



## **Boundaries with Your Parents**

**Guest: Matthias Barker**

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### **[00:00:09] Alex Howard**

Welcome everyone to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with my friend Matthias Barker. And we're talking about boundaries in parental relationships. We'll be talking about how we navigate relationships with our parents when we're doing inner work, and we hit those bumpy, difficult places. We need to maybe have some authentic conversation, but also what do we do when that doesn't go to plan?

To give you a little bit of Matthias' background, Matthias Barker is a licensed mental health counselor, specializing in the treatment of complex trauma, childhood abuse, and marital issues. He holds a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling from Northwest University, and is currently located in Nashville, Tennessee.

Matthias is widely recognized for his unique approach in making mental health knowledge and skills accessible to the wider public. Matthias delivers psychoeducational content to a following of over 5 million people. His innovative blend of engaging content, and relevant mental health advice has fostered a vibrant online community centered on healing, personal growth and moving towards meaning in the midst of hardship. So firstly, Matthias, welcome, and thank you for joining me.

### **Matthias Barker**

Yeah, thanks for having me here.

### **Alex Howard**

So this is a conversation that I think is relevant to all of us, because we've all got parents, and for most of us it's not been the smoothest of rides. Maybe we want to give a bit of an opening context around why can our relationship with the people that probably love us most in the world, and the people that also we have so much love for. Why can it be so difficult?

And, particularly, I think when we do inner work, one of the things that we expect is that the relationships in our life are going to get easier. And maybe it's just me, but it seems to be the case that often that's the relationship that often, for a while at least, can feel harder.

### **[00:02:19] Matthias Barker**

I think of growing up and looking back on our childhood, like we grew up in our family home and then when we turned 18, or 20, or whenever you moved out of your house. It's like your parents signed the house into your name and now it's yours. And then you go out into the world, and you're looking around and you're meeting people, and then you realize, well, not everyone else has mold in their basement, that's a little weird.

Or hey, not everyone else has a deck that's leaning left to the side, and it's going to perhaps fall down in the back garden, or something, that's probably not good. And then we start to feel frustrated, and we look at our house in a new way, because we're starting to realize what felt normal to us growing up, what we didn't really think anything of, actually was probably more of a problem than we really gave it credit for. But we're in a bit of a hard situation, because in the same way that if you bought a house and you signed a contract, you signed the lease.

You can't go back to the original buyers and be like, hey, go fix the mold, or hey go fix the back deck. It's your house now. And so the conundrum of, not even just early adulthood but whenever these aha moments fall on us throughout our lives, is we realize that there's damage there, and it is our job to fix it. And that feels deeply unfair. And the complexity of that, can linger over our relationships with our mom and dad, and make things awkward on the low end, but maybe even bitter and frustrating on the high end, maybe even more.

### **Alex Howard**

I think one of the challenges, as we unpick this together but also we have to unpick this in our own work, is that there are exceptions to this. But in the vast majority of cases, we know our parents loved us. And sometimes the things that they did most of an act of love, were the things were actually the most difficult, and the most painful for us. I think sometimes when we recognize our parents love us, loved us, love us, it can make it more difficult to unpack the things that actually caused us suffering, and caused us pain. I'm interested in your thoughts because I think there's a lot of guilt also that then comes in, "well, I didn't do as badly as other people. My parents love me. What do I have to complain about?"

### **Matthias Barker**

Yeah, certainly. I think that there's almost a bad rap that psychotherapy can get for, you go into the office and we talk bad about your parents, and we try to blame them for everything. And I think you're right where there's a lot of folks listening that, I'm not trying to get mad at my parents, and play the victim, or make them the source of all of my problems.

But the reality is that some of the anxiety that we might be experiencing, some of the insecurity, some of the depression, some of the problems that we're having, maybe with our own kids, or in our marriage often have links. Not 100% someone's fault, but I don't know whatever percent is relevant to the person, maybe there is 10 or 20% of this, that has to do with how my mom expressed physical affection, let's say, or how my dad described his emotions, and how he dealt with his anger. And we grow up seeing these patterns of how they interacted in the world, and we wear that. That's the world we grew up in, and we're living in.

