

Managing conflict in relationships

Guest: David Cooley

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

Hello, and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts, and today I'm very delighted to be welcoming David Cooley. Welcome.

David Cooley

Thank you, Jaia. Good to be here.

Jaia Bristow

Good to have you.

So I first spoke to David during the Trauma Super Conference, and we were talking about the restorative relationship conversation model, which David created and which facilitates new and healthier models of conflict resolution that offer legitimate means of reconciliation, particularly in the context of intimate relationships.

So, David, do you want to start by just introducing a little bit about this restorative relationship conversation model for those who are unfamiliar with it, and then we'll dive into some questions about how to apply it to your romantic relationships and other relationships.

David Cooley

Yeah, of course. Thank you.

So this is a model that was born out of the umbrella practices called restorative practices. I worked for years in the field of restorative justice, and so that basically gave me this framework that I now use in a different context. But it really created a structure that I liked and saw that was extremely effective.

And so I was working with people who are referred to our organization by the police, who either they go through our process or they go through the traditional criminal justice system. When faced with that choice most people chose us because it was a different opportunity that had less impact on their future. But once they got into the process we're often shocked by the potential for transformation that they experienced. And so seeing that over and over again was really powerful for me.

So what we did essentially was bring people who had harmed someone to a circle, restorative justice circle, where they were facilitated in a conversation with the person they've harmed, and everyone gets to talk about what happened. There's a police officer there, there's community members there. It's a very formal, highly structured process that allows everyone to share the impact and acknowledge the impact on their experience and then figure out together what needs to be done to move forward.

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So as you can imagine, it's an intention filled process. Emotions run high. The stakes are high for many people, like if they don't complete that process the alternative is not something that they want to happen. So it requires a lot of skill to manage that kind of process without people losing control of their emotions, becoming dysregulated, making sure that things stay on track and move towards the stated intention.

So it created a really strong skill set for me. When I was done with that work and looking for something else, I realized that instead of working with people who were being referred to me with some legal leverage over their heads, I wanted to work with people that really wanted to step into the process of conflict transformation. People who were having a hard time figuring out how to manage, move beyond solution interpersonal conflicts that they were having without really any other motivation than the wellbeing of themselves and the relationship. I wanted that intrinsic motivation to be there. Kicking that idea around really gave birth to this new model for using the restorative methods in a context that's much more intimate.

Jaia Bristow

What do you mean by that? By intimate context? Who exactly is it that comes to you? Who is it that does this work? Because you talked a lot about harm initially, and about people who had gone through the prison system and things like that, and then this is the Relationship Super Conference. I'm curious about how you use that in intimate relationships and who it is that comes to you.

David Cooley

Definitely. So there's an interesting gamut of people that come to me. When I say intimate it could be a family member. It could be two family members, for example, an estranged mother and daughter who haven't talked for years because of conflict that's happened in the past. It could be friends. I've had friends come to me.

A lot of the work, overwhelming majority of the people that come to me are in partnerships, romantic partnerships, but there's a wider gamut that's available. And I've been surprised about how many people resonate with this model, feel attracted to it, and then find a lot of healing and resolution through it.

Even business, I've worked with business partners who've had friendships that have been hurt or damaged through things that have happened inadvertently in the context of their business relationship, wanting to heal those relationship ruptures.

So it's really about small groups. The largest group I think I've worked with in this model has been six people, and that would be on the larger size. Most sessions I have are with two people, but I also work with individuals. There are people that want to work on their own skill sets, the tools and techniques that allow them to relate in ways that feel healthier and more integral. So there's kind of a gamut.

Jaia Bristow

Okay. And so we've talked about the different types of relationships: business partners, friends, family, romantic. And then how does it work? What do you actually do with them? And why do these people come to you? Is it only if they're experiencing conflict in their relationships? You said you also work with individuals who just want to work on their own skills. So what kind of conflicts arise for people to come to you to work on them?

David Cooley

Really, any kind of interpersonal conflict, any kind of relationship rupture. From infidelity to disagreement about how you should be raising kids together. There's just a lot of opportunity here for

people to get clear about what they're needing and wanting, and utilize this model as a way to safely process that.

