



Conscious Life presents  
**HEALING TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**

## **Six Principles for Healthy Relationships**

**Guest: Martha Kauppi**

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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 pleased to be welcoming back the wonderful Martha Kauppi. Welcome, Martha.

**Martha Kauppi**

Thank you so much. I'm so happy to be here.

**Jaï Bristow**

I'm so happy to have you here. So, Martha, you are a marriage and family therapist, a sex therapist, a relationship coach, and educator, as well as the author of *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and Their Clients)*. You are also in two healthy relationships, each spanning over two decades, which you practice what you preach clearly.

Do you want to start by saying who can benefit from these six principles that you're going to be sharing with us today?

**Martha Kauppi**

Well, honestly, what goes into a well functioning, healthy relationship is not materially different between consensual non-monogamies and monogamy. So even if you're in a monogamous relationship, you can still benefit from the things that we're going to be talking about today. It just happens that people are a little more mystified about what goes into well functioning, consensual non-monogamy, or polyamory, because it sounds harder to do, harder to pull off, and people are like, what makes that work? But if you asked me what makes monogamy work, I'd have a list that had a whole lot of overlap with the list that we're going to be talking about today.

**Jaï Bristow**

Fantastic. I think that's really important to recognize that it doesn't so much matter what the relationship style is, whether it's monogamy or non-monogamy. There are certain things that are going to create a healthy environment for healthy, thriving relationships, and that that can be true regardless of the relationship style, regardless of any other circumstances.

## **[00:02:08] Martha Kauppi**

I would also add that for some people, a non-monogamous relationship feels more congruent, feels more natural, feels more in alignment with what somebody wants for themselves, or how they envision themselves, or how they see themselves as a relational human. And if that's the case, and you've been trying to squish yourself into a monogamous mold, things probably haven't been going terrifically well, in one way or another. So for some people, for a certain subset of people, opening the relationship in a way that feels congruent to who you are, can clear up some mysterious things in the past that haven't gone well.

## **Jai Bristow**

Absolutely. I think that's a really important point to bring in, is that sometimes relationships end up being toxic because people feel like they're having to follow a template that doesn't fit for them. I think the monogamy template works really well for some people but doesn't work for others. And other times, there are elements of the monogamy template which work for people, but not all of it.

Mel Cassidy and I talked a little bit about this as well. I recommend people check out that talk if they're interested in knowing more about toxic dynamics in both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, and how they can intertwine.

Martha, let's dive right into these six principles. Do you want to talk us through them?

## **Martha Kauppi**

Let's start with differentiation, my favorite. Differentiation of self is a concept that isn't talked about nearly enough. It's not a brand new idea, though, it was created by Murray Bowen, who's thought of as the father of marriage and family therapy, systems therapy. The idea of differentiation of self, as I would describe it, is it's a little basket of skills that help you show up in relationship with differences between you and another human. So if you consider that we are, in fact, all unique individuals, we are not exactly the same, it's only a matter of time until your relationship begins to have some stresses because you are different from one another.

Like, oh, my gosh, I didn't realize you voted for whom, you do what in the morning. It could be anything, could be small, could be large. And over the course of a long term relationship, there will be many, many differences between people. So figuring out how to handle differences well is really important. And this little cluster of skills is the foundation that I think is important to build.

The first one, the first part of differentiation is being able to get in touch with yourself and figure out what I think, feel, believe, prefer, desire, separate from what anybody else might want me to think, feel, believe, prefer, desire. So just for myself, even if I've been told it's not the right thing, I've been told whatever. Like, my mother wouldn't agree, my sister wouldn't agree, my family wouldn't agree, my partner might not agree, my culture might not agree, but can I figure out what I want for myself, and what I think and feel and believe? So getting in touch with self is the first part.

Second part is getting grounded enough to be able to share that with somebody else, even if you think it might be hard for them to hear. So once I know what's true for me, then I can share that with you, or with anyone. And sometimes that leads to a hard conversation. A classic example, "my darling, I would like to open our relationship", or, "I've really been thinking a lot about polyamory. What do you think?" That can be a very stressful conversation for a lot of people.

**[00:06:13]**

Then the third part is the missing piece here, being able to get grounded enough, and lean in with curiosity, when someone else is telling you something about what they want, or think, or feel, or prefer that's hard for you to hear.

