



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

From Codependency to True Intimacy

Guest: Jessica Fern

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming the wonderful Jessica Fern. Welcome, Jessica.

Jessica Fern

Thank you Jaï, hi.

Jaï Bristow

So, Jessica, you have written a book called *Polywise*, which is your second book after *Polysecure*. Today we're going to be talking specifically about moving away from codependency. Primarily in non-monogamous relationships, though a lot can also be applied to monogamous relationships. Do you want to start by defining what codependency actually is?

Jessica Fern

Yeah. In the book, because codependency is defined in many different ways, sometimes it's very essentialized, like you are a codependent, or it's considered a diagnosis, or there's codependence anonymous, but we're defining it in the book, my co author and I, David Cooley, as a pattern of behaviors that are learned. And these patterns of behaviors are really interfering with a healthy expression of yourself and healthy autonomy. Where your sense of self has really become enmeshed with somebody else.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. I really like that as a definition, that it's losing that sense of self, losing healthy autonomy. So it's not saying that codependency is bad if you have any dependency on someone, it's that when you're so dependent that you totally lose your sense of self. Makes sense that would be considered a toxic trait.

Jessica Fern

Yes, exactly.

[00:01:50] Jaï Bristow

What are some examples of codependent behaviors that can show up in relationships?

Jessica Fern

There's a whole range, a whole spectrum, the subtle to the wow obvious toxic. And so the subtle can even just be not knowing what your own feelings and needs are. Always asking someone else, or your partner, what they think, what they want ahead of yourself. Struggling with saying no, not even knowing what your boundaries are. Or maybe knowing, but you can't assert your boundaries in this relationship, or connection.

But then it can also be you taking on your partner's feelings. So if they're feeling a certain way, you think you have to feel that way too. Or the seesaw if they're feeling down, then you have to go up, or vice versa. Or your sense of esteem, or worth, or value is only coming through this relationship.

Often in codependency, there's also the behaviors of one partner, or person, is over-functioning and the other is under-functioning. And that can get very toxic and extreme, where maybe the over-functioner is constantly bailing someone out. They're in this rescuer role, and the under-functioner might think they can't even live, or survive, without this other person. So that would just be some examples.

Jaï Bristow

I must admit I can resonate with a lot of those examples you're giving, and it's interesting because I noticed that those patterns can come up in me not just in romantic relationships, but in other relationships as well. So I'm curious, do you find that this kind of toxic codependency, what kind of relationships does it appear in? Is it primarily in romantic relationships, or can it be in other relationships as well?

Jessica Fern

It absolutely is in any relationship. I think people seek more help for it in their romantic relationships because we tend to prioritize those more in adulthood, culturally, societally as well. But this usually does have its root in our childhood relationships, our family relationships. But many people can feel codependent with friends, with platonic relationships, with bosses, coworkers, any of it.

Jaï Bristow

I recently had a relationship rupture with my closest friend. We'd been friends for about twelve years, and best friends for about seven years. And as I came out of that relationship, I realized just how codependent it actually was. How much there was this sense of needing that harmony, of constantly looking after each other's needs. And we actually framed it as a really positive relationship. We were like, oh, we're constantly very merged and happy, and we don't really argue when we look after each other's needs, and that kind of thing.

And so I'm curious again about really recognizing when we are in these codependent dynamics. You gave some examples earlier, but how do we really recognize, how do we know whether we're in just a happy relationship? A happy, loving, mutually loving relationship, again whether that's with

a partner, or with a friend, or with a housemate, with a neighbor, whoever it is, versus when it's actually becoming codependent.

[00:05:08] Jessica Fern

So some obvious signs will be that it starts to feel dramatic and toxic, and it's not feeling good. We feel like we're overextending, or in a lot of drama and tension, or fighting with this person. But it doesn't have to include those things. The first time I realized my own codependent behaviors wasn't a romantic partnership, it was with a best friend in my twenties, and realizing oh wow, I love this relationship, this is one of the most important people to me. But I don't feel like I can say no. I feel like there's only some parts of me that I can show. And I have to conceal other parts of me because it's going to upset my friend. I can't tell them about certain successes because they'll go into shame, that I'm doing this sort of tippy toeing around their sensitivities, or avoiding their shame.

So we can ask ourselves, does this feel like a reciprocal enough relationship? Is there enough give and take? Do I feel like I'm under-functioning and relying too much on this person? Which is different from healthy interdependence. Do I feel like I'm over-functioning? Do I feel like I'm compromising my sense of self to stay in this connection?