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A lot of people struggle with conflict because it can be scary. It's not something that we're taught how to manage. Unfortunately, it's not something that's really embedded in a lot of the societies that we grew up in. And so conflict feels like this thing that you either avoid or you make worse because you don't know what to do with it.

And so one of the things I want to do is create a safe space for people to express themselves in a way that feels authentic but also safe. That's part of the magic of the restorative model is that it creates so much structure around the process. People know exactly what to expect before they step into the process. They know what the rules and protocols are. And that's something that I've kept from the restorative model, is this highly structured process that people have to get filtered through.

And so the first session that we have together, I'll sit down with you, introduce myself, we get to know each other a little bit, I really let you know step by step what to expect in the following session. Then I'll hear your story, what's brought you to me? And so you'll tell me these are the things that we want to work on, if it's a couple or partnership or whatever the relationship configuration is.

In that second session we'll really dive into the work, and that's where I'm going to start incorporating a whole host of different modalities to work with your conflict, depending on what arises and what the particular issue is. But that's really the heart and soul of the process is that second session where people really get to dive in, they learn how to hear each other in new ways, they get acknowledgement for the ways that they've been hurt and impacted because of the problematic relationship dynamic or the relationship rupture that they've experienced. And then they get to work collaboratively on an agreement, something that they can take forward after the process that will help prevent similar problems from unfolding in the future.

If it's an individual context, then really a lot of people come because their partner is not in a space to participate or not wanting to be. One of the prerequisites is that you have to really want to be there to participate. I'll never coerce someone or try to twist someone's arm to be sitting down with me. People really have to recognize that this is something that they want to do, and it's worthwhile for the health of their relationship. But it can be beneficial because it can help individuals get really clear about what they're wanting and needing in the context of their relationship or to be ready for relationships.

I've had people come to me and say, "Hey, I've had this issue in my relationships. I recognize it's a pattern. I don't want to fall in this trap anymore. I'd like to get back into the game of intimacy, but I need help working on X, Y, or Z".

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And so when you talk about, for example, individuals who come to you because they're noticing patterns and stuff, how does that tie in with attachment theory, which I know that is something that you're interested in as well.

David Cooley

For me, attachment theory is the undercurrent. It's one of the larger informing theories that informs my work. I think that once we form strong emotional attachments with people, the possibilities for conflict are increased because according to attachment theory, as adults, a lot of the conflict that we experience are symbolic replicas of things that we've experienced as younger people, as children.

The dynamics that we experience then before we have the ability to really articulate the complexity of those traumas or those hurts of the past stay with us. We have these experiences that get really

locked in the nervous system, and then we look for partners or relationships that allow us to work through those.

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Unfortunately, a lot of times we don't have that awareness that that's what we're doing. So we stumble into or fall into these old patterns, recreate them, and don't realize that we're reliving something from the past. We're doing a lot of projecting onto people. And when those past traumas start to surface, it can be really hard to regulate ourselves emotionally.

So a lot of the work that I do with attachment is recognizing when people are dysregulated in the context of a session and start to make that dysregulation more explicit. There's a lot of self awareness that I do with clients, learning how to pay attention to your somatic experience, learning how to pay attention to your emotional experience, and then your mental experience in terms of what are the stories that you're creating in response to these elevated states of response to our reaction to conflict?

So it's a three pronged or three tiered self awareness capacity or ability. What are you feeling right now in your body? What are the sensations? What are the emotions that correspond with that? And then what are the stories that come along with that? And so as clients get more and more used to becoming aware of themselves in the moment of conflict, it starts to decrease that feeling of not being safe or the need to escalate or retreat, that fight or flight thing mechanism that comes online for most people when they engage in conflict.

So attachment theory really informs the way that I help people modulate their nervous systems in the moment of being triggered so that it becomes much more explicit and easier to manage.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant. And you've talked as well about working with individuals on their own, with couples or pairs in different configurations, whether that's a romantic, business or friendship relationship. And then you've talked about bigger groups. So when you work with groups, I can imagine sometimes friendship groups or work dynamics, but do you also work with non-monogamous polycules or non-monogamous groups where multiple people are involved in the relationship?

