



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Ritu Bhasin

Guest: How to Navigate Toxic Friendships

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[00:00:09] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Ritu Bhasin and we're going to be talking about the importance of belonging and particularly about belonging within friendships.

To give you a bit of Ritu's background, Ritu is an award-winning speaker, author and expert in belonging, equity, leadership and empowerment, and is the CEO of Bhasin Consulting Incorporated, a renowned DEI consulting firm. She is a passionate advocate for authenticity and has presented to hundreds of thousands globally and coached over a thousand professionals. She's living proof of what can happen when you stand in your power while fighting the hate and hardships in your way. And she's the author of several books, including her recent book *We've Got This: Unlocking the Beauty of Belonging*. So, welcome, Ritu. I am super excited to get into this conversation together.

Ritu Bhasin

As am I. Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

So I'd love to start, your new book, *Belonging*, you talk about the importance of connection and belonging. I'd love you just to give a little bit of context of when you speak of belonging, what is that and why is it so important to all of us?

Ritu Bhasin

So I wrote my new book called *We've Got This: Unlocking the Beauty of Belonging* because of my childhood experiences with struggling with who I am, which I then brought into my adulthood. I am a survivor of relentless orchestrated childhood bullying that was racist in nature in particular, and from a young age I learned that something was wrong with me, or that I should believe that something is wrong with me, and I internalized it. And I took that perception with me into my adulthood.

And throughout my twenties and thirties, I deeply struggled to belong, which is what led me to do extensive healing work to arrive at the place I am now. And I can tell you that based on my personal

experiences and my work in this arena, I define belonging as being the profound feeling that we hold inside ourselves of being honored and accepted for who we are, first and foremost, by our own self, because we must belong to our own self, first and foremost, and this is what inspires us to claim belonging with others. And so when I talk about belonging and I write about it in my new book, this isn't just a professional interest for me, I live it personally. I deeply want to belong.

[00:02:59] Alex Howard

You mentioned some of your childhood experiences. What are some of the consequences of not feeling like we belong?

Ritu Bhasin

So let's go back, Alex, to how I describe belonging as being a feeling. When I say a feeling, I mean literally as human beings, as animals, our nervous systems carry the fear of being judged and the fear of experiencing hateful, hurtful things. And so when we constantly have negative messaging coming our way, we can internalize these messages and hold them in our mind. I'm not good enough. I'm not worthy. I'm a loser. I suck. I'm not lovable.

But we can also hold the stress, the strain, the tension, the trauma, the actual dysregulation of the nervous system, we hold all of that inside of us and so we become more easily activated and triggered when things happen around us that feel disrespectful or cause us to feel unsafe. We become more hypervigilant like we're constantly clocking, both consciously and unconsciously, the environment for am I safe? Am I safe? Am I safe? And so we are more likely to be activated and triggered.

And when things happen to us, especially for me, I can speak to this based on my own experiences, as an adult, I would experience forms of inequities or disrespect that were upsetting but they felt even greater, like the magnitude of them felt so much more intense. Why? Because I had trauma inside of me based on the childhood experiences I'd gone through.

And so what I'd love to invite people to think about after today is how is it that my childhood experiences, my adulthood experiences, how is it that these hurtful, hateful things that have happened to me, am I carrying them in my body and in my mind as feeling sensations, as activation? Because belonging as a feeling is about being in flow and when we don't experience belonging, it's the opposite. It's about being activated or triggered or feeling deeply, deeply in fear. Does that resonate?

Alex Howard

It does. But I think one of the things that can be tricky is that in a way, I guess, we normalize to the experiences that we have, right? And so we can go through life not feeling that felt sense of belonging and in a way not realize something's missing. And so I guess I'm curious as to how does one get that awareness or is it that in a way we need to have a flavor or a taste to realize that absence?

Ritu Bhasin

Well, I think you've put your finger on something that's really important. For a lot of us, we are numb or we become disassociated from our bodies. Not because we're horrible human beings and

it's like I don't want to be in touch with my body but as a coping mechanism, as a survival strategy. Because the intensity of what's happening around us, it's too fast, it's too intense and it feels safer to numb and disassociate, not feel the pain.

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And in my book *We've Got This*, I talk a lot about the power of our core wisdom. Our core wisdom is the inner knowing we have that says let me tune into what's my mind saying, what's my body feeling, sensing, what's happening and more importantly, what do I need to do to settle and calm my mind and body so I feel more in flow? And the mind is important, although I would argue strongly that in our society, and when I say our society, I should be more specific. I'm Canadian. I live in Canada.

