

Connecting to your eroticism

Guest: Darshana Avila

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:10]

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 so, so happy to be welcoming Darshana Avila. Welcome.

Darshana Avila

Thank you, Jaia. Really happy to be here.

Jaia Bristow

Really happy to have you here.

So, Darshana is nurturing a culture of erotic wholeness, and as an internationally recognized speaker, coach, and facilitator, Darshana supports women and yoni bearing nonbinary folks in exploring and reshaping their relationships to intimacy, sex and eroticism. She created the Map of Erotic Wholeness as a path to personal liberation in service to our collective sexual liberation.

So, Darshana, do you want to start by telling us a little bit about what you mean by erotic wholeness and what exactly eroticism is to you?

Darshana Avila

Absolutely. Well, fundamentally, one of my little Darshanaisms is, we are erotic by nature, and we are whole by choice.

And when I say that we are erotic by nature, what I'm referring to is that we are imbued with this deep capacity to sense, to feel, to create, to be dynamic, and that includes our sexuality, but it includes a lot more than that. It is the sensuality, the emotionality, our capacity to relate with all of our life force energy, shall we say.

And I think what happened for the vast majority of us living in contemporary dominant culture is the emphasis on sex has displaced sensuality and creativity and these other facets of our erotic nature. And yet we are incredibly limited then in how we're showing up for our intimate lives, for all facets of our lives, really.

So when I say that we are whole by choice, what I'm referring to there is that each of us has an opportunity, has a choice to make if we are really going to commit to understanding ourselves as erotic and embodying ourselves as erotic. Also, too, that encompasses a wider level of healing. It's like looking at all of the parts, the traumas, the lived experiences that have fragmented us, that have kept us from being less than whole within ourselves, and really doing our work and taking the journey of claiming our erotic nature in full, claiming our power in full, and really leading from that place.

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So that's at a high level of what erotic wholeness is all about. People come to me because they want better sex, they want orgasms or something going on in their intimate life. They sense that there is a possibility they've not tapped into. So everyone walks in the door because of something related to sex.

But the reason that people usually stick around is because it's a much bigger healing and transformational journey that many of us are yearning for, even if we don't articulate it as such. There's more that we want out of our intimacy, there's more that we want out of our relationships, there's more that we want out of our sex, there's more that we want out of our lives. So that's what this journey is about.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I think that's really inspiring and really resonates.

And so, when you have clients come to you, what kind of things do they come with? How do you work with them? How do we get to this state of erotic wholeness? How do we make that choice?

Darshana Avila

So I have a couple of different ways that I'm doing my work now. A lot of people know me through *Sex, Love & Goop*, which is a Netflix series that I was really blessed to be a part of. And so there's the Sex, Love & Goop Experience, which is actually working with me in a one to one container. I primarily do that in an intensive format.

So people come from different places and spend a few days with me. And that might include hands on erotic bodywork, which is definitely the catchy thing that people are drawn to. But it also includes a lot of embodied exploration of erotic nature, how to be in your body more, how to relax your nervous system more, how to bring forward different expressions of your sexuality.

And in order to do that work well, we have to, by default, look at what's standing in the way. So it's not like we're just coming in and putting a superficial glaze over the problems. We actually want to get at the root of why is it challenging to show up in a particular way? Why are you feeling frozen? Why is the voice of shame so loud for you?

And we do the work of really learning how to strengthen your own resources and reprogram some of those dialogues, as well as focus on very practical embodied level techniques and so on and so forth. That's one aspect.

And another is I do a group journey called WOMAN: Wise, Wild & Whole, that really is very deeply immersing into the Map of Erotic Wholeness looking at the four facets of erotic wholeness.

And it's a nature based map and so it follows the directions, it follows the seasons of our lives, it follows a progression of really starting out by embracing erotic innocence first and foremost. Really beginning at the beginning. We are born into these very curious bodies. You look at a baby, you look at a young child, it's all touching, feeling things in the mouth, responding to senses, and engaging with the wonder of our bodies and the natural world and really all of our surroundings.

So we start by connecting back into that and then exploring from there what it is to grow ourselves into a mature and healthy and empowered erotic woman who leads with the full force of her sensuality, her intuition. Who knows how to mitigate that voice of shame and really bring her full self forward.

So it's quite a comprehensive journey, and it's done in small groups, because we need each other is a big belief of mine. And we learn so much through the experiences and the reflections of others. It also makes us feel less alone, because that's one of the primary weapons, if you will, of how we become

so stumped, many of us sexually and how our sexuality is actually weaponized against us. There's a way where, because information is so limited because there's so much shame and stigma around having certain conversations that many of us will end up with an experience of thinking, I'm the only one who... (fill in the blank).

