



Conscious Life presents  
**HEALING TOXIC  
RELATIONSHIPS**

## **Penetrating Self-Esteem Disorders**

**Guest: Terry Real**

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

Welcome, everyone, to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking with my friend Terry Real. We're going to be exploring self-esteem disorders. How we can find ourselves being overly inflated, but also find ourselves deflating ourselves. Also, in relational dynamics with someone else, who's doing that, and where does that cross the line into full blown narcissism?

This is going to be a super interesting interview. To give a little bit of Terry's background. Terence Real is an internationally recognized family therapist, speaker, and author. He founded the Relational Life Institute, offering workshops for couples, individuals, and parents, along with a professional training program for clinicians to learn his relational life therapy methodology.

He is the bestselling author of *I don't Want To Talk About It, How Can I Get Through To You?, The New Rules of Marriage*, and his most recent book, which was a New York Times bestseller, which is called *Us*. So firstly, Terry, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me.

**Terry Real**

You're welcome. It's great to be here.

**Alex Howard**

We always have fun together. I want to start with giving some context around self-esteem disorders. Maybe you can say a little bit about what they are and what some of the signs are that they're showing up.

**Terry Real**

Let me start off by saying the whole culture is self-esteem disorder.

**Alex Howard**

Okay, strong. I like it.

**Terry Real**

Healthy self-esteem is hard to come by in this culture, not taught, actually, there are initiatives that try and teach kids self-esteem. There's one in California that was absolutely laughable because we just don't understand it.

**[00:01:57]**

Let's start off with what self-esteem is. Self-esteem is a healthy relationship between you and you. And by the way, I'll probably say this a couple of times, it just so happens that I will be teaching online a self-esteem class starting in late October, but it's recorded so you can tune into it anytime going into November, about what healthy self-esteem is and isn't.

Healthy self-esteem is how you hold yourself, your relationship to yourself. And we have a saying, we tend to hold ourselves the way we were held. So if your parents were indulgent, you'll be entitled. If your parents were harsh, you'll be harsh. We learn how to have a relationship with ourselves by the school of relationships called our families, that we grew up in.

So what is healthy self-esteem? Healthy self-esteem comes from the inside out. It is your capacity, just like the phrase says, to esteem yourself, to love yourself, to hold yourself warmly and tenderly in your humanity.

That's what's so critical, in the face of your imperfections and screw ups. How many people listening to this give ourselves a hard time when we're not perfect, don't measure up, don't get the results we want. So healthy self-esteem, which is not taught in our culture, comes from the inside out. It's ontological, it's spiritual, you have worth and dignity because you're here and you're alive on the planet. Your worth and dignity is no greater or lesser than the person to the right or to the left of you. It cannot be. That is a lie.

In my new book *Us*, New York Times bestseller I'm proud to say, I talk about coming out from under the great lie. Whether we're talking about races, or individuals or groups, the idea that a person could be intrinsically inferior or superior to another is the bulwark of Western civilization. But it is absolutely delusional. You can't add to self-esteem, you can't subtract from it. The Metropolitan Opera is now playing a beautiful opera on *Dead Man Walking*, the true story of a serial killer who is loved by a Catholic nun despite his horrendous behavior.

You have worth and dignity, it cannot be taken away, and it cannot be greater or lesser than anybody. Now, this is democracy. One person, one vote. This is medical ethics. This is the Hippocratic oath. We're all equal. But we don't live like that. In real life we go up and down, and up and down, and judge ourselves, and judge others, and we're very harsh with ourselves. So I have to teach people, just as I had to learn, how to hold myself in warm regard from the inside out. And let me say a word about that. The name of the game is imperfection. And I hate to tell you, but we humans are imperfect, including you, Alex.

**Alex Howard**

I don't think, you not me, I think everyone else. Terry.