In Canadian society, in American society, in British society, there's a high emphasis placed on the mind, and I would argue strongly that we neglect the body. But we know the body goes first because it's the body that tells us we're unsafe and then the mind catches up. And so in the book, I talk a lot about core wisdom and in particular, I'm encouraging people to become more embodied, which means be more in your body.

Let's just pause for a moment here. For everyone tuning in, can you feel your toes on the ground? I'm wearing Birkenstocks right now, I'm thinking about my toes, I feel my toes in my Birkenstocks and as I'm speaking to you, I can tell my mouth is salivating. I'm feeling this warmth in my chest. I feel like a tingling in my tummy. What are you feeling in your body? When we are numb and disassociated, we're less likely to even be able to clock sensations.

And I get why we do this. I get that the body unconsciously does this as a way to keep us safe and protect us from the intensity of the pain. But the problem is, in numbing and disassociating, we don't feel joy. And so one of our objectives in healing and living a more embodied life is being anchored to our core wisdom as it relates to our bodies and starting to feel more.

And for those of you for whom you're like, you know what? I got you. And I actually am doing more and more to be embodied. Great. Keep doing it. In my book, I talk a lot about how to make this happen. But for those of you who are joining today and you're like, oh my gosh, she's describing my life in this moment and I don't even know how to feel. One of the most powerful ways to make this happen is to start doing body scans. And you can lie in bed at night, you can be on the couch, you can be on the train, you could be in the shower.

And say to yourself, what does it feel like to feel this water against me? Okay, I don't feel anything today. It's okay. I'm not going to judge myself. I'm going to try this again tomorrow. Or as I lie in bed, I'm just going to bring attention to my heart. And in fact, you can even put your hand right on your heart. Feel the warmth of your hand against your heart. In fact, try it now. And if you're like, I can't feel it, it's okay. Do it again, do it again, do it again. This repetition helps us to come more into our bodies so that we can ultimately feel the beauty of belonging.

Alex Howard

You and I were talking just before we started about the role of friendships and how we can find ourselves in toxic friendships. And one of the things that strikes me is that when we're longing for that sense of connection and belonging, we can find ourselves staying in dynamics that may not be healthy because it's all that we know and we fear that the absence of that is going to be worse

than the presence of that. And I'm curious as to your perspective on that and how if we find ourselves in toxic friendships, specifically, how we can navigate that.

[00:09:52] Ritu Bhasin

I have so much to say on this, Alex, again, based on, well, two things, my own personal experiences, but you all write to me, you all reach out to me across social media to tell me that this is something huge for you. And so let me start by saying this. We can put the health of our friendships on a continuum. There are the friendships that are rooted in love and being healthy and being anchored in belonging.

And then over here, I would put toxic relationships, ones that we feel like we're constantly being gaslit and really strike at our belonging, where we feel like we can't be who we are and we constantly are activated, like we're in nervous system activation, fight, flight, freeze, fawn. But then there are relationships somewhere in the middle. I wouldn't call them toxic, necessarily, but the point is they don't serve us. They don't feel good anymore.

So I'm going to speak to relationships that lie somewhere in the middle, to edging towards toxic. And I would say this, for toxic relationships, we want to shed those because they hurt us. They literally have an adverse impact on our mental health, our physical health, our spiritual health. So those are the relationships we absolutely should shed. I'm a big proponent, and when I say shed, I mean literally breaking up with people, which you can do by saying, I no longer feel like I can be in this dynamic with you, and I wish you well, but we're not going to be in contact.

Or drawing so many boundaries around that dynamic so that we have very little exposure. And one of the things I always advise people to do is in the context of family dynamics, family relationships where there's high toxicity, you may not feel safe or comfortable becoming estranged from your family member. In this moment, you must have them in your life, fine, see them, but always see them in group settings and have buffers around you. So make it be in large group settings and bring your people, bring your entourage around you and so that they're there, you're there, you're like, hey, but you got your people around you, so you're buffered.

But the relationships that live here somewhere in the middle where they don't feel good, I'm a big proponent of taking stock of does this feel good for me? How when I am in the company of these people is my body reacting? What's happening in my mind? Am I feeling belonging? Belonging is a feeling. Do I feel at ease? Warmth in my chest, my stomach is at ease, my shoulders are dropping, I'm leaning in. I feel free to be emotional even when it feels uncomfortable, to be vulnerable, I'm still doing it.