Again, using the "I want to open the relationship, my darling" example, if somebody says that to you, who is important to you, and you were thinking along monogamous lines in your relationship, this might not be good news. And it might be really hard to hear. So you might have a whole big reaction internally. But to be able to just ground that and lean in with curiosity. What does that mean for you? What is it about for you? What is it about that that you're curious about? How do you think it would affect us? How do you think it would affect you? How might it benefit both of us? So curiosity instead of reactivity.

All of that is differentiation of self. And I think we talk more about safety and security, generally attachment issues in relationships, than we do about differentiation. But the point of attachment is to be able to differentiate. The point of feeling safe and secure is so that you can handle differences, not so that we can just be the same as each other forever and ever, amen.

And if we take this, I can't resist taking this to a more global level. If we were better at handling differences in our kitchen, we might be better at handling differences globally.

### **Jaï Bristow**

100%. I'm so glad you brought that piece in because it's really important. A lot of the time building secure attachment isn't about just merging with a person, and holding hands and dancing through the meadows and everything's fine, and we ignore that anything's not fine. It's about having the safety and the security to have differences, to have conflict, to manage all of that.

I'm so glad you brought in that piece as well, that if we can do that in our relationship, in our intimate relationships, then that's also a fantastic opportunity to do that on a more global level, because that is the source of so much conflict. It doesn't matter who it's with, it doesn't matter whether we're talking about intimate partners, friends, family, communities, nations, or anything else, however big you go. That idea that if you think differently to me, if you have different values, different beliefs, different culture, different upbringing, different all these things. That that somehow prohibits connection instead of the opportunity to... I always talk about differences as being an opportunity to learn and grow from one another, and from each other. That's a really important piece you brought in there.

### **Martha Kauppi**

The other aspect of this that we don't think about so much is how boring it is to be the same. If you merge and you just create tons of safety, and security, and sameness, reliability, dependability, then you're going to eventually wring out every bit of novelty in that relationship, and end up feeling really flat. So not only are differences an opportunity for world peace and connection, but also enrichment, enlivenment, passion, excitement, exploration. Entire vistas begin to open up that we didn't know were possible. And that's so important in a relationship because just same same ultimately will kill the excitement in your relationship. Ultimately you have to figure out how to leverage your differences.

### **[00:10:07] Jai Bristow**

100%. No one wants to be... We don't want a world full of clones. We want that opportunity for creativity, for passion, for evolution, for all these things you've mentioned. I really love this as the first part, and the first point of how to create healthy, thriving relationships, is actually through embracing differences.

Being able to embrace differentiation comes in three steps. There's the working on oneself and being able to tune into what we really want, which can be really hard when we've had a lot of conditioning of what we should want, and how we should behave. And there's always the fear of rejection from the other, as has been mentioned. So it can be really hard to tune into what we want.

And then there's the communicating what we want to our partner, and whether that's about opening up a relationship, whether it's about anything to do with gender roles, to do with open relationships, to do with children, to do with smaller scale issues as well. Like all these things, there can be the fear that if we name what we really want and how we truly are, that there might be rejection.

That other point of being able to really receive the requests from others, or receive the information with curiosity. And that's something that has been named a few times in this conference by different speakers. I really value that element of curiosity rather than reactivity, and defensiveness, and shutting down the conversation, being able to cultivate curiosity.

That might require taking some time for oneself to be able to process the initial reactions, and emotions, that arise when we hear something that's shocking, or surprising, or very different to both our own values, beliefs, and wants. But also maybe what we projected onto the other as being their values, beliefs, and wants. So what is the next step or the next element?

### **Martha Kauppi**

The next element is secure functioning. It is very important to feel essentially okay within yourself, and within your relationships. So there are certain behaviors and dynamics that can really undermine safety and security, and agreement breaking is one of them. So we'll be getting to, I would call that fidelity making and keeping agreements. We will be talking about it.

So secure functioning is really important and some people think if I were in an open relationship then I wouldn't feel secure. And what I want to say about that is nobody wants to be in a relationship where they feel like crap. And that's not the definition of a consensually open relationship. The idea here is that everybody actually feels good. And so if it feels insecure, it might feel insecure because of something that you're imagining, or it might feel insecure because of something that is happening that is actually insecure.

So beginning to parse that out. How much of this is my idea of, it has to be monogamous in order to be safe, which is not the case actually, it's very possible to have an open relationship and still feel safe. Versus there are things going on, that really anybody would feel insecure in a relationship where these things were going on. So there's sort of a parsing of that. But I think it's important to include secure functioning in the idea of what goes into a well functioning relationship.