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And so there's tremendous power in dispelling that myth that we're the only ones who... And actually coming into community, sharing our experiences, being supported and encouraged and uplifted. So it's tremendously meaningful for me to do work with groups for that reason, because I feel like we get so much out of that shared experience and really can do more. It's exponentially more powerful, the work that we get to do, I find, in a space like that. So that's how I work.

Jaia Bristow

That's fantastic. And I'm so glad you brought in the piece around shame. I was just interviewing a former sex worker for my podcast, *Beyond Boxes*, where we were talking about, they're now also a sex and relationship coach, and we were talking about that element of shame.

And especially, I think, in people who have been raised and socialized as women and around sex and shame is so entangled. And I know that I've had my own personal history around that that I'm still working on. I've been doing a lot of work on it for many years now.

And so I'm curious if you could say a bit more about that relationship around sex and shame, and how we can work with that and work through that to reach a place of more erotic wholeness?

Darshana Avila

The fundamental thing is that we are shamed for having desires. And so what that ends up looking like for many of us is if we can identify our desires, we're afraid to actually advocate. But more often than not, what I see for so many, particularly women, although this is not an exclusively gendered thing, is that there's a sense of, I don't even know what I really like. I don't even know what I really want. And the idea of wanting something in a sexual context is unto itself shameful.

And so it really is insidious, and what it ends up then creating realities for people, particularly in a cisgendered heteronormative context, when it's a man and a woman, there's a narrative that's implicit for many. That is, the man comes into our lives and all of a sudden we're having great sex. Our modern day version of Prince Charming is, I think, less about the knight in shining armor that comes and rescues us, and it's actually more we find the lover who unlocks us.

Because as women, we've gotten to a place in modern times where most of us are able to have access. And I wouldn't say most, there's a lot of limitations to access that we could talk about depending upon intersections of identity and where you're living. Make a broad swath statement in saying that compared to generations past, women have access to education, to earning power, to freedom of movement that is way beyond anything that women just a few generations ago had.

So instead of feeling like we need a man to rescue us, what I see a lot of women doing is waiting on the right lover to come along and give her the sexual experience that she's been longing for. And we're not actually then taking our power in that equation and saying, I can be the one who learns about my body, about my pleasure, about my desire.

But again, where this intersects with shame is that there's still for many of us, even though we're making our money, we're educated, we're traveling the world, we're taking great care of ourselves, to acknowledge that we are sexual, to acknowledge that that is a really important thing for us, to say that it's something we would want to invest in and explore, that can still be incredibly edgy for a lot of women who are otherwise very empowered and progressive. So it's like the final frontier of exploration is really connecting.

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And again, I'm talking about sex, but I also want to widen it out to say what we're really talking about here is our erotic nature. And there's so much to explore there, and it goes way beyond. And it gets way better when we're not just going along with what the guy in our life wants or your sexual partner of any gender, really.

We have opportunities to learn about ourselves, about our pleasure, to advocate for what we need and want, to bring our curiosities forward and to do that in a way that can feel safe and free of shame and can nurture connection in the ways that we want connection to be nurtured. But that's an acquired skill for most of us because it's not what's happening in most relationships and most places where we would look for modeling. So it's a big piece of work, but it's the most meaningful piece of work as far as I'm concerned.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think, like you say, that skill is something that I want to touch upon in a bit, maybe giving some practical advice on how people can get to that stage, but there's also something around what you said about not just waiting for Prince Charming or Princess Charming or nonbinary Charming, but not waiting for someone else.

Often we think around relationships, once I find the perfect one then everything will get better, whether that's sexual or romantic. But actually they're ways that people can start working on themselves and start concentrating on their own wholeness.

And for me, a big revelation recently was that masturbating isn't just a tool to be used to relax or go to sleep, for example. But that it's actually sex with myself and that sex is not a bad thing and it's beautiful.

If we can start talking about some practical tips that people can use and incorporate into their daily lives to do this work that you're talking about and to focus on themselves primarily before focusing on a partner.

Darshana Avila

Well, I'm going to jump off where you just started with this idea that masturbation can be more than just, let me get myself off and go to sleep. And that right there is a place that I invite a lot of people to begin. And it is this awareness that our masturbation can be a self-care practice, can be a way of communing with our bodies, it can be a tool for healing.