Or am I, again, in high activation? I'm going to see people, I'm feeling stressed about it, or in their midst, I'm constantly clocking what I'm saying and all that? Once we deeply tune into the beauty of belonging and how amazing it feels, and we're like, with these people, I feel so good, but when I'm with these people, it doesn't. We start to realize what relationships it might be worthwhile shedding. And then the last thing I'll say here is, I have, over my lifetime thus far, shed several friends.

And the reason I have shed several friends is not because I'm a bad person and a horrible human being and no one wants to be my friend. It's because I had yet to do my healing work and I needed more healing work. And in my thirties, I found myself in a friendship group with people with whom I had been connected for a very long time but I ultimately found myself in a place where I felt like I

was constantly being judged. I couldn't be me, it didn't feel safe to be me, and it was causing me more anxiety. And so I let the group go.

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And the reason I waited so long is because I was worried that if I let you go, I won't have any friends. Who am I going to hang out with on a Friday or Saturday night? My parents? Oh my God. But in doing that, what ended up happening is it invited in more space and energy to be filled with beautiful people. Now, here's the wild thing, Alex, I just wrote my book, *We've Got This*, last year. And after I had written it, like a few months after I wrote it, I had a parting of ways with my primary friend circle, who I'd bubbled with during the pandemic.

I'd spent literally weekend after weekend, years, of partying with them, hanging out with them, and I shed that group. Even in my late forties, it happened. And what I realized is this, from a young age, because I was bullied, I deeply questioned my worthiness. I didn't think I was lovable. And actually I didn't have friends for years because people weren't allowed to be my friends because if you were friends with me, then you would be bullied too.

So I started to accept crumbs in relationships. It's like, you like me, I'll be your friend, even though this doesn't feel necessarily the greatest, but I'll take the crumbs because I'm not lovable, I'm not worthy. It's a pattern that persisted in my twenties and my thirties and even into my forties. But last year I had a realization after writing this book and shedding that group, I'm not going to accept crumbs anymore in my relationships.

I am beautiful on the inside in particular, I deserve belonging. I now belong to myself more than ever before and it's time to shed relationships. And here's what's interesting. As I have done this, I have invited in more love and friendship with people around whom I feel greater belonging. And so shedding friends is an important experience for all of us as we journey through our life and our healing.

Alex Howard

One of the things that I think people can find difficult is that if they have sort of people pleasing or empathic tendencies that they can find themselves in these imbalanced friendships where they're always the one that's sort of helping, rescuing. And part of the reason why the relationship is not working is there's a lack of reciprocity in terms of the dynamic and the energy but then one decides they want to shed that friendship.

But actually the practicality of doing that can be difficult because one pulls away and then is getting WhatsApped or phoned or saying well, why aren't you hanging out with me? Or can you come and help me deal with this? And so I'm curious just on a more practical level, how does one navigate that process?

Ritu Bhasin

So I think shedding friendships can look myriad ways. It can be, as I described earlier, having a conversation with people and saying, you know what, I'm sure you'll agree with me, this is not serving either of us anymore and it's time we just part ways and I wish you well and that be that. It can be a dramatic sharp boundary line that's drawn as in you're ghosting the person or you're no

longer talking to them literally. And that often does happen based on experiencing something negative.

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I can tell you, having been on the receiving end of this last year, it really hurt my feelings and I would prefer to have a conversation as opposed to just be cut off outright, although it ended up being a blessing in the end and I'm grateful for that. Or it can just be one of those organic just fading away, like instead of calling the person every day, it's every other day and then it goes to once a week and then it's like once every two weeks and a month.

But here's the problem or here's the thing, a lot of us, and this is also a trauma response, worry about what people will think. And so it's the I don't want to be your friend, but I don't want you to not like me. And it's like I don't want to be in this dynamic. I want to shed you, but I want to have you still hold me in high regard. And here's the thing, that would be great but that can't always happen.

And I think what's more important is for us to realize when we shed friends, there are going to be people whose feelings will be hurt and they may not hold you in high regard. That is just the way it's going to be. And that's not because you suck. That's because we meet people where they are. And if people's trauma response is to vilify the other person as opposed to recognizing their role in creating this dynamic or being responsible for creating the toxicity, you will be vilified. And so you can't control the other person's behavior.