And then we go into the current day, we wrestle with these problems and we can look back and see, ah, some of this started back there. Now that doesn't mean we need to go back and start

waving our finger at our parents, or being disrespectful, or we're cutting off relationship in every circumstance. It does mean though, there has to be a way of engaging that, maybe first emotionally and in our own hearts, and then in the relationship with our parents. And I think that order is really important.

### **[00:06:12]**

That cannot just release that, and let us put the past behind us, and put it to rest, but could actually open up pathways of relating to our parents in a more authentic, and even closer way. That's actually the part I don't think it's talked about a lot, is going back and realizing where our parents made mistakes, and then being able to fill in with our own values, and how we want to maybe live our lives. If that's in contrast to our parents, or maybe in some cases a lot like our parents, because some of us had parents who are good examples.

That actually opens up doors for intimacy and closeness. And our fear of approaching that, our avoidance in that out of maybe sometimes a desire to not be disrespectful. Or to not to make problems a bigger deal than they need to be, creates boundaries with our parents that might not even need to be there.

### **Alex Howard**

One of the things that I think is implicit in what you're saying, that I'd like to unpack a bit more because I think it's important, is that the work that we do therapeutically on our relationship with our parents, is often a journey and at different stages of that journey we may need different things. So you were speaking to, for example, the fact that the bad rap, that I think sometimes as you say, justifiably so, psychotherapy can get, is you go in thinking that everything in your life is your fault, and then you realize that everything in your life is your parents fault.

And then you stay there, and it's like you go to this place where basically you identify with the victim child, and that has its place, but that's not necessarily a destination. And so maybe you can speak a little bit, and obviously I know it's different for different people, but speak a little bit to sometimes the therapeutic journey, and maybe some of the chapters on that journey, we can go on as we start to unpack, and unravel that relationship, and that history.

### **Matthias Barker**

Well, I might go back to the analogy of the house, because that's how I like to explain it to clients. There's mold in the basement, and what use is there blaming my parents? They don't own the house anymore, it's my life. Why go back there? And I'm like, hey, fair enough. That's good and fine, it is your house. But the reality is you can't just blame yourself for being a terrible homeowner and having mold in your basement either.

We get distracted by the blame thing, and it feels like the only conversation to be had is, was I just a sensitive kid? Was I just making too much out of it? Am I just particularly anxious and fragile? Am I making too big of a deal? Or was my parent wrong, and they were a bad mom or a bad dad? And the question I have is, okay, why is there mold in the basement? Maybe there was a water leak that you need to fix. That's the reason you go down there. I mean, the reason you go down there is to fix it, and then to clean it up so you can enjoy your basement.

**[00:08:54]**

I think that's the same in our hearts, okay, why go back and rehash all these stories about mom and dad? Well, maybe they were acting in a way that taught you lessons that are creating a problem. For example, that idea of maybe I'm just too sensitive, or I'm just fragile, that my dad wasn't pleased with me, my mom didn't maybe pay much very attention when I cried. And it's hard to talk about because it's not maybe abuse. Maybe you're sitting here and it's like, I didn't maybe have violence from my mom or dad, or I didn't have this cold neglect. But emotionally, there was an impact.

And we feel a bit shameful to admit that, or to explore that, because it doesn't feel like that big of a deal. But when you do go into those stories, and you realize I had some needs there that weren't really attended to, that when I was at university, or when I was dating that girl or boy, or when we moved, when the divorce happened, when my brother died, I was hurting and I was alone. And back then, the emotions I had to express that weren't attended to, or seen, or held, they were shut down.

And what I concluded was that's because something is wrong with my needs, or wrong with my emotions, that there's something wrong with me, that I'm reacting that way. And I don't think there's any need to go in and try to assign blame, and get all mad at your parents for all that. I'm just saying it makes no good sense to blame yourself for it either. That's fine. Let's be fair on both ends. Let's just go in and see, maybe the mold's there because there's a leak, and maybe there's a wound in your heart that needs to be healed, and that has to be taken seriously.

And it's when we go in there and we realize, I just believed I was something pathetic or weak, and the truth can come in and heal that, fix that leak of identity in our own hearts. Then it frees us up, because I'm not constantly trying to earn my parents approval, to prove to my dad that I'm not weak, to prove to my dad that I'm not fragile. I'm not trying to earn my mother's affection, and be the perfect good little boy that will finally get the positive relationship with my mom that I always craved, because I filled that hole in my heart, I fixed that leak.

