

## **Pleasure as anti-oppression**

**Guest: Ruby B. Johnson**

*Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.*

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:00:08]**

Hello and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very, very happy to be joined by Ruby B. Johnson. Welcome, Ruby.

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for joining us today. So, Ruby Bouie Johnson is a sex therapist in private practice in Plano, Texas. Her areas of speciality are open polyamorous partnerships and families, Kink/BDSM, desire discrepancy, and multicultural relationships. She's the founder and CEO for Poly Dallas Millennium, which is an annual symposium that centers BIPOC and consensual nonmonogamous voices and experiences. Ms. Johnson is a speaker, writer and therapist who has several publications and interviews in many media outlets discussing BIPOC experiences with BDSM/Kink and consensual non-monogamous relationships.

So, Ruby, today we're going to be talking about pleasure as anti-oppression. So let's start with, what does pleasure mean to you?

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

What does pleasure mean to me? I love that question. In its most simplest Webster's Dictionary definition, it is about satisfaction and enjoyment. And so for me, when people think of pleasure, they may want to pigeon hold it and focus on the sexual pleasure. But pleasure goes beyond the activity of sex. Pleasure is in the appetites you have from the food. It could be in other activities you enjoy, from traveling to cooking to reading to exercising. Pleasure is totally about the experience of satisfaction and enjoyment.

It is about emotion. And then it's about feeling. One feels their way through pleasure as an indicator that they're going in the right direction. So that's how I view pleasure and that's how I approach pleasure in my practice for people that are seeking to have more satisfaction. I say, well, let's replace seeking sexual satisfaction, to, you want to have pleasure and the sexual health of your relationship. So that's kind of the framing that I use.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I really like that. And so why is pleasure important in sexual relationships?

### **Ruby B. Johnson - [00:02:37]**

I think pleasure is important, and this is what research indicates. Over the last couple of decades, research has driven this number one just from the therapist side of it. When your relationship is sexually satisfying or if it's pleasurable, you have a more satisfactory or pleasurable relationship. That's what is important.

But let's not just focus on sex and pleasure as it is with two people, just with yourself. You know, the more satisfied I am with my sexual self, my sexual expression, my sexual identity, the more happy I am just with me, period.

And so I believe that pleasure is important in the sexual health of relationship because you are looking to have an enjoyable experience, not just an orgasmic experience, but a satisfactory, enjoyable, pleasurable experience. Because if we simply shoot for the big O, that physiological response that the body is aroused and has reached a place of ecstasy, you know? Yes. But what happens if you don't have that orgasm? Can you still have a pleasurable sexual life without having an orgasm attached to it? Only you can answer that question for you, but I say you can, most definitely. You know, it's not about shooting for that big O, that end goal.

But can we have the experience itself? It takes the pressure off of the experience of sex. If we're just looking to simply enjoy it and be mindful in the moment and not shoot for that end goal, that future of this is what I got to be. I could truly be with Jaia right now and enjoy this moment, without wondering what's going to happen at the end.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I love that. And I really like the idea of pleasure being all about enjoying the experience, enjoying the moment, and whether that's the sexual experience or not, it's really focusing on that enjoyment and then also the way it feeds into each other. So, if we're focusing on pleasure rather than just having good sex or orgasmic sex, then not only will the sexual experience be more satisfying, but also the more satisfying a sexual experience, the more pleasure we sort of get out of it, the more they feed each other, pleasure and satisfaction and enjoyment.

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

And the more I like you, think about it, and the more that I want to have more moments with you. And the moment that, I mean, it's pleasurable being with you... Think about the person you want to be with, right? You think about your home girl or your home boy or your home person. And he was like, why do I want to? Because I enjoyed my last experience I had with them. I'm not going to want to be with you if the last experience I have with you wasn't enjoyable, wasn't satisfactory. I don't want to be with you as much.

And so that to me is also real important because pleasure builds relationships. It builds connection. It's a building block within our relational structure.

### **Jaia Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense. And do you believe that most sexual experiences are pleasure focused?

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

Do I believe most are pleasure focused? I believe that most are aspects of pleasure focus. The embodiment of pleasure is a whole other conversation, because I think one can embody a pleasurable experience, and then they could have the aspects of pleasure, you know, like the orgasm. That's an aspect of something that is pleasurable with it. And then there's the embodiment, the mindfulness of it.