Jaï Bristow

That's really important, that is it mutual? And then am I under-functioning, or over-functioning in this relationship, or is it actually equitable mutual? And of course, mutual relationships doesn't always mean that you're exactly the same in the relationship, but it's that everyone's needs are being met. And I think that's an important distinction to be made here.

Jessica Fern

Right, it's not about it being equal and the same, but there's that sense of enough give and take and balance.

Jaï Bristow

Exactly. And you talked about how often these codependent patterns can start in childhood. And so considering your first book was all about attachment theory, polysecure, and building secure attachment in non-monogamous relationships. I'm curious about the link... attachment often starts in early childhood, and early childhood relationships. I'm curious about the link between attachment and codependency.

Jessica Fern

That's a great question. Yes, those of us that are in more of a secure functioning, or secure attachment, we are less likely to get into these more toxic codependent dynamics. Because we're better able to say, I value myself and I value you. I know how to do connection, and I know how to do separation.

But those of us that have insecure attachment styles are more likely to be in these codependent dynamics, not because it's even conscious, or we want it. A lot of it is just because it's what's familiar to us, to either be in this push or pull dance with someone, what can be one aspect of that

codependency. Or especially with the anxious, preoccupied expressions of insecure attachment, where we're really latching on to our partner, and really looking externally for that sense of worth and validation.

[00:08:16] Jaï Bristow

That makes sense, it makes sense in the whole over, under-functioning in a relationship, I think people with different attachment styles are more prone to one way or the other.

I'm curious because we've talked a little bit about how this is applicable both to monogamy and nonmonogamy, and how a lot of your audience often is people practicing ethical non-monogamy, or consensual non-monogamy, or polyamory, or however people want to name it. And yet there's also a lot that people in monogamous relationships can learn. And so I'm curious, these codependent behaviors, these codependent dynamics, how do they show up differently. Do you believe in monogamous and non-monogamous relationships?

Jessica Fern

I think a lot of monogamous relationships can get by a lot longer without catching their codependent dynamics. And a lot of the monoromantic narratives and ideals encourage this almost codependent dynamic. We're half of a whole, you're my better half, you complete me. That our sense of identity is about being in this particular couple and relationship, and all of our passwords to things or profile pics express that. This coupledness that is prioritized over everything else.

So just that, sometimes people, I have a little section in the book, is it codependency or the romantic ideal? And it's hard to tease apart. I think in monogamy, a lot of people can get away with it longer, so to speak. But then if a couple, let's say, is opening up. It's so much harder to open up and have a codependent dynamic with the partner you opened up with, and actually do non-monogamy well. So that's really what we're exploring in the chapter, is to be aware of how difficult that is, and how necessary it is to explore your codependent behaviors, and work on them.

And then in non-monogamy, though, of course, codependency also arises. I think a lot of people are better up front, of negotiating and catching those tendencies, or it's harder to become codependent with certain partners because you're not necessarily on the relationship escalator with them. Or you're not necessarily going to be nesting with them, or creating a domestic family life with them. So people are usually better able to catch it, but it still happens, for sure.

Jaï Bristow

Interesting. And you talk about how, especially in monogamous relationships, it can be harder to notice, because it's so aligned often with the romantic ideals, which are so pushed forward in mainstream media, fairy tales, rom-coms. They lived happily ever after, you live happily ever after. And I think those ideals, those expectations can weigh heavily on us a lot of the time. I know that I've been very conditioned by those, like most other people. And so, again, we've touched upon this already a little bit, but why is it actually a toxic trait, this codependency? As opposed to just, yes, but why not completely merge one's life with someone else? Why not just live happily ever after? What is wrong with it?

[00:11:44] Jessica Fern

Totally, I think it's beautiful to merge our life with someone else, I'm not against that at all, and I've done that myself. But the choice of, what am I merging? Is very different than, I'm losing myself in this relationship and I don't have a sense of self outside of this relationship, or this family system. So that's the distinction of when it crosses the line.

Or there can be very conscious ways that we say, yes, I don't want to do these tasks because you do them better, so it makes sense for you to do them, and for me to do these other things, and we're being more efficient with our time. But that's interdependence, where we are relying on each other, which is very different than a learned helplessness, that I can't function without this person at all, that's when it crosses the line.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense, and I'm so grateful you brought in this word interdependence. Because sometimes people think that the only alternative to codependency is hyper-independence, and I think that that can be just as toxic, and I'm wondering if you have anything to say about that.