And that's what I think really reveals the crux of childhood trauma with a parent, is you will act out of that woundedness whether you know it or not. And it will be the driving force animating your relationship with your mom and dad until you heal it, even in very small ways.

The energy that you feel when you're irritated sitting at dinner, and they make that passive aggressive comment, their slight nod of disapproval at your choice and romantic partner. Those questions they ask you about your job, that give you that tinge of inadequacy, that you feel like you really need to almost over-inflate or exaggerate the benefits or the successes, because you need them to feel proud.

Or just all the things that you hide and you try not to bring up because you know that they would criticize. All of that is animated by that wound, and the misunderstanding, or the negative label, whatever word you want to put to it, that you concluded as a kid, to make sense of this moldy basement. So that's how I see the purpose of going back there. What comes to mind for you?

**[00:12:32] Alex Howard**

I think that's it, it also depends upon who our parents are, and how much they can hold that dialog, and that conversation. Some people are very blessed, and they can do this inner work, and they can go back to their mom or their dad, or both parents and say, a bit like you described, "I reflected and what I realized was this. And what I think I really needed was that." And they can take a pause and a breath and go, "wow, I'm really sorry. I wish I'd understood that. How can I hold you now?" That's obviously the ideal scenario.

At the other extreme of that, is a parent that just doubles down their position, and starts to add more wounding and more difficulty to that. And I guess that really opens up another question, which is, because I think this is very nuanced and very personal in the sense that... It always makes me nervous when there's very rigid positions, everyone should go and have a conversation with their parents. And I'm sure you and I have both seen the furthering of suffering that can cause.

So I'm curious as to your thoughts around, as we recognize some of these truths and some of these things within our experience, how do we then make choices about what we do and don't bring to our parents? And if we do bring that, how do we do that in a way which is skillful, and not just going to take pain that's in us, and dump it on them, and cause suffering that maybe 20/30 years later when they're gone, we're actually going to regret.

**Matthias Barker**

I want to give a practical, step-by-step thing that I use that I teach in therapy with my clients that might be helpful for folks watching. But at first what I'll say is if you're feeling anger, and bitterness, and vindictiveness in your heart, and you have to be honest with yourself here, you might be at the stage where you need to have that internal exploration first, before you bring it to mom and dad.

And there's this intuition that we have, where if I could just bring it to mom and dad and then they admit, and they tell me that I'm not crazy. And they tell me that actually, yeah, they were a little bit cold when my brother died and I was crying. And they told me to stop making a fuss about it. That was wrong. And they admit it, then that tension, that pressure that we feel will be released. And it almost feels like our healing is contingent on them doing the right thing now, that they didn't do in the past. And I just want to let you know that, if they couldn't do it in the past, what reasons are you holding on to that make you confident they can do it in the present?

You might not have many. So if you're trusting mom and dad to heal that tension, that woundedness in you, you got to be really honest with yourself, and ask yourself the hard question. What gives me the confidence, and the trust, that mom and dad are trustworthy to hold my wounding and healing?

Now, I would, as for a lot of people, take a step back from that, and say, why don't we hold... Because we're adults now, right? We own the house, that house is in our name. Why don't we fix the basement? Why don't we hold that pain and do that internal work?

And then when we start to feel something like, a bit of understanding, empathy, maybe a little bit of warmth, and I'm not saying warmth in the sense that, we think that what they did wasn't a big deal, or what they did isn't important anymore, nothing like that. I'm just saying there's a stability, a

stoutness in your own spirit that isn't going to be wrecked if things go wrong. That's the environment that I think is safest to be able to approach these conversations.

**[00:16:16]**

So here's the practical bit, I would approach these conversations in like, breadcrumbs. Don't think, oh, I want to talk about my whole childhood, and my whole past in one conversation. No, let's start with a two out of ten, a three out of ten in intensity, and let's practice bringing that to mom or dad, and see how we do there, and then we can change course.

So you're not going to start with the deep, dark trauma that happened in your childhood. You might start with something a bit more on the surface, but that's to test the waters, and to do a little investigation. Do they have the presence? Can they have the patience? Do they have the humility? Do they have the ability to listen?