### **[00:13:54] Jaï Bristow**

I love that. I think that's another really important element to bring in. And I'm curious when you talk about secure functioning, you brought in attachment, and healthy and secure attachment. When we were talking about differentiation, does secure functioning have anything to do with secure attachment, or are they different elements?

### **Martha Kauppi**

I would say it has a lot to do with it, so similar but not the same. I'm talking about a feeling of being okay in the world, and a feeling of being okay in relationship. And that is about attachment. So if I have, and I do have big attachment wounds in my past, you can go from whatever attachment style you started out with, to what we refer to as an earned secure attachment.

It's not like if a bad thing happened to you in the past and you have attachment wounds that you're doomed forever to feel insecure everywhere. It's actually possible to grow through that and create for yourself a future, and eventually a present where you feel grounded. And that is a foundation stone that underlies the ability to differentiate.

Because if I'm worried that my partner is going to tell me something that's going to rock me so much that I'm going to literally die, then there's an attachment wound underneath that's coming into play, because I'm an adult, I'm not going to actually die. I don't actually depend on my partner for food, water, and shelter. If you do... So financial dependency is something that can really complicate differentiation, and can make it extremely risky to differentiate. I'm not talking about that special circumstance right now, which I just want to acknowledge is complex. It just becomes very complicated when there is actually food, water, and shelter at risk.

But under most people's normal circumstances, it would be heartbreaking, it would be a grief process, it would be an enormous change. It would be a lot of things, but life threatening is not one of them. So that's how I think about attachment issues in adult relationships, versus attachment issues as a child, when they're generally formed. I don't know if that was coherent enough.

### **Jaï Bristow**

It was very coherent. It's really important to differentiate that, that when the attachment issues, often created as a child, from these traumas and this lack of security, we're literally dependent on our caregivers as a child. So when they're not providing what we need, then of course it's going to create this insecure attachment, which as adults the patterns and the feelings may play out with our partners. But we have to remember as part of healing that we're not actually dependent, unless there are certain cases where people are, again, it's important to name that, and recognize that not everyone has the privilege of being able to apply all of this. And that it can be easier for some people than other people.

And yet, where possible, having that recognition of, oh, I'm having this trauma response, this insecure attachment response, but I'm actually okay. I'm not dependent on this person for all my needs right now.

I really loved what you were saying about the secure functioning is about feeling okay in the world, as well as okay with one's partner, or in one's relationships. Because it's not always about partners, it can be friends, it can be family, it can be housemates, it can be neighbors. There's all kinds of

different relationships that we're confronted with every single day, regardless of whether we're in a romantic intimate relationship, or relationships, or not.

**[00:17:55]**

With the first one, the differentiation you were talking about, how for that you need to be in contact with yourself, you need to be able to communicate, and you need to be open to receiving what the other is sharing with curiosity. So what are some ways that we can reach this secure functioning state?

### **Martha Kauppi**

Therapy and coaching are helpful. I think having reparative experiences is helpful, and you can get that in a relationship with a professional whose job it is to help you have reparative relational experiences. You can obviously also have reparative relational experiences in a relationship. The thing is, it's not your partner's job to facilitate your healing, and they may not always be available to do what you want, when you want them to do it. And so there is an aspect of being in an adult relationship as an adult that requires a certain amount of emotional balance.

You have to have a certain amount of independence as well as interdependence, because we are not always available when our partners want us, and we're not obligated to be. There's always a little bit of tension there, and I think that is just the way that it is.

For instance let's talk about that differentiation piece of it again, and how to begin to move toward it. Beginning to see an emotional response as a thing that's happening to you, rather than an indicator of the truth of the matter. When you're in a tough conversation with someone, to see that as, let's explore the territory together, rather than, let's make a decision, we have to make a decision.

So separating those things out creates a space that it's easier to lean in with curiosity. If you think a decision is about to be made about you, or that you're trapped, or that you're coerced into something, or you're having an automatic reaction, because that's maybe what you experienced in your past. Things happen to you without you having a vote, I mean, that is the experience of a child. Things happen to you, you don't get a vote.

