



Conscious Life presents
**HEALING TOXIC
RELATIONSHIPS**

Cultivating Connection Building Secure Attachment

Guest: Sander T Jones

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello, and welcome back to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am very, very pleased to be welcoming the wonderful Sander T. Jones. Welcome.

Sander T. Jones

Thanks.

Jaï Bristow

You are a social worker, a hypnotherapist, but most importantly, you are the author of *Cultivating Connection*. So I'm wondering if you can start out by telling me a bit about your book, and how it applies to this conference on healing toxic relationships.

Sander T. Jones

Sure, thanks. So *Cultivating Connection* is a relationship skills and communication skills book. I think one of the really valuable things related to healing toxic relationships, is that it gives a really clear set of questions for people to ask themselves, that helps to measure the health or toxicity of their relationships.

Then it takes each one of those points and helps people figure out what to do, and teaches the skills that might be missing that will help their relationships shift from toxicity to health and secure attachment, and joy and affection for each other.

Jaï Bristow

That sounds fantastic. Could you give some examples of some of the questions that you ask in the book?

Sander T. Jones

Sure, I build the questions around the concept of secure attachment, which is very well-known out there in the general populace now. I think of seven primary points that people in adult romantic relationships need to keep their eyes on for secure attachment.

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In secure attachment we talk about providing a secure base, and also a safe haven for our partners, but we also need to allow our partners to do that for us. So that becomes four primary points to look at.

There's also being attuned to our partners and vice versa, which basically means paying attention, noticing when they need emotional support, being willing to provide that emotional support, and being able to emotionally regulate ourselves well enough to provide that support.

Secure self-attachment is another one. And that's also very related to being able to maintain our own emotional equilibrium when needed, and the skills and ability to repair ruptures when they happen, because that's inevitable. Nobody's perfect, there are going to be ruptures in the bond, but you got to have the skills to come back and repair those ruptures.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic, I think all those points are so crucial. I've talked with a few other people on this conference about the importance of not just finding safety in another, but making yourself safe for another as well. I think that that's crucial. I'm wondering if you would like to say a little bit more about that.

Sander T. Jones

In making yourself safe for others, it covers both the safe haven and the secure base. So in attachment theory, the safe haven is being an emotionally safe place for your partner. And then, of course, we need to allow our partners to do that for us.

So the ability to do that really comes from being able to keep our own emotional equilibrium well enough that they can speak their truth, in a way that as long as they're speaking to us respectfully and kindly, we don't lash out at them, or punish them for trying to communicate with us, or close down and stonewall them, or have an emotional meltdown. And all of these things really cut off communication and make us not safe to confide in, not safe to communicate with.

Other things that also apply to that, that are outlined really clearly in my book, are knowing your human rights, and your partner's human rights, and not overstepping that into what we call controlling behavior. So if you're respecting your partner's autonomy, they feel much safer.

If you're crossing over that line and acting in a controlling way, or placing limits on them in a way that's not ethical, they're not going to feel safe. And of course that goes both ways for them doing that for us.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. And I love the way you phrase it. So we're talking about being safe for a partner, we're talking about finding safety in a partner. But the way you phrase it is like, allowing your partner, or partners, to be safe for you. Which I think is a really interesting phrasing, and it's not one I've come across yet on this conference. So I really appreciate... I think it's been implied a little bit in some of my conversations, but I appreciate the way you're making it so explicit.

[00:04:44] Sander T. Jones

Thanks. I think one of the things I'm referring to there is for those of us with trauma histories, or attachment injuries ourselves, we don't feel safe allowing other people to be our safe haven, or be our secure base. We feel that fear whether they're doing anything inappropriate or not. And the degree of vulnerability that a person needs to embrace in order to have a secure attachment in their relationships can feel really threatening, and even terrifying, for a person who has had a lot of abuse in their childhood, or attachment injuries, because we don't feel safe.

If your partner is trying to respect your individuality, and allow you the freedom to go out and explore your hobbies, have friends outside of the relationship, for somebody who had very clingy, or helicoptery parents, and we have an attachment injury around that, that can be really terrifying. We start to think, why do they want to give us this freedom? Are they trying to get rid of us? Do they want that freedom so that they can go and see somebody behind our backs, and all of those fears come up into our head, so we might block the other person allowing us to have that freedom.

