



## Breaking Toxic Relationship Patterns

**Guest: Kelly Armatage**

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### **[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson**

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your Super Conference Co-host. Today I'm speaking with Kelly Armatage, a trained counselor, coach, and cognitive behavioral therapist. For nearly 20 years, Kelly has been assisting the healing of individuals and companies globally. An expert in coaching and behavioral change, Kelly has facilitated over 15,000 one-to-one sessions. Kelly, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Kelly Armatage**

Thank you for having me. It's an absolute pleasure to be here with you.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I'd love it if you could start by breaking down the factors that contribute to us getting into toxic relationships, because nobody wakes up and says, I think I'd like to go round and round in toxic relationship patterns today. So how do we end up there?

### **Kelly Armatage**

Well, it all comes from the childhood really, so pretty much every human being on the planet has some kind of trauma in childhood, and some people have more trauma than others. So if you had an unavailable parent or a parent with addictions or a dead parent, and you got abandonment wounds or unavailable wounds or just specific dynamics that hurt you in your childhood, this would subconsciously make you attracted to somebody that would mirror that back in your present. So it's not like we choose toxic relationships, it's that our subconscious attracts us to the very people that will mirror our childhood wounding.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Going toward what's familiar, right? Yeah.

### **Kelly Armatage**

Fam-il-iar.

**[00:01:39] Meagen Gibson**

Yes, exactly.

**Kelly Armatage**

What is familiar within our family of origin. What felt normal, comfortable, familiar for us as a child, we will play it out in our current relationships in all forms of dynamics, and they can border on toxicity for many.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I like to say, too, that because oftentimes when people think about trauma, they think about the things that you named or maybe a critically ill parent or a parent who was incarcerated or had substance use problems, right? But we can also suffer from smaller traumas, so people might be thinking, I'm in these toxic relationship patterns and I'm caught, but I didn't have any of these big, big things. But you might have had a parent who just couldn't be enthusiastically supportive of who you are at your core and what interests you and turned away from you, right? And so that made you feel... That can also be experienced as relational trauma, right?

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, because that scenario that you just outlined there, Meagen, that would be a lack of acceptance somewhat from the parents, so that would affect the child in their self esteem and so then they would grow up and perhaps find somebody else that isn't present or seeing them or rejecting them on some level. Or that they feel not enough or good enough within a relationship, so, yeah, there's lots of forms of trauma in, like I said, like abusive or addicted or abandonment or death or wars, but then there's other just tiny veins of trauma, and often my clients say to me, but I had a good childhood, but when you actually go back in and identify their dynamics that they had with their mother and their father and we call it the mother or the father wound, this will always be playing out in their relationships, and as we keep reenacting that, it can seem so very toxic, painful and traumatic.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I imagine that part of it too is because we downplay the ways that our needs weren't met because all of our big needs were met, right? You were like my parents were alive, if they were, I was provided for, all of my needs were met, so what do I have to complain about? It's the very denial of the ways in which we were mismatched with our parents or not seen or not heard or not validated that causes that lack of awareness so that we keep kind of going to what's familiar and what doesn't work for us and what might not be the best way for us to love and be loved, right?

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, absolutely. Because of that lack of awareness or denial, we might go from relationship to relationship to relationship and it's upon hitting a pain threshold or a rock bottom that the person says, well, I've had kind of three relationships that are the same, maybe I need to go inward as opposed to blaming or being in denial, maybe I need to go inward and see how I am, perhaps, creating this on some level, and that's where the magic starts to happen.

**[00:04:29] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And if not creating, but just contributing to it, right? Like there's two people in every single relationship and we're both contributing to it at all times, right?

**Kelly Armatage**

Absolutely, yeah. It's a mirror of two people's thoughts, emotions, habits, wounds, triggers playing out in this dance.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, and as I found out and I'm sure most people that have had more than one relationship have found out... Where we go, there you are. And you go through that cycle where you're outwardly like if this person was just different, so we go to seek somebody who's different and then we show up the same and wonder why everything is turning out in similar ways when perhaps we need to do a deeper dive into what's making us tick.