**Terry Real**

That might be part of your imperfection. But anyway, we're imperfect. And the discrepancy between the perfection that we think we're supposed to live up to and our woeful limitations really sticks in the craw. Whether we're talking about ourselves, or whether we're judging another. But it's really the collision of our human imperfections and how we manage it. That is the stuff of relationships itself.

Whether it's a relationship to your partner. I talk about relational shame. If I was with a good partner, we wouldn't be fighting this much and we'd be having more sex, good luck.

**[00:06:30]**

And then individual shame. If I was taller, shorter, smarter, richer, blah, blah, then I would be a wonderful person. Our culture runs on this crap. I mean, the whole advertising industry is based on buy this car and be a person of distinction. But it's all nonsense. Feel good about the good things. I'm not a Marxist, don't check your brain at the door, that's not what I mean by being equal. Feel bad about the bad things. Healthy self-esteem is feeling proportionately bad about your bad behavior. If you don't feel bad, you're a sociopath, you're a narcissist. We'll talk about that.

So you should feel bad about your bad behavior, but it's about the behavior it's not about you as a person. And we teach our kids this on a good day, you're a good kid, get that hammer out of your hand. I have to say, in England, Ireland, Germany, until very recently don't be a bad boy, don't be a bad girl, there was a personal.

But it was really the pediatrician, Ben Spock, who first taught Americans and then it went from there. Don't attack your child attack the behavior. Well, same with us, feel bad, proportionately bad. I feel this bad about running over your doll, I feel this bad about running over your arm. Feel proportionately bad about your bad behavior, hold yourself warmly as a flawed person, both at the same time.

A lot of people go from inflation to deflation, from grandiosity to shame. I'm entitled to, oh, my God, that was horrible, I'm a big shit. I have to teach the people I work with, come out of that deflation, nobody cares, pay attention to the person you hurt. That's the difference between shame and guilt. So we have to teach people what healthy guilt and healthy remorse looks like, coming out of either shamelessness, which is one extreme, or shame attacks, which is the other extreme. It takes a lot to learn how to forgive yourself and be loving in the face of your imperfections, but it can be taught.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah.

**Terry Real**

I'll be relational and let you speak in 1 minute, but let me just nail this, because I don't want to forget it. If your viewers get only one thing from this interview, this is what I want them to get. How many of us treat ourselves harshly? And here's what I teach, there is absolutely no redeeming value in harshness. There is nothing that harshness does that loving firmness doesn't do better. Take yourself by the hand, dust yourself off, learn from your mistakes, get back on the horse. But don't indulge in harsh self-talk. If it's harsh, it's off, take a breath.

I'm an old guy, I'm 73, at 73 I have a deal with the universe, if it's unkind I'm not interested. And that very much goes from the voices in my head. I will say to that part of me, we call it the adaptive child part of me, it's just a child. I will say, listen, you may have something I need to learn from but not the way you're talking to me, just like you would a partner outside of you. And our relationship to this doesn't have to be passive, we can shape it, we can change our relationship to ourselves. We can learn healthy self-esteem. And the rewards are astounding. I mean, to move from self-loathing, which I felt for many, many years, to being accepting and comfortable in your own skin is truly a transformation.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful. I want to pick up Terry on what you were saying around inflation and deflation of ourself, because what struck me is that we can do that in both the micro and a macro way. And what I mean by that is, in the course of a few minutes, we can go from inflation to deflation. But

also, I think, in chapters of our lives, we can be in chapters where there's an inflated self, and there's other chapters when we're in more of that deflated self.

### **[00:10:59]**

I can self-reflect and recognize a period in my early 20s where my sense of self was beyond my capacity and there was that inflated. And then for a few years on the back of that, it was like always playing smaller. It can be quite tricky to find where that point of balance is, and I'm curious how we find that.

### **Terry Real**

It's really simple, you're no better or no worse than anybody else. That's all it is. You can be a better tennis player, you can be a better therapist, you can be a better interviewer, you can have a bigger audience, feel great about all of that, but it stops short of making you a better human being. And that's what we get wrong in this culture.

