

Healing Toxic Monogamous Behaviors in Nonmonogamy

Guest: Mel Cassidy

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[00:00:10] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome to this conference all about healing toxic relationships and instead cultivating healthy and happy ones. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts, and today I am delighted to be welcoming back Mel Cassidy. Welcome, Mel.

Mel Cassidy

Thank you for having me.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for joining us. So Mel is a relationship coach and the creator of the *Monogamy Detox Course*. And today we're going to be talking a little bit about the relationship between monogamy and nonmonogamy.

So I know that in some cases, people explore non-monogamy as a sort of response to things that didn't work out in their monogamous relationships. Do you want to say a bit about why you think that is? And does that actually work as a foundation for non-monogamy?

Mel Cassidy

Yeah, I think you'd be hard pressed to find someone who says monogamy has been great for me, and I've never questioned it, ever, it's always been wonderful. Relationships are hard, right? That's the reality. Relationships are... They require work, there are times where it's an easy flow, and there are times where it feels a little more rocky. And what I think happens, and especially as we have more information coming that supports us in understanding non-monogamy, people will have really bad experiences within a monogamous relationship, often feeling it was toxic or abusive or unfulfilling or stifling them in some way.

Sometimes it's just it wasn't a good fit, there's a whole other bunch of reasons we can talk about there. And coming out of that, they go, all I know what I want is I just don't want that. I don't ever want to go back to what that was. And so people start looking at the alternative. So looking at the alternatives, well, what if I just don't do monogamy? What if I do something that's not monogamy? And of course, monogamy is this very clear bandwidth of, like, you're going to have exclusivity, there's one person, it's a narrower vision.

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And non-monogamy is this vast, wide landscape. And when you're coming out of an unhealthy relationship, especially one where you feel constricted and limited in your options, stepping into something where you have this abundance of options is, I mean, it's invigorating, it's rejuvenating, it's inspiring. And so I think many people enter into non-monogamy with that idea of, I'm looking for that inspiration. I'm looking to feel alive again.

I'm looking to connect to myself and my agency, but also with other people who might see me more than my previous partner did, might understand me better than my previous partner did, who might affirm me more than my previous partner or partners have done. And I know that sometimes therapists in the past have pathologized non-monogamy and polyamory as like a maladaptive response to a bad relationship ending or struggles in an existing relationship.

And I think let's not pathologize it, let's acknowledge that it can be that and that that's okay. As human beings we have permission to explore. We can go and explore something to decide, is this actually for me or not? And I mean, I don't think that non-monogamy is for everybody, but I do think that the journey of exploring non-monogamy can be so helpful for unpacking what all the toxic things that were happening in monogamy were.

Jaï Bristow

Right.

Mel Cassidy

And to unlearn them, to shake them out of our system. Because most of the time, the things that are happening in monogamous relationships that are unhealthy, you're not just going to get rid of them by suddenly practicing non-monogamy. They do carry over. And a lot of those have to do with our cultural conditioning, the gendered roles that we take on, the ideas of ownership and control in relationships, the expectations of being that your person is going to be your be all and end all, you're together till death do you part.

The expectations of mind reading and enmeshment and all of those pieces, those all stem from patriarchal ideas and very limited ideas about how we are able to relate. Getting out of that relationship structure can help you shake out of those limiting ideas about relationships.

Jaï Bristow

100%. And I think it's so interesting you talk about how non-monogamy is a very broad and vast pool that just is anything that isn't the traditional monogamous view or set up or framework that people are familiar with. And then within that, of course, there's what's known sometimes as not so honest non-monogamy or not so ethical non-monogamy, depending upon how we talk about it.

So there's, of course, like you say, when people are struggling in a relationship, some of the tendencies are to cheat, some are to open up the relationship and have that conversation with a partner. Some are to bring in a new person into the existing relationship. Sometimes people escape and have what's known as emotional affairs. Sometimes people escape and have sexual affairs.

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Sometimes it's just about flirting and feeling re-empowered and reconnected to oneself. There's a lot of different ways that we can step outside of the realm of traditional monogamy and explore something else because we're feeling trapped by traditional monogamy. And so I think it's important to contextualize that and to talk about how when we're going to be talking about different forms of non-monogamy whilst there are different ways of doing it, maybe contextualizing a bit the forms of non-monogamy, whether that's polyamory, relationship anarchy, honest non-monogamy, ethical non-monogamy.

There's all these terms that are thrown around these days, but maybe we can contextualize a bit about the types of non-monogamy that we're going to be exploring today.