**Kelly Armatage**

Absolutely, and I just think for a human being, if we can start to really take accountability for the results in our life in a very compassionate way, we can really start to see how we are contributing to the results we are getting in every life area and specifically our relationships.

**Meagen Gibson**

And you have a course that you teach that specifically is about ending these relationship patterns, and one of the things that I loved in that context is that the related courses are all about self love and healing past trauma and transitioning victim thinking. So how do each of those elements play into developing toxic relationship patterns and breaking out of those relational patterns?

**Kelly Armatage**

Well, with regards to my higher love relationship, for example, this teaches you how to end toxic relationship patterns, and that always starts with yourself. Like, are you showing up as codependent? Are you believing it's okay to fix, change, scold others, control others? Are you showing up as somebody that accepts unavailable people, addicted people, narcissistic people? Are you showing up with a lack of self love or boundaries? Because I believe you need to have specific skills in place to have a healthy relationship. And with regards to the victim/warrior mindset, when we do transcend from victim thinking into warrior thinking, we start to really take accountability and then we can then go forward and create the changes that we want in our life.

**Meagen Gibson**

You said so much, that's great there, I want to slow down and go back. I was like, yes, I wrote that down. And then you would say something. I would say, oh, I wrote that down, right? Do you find, because I can say I would find it myself, that doing this work it wasn't like just work on your self love, it was work on self love and my codependency and my need to fix people and my need to accept of unavailable people and my boundaries, they can be separate areas that you can dive deeply into, right? Like, let's just look at self love and what does it mean to develop self love? What

does that look like? But enmeshed in that is going to be maybe you want to fix other people you're outside fixated, so all of these elements are intertwined, but yet separate concepts as well, right?

**[00:07:34] Kelly Armatage**

They're all separate concepts and they're all kind of all different patterns and dynamics and learned behaviors. And often you find that, for myself, when I work with my clients and I've done over 15,000 sessions now, globally, a lot of these areas intertwine. Codependency intertwines with a lack of self love, and because you've got a lack of self love, you probably haven't learnt assertiveness and boundaries so they tend to be all different dynamics that are intertwined, and if you do separate them and work on each area individually, you can start to grow and change within that area.

**Meagen Gibson**

And going back to kind of the family relationships and our relationships from our caregivers when we're children, how this plays out is if you have an emotionally mature parent, who causes you to surrender your needs to theirs, then if you don't have any needs, how can you love yourself because you're not meeting your needs? You're codependent because you're surrendering your needs to the needs of somebody else and have been parentified as a child. You're trying to fix situations so that you don't upset or disturb your parents by having no needs. And then you've got no boundaries, clearly, and then you grow up and feel like a victim and you're full of resentment because you don't even understand that you've been trying to be needless and independent and fixing other people and anticipating all of their needs and in order to receive the love that you didn't inherently get when you had emotional needs as a child, did I get that?

**Kelly Armatage**

Absolutely. You've got that exactly right. And then you're like, wow, why am I in so much pain? I'm just pleasing, I'm just putting their needs first, I'm just having a lack of boundaries, I'm just enmeshing myself with this person, that's what I've done my whole life. And then you start to realize, when you do this type of work, that you have to unpick all of that.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. And for me, I was doing all of these things that I thought made me a good person and that I thought fulfilled me and made me happy. And it was when the resentment just started to boil over like a pot of unwatched milk, right, and there's burned stuff all over to go with this analogy, I'm about to set the kitchen on fire with all the resentment that's boiling over. And that was when I was just like, okay, something's got to give. We've got to look at the interior here because I've tried fixing everyone else, and that's not working so far. So we've got to go inside, right?

**Kelly Armatage**

Got to go inside. And that resentment and anger is often directed at them because you're not changing. You're not becoming the person I need you to be, to define me, to love me, to validate me. You're not changing, and I'm realizing that I have to change, so I'm resentful towards myself, there's like this anger directed outwards and inwards. But the anger is good because it will eventually get you to a pain threshold. Pain thresholds are great for people because that's when they start to change or go inwards at least.

