



Conscious Life presents  
**HEALING TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**

## **Healing Toxic Attachment**

**Guest: Sarah Peyton**

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**[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow**

Hello and welcome. My name is Jaï Bristow, and today I am very pleased to be welcoming the wonderful Sarah Peyton. Sarah is a neuroscience educator, an author, and a nonviolent communication trainer. Welcome, Sarah.

**Sarah Peyton**

Thank you so much, Jaï.

**Jaï Bristow**

Thank you. So let's dive right in. In today's conversation, we are talking about toxic relationships. And my first question is, what draws us to toxic relationships? Why do we get pulled into these unhealthy harmful dynamics and behaviors?

**Sarah Peyton**

Well, I love it that we can say the word familiar comes from the word family. And so when we are treated badly, in very much the same way we were treated as a child, and it's mixed with the hormones of love and attraction, and sometimes sexuality, then it's such a potent mix. It's like a promise of healing. Like, this person can be as horrible as my father was, but they love me, maybe this time it will come out all right. So we are drawn like flies to honey, or maybe it's ants to honey, I guess it's ants to honey, to try to find healing and resolution.

**Jaï Bristow**

It's interesting because I've had this conversation with a few people on this conference already, about how our brains default to the familiar. Even if it's unhealthy, when we're in new situations, or when we're in a state of like, if there's a lack of security or unknown, then we'll default to those familiar situations. And I love that you're talking about familiar coming from, literally, family, and that that's the origin of so many of these harmful, unhelpful patterns.

**[00:02:09] Sarah Peyton**

Yes, but I think also we get to have more compassion for ourselves when we're not just drawn because it's familiar, but also because it's got this possibility of something really good happening.

**Jaï Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense, I like what you're saying. It's not so much about just the familiarity, there's really this hope that comes in it. It's not that people end up in these relationships, not because we're incapable of learning, or because there's something wrong with us... It's actually from a place of our brains being wired to have this hope, this desire, this, maybe it will be different this time, maybe I can get what I didn't get when I was young.

**Sarah Peyton**

Yes.

**Jaï Bristow**

It's really interesting to think, therefore, about why we're drawn into these patterns, but then what happens when we're in these relationships? Why do we get caught up in them? Why do we struggle to leave them if we know, oh, it's this hope, it's these patterns we recognize, oh, this happens again and again. Why do we get so caught up? Why can't we leave? Why is it so hard to break the patterns?

**Sarah Peyton**

Well, one thing is because the attachment is genuine. I mean, we genuinely care about these people, we see something in them. This is that seed of possible healing, we see, in a way, their inner child, or we see the innocent young person that they were, we see something. And it's so seductive to just keep trying to coax that beautiful part of this person, that we love out of them again, so that we get to resolve really important and deep issues.

But what I really love is the possibility that our healing takes us towards a certain degree of boredom with people who are not truly in relationship with us. That we get to begin to find the part of ourself that's looking for juicy interrelationship, that really wants to experience what it's like to have somebody else have warm curiosity about us consistently over time.

Because one of the other factors that goes into your question is the whole love bombing phenomenon, that when people first get together with somebody who often turns out to be difficult, there'll be an initial period of wow, just fireworks, and sparks, and flowers, and loveliness, and then the worm starts to turn.

So then we're always looking for another thing. We're always looking for if we don't even think about childhood, we're thinking about a return to the honeymoon. But during those three months, or two months, or one month, it was so good, it must be here somewhere. I must have done something wrong to lose it.

## **[00:05:29] Jaï Bristow**

There's a lot in what you're saying because I'm hearing, of course, there's the attachment piece, and maybe we can go into that a little bit more. I think many of the people who are watching this conference will be familiar with attachment, and attachment style, and attachment theory, but perhaps there are people who are new to it, so maybe we could just spend a few minutes talking about that, and then we'll go into the other pieces you touched upon.

## **Sarah Peyton**

Yes, well, attachment is a word that talks about bonding, about being connected to one another. And we each have our own attachment style, and there are four main flavors that we mix and match between, and one of the flavors is secure attachment.