Mel Cassidy

Yeah, thank you for naming that. I think of it as what you're describing in those dishonest ways, that's messy non-monogamy and I've definitely been there, done that. It's now thankfully far behind me. And I think that messy non-monogamy, again, comes from those places of shame and the constrictions that we feel in our dominant cultures today that we're not allowed to talk about the fact that we are unhappy in a relationship and so we just go and cheat instead.

We're not allowed to have emotional needs that our partner can't meet, we have to dump all our emotional needs on our partner, but when we can't do that, we go have emotional affairs. I think that is symptomatic of the restrictions that patriarchy and colonialism and all those pieces put on the ways that we relate. And so what we're talking about with non-monogamy is definitely the honest non-monogamy, right. What becomes possible in how we do relationships when we can be honest and let go of that shame constriction around having desires, having needs, having a desire for more sex, having a desire for less sex, right?

That there is an inherent liberation in that level of honesty and authenticity. I really am a big fan of the term consensual non-monogamy because I like to view consent as a collaborative process. And so if you view relationships as a collaborative process, that means everyone has to have agency and everyone has to be able to speak up in that.

And when we all have that space to have our voice and be heard and be understood and the capacity and skills to hear and understand our partners, then so much more becomes possible, and what is possible is done with honesty and compassion. As part of growth and healing in relationships rather than something that causes harm and constriction in relationships.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's fantastic. Sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off.

Mel Cassidy

Oh, I was like I should probably name some of the types of non-monogamy. So, like, polyamory is defined as consensual non-monogamy, so multiple relationships, multiple loving relationships of the full knowledge and consent of all involved. But not all non-monogamous relationships fall under the umbrella of polyamory. People can have kink based open relationships. People will sometimes just be like, oh, I'm just openly dating. I'm not labeling it as anything.

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There's swinging relationships as well, relationship anarchy, which is what I practice, de-centers the sexual component of relationships and really focuses on resourcing support through community care and mutual aid rather than getting onto that escalator with a single person and that's your pinnacle of achievement as a human being. And even within polyamory, there's many different forms. There's solo-polyamory where most people, myself included, would say I'm in a primary relationship with myself and we don't necessarily cohabit with partners or look to get onto that escalator with partners.

And then there's partnered polyamory where people have a primary relationship and then they date additional people outside of that. And then there's polyfidelity where people might have multiple partners and they're all on that we're together in a life path on this relationship escalator together. And that's just a smattering of examples. There's so many ways. Get 100 people in a room who practice non-monogamy, you'll have 100 different styles of non-monogamy in that room.

Jai Bristow

I think that's really important to name that there's lots of different ways of doing it, including within the very sort of honest, consensual non-monogamy, right? As well as less honest. I love the term messy non-monogamy, I think is a great term. I hadn't heard that one before. And so for people, I think that's one of the first things to differentiate and to talk about in this context of moving away from monogamous relationships that feel that they're not supportive or feel restrictive or feel harmful in some way, is to differentiate between messy non-monogamy and consensual, honest, ethical, non-monogamy, which are all those three descriptors.

Sometimes it's known as ethical non-monogamy, sometimes consensual non-monogamy, and sometimes honest non-monogamy, and that's all umbrella terms for what it says on the tin, basically. And so I think that first differentiation is super important. And in the first edition of the Relationship Super Conference, I talked with Martha Kauppi about building and opening up relationships and moving into from monogamy into non-monogamy. And that's available on the Conscious Life platform for anyone wanting to watch that.

So then you were talking about once we have this framework of... We'll call it honest non-monogamy today. Once we have this framework, there's different things that it doesn't necessarily mean that there's different ways of doing it, but it also doesn't necessarily mean that we have all the skills needed to enter into it, right, because we're still informed by all the expectations that we had with monogamy.

So maybe you can say a bit more about once we've established and separated those two and that we're transitioning into this honest non-monogamy, which you talked about at the beginning, what are some sort of traits or unhelpful... I don't like using the word toxic so much because that's such an extreme word, but yeah, some harmful traits or patterns that can come up in these new relationships that are still influenced by the monogamy expectations.

Mel Cassidy

Well, I think what happens in our nervous system is really fascinating. So if you go into the wisdom of somatic experiencing and anytime that we are faced with a novel experience, our nervous

system goes through this little check and the nervous system goes, am I safe? This is a new thing, this is not what we were expecting, are we safe here? And if we have enough information to know whether we're safe or not, we can go into the responses. If I'm not safe, I'm going to have some strategies for safety. If I am safe, I chill out.