And to your point, it's a way that, we think about it like we would complain if we were with a partner, and the partnered sex that we were having was constantly a quickie that focused on nothing more than the get off. Chances are most of us would feel some level of dissatisfaction with that. We would be like, oh my gosh, it's so routine. And yet we treat ourselves exactly that way.

Now, I don't want anybody going and shaming themselves for this because there's actually a reason why that happens and that is, neurologically once we start masturbating and we figure out a way to do it successfully, with success being we find a path to orgasm, our brains are wired for efficiency, so they're going to keep following that pathway, that route from A to B, go, go, go. If it's your vibrator and porn, if it's laying on your belly or rubbing against this corner of the couch or whatever it is that you learn to do very possibly at a young age, because your brain knows that it's going to get the reward loop that it wants very efficiently following that path, that's what it does.

So when we understand that we're basically just in a very Pavlovian cycle with ourselves when masturbation is concerned. We can actually then be more conscious in making a choice to say, what would it be like to create opportunities where instead of me focusing on my get off, instead of it being orgasm centric, I create spaces and time, sacred space and time to actually connect with my body, to lovingly and sensuously explore myself, touch myself, move myself? It can absolutely include your

genitals, it can even in ways focus on your genitals, but it doesn't need to exclude the rest of you. And that's what ends up happening is the rest of us often is excluded in a situation like that, but we have an opportunity to be succinct and simple.

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What I invite people to do is to spend some time in front of a mirror, taking off their clothes and actually noticing what arises. And chances are there's going to be a big wave of judgment that comes crashing down. Stay with yourself. And can you actually spend time with curiosity and compassion, lovingly, giving attention and affection to your body? Can you turn on some music that is evocative to you? Whatever that word evocative, evokes. My version of sexy music might not be yours, Jaia, it might not be somebody's listening to this, but whatever it is that would inspire you to maybe explore some movement, be willing to get outside of your comfort zone with yourself as a starting point.

Because if you can't do that in your own space with nobody watching, how do you expect them to come into a partnered, intimate exchange and feel more free and liberated in your body? So we really do have an opportunity where we're concerned, and I would say a responsibility, but let's focus on the opportunity to be with ourselves in a wider scope of intimate connection before we bring that to a partner or make demands of a partner or have expectations of a partner doing that for us.

And then everything I'm saying can be extrapolated and applied to how we stimulate ourselves. Get curious. I'm somebody who is, I am hugely pro vibrator. I am hugely pro whatever toys and tools you want to use, but, and there's a but here, if you're always and only are masturbating with those, you're not giving your body a chance to learn how it responds to other forms of stimulation.

So again, back to that idea of instead of following the known pathway, and instead deliberately creating a space where you try some different things out, bringing your curiosity, bringing an energy of experimentation of, okay, so what happens if?

And maybe it's not going to be as exciting, maybe the orgasm is going to feel different if you get there. Maybe you don't get to orgasm, but can you still appreciate what you are learning and experiencing just by spending time with your body in an intentional way and learning how it is that your genitals respond to a really soft stroke, to a firmer pressure, to tapping, to tickling. Just being creative in a way that many of us aren't because we're just following that known pathway. So creativity and curiosity gets you really far where all of this is concerned.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I think what it's evoking to me is, if I'm going to have sex with a partner, then it's really important to have some foreplay first. And foreplay can mean lots of different things. It's not just foreplay before penetration, for example. It's sometimes foreplay before sex so it's getting aroused, getting excited, it's flirting, it's teasing, it's all of that. And so why would I not give myself that when I'm about to have sex with myself? Why would I skip over those steps and just focus on the orgasm as you were saying?

So I love everything you're saying. I love that focus on creativity and experimenting with oneself and with others. And that genitals can be included but there are so many other parts of our body, there are so many other erogenous areas, some of which might be obvious and some which might not be. So I love everything you're saying around the experimentation piece.

Darshana Avila

And I also just want to be gentle and be kind and make sure that no one listening to this goes into their own little shame spiral around it. Because we're going to want to follow that quick pathway, the known pathway. And I'm not saying don't do that ever. I do it frequently. But I also make it a point to create space and time, whether it's me with myself or if it's the way that I'm having sex with my lovers. I really make it a point to bring variety into the mix. And that takes us really far. That commitment unto

itself that I'm going to bring in some variety to how I'm relating with my body or to the kind of sex that I'm having with partners.