Secure attachment can come from childhood, or it can emerge from our healing journey. So, folks, as you're listening to Jaï and following through on this conference, you're committing yourself to your healing journey, you're committing yourself to the movement from insecure attachment to earned secure attachment. You are learning and earning your security in this world.

And that's the loveliest attachment where we have a sense of both existing in the relationship, both mattering, both having moments where we're separate, having moments where we're really joined. And free more or less of those really difficult things that make the relationships toxic, like verbal abuse, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional withdrawal, silent treatment. All of these things are part of the toxic relationship, infidelity.

## **Jaï Bristow**

I think it's really great that you bring in this piece about attachment because there's the four main ones that people may or may not be familiar with. There's a secure attachment and then there's the different types of insecure attachment. There's anxious style, there's avoidant and there's anxious avoidant.

And then within that, the framework is to do with childhood and people can get very attached, yes, pun intended, to an attachment style, and can identify very strongly with, oh, well, I'm insecure in this way, or these patterns keep happening with these relationships. But we can create a secure attachment through our healing journey.

I'm someone, I went from very insecure attachment styles in some relationships, to much more secure ones in general, and in relationships. And I think that's the other thing to distinguish, is that we can have different attachment styles in different relationships. And I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about that.

## **Sarah Peyton**

Jaï has just mentioned ambivalent/anxious attachment, and then avoidant attachment. With avoidant attachment we carry a conviction that we have to do it alone, that we really shouldn't be dependent upon others, that that's dangerous, and unlikely to be a successful strategy. So we carry this insulation layer around us, which takes us away from being connected to emotions, and sometimes makes us just really task oriented, and getting things done, and not pausing to take time for resonance or empathy.

**[00:09:02]**

And then we have anxious attachment, where we are very dependent on the nervous systems around us. We want to either co-opt the nervous systems around us to make us more stable, or we enter the nervous systems around us to try to make them more stable. Both of these are anxious and ambivalent attachment.

In avoidant attachment, we have too much center and not enough connection with others.

And in anxious attachment, we have no center and a worry, a constant worry, about how everybody else is doing, or about whether or not they're really in relationship with us. These things then, of course, as you can predict, show up in our toxic experiences.

We've also got that whole other area that you said, anxious avoidant, and that area can also be called disorganized or traumatic attachment. And that's where we get the real toxicity. That's where we get domestic violence, and contempt, and relationships that impact our immune system, and our health, and stuff that hurts when we're in it, and then keeps hurting after we're out of it. Just those things that hurt forever.

So we get to be so loving and gentle with ourselves as we're trying to find our way, because each of these styles is different. But they're all attachment, they're all bonding. These are the ways that we bond with other people. And as we become more aware of it, then we can find ourselves within our toxic relationships and say, oh, this man, or woman, or being has more insulation around them, then it's really interesting to me. I think I'm a little bored here.

Or this person needs me to be more intermeshed with them than I'm quite willing to do. I think I'm a little bored here now. With those two possibilities, actually, there's movement. If we are securely attached and we have an avoidant partner, or an ambivalent partner, over a period of five years that person will move into security. It's cool that we can affect each other this way.

But when we get into disorganized traumatic, we usually need help for healing, because the trauma is so big that it'll pull a securely attached person into their own ambivalence, or into their own avoidance, in the effort to cope with the stress.

### **Jaï Bristow**

So tell me more about this fourth style then, this toxic traumatic style, because that's a new definition for this fourth style than I've previously heard. So I'm curious to hear a bit more, especially on this conference where we're exploring toxic relationships. And maybe you can also say a bit more about what toxic means for you, and how this fourth attachment style is the traumatic toxic one. Why does that come up, what happens for that to manifest?