The same is true for the emotional safe haven. If they're trying to create a safe environment so that we can speak our truth, that doesn't mean we feel safe, accepting that and speaking our truth anyway. We may feel like we need to hide a lot of things. So, that's a lot of why I phrase it that way. We need to look at ourselves. We've got our own growth to do that can sometimes impact our relationships.

Jai Bristow

Yeah, 100%. I think that's such an important point to bring in. And I really appreciate the way you're talking about vulnerability, wounds, and trauma, and things that have happened in previous relationships.

You were talking a little bit about boundaries earlier, and in terms of the safe haven, and so I was wondering if you could say a little bit more about how we define a personal boundary, in a way that doesn't allow for this kind of controlling, or abusive behaviors and toxicity.

Sander T. Jones

I think there's lots and lots of confusion around personal boundaries, especially in regards to our interacting with a partner in a relationship. I think that confusion really comes around some people think that if you have painful emotions, that means you need to build a boundary around something to protect you from having to feel those painful emotions.

I would say that leaves a lot of room for that concept to be abused because if I'm a controlling person, and you're doing something you have every right to do, I'm going to have painful emotions around that. And then I'm going to say, okay, that's a boundary for me, you can't do that thing, you can't post those pictures of yourself on social media, it makes me uncomfortable.

So instead of building our personal boundaries around our feelings, I believe we need to build our personal boundaries around our human rights. So we need to pay attention to what do I have the right to control, and what do I not have the right to control? My partner has the right to control their stuff. I have the right to control my stuff. I've outlined 13 human rights that we have when in a relationship in my book.

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And just to give you a short synopsis, some of the primary ones are we all have a right to our own sexual and bodily autonomy. And we all have a right to control our own personal assets. We have the right to shape our individual identities and present ourselves publicly in that way, or keep things private if we want.

There's a bunch more like for informed consent, we have the right to the information we need in which to engage in informed consent, and we have the right to that information in a timely manner. Timely, honest, clear manner. And so that's maybe five or six of them, but there's 13 in the book.

If you build your personal boundaries around your rights, now you've got a very clear way of telling, what do I have the right to control? What does my partner have the right to control? And what do they not have the right to control?

So if my partner tries to tell me that I can't wear certain clothing in public because they feel embarrassed. They don't have the right to tell me that, they have the right to request. They can say, that makes me uncomfortable. I'm going to ask you to not wear that when we go to this particular party where there's a certain dress code or something.

But the thing about a request is that when you make a request, you have to be prepared to gracefully accept no for an answer. Whereas if you think you're entitled to something, then you demand it, and you try to claim that's a personal boundary for me, you can't embarrass me like that, blah blah blah.

Jai Bristow

I think that's so important, that distinction around... I've heard other people talk about the difference between boundaries and rules. For example, a boundary is like saying what you'll do in response to something, and a rule is telling someone else what they can or can't do.

But I really love the way that you've already differentiated between a boundary and a request, as two very different things. I think that's really important. And I also really appreciate you talking about boundaries in the idea of rights.

I interviewed Dr Betty Martin as part of this conference, who is the creator of the Wheel of Consent. We talked about a framework around boundaries, about how you have your rights, what's your right, but also how you have a responsibility for what's your right.

You have the right to feel whatever, all your inner world is your right, but it's also your responsibility. I really recommend people check out that talk if they haven't yet, or after this, because it's very tied into what you're saying.

I'm curious, we've talked about defining what a boundary is, and the difference between a boundary and a request, and yet there's still this word, controlling. You can control your own behavior but not someone else's, but you can make a request for someone else's.

Boundaries like with most things I find are really useful tools, and really useful concepts, they sometimes have a shadow side. And so boundaries, or the concept of boundaries can sometimes

be used to control other people. And you've touched upon this already, but do you want to talk a bit more about how boundaries can be weaponized, or the illusion, or concept?

[00:11:18] Sander T. Jones

Sure, absolutely. Weaponizing a boundary is basically... It's a bluff. If I say, I have a boundary that I can't be in a relationship with a person who smokes cigarettes, for whatever reason. And if I am seeing someone, and they clearly weren't smoking cigarettes when I started seeing them, or I probably wouldn't have done that. But then, let's say they take up smoking, or they return to smoking when they had quit in the past.

Weaponizing a boundary is using that boundary of mine as a threat. And it's saying that's a boundary for me, I can't be in a relationship with somebody who smokes, so you need to quit smoking or I'm going to have to break up with you.