You can only control your behavior. And in fact, the more we stand in our power and claim our belonging and feel amazing about who we are, we realize, I'm a walking person who has childhood trauma, adulthood based trauma, I'm wounded and I'm doing my healing work. So is this person. They're vilifying me, but that's on them, not on me. Because I'm amazing. I have healing work to do, but I'm still amazing and I belong. I care less and less about what other people will think of me.

And so the more we claim our belonging, the less we will give a shit about what other people have to say about us and the better we'll feel. But this is a practice. It doesn't happen over time. Like I can tell you, two years ago I would have had difficulty saying, I just went through this and here's what you need to do. Or here's how I navigated this. I now have the benefit of multiple experiences to share. So we're all on journeys.

Alex Howard

It also strikes me that, as you started off by pointing to, our relationships with other people are reflecting our relationship with ourself. And so in a way, the person that we need to, the way that we need to be with ourselves to leave that friendship may well be a key part of the person we're becoming to invite in a different kind of dynamic.

Ritu Bhasin

Yeah, I'm reaching for my book because there's a section that as you're speaking, I just pulled this quote the other day, I was doing some social media work and I want to read you two things. It's right from the book. Okay? Our relationships become mirrors of the healing work we still need to do. Our relationships become mirrors of the healing work we still need to do. In other words, we

stay in relationships where we do not experience belonging. Why? Because we still have healing work to do.

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We allow people to disrespect us. Why? Because we still have healing work to do. We choose people to be around in whose presence we feel activated and uncomfortable. Why? Because we have healing work to do. So on that note, I'm going to invite you to take a moment to reflect on the following. Who are the people you spend the most time with? Who are you around the most? What's happening with the family members? What's happening with your friend circles? What's happening in your workplace dynamics? What's happening at school, wherever you are, who are the people you're around the most?

And I would literally journal because we know there's a cognitive process that happens when we write things down, like, write out your inner circle. In fact, I call these people our cloud relationships. The people we're around the most who we think are lifting us and supporting us and all that. And then I want you to start tracking the patterns. Where are you actually feeling really good and whole and beautiful and like you're experiencing belonging? And where is that not happening?

Track patterns. Start to pay attention to this and then ask yourself, okay, for the relationships, so the relationships that feel good, why am I still in them? What am I getting from them? Oh, it's that I can actually exhale and just be, and I don't feel judged. Okay, hang on to that. The relationships that aren't serving me, take a look at those and go, what is it about this dynamic that causes me discomfort? Why am I feeling like I need to be here? And then you may start to realize I'm staying in these friendships because I worry that if I don't have these people, who am I going to go dancing with?

Or who am I going to go out with? Or I'll be a loner, I'll be a loser, which, by the way, is what I would say to myself. And then we start peeling the layers of the onion, we realize, wow, this is actually stemming from a place of me not feeling like I'm good enough and whole because I worry that if I let go of them, no one else is going to enter. As opposed to, wait a second, if I stop spending time and energy here, yeah, it'll free up some time, and it'll be an awkward transition because you will have months of sitting around going, I have no one to hang out with, which is what happened to me from January to March of this year, in the dead of winter, I didn't have my friends anymore.

And I'm like, every weekend I'm like, either I was hanging out with my spouse, but when he was busy, I was like, but then you realize, but I'm amazing. I don't need to sit here anymore. I'm going to start putting out calls and I'm going to start orchestrating. And you know what? When I go out, because I feel more free to be me, I've dropped the tension. I'm like a magnet. And look at all these people who I'm attracting. So I want you to do this literal exercise and pay attention to the patterns and start making the shifts.

And then the last thing I'm going to say is, I got to read this because this is really powerful, it's lonelier to be surrounded by people who don't accept us for who we are than to stand on our own. I would rather you stand on your own, feeling effing amazing about who you are than being in the company of people around whom you feel diminished.

[00:24:07] Alex Howard

I'm also curious as to the role of authenticity in this. So one of the things that strikes me is that when we're in toxic friendships, often part of what we do is we compromise our own truth to keep the peace in the dynamic in that relationship. And what I'm hearing you describe is, in a way, creating the space to step into one's authentic self. And I'd love you to speak to that a bit.

Ritu Bhasin

Yeah. So in the book, my first book, *The Authenticity Principle*, and then now in *We've Got This*, I share a model, a framework, for living more authentically, it's called the three selves. And there are three selves. There's the authentic self, the adapted self, and the performing self. And I say performing as in not high performance, but like, life is a stage and we're putting on a mask and curating an image of who we are to shield from harm.