### **Sarah Peyton**

Well, first of all, the way that you framed it initially is the way that people talk about adult attachment styles. When people are talking about adult attachment styles, they don't usually talk about traumatic disorganized. When they're talking about childhood attachment styles, they'll talk about traumatic disorganized, but I think we need to talk about traumatic disorganized, because it doesn't stop when we're children. It persists into relationships where we get hurt.

**[00:12:53]**

And that's how I define toxic. It's like, is this relationship taking a toll on your health? Is this relationship taking a toll on your self-esteem? Is this relationship leaving you with painful intrusive memories or shame? These are all signs of toxicity.

What matters to me is how are you doing in your relationship? Is it contributing to you? Do you feel a warmth and a support that's coming from your partner? Or is everything flowing out of you toward your partner and you're not getting anything back? These are the questions I think are really interesting.

And now we're going to go somewhere really interesting, which is sexuality. When people meet somebody who has this magical connection of the damage that our parents had, and the hormones of sexuality, and the actual love of attraction, and attachment, the sex can be fabulous because sexuality is always looking for truth.

So we're being called in our sexuality to discover the truth of how we were treated when we were little. And once we discover that, we can start... Before we discover that, we become convinced, I could only be with this sort of man, because my body, or only this sort of woman, because my body only comes alive sexually with this sort of man or woman. I only get a charge, an electrical charge with this sort of man or woman.

So a part of this interesting healing boredom is that we begin to go, okay, the men, or women, or people that I used to find really attractive, they're not relational enough for me. They're not in the game enough for me. I'm looking for something different. And in a way, we're looking for relationships with less adrenaline and more oxytocin, with less drama and with more bonding and warmth.

So how do we preserve passion? How do we bring passion to our relationships that aren't filled with adrenaline? One of the healing things that needs to happen is to restructure our understanding of what passion is, and to begin to find it very sexy when people are into us in the long term.

And this is a little bit of a pivot and a rotation that only comes when we begin to go, oh, yes, the way that I was treated in that very sexually charged relationship had so much truth in it, about what it was like to be a little kid in my world.

### **Jaï Bristow**

It's fascinating, it's really interesting because so often in my own experiences, and what I hear from friends and peers is this idea that, oh, it's boring, or it doesn't have that same spark, or it's not what I know what love feels like, and this isn't it. This is just too comfortable. And so I'm curious, is that sort of what you're alluding to?

### **Sarah Peyton**

Yes, except I'm inviting something additional in the comfort, in the exploration of comfort. I'm inviting a discovery of whether or not this comfortable person has the capacity to have warm curiosity about me. Because we can be with somebody really safe, who the world thinks, this is a

very good relationship for Sarah, she should stay in this relationship, it's financially stable, the man is warm.

**[00:17:34]**

But they don't know that this man never asks me questions, never turns toward me with warm curiosity, is not able to sustain conversation over more than one question. Like, how was your day, honey? Okay, let's have some dinner. That's one question. All we want is, how was your day, honey? Wow. Then that happened, what did you do? What happened next? Like, somebody who can sustain interest in us. Learning to find the sexuality in that is a wonderful journey.

**Jaï Bristow**

Yeah, because when there's curiosity, there's a lot of room to learn, to discover, to share. And so I'm curious because you've mentioned boredom a few times now throughout this conversation, and my initial understanding was you were saying you can heal when you get bored of the toxic patterns. Was that what you were saying? But now you're saying you need the curiosity, which is the opposite of boredom, perhaps, to be able to cultivate this passion. So could you say some more about boredom?

**Sarah Peyton**

Our boredom becomes the lodestone, becomes the northern pointing needle on the compass, because it goes with this person. It says, no, the drama, boring, this person is not really interested in me. And then you go, oh, very safe, lovely. No, boring. This person is not really interested in me. Where's the person who's interested in me? That's what I want to find sexy now.

**Jaï Bristow**

It's making sense, so what you're saying is that we have this inner knowing of what feels right, and what we're really looking for in healthy relationships. It's not one extreme of drama, and passion, and intensity. It's not the other extreme of just safe, and reliable, and ticks the boxes on paper. It's that if we take away all the layers of distraction, and we really sense, does this person care about me? Is this person interested in me, in my well-being, in who I am, in what I need, in what I want, then that's where the real healing can happen. That's where the real relationships can bloom. That's where we can discover a new form of passion, and excitement, and love, and sexuality. Is that what you're saying?