But if you bring that forward into your adult relationship without examining it, so you're reacting from that point of view. When somebody says something like, I'd like to open the relationship, you may have an experience like, well, in that case I'm out, because I don't want an open relationship. Instead of, okay, let's examine the territory, let's think about it, let's feel about it, let's explore it. What are the pros? What are the cons? What lights you up about it? How did you hear about it? How long ago did you hear about it? Tell me all about it. We can get curious, if we stop thinking somebody is about to do something to us that we don't want to have happen.

### **Jaï Bristow**

That's so incredibly important, you differentiating between exploring a topic as it comes up, versus immediately making a decision about that. I remember one time I was in a non-monogamous relationship with someone, and they were having lots of different partners, and I was okay with that. I wasn't having any... Well I was having some jealousy, but nothing more than just an uncomfortable emotion that I was experiencing like many others.

**[00:21:44]**

And then there was one particular incident where, for example, they had a relationship with someone, and it made me extremely uncomfortable and I even had a panic attack about it. And so I was like, oh, that's interesting. So when I saw my partner, I asked, can we have a conversation? Can we see what happened? Why was it that their relationship with this particular person activated something in me? I think being able to have those conversations is a wonderful opportunity for everyone involved to learn about themselves, to learn about their relational patterning, to learn about their history, and to just, even though you're talking about differentiation, it's actually an opportunity to connect through that exploration.

But in my instance, the person shut down and got very defensive and was like, out of principle unless you give me a rational reason why you don't like this person, then I'm going to go on a date with them, or something. And it was like, okay, this is not going to work. We don't have the capacity at this point to have that conversation, to have that exploration. It's really interesting, I see what you're talking about, differentiation as almost like the opposite of codependency. It's that ability to explore, not necessarily take decisions, the decisions can come later on, but to just have the conversations to connect through the differences, to allow them.

And as we said earlier, it can bring about creativity, it can bring about evolution, all kinds of things. And then again this secure functioning which is easier said than done, it sounds like, but is so important, and connected and different to secure attachment. But really that ability to feel okay in oneself, and therefore okay also in relationships. What is the third principle?

### **Martha Kauppi**

The third principle is mutual benefit. So this can be a bit of a surprise to some people, but any relationship that you're in should feel like it benefits you, and everybody else concerned. It should feel like a good fit. It should feel like there are some reasons why I'm here, there are some reasons why I would choose this. There are some actual benefits to me.

Sometimes this is surprising to somebody who's got a mindset of monogamy, is the way that I do relationships to think, so if I have a monogamous orientation and my partner says, I think I might want to open our relationship. I might think, well, they would entirely benefit from this, and I would just be screwed. What I'd like to say is, actually no, that would not be a workable consensually open relationship. A workable open relationship involves benefit to everybody.

So some of my curiosity questions would include, how do you imagine this working for us? How do you imagine it working for me? How do you imagine that I would benefit from it? How do you imagine that you would benefit from it? Like, walk me through it. What is in your mind about this? Not because that's the way it has to be, but because together we can explore the territory together, and probably very much expand what's possible for us. Which is the importance of engaging in the conversation from a place of curiosity. It takes a lot of practice to get good at this. And a lot of support.

Sometimes we can support each other in these conversations, the conversation that is not about decision making, but is about exploration is super important. If you ultimately want a strong decision, start with a strong exploration.

### **[00:25:35] Jaï Bristow**

What's interesting with the exploration is that the person who initially suggested, or makes the request, or names the difference, might also learn some more stuff around the differentiation of, what is the needs behind the request. What is going on for them, as well as the other person, or people involved, who are having the request presented to them, might also learn something.

It's really interesting and it makes sense, it has to be mutually beneficial to everyone involved, and yet sometimes it can feel like it's difficult. It can feel, particularly if someone is listening to this, and then they go and try and approach their partner, but their partner, or partners, and their partner hasn't listened to this talk for example, and doesn't know about all the six principles. How does someone make sure that it is mutually beneficial?

### **Martha Kauppi**

Well, it's a relational stance to wonder how your relationship benefits your partner. So whether you're monogamous, or open, is almost irrelevant in this question. If I'm saying, "honey, I really have been oriented around monogamy, I still wonder, how does monogamy benefit you," then "how does monogamy benefit me?" If we're talking about a discussion between somebody who's leaning toward monogamy, and somebody who's leaning towards, say, polyamory, or some other form of open, there's a question of mutual benefit on all sides, from all perspectives.

