



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Breaking Toxic Cycles

Guest: Katherine Ripley

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very, very pleased to be welcoming Somatic therapist and educator Katherine Ripley. Welcome, Katherine.

Katherine Ripley

Thank you for having me.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for joining us today. So, on this conference about toxic relationships, I'm wondering if you can tell us a little bit about, in your professional opinion, where do toxic relationships come from? Why are some people more prone to this kind of harmful toxic relationships and patterns and repeating than others?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, so the unfortunate reality is that a lot of people's first toxic relationship is with their parents or with one of their primary caregivers in their childhood. And what happens is that when we're very little, the relationship that we have with our primary caregivers creates these maps that we kind of tend to follow throughout our lives. So if you have a toxic relationship with one or both of your primary caregivers when you're very small, then it sets you up to be more likely to repeat those patterns when you are going into relationships as an adult.

And all of this is usually happening on the subconscious level. It is not something that we are consciously aware of, but on the subconscious level, we do tend to seek out or gravitate towards people who engage in similar behavior patterns that our parents did because it feels familiar to us. There may be parts of us that are trying to subconsciously heal those relationships with our primary caregivers. And so then we seek out people who remind us of them with this subconscious goal of maybe trying to heal or fix or repair the relationship in some way.

And then there's also the reality that the way that we are cared for as children, that creates certain patterns in us that we may end up repeating. So, maybe struggles with our own emotions, our relationship to our own emotions, the way that we process how we feel about ourselves, we take

all of that into our relationships with other people. And if there are certain blind spots that we have because we didn't get enough emotional attunement and nurturing and protection from our primary caregivers, then we're going to take those blind spots out into the world, and we may end up not seeing certain red flags in other people that then end up getting us into the same toxic relationship in our adulthood.

[00:03:08] Jaï Bristow

Thank you for sharing that. You talk about familiar patterns, right? And I interviewed Sarah Peyton on this conference. You talked about the word familiar literally coming from family, right? So that's exactly what you're saying, how these familiar patterns come from our family structure, whatever that family looks like, and it's not always blood relatives. And so I really appreciate what you're saying about how that will then shape how we go out into the world.

It will shape what we're looking for. It will shape the relationship patterns or the relationship, yes, schematic, perhaps is a good word of what we're drawn to, what we feel is familiar, even if it's actually uncomfortable, it feels comfortable in the sense that it's familiar, literally. So I really appreciate that.

And it's interesting because you were saying how it can mean that if we've grown up in that environment or in an environment that's toxic with parents, and I think we can maybe define in a minute what you mean by toxic or what that looks like, but it means that we don't see red flags in other people. But perhaps it also means, and you talked about the relationship with oneself and one's emotions, so perhaps it also means that we might exhibit certain red flags or we might not see red flags in ourself. Could you maybe say a few words about that?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, for sure. So when it comes to red flags in ourselves, we can sort of exhibit some of the same things that maybe we might not like in other people, but we don't always notice the things that we're doing because we kind of get accustomed to our own patterns. So if we're talking about a relationship that is not a domestic violence or an intimate partner violence situation, both people are always contributing to whatever kind of dynamic is going on in that relationship.

So if there is an inability to communicate one's emotions, or if there is an inability to know when your historical material is coming up and that is kind of intruding on the interaction that you're having with your partner, then that can definitely influence these toxic dynamics that end up happening. And again, it can come from both directions. It can be you, it can be the person that you're with that is not able to recognize when you're triggered, not able to recognize when you are reacting to something that's in your past rather than reacting to what's actually happening in the moment.

And that can end up creating these loops that end up happening over and over again, where you're sort of having the same argument all the time or having the same conflict that's happening over and over again because if you're not able to see where your own historical material is coming in, then you're never going to have that awareness that you can bring into the conflict so that you can actually separate, okay, this material is mine, I need to take this and I need to do my own work on it. And how can we separate that, what's mine, from the work that we have to do together as a pair?