Jessica Fern

I just think it's a myth, it's a falsehood. As humans we are social creatures, and even though we are wired differently, and some want more connection than others, there's no human that's just solely living by themselves without ever having previously learned anything from another human before them. So we do need connection, we do need community, of course, to varying degrees. And this hyper independence where we're just avoiding, or pushing away connection, it's just the opposite end of this pendulum swing.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense, we have codependency on one side, we have hyper-independence on the other. And then you were talking about interdependence as an alternative. So could you define a bit more about what is interdependence? And then we'll talk about how we can move from codependency into interdependence.

Jessica Fern

Interdependence is going to first allow that there's two or more autonomous humans that are able to articulate their needs, and their preferences, and negotiate them, and respect them. Respecting the differences of each other. So really allowing each other to be different, and embracing those differences, and the challenges that come with those differences as well.

And then figuring out, what does it mean to be close and connected, and to rely on each other, and to depend on each other? And to give some of that control, that I might have, over to someone else. It's very beautiful, and it can be too... It's not static, the way we're interdependent with a partner, or partners, will evolve and change over time depending on what's going on in our life.

Jaï Bristow

That's really beautiful. How do we move from codependency into this interdependency?

[00:14:49] Jessica Fern

I think it's both individual work and then it's relational work. That individual piece is starting to do your trauma work, everything that you've seen in this conference. As well at the individual level of defining oneself, what are my values? What are my wants? What are my needs? Building the capacity to be in touch with yourself, having self-care, having a secure attachment internally, that would all be part of it.

In the book we talk about becoming your own source. So instead of outsourcing your happiness, or value, or worth to someone else. We can still get that from other people, of course, but really finding those places internally. That I am the source of my own love, and inspiration, and happiness, and value, and worth is huge. This isn't a small task, it's a journey.

Then simultaneously in relationship looking at, what are the ways I show up that are contributing to a codependent dynamic? So first defining what are the codependent dynamics or behaviors between us? And what am I responsible for on that end? And if you have a person that is willing to look at their end too, and you look at the cost and benefits, because we get a lot of these behaviors too, and being honest about that. And then also the cost of them on ourselves, on each other, the relationship, on others around us.

So that's one of the things in non-monogamy, too, just a tangent. If two partners are codependent it doesn't allow a lot of space for anyone else. And that's so difficult, specifically in non-monogamy. There isn't enough space to have a full relationship with a partner if they're codependent with somebody else.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely, and I think whilst it's true in non-monogamy, it can also be true in monogamy. There's not enough space for close friendships, for any other relationship to develop. Even work relationships can be limited sometimes. And so the capacity to grow in your career, or to pursue new hobbies, or to make new connections, is limited in these codependent relationships patterns, whether it's monogamy or non-monogamy.

It's more obvious in non-monogamy because people are looking for maybe other partners, and there's a lot less room for that. And having been another partner to very codependent relationships, I can recognize how it's also painful in that way. But I think it's true in both cases.

Jessica Fern

Yes, absolutely.

Jaï Bristow

Did you have anything else you wanted to add?

Jessica Fern

Just doing that work in your relationship of taking ownership and redefining, okay, we've had this dynamic, what are each of our behaviors towards this, and what can we do differently? So that's a process to take on, and sometimes it does take time, because it's not just changing a behavior, as

if you can do that in a quick pivot. Sometimes it's like, oh, there's skills I need to learn, there are certain capacities I have to develop in order to actually change my behaviors. So letting the relationship have the space and time to evolve into more of an interdependence.

[00:18:23] Jaï Bristow

And what are some of those skills and capacities which feel important?

Jessica Fern

I forget if in the book we talk about this, because my co-author David, we were married for ten years. One of our dynamics was I would over-function with his email, I'd see his email, and he didn't have a lot of tech, or management skills the way I did. It's just easy for me. So I would do these little, oh, did you see the email from your boss? Oh, do you need help with this? Sending this and that. And so in us shifting that dynamic, he actually had to learn time management skills. He had to learn literal email skills that just weren't there. I couldn't expect him to just be able to do that overnight.

And similarly, he's the cook, and he was a professional chef, and that was one of the things that in our interdependent dynamic, always made sense for him to cook more. But then it realized like, oh, I actually have to uplevel and at least be able to do some things in the kitchen, to contribute occasionally that way. Not just fully, it's always on him.

