't know if I should share this, but I will. When I run my online programs, we like to send posts, like cards, to our new members, in the mail.

**Alex Howard**

Real physical things?

**Irene Lyon**

Like paper.

**Alex Howard**

Wow.

**Irene Lyon**

Really simple, like a postcard. Thank you. Yeah, we put postage on it. It does the thing. And we've been doing this for years. And this last round we got some unhappy people. And it never occurred to me, but they were living with people who they didn't want them to know that they were doing this work. And that was a learning curve for me. I was like, God damn it, you're right. So apologies to those who might have got those postcards from us.

So now we put them in an envelope, but it shows you if you are living in a home where you can't tell someone that you're learning about your nervous system and you're working towards self improvement, that's not good, because in the end, you're not actually going to be doing the deep, deep, deep work. There's always going to be a bit of a hue around you that will not fully get to that point of regulation because there's still this little bit of threat there. There's this little bit of threat there.

So it is an interesting balance between starting to do the work, knowing that there's probably going to be some sticky situations and tricky situations, and then how can you continue to grow your resources, your capacity, and then make an exit plan? And this is where social support is so important also.

**[00:24:13] Alex Howard**

I want to come back to that in a second, I also just want just to emphasize something that you said as well, which is that when that person starts to pull away, person that is being toxic in the relationship, let's say, in a way, it's not just that this person's putting boundaries up, but it's also, I'm losing control of this person, right? So if that person's, their way of finding safety is by having control of the other person, then the tendency is they're going to fight even harder to try and get that control, right? And so there could be that escalating of that behavior the more that person works to pull away and so it's how to also navigate that.

**Irene Lyon**

And this reminds me of our upbringing as children and how many parents never want their children to leave the house. They always want them there or they dote on them or they overly shower them with gifts. That's one example. Some people might be like that never happened to me, I was neglected, but it also goes the other way and I always go back to the animals, when the animals are grown up, they leave. There's a healthy dynamic and relationship of we're going to take care of you, we're going to teach you how to do all these things and then you go off and you fly away on your own.

And again with humans we're so much more complex and so a lot of these relationship dynamics also start in how we were either cared for in a way that was smothering, devouring, the devouring mother that Peter has talked about and other people have talked about in the psychic space or the psychological space. And when that occurs, one influence might be that that person is like I don't want any connection because I've just had this person smothering me for so long, or that's all I know so I'm going to be overly connected to this person to the point of dependency that is not healthy.

So our patterns go back so far and I sometimes wonder how much toxic relationships are happening because we weren't taught how to be differentiated from the family system. And so if a person has not ever experienced differentiation from their family system and again this goes back to being your own independent sovereign person, you were never that person, if everything was dependent on certain things, if you don't do this the family is going to suffer. If you don't do this we're going to be seen as the bad family on the street or whatever it might be.

If we haven't differentiated it with that then that's another way that we can fall into a toxic relationship that doesn't allow two people to be their own person but also be in connection that is healthy. There's so many examples I can give but it is a very interesting thing to consider that being in relationship means being in relationship but also being in relationship with yourself first. And a good partner will honor those personal needs as well as the need for their independence, but then you come together and you can go apart and then of course children make a whole other different piece there but I hope that makes sense. Kind of went on a bit of a tangent there.

**Alex Howard**

It does. And I want to continue on a point that you started around as one starts to find the ways to leave, that they need to have the support to help them do that. And of course, that's one of the challenges here, that if we've normalized these toxic dynamics, it can be hard to even know what that support looks like and to believe that we deserve it, or to even just practically know where to go to find it. So I'm curious as to some of the stepping stones that can help that transition.



### **[00:28:36] Irene Lyon**

So, because it's impossible for me to know what kind of, we could say, social support from counselors, pastors, groups, everyone's going to be different in what they have access to, I'm going to leave that because that's another topic. But I'm going to talk about the support that you can give yourself personally and in relationship to the environment. So one of the primary things that I teach all my students when I work with them, well, there's a few things, but one is to learn how to connect to the outside world.

And by the outside world, I don't mean the chaos that's out there. I mean nature, the Earth, the trees, the gardens, the sky, the sun, especially the oceans, even imagining that goodness is so important. And this ability to stay, we always are saying you got to ground, you got to stay grounded, but make it really specific and this is where the concept of learning how to orient, which was something that Peter Levine sort of popularized in his ethos, is trauma takes us out of the here and now. So one thing is we have to get back into our body.