**Sarah Peyton**

Absolutely, it's the emergence, it's the emergence of self.

**Jaï Bristow**

How do we then navigate that with narcissism, which these days has become a very taggable, instagrammable, hashtag word, because it can feel uncomfortable for people to be, you know, you're in the right relationship if they're making it all about you. And I know that's not quite what you're saying either, but that sense of, how do we find that line between making sure the person is interested in us, and making sure that we're also interested in the other one. And that it doesn't

become an imbalanced relationship, or that it doesn't promote narcissism, or narcissistic tendencies?

**[00:20:52] Sarah Peyton**

Well, if you start to just notice how the conversation flows, and you're responsible for having a warm curiosity and engagement with your partner's life, and they're responsible for having a warm curiosity and engagement with your life, then there's a mutuality that's sweet to be in.

**Jaï Bristow**

So it's looking for that mutuality, looking for someone who's genuinely interested and curious about you, about who you are, about who you're becoming, about your well-being, and equally having and cultivating that curiosity for the people you're in a relationship with. And I think if you're also curious about other people, then you'll see the lack of curiosity if it's there that they have for you.

I'm curious as well, earlier in the conversation you were talking about, I can't remember how you phrased it exactly, but it evoked in me this idea of dating someone's potential. You were talking about how we have this hope, we date from a place of hope, and sometimes we have this bonding, this attachment with someone. And then even if they're not curious in us, there's something about them that gives us hope, that creates the attachment, that makes us want more.

And I know other people have heard this from their therapists, from their friends, from whoever is offering guidance in their life about... And someone has to tell me, stop dating someone's potential and date the person in front of you. And I'm curious if you have more to say about that in terms of today's discussion.

**Sarah Peyton**

Well, that takes us right back to that ability that we can have with people who are the walking wounded, to see their little one, what beauty. Oftentimes this happens for me with folks who are alcoholics. It's like the alcohol is the insulation, and right behind the alcohol is this beautiful artist, or musician, or creator, or inner child. I often think about that, about how I'll fall in love with the potential of someone who's got the addiction mask, rather than the nervous system shutdown mask.

And we want to be with beauty, so we get to be kind to ourselves, we get to hold ourselves with warmth in our love of potential. But I'm really enjoying that your person, or that you've heard this phrase, don't date the potential, date the person in front of you. This is a wonderful way to say very much what I'm saying in a very short sentence.

**Jaï Bristow**

I'm curious if we're going back into the neuroscience perspective of things, what is happening in our brains when we're getting pulled into these toxic relationships? And then what happens as we begin to heal, or what do we want to happen as we heal?

**[00:24:09] Sarah Peyton**

I also wanted to say that the love bombing stage is very much like this engagement that we're looking for. So sometimes it just takes a little while to figure out, oops, that was love bombing, it wasn't actually engagement.

**Jaï Bristow**

And on that piece before we go into the next bit. How do we differentiate when it's love bombing, and when it's authentic healthy curiosity?

**Sarah Peyton**

Because of the way the hormones work, which we'll talk about in just a moment, there's not really a huge difference, in some ways. It's no wonder we get pulled in by love bombing, because the person in the initial part of... The both of us, in an initial stage of a relationship, if you think about a cliff, rocks at the bottom, the tide coming in, and when the tide is high, it's high on the cliff, and you can't see the rocks and you can't feel the rocks. But when the tide goes down, the rocks start to appear.

So the vasopressin, the adrenaline, the oxytocin, the hormones of intense sexuality and attraction raise both people off the rocks. And then as the time goes on, then the rocks become really apparent, because the tide has gone out, and there we are bouncing on the rocks, hoping that the tide will come back in. But unfortunately, it's not the same as the moon tides. Sometimes we just stay on those rocks for 40 years, and doesn't end, the tide never comes back. So part of what we need is a little bit of time.