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To your speaking about foreplay, I wish that that term didn't actually exist, but I totally know what you're talking about. And that's because it reinforces this idea that when we say sex, we mean intercourse and that everything short of that is less than. But this is where I want to invite people again to be creative and to be curious what becomes possible when sex is what you decide sex is? That was a little bit of a tongue twister. When sex is what you define it as. If it's a hot make out session, if it's some kinky play but your genitals are never involved, if it's outer course but not intercourse, if it's only oral, is that not sex if we deem it so?

And that right there is a place where we get to take our power back. Because this idea that sex is intercourse, isn't ours. That did not originate with me, that did not originate with you. This is something that's been conditioned into us and it comes from a very misogynistic male centric perspective. And the reality for many Yoni bearing bodies, and in case that word is not known, Yoni is the Sanskrit term for the female genitalia. And we don't have a word in English that encompasses everything quite as succinctly as that. But the reality is, for those of us with vulvas and vaginas, intercourse is not the reliable pathway to our greatest pleasure for many.

Now I hear a lot of women, and I would include myself in this, speak about, or a lot of vulva bearers saying, I enjoy sex, I enjoy intercourse, but I don't necessarily look to it for an orgasm. And that's fine. Most of us require clitoral stimulation. Most of us require a different degree of focus and a longer time frame than our penis bearing partners might actually have the stamina for in typical intercourse.

So we get to expand the menu of what sex can be for us in base of what we enjoy and we get to honor that. While intercourse might be a part of that that we really love like want, if it's not getting us everything we need, if it's not taking us where we need to go, why would we devalue the acts that do? Why would we put those in a lesser category or a separate category? If what you need is your partner going down on you for a solid 30 minutes for you to have the orgasmic experience that you want, that's sex. If it's your vibrator, that's sex. If it's having a luscious bubble bath together and making out and having a shoulder rub and that feels sexy to you, great, that's sex. So, I could go on and on.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I love that your redefining sex. I think that's so important. And I also love this idea of variety. And when you're talking about shame and the pathways, and not feeling shame about the way that we do want just a quick get off because that's the way our brains have been trained to do that. So it's not about changing everything you're doing, but it's about adding variety.

So it's not about, no you're never allowed to masturbate the way you used to, this is how you should now do it, because that will just reinforce people's ideas around what's right and what's wrong.

And I talked to Meg-John Barker on this conference, and they have a book called *Rewriting the Rules*, and one of the things I love about that book is that they talk about, there's the rules that society gives us, but then we can just as easily go and create other fixed rules that are in opposition to that, but they are just as fixed.

So what you're talking about really feels like it's not about changing everything and creating a strict menu that's different to the original menu. It's about experimenting. It's about adding. It's about creativity. And that's with sex with oneself, that's with sex with other people. That you can have intercourse, you can have penetration, and you can also add other things.

And one of the things I once heard around that was someone saying something like, if you're going out for a meal and it's a delicious menu, why would you focus just on the coffee at the end? Someone

was comparing just orgasming as just a coffee at the end or even penetration, as that's just one part. And there's so much more to sex.

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And as you say, for some people, sex doesn't include genitalia, it doesn't include penetration. There's lots of things it doesn't include, and there's lots of things that it might include that is different for each person.

Darshana Avila

Exactly. Many of us are far more responsive to sensuality or to an energetic connection and that may or may not be genitally focused.

And with everything that you just said, like that metaphor or the anecdote of comparing it to a luscious meal, but then focusing on just the coffee or the dessert at the end, I agree.

And what I would say there is that brings the erotic innocence piece in, actually. It's like when you think about how children or animals or those who have not yet been conditioned to follow a really strict set of right and wrong, who are in a place of more wildness, by which I mean authenticity, undomesticated, there's a free spiritedness, there's a willingness to explore, experiment and maybe not like something sometimes, but it doesn't stop the experimentation happening. It doesn't stop the curiosity being the driving force.

And I feel like for many of us that have been utterly stripped out of our intimate lives, we're not especially curious about them. We complain a lot about them. We demand a lot from them. We have ideas and expectations of what it ought to be like. But we're not actually showing up with a lot of presence, and we're not actually being creative about the ways that we're exploring and experimenting.

And so really, more than anything that is what I seek to impart to people. That you can explore in a much wider and broader way than you ever thought was possible.

And you phrased it really beautifully just there, before when you were reflected back. You don't have to take anything away unless you decide that there's something, or you could realize there's something you really don't like, then of course, by all means, because you have free choice.