And here's practically how I'd say to bring that up. I would perhaps start with something like a common goal. I think if you go into it within the first statement that you say is, "you weren't there for me, when..." They're going to leap up on the defensive immediately. And then they're going to start talking about all the excuses, or all the things that they did, and you're going to get a lot of argument, and that's not going to be beneficial.

Starting with something like, "hey, I really am enjoying your presence in my kids lives. I'm loving this stage of life that we're both in. I would love to make it deeper, I would love to make it even closer. Something I've been doing in my therapy is reflecting about childhood and growing up. And there's so many parts of childhood I'm so grateful for. I'm so appreciative for all the sacrifices that you made. And there's some places where I think things were a bit hard, and I've done some processing on that, and come to some acceptance and peace around some of those things. Would you want to talk about some of that? How open are you to me letting you know..."

You can phrase it in whatever verbiage you think your mom or dad would be able to hold it. But starting out with your intention there, and starting with the common goal. We're talking because I want more intimacy. We're talking because I want more closeness. We're talking because I want there to be more understanding. Not because I have a bone to pick with you, I have some sort of revenge I want to get on you. I'm not trying to tell you off. I'm trying to make sure that whatever conversation we have here actually gets us closer.

Now that's going to, for someone who's mature, can hold space for that, really put them at ease and like, "okay, I know why they're bringing up the divorce now," or "I know why they're bringing up the times when maybe I drank too much alcohol, and they were in the backseat when I was driving. I actually want to talk about this to get closer." And then after that, as you're relaying the story, stick as close to you can to the facts of the story and then your internal experience of your emotions.

When we start getting into accusations like, you weren't there for me. You were being reckless, you were being self-absorbed. It's really hard to absorb those things, even for a very mature present parent. But if I can say, "hey, when you were drunk." That's a fact. That's like if we were reading the police report, that's on there, so that's not an accusation. "When you were drunk and you were driving around, I remember feeling really terrified, and really scared, and I would sit back there, and try to be as quiet as possible so that you could focus."

**[00:19:30]**

And reflecting back on that, "I don't know if I've really ever shared with you some of that fear. And I've been processing that in therapy, and realizing some of that fear has actually carried over into my adult life." Now, I'm doing the responsibility to work through that. "I'm not saying that to try to get at you, just thought it would be meaningful to share, and just see what was that like for you? And what's your memory of those experiences?" What are your thoughts?

**Alex Howard**

I wanted to track back to something you said a few minutes ago, just because I think it's really important, that it's being very clear of what that intention is. Because at the heart of what you're saying here, there is a sincere intention towards more connection. And that may be possible, and it may not be possible. And we'll have within us that young child which has this idealized idea of what it wants to happen, in a way, what it needs to happen.

And if what we're looking for, is for mom or dad, as you said earlier, to hold that part of us in a way they couldn't do before, as soon as we feel like they're not, it goes from a reach for intimacy, to an escalating and building up that's likely to add more suffering on both sides. I wanted to really emphasize what you said around, "I've been doing some processing in therapy." In a way the learning to really hold that place for ourselves, and just how important that work is. Because without that work, it's like we can start with the right words and the right intention, but that part of us is going to be leaping for something that it may not be getting.

**Matthias Barker**

That's right. I like to think of it like you're bringing the fruit of your counseling to your parent. You're not trying to go to your parent for the fruit.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's great.

**Matthias Barker**

Because if mom and dad don't respond the way you hoped, which there will always be statements there you didn't hope for. Just to be totally honest and real, it's super common you're going to get the response of, "I tried my best, I did my best. You call me a bad parent." And if you're reactive in that moment, you're like, "no, why can't you just be there for me?" That's going to escalate. But if you can back up and restate your intention "oh, mom. I'm not trying to call you a bad mom. I love you and I'm so appreciative for you. I'm bringing this up, not because I want to criticize you, because I want you to see me, because I want to feel closer to you. And what would make me feel closer to you is that you knew some of my experiences that I had as a kid. It would be meaningful for me to share that, and to get to hear what your experience of that was."

It's all in the energy, too. That's another thing I wanted to say, if you can bring this calm, relaxed energy. I know that might feel impossible for some folks listening now. That's the work in therapy, though, and that can take, we're not talking just weeks and months, that can take a longer time to really work your way all the way around some of that.