David Cooley

I do, absolutely. For me, the relationship style, relationship orientation is not a hindrance. It's not a problem for me. I look at all relationships as relationships. To me, there's just different degrees of complexity. And so I really find a lot of joy in the work that I do with all kinds of people. And I love the variety. I love the dynamic complexities that arise in different relationship configurations. Many of the clients that I see now do have different kinds of nontraditional relationship dynamics. So it's something that I have a lot of experience with.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. I appreciate that.

And I'm curious as well about how is this RRC model different from other kinds of conflict resolution models? What makes it unique and stand out?

David Cooley

One of the main things that makes it different is this strong foundation and influence of restorative principles. Again, the structure is unique. I just personally haven't seen a model of conflict resolution or transformation that's tailored to intimate relationships that has the same restorative framework in it. So preparing clients in this way, that's very deliberate. And then a highly structured model for sharing

and receiving information, the emphasis that's put on acknowledgement is unique, and I think really powerful.

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I think as human beings, when we're in conflict, that need to be acknowledged, just having that acknowledgement of what our experience has been without dismissal, justification, talking back over explanation or solutioning that often happens when people are in dialogue, is really powerful. And that's part of the restorative model is really allowing someone to express what they've experienced, name the impacts of it, the rupture or the conflict, and just have that mirrored back.

And so this process really guides people step by step through that to get to that acknowledgement. So everyone involved gets that. And that's sometimes one of the most powerful elements of the process.

In another sense, it's also very practical. And a lot of what I hear in terms of feedback from clients is, "Wow, we've been working in talk therapy for months or years and never had these kinds of results". So it's a very process oriented modality, which means that there can be some radical shifts in people's experience or problematic dynamics in relatively short amounts of time.

I also incorporate a lot of different modalities into this work that I find helpful in helping people modulate their nervous systems while they're in conflict or go deeper into a particular conflict dynamic that may be rooted in other areas of their lives. For example, I use mindfulness to help calm and set the tone for sessions. I use inner parts work to identify older hurts that could be the root causes of something that's triggering someone in the moment in a way that's symbolic. There's also a lot of influence of narrative therapy in theory and the work. And that's one of the things that I love is decentralizing the professional or facilitator as an expert and really believing that individuals come as experts in their own experience and not pretending that me as a professional that I know exactly what you need or what's most important to you.

And so this is a very client centered and client led process. It's a duality in the sense that it's highly structured and I'm actually doing a lot to make sure that things follow a certain course while at the same time, in terms of content, the individuals themselves are really letting their own experience guide that process.

Jaia Bristow

And I think that's so key, and it sometimes gets overlooked, that thing of, I think it's true in relationships, it's true in health, it's true in so many areas where you go to a professional and they start telling you how you're feeling and who you are and how to... So I love the idea of what you're saying around it feels like you're more there as a guide and to support and to offer structure to explore, but ultimately, your clients are the ones who know themselves and their relationship, and as you say, are the experts. It's not in however many sessions that you can start to know them better, you might recognize certain patterns, there might be things you can relate to or that you can tie back to other people, but ultimately trusting them to know themselves sounds very empowering.

David Cooley

It is a very empowering process. And part of what informs that orientation, along with narrative therapy, is trauma-informed care. And so what I've recognized that it's really important to check in every step of the way with clients to make sure that, one, the language that I'm using to reflect back their own experience is in alignment with their own lived experience, making sure that it fits with how they're perceiving their own reality. And then always throughout the process making sure they're feeling safe even when they're triggered.

So I'm constantly doing somatic check ins. How are you feeling in your body? What's going on? Where are you? What's coming up? How does this land? There's a lot of referencing the clients

experience in the moment to make sure that they're still feeling attuned to. That can be a lot of the painful experience for people in therapeutic sessions when they don't feel like their professional is really tuned into them emotionally. So for me, that's a really key piece.

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One of the things I like, too, about the difference in the model that I offer is that there's a lot of room for me to offer my own or share my own experience. I'll get vulnerable with clients, whereas the traditional therapist model is to stay removed, never let your own true experience show. There's this distancing that happens. And I agree that you have to be careful and there is a fine line, it takes a lot of skill and self awareness to do that without stepping over into enmeshment, but what I found is that when people can relate to my experiences that are similar to their own, and I can name those, there's a lot of just camaraderie that happens that also defuses some of the tension and reservations that people feel. So I love to give people as much opportunity to relax, feel seen and safe. Here are just two human beings trying to remove the obstacles to healthy and happy relating.

