

Coping with vulnerability in relationships

Guest: Amalia Miralrio

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Amalia Miralrio, a mixed race Mexican American woman trained in social work and human sexuality. She specializes in supporting women of color through painful dating experiences, and healing old relationship wounds.

Before transitioning into private practice, Amalia worked at a nonprofit supporting survivors of sexual violence and traumatic loss. She was motivated to launch a practice that honored all parts of her identity, supported her clinical growth, and allowed her to part with the pressure to remain neutral in regard to social justice issues.

Thank you for joining us today Amalia.

Amalia Miralrio

Thank you so much for having me, I'm so excited.

Meagen Gibson

So, let's start beginning about how can therapy support individuals in the dating world and in relationships?

Amalia Miralrio

Absolutely. So, I always say that dating is an act of courage for anyone, and that can be even if someone thinks they're really confident or is really confident, it is just such a vulnerable thing to put yourself out there. It's a totally unpredictable environment. You can't control how someone else is going to behave. There can even just be a volume of maybe you have a pretty good handle on handling vulnerability, but then it's just so much.

We have people on dating apps who are messaging dozens of people at a time, and it's just system overload it can be or it can be the volume of making it to a certain point with so many people and then having it not work out.

And then, of course, further along the spectrum of intimacy, there's all of the issues that come up with having a committed relationship, of being in an intimate partnership, of having that not work out, of having conflict. There are so many different entry points into therapy that along the spectrum of dating and relationships that people can really be struggling and can really be in need of some support.

And there's so much from our childhoods and our past relationships and, of course, past traumas that can be triggered at these various entry points along that spectrum.

Meagen Gibson - [00:02:33]

And I imagine that so many people that I know, don't enter into a therapeutic relationship with somebody until there's massive dysfunction. And so I imagine that you wish everybody would start therapy and start that investigation to themselves with the guide of somebody, like a trained therapist like you, before they enter into relationships.

Amalia Miralrio

Absolutely. I think of it as this feedback process of like, okay, you have some therapy, you go out and live your life, and then you have new things to come back to therapy and process, and then you go live your life a little bit differently. You adapt. And that feedback loop can really help you get the most out of these experiences.

Meagen Gibson

Almost like emotional training. You do a little bit of work for a while, and then you maybe plateau and you've got to come back and push yourself and look at some areas where you may have not been investigating. So I love that kind of context.

Amalia Miralrio

Definitely. Life will do that. Life will provide the context, that's for sure.

Meagen Gibson

And I was just reminded this morning of the phrase, wherever you go, there you are. So, obviously there are limitations to therapy. Let's talk through those. They're not going to absolve you of all of your relationship issues, right?

Amalia Miralrio

Absolutely. And especially when we're thinking about the ways that white supremacy and racism and discrimination, the ways that all of these cultural factors influence your experience of dating or your experience in the world in general, therapy cannot change that. And therapy cannot erase that or make you invincible to those forces. But it can be a safe landing point to come back to and to make sure that those toxic forces that are happening in your external world are not also happening inside of you.

Meagen Gibson

I love the context that you just said there for that.

And so, what are some of the microaggressions and other challenges that are specific to women of color, since that's who you're dealing with a lot and who you're working with a lot in dating and relationships?

Amalia Miralrio

Absolutely. So that can show up in a few different ways. That can show up very explicitly as discrimination. For example, people might say that they just have a certain preference for who they date, that they're just not attracted to people, for example, who are not white or who are not lighter skinned.

And there's really this belief that that's not embedded in racism. There are people who think that that's okay. That's just personal preference. And we really have to put that into context of where our beauty standards come from and the ways that we're socialized to view certain people as worthy partners or as attractive. And we really can't separate racism and our political climate from what we might perceive as individual preferences.

And then, there are some ways that it can show up a little bit more nuanced. There are ways that women of color might be hypersexualized and might only be seen as attractive sexually but not seen as a worthy partner in terms of having deeper intimacy, of having deeper commitment, deeper connection.