**[00:22:39]**

And that's why I also say again, start with breadcrumbs. Don't start with the most intense part of your childhood. Start with something small that you feel like you can have that more grounded sense of calm within. And then if it goes wrong, you don't blow up the whole relationship. You're not losing your temper, you're not yelling at dinner. You can retreat back and say, "okay, hey, let's talk another time. I think I'm going to go home for tonight. We'll bring this back up another time." And you can cut the conversation before, and I would advise cut the conversation if it gets a five or six out of ten intensity. Not when it gets to a ten out of ten intensity. Anything you'd add to that?

**Alex Howard**

The other thing I was thinking... It's an interesting time for me because as you know, I just published a book on how childhood trauma shapes us in adult life. I was having a conversation with a very dear friend of mine, who is a number of years older than me, who has kids a similar age to me. I could see he was giving himself a really hard time because he was reading this book that was helping him see the ways that in hindsight, he wishes he'd been a better father. And it was turning into quite a lot of inner critic, and self-judgment.

The thing that I noticed really helped him get some space from that, was to make the point that it's very tempting to, but it's unhelpful, to judge our actions 40 years ago, with things that we only learned four minutes ago.

**Matthias Barker**

That's right.

**Alex Howard**

And the same thing with our parents. We have the gifts of modern psychology, and understanding, and the privilege of the time to even to do inner work, which our parents may have had. And so although our truth may be true, it doesn't mean they didn't love us, and it doesn't mean they weren't even a good parent, in the understanding and context of that time in history.

**Matthias Barker**

That is such a great point, I love that. The way I like to explain that is my daughter when... I have two kids, I have a daughter and a son. My oldest I remember when we got the ultrasound photo for the first time, and it's just this blobby mess that looks like a cloud at night, or something, I didn't know what it was looking like.

And they explained that, oh, that's her nose and that's her eye. And I remember thinking, oh, I can't wait to find out what she looks like because I was so eager to see what her little face. Does she have my nose or my wife's nose? And then we got another ultrasound a little later on when she was a bit more developed. And still, I'm like, I don't really know.

And then she was born, and I remember looking at her and being like, man, she just looks like every other baby. I thought there'd be all this clarity. And of course, she had a few features, but I don't know, a lot of infants look very similar. And then I remember her growing up and getting close



to her first birthday and still wondering, like, oh, I can't really imagine her as a kid yet. I wonder how she's going to grow up and develop.

**[00:25:37]**

And now she's two and a half. And I look back on that photo of her at a year old, I'm like, oh, that looks just like her. I look at those ultrasound photos and I'm like, I can see it, I can see her, I can know that that's her. And what's funny, too, is I had the same experience with my son, and I can look at both of their ultrasound photos, and I can see, oh, that one's Etta, and that one's Winslow. And I know what they look like now that I've seen them a bit older.

And we forget what it's like to not know things. That's actually a glitch in our memory systems. It is very hard to hold in mind what it's like to not remember what things looked like, or what things were like. It's almost like we backfill our whole memory system with what we've learned now. I cannot look at that ultrasound photo and unsee what I know, even though back then I couldn't see it, now I can't not see it.

And that's what I think it's like being in these moments when we're like, why did I yell? Why did I shut down? Why didn't I go back into their room and see if they were okay? Because it's so hard to unsee what you can see now.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. And what that also reminds me of is I thought I knew a lot about parenting until I had kids.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah.

**Alex Howard**

I thought I knew a lot about how bad my parents were until I had kids. Then I realized that my life circumstance at the point I had kids was easier than theirs was. And then it's like, wow, it's hard when the circumstance is okay, what's it like when it's not? I think this is one of the places that can be a really tricky navigation for people. Where it's holding the truth of how that younger part of them feels, whilst also being an adult and understanding that the parents did the best they can. And it's like how we can hold the child, but also act as the adult.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah. I was thinking even earlier to what you were saying about holding that guilt, and looking back and feeling a lot of remorse for ways that you chose. I wanted to say one thing there, because that I think is relevant to what you just said is, I think part of the pathway to learning how to forgive ourselves is learning how to forgive those who have hurt us.