**[00:10:31] Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Sorry to interrupt. I want to go because that seems like a really good point for you to piece apart a little bit more this transition between first identifying your victimhood and your identity as a victim, and then how do you transition into that what you're calling the warrior path or mentality or position?

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, so I do this on TikTok quite a lot, I victim mindset versus warrior mindset. It just went viral, like a couple of weeks ago. And so really, a victim mindset is just somebody that is outwardly focused. They're not taking responsibility for their thoughts, emotions, and habits. They're blaming. They're blaming others. They're blaming the external world. They're full of resentment and anger. They think that the control and fixing is okay, and they're just kind of just powerless in their life. They're powerless to create change, and there's just a lot of blame going on, whereas the warrior mindset just takes accountability. It is I who create my life. It is my thoughts, my emotions, my habits, my triggers, my wounds, and if I can look at those and start to shift them, I'm going to get better results. I am empowered over my life experience. I am empowered within my relationships, I can learn certain tools to be better in my life, such as self love, interdependence boundaries, et cetera.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. That accountability piece is so key, right? Because if you're trying to control everybody else and not looking at yourself, you're trying to force accountability on everyone outside of you so that you will be comfortable and feel loved. And, woo! What a trap, right?

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah. If only you will change, then I will feel better. If only you would do this, then I will be happy, and it's illusional and delusional.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Kelly Armatage**

Because they might change for a second and you feel that little subconscious payoff of power and reward, but then they go back to doing something you don't like. It's a bit like obsessive compulsive disorder, there's always going to be another picture to straighten.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Yeah. And for me, those patterns of I'm just going to out myself entirely, right, like I would blow up with resentment and then make a request and then that request would be fulfilled once or twice if I was lucky, and then we would just go back to the same patterns. And it wasn't until I started working... And then, this is a perfect point to bring this up, which is that once you start doing all of this work, things get a lot better on the inside of you and get a little precarious in

your relationships, right? Because all of a sudden you've actually got to look at the relationships for what they are and not what you had envisioned or hoped that they would become at some point.

**[00:13:15] Kelly Armatage**

Yeah. And some people start to heal and then they grow apart from their original partner, as in that partner came in to teach you a lesson and now as you've ascended, they perhaps can't ascend and you have to come apart. But going back to what you said about that person would please you just a couple of times and then they would go back, that's what would keep the codependency in place because your mind would think, well, actually, this works.

**Meagen Gibson**

I've got the pattern, it's effective!

**Kelly Armatage**

I think I did in my first marriage, he would please me in how I wanted him to in a controlling way, so when it comes to my second marriage, I'm like, that old pattern will work. It did not work in my second marriage. So I was like and I was in my 30s thinking, well, why aren't these tactics working? Because they did before, that's how I got love and adoration before. So yeah, it's interesting stuff.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely. And when we think about toxic relationships, we often immediately in our minds go to romantic relationships, but they start in our families of origin and then extend out into siblings and can often infect or not infect, but impact our work environments and our community roles. And so can you talk to me about how to recognize them in these periphery kind of roles, and how we show up in the world and in our extended families and how our approach might be different with each of those different roles?

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, absolutely. So say, for example, as a child, you had a very critical and controlling mother. Therefore you would have picked up a wound, which is, I am open to criticism, I am open to control, so the wound is open. So you then grow up and you will attract in naturally via your subconscious a critical boss, an overly critical boss, or an overly critical partner or a very judgmental sister or brother or a friend that thinks it's okay to control and scold you and criticize you. So it will play out not only in your intimate relationships, but in your work, friendships, for example. So you have to a) identify the wound, which is okay because of the experience with my mother as a child, I have this wound. It means I am open to criticism and control. I am allowing, it is I who gets triggered when that happens.