I define the authentic self as being the following. If there were no negative consequences for who you are, for how you behave, this is how you would show up. This is how you would speak. This is what you would wear. This is where you would say yes, no, draw boundaries, take a hike. It's who you would love. It's the work you would do. Our authentic selves are the good, the bad, and the ugly of who we are. But because it's the truest reflection of our core self, it's the easiest and feels the best to do. So my question is to what extent are you living as your authentic self as much as possible?

But in particular, I'm going to carve out the bad and the ugly of who we are because we don't want to be doing that as much as possible. We want to do our healing work to park the bad and ugly. Although we're humans, we're fallible, we will always have bad and ugly to us. That doesn't mean there's anything wrong with us, it means that we're human and that's just what our bad and ugly is.

I'm talking about the best side of your authentic self, the good side, the side that really feels amazing to do. And it's not born out of a place of woundedness, because the ugly sides of who we are usually are born out of ugliness. So, for example, if your authentic side is to yell a lot, and that's the ugly of your authenticity, that's not coming from a place of goodness. That's coming from a place of woundedness. We yell because we were conditioned to yell. It's a fight mechanism in the trauma response, all of that.

So let's put the bad and the ugly over here. How would you speak? What would you say? Who would you love? Who would you be around? What would your nonverbal communication look like, how would you laugh? It's just every aspect of what would it look like? And I think what's really important here is to draw the connection between our authenticity and belonging.

Because what I can tell you is this. We cannot experience belonging without being authentic. Belonging is about being who you are. The more you be your authentic self, the more you be your authentic self with yourself, the more belonging you'll feel. It's like tell yourself, talk to yourself, know yourself, for yourself. And that's what will cause you to claim belonging with others. So the more authentic you are, the more belonging you will feel. And in fact, know this. And then I'll pause. Belonging is the outcome of being authentic. It's the outcome. And that's a really important takeaway.

[00:27:35] Alex Howard

I guess the challenge is when we're not being authentic and we're in connection with people, however good that connection feels, we don't feel it in us because it's not us they're connecting to, right? And so there's always a sense of separation or a sense of distance. But to be that authentic self, particularly when what we learned from childhood was that we weren't lovable as we are and so we adapted in the ways that we did to try and to win love and to feel safe, it can take courage to return back to being that authentic self. I'm curious as to what you find helps people to really live from that place.

Ritu Bhasin

I think ultimately what causes people to live from a state of I'm going to feel the fear of being who I am, know that there's going to be some negative consequences because people will cut me out because they don't love my authenticity or this new projection of my authenticity, or they'll take love and opportunities away or whatever, what causes us to keep going back to doing it is that it feels amazing. Even in the face of having negative consequences, like you're going to take your love and opportunities away, I still feel really good about who I am because I stood in my power.

And I can tell you that I have this happen with friendships. I just told you about the shedding of a friend group. It has invited in even more powerful, meaningful relationships in my life. I have said no to clients or fired clients or had clients fire me because I drew boundaries around I will not perform, as in masked up, and curate and conform to how you want me to behave. I'm going to do me and be me. And it meant losing money and opportunities, but it was okay because in the end, in doing me and being me more and more, it's like this radiance has been shining out of me.

And like a magnet, I've been drawing in more clients and people I love working with. The same thing has happened to me as it relates to my romantic life and being able to attract in a partner, finally, after years, like decades of struggling, because I didn't know who I was, attracting in a life partner with whom I feel the greatest belonging I've ever felt with a partner. So we anchor to the outcome. We keep coming back to what's more important to me, that I stand in my power and experience the beauty of belonging? Or fawn around people and be in a place where I push down my happiness to accede to other people's expectations?

Alex Howard

That's awesome. For people that want to find out more, Ritu, about you and your work, what's the best place to go? And what's some of what they can find?

Ritu Bhasin

So, first of all, I would say you must, must, must get a copy of my new book, *We've Got This: Unlocking the Beauty of Belonging* because it expands on all of what I've just shared. You can buy it online anywhere books are sold. Most people buy from Amazon. You can also go to my empowerment site, ritubhasin.com. My name is spelled R-I-T-U. Last name Bhasin, B-H-A-S-I-N. Ritubhasin.com. Connect with me online. [Instagram](#) is my favorite place. I respond to all the messages that come my way personally. And you can connect with me on [LinkedIn](#) in particular.

Alex Howard

Awesome. Ritu, thank you so much. I really appreciate your time.

[00:31:11] Ritu Bhasin

Thank you so much for having me. Bless. Be well, everyone.