But the point here is that you get to expand what is possible. You get to add on to what is possible and find more pathways to pleasure, more pathways to being in your body fully, in your power fully, in the flow of an intimate exchange with another fully, in love fully. That's really what it's about when we talk about expanding what's possible.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. And I think there's two things that really resonated with what you've just said. And one of them was talking about that exploration and innocence. And the word playful comes to mind as well, like being playful with your explorations.

And then another word or another image I have around that innocence is, because we're talking about adding things and not necessarily changing things, but it's just taking everything anew. So not going back to default mode.

And so things that we thought we think we like or we don't like it's like, what if we bring a fresh perspective? What if we experiment and explore with this again, but without these fixed ideas that this is the way sex is, this is what I like, this is what I need to get off, this is what my partner needs to get off? What if we just are curious again and playful and try things and try things a bit differently, or add new things or remove things and see what happens?

Darshana Avila - [00:28:06]

Yeah, exactly that. And for those people who are in longer-term relationships and have been having sex with the same person or maybe not having sex with the person that they wish they were having more sex with, I can imagine listening through the ears of someone in that position being like, yeah, okay, what do I do about this? That it can sound like its own form of pressure.

And it does require care, and it does require communication. You actually have to talk to your partner. You've got to get as curious about their experience as your own. What we're looking for, ultimately, is the overlap between each person's interests, desires, proclivities, boundaries, for that matter, as well. Where can we create the most common ground from which to build our connection or deepen our connection or widen our connection? Whatever direction you would want to take that in.

And that does require us to actually sit down, have some conversations that might be outside of the box of what you're used to talking to your partner about. You very likely might need to seek guidance around this, whether that's listening to summits or podcasts or conferences, whether that's working with somebody individually, reading some books.

There's a reason why so many of us are struggling, and that's because there's a significant lack of really quality education and modeling around how to do sex well and how to do intimacy well.

Now, while I say that out of one side of my mouth, out of the other side, I would say that we probably right now more than ever have more people like me and everyone that's part of this conference out there who are offering guidance, who are able to give you more practical suggestions and really help you find your way in.

So you don't have to invent the wheel or reinvent the wheel, as it were. There are people who can give you guidance. And two, you have to show up for those conversations. You have to show up and really bring the curiosity and the compassion and the willingness to say, okay, something here has not been working for us. If we want to do it differently, what are we willing to commit to? How far outside of our comfort zone are we willing to go? How much space are we going to create in our schedule for this?

It doesn't just happen out of nowhere. So it is something that there needs to be a base level commitment made in a partnership to really strengthening and improving the health and wellness, if you will, of intimacy, because it doesn't just happen on its own.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. I love that.

And so other than researching and finding specialists like you, what are some practical tips you can give to people to start putting that into place?

Darshana Avila

A lot of the couples that I work with, one of the things that I end up really encouraging is to create simple but consistent ritual space for themselves. Now when I say ritual space, for those of you whose woo woo alarm might be going off, look, you can bring out all the crystals and all the sage and whatever you want, and you can have none of that.

When I use the word ritual, I'm really wanting to evoke here the idea that we can create a dedicated and devoted space and time to hone our attention in on something very particular. In this case it would be intimacy.

So if the ritual is that every evening before you go to bed you... (fill in the blank). Or on Saturday mornings when you feel spacious and the week is done you do... (fill in the blank). The consistency and the continuity piece matters.

[00:32:02]

And a ritual simply is that sacred and devotional act that has a clear beginning, middle and end to it. And so you begin by creating the intention together of what you're here to do. The middle is the activity itself. The end is some kind of intentional, unconscious acknowledgement that we're complete now. So this can be super simple.

And what happens in that in between varies depending upon the people, but the simplest thing that I could suggest is to be together. No phones, no screens at all. Focus attention on one another, tune into your own heart, tune into your body, take a few deep breaths.

And depending upon where you are in the arc of your journey, if you're somewhere where you're basically in a sexless connection, the idea of jumping straight into sex is probably not going to make a whole lot of sense. That would be putting the cart before the horse. So maybe what you sit and do is sync up your breath together. Maybe you focus on holding hands or exchanging touch that is perhaps sensual in nature but not sexual.

Now if you are a couple who is relating with more ease and feels like there's some goodness already there because you've got that built up, you might take turns for instance, each of you speaking a desire that you have and asking if the other one wants to fulfill it. Or you can be a little random with it. You could focus on a particular body part and say how you would like to be attended to in that part of your body and it doesn't have to be genitals alone.