So, number one, identify it, recognize it, acknowledge it, take accountability for it, and then go in and really forgive a) your mother, because she probably was doing generational trauma or own learned behavior a) if you can understand/forgive your mother, forgive yourself for creating that wound or having that wound. Forgive yourself for your behavioral conditioning and then be willing to put that down and pick up a new behavior, which is actually, I can take on constructive criticism if I like, but from a centered, empowered, calm place. And if there's criticism or control that's bordering on emotionally abusive, I must learn boundaries towards my boss, even, you can give

your boundaries to boss, to bosses, to my boss, to my friends, to my sisters, to my partner, to my children, even. So you heal that trauma via going all the way through recognition, forgiveness, and being willing to have a boundary. And then even further, you can say, I have a new self belief, which is, I am open to support, encouragement and love.

### **[00:16:40] Meagen Gibson**

I love that transition. And I'm so glad that you ended what you said with that because I was feeling for people at home listening to this, that as you went through that list of you can tell this person and this person, I was imagining all the people watching at home. And one of those names caused like a flush of blood and sweat and somebody started to sweat at home when they imagined talking to their boss or talking to somebody. And so to then also button it up with that, if you could say that phrase for me one more time, I am...

### **Kelly Armatage**

I am only in alignment, or I am open to support, love, encouragement, compliments, from others there's a whole different paradigm you need to go to. And even when you give the boundaries to somebody, it can come from such a vulnerable, calm, compassionate, respectful place, such as hey, I feel criticized, please stop. Or hey, that's mean, or knock it off, that's bullying. It doesn't have to be this whole aggressive scenario because then you're not healing. It can just be a really calm, one sentence message boundary absolutely. Which will then make the other person go, oh, sorry, I didn't realize, because they're also unconscious, right? They might be unconscious in their own criticism or critical controlling behavior. So as you say it in such a loving way, you then bring awareness to them going, oh, sorry, I didn't realize.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Right. Until you tell someone I'm uncomfortable with the way that you're communicating, you can't expect them to understand until you say it. Now, if they continue to speak with you or converse with you or criticize you in that way, after you've stated your discomfort and desire for a different mode of communication, then you've got the information you need about that relationship and what you need to do next, right?

### **Kelly Armatage**

Yeah. But so many of us in toxic relationships are communicating in passive, passive aggressive or aggressive ways. And those communication styles, along with the codependency and the self love and the boundaries and all of the other stuff, the communication styles really need to be released passive, passive aggressive, aggressive, out and assertiveness in. When we truly learn assertiveness and boundary setting and that vulnerable respectful communication, we transform all of our relationships.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And I know, in case anyone at home relates to it, when I first learned about boundaries several years ago and started communicating them, I was really surprised and taken aback at the fact that once I was clear about what my boundary was and communicated it, that wasn't the hard part. The hard part was the after of how I felt. Right?

**[00:19:16] Kelly Armatage**

My heart would go up and down.

**Meagen Gibson**

Right? It wasn't figuring out the boundary, it was the guilt or the shame or all of these surprise emotions that came up afterwards of like, I just stated a very, very simple not really that outlandish, and now I feel like a bad person because I just told this family member that I want to be communicated with in a certain way or that I'm unavailable to be with them in a certain scenario or just like basic human needs. And now I'm collapsing into myself in a shame and guilt spiral. So if you could talk about that a little bit.

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, I think I've been teaching boundaries to my clients for years and also on my own journey, been working on my assertiveness and boundaries. And at the very beginning when we start to give boundaries, our heart will pound or we'll shake or we'll feel so nervous because we're stuck in the old paradigm, which is I can't express my needs and actually I'm going to upset that person and I can't upset that person because I can't disappoint them. It goes back to that childhood, I can't disappoint mummy or daddy. So when you do start first doing boundaries and assertiveness, it's difficult, but you just keep going, stay in that calm, empowered space and also have a nice expectation behind which is they're going to listen to me, they're going to respect me.