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But when we are facing something like moving from monogamy into non-monogamy, we may not yet have enough information to know whether we are safe or not. So we get stuck in that process of orienting. Or at least there's a risk of getting stuck in that process of orienting. And the way that we deal with that ambiguity of I don't know if this is safe yet, and this can happen even if it's what you really want, even when I am 100% committed, I really want to be polyamorous. I really want to do this honestly, but oh my gosh, I have no context to know if what I am doing is sensible, is healthy, is good for me. I have no idea.

And so within that ambiguity, we will default to what we know to be strategies for safety. And what do we know to be strategies for safety? All the trappings of monogamy. That's what I call the monogamy hangover, right? That comes in because we're faced with the unfamiliar. This, I think, is something really important to remember when we notice that we have patterns in our lives of falling into unhealthy relationships is that our nervous systems are not always brilliant at recognizing the difference between what's healthy and unhealthy.

Our nervous systems recognize what is familiar as healthy and what is unfamiliar as scary and unknown and let's not go there. I want to stick with the madness that I understand. I know how to handle this chaos. I'm experienced at handling this chaos. In that space of ambiguity, we default back into the old monogamy patterns because they are familiar, we know how to do them. I see this play out with gender stuff too, right? We go back into the role that we played before, when we're scared, when we're unsure, when we just don't know that there's another way of doing it.

So for someone just starting into the journey of honest non-monogamy, the pieces of monogamy behavior that are going to come up are expecting someone to be your person, your soulmate, your life partner or whatever that is. And that can sometimes look like just really deep diving and investing into new relationships very quickly, which I think is something we all do, whether monogamous or non-monogamous. We look for safety in our relationships by going into a deep fantasy of who we hope the other person is.

And over time, hopefully the reality that comes in is not too different from the fantasy. But I see people do that. There's also this feeling that we can sometimes have of being like a kid in a candy store where you're like oh, I finally get to try everything and I can have this all. And so in that ambiguity and that anxiety with that we overcompensate. We gorge ourselves on relationships and connections and new experiences, which can be an amazing learning experience, but it can also be overwhelming. And then in the burnout from that overwhelm, again, we're going to default back to old monogamy behaviors.

Another one that I see come up in those monogamy behaviors is the unspoken expectations. There's a handful of ways to do monogamy, right, and in certain cultures it's very clear about how you're expected to do monogamy and we don't have to talk about it a whole lot. You can default your way through monogamy a lot of the time, but as soon as we are doing things outside of that, we have to talk more about what it is. It is never as simple as well, I'm polyamorous, you're polyamorous, we have so much in common, look at that, we should date. It's much more nuanced.

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And to practice those communication skills can be very challenging because in monogamy, a lot of people have experienced that shame of like, well, if I have to ask my partner for something, they're going to feel like they have failed me. Or my partner takes it as a critique and has an emotional reaction to that. So I just stop asking them. So learning how to more clearly communicate is one of those skills that we have to develop. And I mean, monogamous people will benefit from that skill too. But again, it's one of those default things that we go back into.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. There's so much in what you've just said that I'm just like yes, yes, yes! I love what you were talking about, about how the nervous system when it's in a new situation, is unsure whether it's safe or not, will default to what's familiar rather than necessarily what's safe. And I think that's so important, not just for non-monogamous relationships, it's so important in so many areas of our lives, but especially in relationships because it just creates spaciousness and understanding and compassion for why so many of us repeat the same patterns again and again and again and again, right?

Because until we learn to find a new path and to create and to do the sort of trauma healing that's needed in relationships where we kind of create safety and support in whichever relationships we're in, whether that's with ourselves, with family, with friends, with loved ones, with a primary partner, with multiple partners, with just one partner, it doesn't matter. It's really needed to create that safety and security and then that's where all the other skills come in. That learning to communicate, like you were saying. And I love the term the monogamy hangover, right?

This idea that you're defaulting to what's familiar even if it's not what you actually want anymore or even if it's not supportive anymore. And so I think that's so important. To name that, to recognize that along with all the other wonderful things you were saying. And there's one extra piece I want to bring in here, which is sometimes, again, we've talked about there's a lot of different ways of doing non-monogamy and there's not one right or wrong way, right?

And so sometimes people come out of an intense monogamous relationship and they just want to casually date for a while and they're casually dating different people. And it doesn't mean that they're suddenly polyamorous or want to be non-monogamous all the time, but it's a totally legitimate form of non-monogamy to explore for a while. As long as a person is being honest with themselves and with other people. And that's why honest non-monogamy is such an umbrella term.