And this is why it's important not to marry somebody, or move in with them in the first four months. It's very good to wait six months to a year to see what happens when the tide goes out, and what the rocks are like, and how you're bouncing, and whether that the person suddenly has contempt for you, or whether they're suddenly telling you that you are ugly, or that you don't dance well, or that your body's wrong.

**Jaï Bristow**

So is that the danger with love bombing as opposed to curiosity, is that love bombing has that same intensity which impacts our hormones and neurologically impacts us in the same way as healthy attachment initially, but then the flip side of that is toxicity.

**Sarah Peyton**

Yeah.

**Jaï Bristow**

And is there a way, of course our hormones react a certain way, but is there a way that our rational selves can notice some red flags, to notice signs of whether it's love bombing or healthy attachment, healthy curiosity?



### **[00:26:54] Sarah Peyton**

Well, some of the things to be able to look for are, what is the person's relationship history? What is their relationship with their past partners? What do their past partners say about them? Are their past partners gently trying to warn us away from them? It's a very good sign that something might be wrong.

Does the person want to keep us away from our social circle or our family? This is a very big red flag. If a person wants to isolate us, or wants to control our cell phone, or look at our internet, or has that kind of jealousy, that's a big red flag that there are some big old rocks down below, that we're going to be bouncing on soon. That's one of the very biggest ones.

### **Jaï Bristow**

Now let's talk about neuroscience.

### **Sarah Peyton**

Well, we have been with the tide, talking about the tide, the neuroscience is that the initial attraction carries us up above the rocks of trauma, and keeps us out of the traumatized area. The thing about bonding is that we start to become part of one another's precuneus, which is a part of the brain in the back that holds our sense of self. But that also grafts in a sense of others as a part of us. People who are important to us, our brain makes us... We develop actual brain territory that's devoted to the person.

So we have brain territory devoted to a sense of self, but we have entire swaths of brain tissue that are devoted to a theory of mind for the people that are most important to us. So part of what's happening, and why it makes it hard to leave, and why I said it's genuine attachment, is that the person becomes a part of us. It's hard to leave a part of your own self, even if you're bored with them, even if you know, there's drama that you're not enjoying. It's hard to go. So acknowledging the grafting is also very important, and very interesting, like, to what degree?

And we can walk away from a relationship and still know, well, that person is a part of me, and they always will be a part of me, they were really important to me. And to be able to acknowledge that, and not make it wrong. Much of the riddle of how to leave a toxic relationship is about how to not make ourselves wrong, because in toxic relationships, the other person is making us wrong, and we're trying to believe them in order to get their love back.

If we can believe them, and understand them, and change ourselves, then we'll be that person that got to have the love bombing in the very beginning. So we get to be so gentle with our own little starved and hungry selves, starved and hungry for love, and for hope, and for healing. The more self-compassion we have, the more likely we are to be bored by somebody who's treating us badly.

### **Jaï Bristow**

It's fascinating what you're saying about how in the brain, literally, the other person becomes a part of ourselves. It's more than just attachment theory, it's a physiological attachment, you know what I mean? It's in the brain, there's a real sense of this person is a part of me and not wanting...

**[00:30:48]**

So it makes sense why it can be so painful, and so difficult to detach from these relationships, and to get the closure. Especially when the other person is reinforcing patterns that maybe we've developed since childhood, reinforcing beliefs we have about ourselves, reinforcing all the negative and scary thoughts that we have. So, of course, it's really difficult.

I know from my own experience it is possible. So how do we, once we become aware that maybe that's happening, what can we do to remove ourselves from these harmful environments and relationships?

**Sarah Peyton**

Well, if you're liking what I'm saying, there's actually some free resources on my website, to begin to create the neural connections in the brain that bring the self-warmth, and move us towards a healthy boredom that gives us our north star compass experience.