Because it's like if you have the expectation that you won't be listened to and respected, then you will manifest that. So yeah, it's a practice, it's an art and it can take a long time to become amazing at boundaries. I'm still not that great. I can still get triggered into the old passive, passive aggressive or aggressive spaces, but I'm way better than what I used to be. And the same with anyone else that starts this path. It's a practice of communicating in great ways, and actually also if you learn about your triggers, you will be better triggers and assertiveness and boundaries kind of all combine.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Kelly Armatage**

Because if you communicate from a trigger and you're in a triggered stress response space, it's not going to work for you.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely, right? You're going to come off as the aggressive boundaryless critical one if you're communicating boundaries from a trigger.

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think so many of us with our triggers, we communicate from our trigger and that alone can create toxicity and conflict in a relationship and confusion.



**[00:21:49] Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. And in case anyone relates to this, thank you so much for disclosing that you still struggle with boundaries. I had an interaction recently where somebody was critical on crossing a bunch of boundaries and afterwards, and I handled it well in the moment, but afterwards the person I was mad at was with myself. And I was so surprised, I was like, gosh, and I was really angry with myself that I had walked into the trap and allowed all of this to happen and not seen it, even though I knew better and even though I knew that this could happen.

And then afterwards was able to just be compassionate towards myself, as you said, of like, of course I was mad at myself. This is the pattern, this is what we do, this is what this relationship is like. I take the blame for the emotional interaction and then was like, wait a minute, all of this, the miscommunication, the misbehavior is not mine and I'm going to stop blaming myself, right? Let's put it on the person who's responsible and forgive ourselves for wanting to be in relationship with someone who continues these patterns. Like we're wired for connection and we can forgive ourselves for desiring to stay in relationships that have toxic patterns.

**Kelly Armatage**

Absolutely. Yeah, we can forgive ourselves for that. And actually any action we've ever done in the past because it came from our brain chemistry and learned behaviors and behavioral conditioning at that time, it's absolutely okay to forgive ourselves for every past action and moment.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. If you could detail for people, in case they're not familiar, how to know what are the signs between, because as you said, before we know what the red flags look like in detail, we might not see them. So I imagine somebody who's going to interview for a job and it's with a hypercritical boss, but they don't recognize that they're open to a lot of criticism. So what does constructive criticism look like? And what does hypercritical aggressive, unkind criticism look like? How do you know the difference?

**Kelly Armatage**

I think you know the two different scenarios because the first one is constructive, it will be delivered kindly. A good boss or mentor or coach would deliver the criticism in a calm, guided, kind way, and you can feel the intention behind it, whereas somebody that's hypercritical or abusive, demeaning putting you down over and over, that's got an anger behind it, a resentment, a control, a different kind of emotional vibration. So I think intuitively, we would know whether it's constructive criticism or abusive criticism. Emotional abuse.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely. Given with the intent to help you as opposed to given with the intent to offload somebody else's discomfort or to intentionally hurt you. Yeah, because I think most people... Go ahead.

**[00:24:51] Kelly Armatage**

Yeah. And I would also say that the constructive criticism will come occasionally, but the emotional abuse will be a regular pattern over and over.

**Meagen Gibson**

That's a great point to make. You're right. It's just constant. There's no, like, let's review and go over some things that you could adapt and change to become better at your job, it's every day is going to be an attack.

**Kelly Armatage**

Yeah, that's the way I would say quantity, too.

**Meagen Gibson**

That's a great point. Kelly, how can people find out more about you and your programs and your content?

**Kelly Armatage**

They can go to my website, [kellyarmatage.com](https://kellyarmatage.com). They can check out my Ted Talk. There's lots of media interviews online. Go on my [TikTok](#), that's my main platform, or it's called StickTok yeah, happy to let people know my platforms and come and have a look at all the content we have there that are helping people.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I just want to encourage anybody to definitely check out Kelly's TikTok. That's actually how I found Kelly was I was like, wait a minute, this StickTok, she draws little diagrams that help all of this come across very clearly, and she uses stick figures, and it's great. So check her out. And Kelly, thank you so much for being with us today.

**Kelly Armatage**

Oh, thank you so much, Meagen. I absolutely loved doing the interview with you.