And the other thing is we have to get back into the environment. And that environment is key because if we aren't really able to connect to that environment, we won't see the bad stuff that comes to us also. So it goes both ways. So that practice and how that happens, there's so many ways that a person can do that. Of course I teach that. But just going for a walk and seeing the stuff, the nature, touching the trees, it's not a hippie thing anymore to go hug a tree. We know scientifically that good stuff comes into us when we touch nature. That's why it feels so good. So that's one thing. How can you resource yourself with the environment? Because it's always there, no matter when.

The other thing is reconnecting to the body. And this is where it's a little trickier, because if we've been disconnected from our body because of our traumas and our dysregulations, it can be a little scary to actually drop into the body and connect with it. And this is where each person will be different. But some of the more basic ways that I teach people to get into their body is to start to follow their biological impulses.

The simplest things like do you know when you have to go to the bathroom? Are you holding in your urine? Are you holding in gas? Are you actually taking time to eat your food? Are you even noticing that you're hungry? Are you eating and you're not hungry? Are you thirsty? Are you tired? The reason why these things are so important, even though they seem so remedial, what do you do when you have a newborn baby? You've had babies, Alex? Well, not literally, but...

### **Alex Howard**

I've been heavily involved in the raising of babies.

### **Irene Lyon**

You've been very much involved. What do they need? They need to be fed, they need to be picked up when they cry. They need to be soothed gently. If they're hot, you need to help them cool down. If they're cold, you have to warm them up. They have some gas, you gently rub their belly to help move that digestion and get the vagus nerve in a better place. You talk to them, you make faces, you co-regulate. If you don't do that with a human, the human dies. We know that.

**[00:32:31]**

So as an adult, to get this back, because let's be very clear, if we don't have that good nurturing and that good co-regulation, that is what lends us to these toxic relationships, because we're not connected to that spidey sense. So as an adult, this simplicity of listening to these hunger cues, temperature regulation, fatigue, even fear, so you're feeling a bit scared, great, don't breathe it away. How can you learn and grow capacity to stay connected to it and maybe just notice the environment a little bit?

This is where you bring in that orienting. Because if a baby is scared, you're not going to say to the baby, take ten deep breaths and calm down, please. So it doesn't work for us when we're dealing with these early, early unconscious patterns that got started so young. So how can you resource to yourself to reteach yourself these early impulses that maybe never got taught?

Because what occurs, Alex, is when you start to do that as an adult, you start to become more aligned with your nervous system, you start to become more aligned with your biology, you start to become more aligned with what your needs are. And if you just work on that for months, like half a year, when you meet that person that is toxic, I can almost guarantee you, you will then feel your gut go, ugh. You know, like that disgust, which is a primal emotion, it's a primal sensation.

Or the fear, the hairs on your neck stand up versus the butterflies that are good, that are like, ooh, I like this person, I want to go towards them, I don't want to recoil in disgust. And what happens, and this happened to me when I was in my first long term, well, second long term relationship, first marriage, I knew something wasn't right, Alex, when I picked up this gentleman from the airport after not seeing him for two months. And I physically vomited in my mouth.

### **Alex Howard**

That's a fairly immediate and clear response.

### **Irene Lyon**

That was the cue. I was like, this isn't good. And this was before I did any trauma training. I was smart enough to know not good, this isn't going to get fixed. So to go back as a review, how one can start to support themselves in addition to other support social systems for you, connecting to the environment, really learning how to connect to the natural living world because it is always there and it doesn't have any judgment.

It's just there for us. It offers us food and oxygen and all the things, sunlight and all the things that we need to be alive. And then how can you listen to your own physiology? And the reason why, again, learning to follow our impulses is so important is these digestive processes, the heart rate, the survival stress physiology, that is governed by the autonomic nervous system. And so what's happening is you're sort of reverse engineering, working with the nervous system through the physiology, as opposed to trying to think about getting calm and think about retraining the brain.

You are retraining how you relate to your physiology and then by default or by direct means, it shifts your autonomic system. And that's what we're finding in our students, is that's the starting point to grow regulation and capacity. And it's exactly what you do with the baby.

**[00:36:37] Alex Howard**

It strikes me as well that sometimes the narrative becomes: I need to leave this relationship to be able to get re-resourced, but I can't leave until I have the resources.

