



Beyond Shaming and Blaming: How to End Conflict

Guest: Jayson Gaddis

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your co-host of this conference. Today I'm speaking with Jayson Gaddis, author, relationship expert, and coach who teaches people the one class they didn't get in school - how to do relationships. Jayson leads one of the most in-depth and comprehensive relationship educational programs and trains relationship coaches all over the world.

He's the host of the Relationship School Podcast with over 4 million downloads, and he's the visionary behind the Relationship School. His book *Getting to Zero* is out now. Jayson Gaddis, thank you so much for being with us today.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, great to be here.

Meagen Gibson

I want to start by asking you what inspired you to start working with couples in the first place? Was it your background or your history? Why is this the kind of work you wanted to do?

Jayson Gaddis

I didn't actually have a plan. I just started trying to help people after I became a psychotherapist. I was like, I work with everything and everybody because I wanted experience. I was working at mental health centers and a wilderness therapy program, inpatient, and I was working with a variety of people, and it seemed to me I was drawing conclusions that everybody's issues, whether it was a mental health issue or something else, was a relationship issue. So I started to focus on relationships and I started to focus on couples because it organically went that way.

Prior to this, I was doing a lot of men's work and some men, they're just reluctant, resistant. When they come into couples work, there's an opportunity to break into the male who's maybe not seeing the value and win him over, so to speak, and have him see that this is actually a really important thing and important work he could do. So I started primarily focusing on couples many years ago because of that, trying to help the men.

[00:02:20] Meagen Gibson

I love that context and obviously we don't want to over-generalize. There's plenty of men that do go to therapy, but speaking generally, I have found that and my therapist and I have a joke that she sees men who are there for career counseling, not therapy. She has to contextualize it correctly for them in order to get their engagement and participation. If it doesn't impact their income or their relationship status, sometimes men can seem disinterested in doing that work. What do you think the main part of resistance is for that?

Jayson Gaddis

There's so much shame in the male psychology and persona. Men are subordinating still to the construct around masculinity and what it means to be a man that they adhered to since childhood really unconsciously, and they just haven't evaluated that. They're up against a lot to break through some of those invisible barriers there in themselves, but when they do, it's pretty liberating, I think, for a lot of guys.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I want to shift a little bit in talking about relationships, in asking about, in your experience, how common is it for couples to come to you with toxic relationship patterns and that they're unclear about how to disrupt them, that they just kind of see the same thing happening over and over again. Is that common for you?

Jayson Gaddis

Well, what do we define as toxic?

Meagen Gibson

Exactly, my definition or yours, but it can go several different ways. For me, toxic is when there's either an imbalance where one partner is doing a bunch of the emotional heavy lifting and doing the emotional work, and the other one's checked out and doesn't find value in it. It can be if somebody's having mental health struggles of their own or they're ill or they're just under a tremendous amount of stress, and so we're acting out in ways that don't increase relationship trust and safety. These are the kinds of dynamics I'm talking about.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Cool. That first example you shared, I'd say is pretty normal. I wouldn't maybe call that toxic, but I can see how it can become that way over time if I'm doing the work and you're not kind of thing. I would add toxic, to me, is like there's a cortisol drip going on all day long in the relationship. I like the word you use, acting out. There's acting out by one or both people in the form of blame, not taking responsibility, not repairing conflicts consistently.

All that creates an environment that's just really stressful and bad for both people over time, but if you grew up in a family that was like that, you think this is normal. And so you stay in these kind of relationships, which is mind-boggling to people who grew up in environments where there was healthy relationships. Why can't you just leave? It's not like that. It's not that easy. So your original question was why, about toxic relationships?

[00:05:38] Meagen Gibson

Well, I was trying to normalize for people that sometimes we get into these cycles of relating that aren't healthy, that don't increase safety, don't increase connection, don't increase trust, and that it's common for us to get into these patterns. But I was really questioning that. Is it common for you to see people with these kinds of patterns of disconnection?

Jayson Gaddis

Yes, because I think I'm in the relationship space, I get people who come here for help. People who maybe are having a good experience don't come for help. A lot of people are in really challenging relationships. I don't know if COVID made it worse or if phones and the stress of tech and our overwhelming constant access twenty-four seven to everybody.