[00:06:23] Jaï Bristow

I really appreciate what you're sharing around how it takes two to tango, right? So if a relationship has toxicity in it, you can't just point the finger and point it all at one person or, on the other side, blame yourself entirely because it's a dynamic between two people. And on this conference, we have a whole day dedicated to healing one's relationship with self and looking at one's own patterns and healing trauma in oneself. And I think that's such an important part of this journey of healing toxic relationships.

And I also interviewed Ty Powers who talks about how to sort of stay in connection with yourself and others in toxic relationships using Internal Family Systems. And I think that that's coming up a little bit as well in what you're talking about here.

So I'm curious, Katherine, about, we talked about, how these toxic relationships start in early childhood with our primary caregivers, whether that's parents or others, but what does that look like? What are the symptoms of that? How do we recognize it? Because again, how do you define toxicity in that context? Because I feel like toxic can mean such different things and can be such a wide spectrum. And so, of course, there's the obvious, if you were in a very sort of abusive household, then of course that's going to have an impact, but I feel like in what you're saying, there's more to it than just that.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah. So my personal theory about the word toxic and why it's pretty widely used now to describe relationships is that I think that it's a term that is sort of like an alternative to using the word abusive. If we don't necessarily want to categorize a person's behavior as abusive because maybe we want to give them the benefit of the doubt that they had a good intention, like if we're talking about a parent specifically, a lot of people don't necessarily want to assign bad intentions to their parents. And the word abusive can be very charged when we're talking about, in particular, parental relationships.

And so I think that the word toxic comes in as a kind of alternative to describe a dynamic that maybe is not necessarily abusive but is problematic in a lot of ways. So we could be talking about things like parents being very intrusive and not giving their children any kind of personal space or privacy whatsoever. Is that abusive? Well, maybe you could categorize it like that, but maybe you don't necessarily want to put that label on it and you could categorize it as toxic because a child having a very intrusive parent, that can definitely have a negative impact on the child as they grow up, because they may feel as though they are not allowed to have boundaries. And we all need to be able to set boundaries in order to be healthy and to have healthy relationships with people.

Another example potentially could be a parent who is kind of doing the opposite and is not really involved at all in their child's life and we could categorize that as neglectful. It could also fall into the category of being toxic because that is going to have a negative impact on the child. It's going to create some kind of toxicity in the system. That person may learn that they are not important enough to get their needs met because their parent is just not being involved in their life at all.

And so they could end up growing up to be subconsciously choosing partners who are not giving them enough because they're accustomed to not getting anything or just accepting crumbs. We refer to that as breadcrumbing sometimes. And so in that way they could grow up to think, well, I'm not deserving of any more than this. So that person's toxic relationship could be being with

someone who's just not giving them enough support and emotional attunement and they think that that's just normal.

[00:10:44] Jaï Bristow

That makes sense. And I really appreciate this definition of toxicity, that it's not necessarily abusive, but there's not quite enough of something or maybe there's too much of something, either overly intrusive parents or emotionally neglectful parents and that that of course is going to have an impact on one's adult relationships.

So maybe, you've already touched upon this quite a bit where you were talking about difficulty with boundaries or unconsciously attracting people who aren't able to give so much, so maybe you can say a bit more about, yeah, what does that look like in adult relationships when you've grown up with sort of toxic relationship with primary caregivers and parents?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah. It can look different for everybody depending on what your experience was and how you metabolized it. For some people it can be choosing to be in relationships with people and, again, this is all happening at the subconscious level, very few people are actively making this decision of, okay, I am going to be in a relationship with somebody who doesn't treat me well but if as a child, you, for example, experienced a lot of manipulation from a primary caregiver, because that happens a lot, you may have a hard time when you get into a relationship as adult, maybe noticing that somebody is manipulating you.

Or maybe even if you do notice it and it doesn't feel quite right, you kind of just assume that that's normal. Or maybe you assume that it must be your fault if your partner is being manipulative with you and then you kind of take on the blame for that. Another way that it can manifest is maybe if you had a parent who expected you to take care of them when you were a child, then that may result in a propensity to get into relationships with people who are what we call under functioning.