I don't really want to have to break up with them if I'm saying it that way. What I want is for them to change their behavior so that I don't have to enforce my boundary. And that's weaponizing a boundary. It's sort of a bluff, and I'm going to be upset if they call my bluff and they say, well, I'm not willing to give up smoking, so I respect your boundary. I guess this is goodbye. I'm going to be upset if I'm weaponizing that boundary.

On the other hand, the exact same boundary, if it's communicated differently, isn't so weaponizing, or isn't weaponizing. It's, this is a boundary for me, this hurts me, I imagine it's going to hurt you, this is going to cause harm, but I can't do this, so I regret causing this harm, but I have to back out of the relationship. What I want then is for them to respect my boundary and allow me to step out.

Jai Bristow

I think it's a really good distinction of not bluffing with boundaries. So just like we were talking about safe havens and stuff like that, with a boundary one thing is differentiating between trying to control someone else's behavior versus establishing a boundary.

The difference between making a request of someone versus establishing a boundary. But then also, what you were just alluding to there, that you can't use boundaries as threats you have to follow through. You have to communicate what's actually going on... I think that's really interesting.

I'm curious, in the example you gave, you said something about respecting my boundary. What does that always look like? Because, for example, I was just talking to a friend today who'd broken up with a partner, and said that they wanted space and then the partner wrote them a letter. And in the letter there was no sense of you need to respond or da da da da...

And my friend was saying, oh, I feel like my partner, or my ex-partner, didn't respect my boundary. Whereas I was thinking for me, they also had the need to express what was going on, and it was my friend who choose whether or not they read the letter, whether or not they responded to the letter.

But the act of writing a letter, is that crossing a boundary or is that not crossing a boundary? When the person's asked for space, for example. I know it's a specific, and you don't have to respond to that example, but it's just to get a sense.

[00:14:25] Sander T. Jones

Well, I clearly don't know all the details of that particular situation, so some of the questions that I would ask are, how clearly was the boundary communicated? Because I need space doesn't sound super clear to me. Whereas, I am putting up a boundary. I would like there to be no contact between us for a certain amount of time. That's much more clear, so that's very clearly no contact, don't send me emails, don't call me, don't send me text messages.

So how clear was the boundary verbalized? But then also that other person having the right to communicate, or well not so much the right to communicate, they have the right to express themselves. They don't necessarily have the right to express themselves to just anybody, because a conversation, just like sex, I think, needs to be consensual. Both people need to enthusiastically consent.

So if one person has been adequately clear that they are not consenting to a conversation, then it's not okay for this person to express themselves to that person. They can express themselves to their friends, to their therapist, to their mom, to whoever they want, to an empty room, but they don't have the right to engage this person in a conversation that they have said clearly they are not consenting to.

Jaï Bristow

I love that. I love, first of all, that concept of a conversation needs to be consensual. Why have I never heard that before? It makes so much sense when you say it. It's just like anything else that involves two people, or more people, just like sex, two or more coming together to exchange. Whether it's a conversation, whether it's sex, whether it's dancing, whether it's a whole myriad of things, they need to be explicitly consensual. I think that's one of my key takeaways from this conference, so thank you.

I also love how you responded with a question, because, again, it's not always easy to offer a blanket statement, or a blanket rule of how things should and shouldn't be, and how things should go and shouldn't go, and what is a boundary, and who set it, and how well they set it.

Sometimes we don't all get the opportunity to have these conversations, so sometimes it can be unclear. So having questions like, how clear was it set? Rather than just immediately vilifying one person or the other, there's that mutual responsibility within boundaries. It sounds like, is what you're saying, it's the clarity of, this is a boundary as opposed to a request, or as opposed to a rule, or as opposed to a bluff, or as opposed to any of the other things we've mentioned, which are boundary adjacent.

Sander T. Jones

Yeah. I think one of the things that's really important to recognize as far as personal responsibilities is, we need to know ourselves well enough to know what boundaries we need. And then we need to be able to not only adhere to the boundaries we set for ourselves and our own behavior, but when somebody else violates a boundary of ours, we need to have some strategies for enforcing that boundary, for telling the other person it's not okay to violate my rights in that way.

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If somebody speaks to me in a demeaning or derogatory manner, that ability to say, hey, that's not okay, is really important to maintaining our self-esteem and self-respect. And so this is where some of the damage to the individual can happen when boundaries are crossed and when rights are violated.