### **Alex Howard**

But I think the challenge is often we can become identified with those roles. Again if I self-reference it, the point of inflation, the problem was my whole sense of identity was constructed around certain roles, and I wasn't just those roles when I was in those roles, I was in those roles when I was dating. So it also becomes a place to hide, a place to try and inflate the small self.

### **Terry Real**

Yeah, just as there are periods in one's life when you're more up or down, there are people who ride more in the one up position, and there are people who ride more in the one down position. Of course, I'm a gender guy, so men in our culture tend to lead from the one up superior position, entitled position, and have covert shame. Whereas women tend to lead from the one down position traditionally, and have covert grandiosity.

Let's talk about the flip sides of the same coin. Shame, inferiority, unlovability, defectiveness, I'm small, I'm weak, nobody. Or superiority entitlement, I'm god's gift, I'm looking down my nose at you, I feel contempt for you, or for another race, or for another type of person, I'm in judgment.

I think the therapy I've created is, one of our real contributions if I can say this, is that we deal equally with issues of superiority and grandiosity, as we do with issues of shame. And not too many therapies do that, most all of us are focused on helping people come up from the one down. But if you can't help people come down from the one up, you cannot move them into intimacy, you cannot love.

Think of your own life, Alex. You cannot really love from the one up looking down your nose position. You cannot love from the one down desperate, love me, love me please, I need you, position. In the words of the great feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, love demands democracy. We have to be eyeball to eyeball in order to be truly intimate with ourselves, and in order to have an intimate relationship with others.

### **Alex Howard**

You said something in passing a few minutes ago that really caught my curiosity, you said covert grandiosity. Speak to that.

## **[00:14:24] - Terry Real**

Everyone wants to hear about women's grandiosity, it's intriguing. Here's the catch-22 for women, traditionally women are... I don't believe in biological difference there's just way too much variation, it just doesn't pan out, nice to think in these simple binaries, but the research doesn't back it up. But women have been socialized forever to learn more about relationships and to want more from relationships.

Then we stamp out those relational qualities in traditional masculinity. My first book, *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, was about male depression. But beyond that, it was about what sets up male depression, which is what I call normal boyhood trauma. Patriarchy lands on sensitive relational boys and shuts them down, which is traumatic for all of us.

But girls and women are allowed to know more about relationship and want more from relationship. Men are shut down at three, four, five years old. So the covert grandiosity in heterosexual relationships is wink, wink, nudge nudge, we know more about how to be intimate than these boys work with. We have to grow them up and manage them, which is understandable, but it ain't going to work.

What I teach women is to assert themselves and speak up for what they want and need from their partners. But not from the position of being the voice of objective reality, you are not God's gift to relationships, you are an expert on you. I'm an expert on Kathy, and I can give you Kathy operating instructions, I don't have to cross the line into your side of the street and start telling you what you need to be in order to be more relational. But that's a hard lesson for a lot of women. A lot of women vacillate between, I shouldn't tell them, I don't want to confront men, it'll go badly, so they get disempowered.

Or this Cinderella thing, I shouldn't have to tell them. My prince should just know what I want and give it to me, why do I have to work so hard? That's women's entitlement, sorry, if you want it, you're going to have to fight for it. But what I say to women is, well, Cinderella's dead, Prince Charming probably just got out of rehab, and if you want it, you're going to have to roll up your sleeves and go after it. It's not going to come to you.

But on the other side, when women do open up and speak, a lot of them move from disempowerment to what I call individual empowerment, which is rampant in our culture. Psychotherapy, twelve step feminism, I was weak, now I'm strong, go screw yourself, I found my voice and I'm going to pin your ears back. That is not, no, I want relational empowerment, which is new for the culture. I love you, I want you to come through for me, we're a team, this is what I want from you. How can I help empower you to give it to me? That's a whole new lexicon for all of us.