**Irene Lyon**

Exactly.

**Alex Howard**

And what I'm hearing you say is that it's kind of both but there are things that one can do to grow their capacity even whilst they're still working on leaving that dynamic.

**Irene Lyon**

Yeah. And those two things that I just mentioned, you can do that and nobody knows you're doing them.

**Alex Howard**

Unless someone sends a card in the post.

**Irene Lyon**

Exactly. But you can be sitting, working or doing things and you can start to feel your insides and listen to them. And this partner that maybe you don't want to be around, they don't need to know that that's why you're now going to the bathroom. So there's this way of doing it in a stealth like fashion, but what you said about sometimes you just do need to leave and that, again, is tricky. There might come a point where it's like this is so abusive, like really abusive, that I don't have time to work on this because I could be really harmed. And so that's a whole other situation. I often say, people will ask, is there anybody who shouldn't start doing this work? And what we will often say is, if you're really living in a war torn zone, like real war, bombs, it's not safe to go out your door...

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, you live in a part of Ukraine which is currently being attacked by Russia, for example.

**Irene Lyon**

Yeah. Or parts of Yemen, Syria, parts of China, North Korea.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. Plenty of examples.

**Irene Lyon**

Yeah. Plenty of places where it is literally not safe to even express your interest in culture. I'm really thinking about North Korea now, you know, it's not safe. And we've had folks, Alex, I've had DMs, and it just breaks my heart, this one young woman, I think she was from India, was completely

living in an abusive family system, and she started doing some of this work just online, free resources, and she started setting up boundaries, and then she was persecuted by her family and abused.

**[00:39:16]**

If a woman in a more Muslim country starts to express herself in a way that she wants to, we don't even want to think about what might occur to her. With a deep sigh, I say that. So I think there is a time and a place, and you have to be cautious because you don't want to put yourself into more harm by starting to assert your boundaries and take off your hijab and start doing the things that you want to do. So you have to be very calculated, because the key is you don't want to become more unsafe. So I share some of those stories because we've heard them.

And so I used to say, everyone does this work and I've aged and become wiser. And it's like, well, it depends. Is it safe for you to do this work?

**Alex Howard**

Well, I guess what you're really speaking to that I think is actually really important is the place where there is genuine threat as opposed to a pattern of looking for danger when there isn't danger there.

**Irene Lyon**

Yes, you said it. Yeah. So that comes back to is this pattern old, from old ways of being brought up? And the other thing, too, even when we're living in a situation where it's safe, foods in the fridge, it's not easier to break through these things, it's actually sometimes harder because the psychology that a person makes up in their mind is, it's not that bad. I'm not in a war torn country. I'm not living somewhere where I can't walk outside in shorts and a tank top as a female. I have nothing to complain about.

**Alex Howard**

I can't be in an abusive relationship because it's not physically violent or sexually violent.

**Irene Lyon**

Yes. And this is the interesting part, and there's crossover, and you might have seen this in your practice, too, Alex, is those who have come from, whoa, that was abuse. You have an ACE score out of ten, dad was incarcerated, mom was unwell, you were looking after your ten siblings and a person knows, yeah, that was screwed up. The ones that are often trickier, I find, are my life, my husband's life, fairly high income parents.

You went on ski trips. You had all the food. You still had chores, at least I grew up with that stuff, but there was just this silence or there was just that little hit every day of, you're not good enough, you're not good enough. You got to do better. Look at your sister. Your sister is so much smarter than you. And it's done with this care, but also this malice and this talk contempt. That's actually, from my experience, tougher for people to unravel because often they don't remember.

**[00:42:24] Alex Howard**

I totally, totally agree. In my work, I call it the difference between overt and covert. And some of those covert traumas are far more damaging because you don't see them. And when you do see them, you think you're not justified to talk about them or to work with them.

**Irene Lyon**

Yeah, we're here now to say they're just as justifiable, they're just as important and they do matter. And this is where I don't like to say big T, little T like this was a big trauma because you were abused physically, and this is a little trauma because you were screamed at when you didn't get an A on your school project. The nervous system doesn't know any different. There's still a procedural memory that is created, that is, I want to fight this, I want to flee this, I don't feel good when you say this or do this to me.