I also want to make it really clear that our ability to enforce our boundaries is very impacted by interpersonal power. It's so much easier for me to enforce a boundary if it's a situation where I'm doing a favor for a friend. And if my friend starts to talk to me in a demeaning, derogatory way, I can go, hey, it's not okay to talk to me that way, I'm taking my ball, and I'm going home. That's much easier.

But if it's my employer who's talking to me in a demeaning, derogatory way, and I'm very dependent on that job and that paycheck, now it's much more difficult. Now I'm forced to choose between two things that I value very much. I need to survive financially, and I've got people financially dependent on me that need me to suck it up and accept this abuse right now.

And my self-esteem, self-respect says, I need to stand up for myself and tell my boss, it's not okay to talk to me that way. And this is where real damage to ourselves as individuals and even trauma can happen, when we don't have the interpersonal power to enforce our boundaries against a person who's being abusive.

It's really important that we are as compassionate and forgiving of ourselves as possible in those situations, where we just don't have the power to enforce our boundaries and then try to repair that self-esteem and self-respect where we can. Like, if I can't tell my boss, it's not okay to talk to me that way, what I can do is, I can start job hunting. And when I find another job and I go to my employer to tell him I'm leaving, I can tell him then, this is because of the way you spoke to me that day, because now he can't do anything. I've dismantled his ability to have any power over me.

Jai Bristow

I'm curious, in that example, I think it is important to let the boss know why you're leaving. But I know people can often feel shut down, afraid, and then end up just quitting because they feel uncomfortable in the situation, and they never have that feeling of being able to say why. So I'm wondering if you have anything you'd like to say about that that?

Sander T. Jones

Comes back to self-compassion. Again, a lot of us have been taught through previous life experience that it's very frightening, or threatening, to confront another person about their harmful behavior. And so if your fear spikes high enough that that's going to be damaging to you, and you choose to not tell the boss why you're leaving, have compassion for yourself. That is perfectly okay. You don't owe it to the boss to tell him why you're leaving. You don't owe it to him, or him or her, to educate them in that way.

And I think that applies to all kinds of situations. We hear this a lot when people of any minority status are saying, it's not my job to educate this person who is of a majority status, who is violating my boundaries. It's not my job to educate them. I have to take a look at my energy as a person, and whether or not I need that energy for self-care, or whether I'm going to choose to use it to educate

this other person, when they really need to educate themselves. But sometimes we choose to educate that other person anyway.

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But it comes back to take care of yourself first. If it's going to be damaging for you to do that, have compassion for yourself, it's perfectly okay. You don't owe that to anybody.

Jaï Bristow

I think bringing in that piece is so important because we've been mostly talking in this conversation about partner relationships. But what you're saying there shows what we're talking about around boundaries can be applied to all kinds of relationships.

It can be applied to a work relationship. It can be applied to just anyone who is being difficult, and asking more from you than you're able, or willing, or wanting to give. It can apply to family relationships. It can apply whether it's monogamous partner relationships or non-monogamous partner relationships.

I really appreciate you bringing in that piece because it shows how all these tools that you're offering in your book, and in this conversation, can be applied in so many different ways.

Sander T. Jones

Thanks. I think the one place where these tools don't apply exactly in the way that I've outlined them in my book, is between adults and children, or teenagers. Because there's different needs of children and teenagers, and they have the right to certain kinds of care, and their needs being met from adults.

That two adults of equal power and status, they don't have the right to expect or demand that from each other, whereas children do. And adults have responsibilities towards children that they don't necessarily have towards other adults.

So I do think that these tools apply to me. I'm an adult, me and my parent, me and my siblings, me and my employer, me and a co-worker, me and my neighbor from across the street, and me and my partner, or me and my other partner. It applies to adult relationships across the board.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's a really great distinction to bring in, that it applies in adult relationships, including if there's power dynamics in adult relationships, which of course you need to factor in as well. But it doesn't apply in adult to children relationships.

I'm wondering if we can talk a little bit about relationship agreements. Do you want to start by telling us a bit about what relationship agreements are? And then we'll talk about how they relate to this theme of boundaries.

[00:23:43] Sander T. Jones

Sure. So, of course, if we're talking about our individual human rights, and that we have the right to build boundaries around those human rights. Relationship agreements are, however many people, let's say two, who are going to negotiate a mutually consensual agreement to not exercise one iteration of those rights.