## **Alex Howard**

We get back to the quote you shared that I thought was great, which is that intimacy requires a democracy. The point you're making is if we're trying to be bigger, or we're trying to push someone down, then that becomes a barrier in the way of the relationship. Sometimes I think that the struggle for people can be that that inflation is a masking. It's trying to hide a place of vulnerability, or a place that feels not able, not capable. So how do we work with that? Because if we lose the masking, we still have the issue that's behind it.

## **Terry Real**

Yes. There are two levels to that. One is that, yes, a lot of flight into grandiosity is an escape from shame and vulnerability. And I got to say, we are speaking in the midst of this terrible crisis in Israel and Palestine, and tremendous trauma across the nation. Let me say something, when 911 happened, I wrote an op-ed piece that nobody wanted to publish. I sent it but nobody wanted it.

But here's what I said, 911 was the first attack on American soil ever. It was an historic trauma to our nation, unprecedented.

**[00:19:26]**

What I know as a trauma expert is that if we turn and face the vulnerability of our traumatic experience, and hold on to one another in community, we can be healed from it. The temptation is to escape that vulnerability into a flight, into grandiosity, superiority, dominance, and attack. And I prayed that as a nation, we would not go there. No one published that op ed piece, and four weeks later, we were at war with Iraq over non-existent weapons of mass destruction.

It's the same dynamic in domestic abuse. Women in heterosexual abuse circumstances are most at risk when they separate from the men. The men feel abandoned, they feel helpless, and they have 10 seconds of tolerance for that. Go from shame to grandiosity, dominance, rage and attack. This is a dynamic of violence across the world. Carol Gilligan's husband, James Gilligan, wrote the best book on violence I've ever read, it's called *Violence*. And like me, and *I Don't Want to Talk About It*, central to masculinity is the shunt from shame to grandiosity, from inferiority to superiority, from helplessness to attack, or entitled irresponsibility.

Yes, we have to teach people how to come down from these things and face the shame, face the vulnerability, it won't kill you. The flight into grandiosity can kill you and those around you, literally. So both individually and as a culture, we must teach people how to come down from this grandiosity.

The devilish thing about grandiosity is that it works. It does self-medicate, the shame. The open secret about grandiosity is it feels good, shame feels bad, and you want to get out of it. Grandiosity feels good. Intoxication is a form of grandiosity. Mania is a form of grandiosity. And it's hard to talk bipolar people into staying on their meds because the mania feels good.

The thrill of superiority and dominance feels good. It will create havoc in your life. And most therapy does not tackle this. Most therapy is nicey, nicey to grandiose, narcissistic people. And we get about as far as traditional wives do. And what stops us therapists from leaning into grandiose people and dealing with them, is the same intimidation that stops women with men.

There are three things. We're afraid if we confront a grandiose person, they will attack us, get mad and attack us. We're afraid they will storm off and leave us. Or, this is interesting, we're afraid they'll move from inflation to deflation and collapse, and we will have hurt them, and we don't know what to do with it. These are the same forces that stop women from confronting their grandiose partners, the same fears. It's endemic in therapy.

Therapy colludes with narcissism and grandiosity. We're taught first you win the person's trust, and then maybe three, four years down the line, you could bullshit in RLT we win the grandiose person's trust by confronting them right out of the starting gate. But there's an art to it. You don't clobber them with it, we call it joining through the truth.

Alex, listen. I don't know, we'll say you've just broken in. You're now a nationally famous therapist and thought leader. I got to tell you, buddy, you're walking around your living room like your poop don't stink so much no more. Your wife and your kids are really fed up with you. Do you know that? And of course, when I'm working with grandiosity...

**Alex Howard**

Sorry is my wife messaging you Terry? Is there something going on here I don't know about?

### **[00:23:46] - Terry Real**

I want the other people in the room when I confront them, that's very useful to be a couple therapists when working with, listen to your partner, that's called leverage. I want to empower the people around you to stand up to you, and then I can come in under that and go, Alex, you love your family, you don't want to be like this, who taught you how to? Where did you learn how...?