Because and when I say aspects of it that is pleasurable, because, I talk to couples and even myself before I liberated my sexual self, I went into it thinking, okay, I got to get mine. I got to get mine, you know. And it was self-gratification. It was, you take care of you, I'm going to take care of me. It was that kind of attitude going into it. And that wasn't the embodiment, that was about pleasure, but it wasn't the embodiment of the entire mutual pleasurable experience. And I think that to me, is a lot of the issues that I have with people when they come into my office, and they want to improve the sexual health of their relationship, is that it's kind of this self-preservation mentality with the pleasure in their sexual health of their relationship, versus the enjoyment of the entire experience.

So that's not kind of a straightforward yes or no, because it's not a yes or no answer. And it also depends on your definition of pleasure. It also depends on you, is this, all kinds of conversations around that. That's an excellent question. It's like an hour long response so I can answer that question.

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:08:19]**

We'll go into that some other time.

I'm curious because you talked about before you liberated your sexual self. What do you mean by having a liberated sexual self? What does that mean for you? And how did it happen for you?

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

For me, how it happened was probably back, I'm polyamorous. And so back in 2010, I was introduced to the concept of consensual nonmonogamy, which is the idea that I am not, say in a relationship with one person only, I have opportunity to have multiple, simultaneous relationships where everyone is aware and everyone consents to it. There's no secrets or anything like that. And so what I found is that before I was operating from this framework of what someone dictated to me, what a healthy, happy relationship looks like, hence what a healthy, happy sexual life looks like, what that is supposed to be.

I came from a framework of, it was rooted in competition. Every woman was a threat. I was from that heterosexual framework. Also, that pigeon held me of me it's supposed to be between a man and a woman. I didn't allow my queerness to come through. And then there was a whole lot that was locked down and oppressed for me based upon someone else's ideology and a dominant cultural paradigm of who I was supposed to be and operate and behave within relationships.

In 2010, that shifted, I got introduced to consensual nonmonogamy, and also BDSM. And so my erotic self changed. My sexual identity changed. Who I was shifted. I became educated myself. I started thinking more critically about all of who I was. I introduced myself to Black queer feminist, Audre Lorde (got to read *Sister Outsider*). *Uses of the Erotic* changed my life, that essay by Audre Lorde.

I started developing my own ideology around sexuality, sexology. And I started hanging out with other women, just like me. So in the collective, I got new ideas, new experiences, new information. And it changed me, you know, and I started living differently.

So that is how it happened for me, is that I had, I was exposed to other things. That's how my shift happened.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And how does that intersect with your experiences as a Black woman? Because you talk about all this liberation and these ideologies that you were constrained by in terms of heteronormativity and monogamy and all these quite constraining styles. And I know that a lot of time, the queer scene, the nonmonogamy scene is quite predominantly white. At least those have been my experiences. So I'm curious in terms of your experiences as a Black woman, how that was impacted as well.

**Ruby B. Johnson - [00:11:41]**

When I first got into the scene, yes, it was very white. People did not look like me, but I found my tribe. And so in the process of being introduced to the concepts, I slowly started moving more freely. And I found my people. And then I discovered how much of me as a Black woman was a white-washed Black woman. I really, truly feel that I discovered my Blackness. And I'm still discovering that. I'm still deprogramming, unpacking, decolonizing, deconstructing, doing my anti-capitalistic, anti-oppressive work.

You know, for example, I'm growing my locks underneath this protective style, but I'm so damn vain because my locks are little, like my hair too big. It's just that idea of who's looking at me, being caught up in that. I want to be free. I'm striving for being able to walk with freedom in that regardless of whose gaze is looking at me. That's the kind of liberation that I'm looking for. And it's through the process of reading slave journals of Black women who were enslaved women, and their journals, and reading some of how their identity and sexuality and sexual selves were stripped and raped and pillaged and taken.

You know, you'll be amazed. I encourage anyone to, you can go to libraries, libraries have them. You can go online, now Youtube people, people are reading journals on YouTube, and listen to some of the work out there on women and Black sexuality, because you'll learn so much about yourself, and that's the journey that I am on, that my mom didn't get, my sister didn't get, you know.

Through the process of this opening to exposure of new things, I'm developing a brand new ideology that is allowing me to be a pioneer in my own life, which I wasn't able to be before because I was led by someone else. Now I'm pioneering myself, basically.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic, brilliant. And how does this all connect back to pleasure? How has pleasure supported this liberation?