And the comparison, I wonder if our relationship lives are worse than ever in some ways, which is sad, but we definitely get a lot of folks here coming to the Relationship School, really wanting to change something, which is great, because we get someone saying I'm in a toxic relationship or a bad relationship and I want it to be different. How do I do that? Which is my favorite kind of person.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Speaking of that cortisol drip that you were talking about earlier, I don't think I became as well aware of that dynamic until I had a child. My child and I dispositionally are very opposite and so it took a lot of work for me personally because I'm not going to change him. He's a child, he's still developing. I can steer, but I'm not going to change him. I had to think about myself and our dynamic and I would get so wrapped up in matching, if he was going to be combative, I was going to be "combative-r".

We have these relationships where we're matching energy, or that's what it felt like. It started of course during COVID lockdowns with homeschooling, that I just realized that we were in this pattern of matching. I suddenly had to be like, I'm the adult here, I'm the only one that has the actual wherewithal and executive functioning to change this dynamic. What do I have to do within myself to step back, reset, get regulated, lower my own cortisol and then try to conduct myself like a parent?

Jayson Gaddis

I appreciate that honesty. Exactly. I get into these things with my son who's a teenager now. I don't know if combative is the word, but it's close to that where he just makes a comment and then I make a comment. Pretty soon and I'm like, wait, hold on a second. I'm the grown up here. What's going on?

Meagen Gibson

How did we get here? Matching energies and we're speaking unconsciously, it happens to a lot of us. I think that's really what I want to talk about. You mentioned repair earlier, so for people that aren't familiar with the concept of repair, which I learned from Tina Payne Bryson. And just relationship repair, every relationship is going to have conflict, whether it's friends, parents, children, romantic. When we conflict, because even somebody who's a relationship expert like

yourself and me who plays one on TV, when we have conflict, how do we then navigate it once we realize what's going on. How do we repair?

[00:09:11] Jayson Gaddis

That's the most important question, honestly. I want to house this inside of conversation around insecure relationships versus secure ones, if we want to use an attachment science lens like Tina would. Insecure relationships don't recover after conflict, almost never. Secure relationships recover, you could say all the time after conflict and after challenges. In life out there and between us, in here, in our home and in our relationship, the resiliency of both people to be able to recover and reconnect requires what I think is now a popular term called repair, which I just define as making it good again, getting back to a good place.

That's what my whole book was about: how do we get back to zero or back to a good place? It's really just about being grown ups, being adults who listen until the other person feels understood or we take responsibility for our part in the dynamic. We understand the impact on the other person so we can empathize. There are a lot of tools we can use and employ to do our part to get back to a good place.

It's obviously in a toxic relationship, usually one or more people are resistant or don't want to play by these rules or agreements for whatever reason. It's really a problem because if you can't get back to a good place, you're going to be in inherently insecure relationships your whole life.

Meagen Gibson

You said something earlier about shame when we were talking about masculinity, but I've also found that just that resistance, regardless of who you're talking about, is steeped in shame, regardless of sex or gender. So much of it is defensiveness. Maybe if you could talk about where that comes from beyond shame, of just like the protective nature of defending yourself. You can perceive in conflict that you are being attacked.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, when I'm attacked, the human instinct is to defend and self-protect. I think it's so 101 in human behavior, but we forget that, it goes out the window in a partnership and we do the thing, we blame and we attack and we criticize. What do we expect? We're going to expect a defensive response, but underneath that, if the person could soften, let's say, and that requires a tremendous amount of maturity to soften and go vulnerable. Below the defensiveness five minutes later, five hours later, or even during, to admit and acknowledge, like, wow, I feel really ashamed and bad about how I've behaved here, and I don't want you to see me in that.

I want to hide and run away. If I push you away and make you wrong, then I don't have to go there into those vulnerable places and feel like terror because when I was a kid and I got vulnerable, I got humiliated or bullied or hit or whatever. There's a lot of layers here, but it is to be expected that people are going to defend when we blame.

Meagen Gibson

I love that context that you just gave us around what all of the processes that are happening in the background. I think sometimes, especially for extra sensitive or empathetic people or people who

tend toward more codependency, that we understand all of that to such a degree that we overcompensate or we put up, we're more resilient than we necessarily should be in allowing someone else to take accountability for their actions.

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We contextualize, oh, well, they had a tough childhood, or oh, this and that about them, or they've got a lot of pressure, or I know that they feel shame, so I'm not going to hold them accountable for what they do. That in and of itself creates a level of toxicity in the relationship as well.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, completely. Enabling. I'm enabling the person to keep getting away with bad behavior, behavior that's hurtful, behavior that's damaging the relationship, behavior that just impacts us both. My wife and I talk about this all the time because she primarily works with couples now, I'm primarily teaching courses. But just how difficult it is to break the cycle of blame and help people understand that we're a team.