Well, my father. I mean, it's always someone. Well, you know, my friend, you of all people know what it's like to be the child of a preoccupied, self-centered man. Is this what you want to pass on to your kids? I don't think so. Let me help you.

And what I'm doing is, I'm scooting through the grandiose part of you to form an alliance with what we call the wise adult prefrontal cortex, the thinking part of you that knows better. And I'm forming an alliance with that part, saying, come on, buddy, you and me...

At the end of almost every interview with a grandiose client, an RLT therapist sounds like this hey, Alex, role play Alex, not the real Alex. Hey, Alex, who's been a liar and a philanderer for 20 years. You're a good guy, I've been with people who are bad, they're called sociopaths, and they're cold, but you're warm, you've got a good heart.

You know what's so sad role play philandering Alex? I'm talking to a good man who's behaved indecently for 20 years. Will you let me rescue the real you from this crap? And by the way, save your marriage and spare your children. Are you interested in that? Now, who says no to that? And they don't. It takes a good year or two to learn how to do this properly. It's called joining group. But if you're skilled at it, you can form an alliance about the troublesome grandiosity with the person in the first session.

And there, you know, if you're doing a great forgive me, but a great RLT interview, when the person at the end says, I got more out of this one session than five years because we're dealing with the issue right out of the gate.

### **Alex Howard**

I also think for someone that is in a grandiose role, when someone is big enough to challenge and smart enough to really see what's happening, it's hard to sustain that position of defense.

### **Terry Real**

Right. And then often they will go into deflation, and you have to go in there and teach them the difference between shame and guilt. I say, okay, Alex, you're beating yourself up, your wife doesn't need that, there's no favor to anybody. And you know what, my friend? Guess what? You moved from that self-centered entitlement, oh, I'm the biggest guy in the world, to now you're beating a different form of self-centeredness. Nobody cares about what a shit you are. Turn to your wife...

### **Alex Howard**

Stop being grandiose in the claps. I love it.

### **Terry Real**

Turn to your wife and pay attention, she's the one you hurt, make amends. I teach people how to come up out of that shame into guilt by coming out of their self-reactivation into caring about their... I'll say coming out of shame into guilt is really hard, I'll give you 60 seconds, go, and they do.

**[00:27:25] - Alex Howard**

I'm also interested in the difference between... The frame is this is a good person with bad behaviors. Where's the line between that and someone that has full blown narcissistic personality disorder and actually doesn't have the empathy. Because part of how you're leveraging that session is that deep down, that person does have empathy, they do care, and their intimate relationship does matter to them. Where's the line of where that isn't the case? And for folks that are in relationship with someone like that, what's the pathway?

**Terry Real**

Well, so far, I haven't met that person, and there's a lot of ink being spilled about, oh, these narcissistic character disorders. They're all men and it's all women who are complaining about them, and they're hopeless and they're toxic and they're horrible, and I need to get out. To me, this is more of the individual empowerment of our culture. Bring that guy to me and let me at him.

**Alex Howard**

I guess what folks might say is the true definition of that person is not coming to you in the first place. Right?

**Terry Real**

That's right, and that is our limit. I say that if you have a very grandiose person and you either have no one who's going to stand up to them, and or they don't give a shit, then you have no leverage. Then the question to them is, Mr Jones, what are you here for? Why are you darkening my door? And the answer is that they're not.

So, yeah, look, if you've got somebody who is... Same thing with verbal or domestic abuse, or alcoholism, or anything. If you have somebody who's wildly mistreating you, or wildly irresponsible and they don't give a damn and they don't want to do a damn thing about it, well, yes, get out.

If you go to my, forgive me, but if you go to my website, I do have an article called *Rowing to Nowhere: When Enough is Enough*, and it's about how to decide when it is time to get out. And one of the deal breakers is if you have somebody who's egregiously anti-relational and they don't want to do a damn thing about it, what are you doing there? Get out, but first, if you can drag them to a therapist, try that first.