So they have a lot of needs, they're not really contributing very much. And if you're accustomed to taking on that role of taking care of somebody because that was what you had to do when you were a child, then that may feel normal for you. And then you have people who are doing like 95% of the work in a relationship and their partner is not really doing anything. And that's a version of codependency.

And it's codependency both ways because the partner who's under functioning is relying on their person to basically take care of everything. And the person who is doing the caretaking work, they may feel as though they need to do that. That's kind of a compulsion that they have and that they can't feel okay unless they take care of their partner and know that their partner is okay.

Jaï Bristow

That makes a lot of sense. And I think it's really helpful to just make explicit some of these behaviors and to understand where they've come from and also to understand, like you were saying, that it's not always super obvious either, when you've had sort of toxic relationship with caregivers, partly because it's literally so familiar that that's all you've ever known. So you don't necessarily know what a healthy relationship looks like if you've never experienced one before,

which is why sometimes having a therapist or a coach or someone who can guide you through it to show you and point out what's harmful and what's healthy.

[00:14:24]

Because, again, I'm trying to remember who it was, I was just interviewing someone on how to recognize, I think it was Sarah Peyton again, I don't know if I mentioned Sarah Peyton already at this point, but Sarah Peyton was talking about how to recognize the difference between toxic traits and healthy traits, so the difference between love bombing and healthy bonding. Or the difference between narcissism and healthy self centering and all that kind of thing. And it can be a really fine line sometimes between both of those.

So, yeah, before we go on to the next part, I wonder if you want to say a little bit about that fine line between these toxic traits and healthy relating and healthy dynamics.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. And this is a question that comes up a lot in the comments on my social media posts, because this is something that can be really tricky to pick out. And I think that what it comes down to is that you have to be monitoring in a relationship; is there a me and a you and a we? Rather than there's just a we, and I don't know where myself is anymore, or there's just a you, like you're the whole relationship, and I don't feel like there's room for me anymore because that's kind of, like, I guess, the yardstick that you can use when you're talking about wanting to measure, okay, is there too much narcissism?

Because we all need a healthy degree of narcissism. We have to be able to turn our focus towards ourselves so that we can take care of ourselves and that we can assess and all of that. So if in a relationship you feel like, okay, there's a me, there's a you and there's a we, then there is a healthy degree of narcissism so that I can be self reflective, you can be self reflective, we can both take care of ourselves and we can also take care of each other to a certain degree.

And I think that this comes in when we're talking about love bombing, for example, also, with love bombing, there's an end goal with that. I'm going to bombard you with all of this affection so that you do what I want but the second that you do something that I don't like, the affection goes away. And that's an example where there's not enough room for me. I have to be able to have needs also. And if the moment that I have a need, you're withdrawing all of the affection from me, then that means that there's no room for me in this relationship. So you have to make sure that there's that balance there.

Jaï Bristow

I love that definition and that explanation. I think we sometimes hear one plus one equals three, right? That idea that it's you, me and we, exactly like you were saying, and so the danger is when it feels like one plus one equals one, when there's just suddenly just one merged relationship and that that's the primary focus and there's no room for healthy separation. There's no room for autonomy within the relationship. And I guess that's when we go into extreme codependency and that kind of thing. And I love what you were saying about that idea of, with love bombing, if it's conditional, if it's conditional on you being a certain way, then that's when there's a red flag, I guess. So I appreciate that.

[00:18:00]

And just continuing down this line of questioning a little bit, one of the things that came up for me is sometimes as someone who's had a very anxious attachment style in the past, I sometimes ask myself the question, is it insecurity or intuition? So if I'm relating to someone and there's this idea that something doesn't feel quite right and I know that I have all my trauma responses or defenses which are like, get the hell out of here, it doesn't feel quite right.