So it's just creating fun little simple rituals. I say fun, I guess that's subjective. But the intention is that it be fun and be connected and be a space where everything else gets pushed to the side. It'll be there when you step out of the ritual. And the focus is, how do we come together and really feel nourished by our shared connection and come back to our bodies and come back to our hearts in a way that many of us are not connected to in the day in and day out rhythms of our lives? So that's a simple something. I hope it sounds simple.

Jaia Bristow

It does. And first of all, I love your redefining of what ritual means. It's not something complicated. It doesn't have to be a big deal. It's just something with a clear beginning, middle and end, essentially.

And I think it's really important what you were saying that during that middle bit, during the time, it doesn't have to all be about sex, whatever sex means to different people. That it can just be about just being, because that removes a lot of the pressure that can often get in the way of sexual enjoyment.

And I know for myself when I feel pressure to have sex, that's when I'm least turned on. So I love that idea of just syncing up with your partner, just breathing together, just touch and then focusing on desire.

And I interviewed Betty Martin for this conference as well, who's the creator of The Wheel of Consent, and we were talking a lot about giving and receiving and how to make requests and how to be with the other person. So I think that's all really wonderful, practical tips for people.

And again, it brings in the piece you were saying earlier about communication. How important it is. This doesn't just all happen on its own. You can communicate to your partner, when's a good time for us to connect? You can light a candle, be together, turn out the candle. It can be as simple as that, the beginning and the end of the ritual, from what I understand.

Darshana Avila

Yes. And you mentioned Betty Martin, and I fall back on Betty's work constantly. I did the training with her so many years ago. And I think the world of The Wheel of Consent, if folks are not familiar with that.

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And in particular Betty, it's called The 3-Minute Game, which is a very simple practice of giving, receiving, taking, allowing, which are the four different quadrants of The Wheel of Consent. And we can be in the giving and receiving exchange, we can be in the taking and the allowing exchange. The distinguishing thing there is whose pleasure are we doing something for?

And ideally in our partnerships, what we want to create are experiences of mutual pleasure. And yet we also have to understand that at times we might make a choice or our partner might make a choice to do something for our pleasure that they're not as enthralled about.

And this is worth speaking to because I think compromise is important, but so too are boundaries. Both of those things have to get held in the mix. At some moments in time, invariably, you will be compromising your ideal scenario to satisfy your partner. That is not the same as saying you don't get to have boundaries and limitations to the ways that you are willing and available to show up in a connection.

And we need to be mindful of this is now where we turn things back on ourselves. We for ourselves have a responsibility to know what our boundaries are just as much as we want to know what our desires are. And that's something that for many of us can be really challenging. We often don't know that we have a boundary until that boundary has been crossed.

And so this is where doing the work of really cultivating deep intimacy with ourselves, embodiment practices, why they are so meaningful is because by being more present in your body, you are more able to sense that innate wisdom that rises up, that gut feeling, that gut knowing of, I'm a yes to this or I'm a no to that. When we are not present in our bodies, we're missing the signals that are being sent to us constantly.

So I think a lot of people too like this term embodiment. What are we even talking about, and why does it matter? It's probably somewhere we could have begun at the start of this conversation. But that's why it matters, because when you're present in your body, you are actually able to practice a level of discernment that lets you have clarity around your desires and your boundaries. That far surpasses anything your mind can do.

Because your mind has all the conditioning, your mind has all the scripts that have been fed to it saying, this is the right way, this is the wrong way, good girls do this, bad girls do that. And our body actually is living right here in the present moment.

And so when we're capable of really being present in our bodies and listening to those signals, it actually makes it a lot easier to show up in any kind of exchange with another person and stand in our center while also being available to them in a way that's authentic and integrous and will let us navigate that balance of compromise and boundaries with more ease and grace.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's fantastic. And I'm so glad you brought in that piece around, everything you've just said is fantastic. But I'm thinking as well about the embodiment piece and what can happen sometimes when people get more in touch with their bodies and more in touch with themselves, there is that innate wisdom.

But also when people do this work, as you said at the beginning, you were talking about things that can come up and to really connect, there's different traumas, there's different things. And as people become more present to themselves, more present to their bodies, more present to their partner, more present to intimacy in a different way and shift away from just sex and genitals, things can come up.

So when those things come up, when traumas get triggered, when things become uncomfortable, when people start noticing discomfort in their body or tension, how can people work with that?