And so you don't have to be, if you're watching this and you're thinking, I'm relating to some of this, but I'm not polyamorous, I'm not non-monogamous, that's okay. Like, there's different ways of exploring. I'm currently in a monogamous relationship with myself and that's going great, and I'm still learning a lot from this conversation, right? So I think it's really important to name... You know, similar to Meg John Barker's work, which I know we're both fans of, like, you don't want to go from one set of rigid rules of monogamy straight into another set of rigid rules.

So just because one thing's not working doesn't mean you have to jump and do the complete opposite and suddenly become, and I've had this experience of dating someone who they had a long term monogamous relationship that no longer worked, so suddenly they were polyamorous

because they were dating multiple people at once, but what they really wanted was just some time and space where they didn't have commitments, but instead everyone that they were dating were getting mixed messages and they were unable to commit even to the fact that they were non-monogamous because they weren't.

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And so, again, I think that honesty, you were talking about honesty and compassion earlier, or honesty and kindness is sometimes used, but that honesty is so vital to have with oneself so that we can have it with other people.

Mel Cassidy

And I think that there's a potential for polyamory to, and for any kind of non-monogamy actually, to help highlight those things for us and to confront us with the need to be more honest. I've seen this happen for a lot of people, and this has happened for me too, that when we come out of monogamy into non-monogamy, instead of having one partner who's reflecting back the things in ourselves that we are perhaps uncomfortable with, we suddenly have multiple partners who might reflect back the things that we are not working on.

And I know in my relationships I had a pattern for years of dating CIS men who were emotionally unavailable. I'm sure I'm not the only person in the world who's had that experience. I've done a lot of work to figure out the experience of men in our culture today and why that is so, and I have a lot of compassion for that and that's something that I am very passionate about supporting, is for men to come back into emotional relationship with themselves. But that aside, I kept having this pattern and it was the familiarity of it.

And I got to a point where I had several partners who were CIS, het males who were in different ways emotionally unavailable or would be emotionally available for one thing, but not for this other thing. And I had to take a step back and go, what is happening here? Why am I drawn to all of these people? And then one day I caught myself saying something to my dad in a conversation that I had said to one of my partners and I was like, oh my God, I'm doing it right now. There's this pattern of familiarity I got from my dad of men being emotionally unavailable, must be safe.

And I was just repeating that over and over and it was so amplified by having multiple partners that I was like, okay, I got some work to do, called up my therapist and started to explore that. I think even when we are approaching relationships with that conscious mind, with that intention to be doing things in a healthy and honest way, it is sometimes very hard to escape the patterns that we hold.

And this is where I think that, like an example you shared of someone who's just gotten out of a long term monogamous relationship and just wants to openly date for a little while. I think it can be so refreshing to do that because in doing so, we learn more about ourselves and that can be so healing for ourselves if we can embrace that and take that and grow with that.

Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And in my case, the issue was that the person was so used to having fallen back on familiar patterns right, of having very deep intense connections with all of the people that they were dating. And so no one realized that they were just, including themselves, realized that they

were just casually dating because that's not what they were doing. They were somewhere in between where I think that's what they wanted, but they didn't know how to do that because they'd never done that before and so they ended up having...

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And most of the people they were dating were only dating them whilst they were dating multiple people. And so even though each person knew they were dating multiple people, there was still that sense of when each person was with them of feeling very like they were the primary person kind of thing, and then that created a little bit of miscommunication, let's say.

What I'm really hearing in what you've shared is just how much non-monogamous relationships can amplify and accelerate both seeing one's patterns and then working with those patterns. Because it's not just with one person where you can make it all about that person and any issues you have, you can just point the finger and blame.

When you have five people and you're having all the same issues, you have to ask yourself what's the common denominator here?

Mel Cassidy

Absolutely. The problems in monogamy and nonmonogamy are the same. It's the same root cause. And all of that comes from the unhealthy ideas and notions that we are handed about relationships. I think the model of the nuclear family especially, it's so harmful in so many ways because it encourages this isolation away from community. And I've seen people jump into exploring non-monogamy who, much as we sometimes do in monogamy, like, they lose touch with their friends, they drop the relationships that were non-sexual.

And it's suddenly like, you're only interesting to me if there is a potential of a sexual relationship or a romantic relationship. And that still comes from that nuclear family model that I'm looking for that person to have a secure base to explore my life from. And that negates the fact that as human beings, we did not grow up in the nuclear, we did not evolve as a species, in the nuclear family model. We emerged through communities, through villages, through tribes.