And then it's like, do I override that to stay in contact with this person because on paper this person is healthy, or is it actually intuition? Is this person hiding something from me? And again, we were talking about the fine line earlier about toxic traits and healthy traits or healthy bonding. And I feel like that's another fine line. And so I'm curious what you have to say about that distinction, and whether it's important or not, between insecurity and intuition.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. That is something that is really difficult to determine for a lot of people. We all have a nervous system that is designed to react to danger and to protect us from getting hurt. So a lot of times that gut feeling, so to speak, that voice that's saying you have to get out of here, it's really hard to tell, is that reacting to the reality of the circumstance that's happening here now with that person? Or is it reacting to the historical stuff that you are carrying with you because of your early experiences?

And I think that when it comes to teasing that out, it's very important to have another pair of eyes on it. So being able to work with a therapist or a coach so that you can tell that person, hey, this is what it's been like in my early stages of connecting with someone. I have this funny feeling in my stomach. What do you think about that? Because I've had clients who have asked me that question and I've asked my own therapist that question. And it's important to have somebody who can really think about it critically from an outside perspective and kind of assess, okay, does it seem like there's some danger here? Does it seem like there's some potential for abuse in this situation?

And also what you can do with your supportive person is kind of create a contingency plan of, okay, well, if it seems like it's sort of in a gray area right now, but this relationship feels good for you in a lot of ways, can we create a contingency plan of, well, if I see X, then that means that this is definitely not an unsafe situation, and I would need to exit at that point. Or if X happens, then what can I do to make sure that I'm okay? And what supportive people can I reach out to?

So you can sort of put a plan in place so that you can feel a little bit safer if maybe this is a connection that you want to continue exploring. Because when we explore new connections with people, there's inherently a risk involved with that and we have to let down our defenses a little bit if we're going to be in connection with somebody. So I think that it's really important to have somebody else who can kind of help you in navigating that process so that you can do it in a way that feels okay.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely, and like you say, you need to be able to let you down your guard and it can be really scary. So, like you say, having that support from someone else who can be an external and objective pair of eyes, hopefully objective, everyone has their own stuff, and also having that sense of contingency plan and so seeing it more as like if something's coming up, rather than

immediately like a red flag or immediately overriding the danger feeling, being more like, okay, let's consider this an orange flag, perhaps, a warning sign of something to keep an eye on and see how it develops.

[00:22:18]

And whilst that can be uncomfortable, I think that that's where you get to do the real work and find out, oh, actually, it has started going down that same route that I've gone down a million times. This time I'm going to break the pattern. Or, oh, actually, it's bringing up discomfort because it's unfamiliar and it's unfamiliar because my familiar patterns are actually the toxic, abusive patterns. So I really appreciate what you're saying in that. And you use the word safety and around the therapist, and I think that's paramount. In the end, it doesn't matter so much if it's insecurity or intuition. Often I think it's a bit of both, at least it has been a lot of the time in my own experience.

And so whatever you're feeling, it's about developing that safety to support the healing and that safety can come from a therapist, from a friend, from just someone who can hold your emotions and doesn't make you feel crazy for having the emotions you're having in that moment. And again, if the person that's bringing up that feeling, you can have a conversation with them, great, but often I think, and you probably agree from what you've said, that maybe go off and work a little bit with someone else to get a bit more clarity, to get an extra set of eyes and then maybe have the conversation with the person afterwards.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah and I think it's both a lot of the times because you want to be able to go off and do your own work, but also having a conversation with the person who you're developing a connection with, that can be a really great litmus test to kind of assess, okay, I'm getting this danger feeling, but is it actually danger from this particular person?

If you bring up a conversation about, hey, there was this thing that you did or said that kind of made me a little bit uncomfortable, and the person is able to have a conversation with you about that thing, without getting defensive or without getting reactive, then that's a really good indicator that, okay, they're probably able to engage in a healthy conversation where they can look at things in a way that's clear headed and understand your feelings and why you're feeling that way. And that's a really good sign if they're able to do that.