Jaia Bristow

That's wonderful. And I think it's so important when working on relationships to have that relationship and to be able to work on the present relationship. So rather than have that cut off, I'm here to just work on you and I am a nobody, it's like, no, but of course, and it happens in therapist client relationships all the time. It's a relationship that is being created, and there is a dynamic happening. And so to be able to name that and to work with that and to be vulnerable with a person whilst also maintaining boundaries and acknowledging the power dynamic that's happening, sounds fantastic.

David Cooley

Yeah. I think naming bias, naming when things come up for me, being transparent about my own internal experience is a very humanizing experience for clients. And for me, this is a very humanizing modality. And so I love deconstructing a lot of the assumptions that we have about what this kind of work is supposed to look like.

In the same way, there's a lot of ideas about what our process internally is supposed to look like. So that's a lot of the trauma that people incur in the professional context is that there's these ideas about what it's all supposed to look like. And so I think in this context, there's a safe way to explore that differently and offer people a chance to really just be themselves.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And so you're talking about the practical element. And of course, each session, I'm sure, is tailored to the individual because as you said, each person or people or group brings in the content themselves. But seeing as we're talking about how practical it is, let's offer some practical tips. How does it work? What are some things you can share with our audience here today?

David Cooley

Like I said, one of the most important things that I offer, let's focus on two key things. One is the structure in content or how to organize content. A lot of people, when they're in conflict with someone else, when they initiate a process with a partner for example, they're typically already triggered. So people often come to the moment already dysregulated, which then the other person can feel, the way that we communicate when we're dysregulated is distorted, things are disproportionate, the emotion to the perception of what's going on is really off. So that's almost one of the most important first steps is to recognize when you yourself are dysregulated or triggered and to be able to take a step back. Don't initiate a process when you are triggered, wait till you've gone through the wave of the experience and you're on the other side of it and your nervous system has come back to default or baseline.

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Then ask for a process. Get consent. You mentioned nontraditional relationships like polyamory or ethical non-monogamy, those are really interesting lifestyle or relationship pathways because they rely on consent. They really put consent at the center. What I like to talk about is consent with conflict. Don't just launch into conflict with somebody that you want to process with, but get consent first. That way they're prepared. That way they can be regulated. That way they know what's coming instead of catching them off guard. You don't want to say to a partner 10 minutes before they're about to walk out the door, "Hey, I'm really triggered about this, and we need to process it", even though I know you can't. And I see that happening a lot with couples.

Ask, "Hey, are you in a space where you could process something that's coming up for me right now? If not, when?". And then it's up to the other person who says, if I can't in this moment to come back and say, "Yes, okay, how about this or that time?". It's important to make sure that person who's asked for that process doesn't go around having to chase their partner to make sure that happens. So there needs to be the coming together around that.

But I think the learning how to integrate the practice of getting consent before going into a process that's potentially challenging or emotionally triggering for either one of you or both, it's really important to set the stage. That's one thing.

Two is this other piece that I was talking about before, which is somatic and emotional awareness, learning how to become experts in our own nervous systems. What are the cues that are telling you that you're starting to get dysregulated? Do your shoulders go up? Does your breathing change? Are you feeling sensations in your gut and your head? Nauseous, sweaty, whatever it is, what are these cues that your body is sending to you that you are now not in your center?

And then learning what are the corresponding emotions that typically arise for you when you notice that you're triggered? If you can start to become aware of those over and over and over again in the context of interpersonal dialogue, you can start to take a step back. You can start to learn how to keep reregulating yourself. What happens for most people is they just escalate and they either explode or they just shut down. So I want to teach people how to stay engaged. How do you stay at that sweet spot of engagement in something that's triggering and difficult without exploding or shutting down? How do you stay in it? How do you stay relaxed? It's almost like a martial art.

One thing that practitioners have to learn how to do is get thrown or tossed by their teachers over and over and over again. The way to not get hurt when you're being tossed through the air is to stay relaxed. The way to stay relaxed is to stay breathing. That takes a tremendous amount of experience and awareness. So training and teaching is a lot of the work that I do with clients on how to regulate themselves in the moment when it matters most with their partners.