And my relational assumption, personally and professionally, is that what we're shooting for is something that's actually a feel good situation for everybody concerned. So, how do you imagine the thing that you prefer being a good fit for me? How do I imagine the thing that I prefer being a good fit for you? It's fair and reasonable to expect that your partner would be considering what's good for you, and interested in what's good for you.

So how would we set this up so that it feels good to you? How would we set up monogamy so that it works for you? How would we set up open so that it feels like a great fit for you, so that at least you're really willing to engage in an experiment about it, and then we can assess it. But I'm not looking to screw you over. I'm looking to find a situation that feels good.

### **Jaï Bristow**

That's so important because people often talk a lot about compromise in a relationship, but this goes so far beyond that. It's like, no, it's not about I'll meet you halfway, you meet me halfway. I'm giving up stuff, you're giving up stuff. It's more like, how can we find something? How can we build something that, a framework, or a relationship, or a dynamic that really benefits everyone involved, that really feels nourishing to everyone?

A reminder that these kinds of things, and I'm sure we'll get into this in a bit with the agreements, but these kinds of things don't have to be rigid and fixed. They can be adapted, because sometimes we don't know what's going to benefit us. Sometimes we have an idea of what we want, or what we think would be beneficial for us, or our relationship, or our partner, or partners, or whoever, our friends, whoever is involved. And then we try it and we go, this doesn't work. So it's about... I love what you said about a relational stance should always be questioning, like, how does this relationship benefit my partner, myself, and anyone else involved?



### **[00:29:30] Martha Kauppi**

And then on a day to day basis, we should be helping our partner enjoy the way that we are together. I want to be considering my partners in everything that I do, not obsessively, and not in a coercive way, but I'm taking into consideration the people who are close to me when I'm making decisions. I wonder how this is going to affect this partner, I wonder how this is going to land. And if I have that feeling, that feeling like, oh, I'm a little nervous to talk to this person about this, that's a sign that it's time to talk to them about it. So I'm not just going to go, do my way or the highway, and then let the chips fall where they may. I want to be a relational being. I want to check it out first, and then trust that we'll come to some sort of an agreement that makes some sense to both of us, and all of us.

### **Jaï Bristow**

100%. It's really important that we as individuals who are listening to this, prioritize and make sure that the relationship is benefiting our partner, partners, as well as us. That we're factoring in the impact of any decisions, or any desires, on everyone involved.

And because this is the Toxic Relationship Conference, a lot of people listening might also sometimes forget to make sure it's happening the other way around as well. Make sure that the relationship is also benefiting you, because sometimes it can be very easy for people to take responsibility for their partner's well being, and always prioritize the relationship and their partner, and actually they get left behind in it. They're leaving themselves behind, they're neglecting their own needs. So it's important to make sure that the relationship is mutually beneficial. That it's benefiting your partner, but that it's also benefiting you, and that the relationship is supporting you both to grow.

### **Martha Kauppi**

Well, that brings us back to differentiation, doesn't it? So if you feel unhappy in your relationship, it's so important to speak up about what's important to you. And I would encourage you to think, first what is the most important thing here that I think my partner is not understanding about what's important to me, and have a conversation just about one thing at a time, and really stick with yourself. This is important to me, I would really like to feel like you get this, I'd like to feel like you really understand how important this is to me.

It's important to be able to audition a partner to help us in tough moments. So if I feel like my partner is not willing to put in some effort to understand something that's super important to me, that's going to be a little bit of a no go for me. But willingness to be in a conversation, that's terrific. And we can have lots of differences and we can have lots of ideas. And I'll feel much more secure once I feel like my partner is willing to put in some time and effort to hear what's going on for me.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Absolutely, that's such good advice. You said that taking the time to really figure out one thing that feels like it's really important for you, when you're bringing in that differentiation conversation piece. Because it can be easy to allow things to build up, and then suddenly bombard your partner with a whole list, and a whole backlog of, you do this, and I didn't have, this didn't happen. And then that's not conducive to a healthy conversation. So being able to really... Again what you said about differentiation, the first step is looking at oneself, and really finding out what is it that you

need to share, that what is really important to you, that you really want your partner to hear, and get, and understand. I love that piece. What is principle number four?

**[00:33:26] Martha Kauppi**

Consent. So we could go on and on about all of these, obviously they're big ideas. But the idea of consent is that everybody involved knows that their relationship is whatever it is. So everybody is aware of what the relational agreements are. Everybody's aware that the relationship is open, if it's open. There's not somebody who thinks they're in a monogamous relationship while their partner is having multiple other partners.