And within that, the dyad relationship is not the pinnacle, it is the community that is supportive. And there are very few communities, I think, that still practice this without the influence of Western culture. But we can see it in a lot of traditions around the world that the communitarian cultures where it is not just about the individual family. We are all family together.

We are all in this together and resourcing ourselves, not just through our partners, not just through that individualism that our culture encourages today, but resourcing ourselves through a network of relationships. Finding that secure attachment through a network of relationships instead is actually a much more stable base to live one's life from.

Jaï Bristow

100%. And I think it's so interesting in what you're saying, well, first of all, I don't think yes, it's a Western colonial perspective of that monogamy, it came from Christianity, et cetera. But no one is in a relationship with just one other person. No one. Even people who are monogamous, who are married, they still have friends, they still have work colleagues, they still have family members,

whether biological, chosen, adopted, whoever, they might have children, they might have I mean, that comes under family, but there's just so many people in their lives that they're relating to.

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And often when they're not getting their needs met through their partner, they'll be getting their needs met through their friend or friends or that friendship group. And we all have these different ways of relating to multiple people. And yeah, I want to go on a tangent, but I'm aware of time, so I won't. And the other thing I'm really hearing and what you're saying, like you said, the issues that you have around relationships are the same, whether monogamy, non-monogamy, whether with intimate romantic relationships, sometimes they'll show up in your friendships as well.

Because ultimately, I made a joke earlier about what's the common denominator, but we have to and we point this out in this conference and there's a whole day dedicated to it, but we have to work primarily on our relationship with ourselves. We have to understand what our relationship patterns are because they're going to show up. Maybe they'll look slightly different with slightly different people, but they're going to keep showing up in all our relationships.

So ultimately this conversation isn't really about monogamy or non-monogamy, it's about those behaviors that are harmful or that are hindering us in relationships, are going to show up regardless. But the other thing that I'm also really hearing in what you're saying is how much people from mainstream culture, in this case monogamous culture, can learn from people in alternative models because we're having to reassess relearn and it's not about... There's no rulebook.

We can either create our own rules and yes, it means that sometimes we'll feel unsafe and we'll default back to what's familiar, which is what we grew up with, what we learned, the monogamous structure, but it also gives us the opportunity to create new forms of safety, to figure out who we really are, what we really want, when we're not being told what we should want.

And I think that's really important. But my question is about people who sometimes use non-monogamy as a way of... Because we've talked about how non-monogamy can be very healing, but sometimes people use non-monogamy to avoid healing those patterns. We showed how non-monogamy can sometimes amplify those patterns because there's more people, but sometimes people find a way of using it to dissociate from themselves, to be so involved in all these different relationships. So maybe you could talk a bit more about that.

Mel Cassidy

Yeah, thank you. It happens. It happens a lot. And what I think is interesting within, certainly in the polyamorous community and discourse, there's a hesitancy about talking about this because there's that stigma and that fear of like, are we going to be pathologized that non-monogamy is just this commitment avoidance or whatever. And obviously I don't think that's the nature of non-monogamy necessarily, but I think we need to talk about the fact that that is something that some people do.

And when we are exploring non-monogamy as a maladaptive response to trauma and hurt and pain in relationships, I do see it come up as this kind of bypassing. It's a one man or one woman or one non-binary person wrecking ball going through the community, and I'm sure I have my own phase of that. And it comes from that running away from yourself. Just as we can distract

ourselves with substances or shopping sprees or video games or anything else, right? We can distract ourselves from the pain through connecting with others.

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And I think it's such a compelling way to distract ourselves from the pain and hurt that we're feeling. Because if I'm having sex every single day, I'm getting all those lovely endorphins every single day, my body is getting touched, I'm feeling some form of validation. It can be very effective for building a wall around my pain and hurt. And yet, when we build a wall around the things in us that hurt and we're connecting with others at the same time, we run the risk of disconnecting from our sense of empathy and compassion.

And I think we can then end up playing into, whether we mean to or not, we can end up playing into some of the dehumanizing tropes that come out of the very patriarchal gaze of relationships. And that's true for any gender. That we start to see the people that we're engaging with as objects for meeting our desires rather than human beings that we're sharing connection with. Let's acknowledge where that is coming from, I've heard Gabor Mate talk about this so many times that when he has met someone with addiction, he's not like, why the addiction? Why the pain?