Jaia Bristow

Amazing. I love all of what you've just shared, and I know from my own personal experience how useful these tools are.

So just recapping a little bit. So that first thing of when you feel triggered and you're about to enter a conflict, rather than just exploding or retreating or lashing out at your partner, just walking away, walking away in that moment, taking a breath. And the number of times I've done that and it saved whichever relationship I was in at that moment. And even if it hasn't saved the relationship, it saved a lot of relationship repair work afterwards. It's preventing.

Relationship repair is fantastic, and I've spoken to lots of people about that topic on this conference, but if you can avoid it, if you can feel that rage coming up... And for me, and a lot of NVC practices have really supported me in this as well. So NVC is nonviolent communication for those unfamiliar with it.

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And so, again, what I'll often do is if I feel really riled up, I'll step away from the person who's riled me up, and then I'll call a friend or I'll just go for a walk initially, if I have really a lot of charge. I'll call a friend and I'll be like, I'm so frustrated. And so I won't be yelling at the friend, I'll just be venting my frustration, my anger, my charge in that moment so that I can breathe and release. And then going back to the person involved, and again, whether that's a romantic partner, a friend, a business partner, whoever it is, the other person involved and saying, "Hey, I was really upset by that thing. Can we talk?".

And like you say, that consent piece is so crucial and it gets overlooked so often. And as you say, I love that example you gave of when someone is about to walk out the door and you're like, "I'm really annoyed about what happened earlier. We need to talk about it". Now is not the time.

I once had someone call me up at midnight on a Sunday night just before I was about to start a new job to try and discuss all our relationship stuff and suggest a new type of relationship together. And I was just like, wait, what? When they texted me at midnight on a Monday night or Sunday night knowing I was starting a new job, I assumed something had happened. So I was immediately like, "Are you okay? Yes, of course you can call. What's going on?". They were like, "Yeah, I've been thinking about our relationship". And I'm like, now is not the time. So I think timing, consent, taking a breather is super important.

And then the second piece you were saying about knowing when to walk away, taking that time to get to know yourself. And I think these practices are essential to all relationships, but they're also just essential to life. Recognizing your triggers, recognizing when something's up. And as you say, having IFS systems in place as well. Having that, my young child has been triggered right now, and I feel small and vulnerable, or recognizing which part has been triggered? What's coming up for you right now? Why is that coming up and taking time to process? So thank you for bringing that in.

David Cooley

And I want to say something about that. What you're talking about now is really a precision. And that's just something that people have a really hard time with. It's interesting. And one of the things that I see with a lot of clients, especially my male clients, is there's a real endemic difficulty with naming emotions. I see it across the board, but with men especially. Men have a really hard time just naming it because they don't have permission to do that. In many Western societies in particular, it's not okay for men to feel the whole range or the whole gamut of emotions. So people can be really shut down to their own experience.

For example, sadness. It's not okay for a man to be sad because that undermines this classic sense of what masculinity is. So they've lost the capacity to be self aware there. So sometimes we'll have to use these mechanisms, these modalities to really get precise in naming what the experience is so that the person can have access to that experience, then communicate it in a way that's healthy, safe, and not projecting onto the other person or making them responsible for it.

Another thing that you talked about that I just want to make even more explicit, because you're asking about what are the practical tools that we can give people, is recognizing the three enemies of conflict transformation. And the big one is urgency. And so I love that you're really focusing in on this concept of a phenomenon of emotional drive bys. Like when we're triggered, it seems like the most important thing in the world. It has to get worked through right now because we can't handle the discomfort of what comes up for us. We have to learn how to be able to handle that discomfort and recognize that things don't always have to get handled in the moment. I think that's a big deal.

And so what that alludes to finally, what I'll say is I love that initially people come to me because they've had some kind of rupture, something's already happened, but almost what inevitably happens is we continue working together because people really, what they need to build in a more long-term sustainable sense is skill building. How to be proactively avoiding conflicts. And I like that you are alluding to that.

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How do we have a culture in our relationship of preventative relating so that we're not going around just accumulating these emotional paper cuts with our partners that start to just create this toxic environment. And that's something that I really want to focus on with my clients as well. It's not just fixing what's happened in the past, how do we prevent things building up to that in the future?