So let's take a simple one like monogamy. Monogamy is a relationship agreement. And unfortunately, monogamous people don't often talk about that in detail, in what it means. Which I think is one of the benefits that the non-monogamous communities can share with monogamous people. In that we are much more in the habit of talking about things in extensive detail. And because of that, we've developed some very finely honed tools for this.

But monogamy is a relationship agreement. So let's say that we're talking just about the version of monogamy that's sexual exclusivity. So each of these people has the right to full bodily and sexual autonomy. When we engage in a relationship with another person, and let's say these two people want to be monogamous to each other, they're agreeing to not exercise that one specific iteration of that right. They're keeping all the other iterations of that right.

Each person can still decide whether or not to get a tattoo, or to go on a diet, or to shave their legs, to get a haircut. They still have the right to all of these other decisions about themselves.

They also still have the right to say yes, or no, to any specific invitation to have sex with their partner. But they're agreeing that where it comes to sex, we're only going to do that with each other. We technically have the right to go out and have sex with other people, but we're agreeing not to. So that's just one example.

The difference between a human right and a relationship agreement is, first off, you always have these. A relationship agreement has to be negotiated between at least two people, and it can always be re-negotiated. These are non-negotiable, your human rights are non-negotiable, these should be respected no matter what. If somebody's not respecting them, then they need to be corrected. But relationship agreements can always be renegotiated.

Jai Bristow

I love that definition. And I think it's also like we were talking about earlier, these agreements need to be consensual, with all the parties involved, just like conversations, just like sex, just like all these other things.

But then bringing in this idea as well, that unlike rights, which are basic and non-negotiable, that these agreements are negotiated initially, and can be renegotiated at any time with all parties involved. And so how does this relate then, these relationships agreement relate to boundaries? How do they connect with the theme of boundaries?

Sander T. Jones

I think answering this question is going to reflect a lot on the question of, how can you tell if your relationship is toxic or not? Because a lot of that has to do with how we communicate around these things. If you are trying to talk about something, or negotiate an agreement with your partner, and your partner stonewalls you, refuses to talk about it, lashes out at you, or tries to blame you, or tell

you you're a bad person, or you're wrong for even wanting to talk about such a thing. Or they have such an intense emotional meltdown that you can't talk to them about something. Those are all signs of toxicity in a relationship and that can go two ways, both people can have those issues.

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The ability to communicate about difficult things is a lot of what makes a healthy relationship healthy. So it does require each person to have the emotion regulation skills to be able to hear something that's difficult, or even painful to hear, without having an emotional meltdown, or lashing out, or telling the other person they're wrong, or bad for even wanting to talk about that thing.

And of course, Stonewalling is very much a power move. It's, I refuse to speak to you at all, I'll talk to you when you can be rational.

Jaï Bristow

I wondered it's a word I hear a lot, but I wasn't sure exactly what it meant, so thank you for clarifying that.

It's interesting how all these themes are linked. This idea of boundaries, of relationship agreements, of communication, of healthy relationships as opposed to toxic relationships. It's all interlinked. And we were talking, we started the conversation talking about attachment, and secure attachment, and being a safe haven.

I'm wondering if we can go back to that theme a little bit around attachment, and talk about insecure attachment, and how we get from insecure attachment to secure attachment.

What does insecure attachment look like? Especially maybe in connection to the themes we've already been talking about. When you're talking about these agreements, something I see a lot is someone with a very anxious attachment style in a pseudo-relationship with someone with a very avoidant attachment style. They tend to literally attract each other.

If you're in that situation where you're basically fundamentally wanting different things, or having opposing fears, how do you navigate boundaries and relationship agreements in that situation?

Sander T. Jones

The first step is in recognizing the toxic pattern, and then making an agreement to recognize when they're stepping into that pattern again. So just the one that you brought up, the anxious attached person, and those two opposites do tend to attract. I think a lot of that has to do with, it feels familiar in the early stages of the relationship, this person who's more avoidant feels safer to the person with the anxious attachment and vice versa.

In the early stages, this person feels more safe, more familiar. But later, when struggles happen in the relationship, those two responses to a rupture in the relationship bond, work against each other.

So what tends to happen if we've got that kind of trauma history, and those attachment injuries. Then, when that argument, or that disagreement, or that rupture in the bond happens, each person is probably going to go into their own version of the Fight Flight Freeze response.