If we think about this concept of the virgin and the whore complex that exists really for the way we view women in general, and I'm speaking specifically to U.S. culture, that's where I'm located, thinking about specifically in the United States, the way that purity culture can impact all women.

And then we add an element of not having a white identity, and it can really box women into being seen only as sex objects. And that leads to increased rates of sexual violence. That leads to, in dating experiences, really, a lot of the women I work feeling, it takes extra work to make sure that someone they're interested in is interested in them as a whole person and not just as a sexual fetish.

And that's just the surface of it. I think those are two really big categories we can think of, but it can certainly show up in other ways as well.

Meagen Gibson - [00:07:26]

And I want to continue talking about this and picking it apart because I know that for a large part of our audience, this is going to be regulatory information. This is going to be new information. This is going to be context they've never heard before.

And I'm definitely not arguing with you. I just want to piece it apart. So, for somebody that looks like me and has my cultural background, I'm going to go into the dating world, and I'm not going to think about my country of origin or how it came about. I'm not going to think consciously about the color of my skin. I'm not going to think that somebody has fetishized me because of the color of my skin. It's not going to occur to me. And that's the problem, or part of the problem, as I imagine you're saying.

I don't have to carry the weight of that. I don't have to carry that context. I don't have to be protective of it. I don't have to be actively looking for it. I don't have to be making someone else aware of it when I encounter it in an intimate setting where I'm already vulnerable.

Is this the kind of stuff that you're talking about? When I go on a date, I don't have to do any of that heavy lifting. I don't have to do any of that work. I don't have to have those defenses up.

Amalia Miralrio

Exactly. Exactly.

And I love that you're, thank you for using yourself as an example of yes, your awareness that these are not things you're thinking about, the contrast of what it's like to also have to think about that. Because dating, like I said, it takes courage, it's a vulnerable experience, I would say universally. Social privilege doesn't protect you from still feeling like dating is hard and vulnerable. But exactly like you said, when you add on layers, if there's ten other filters, is this person going to value me even within dating and within the same race or ethnicity?

So we're not only talking about being a person of color dating a white person. We're also talking about dating someone who might come from even a similar background. Because white supremacy and white supremacy culture is not just an individual problem. It's something that is seeped into the U.S. culture, and many parts of the world, but I'm going to be clear about what I know best.

When you are swimming in this it enters your consciousness in ways that we are all continuously unpacking, myself included, of course. And so you're also not sure is this person, how much, where are they on the spectrum of how much of this that they're internalizing that they're going to project on to me?

Meagen Gibson - [00:10:28]

Right. Because there are levels of development in the awareness of this systemic white supremacy and colonization and the context that it sets. And so, you have to be, again another job I'm sure that women of color did not ask for when they were dating, is to be aware of that spectrum of the other person that they're dating awareness, education, activism, for that matter. Where are they there? Which is a whole other set of work. It's not only am I compatible with this person? Am I safe on this date? Do I feel secure in the arrangements that we've made? It's also, like, am I going to have to unpack all this for this person? It's just a burden that, it's unfortunate and no short term solutions there.

You talked about the racism that exists within people of color and within the many cultures that make up people of color. And I want to get into some specific examples, if that's okay with you? Because it's a little bit abstract for people.

So, the example that I think of that's been moderately recently in the news is like black Latino communities and the erasure of that community in the representation of Latino culture.

So if somebody is dating, they're a black Latino, but they're dating someone who is not and there's an erasure of their own culture in that relationship, or they're seen as less than Latino because they have darker skin.

Amalia Miralrio

Yes. The erasure of blackness as a whole within the Latino community, if you want to even call it one community, it's huge. And if you can see me on video right now, you know that I absolutely have that lighter skin privilege and I do have one parent who is white. And that is something that is so important for me to name publicly with my clients, because my experience is also coming from a certain place of privilege.