Darshana Avila - [00:39:52]

I'm glad that you brought that up, because it is tremendously important. Very few of us, I would almost say none of us are walking around unscathed these days. There's a lot of trauma collectively that impacts our intimate relating. And then many of us have very personal and individual traumas. And it doesn't even have to be trauma. We can simply say lived experiences that we are carrying with us, not all of which would fall into the technical definition of trauma, and yet still are shaping us.

Our attachment styles, for instance, come into play in a really big way there. And there is relational and attachment based trauma. And then there's also simply patterning that we have accumulated over time based upon our lived experiences.

And if we don't know our attachment style, if we don't know what our default protective strategies are, and we come into a relationship, what that means is that we're coming into a relationship with these parts of ourselves that have been developed as coping mechanisms at the forefront. And our wholeness is completely buried underneath all of that.

And so the whole reason why then we would want to do our own personal work of exploration and healing to understand more about, are you somebody with a secure or insecure attachment style? Are you someone whose defense mechanism tends toward fighting, or do you tend toward flee? Anxious, avoidant, argumentative, docile? Are you someone who fawns or appeases? Which is something we see come up a lot in relationship.

And if the words that just came out of my mouth are not words that you, dear listener, are familiar with, then you're in the category of somebody who needs to educate themselves more about how you show up in a relationship. And that's not a bad thing. It's a beautiful opportunity.

I was married in my early 20s, and if I had known more skillfully about my attachment style and how I show up in conflict, I don't think I would still be married because I think I would have chosen a different person anyway, but certainly there are things that might have gone down much easier and much differently had we had language and skills to help us navigate these differences in what was a classical anxious avoidant attachment dance.

By which I mean, I'm someone with an anxious attachment style. I need a particular amount of reassurance, and there are ways that my system gets sued by communication and contact and consistency. Whereas my ex-husband was someone with a more avoidant style, who he recharges and resources in solitude and does not like to use as many words and gets overwhelmed by them. And if we had actually understood ourselves and one another differently, we could have navigated the bumps in the road and the differences between us with so much more skill and care.

Instead, what would end up happening is I freak out about something. I'd cry, I'd fight, I'd get all upset. He would be completely overwhelmed and just want to go disappear for a while. And then we both get dragged through the mud by this whole process because we didn't know how to really advocate for ourselves while also caring for the other.

And so when I talk about the opportunity in learning about these things for ourselves, that is the opportunity. We get to take better care of ourselves. And we get to invite the people close to us to take better care of us. And we also get to offer that back to them. So it really is just a way of coming into relationship more informed, more skillful, better prepared, because relationships are always going to have complications and conflicts in them. The point is not to avoid that.

There is no such thing as a completely perfect, peaceful, harmonious relationship. I want to know if they're out there, I've yet to meet them, and I sit with a lot of people in this space.

So we're not trying to avoid that. What we're trying to do is position ourselves to be with it, to navigate it with a degree of conscientiousness and compassion, with skillfulness, with presence that many of us would have to acquire that over time because it was not what we were given in our formative

years. It was not the role modeling that we had. It's not where we are within ourselves. So we have to do the work to get ourselves there and bring that into our partnerships.

Jaia Bristow - [00:44:27]

100%. And I think, as you say, most people understand how they tick, understand their attachment styles, understand their communication styles, understand their conflict styles, all of these kinds of things. Then that's when it becomes easier to make requests and set boundaries, which is the piece you were talking about earlier.

Like you said, this conference has a ton of resources for people wanting to understand attachment style more and conflict management and all of this. And there are tons of books and resources.

I think there's no shame in that. There's no shame in... These days we live in a very individualistic society where people put a lot of pressure on the individual to do work on themselves. And that's great as well. But it's also okay to do work in relation to another, to do work in your relationships. And that requires getting in touch with yourself. But it also can require making requests of a partner, setting boundaries, and all these kinds of communication tools that are so important for healthy relationships.

Darshana Avila

Exactly that. There is no shame in not knowing, but the shame is when we are given opportunities to know and we choose not to take them.

Now granted, real trauma will prevent us from really being available to that. And that's why it's a very delicate journey for some people. Not everyone is coming in on equal footing, and I want to speak to that very plainly. And there are ways that we can get supported.

I agree with you wholly, that there is work that we have to do in partnership, and that's an okay thing. And I would say that's a both and. There are definitely pieces that we need to do in relationship to others, especially when it comes to wounding that was inflicted in the relationship.

And I'm not only talking about, oh, well, my ex-boyfriend did this, so I need to work it out with my current partner. I'm actually talking about our formative wounding as children, the ways that we might not have gotten the care that we needed, the attunement that we needed, and that's how our attachment styles are really formed.