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And when they go into that Fight Flight Freeze response, access to certain executive functions of the brain get shut off. In particular, empathy, the ability to connect with another person. So this person is going to want to run away so that they can get back to... They're each going to try and get out of the Fight Flight Freeze response, but they're doing it in ways that are opposite.

This one feels like if I can just reconnect with this person, then I'll feel safe again, then I can calm down. This person is like, if I can just get away from this person and be by myself, I can calm down. So if they can learn to recognize the symptoms of the Fight Flight Freeze response, and when they recognize those symptoms peacefully, they got to talk about it in advance so they each know what's happening, call for timeout.

It takes a minimum of 20 minutes for the adrenaline of the Fight Flight Freeze response to leave our system. So that timeout is going to last anywhere from 20 to 60 minutes. And then they have to figure out what they're going to do in order to self-soothe, and get out of the Fight Flight Freeze response. So they can come back and talk with their executive brain functions online.

Now, the anxiously attached person is going to want this person to stay. This person's going to want to get away. So they have to negotiate this when neither one of them is triggered into the Fight Flight Freeze response, and brainstorm creative solutions. If this person really needs to get away, can they get away in a way that doesn't trigger this person?

Like just go into the next room, or go to the back patio where the other person can see them through the window. Or turn on that app on the phone where your partner can see where you are in space. To find some way of getting what you each need to get out of the Fight Flight Freeze response without triggering the other person.

If you just can't leave the room for this person to calm down, stay in the room, but don't talk about the issue. Because if you talk about the issue, you're just going to go right back into Fight Flight Freeze response.

The other question is, when the two people are trying to do that, are they thinking thoughts that keep them revved up into the Fight Flight Freeze response? So we've got to do the self-soothing skills during that time out, or they're going to keep revving themselves up.

If your partner is out on the porch and you're sitting there and you're trying to calm down, but your brain is going through all of the fear-oriented questions of, what did this mean? Does this mean they're going to leave me? Does this mean they're not attracted to me anymore? You're just keeping yourself revved up in the Fight Flight Freeze response.

You're going to need to learn some emotion regulation skills, and some mindfulness skills, to stop that pattern from happening. Because you're not going to be able to calm down enough to come back and talk with your partner from a place of not being in Fight Flight Freeze.

So then also in the book, there's communication skills for once you get out of the Fight Flight Freeze response. You need to use non-violent communication because that tends to trigger people back into Fight Flight Freeze.

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I also outline a communication exercise called the Imago Exercise, where one person speaks and the other person listens. Because by doing communication in that manner, we are more inclined to listen, to actually understand our partner. Whereas most of us are raised in cultures where we listen for the sake of hearing the thing we disagree with, so that we can then prepare for the next thing we want to say. And then both people end up trying to be heard, but neither person is really very focused on listening.

Jai Bristow

Thank you so much for that. I love what you were saying about how anxious and avoidant people attract each other because initially they feel safer, more familiar, to each other. And one of the things I've learned during this conference is about how that familiarity, literally from family, is because it's what you recognize. It's because it was the pattern you had growing up with your primary caregivers a lot of the time.

It makes sense why, because that's where the attachment style has come from usually, so it makes sense that's why you're drawn to each other. So I think naming that, and making that explicit, can hopefully bring some compassion to the people who end up in that pattern a lot.

All these fantastic tools you're offering, which can be built into your relationship agreements. How do we navigate arguments, or how do we navigate when we both get triggered and our attachment style gets activated and we want opposite things.

And everything that you've talked about boundaries can be applied into those moments as well. And that sense of saying, hey, this is what I need, this is what I'm going to do, or making requests. It's a fantastic piece to bring in, so thank you so much.

Sander T. Jones

Can I add one more thing? I'd like to talk about the idea of personal responsibility for our own growth. And so I've outlined in my book four simple questions to help us identify when we have our own growth to do. And it's very much related to personal rights, boundaries, and relationship agreements in our relationships.

If I'm experiencing a painful emotion, and let's say my partner is upset with me for something, and I'm feeling guilty because they're upset with me. And I'm trying to figure out should I be feeling guilty? Did I do something wrong? Am I giving away too much? Am I being too selfish?

So I ask these four questions, and the first one is, I'm feeling guilty, my partner is upset with me, did I violate one of their rights? If the answer is yes, then I need to take responsibility for that. I need to apologize. I need to make amends if possible. I need to go back to respecting their rights.