Because when we can move through that experience of seeing, mom and dad did hurt me and, not but, and they perhaps were trying the best they could. In some cases, people aren't trying the best they can, in some cases, people are acting malevolently. But let's say the vast majority circumstances, maybe they were doing the best with what they had. And it hurt.

**[00:28:29]**

When you learn how to hold that own tension and come to a state of forgiveness, and your own heart towards the people who've hurt you, then you're more emotionally sober. That's an analogy I like. If guilt is this intoxicating force, we're more emotionally sober to see ourselves in the mirror, and be like, "oh, I'm so sad, I can't go back and do things differently" and, not but, "And I have choices now, with what I can do here." And in the same way we can have forgiveness for those who hurt us, we can start to extend forgiveness for ourselves.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's beautiful. I want to spend a little bit of time talking about those situations where these explorations and conversation don't go the way we want them to. And those situations where on the more extreme end, it may be that our parents have strong narcissistic qualities, and lack of empathy, and an inability really to reflect on our experience. Other times it may just be that they've just had such a tough time, they're very defensive, and they can't really go there.

I think sometimes as we do our own inner work, the assumption can be that everyone else around us has also had those insights. Like, we grow, so we look at the world through a different lens, so the assumption is that that change is happening in other places. And sometimes I've seen people get the most wounded when they've come back, for example, from doing intensive inner work on a retreat type place. And they've come back and they've forgiven everyone, and they let people right back into their inner world, and they just get wounded as hard as they have, sometimes harder, because they're actually more open in those places.

I'd love to hear your thoughts on those relationships, particularly parental relationships where we need boundaries, and we need to have edges. And those edges aren't always being respected, they're not always being seen. And even if they're seen, they're not necessarily being treated in the ways that they need to be. What helps us navigate that, and what helps us hold those boundaries when we need to?

### **Matthias Barker**

I think we feel a lot of guilt when it comes to setting a boundary with mom or dad, because we feel like we're being disrespectful. We feel like we're not being appreciative. We feel like we're doing something wrong. And the way that I always like to explain boundaries is really the reason we put in structure. The reason we put in boundaries is because there's been damage.

So if I sprained my wrist, I would need one of those cloth bandages that I'd wrap around. The reason I'm doing that is not because I'm trying to punish my wrist. It's not because I'm mad at my wrist. It's because there needs to be a structure that holds the wrist in place. So that it can only move in ways that are healthy, and prevents it from moving in ways where there can be more damage. It's especially needed if a wound is fragile.

The boundary needs to correspond to the level of damage. So if I've broken my arm, a cloth bandage isn't going to do anything. I need a cast, I need some sort of big wrap around there. If someone ran over my arm with a truck, I would need metal bolts, and surgery, and metal bars holding it in place. One of those big shoulder things that I can move, like a robot.

**[00:31:55]**

So the structure is always in relation to the amount of damage there's been. And the structure is not there as a punishment. It's there to hold the bone in place, or to hold the relationship in place, so that it can have healthy movement as it gets stronger, and prevents it from moving into unhealthy places where we can get re-injured and there's more damage.

And when you have that view of boundaries, you stop feeling guilty for what you're doing and you realize, "I'm doing something that's helping both of us, it's not just I'm helping myself." The, "who cares if mom and dad are lonely or who cares if they're sad? I have to prioritize myself." That's not very compelling for most folks, I find what helps is, "no, I'm helping us. I'm holding our relationship in a place that's healthy, and that's what's best, not just for me, but for both of us."

### **Alex Howard**

That also may require us to be able to, and you touched on this a little bit earlier, to stay grounded when we're being triggered.

They may be saying the very things which are at the core of the inner work that we're doing. And so that protect... Maybe in the past we had to roll over and take it, and now we're working on our boundaries. We want to go from defense to offense. So what helps us to stay present and to not go into that activation?

### **Matthias Barker**

I think of two stages to that process. One is you have to answer the question, would they be willing to participate in this boundary with me? Meaning is this something I can negotiate and talk about openly and directly with them? Because that means that you can have a common goal.

You can say, "hey Mom, I would love to have you over, I'd love to spend time with you. But when you drop by unannounced, and you expect to stay for dinner, and then we're trying to get the kids bathed and ready for bed, it's really throwing off the routine." You can have a conversation, because we both want to have a pleasant evening and to enjoy time together. Let's just have a discussion around the best way to do that.