And I think it's the same question that we need to ask ourselves when we find ourselves doing that, I call it Pokemoning. Like I want to catch them all, I just want to date all the people. When we find ourselves doing that, it's a really valuable check to ask ourselves, okay, what pain have I been experiencing that I am finding alleviation from through doing this? And have I actually addressed what that pain is?

Jai Bristow

And a lot of the time the answer is no. And I think that's what's really interesting, right, is that relationships, again, whether monogamous or non-monogamous, can be a real tool to reflect back to you what needs to be worked on. It can be a tool to become closer to yourself, to better understand yourself as you're reflected by someone else and also by seeing what your triggers are, what your points of activation are, why am I having such a response to this person not doing the dishes, for example.

For me it was the toothpaste. It was whenever I had a partner who didn't put the lid on the toothpaste, it would drive me absolutely nuts, like completely disproportionately. And of course it's always not about the toothpaste lid and about something else going on. And I think relationships can be a wonderful mirror to oneself, but we can also use relationships like we use many other tools and distractions to avoid.

I think that's easier to do when you have multiple relationships because it's easier to sort of juggle and you know, your other partners are getting maybe some of their needs met by other people or having more deeper intimate relationships, so you can kind... Juggle a lot of people and never get too deep. Whereas if you have a relationship with just one person, people still do the exact same thing with one person, we were talking about the Barbie movie before, you know, when Ken asked for a low commitment... I can't remember the phrase.

Mel Cassidy

Low commitment, casual girlfriend.

[00:36:35] Jai Bristow

Exactly. The low commitment, casual, long-term girlfriend. I think that is a way that people might do that, for example, in a monogamous relationship. Where they sort of take what they need from the relationship and what they want, but they keep the other person at arm's length. And it also can show up in non-monogamous relationships where sometimes it's less noticeable because there are more people involved and sometimes it's very noticeable but it has an impact either way.

Mel Cassidy

On bringing it back to what you said earlier about our self relationship and the importance of that in healing. I think that in our society that tries to encourage us into these enmeshed codependent partnerships, we are not empowered for self resourcing. So I talk about self resourcing as we self resource ourselves emotionally. We can self resource ourselves socially. Like I can learn how to engage with strangers and make conversation and find connection.

I can resource myself emotionally by having processes for understanding my emotions. I can do art, I can do journaling, I can resource myself practically. I know how to fix things in my home, I know how to take the garbage out and things like that. I can resource myself erotically. I can take care of my creative needs, I can take care of my sexual needs. And what the dominant society does is tell us you cannot resource yourself, that is selfish. You can only resource other people and you have to wait for them to resource you.

And in a monogamous relationship that leads us, that's the fast track to codependency which I think is one of those things that the Barbie movie illustrated so well in the way that Ken relates to Barbie. And also in non-monogamous relationships, if we aren't prioritizing that relationship with ourselves, what we're doing is further spreading the external resourcing without ever figuring out how to do that ourselves.

And I'm not saying that we need to be completely self resourcing in that hyper individualistic way because when we do that we lose our space in the wider relational ecology. But we need to cultivate that in ourselves so that we are able to connect with, I would say, like a full cup or as full a cup as possible. That we are coming in with something to be present with, not just wanting to take.

Because I think that's one of the most toxic aspects of relationships is when we are coming into connection purely to take. And we'll do that if we feel empty inside. We'll do that if we don't have the resources ourselves. And I think that going back to the toxicity in modern masculinity a lot of that has come about because of that patriarchal trope of like the man is here to take the sex. The man wants to take and conquer and dominate.

And now we're in this space where women are going like I don't want to endlessly give. I want to have things too. And we don't have enough resources and support for men especially, but for all genders to learn how to be able to step out of that taking, grabbing mode and into a space where it's like there are things I can resource myself with and then sometimes self resourcing looks like reaching out to somebody else to ask for their help.

[00:40:17] Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. And I think it's so important that the options aren't either codependency or hyper independence, right? There's some middle ground that we can play with.

Mel Cassidy

Interdependency.

Jaï Bristow

Exactly. Interdependency. And I like what you were saying about the empty cup. And I always use the metaphor like you have to put your own oxygen mask on first before you can help others. And it makes me reflect on an interview I did for this conference with Dr Betty Martin who offered a framework on boundaries and on our rights and responsibility, where she was talking about our inner landscape, thoughts, feelings, as well as anything we put in our body as our right.