Jaia Bristow

I think that's so great. And I really appreciate you talking about how, first of all, this is work. What we're talking about does not come easily. It takes practice, it takes skills, it takes work. And as you mentioned, this work can be more difficult for those who are socialized as men, because as you say, society doesn't always encourage men to fill a full range of emotions and to express those in a way, it encourages all kinds of unhealthy ways of relating.

But as you say, I think this is applicable to all genders. And I think it's important to remember that these are really important tools, really important skills, really important ways, but that it's difficult. And yes, we want to focus on preventing conflict. But if you don't, if you do explode in a moment, if you do call someone up and break up with them at midnight on a Sunday night, if you do yell at your partner before they walk out the door, that's okay, we're human. There is a possibility to do relationship repair afterwards, to apologize and take responsibility. To say, "Hey, I'm really sorry I yelled at you earlier". You can yell at someone and then still walk away, take a breather, calm down and come back and say, "I'm really sorry I yelled at you earlier. I'm much calmer now. Let me know when would be a good time to discuss such and such an issue".

So I think it's important that people remember we are human. Relationships are hard. All kinds of relationships are really hard. No matter how much work you've put into them, how many skills you've developed, it's okay. And so that's another piece I just really want to bring in here.

David Cooley

Yeah, absolutely. And I love that. Another thing that you are alluding to just a moment ago that I think is important to highlight, which really dovetails into the restorative justice origins that work for me, is social justice, which is something that's really important for me.

And this relates also to the modality of narrative therapy that I mentioned earlier, which is really good at naming the way that narratives, social narratives that really in some ways determine our experience to a degree that often we're not aware of, can be the influences of conflict. Noticing privilege, noticing bias, noticing power, and different imbalances. What are the ways in which society has these narratives about who we're supposed to be as individuals? Depending on where we come from, how are those larger overarching narratives that talk about and mold us in ways that we may not be in alignment with, in terms of our own values, influence the dynamic?

It's also important to make those explicit. Oftentimes people feel like the dynamic or the problem between them is just here between personalities. But often there can be these larger concentric circles of influences that it's important to name. Like, oh, here's an issue of injustice. Here's an issue of someone's large experience not being seen as someone who's not part of the dominant experience. That's a really important element of this work as well. It's just naming when is society influencing the dynamic between individuals?

Jaia Bristow

I'm so glad you brought that piece in. I literally was interviewed about that exact topic on *Clubhouse*. Every Monday there's a relationship room called *The DIVA Relationship Room* hosted by Ali Hendry, who is also one of my guests on this conference. And she brings in people, new experts every week, to talk about different topics. And we were talking about power and privilege dynamics in relationships and everything you've just said.

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And I think it's so easy to overlook and it's so often a source of conflict because if it's not mentioned, that's a problem a lot with, especially romantic relationships, but also friendships, people use words like partner, significant other, other half and things like that, which suggests that everyone's starting on the same playing field, that everyone is equal. And the truth is we don't all start equal.

And so if we don't name the differences, if we don't name and acknowledge the implicit biases that we have, the ways that we're treated differently in society, the financial differences we may have, the power imbalances which might come with an age difference, but also gender differences and racial differences, there are so many factors. And if we don't name them and acknowledge them and bring them in, then it will lead to conflict if they try and get pushed under the rug and we pretend that we're totally equal when we're not.

So I think by recognizing it, naming it, acknowledging it, again, it can prevent the conflict rather than having to then unpick all of that within the conflict. And then it gets messy because we no longer really know what we're arguing about, as I'm sure you are very aware with your work. A lot of the times conflict isn't really about the thing that people are arguing about. There's a lot of underlying issues, and that's often just the straw that breaks the camel's back.

David Cooley

And I think not just preventing conflicts, sometimes naming the larger societal narratives that feel oppressive or restrictive for individuals and create these imbalances, can often be the key. The thing that actually disengages that tension that is holding people stuck in a certain dynamic. The naming of itself can be that acknowledgement that I was talking about before. Someone gets seen in their experience. Like I've felt at the mercy or subject to this social expectation about what I'm supposed to be because of who I am, and that's been keeping me behaving in a way, and you responding to me in a way that hasn't been seen. And when that gets seen, that can be this huge relief for people that they've been carrying, which obviously is going to feed into and exacerbate any kind of conflict narrative.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And not only does naming it reduce that tension, it actually brings the parties involved closer together.