Now, if like you said, some of us have parents that wouldn't be open to a conversation like that. They would take that with high offense and it would get really intense.

How do I just tell mom no at the door? And I would say two things. One, you're holding the relationship in a structure that's healthy. And like you said, you put a good analogy, if they've always been rolling over you, the healthy thing is to say, no, you can't roll over me. That's actually healthy. That's not punishment, that's not me being vindictive. That's me saying we should have always been acting this way. We should have always had mutual respect. Respect for our time, our proximity, our possessions, our relationships.

So I'm going to hold it there. And if you get frustrated and angry, I don't have control over that. All I can do is hold us in health. And if you demand to be in a place that's unhealthy, then that's not a conflict I'm bringing at you. That's essentially a conflict that you... I'm not the one maybe pushing on the gas pedal, pushing against a brick wall. You are. Does that make sense? Like the energy that powers the other direction?

**[00:35:12] Alex Howard**

It does. The challenge there is when we've been acquiescing all along, and then we put the wall up, what they experience is us pushing back, but what we're actually doing is protecting and defending ourselves. And sometimes the outcome of that change in dynamics can be relationship... It can be critical for the relationship, it can be anything sometimes, or it can be a serious restructuring. And that takes some capacity, because the tendency is, that after a while when we hit too much resistance, is to roll over and have it be the way it was before.

So I guess my question is, I'm interested in what helps us sustain when we're having to restructure these toxic dynamics. And there's a lot of headwinds, a lot of resistance against us doing that.

**Matthias Barker**

I wish I could tell you there was a way to set a boundary where they would be happy with it. I would love to have that answer. I'd be a wealthy man if I had that secret. The reality, though, is if we're playing by the rule that they have to like my boundary, and agree with it in order for my boundary to be valid, that is not a reasonable expectation.

That is you trying to hold two things together that might not be compatible, and you might say, well, it's not worth the big fight, it's not worth the big blow up. I may as well just invite mom in, and serve her dinner and let her over for tea, whatever. Why put up a big fight? But you might not be playing that out over time. You have to think what happens in my own heart if I let mom in, and feel bitter, and a little agitated and resentful, and I hold a grudge, but over 5, 10, 15, 20 years, what happens when one day I'm not as composed, I got little sleep, and then I lose my temper and I yell at my mom?

What happens when my kids see my agitation and bitterness towards my mother, and then pull away from their relationship with their grandmother, because they see how much mom is just completely frazzled by Grandma? You have to look at all those pieces and then ask yourself, what is the bigger fight there? You might say, oh, it's not worth the fight. And I'm like, man, there is a lot more conflict coming. If you avoid the conflict, iterate it over time, than if you had one honest conversation. That might result in a spat, it might result in hurt feelings, and frustration and "fine, if I'm not wanted here, then forget it, I won't come over." But I think there's hope. Yeah, I think there's hope.

**Alex Howard**

I think there's something around knowing our truth and holding our truth. What I felt in what you were saying. It's like they may have their narrative, their reactivities, the history, but what you're really saying is that's what's true for us, and we have to stay true to that.

**Matthias Barker**

Yeah, that's right. And that is holding the relationship in health, it's not reasonable to let the bone heal sideways, and then not enjoy the mobility of having your wrist, and being able to move through your life with an arm. To use the analogy even more, if there is a break in your arm, it deserves to be healed in the right direction. And if your mom, or your dad, is not down for that. If they don't want to join you in that health, you have to make the decision. Am I willing to make my

life exist in these directions that bend me, and damage me, and do not promote my health? Or am I going to let them go?

**[00:39:07] Alex Howard**

Yeah. Matthias, lots of questions I'd like to ask you, but I recognize we're out of time. My final question is tell people how they can find out more about you and your work, and also some of what they can find.

**Matthias Barker**

Thank you so much for having me on here, this was just amazing and a great conversation. I do a lot of workshops. I teach on trauma and healing relationships. I do stuff on marriage and parenting boundaries with parents. So all that can be found on [matthiasbarker.com](https://matthiasbarker.com). You can also find me online on [TikTok](#) or [Instagram](#) @matthiasbarker, all the same, thank you. Thank you so much.

**Alex Howard**

Awesome. Matthias, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.