And so then these insults to the system just become undifferentiated. And then that undifferentiation makes it such that we really are often lost. And this comes back to why people just don't understand why they're so lost, I had a good childhood, you hear that a lot of times, but it was really good. I was like, yes, I know, and we need to respect that. And you're a human being that has a biology that never got to cry. That's not good. And we know that's not good.

**Alex Howard**

I guess also, though, what strikes me, Irene, in what you're saying is that the same can show up in a relationship now, right? So we may have had a childhood where our parents basically loved us, but they weren't skillful at meeting the needs that we had. And we can be in a relationship with a basically good person, but actually it is still a toxic, damaging relationship because our needs are not being met and we're constantly being sort of depleted and drained by that. It sounds like the way you described your first marriage that it sounds like he wasn't a bad man. It just sounds like it wasn't...

**Irene Lyon**

No. My parents still see him. He's a wonderful, really wonderful, human, but it wasn't for me at the time. And our paths were just different. And this is, I think, where sometimes this is for all the people who are just in that situation you just mentioned, Alex, like, it's not bad, but if you're saying ah it's okay, it's like, well, then, maybe consider that what would it be like to actually not even say that?

If one is trying to evaluate the relationship about how good it is, then chances are there's something unconscious that's not very good. I'm thinking about instances where I've reconnected with old friends and I can tell there's something not right. And the first thing they say is, I'm really happy. I'm so happy. Alex, when we get on the call before we start pushing play, we say, how's it going? I would never just be like, oh I'm so happy.

**Alex Howard**

No, we complain about builders and various dramas.

**[00:45:35] Irene Lyon**

Yeah. Like, well this is happening. But you see where I'm going there, it's like a facade. And so if you're finding yourself justifying the normality and its okayness, be careful with that. That's what I'm saying, I guess, is to be careful with that because when we 'settle', that's sort of the word there, even this is true for jobs, by the way, we've been talking about relationships, but it's the same for career, those sorts of things. If you've got a boss that's not good, that could be just as bad because you're usually with that boss more than you are your spouse.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah.

**Irene Lyon**

Just be careful with it because what will happen is that lack of alignment, I believe, the universe will be like you're not living where you're supposed to, so we're going to keep giving you problems. It goes back to that neuroception, I didn't say that term, but that spidey sense, that Stephen Porges term, the neuroception, which is the perception of safety and danger, if we are not fully in alignment and truly embodied and regulated, the universe, whatever you want to call it, will find ways to keep waking you up and it'll keep offering you an accident or a problem.

And it could be that this is an okay relationship, I'll settle, it's that lack of alignment that's throwing all these other things off. You were going to say something?

**Alex Howard**

I find the universe is so generous in that way.

**Irene Lyon**

It's so darn generous. Well, I think, here's the thing. I believe it wants us all to win. It wants expansion and it wants goodness. But it's the choices, it's that free will, because we can choose, we don't have to choose the tougher path that actually might bring us more regulation because that's pretty hard. I don't know if I, you know, I'm already 70 and we see, I see, this in much older couples and I get it. You probably don't want to break up at that age. But I saw that, I saw that ironically, not ironically, I don't know what the right word would be, but the partner that I was talking about, his mom was desperately unhappy.

And she wasn't going to break up at age 70. And I get it, at that age you don't really want to split assets and find somewhere else to live and restart again. So I get that. So I guess this goes to the younger generations here who are still able to shift and create a new life, be very careful because it's a long life to 90 to be in that situation where you're just kind of okay, but not fully okay.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. I always think when it comes to choosing a life partner, it's a bit like employees you should hire slowly and fire quickly, that you need to really take time to get you, just, yeah, it's kind of a big deal to get it right.

**[00:48:54] Irene Lyon**

It's a big deal. Some of the best advice that I was ever given by a girlfriend who's still happily married to her husband of many, many years, she's like, but do you like him? It's not about love because I still love my ex. Do you like him? Do you like them? And that was the best advice I've ever gotten. Because at the end of the day, it's about being able to connect and be literally in a partnership in all the things, not just romantically, but in how you clean the house, how you grocery shop, how you pay your bills, how you deal with contractors, how you do all these things. And if you don't like that person, it's not fun.

**Alex Howard**

Whenever I come back from family holidays, people say, how was it? And I always joke and say, you know, I know I've got the right wife, because I always feel happy when I spend more time with her.

**Irene Lyon**

Yes.