But if the answer is no, I did not violate one of their rights, then I go to, did I violate a relationship agreement? If I did, then I need to either go back to respecting that agreement, or I need to initiate a re-negotiation around that agreement. But if I didn't, then I didn't violate one of their rights, and I didn't violate a relationship agreement, but I'm feeling guilty, I have some work to do. I have my own personal growth work to do around, why am I feeling guilty? I didn't do anything wrong.

[00:36:54]

The other side of the chart is on, if I'm feeling a painful emotion because I'm upset with someone else. It's the same two questions, only it's, did they violate one of my rights? If the answer is yes, then I need to require that they go back to respecting one of my rights.

But of course, also with an eye on, do I have the interpersonal power to actually enforce that, and then to be kind to myself if I don't? But if I'm upset with that person and they did not violate one of my rights, then I ask the question, did they violate one of our relationship agreements? If the answer is yes, then I need that person to either go back to respecting the relationship agreement, or we need to initiate a re-negotiation of that agreement.

But if the answer is no, I'm upset with that person, but they didn't violate one of my rights, and they didn't violate a relationship agreement, then chances are I have my own work to do. Because maybe I'm being controlling, or I'm expecting something as an entitlement that I don't really have a right to.

Jaï Bristow

I think that's such a great tool to have. I'm curious if you make explicit in the book, what are rights? I know you talk about human rights, and maybe it might seem obvious what they are and what they aren't. But sometimes, especially when you're in it, and you've maybe had toxic relationships in the past, so you don't always know what is your right. Have you made that explicit?

Sander T. Jones

I have. It comes up in chapter five and I've outlined 13 personal rights, that I believe are very important to making sure your relationships are not toxic, but also that these are rights that protect our self-esteem and our self-respect.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. And then with the relationship agreements, as you say, they're individual to each relationship, or unique to each relationship. But I'm wondering if you were using the example of monogamy, where it's actually implicit rather than explicit. So is there also guidance in your book about how to make explicit what the relationship agreements are?

Sander T. Jones

Yes, and I encourage that a lot because like I said earlier, there can be a lot of misunderstandings around assuming that the person you're engaging with has the same definition of this thing that you do. And so, one person will say, I would like us to be exclusive, the other person assumes they know what that means, they agree to it, but they've never spelled out exactly what that means. And so that can turn into huge disagreements down the road where one person says, well, what you're doing is emotional cheating, and the other person says, there's no such thing, I'm just talking to my friend. And huge painful disagreements around that.

But relationship agreements can apply to literally anything from how are we going to handle dirty dishes in the evening, to how do we treat our pets, to whether or not we're going to have children,

to what is monogamy, what is non-monogamy, if you're engaging in non-monogamous relationships, and the many, many agreements that can come into existence around that.

[00:40:03] Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. And I think it's so important to have those conversations as early on as possible because so often people get very far down the line, and then suddenly realize that they have very different definitions, and ideas of what's happening. And I guess also relationship agreements don't need to be the same agreement for each person.

I know a couple where you gave the example of emotional cheating, for example. So one person their patterning was that they were very comfortable with their partner having emotional entanglements or something, but not so much sexual ones, and vice versa. And I can't remember if it was they were happy for their partner to do that, it was how they operated.

Maybe it was the opposite, was like one of them felt like having sex with different people wasn't cheating, it was there was no emotions, and what was actually cheating was forming deep emotional attachments. And the other partner felt like deep emotional attachment, they had lots of friends and stuff, sex was cheating. So they had to negotiate that together and apply different rules to each one, so that they could both feel safe in the relationship.

Sander T. Jones

Yes, agreements can be that way. Where the agreement includes one person's behavior can be this, and the other person's behavior can be that. But I'm really glad you brought up the point of things can go a long, long time. I also talk in my book about precedents, and so if you didn't negotiate something and you just do things the same way for a long time, that precedent is sort of an implicit agreement that needs to be treated with respect and re-negotiated when you find you have difficulties.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Well, I for one am looking forward to reading your book. I think it's going to be fantastically beneficial in all my relationships, and I recommend others do the same. Sander, thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work, and where can they buy your book?

Sander T. Jones

Thanks. My website is sandertjones.com. You can find me on any of the social media platforms basically the same way sandertjones.com or just Sander T. Jones.

My book is available wherever you buy books. Please support your independent local bookstore if you can. But also my book is available with the bigger retailers like Amazon, and Barnes and Noble.

Jaï Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much.