**Ruby B. Johnson**

Oh, pleasure has supported it because I love this shit. Oh, am I allowed to cuss, because I just did?

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. I think that's fine.

**Ruby B. Johnson**

It has allowed for a lot more freedom of thought and open mindedness. And so that allows for the generative growth process of pleasure. My mind is not so closed and limited, which encourages pleasure because I'm excited and enthusiastic about it. And so for me, that's what I believe in carrying to the people, which is that, this is not anything to me afraid of. It's unnerving, it's confusing, but it's exciting, and it allows you to have that exploratory mentality.

So when you're with a partner or you're with yourself, and you're self-gratifying or self-pleasuring. You know, you may be more willing to explore with your hands in places that you may have had some shame about. I don't know if I want to touch my, my anus, you know, that's kind of, ooh, shame yourself, but maybe not, maybe that's somebody else's shame. And you are going to explore that and have pleasure. Or you could do that with your partner.

You know, people want to explore different aspects of it. So that kind of all comes back to it. When you open yourself up to be curious, when you open yourself up to explore, when you open yourself up to push boundaries, and not to censor or oppress or suppress yourself, you're opening yourself up for opportunities, for equitable access to pleasurable experience.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:16:29]**

Brilliant. And so talking about these pleasurable experiences, how does one reframe pleasure and refocus pleasure as part of one's sexual activities, but also in life in general, do you have any actionable tips on how to do that?

**Ruby B. Johnson**

To reframe it? Yeah, you know, just for Black men, Black women, folks of color, women like you and I... I'm sorry, I define as a woman, people.

**Jaia Bristow**

I do.

**Ruby B. Johnson**

Ok. There can be this hyper sexuality for darker skin. There is this idea that we are there to serve for someone else's pleasure. We are there to be exploited or to entertain for someone else's gaze. But reframing pleasure is about, not so much about you, and then it's also not so much about self, but it's about the mutual experience of it. It's not about the performance of the act, but it's about the experience of pleasure mutually.

How can I show up for you or us, can be more than two. How can I show up for us in this experience to where all of us enjoy it? And it's about the collective. It's about us together. And I think shifting from such this individualistic way of thinking, especially here in the United States, it's very individualism. It's very capitalistic. It's very product driven, it's about what is the product that we're going to get here? What is the utilitarian purpose? It's all of that. And once we shift our framework and paradigm of how we see just life in general, it helps tremendously, and how we treat pleasure and we experience pleasure in our relationships.

**Jaia Bristow**

And so talking about this sort of mutual pleasure, then if we're talking about this in a sexual framework, how can we make sure that all parties involved, because we're talking about nonmonogamy as well, so it's not just two people. Sometimes it's more. How can we make sure that all parties involved are focusing on their pleasure and are enjoying the experience?

**Ruby B. Johnson**

Absolutely. And I think there's this great concept in the kink world called "after care," and it's basically like a debriefing. And so for us to like, how can we optimize our experience? Part of that is kind of exploring yourself before you get into certain experiences and doing that introspection. There's great books that are out there, quizzes online where you can look at your erotic blueprint, and figure out, okay, what turns me on? Am I sensual? Am I kinetic? Am I energy driven? Am I tactile? You can answer those questions for you so that you're able to communicate to that person if you're going to have a mutual experience with other folks.

There's a great book that came out by Marla Renee Stewart, which talks about... What is the name of that book? *The Ultimate Guide to Seduction & Foreplay*, there's another great book out there.

You can also explore and talk around consent. I think consent is not discussed and talk to the person before you're going to get into experience with someone. Okay. This is my hard yeses. And this is my hard no's. Because people have hard yeses, like hell yeah! I need that to happen, that's my fetish.

And so just having conversations like that. So communication, understanding yourself, figuring out what turns you on, what turns you off. These all optimize. Also what else needs to happen for you before you even get into the bedroom. Some people need to have a connection with that person before. Figure out, am I feeling sexual? Me? Is this what's hindering me? Am I mega sexual? Am I... Just all of these different things that you can figure out about yourself.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:21:27]**

Wonderful.

**Ruby B. Johnson**

Those are some things.

**Jaia Bristow**

Brilliant.

And I'm curious then, what are some of the dangers when people don't focus on pleasure during... We've touched upon this a little bit already, but when people don't focus on pleasure during sex, for example, what are some of the dangers that can arise?