**Alex Howard**

I hope she feels the same. I'm mindful of time, but I'd love you to say a bit about maybe just bringing this to a few practical pieces, and then we can come to some of your offerings that potentially can help people as well.

**Irene Lyon**

Well, practical, if I just tune into my own system now and if I think about this idea of reflection on my past relationships, try not to beat yourself up, if you know that you're in one now that isn't good because this is new territory for humans and back in the day, it was not good to get a divorce, the church would dictate, you shouldn't do that, so there's some pretty, I think, deep conditioning around I've failed because I've put myself into this bad relationship. I'm a failure.

But this, again, goes back to how often were you told that you weren't good enough in school or at home? The way we've taught children to value themselves based on grades, it really sucks. It makes it such that we have a really skewed view of what it means to learn and be in our bodies and learn as humans. And so that makes it such that we like, oh, I failed, nothing else I can do. I deserve this shitty relationship. Just the way my parents said, you're no good. You're nothing. You deserve nothing.

So be very mindful, everyone, of how these old patterns might be affecting your inability to honor, even though you've made a mistake, even though you know you're in this relationship that is probably not good or this work relationship or you've made a terrible career choice, I'll make it more broad, okay, now learn as opposed to heal, even though I'm in that healing space, I like to say to my students, focus on how you can learn again, maybe for the first time in a way that doesn't have judgment and shame.

So that's one thing is learning and acknowledging, gosh, I'm here, this isn't good because that's the other thing, we have to have awareness and acceptance of what we've done and okay, yeah, it

was wrong. Poor choice. That's the other thing. Really owning up in an adult way to that maybe misstep, that overlooking, like, I knew I had that niggle, but I ignored it. Those little niggles, this comes back to being able to listen to your biology, those following of the impulses I mentioned, when you have that with a person, it's true, like the system is trying to talk to you.

**[00:53:33]**

And what I see sometimes, Alex, is this desperate desire to not be alone. And that's also there because we probably weren't brought up in a way that taught us how to be sovereign and self-regulated. If we're not self-regulated, then yes, it might be either terrifying to be alone or terrifying to be with someone. It goes both ways. So that's the other thing is to come back to that biology, to really honor the biology.

I just can't say how many stories I've heard where people have either gotten out of toxic relationships or they've found literally the partner of their life because they've started to follow these impulses. So rather than trying to search and search and search for that next best person, search for yourself. Search for your self. Because we're meant to be with people. And then that universe, like we said, will spit in front of you when you least expect it, the person that you are meant or the job or the group or the place that you're supposed to live, it will just manifest, cheesy, I know, to say manifest, but it will manifest out.

And the biology wants that regulation. It doesn't want to be in threat, doesn't want to be in this toxicity because it's straining on the system. So those would be my two things to wrap up. And then don't underestimate the power of simple everyday pieces like orienting to nature, reconnecting with the natural world, and then reconnecting to the self.

### **Alex Howard**

Beautiful Irene. For people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best place to go and what's some of what they can find?

### **Irene Lyon**

Yeah, just my site. So my name, Irene Lyon with a Y, no S, .com. [irenelyon.com](http://irenelyon.com). And there you will find a lot. So don't be overwhelmed. The main thing I would say, if someone's never heard of me or any of my stuff, there's three places to start. One, there's a lovely [NEW HERE?](#) page that we've just created this year that is a nice overlay of some of what I've spoken to today, but a bit more of a deeper dive into what the autonomic nervous system is, all these issues that humans have.

And there's a wonderful field guide that has curated some of my favorite articles, videos over the last few years. We've done that because if you go to my YouTube page, which is great and binge worthy, there's over 450 videos, so it can be overwhelming when a person doesn't know. But I will also say, if you want to go and check out the YouTube page, go there and follow your impulse. Just scroll through some of the videos, and if you see a title, just click on it. And that is, in some ways, the best way to just navigate.

And then the two courses I have, I have one that's a self study course. It's a [21 day nervous system tune-up](#). That one's great. And then [SmartBody SmartMind](#), which is our twelve week curriculum. In the fall of 2023, we'll be running it for the 14th time. So it's a powerful program and it teaches



one everything that we talked about and more. It's all of my methodologies and what I've learned from all the great mentors I've had into one. That's me.

**[00:57:13] Alex Howard**

Amazing. Irene, thank you so much. I always love our conversations and thank you for your time today.

**Irene Lyon**

Thank you so much, Alex. I'll talk to you later.