It just boggles our minds sometimes that people sign up, hey, let's get married, let's be a team, and then let's not act like a team for two decades. What? Who agrees to this? I do think if people can grok and get the view that this is not how it should be, that people should be held accountable in a relationship. There's agreements that we can live by that protect us from hurting each other, hurting ourselves, hurting the relationship. Gosh, it would go so much better, but a lot of us are kind of dense here.

Meagen Gibson

Well, we sign up, we sign these imaginary contracts, or sometimes actual legal-binding documents, in partnership or in relationship and families. And then I think sometimes we're like, well, that's done. It's like a transaction and we forget we're on the same team.

Jayson Gaddis

We took vows. Hey, we took vows, and we had this \$25,000 wedding. Can't you just love me? Isn't love enough? People use that excuse all the time, like, well, we really love each other. I'm like, dude, love is never enough to make this work. You have to do so much more than just love or be loved.

Meagen Gibson

I don't know about you, but I've changed a lot since I got married. I've grown, I've adapted. I've moved across the country twice. I'm not the same person I was when I made that agreement. I need to make sure that I'm keeping my partner up-to-date with the ways in which I'm developing, and also vice versa make sure that I'm really in tune with how he's growing and changing too.

Jayson Gaddis

Absolutely. There's so many life stages we all go through, from moving to having a child, to empty-nesting, menopause, work, getting fired, losing a job, getting a disease, getting an autoimmune disorder, getting cancer. It's relentless in terms of what can happen to us and what we

go through. It really does take the growth-oriented people to see that and to acknowledge that's actually going on and I change as a result and therefore that might impact you.

[00:16:12]

How are we going to deal with these changes? I just think a lot of people stop growing after college or sometime after high school. They just stop developing themselves. And then there's of course, arrested development prior to that at very young ages, depending on what the issue is. To be successful in a relationship requires a tremendous amount of developmental work on oneself.

Meagen Gibson

It's not necessarily societally or culturally rewarded. If we go to school and we earn a bunch of degrees and we are really successful at work, we are rewarded in our success or finances or whatnot. But if we continue to develop psychologically and relationally in our love and in our lives and in our relationships with other people, it's not like there's big ribbons for that anywhere other than just life satisfaction, is there?

Jayson Gaddis

No, I think you're right. The big ribbon, though, is the sense of fulfillment and self-respect I have being a compassionate, caring human with another person and then the terrible feelings we have when we act out of integrity. There's a nice feedback loop there I think. Negative feedback loop means I'm probably being an asshole. Positive feedback loop means I'm probably being a good person.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. I know in your book, if I remember right, you had something about a relational blueprint. Can you remind me what that was and tell us about it?

Jayson Gaddis

The download there is that we all come into this world, there's nature and nurture, of course, so there's temperament and things that we can't quite control and then there's how we're raised. That starts in utero with how the mother is doing and how the co-parent is treating the mother. And then we come out into the world and it's all about attachment and how well that bond goes between caregiver and child.

Those first two years are critical, that if they go well we have a relational blueprint that's going to basically say later in life we're more likely to have successful relationships, particularly close relationships like a partnership. Because that's when the attachment system turns on, it doesn't turn on in the same way in friendships.

When that doesn't go well and there's insecure attachment along with some kind of trauma or an overly engulfing mother or an overly punishing mother, distant father, whatever, then that's where we start setting up these personality disorders and also attachment challenges that people have that go really deep into our psychology and our nervous system. We can't figure out why later in life we struggle so much. Those first two, three years are pretty pivotal to get a blueprint that is going to set us up for success.

[00:19:19] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. What do you recommend when people are coming to you and they've got these patterns? What's step one? What are you telling them in their first five visits? Here's how we're going to relate to one another from this point forward. Here's how you're going to do the work inside yourself and then with one another.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, I try to keep it really simple. Hey, let's do one thing. You're going to get really good at repairing these conflicts that are unresolved. It's harder with a couple that's gone 30 years without ever repairing a conflict. That's amazing. I've worked with couples that 30 years, they could never successfully resolve anything, so they just compound and then there's just a tremendous amount of resentment. That's almost too hard to work through.

Those people, they'll come in, but they want to just get you to join with their position about how they're right and the other person is wrong. It's like, no, you've played that game for 30 years, look where it got you. It's like repair. It's like every new married couple, look, you need to get good at one thing and that's repairing after conflict, and then your life is going to be so much better.