And so because these are things that were cemented in a relational container, often we need a relationship to help us fully work them through. But that might not mean that your partner is the person you're doing that with fully. That might mean it's a practitioner, a coach, a therapist, a practice group that you're in. There are ways that we can be both self-responsible and then be better positioned to let our partners and our close friends, I want to expand that circle because it's not like it's all on a romantic partner to do this either. There are many forms of intimacy that we can cultivate.

I would say my closest friends have been as integral to my thriving in this way, to me doing my own work and learning how to process through my stuff, as my romantic partners have. And that's because as I'm growing they are generally a little more patient with me as I fumble around and screw stuff up because I'm human.

But also I get to practice with them being self-responsible, acknowledging when I get triggered, being forthright about, oh, I see myself spinning out into this pattern which I know is a defense strategy that's protecting this really vulnerable part of myself. I want to lean in vulnerably now and hear someone who I know loves me so I can take a chance to do that.

[00:48:01]

So it's both and. There are pieces that are ours to do and ours to consider who in our circles of support can really show up for that. And then there absolutely are pieces that we'll do in our partnerships.

And I guess what it comes down to is getting that balance just right so that we're not overloading another person, but for people who tend towards self-reliance, we don't want to carry around a story that we could do everything ourselves either.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And I think for me, one of the things I've most learned in attachment theory is direct communication. And the way your partner or person in your life responds to direct communication can tell you everything you need to know.

So you can see how people respond when you make a request or you can do all the work yourself but the other person needs to also be doing a lot of work on themselves as well, and then you can do the work in relationship or whichever way around it goes.

I'm mindful of time Darshana, but this has been a great conversation. What are some key things that you'd like people to take away from today?

Darshana Avila

There's no shame in being who you are as you are where you are. We need to strip the shame out of our sensual lives, sexual lives, our intimate connections, also our personal development, growth and journeys. Everything we've talked about. I just want to be somebody who says very pointedly, there is no shame in you being you.

And there are abundant opportunities. Some of them are going to be very complex, big old investments of time and energy and attention and money and all the things. And others are going to be very simple ways of just turning attention toward yourself, creating those little rituals. So I want to place an emphasis and be like a cheerleader of making it easy when we can, finding simple pathways. It doesn't always have to be so complex.

And back to just what I spoke to earlier about embodiment and what is that and why it doesn't matter? Being present in our body is really where our aliveness is at, so we need that. We can't expect great sex, thriving relationships if we're not actually present in ourselves. And embodiment is fundamentally about that.

There is a slogan for a collective that I used to be a part of that said, "Embodiment is the new mindfulness". I was like, yes, because mindfulness for many is the very, if we consider the origins of many mindfulness practices, and I'm not knocking them, not at all, but a lot of contemplative practices was hundreds and thousands of years ago when people were living in these communal monastic settings and most of the people practicing were men. And it was a very disciplined and rigid and not attuned to the body kind of practice.

And now here we are in a time when in the collective in many ways, many people believe there's a surge of the feminine coming back in. So it's no surprise to me that embodiment is taking its place as the new mindfulness.

And when I talk about feminine, I'm not only talking about women, every gender can be embodied. All of us have a right to this. It's our birthright, actually. So choosing the practices that help you to turn towards your body is going to be integral to any of the sex stuff that you want to have happen. If you're not there, then how could you show up for better sex? Point blank. So I really am a proponent of anything and everything that helps you be more present in your body.

Jaia Bristow - [00:51:51]

Wonderful. Darshana, how can people find out more about you and your work and what are you working on at the moment?

Darshana Avila

Well, I don't know exactly when this is airing but chances are my website and Instagram are the places to find me. My website is my name, darshanaavila.com and my Instagram is [@eroticwholeness](https://www.instagram.com/eroticwholeness).

And I will be starting up a new cohort for WOMAN: Wise, Wild & Whole over the summer months or summer in the Northern hemisphere. It will be July. So there'll be a lot ramping up for that.

And I do have, on a rolling basis as space becomes available, opportunities for working with me one to one. And then there are some spontaneous one off workshops and things like that that I offer here or there. So stay connected. My email list is really the place to get all the information and I love hearing from people so don't hesitate to reach out.

Jaia Bristow

That's fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today and thank you for this conversation. I really appreciate it.

Darshana Avila

You're very welcome, Jaia. Thanks so much for having me.