Jaï Bristow

I'm glad you made that distinction because I was going to ask about what you were saying about that interdependence. Where sometimes it makes more sense for certain people to do certain tasks than others. But I really hear that difference of when it's totally reliant on the other person, not having any ability, that if David was out of the house, you had to cook for yourself,

Or vice versa, if you're away and he has to send an email. Then there's that really reliant on the other, which is different to, hey, we're living together, it makes more sense for you to do the majority of the cooking, and for me to do the majority of the admin. But then within that, there's still both taking responsibility for it, or both making it an explicit agreement, as opposed to just relying and letting the other take over.

Jessica Fern

Exactly, watching, is one of us falling into a learned helplessness around this thing? Which is different than, I'm not really going to learn this thing, it's not in my makeup to be this way, but if I had to I could call someone else and hire them, or call a friend to help me figure it out. I wouldn't be helpless if you weren't around.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. You mentioned that it's particularly helpful if you have someone else who's willing to do the work with you. But sometimes that work, especially if the other person isn't doing it, or other persons involved, can be scary. Because as you say, it's creating these shifts. And there's a quote in the book, where David talks about the moment that you both started moving

towards differentiation, and maybe we can define that in a minute, and that you both had to develop these skills, and you both started working on your autonomy.

[00:21:22]

And he says, honestly in moments it felt nearly impossible not to interpret the healthy changes she, i.e. you, was making as an abandonment. So I want to talk about that, about that fear of as we move away from codependency, it can actually feel really scary, and it can almost feel like the other person, or persons, they're abandoning us, they're being somehow mean, rejecting, all those kinds of things.

And it was really interesting as I was reading your book. Whilst rationally it made a lot of sense to me, and I agreed with everything that was saying. I was having a very visceral reaction as I was reading it, being like, no, don't leave me. And I don't even know exactly who I was shouting don't leave me to.

And so, again, it makes sense that you talk about needing to work on your own traumas as part of the work, as part of the stages. But let's talk about that, the difficult emotions that can arise when we go through this work. When we go through stages of moving away from codependency, especially if that's everything we've ever known.

Jessica Fern

Ultimately I'll start with when we're truly differentiated, I am my own person and you are your own person. That's where we have true connection and intimacy. Whereas in these codependent dynamics, it's like I'm a partial person, and I'm hiding these others, or trying to exile these other aspects of me, and you're a partial person, and that's how we're bonded. Which is very different than all of us is allowed.

And we do the harder work of figuring out, how do two people, or three people, have all of us allowed? So that's when we're differentiated, that's when we have true intimacy. Yes, but in this process of there's been codependency and we're differentiating, it can be so painful. And David says it perfectly in that quote, is that even though he knew it was healthy, it felt like I was abandoning him. I think he talks about it, I have permission to share this. That was a younger part of him that was looking to me as a mother saying, you're abandoning me.

Because in adult relationships, yes, there's some exceptions, but abandoned, where we can truly abandon each other, but most of the time that word abandonment is not appropriate, or relevant, to adult relationships and the way we use it. The irony was I was actually showing up more of saying, we need to be healthy together, I'm not actually leaving you. So we have to look at the parts of us that are feeling abandoned, that might have an actual history of abandonment from childhood. And that's important inner work for this.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely, I really appreciate you talking about that importance for people to show up as all of themselves in relationship. And it doesn't matter how many people are in the relationship. A healthy relationship is where everyone can show up and be seen, and apply their skills where it's useful, and give some of the reins where it's useful.

[00:24:34]

But that there's space for the fullness of people. I think that's such an important distinction, and why it's really important to do the work, even though it's painful and uncomfortable. To move from a place where you're having to hide parts of yourself, or diminish parts of yourself, or perform to the perceived expectations of the other, or others, into something where actually it's really wholesome, and we can be fully accepted and have this, I think you talked about symbioticism in the book.

Jessica Fern

Symbiosis is a stage.

Jaï Bristow

Symbiosis, do you want to speak a bit more about that?

Jessica Fern

This is the Couple's Developmental model developed by Elyn Bader. She talks about these stages of couples development that really parallel childhood development with a caretaker, or parent. First, there's this symbiosis, the couple bubble, the falling in love, the romantic phase. We're very familiar with that, the new relationship energy. And this is a good thing, it's like two, or more, people need to have this symbiosis phase to create this bonding. We need a strong bond to continue on to what we're going to navigate together in life, or our relationship. But we're not meant to stay here, we're not meant to stay in the honeymoon.

And after that comes differentiation, oh, I'm actually a whole person, you're a whole person. How are we different? In this phase of differentiation is where conflict usually increases, and it freaks partners out, because it's harder. It's like, oh, we're disagreeing more, we don't see everything eye to eye. We don't want everything the same as in the symbiosis phase. A lot of that is just we don't see it, there's rose colored glasses on, we miss it. And these differences start to show up because the hormones aren't there.