The attitude of what I call standing for three will help you make a commitment to repairing after every single rupture or conflict. Standing for three just means, I'm taking a stand for me and myself and my success and my values. I'm taking a stand for you, your success, your values, and I'm taking a stand for us, and then you do the same for me.

If we have that orientation, there's two boats right out in the ocean and they're like a catamaran, and the bridge across the two boats that bridges the two together is the relationship. We can be two individuals. We don't have to compromise or sacrifice who we are, because that's one of people's greatest fears in a relationship, is I can't be me here or I'm only going to get what I want if I conform to who you are and who you want me to be.

It's got to be two individuals, really standing in themselves for themselves, but getting that there's an impact over there. Also standing for you to be yourself and who you want to become in your life, and then standing for us is the relationship that we don't tolerate - Why would I be in a relationship if something is good for me, but it's not good for you? You have to become such a more mature person to be in adult relationships.

It's not all about you. I always tell people, never get married unless you're willing to learn how to collaborate and give up some things in your life that's all about you and yourself. This is about sharing a life, sharing space with someone. Standing for three and repair are probably the two. I try to keep it so simple. And then it's like, how do we repair? Well, someone has to take responsibility, and someone has to listen and listen with a commitment to understand the other person until they feel understood, those kinds of things.

Meagen Gibson

I'm so glad that you were explicit about it because that was literally going to be my next question, because sometimes people hear repair and they think it's just saying, I'm sorry. I'm sorry without

accountability, and then follow up action in the future is not actually any sort of an apology or repair. Repair differentiates from an apology, doesn't it?

[00:22:51] Jayson Gaddis

It does. Thanks. You're right. Too many people, it's the get out of jail free card. Hey, what, I said I'm sorry, you should not be emotional anymore. You shouldn't be upset with me anymore. I say most, I don't know if it's most, but many people's nervous systems don't let down with a simple apology, especially if the apology is coming from, I want to get out of this uncomfortable mess immediately, so I'm going to apologize because I'm so uncomfortable.

That's not going to work to settle the other person's nervous system. We need ownership, empathy, and validation are three of the biggest things that we can do that will help the other person. And then if we want to add the cherry on top, we can say, I'm so sorry that I hurt you like that. Then an apology can be effective.

Meagen Gibson

I love that context. Ownership, empathy, and validation, all those things. I was imagining a situation, one partner comes home later than they said they were going to, the other partner is upset. They're just like, I'm sorry, because they can't stand the feeling that they've made their partner upset. It's a classic case. I'm apologizing not because I'm actually sorry or I understood how I impacted you, but because I don't like being uncomfortable with your discomfort.

Jayson Gaddis

Exactly. Which in psychology terms is differentiation. They're not differentiated so that the person can't have a separate experience. I can be okay knowing that you're really upset with me. I can be okay. It's uncomfortable, and I don't like what I'm feeling, given seeing you in pain, but it's not going to take me out, and I'm not going to react and respond from this place.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. What did you call it earlier? The rule of three.

Jayson Gaddis

Standing for three.

Meagen Gibson

Standing for three. Thank you. I can see how those two things go together. It's you, it's me, it's us. I'm going to take ownership, empathy, validation into it. I think the possibilities are endless when you're operating from those two points of view.

Jayson Gaddis

Totally. But the big challenge and probably why you're doing this conference is we're with someone who won't do any of that. And then what?

[00:25:10] Meagen Gibson

Exactly, I was going to say. And then what, Jayson?

Jayson Gaddis

My partner doesn't do this. It would be great if they would. What typically happens is people spend an enormous amount of time trying to get the other person to do these things instead of just accepting who they're with and moving on. The thought of moving on, because of financial dependence or all the complications associated with being in a long-term marriage, say, with someone. I get it. It can get very complicated to, quote, just leave, because it's never that easy.

People have to keep recognizing. I always tell people, start using choose language. I choose to stay in this relationship where I'm not getting my needs met and just say that out loud every single day and see how that feels. I choose to try to change my partner, which is trying to change the outside in order to get what I want over here, and just say that out loud a bunch. People need to see the inherent limitations of their approach before they go, oh, fuck, this is not a good use of my time.

It's pain either way. Pain staying in the relationship, pain leaving the relationship. Which pain do you want? But a lot of people want to stay in the pain of being in a really unhealthy, hurtful relationship where they don't get their needs met. Cool if you want that.