Jaï Bristow

100%. And I'm so glad you brought that piece in because I think it's so important that, actually, whatever you're feeling, if you're feeling unsafe and you name that to the person that's making you feel that way, their response or their reaction to that is going to tell you a lot, like you said, it's going to tell you whether this is someone that can build safety, whether they understand your response or not, or whether it's someone that you have to be careful of. And then, again, you can, like you say, work with it with a therapist or with someone else.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah.

[00:25:06] Jaï Bristow

So I think we've talked a lot about this sense of what it can look like, what toxic relationships can look like, where they come from, from the sort of early family, and how they can play out in adult relationships. But I guess that also means that if they're continuing to play out and we're not interrupting those patterns, then they're likely to play out in future generations as well. Because if we've inherited a lot of toxic patterns from our parents or our early childhood caregivers, they've probably inherited that from theirs and et cetera. And then it becomes this kind of cycle.

So, first, maybe you can talk more about this sort of intergenerational cycle and then we'll talk about maybe how we can interrupt that cycle of abuse or toxicity.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, absolutely. It does tend to get passed down and it's hard to break it because what happens is that, first of all, it's hard to even pinpoint where is the origin point of all of this? But if you have a parent who is not able to regulate their own emotions, not really able to be self reflective, doesn't have the ego strength to be able to recognize when they did something wrong and apologize for it, then their child is going to end up taking on so much more than they should. Taking on the parent's emotions, taking on the guilt and shame for something that happens that was really the parent's fault but they never apologize for it.

And then that child is going to grow up to be carrying all of that extra stuff that the parent kind of maybe unknowingly offloaded onto them. And when you're carrying a lot of extra stuff and when you're carrying a lot of that burden, then it's going to be difficult to regulate your own emotions. And maybe it's going to be difficult for you to be self reflective and to apologize when you've done something wrong because there's so much shame that you're carrying around.

And if you don't heal that, then if you choose to have kids, then you will probably end up passing that on to them because if you're not able to regulate yourself, then you're going to, again, unintentionally, offload all of that onto your kids because if you're not dealing with it, it's going out into the atmosphere and the people who are around you, the people who are relying on you, they're going to have to metabolize it through their system.

Jaï Bristow

100%. And I remember in my own healing journey, recognizing the point where I inherited shame from one of my parents and understanding in that moment as I was working with that, they weren't trying to shame me or trying to pass down shame. It was just as young children, especially the early years, we're sponges, we're super reactive to how our parents react. So if you're doing something very innocent as a child, whether that's playing near an edge without realizing it's dangerous and the parent suddenly freaks out and it's like, oh my God, careful.

And of course I understand why that happens in the parent because of their own conditioning, but that's going to create a sort of freeze response or a trauma response in the child. And then if it's not taken care of, if there's not the support or the healing, then that's going to perpetuate. Similarly, you talk about shame, I think there's often a lot of shame around sexuality and genitals and things like that. So kids are very curious. They're curious about their bodies. They haven't been socialized to know which part of the bodies are appropriate to touch or explore in public or not.

[00:29:00]

So that's another way that I think shame can often be passed down where a child is just sort of touching their genitals or asking about someone else's or pointing at someone's breasts and making a comment or something like that and then the parents are mortified because they've inherited all the sort of cultural shame around sexuality and the child isn't sexual at that point.

So I think that those kinds of things where, again, it's like what you were saying, it's unconscious, it's not the parents actively trying to teach their child shame and trying to teach them to not be good with boundaries. It's just if they haven't done the work to heal their own inner child, to heal their own patterns, to heal their own trauma, their own toxic behaviors, then of course it's just naturally, unintentionally going to get passed down.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, sometimes we say you repeat what you don't repair.

Jai Bristow

I love that. I think that's a really good line. I'm probably going to use that again at some point. I'll credit you.

Katherine Ripley

I didn't come up with it. I heard it from somewhere else that of course I can't remember.