So go to my website, [sarahpeyton.com](http://sarahpeyton.com). There's a start here button that gives you downloads of guided meditations to begin to change your brain, to begin to invite self-warmth, to begin to acknowledge your emotions, to validate who you are.

I just recently have been receiving a number of letters from a woman who keeps writing to me to say, how do I tell the difference between him actually being abusive and me being too sensitive?

**Jaï Bristow**

Good question.

**Sarah Peyton**

I'm like, it doesn't matter. We don't care about that. What we care about is you. If it's unpleasant for you, that's what we care about. It doesn't matter. Who cares if he's being abusive or not. This is where that healthy boredom starts to give us that compass needle direction.

And then of course, to acknowledge to folks when they write me, yeah, I wonder if you need some acknowledgment of how hard this is, and how bewildering it is, when you have a sense of ouch, and somebody else tells you that you're the one who's causing it. Would you like a little acknowledgment that, of course, that's bewildering.

**Jaï Bristow**

I think you're touching upon a really important piece. It's true in trauma, it's true in toxic relationships, it's true in anything that's harmful, that to our brains it doesn't matter if it's real or not. It's that cliché of if you see a piece of rope on the ground and you think it's a snake, and then you're going to have a fear response, but then you'll reset once you realize oh, it's just a piece of rope.

But when we're in relationship, if our unhealthy patterns, our traumas are being activated, are being triggered, then whether it's the other person's fault or not, whether that person is being... If

they don't have the capacity to hold and heal and support you, then it doesn't matter. It's a relationship that it's time to get out of.

**[00:33:58]**

And I remember saying to a friend something similar around that once where it was like if there's a fundamental incompatibility with this person you're in, then we can drive ourselves crazy trying to fix ourselves, or heal ourselves into a positive relationship with that person. And sometimes removing yourself from the situation, and healing with people who have the support and capacity is what's needed.

And maybe that relationship would have worked much better if there was less trauma there. But the fact of the matter is, if there's trauma, you don't want to be retraumatizing yourself in an unhealthy, painful, toxic, harmful relationship, regardless of whether the other person is toxic, or harmful, or abusive. Of course, it matters to some degree, but in terms of the impact on the individual, that's not the most important thing.

**Sarah Peyton**

The most important thing is us. Again, how do we tell the difference between making ourselves the healthy center of our world and narcissism? We tell the difference by looking at how much warm curiosity and ability to sustain conversation about somebody else do we have? How much of that do we have? That's what tells us the difference between our narcissism and our healthy centering of self.

And it's especially important not to think about how we are with strangers, because with strangers there's no trauma rocks. We have to think about whether we have a warm curiosity for the people that are closest to us, our partners, our children, our best friends. Are we warmly curious about them? That will tell us about whether or not we're moving away from healthy self-centering.

**Jaï Bristow**

Well, I think that's a wonderful reflection to leave people with. So ask yourselves, do you have a warm curiosity for the people in your lives? Or are you making it all about you? In which case, check out the tools on Sarah's website.

**Sarah Peyton**

Or are you making it all about them? And notice that they don't have a warm curiosity about you? We don't want that either.

**Jaï Bristow**

It's that mutuality you're talking about, it's important to cultivate a warm curiosity, but also have people be curious about you. So it's not just asking, do you have a warm curiosity about other people? But do the people in your life, do you feel like they have a warm curiosity about you? Do you feel like the mutuality with these relationships? And if not, maybe it's time to let them go.

Sarah, thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work?

**[00:36:43] Sarah Peyton**

Thank you so much. [sarahpeyton.com](https://sarahpeyton.com), and I'm just publishing a new book on the 29th August called *The Antiracist Heart*, which is about bringing the neuroscience of relationships into our relationship with trying to change the world, make the world a better place.

**Jaï Bristow**

Fantastic.

**Sarah Peyton**

Yes.

**Jaï Bristow**

I'm very grateful for all the work you do in the world. Thank you.

**Sarah Peyton**

Thank you, Jaï. I'm very delighted that you're doing the work you do too.