For example, if you turn on any major movie or TV, if it has even one Latina character, they might look more like me. And I am not representative, when we talk about even this idea of what it means to be Latino or Latinx we're talking about such a broad, diverse category of people from many, many parts of the world. There's cultural and linguistic diversity and racial diversity. And so I think there are certain ways that I've seen, even in my own experiences, that privilege play out in that community.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I mean, I'm sure that that extends to Asian communities as well. I mean, the vast massive amounts of land mass that make up Asia and Asian countries and Asian people and Asian cultures and Asian language, similar things happen in that regard there.

So, if you were speaking to somebody who was white presenting, let's just give that the umbrella term or somebody that benefits from a lot of white privilege, and they were perhaps dating a person of color for the first time, and we're unaware of any of this. What would be the advice that you might give them to set a context?

Amalia Miralrio

The advice I would give would be to believe whatever their partner is saying, and to recognize that it might sound ridiculous. It might sound like, their immediate reaction might be your reading into this too much. That's not what happened. Or are you sure? Because it might be so different from their

reality. And so it's not about needing to know at all. It's about needing to know that you don't know it all and being ready to believe and listen.

Meagen Gibson - [00:15:18]

I'm sure that that happens a lot and before you even said that, I was thinking more of the ways in which within a couple these microaggressions are occurring, but I also hear you saying, and correct me if I'm wrong, that just in the context of the world, when you're on a date, that somewhat your partner's experience might be totally different than yours because of the things that you're not picking up. And so to resist the temptation to explain away that person's experience.

That's not what I felt. That's not what they meant. That's not what they intended. You're reading into things or you're making this about race, those types of phrases from somebody that can really close down the intimacy and feel really disregarding and dismissing, I imagine.

Amalia Miralrio

Absolutely. And I think it's both. I think even within the context of the partner, within the context of the couple, to be open to hearing what I just said or did or didn't do or didn't speak up on was hurtful.

Meagen Gibson

And so, what might be best in those situations instead of, because I know that most people when they get a trigger in conversation, every couple experiences this. Your partner says something and there was a tone, or there was a face or somebody rolled their eyes. This happens in every relationship, and we get triggered and we don't even notice the trigger. And then we're in an argument before we even know that that's what's happening.

And so, in those moments when you notice that your partner is expressing that they've been triggered by something you said or something you did or something you didn't notice, instead of arguing with their experience, what might be something you could say instead? Instead of justifying your actions. What might be the response that would lead to better conversations than lead to more intimacy and lead to more trust?

Amalia Miralrio

Sure. Something like, this is new to me. I didn't see it that way. I didn't think of it that way. But I hear you. I believe you. I'm here processing this.

Meagen Gibson

Right.

So how does white supremacy show up in the views of U.S. culture or colonized culture regarding intimacy and relationships? I know we touched on that just a little bit, but I want to go more deeply into that.

Amalia Miralrio

So, there are some ways that white supremacy, culture or colonialism influences the way we view intimacy, regardless of the identities of who is experiencing that intimacy.

So in a really broad sense, things like perfectionism, for example, that not only that the individual has to be perfect, to be worthy of love and to be desired and to experience intimacy, also that the couple needs to be perfect. That if there is conflict, avoidance of conflict is another piece of this, that if there's conflict, that means that there's something wrong with the relationship or the relationship is automatically toxic, and it must just not be the right relationship.

And we don't have very many cultural scripts for knowing how to lean into that conflict. That conflict is not bad. Conflict is part of intimacy. You cannot have deep intimacy without having conflict. It doesn't have to be toxic or it doesn't have to be a sign that the relationship is no good.

And of course, we want to be careful when we talk about this, because we want the therapist in me screening for are there abuses of power going on that's different from conflict?

Meagen Gibson - [00:19:27]

And that kind of abuse where there is actually control, and some of that conflict can be a red flag and can be a signal of a bad relationship dynamic.

Amalia Miralrio

Exactly. So there's sort of, like, a footnote there. That's something else.

Meagen Gibson

You don't want anybody to take away, Amalia said we could fight and it would be okay.