Jai Bristow

You repeat what you don't repair. That's really great stuff. So now that we understand how these cycles of toxicity and toxic relationships happen and develop, again, unconsciously and maybe we've touched upon the solutions already, but maybe we can spend a few minutes talking about how do we interrupt these patterns? How do we interrupt these cycles? How do we make sure we don't pass this down to our children or our niblings or whoever it might be? How do we not pass this down to the next generation? How do we not project this onto our next relationships?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah. It involves a lot of healing work to process your own stuff and to be able to take ownership of your own stuff. So we have to do work on our emotional regulation skills so that we make sure that our emotions belong to us. And we always know that we have the responsibility to regulate our own emotions. And that should never be the responsibility of our kids or kids who are in our care or our responsibility at any time. So we have to be able to take ownership of our own emotions.

And we have to be able to recognize what our blind spots are. So if we do have certain toxic tendencies that we inherited, we have to be able to start recognizing when we are doing those things and work on being able to not do them anymore and also be able to apologize when those things happen because we're not perfect. We're always going to be a work in progress, and we're always going to make mistakes. And so when mistakes do happen, we have to be able to say, I

messed up. That was my fault. It was not about you. I am working on it, and I'm going to do better in the future.

[00:32:13]

And that reparative process is so essential. And I see people on Instagram who have gentle parenting accounts talk about this all the time, how you have to be able and willing to apologize to your kids because you're always going to mess up. We're human. We mess up all the time. And if you can say, hey, I messed up, that wasn't okay, it was my fault, it wasn't about you, then that child is going to learn, oh, my feelings matter. It's important that I felt hurt in that situation. It was not my fault.

And it's important for somebody to apologize to me and to take accountability if they've done something that has hurt me. And then they're going to take that forward into their relationships as adults, and they're going to expect that from the people they choose to be in relationships with.

Jai Bristow

Exactly. But not only does it teach them my feelings matter, it's important to receive that and expect that from other people, it's also teaching them it's okay to make mistakes and when you make mistakes, this is what you do. So it's not just teaching them to expect when someone hurts them that there is repair, but it's teaching them to repair when they inevitably hurt someone or make a mistake because like you say, we're all human. And I think that that's a piece that so often gets overlooked.

We're often talking about, again, and this conference has been great around interviews of people saying, look at yourself first and not always blaming the other. But we're so often taught about what do you want in another? But it's also learning to be able to do that yourself, to learn to be compassionate when you make a mistake, learn that when you make a mistake, you can apologize and repair. And that that's okay. That's part of the healing.

And also with everything I've learned about trauma, hurt is always going to happen, whether it's physical or emotional pain, hurt is going to happen, and yet it doesn't have to turn into trauma. Trauma happens when there's not the support and holding for the healing to happen. Right? And so, again, by hurt happening and then an apology or holding, reregulating the nervous system, that means that that hurt won't develop into trauma, whereas if the parents feel like guilty or ashamed, for example, of what they've done, and they want to appear like there's sometimes this idea in parenting that the parents should be Godlike and can do no wrong and should never apologize.

And that actually does the opposite of what it's expected. Or sometimes, there's the idea of the world's a painful and difficult place, you have to toughen up your kids. But again, whilst I understand where that idea comes from, it actually has the opposite effect, because that's when trauma is created and then when trauma is created, that's when it gets repeated in these toxic cycles we were talking about.

Katherine Ripley

Yeah. Exactly.

[00:35:17] Jaï Bristow

Well, Katherine, this has been a wonderful conversation. We also have another talk coming up on the next event, which is all about trauma, the Trauma Super Conference, where we talk about recognizing and healing emotional neglect, which is another form of abuse that you touched upon a little bit. So I really encourage people to check that out. It will be airing soon. And how can people find out more about you and your work?

Katherine Ripley

Yeah, so you can follow me on Instagram [@therapy.with.katherine](#). And I am also on TikTok [@therapywithkatherine](#). No periods.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today.

Katherine Ripley

Of course. Thank you for having me.