Meagen Gibson

It's the discomfort you know, over the discomfort you don't know yet. There are so many thoughts I have about just power dynamics. When you make yourself the victim and you make somebody else the villain, giving away your power and not having your own agency over your life because there's a part of you that's uncomfortable with that self-accountability and empowerment.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. It means for a lot of people, they're going to have to face why the victim in each of us won't get empowered, is because it's terrifying. I'm going to have to confront a lot of things about myself that I don't want to look at, see, feel, do, be with. So I won't self-activate and I'll continue to set up my life so it's someone else's fault. I can't. I won't. All of us, I always like to say when we're talking about the victim, that all of us are victims when we get hurt.

There's really like three different kinds of victims. There's the victim that gets hurt and blames the other person and has the outcome or the strategy to get better over there forever. They'll basically never get out of victimhood. There's the victim that recognizes, oh, I might have a part here, and I got hurt. It's appropriate that I'm a victim and gosh, how do I move forward? I can't remember what the third one was. Maybe it's just two, but obviously all of us, when we get hurt, we don't want to stay hurt, stay angry, stay stuck. At least intellectually, we maybe don't, but we have to realize there's a journey to make to get unstuck. Not everybody's up for that and that's okay.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. We never know how long anybody else's stage of stuckness is going, our own or anybody else's. That's what you were talking about earlier, about how long are you going to wait

for your partner to change or beg your partner to change, or if you've taken your own accountability. You don't get to predict when they get the inspiration to show up in the way that you've been begging them to.

[00:28:50] Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. I was working with this guy, and he was married for 16 years, essentially with a woman who had all the features of borderline personality disorder. He was a classic codependent, trying to fix her, change her, trying to make the relationship work, getting stonewalled at every corner. She just wouldn't own anything. Well, finally, long story short, is he through our work together, he gets the courage to leave the relationship, which is what he was scared to do, because that was the unknown that you were just talking about. Well, I don't know how bad that's going to get.

It got really fucking bad after he left. It's not like there was a celebration and liberation. Now I get to experience this, quote, easy life and everything's straightforward. No, the divorce was hard, the custody was hard. He lost a tremendous amount of money. He had to sell his house. It just got hard for two fucking years. It was brutal for him. I get why people are like, I don't want to deal with that. It was easier in some ways for him to stay in it and be miserable, than to self-activate and then have to face a heroic journey of all the challenges. He's finally on the other side of it, but it's hard.

Meagen Gibson

They call it a hero's journey for a reason. But I did want to touch on that is what you see from people when they do take action, when they do self-activate, even though it takes a while. That the reward of that at the end, it isn't the blue ribbon like we were talking about, but there is a different kind of reward, isn't there?

Jayson Gaddis

That's right. A person like this guy, the confidence and the belief in himself now, compared to two years ago, is way stronger. His community support came in stronger, so his friendships are closer. He's more self-aware, he got to know all kinds of aspects of himself. He got back into therapy and started doing different work on his trauma from the past and his family of origin stuff.

He's becoming who he's here to be because he had the courage to say no. Again, it's not easy, but if I asked him now, I think he'd say, absolutely, I prefer this kind of pain than the pain I was in before, because the pain I was in before, I was leaving myself behind every single day. Now I have myself.

Meagen Gibson

Such a beautiful way of putting it. Back to the point we were talking about at the beginning, that cortisol ride all day long. I think people really overlook and underestimate the amount of energy required to sustain in these relationships. Once that's freed up and some healing has been done, the energy of what you attract because you've done all of that work, whether it's friendships and your work relationships, the support that shows up once you prove to the world that you're ready for it.

[00:32:09] Jayson Gaddis

Exactly. You said it. The allostatic load, the stress in the body over time is invisible, as Gabor Maté says. It's hard to know the consequences of that until your forties and fifties. It starts to come out in usually an autoimmune disorder of some kind and other health problems that are hard to diagnose and pin down. But it's intense, man, when people just stay drinking that water all day. It's hard on the body, heart and mind.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, not to be understated. Jayson, thank you for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work and your book?

Jayson Gaddis

Two places probably, jaysongaddis.com. That's J-A-Y-S-O-N. Gaddis, G-A-D-D-I-S.com. Or therelationshipschool.com. It's actually relationshipscool.com, no 'the'. We're on the social channels as well.

Meagen Gibson

You've got a podcast as well.

Jayson Gaddis

I've got a great podcast. 400 and something episodes now and going strong.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Jayson, thanks so much for being with us today.

Jayson Gaddis

Thanks a lot. It was fun hanging.