Like, we have the right to think what we like and to feel what we like, but it's also our responsibility. And so people can watch that whole interview on this conference if they want to know more. But I think it's really interesting in this conversation as well, right? So that it's not trying to get someone else to be responsible for our inner landscape, and it's not trying to impact someone else's inner landscape, but it's part of taking responsibility for our inner landscape is knowing when we need to resource ourselves and when we need support in resourcing.

And that's part of taking responsibility, asking for support, asking for help, not demanding it, but asking is part of that taking responsibility. So I'm aware of time, but there's a couple more questions I want to ask you. We talked about how the similar traits, that it's the similar issues in monogamy or non-monogamy that come up, that if people have toxic patterns, toxic behaviors, toxic traits, they'll come up in both relationships. So I guess that answers my question of can non-monogamous relationships be toxic?

And I know we don't want to say that it's not that all non-monogamous relationships are toxic, it's not that non-monogamy is toxic, it's just that there are people who have harmful and unhelpful behaviors, whether they're working on them or not, that are going to impact the people they're relating with, regardless of the relationship format.

Now, the main difference I've noticed with monogamy and nonmonogamy is that because monogamy has a framework it's often easier to spot the, let's call them toxic traits, the harmful traits, the behaviors, because you know what it should, quote, unquote look like. Whereas in non-monogamy, especially if people are new to non-monogamy, then you don't know what to expect. You know it's going to be different.

And therefore there's sometimes more acceptance or more enabling, I should say, of certain toxic behaviors. And I know from my own experience that my first non-monogamous relationship was exactly that. It was now, in hindsight, a very toxic, emotionally abusive relationship. But I was unaware because I was like, oh, it's just because I'm not used to non-monogamy and this is normal behavior, non-monogamy, and the issue is me, and I should adapt and the whole time making it all...

[00:43:26]

And thankfully, I very quickly, within the start of this relationship, found a whole community of non-monogamous, polyamorous people who had been doing it for a long time and had very healthy, loving relationships and were able to give me the same feedback that my monogamous friends would give me in a monogamous relationship of, hold on, this isn't normal behavior. This person shouldn't be treating you this way. Like, no, this is not what non-monogamy is.

This is this person who has some very toxic traits that are harming you and the relationship and that need to be addressed. So maybe you could speak a little bit more to that?

Mel Cassidy

Yeah, I mean, I think the example you shared there is a great example that comes up very often where people are made to feel that their reaction to what's going on is completely their own responsibility, and I think that's really unhealthy. When we are in a relationship, we're existing in an ecology together and we then have an impact on each other.

So even if I'm off dating this other person over here, if you have a reaction about that, it's not just about you. You are responding to something that I'm doing that has to do with this other relationship, and it is my responsibility to at least listen, tune in, understand, have compassion and engage with you about that. And then we work collaboratively to go, okay, so what's possible here? What would your needs be? What am I able to shift to support your needs without discarding the humanity of this other person? Right?

And I think this is one of those pieces that people in non-monogamous situations have gotten into saying like, oh, just deal with your own stuff. Don't put it on anybody else because of the overwhelm. When we get overwhelmed, we shut down from empathy with other people. And when folks are doing that and they don't have that capacity to engage with the strong emotional reactions, the jealousy, the insecurity, all of that, that to me is an indicator, like, you're overwhelmed, you're tapped out.

You need to change that because you're losing capacity. You may be in that bypassing date all the people avoid the pain kind of place. The other thing that I see come up very commonly in non-monogamous situations is toxic triangulation. So there are healthy forms of triangulation, which I think is really important to acknowledge that, a couple can go into a therapist, that is a healthy form of triangulation.

But in unhealthy triangulation, I think of Cartman's drama triangle with that. We go into this mode where we seek out a third party to project something onto as a way to create an illusion of stability in a dyad. And non-monogamy, having multiple people involved, kind of sets itself up for that. And so very commonly I see that middle person, the person who's dating two or more people feel like they're stuck in the middle and having to play mediator and maybe playing into that role of rescuer.

And then when the other partners, if one person has some insecurity come up or has a need that isn't being met or feels some kind of envy of the other person, the other partner of their partner, that can play into situations of triangulation. Sometimes the person who's that pivot partner, the hinge, can play into the triangulation with not communicating transparently with everybody.

[00:47:12]

I could say to one partner, like, oh, I can't make that date on Friday because my nesting partner really needs me that night, but my nesting partner doesn't actually need me that night, I'm just trying to avoid that date on Friday for some reason. There's all sorts of unspoken things that come up in that triangulation and one thing that I found to be almost universally true is that whenever drama erupts in a non-monogamous relationship, it is because communication has happened without someone present that should have been there for it.