Consensually open relationship is the opposite of infidelity. The idea here is we're transparent about what we're doing, as opposed to trying to sneak around and pull the wool over somebody's eyes, and keep a big secret. So this is a relationship form, consensual non-monogamy relationship forms based on consent.

**Jaï Bristow**

Great. I think that's such an important piece, you know consent is often used mostly around sex, but consent is so important in all areas of a relationship. I was talking to Sander T. Jones about consent in communication, for example, which is something that often gets overlooked.

Anything that requires more than one person interacting together requires consent. Whether it's communication, whether it's sex, whether it's dancing, whether it's... Whatever it is, whether it's choosing an activity for date night. It's really important that everyone is on the same page, that everyone knows what they're agreeing to. Even in monogamous relationships, sometimes people don't have the same rules about what monogamy is, or don't have the same ideas, so it's really important to make it explicit. Sander and I talked a bit about this. So if people are interested in exploring this topic of relationship agreements further, I recommend people check out that talk.

**Martha Kauppi**

Awesome.

**Jaï Bristow**

So consent, mutual benefit, secure functioning, differentiation. What I love about all these things is, like what you said at the beginning, that the lack of any one of these elements can create toxicity. So I feel like if you don't have differentiation, then you often have codependency, or other such unhealthy toxic habits.

If you don't have secure functioning, then you have insecure functioning, which can be a lot of anxiety, a lot of unhealthy toxic behaviors. If it's not mutually beneficial, then it's only benefiting one person, that's not healthy. Same with consent. And like you said, especially in open relationships, the opposite of consent can look like infidelity, it can look like lying, cheating, it can look like all kinds of very unhealthy ways of being. What is principle number five?

## **[00:36:24] Martha Kauppi**

This leads us right to fidelity. Consent and fidelity have a lot to do with one another. Some people don't get how an open relationship has fidelity or infidelity, but it does. Any relationship has fidelity, or the lack thereof. I would define fidelity as the ability to make an agreement and keep it.

I could write a whole book about making and keeping agreements. It's a differentiation based skill, as is consent, by the way, you can't consent or withdraw consent if you can't figure out what you want and say it. And you can't respond in an attuned way to a partner's preferences if you can't lean in with curiosity and honor what they're saying, and then postpone your own gratification for long enough to actually be in alignment with relational dynamics and values.

So fidelity is a process of crafting what feels like a doable experiment. I frame this as an experiment because I think we sometimes think we need to make rules that are going to govern our whole relationship, and that's not a thing. We are evolving humans, things change, relationships change, individuals change, everybody changes. It's fine, that's a good thing, it's not a bad thing. We want that, we want growth, we want change.

I think of a set of agreements governing our relationship as being a living document. It's a thing that is going to evolve over time through lots of interesting new awarenesses, and it can start out with a very tentative experiment. I'm willing to experiment with this for two weeks and then let's assess. Willingness is sufficient for consent, but it's a fuzzy little fine line between willingness and unwillingness. So I'm willing to experiment with this, has to come truly from, I can see potential benefit for myself in this experiment. Even if that benefit, it could be, I'm running this experiment because I love you and it's so important to you, and I'm willing to run the experiment, and I'm willing to do my very best with it. And then we're going to assess and figure out what we're going to do moving forward.

Just because you make an agreement doesn't mean that you've written a law that is now a foundation stone for the whole remainder of your relationship. Values are foundation stones, like, I have a value of presence and a value of compassion, but agreements aren't values. I am going to show up in this particular way in this particular situation, that can be an agreement that we're going to make. Or because it would be very uncomfortable for you, I will agree to not do this thing for a period of time. We'll see how that sits for me.

And then a fidelity agreement is something you can rewrite. So you can't make a good agreement if you don't know that you can renegotiate that agreement. And what I mean by this, if I made an agreement and then something happens and I am not comfortable with that agreement, I have two choices. Renegotiate the agreement or break the agreement. That's why it's important that it be a living document, because if it's understood between us that we can rediscuss any of this, we can open it again. Then I don't have to lie in order to stand up for what it is that I want.

What we want is for everybody to be in a transparent communication, relational interchange, rather than, I'm just going to sneak around behind your back because I think that I'm not going to get what I want.

There's a lot of complexity in there, it's not a relational stance to think, I just want what I want, when I want it. And there are times when we all just want what we want, when we want it. But can we postpone gratification and come to the table of discussion and honoring our partner, and let them into the conversation of what the next chapter, or experiment is going to look like?