But you got to drag them, I'm going to say, RLT Relational Life Therapy. You got to drag them to a therapist who's going to back you up and take them on, which most therapists will not do.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah, it's really interesting, Terry, and I think this will be a really important realization for people that whether it's the inflation or the deflation, the grandiose or the collapse, in a way, at the core of all of it is a self-worth issue. Which presents as shame, guilt, self-esteem in its different forms. Where does someone start with working with that piece?

**Terry Real**

I say this a million times, Alex. In our culture, our relationship to relationships is passive, including our relationship to ourself. You get what you get, and then you live with it. The revolution is that we can shape it. You can stand up to the harsh voice and say, excuse me, little Terry, it's just a child in me. Excuse me, little Terry, I know that you're trying to teach me something, right now, whip me into line the way my dad tried to. That's where that part of me got it from. Nice intention, but no, pipe down.



### **[00:31:29] - Terry Real**

And you can stand up to that voice and then replace it with something more loving and realistic. You don't give yourself a free pass, this is reparenting. You can reparent these immature parts of yourself. You know, what if I fail at something, or I screw up, or I'm a dick to Belinda or my kid? Okay. You're right, I was, I need to say I'm sorry and learn from it, but don't beat me up. Just tell me, I'll listen. Just like you talk to somebody.

Over and over again I say to my individual patients, you wouldn't let somebody outside of you talk to you the way you talk to you. So you can stand up and then replace it with something more moderate and loving. Yes, I goofed, okay. And the same thing with shame, or with grandiosity, you can literally...

The first thing I have people do is keep a journal for ten days notice when you're up and down and write about it every day. What was the trigger? What was the physical sensation? That's really critical. I ask people to get to know the physical.

When I'm up, my neck goes... I'm like literally. And when I'm down my shoulders... And then you can pull your, literally imagine pulling your grandiose self down until you're looking out of your eyeball, no better or worse. Pull yourself up from that shame until you're looking out of your eyeballs. No better or worse. And the first time you do that, that adaptive child part of you, those immature parts will laugh themselves silly.

But the thousandth time you do it, you'll do it, and you can intervene. First get to know when you're up and down. And then you can take a breath. Here's a mantra, this is from my mentor Pia Melody, each person has inherent worth, no one more than, no one less than. Each person has inherent work, no more than... You can say that to yourself. Pull yourself down, bring yourself up, take a breath, and then be at one with the person you're speaking to.

I know we have to end in a minute, but you know I love poetry. Here's a couplet from Auden. Well, first I'll do the Irish one. No matter how high or great the throne, what sits on it is the same as your own.

### **Alex Howard**

That's great.

### **Terry Real**

Or said a little more poetically at the end of a poem, Auden looks out at the world and says, I will love my crooked neighbor with my crooked heart. You're no better or worse than the guy to left right of you. Come down off your perch, come up from your cross and embrace your imperfect, flawed humanity. That's a spiritual practice that you can do. Get harshness out of your life, and get centered in your essential worth, and the worth of the people around you.

### **Alex Howard**

Yeah, that's beautiful, really beautiful. Terry, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, you mentioned that the course that you've got is going on. So tell us where they can go and what they can find.

### **Terry Real**

Just google me, Terry Real, go to [terryreal.com](http://terryreal.com). If you're a therapist, you can go to [relationallife.com](http://relationallife.com). That's the name of my therapy, two l's relationallife.com. Or just go to [terryreal.com](http://terryreal.com) if you're what I call a normal person.

**[00:35:17]**

We have courses for therapists, and we have courses for the general public as well. But your family didn't teach you how to do this. The culture did not teach you how to do this. This is serious business. Take some time. Learn these skills, practice them in community, and transform your life. It's really quite possible.

**Alex Howard**

Yeah. It's very beautiful, Terry. Thank you so much.

**Terry Real**

Alex, always a joy.