Amalia Miralrio

Right. Right. Okay, bookmark that, that's a different talk. That's a very important talk. But what we are talking about a safe relationship where people have equal access to power and there's not overt manipulation and control. When we are talking about conflict, that is a healthy part of intimacy. That is something that when we think about perfectionism, when we think about avoidance of conflict, that is directly connected to colonial culture, colonialism or white supremacy culture.

Another thing we can think about is the idea that a relationship looks one way, that it looks like, this gets into heteronormativity. This gets into gender roles that it's a cis woman and a cis man. And their sexual intimacy follows a certain trajectory. And that they're external markers to the world, like getting engaged or getting married, look a certain way.

Meagen Gibson

Happening in a certain order.

Amalia Miralrio

Exactly. That they are monogamous, that's part of it. That if you desire someone else or are attracted to someone else, that that means it is a sign that the relationship is doomed.

And so, we think about where do these gender roles come from? Where do these ideas of what a committed partnership come from? We can follow the history back to colonialism. We can follow the history back to oppressive routes. And we think of these things as being almost like, biologically driven. We think of these things as being so innate that, even the way we think about gender, we think of gender as something that's rooted in biology, and we connect gender to genitalia, which is completely ridiculous.

And so, we can pick it apart at the individual level. We can pick it apart in terms of the relationship. We can pick it apart in terms of the cultural expectations of what it means to date.

And so, when someone is having an issue with any part of this that they're not able to follow this impossible script right to a T, they can internalize that as something being wrong with them.

And so, sometimes when people come to therapy, they're coming in with the idea something's wrong with me, because I am not performing this script properly. And the journey of therapy is so much of unlearning that can we externalize that these scripts are not inherently better than who you are authentically. And how can we help you relearn and reconnect with who you are truly?

Meagen Gibson - [00:23:12]

Well said. And speaking of that therapy relationship, when you're choosing a therapist, and especially as a person of color, like how does the ethnicity or cultural background of your therapist factor in? Does it matter?

Amalia Miralrio

I think that for some people, it really does matter. And if you have a feeling that it matters, that's okay, you can lean into that. You can let that happen. Let it matter. If it matters to you, it matters to you.

And I think there's so much risk involved in putting yourself out there to make that initial call or email to a therapist. Overcoming that hurdle around ethnicity or race or skin color it might be one hurdle you're just not willing to take on. And that's okay. That is absolutely okay.

And I always say I might not be the person. I might not feel safe enough. I might be too far removed from what someone's experienced. And even though I am absolutely here for anti racist therapy and I'm here for my people of color, I also understand that if it's too much of a risk, if I'm not your person, that's okay.

For others, it isn't so much of a big deal. But you might need to just know, regardless of your therapist's own background, are they committed to anti racism? Are these things that they're okay talking about? Are these things they're okay hearing about? Are they okay if conflict comes up in the therapeutic relationship around these differences? So those are some questions that I think are important to ask any therapist.

Meagen Gibson

And, I mean, there's certainly no guarantee that even if somebody looks like you and perhaps shares a cultural background with you, that they would have the same viewpoint or have a shared experience with you, it's not a guaranteed right?

Amalia Miralrio

Of course, of course. And it might feel safer initially. But I think those questions are still important to ask.

Meagen Gibson

And as my therapist said, yesterday, let's normalize dating therapists. Find the right fit. And in a professional relationship there's nothing wrong with saying I'm going to seek help elsewhere, or I'm going to try different arrangements, and no professional offence.

Amalia Miralrio

Of course. And what good practice for relationships outside of therapy because you get to say that to someone who should be able to respectfully hear that, that might not always be true out in the real world, but it should be true in the therapy world.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Should be, I'm sure it's not always.

Amalia, thank you very much.

What if people want to find out more about you and your work? How can they do that?

Amalia Miralrio - [00:26:16]

Absolutely. So my website is amitydetroitcounseling.com

And I'm pretty active on Instagram. You can find me [@amaliamiralrio](https://www.instagram.com/amaliamiralrio).

Meagen Gibson

Wonderful. Thank you so much for joining us today Amalia.

Amalia Miralrio

Thank you for having me.