### **[00:41:18] Jai Bristow**

I really appreciate how interlinked all these different principles are. Obviously consent and fidelity, or fidelity agreements, how they interlink with differentiation, and the need to know what's going on for oneself. How, of course, it's totally interlinked with secure functioning. And that the fidelity agreements and secure functioning go very hand in hand, because you can't feel secure unless you have those fidelity agreements. And if those are broken, then it's going to create that insecurity.

I love what you're saying about, we all have those moments where we want what we want and when we want it. But just like the moments where we have a trauma response, or an insecure response. We have to remember we're not children anymore, that we're adults, and that we don't get to throw a tantrum and just take what we want when we want it. And that, again, that delayed gratification, that taking a moment to pause, to be curious, to figure out what we really want.

And what you were saying earlier about the consent, that how it can be so difficult sometimes to know what we want. Like consent is a great concept, but applying it can be difficult because people are all, like, no means no. Yes, you need an enthusiastic yes, but sometimes we don't know what we want to say no or yes to. So again, it ties back into the first point, and the taking time to know ourselves, to figure out what we do and don't want for it all to work out.

Now, you talked about a living document. How literal were you being? Do you feel like people should actually have a document with their relationship agreements, or was it more like a concept, or a metaphor?

### **Martha Kauppi**

Well, it depends on the people involved. It's important if you tend to avoid conflict, if you tend to not get into the tough details, you might want to, just as an experiment, write down what you think you're agreeing to, because it'll help to clarify things.

If you and I have a conversation and we come to an agreement, it might be super simple. I mean, we did come to an agreement. We're going to have this conversation at this time, and it's going to go something like this. If that felt like it was a tough agreement to make, writing it down and checking, like, so when you read this sentence, do you see the same thing? When I read this sentence, are we actually going to be in the same place at the same time, doing the same project?

So if it's hard, the harder it feels, the more helpful I think it is to actually put some words, and put it on paper. Not so that we can hold each other to the letter of the law, although that's maybe part of it, but more so that we can be clear in the moment because loopholes are a thing.

When we're trying to end a tough conversation, it's really easy to just be like, "I'll give you whatever you want," or "that's good enough, I got you, I know what you're saying here, let's just move on." Basically any tactic at all to get me out of this conversation. These are all pitfalls to watch for in a conversation about agreement making. Making a pseudo agreement, or I would say an agreement that's a non-agreement. "I'm just agreeing to shut you up, I'm just going to pretend that I can do this because it makes sense, and I've never been able to actually do it in the whole rest of my life, but somehow I'll do it for you, my darling. I'll do it this time. I know I will." Like, jeez, what could go wrong?

**[00:45:09]**

So beginning to look at that stuff and be like, "actually, I'm not sure I can agree to that. There's a part of me that wants to, and I'm not sure that I can follow through on it." I love that conversation a lot, and it can be really tough. But then I want to facilitate a conversation between partners where they say, "what is it that's hard for you about that? What is it that you think is going to happen? Like, tell me a circumstance that might happen in your life where you would feel really torn about having made this agreement."

But lots and lots of people don't want to get into the nitty gritty because they're uncomfortable. I would say if you're a conflict avoider, or you tend to get really reactive when hard conversations come up, you are in a lot of danger of not making good agreements. Both of those dynamics are not conducive to making and keeping agreements.

### **Jaï Bristow**

I come from a line of people-pleasers, and by a line I mean I am a people pleaser, it's something that I'm working on. I noticed I recently moved house and was looking for housemates, and I had a very clear idea of what I wanted in my mind. And then I meet someone, and everything they say was against what I wanted, and I'm just like, "yes, of course." And then when we came down to actually, it was a bit before signing the contract, but to actually putting on paper exactly what the rent was, the division of bills, of the space of all of that, realized we weren't on the same page at all.

I think you're right, sometimes putting things on paper, or digital paper more likely these days, even if it's a text message or something, to just be very clear. I can think of a lot of friends that I really want to give this tool to, because I think it's a really good one. We're almost out of time, but we do have time for the 6th and final principle.