**Ruby B. Johnson**

When people don't focus on pleasure, like when they go into it for ulterior motives?

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, I guess, or when they're... Maybe, I don't know if they go into it for ulterior motives. But when pleasure isn't the main focus, are there dangers with that? Or is that something that is also okay? Or is it more about again, redefining pleasure. And it depends on what pleasure means to someone, whether that's physical sensations or whether it's the whole enjoying the experience or...

**Ruby B. Johnson**

So I see what you're saying. Yeah. What happens, like is there a danger to that when they're going into it and it's not about the pleasure of the experience. There can be ramifications, I think is the word I'm trying to find, to where there could be maybe some emotional or mental hurts that can happen, that can mess with them. Or it can be a tarnishing of the experience. You don't have a good experience with that person.

And so what else was going on there? Kind of like that evaluation that happens. What is my motive? What is my intention? Was this about a good time or was this about something totally different? And I think that is actually a really good point, Jaia, because we really sometimes do need to check that.

And pleasure doesn't necessarily have to... It's not about transactions, because you know there's sex work, there's all types of things that are involved there, and sex work is very pleasurable, for many, many, many different reasons. But everyone understands the motives of the intentions and what is happening there. And I think that is important to understand, whatever pleasure means for you in that moment, whatever the enjoyment and satisfaction. Check that, to make sure that you optimize that moment.

**Jaia Bristow**

Wonderful. One more question I have for you when we're talking about pleasure as anti-oppression. What is anti oppression? How does that show up? And how are the two interlinked?

### **Ruby B. Johnson - [00:24:12]**

Right? I think that's an excellent question. Oppression itself is about the prolonged mistreatment or control of a group. And this is how I define oppression. And so when I'm doing the anti-oppression work with people in my office, what I'm looking for is, how has sexism played out? How has racism played out? How has capitalism? How has ableism? How has any of the isms, how has that played out within the intimate relational structure that you have with whomever you're in a relationship with, including kids? How has all of this played out and impacted the pleasure and how pleasure manifests in your life?

Because when one is not pleasure-centered, and one is more performative-centered in their world, especially as a woman, then sex becomes obligation. It becomes utilitarian. It can be used as emotional manipulation. One can be basically seen as their sole purpose is of servitude and nurturing and taking care of you.

For Black women, the archetypes of the Black women can play out in a relationship. I find that the mammy archetype, which is for women who are larger, like me, larger and dark skinned. I see this a lot. I get a lot of dark skinned women in my practice. Larger, dark skinned. Within a relationship, that woman shows up as the mammy, and she is the wantless needless sexless archetype, that is just there to take care of the world, and be that superwoman, and never ask for anything. And she's yet the most oppressed, anxiety, full of trauma, and doesn't know how to communicate wants, needs and desires.

Anti-oppressive works and sexuality challenges, all of that. It looks to annihilate and remove that infrastructure that does not allow for the exploratory, curiosity, sexual expression, and the opportunities for equitable access to pleasurable moments and experiences.

Does that answer?

### **Jaia Bristow**

It does. And Rafaella Fiallo, who is another speaker on this conference, is doing a great talk on sexual self care, and reclaiming your sexuality, especially after trauma. So I recommend guests check that out. And if you want to check that out too, that's excellent.

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

And you know, Afrosexology because you talk about Rafaella, Rafaella, and Delicia. They were keynote speakers at Poly Dallas Millennium in 2018. And that's also, I believe, the same year that *Pleasure Activism*, that book came out. And so all of these concepts were introduced to me in 2018 through their keynote at Poly Dallas Millennium. Additionally, Afrosexology, or Rafaella, Delicia, they have this great T-shirt, "Less oppression, more orgasm". That's their thing.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I love how everyone is so interconnected. How can people find out more about you and your work, Ruby?

### **Ruby B. Johnson**

You can look me up. I'm not on social media as much, but I have a great hub of stuff on Instagram under [BlackSexGeek](#). That's my Instagram handle. Also on my website, [inamorata.me](http://inamorata.me) (I-N-A-M-O-R-A-T-A dot M-E). You can find my website, or you can Google my name, Ruby Bouie Johnson, Sex Therapist, and I'll pop up.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:28:41]**

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it.

**Ruby B. Johnson**

Thank you. Bye bye.