Or that communication has been incomplete, basically. And when that continues unchecked, because when we get scared going back to that, like we can't orient to safety, when we get scared, we will make up stories to base our nervous system response on. And very often those stories are the worst case scenario so that we can really ensure that we are doing everything we can to find safety. So we will catastrophize. And when we catastrophize, then that elevates the drama in a relationship.

And then the third thing that I see happen is when people haven't really taken that time to explore this monogamy hangover, to question all of the things that they're carrying over. I love Meg John Barker's *Rewriting The Rules* because I think it offers such a great guide for what are those questions to ask yourself. And I think they've done such a wonderful job in pulling those together as a resource for the community.

So really questioning those things, asking yourself like, why is it I prioritize sex as part of my relationships? Why is it that I am attracted to these kinds of people? Why is it that I think sex should look this way? What if it could look that way? When we haven't done that questioning we're more likely to fall back into, I think, the most unhealthy parts of monogamous behaviors whenever we're threatened or feel anxious about our safety. And then that is going to have a harmful impact on our non-monogamy.

Jai Bristow

Absolutely. And I think it's really important to name some of these patterns, some of these traits that are unhelpful, that are toxic in non-monogamy. Not to say again, I can't repeat this enough, that non-monogamy is the issue, but that these things come up and that we need sometimes more help spotting them. You were talking about the triangulation and about how incomplete communication and then catastrophizing and creating stories in our head which are so familiar.

But it was also evoking for me another form of triangulation, where sometimes there's one person who... It's not always triangulation, it's what I sometimes call the negative ripple effect, where if one person is exhibiting toxic or harmful behaviors that's going to have an impact. Not just they'll maybe talk, they'll do something to their partner, then their partner will be impacted and that in turn will impact that person's other relationships because they'll be impacted in whatever way negatively and will therefore talk about it or need to process it with their other partners.

Then their other partners will take that on and will be worried about their partner's relationship with that other person so they'll talk to one of their other partners about that and it just creates a sort of negative ripple effect. And this can be true as well in friendship circles, it can be true as well... But it has a certain flavor in non-monogamy and a certain ripple effect.

[00:51:04]

So it's super important to be able to recognize the behaviors that are unsupportive, that are harmful and not just bypass them, not just allow them, because we don't want to name that there's anything wrong at all going on in non-monogamy. And to just accept, like we've said, again and again and like you mentioned at the beginning, it's the same issues. It's the same issues happening, it's the same unhealthy patterns. And again, we all have them.

There is no perfect person who had the perfect childhood, the perfect parents, the perfect relationships, even people with the most secure attachment styles, even people who have done a ton of work on themselves. Even your best therapist is human and is doing their best. And when two humans relate with each other, it creates one and one equals three because there's two humans and then there's a field between them which is being impacted. But when you're doing non-monogamy, I can't do math anymore because if you add a person, it's no longer one plus one equals three or even one plus one plus one equals however many.

Mel Cassidy

I've done the math. It's 21 relationships.

Jaï Bristow

21 relationships. Thank you. That explains why I had so many issues in my thurple.

Mel Cassidy

And that's between three people. Someone did the math for me for like a formula to keep amplifying it, but it is exponentially complex. And what you're describing, that vortex kind of effect where we get pulled into the drama, I think that also happens because of that enmeshment codependent behavior that we've learned.

And that combined with the shame and the fear of being misunderstood about non-monogamy, we don't reach out to elders, we don't reach out to therapists, we don't talk to people outside of our situation about it who might be skilled as a helping professional to give us the reflection and insight that we're looking for.

And so I always tell people, there's four people you need to include in your relationships, no matter what. You need peers, absolutely. You need some kind of counselor or therapist. You need some kind of coach, and you need some kind of embodiment guide. And none of these should be people who you date.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's so important. And I interviewed Kathy Labriola for this conference, who talks about aging and polyamory but also talks about polyamory elders so I recommend people check that out if they want to know more. Mel, thank you so much for your time today. I think we've gone well over time, and I feel like I could still talk to you for another few hours, but I really appreciated this conversation. How can people find out more about you and your work?

[00:53:56] Mel Cassidy

Oh, thank you so much, Jaï, this has been delightful, as always. So if folks are interested in knowing more about what I do, you can find me online on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#) @radicalrelating. My website is radicalrelationshipcoaching.ca because I am in Canada. And then my monogamy detox course, you can find out more about at monogamydetox.com.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic, thank you so much.