### **Martha Kauppi**

Which is mindset. I'm going to talk about this quite specifically for non-monogamy. I think that culturally we have a monogamy mindset. And in the monogamy mindset, if I'm with one partner and I develop an attraction for another person, all of a sudden I'm in a situation where I have to make a choice. Am I going to be with this person, or am I going to be with this person? This person that I have a long term bond with, a lot of water under the bridge, a certain amount of conflict, we can see our differences, there have been some rough patches, but we also know each other's rough patches. We know all of our strengths and our challenges, a lot has been revealed. There are some incredible strengths there.

Versus a new relationship that is so exciting and so mysterious because it's all one great big rose colored projection. In that early meeting stage, we just want to be as likable as possible, and we're looking to just create a little bond. And we know this much about that person, and there's this much to know, and we know this little bit, whereas with our longer term partner, we know a whole lot more about them, and therefore we can project a lot less.

I can't really make up who my partner of 29 years is, like, I know who she is. I can't pretend she's a completely different person than who she is. But if I'm on a first date with somebody new, all I can

do is pretend, because I absolutely don't know anything about them. This is an example of the monogamy mindset sets us up to make a choice.

**[00:49:14]**

If you're in an open relationship, if you want polyamory to work for you, or any other form of consensual non-monogamy, you have to get yourself in a different mindset. A mindset where if I have a frustration with my partner that does not mean I have to leave them. And if I have an attraction to someone else that does not mean I have to leave. I do not have to make a choice between two partners. I can let relationships find their own level.

And this mindset shift is really important and kind of sneaky. I work with people as a therapist and as a coach who are in open relationships, and have been for a long time, and still fall prey to the monogamy mindset in thinking, but this partner doesn't give me all the things that I want in these particular ways, and so probably maybe I should leave that relationship.

I would say if there are things about this relationship that are toxic, those are reasons to leave a relationship. But if it's just that it isn't somebody who does all of the things, maybe that's not a reason to leave a relationship. You probably have other relationships that meet these needs. And actually this is true of people who are monogamous too. Like you have your friends that you go to movies with, and you have your friends that you have deep long discussions with, and you have your friends that you go out dancing with, and you have your friends that you have sex with.

If we change the idea that everything has to be met by one person, especially in the sex and romance department of things, it really opens up a world of possibilities. So if somebody is kinky in this particular way, but their partner isn't kinky in those ways, and in fact finds those kinks to be anti erotic, just to use one example here, that doesn't mean you have to leave that person. You just go have a kinky play partner as well, or you could have another very serious long term relationship that really thrives in that area.

And in each relationship, any relationship that we might have, it's going to meet certain of our desires and not others. So beginning to think of this as more and instead of, okay, now I have to choose and weed out a bunch of stuff that otherwise is working well, is a big mindset shift. So I hope that made sense.

### **Jaï Bristow**

It did, thank you so much. It's interesting because you talked about it from a non-monogamous perspective, but there was a lot there that I think monogamous relationships can benefit from as well. It ties in with all the other things, because once you realize what's not working in one relationship, or what's missing for you, or something that you would like, one of your needs that you would like that you're not getting, or desires you would like that you're not getting, then you can have the differentiation talk. And I think that's true of all relationship styles.

That idea that when you're in a long term relationship, you know the person, you know what's working, what doesn't, you know what needs are being met which aren't, and then you can meet someone else. And it's very easy to project everything that you're not getting from one partner onto this new person. But the truth is you're projecting that, so if you're in a long term, stable relationship and things aren't working as well, and you meet someone new and shiny and exciting, then it's worth taking the time to actually figure out and get to know the person, actually have the

differentiating conversations with your original partner and all that kind of thing. I think regardless of the relationship style.

**[00:53:06] Martha Kauppi**

I'm going to add one more thing. It takes some years for that differentiation thing to come along. I would be very cautious about ending a longer term relationship, there's stuff in that relationship. It's going to take years to get a new relationship to a place where you have that kind of depth. So don't give that step up so easily, I would encourage you.

**Jaï Bristow**

Thank you. I think that's a wonderful note to finish on. Martha, how can people find out more about you and your work?

**Martha Kauppi**

I'm at [instituteforrelationalintimacy.com](https://instituteforrelationalintimacy.com). You can buy my book *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and Their Clients)*, which is a great self-help manual with 25 worksheets in it at any bookseller, including the big ones that we all know the names of. I'm pretty easy to find, just Google Martha Kauppi or Institute for Relational Intimacy.

**Jaï Bristow**

Amazing. Thank you so much for your time today and for this fantastic conversation.

**Martha Kauppi**

Thank you, what a pleasure.