Now what happens is because there's increased conflict, we can keep going forward and through it, and get through it. And then we move into this more individuation, deeper intimacy, and so on. Or couples are like, I don't like this, let's just go back. And it's not really a true symbiosis you're going back to, that's the codependency, I'll shut up about this, if you shut up about that, I won't be this part of me, if you won't be that part of me. There's things we just don't talk about, places we just don't go.

So that's part of the model that we're presenting in the book, we really need this differentiation phase, and if we go through it, there's a lot more the relationship can explore and experience together.

Jaï Bristow

And that's the work, which is extremely uncomfortable and difficult to do, but which is so rewarding if everyone is willing to do it. And yet, sometimes if only one person is doing the work, the risk is the other person might feel abandoned or something. But it's also that they might end

up breaking the relationship, rupturing, walking away from the relationship, because it feels uncomfortable to them. Because they've been accustomed to you behaving a certain way, being a certain role for them, and then suddenly that's changing.

[00:27:57] Jessica Fern

Right.

Jai Bristow

And differentiating.

Jessica Fern

Exactly. I was in, not long ago, had an ending of a relationship that I realized, oh, I was over accommodating something. And once I realized, oh, this isn't good for either of us, and I'm going to stop over accommodating this thing, they didn't like it, and it really ended the relationship because of that. So everyone involved has to want to do this work, and of course, not everyone has to. But it's really hard to move forward together if you don't have everyone doing that work.

Jai Bristow

Absolutely. Do you have any words of advice for people who are willing to do the work, but where, like in your case, or in my recent case with my friend, where the other person just isn't either able to, or isn't willing, or just steps away from the relationship?

Jessica Fern

Yeah, try a few times to make that request, so you feel like you put everything that you could into it, so that if you have to walk away, you at least feel like, okay, I threw everything I could at this. Like, hey, can we do this? Hey, can we explore this? I really want us... And hold the torch of, I want us to be healthy, this is going to be even better for us.

But if someone isn't capable of doing that, or able, or willing, then knowing this is what's best for us. Because to stay in that dynamic isn't going to serve, and it usually just gets worse. Sometimes people can come back together months, or years later, and they can start in a better, or different place, so it's not always that it's permanently over if we need to step away.

Jai Bristow

Yeah, people do the work at their own pace. And by the work, I don't just mean the work of differentiation, but the work of healing childhood trauma wounds, of figuring out relationship patterns, of understanding their own toxic behaviors and relationships.

And we have so many excellent resources on this conference for doing just that. And yet not everyone always goes at the same pace. Sometimes there is a lack of compatibility with the people you love, or the people you're in a relationship with, and it doesn't necessarily mean it has to end forever. But also sometimes it does.

[00:30:10] Jessica Fern

Yeah, and nonmonogamy people have more of an allowing of relationship transitions and relationship fluidity. I've seen it more common where someone's like, oh, I do need to do certain aspects of work, and I'm not fully available to be a certain relationship, or partner. But that doesn't mean we have to stop seeing each other altogether. Whereas in a monogamous structure, it might mean, I can't meet the majority of your needs, so we have to break up.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah, that's another thing that is different between monogamy and nonmonogamy, but people can maybe learn from non-monogamy. Because people, even in monogamous relationships, have lots of relationships in their lives, whether it's their friends, their housemates, their family members, their work colleagues. So learning how to de-escalate, or transition relationships, or be able to communicate needs and say, hey, for the next few months, I'm not going to be as available, or, I'm going to be sharing my time in this way, without necessarily having to mean an all or nothing situation.

Jessica Fern

Exactly right.

Jaï Bristow

Jessica, thank you so much for this conversation. Is there anything else you wanted to add?

Jessica Fern

No, this has been wonderful. Thank you.

Jaï Bristow

How can people find out more about you and your work?

Jessica Fern

Just jessicafern.com, they can find me there.

Jaï Bristow

Amazing, thank you. I did get to interview David Cooley, your co-author. We talked about breaking toxic behaviors, healing toxic behaviors using the RRC model (Restorative Relationship Conversations). I recommend people check that out.

I also interviewed Martha Kauppi about six principles of healthy relationship, again applicable to non-monogamy and monogamy. We talked about differentiation as one of them. So if people want to find out more about that, they can also check that out.

Thank you so, so much for your time today, Jessica. I've really enjoyed this conversation.