I had a partner who was white and presenting as male and used to make jokes about my ethnicity and my gender and never really got why that was problematic. And then one day we just sat down and I shared my experiences, and they really got it in a way that they never had previously. And we just grew so much closer in that moment because I felt heard and seen. And then going forward, not only was that no longer a source of tension that could trigger conflicts, but there was a sense of love and connection. And that's so often so important.

And I noticed that in a lot of my early relationships when I feel like I can express who I am and talk about my own identity and the work that I do, then seeing the responses from the person will really tell me early on whether they're someone that I want to engage in a relationship with or not.

David Cooley

And one of the things that... It's interesting, I like the way that you're developing this litmus test, this vetting process for potential partners or people that you want to relate to intimately. I think that's critical. I think we all need to do that on some level.

And for me, one of my gold standards for potential deep relationships is going to be the way in which they approach and handle conflict. And so one of the things I want to change in the culture that I live in is the way that we think about and approach conflict. Right now I feel like the current paradigm is such that conflict is problematic, something to avoid or something to squash. If it's coming to the

surface that means something is wrong with the relationship. What I want to do is flip that on its head and change the way that we fundamentally feel in our nervous systems in real time conflict. And instead of seeing it as something threatening, actually see it as a profound, potentially one of the most profound invitations into self growth and self awareness.

[00:38:39]

And so when someone that I care about comes to me with a conflict, saying, "Hey, this thing happened that I'm really upset about, and I'd like to process it with you", I've trained myself to have my first default response be like, "Thank you so much for honoring our relationship by not letting this get toxic underground, for trusting in me to hold this and for giving me the opportunity for us to create deeper intimacy". And that would be my goal. That would be the ideal is if everyone that I worked with could walk away and say, wow, when I hear someone bring to me conflict, my natural inclination, natural, now that it's learned, would be, "Wow, thank you. I see that you're honoring our connection by bringing this to the table. Thank you so much".

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I'm very touched by that. And it really reminds me of, I think it was with Rafaella Fiallo, who's also in this conference, we were talking about modeling good behavior. Or not good behavior, that's maybe not quite the right word, but modeling the behavior that we want to see. And I think that's really key.

So when someone comes with conflict, rather than being dismissive or defensive, just to be like, thank you. Thanking someone. Because it's hard. It's hard naming discomfort in a relationship. There's a fear of rejection, a fear of what's going to happen, a fear of conflict, because as you say, there's this idea that conflict is wrong. So if someone brings forward an issue, and sometimes people do that more skilfully and sometimes they do it less skilfully, but however people bring it, if you're able to thank someone when they bring something to you, that's an incredible resource, an incredible tool, and a fantastic point to begin a conversation.

David Cooley

And I really appreciate that other side of it because I think you've named the Yin and Yang now of ideal conflict transformation. One of the things that I'm naming, which is how do we receive it when someone brings it to us? But then also what you're saying, which is another set of the skills and techniques, is how did someone bring it to the table? And that can make all the difference. So if both people can do their part, bring it with skill and receive it with openness, I think you've got the ideal combination of factors there.

Jaia Bristow

100%. I love that. So for those listening, let's practice bringing conflict in a skilful way and receiving when someone brings it to us openly.

Now, I don't think we can talk about conflict without also talking about breaking up. So, David, when do you feel like it's time for a relationship to end, and how does one do that skilfully as well? Because sometimes certain conflicts can't be avoided or aren't creating growth. Sometimes they do, and that's fantastic, but sometimes they don't. And sometimes it feels like we're just having the same argument again and again with people. And sometimes it feels like this relationship isn't working anymore. So let's talk about ending relationships and how that ties in with conflict.

David Cooley

Absolutely. I love that.

[00:41:35]

One lived example that I can give is my marriage of 10 years. When that dissolved it wasn't easy. I went through a significant attachment rupture. It was painful, and yet we were both committed to not making it a more traumatizing experience that it needed to be. We also had a young son in the middle of that experience, and we really wanted to make sure that his emotional well being was cared for. So there's a lot of intentionality in that process.

And we actually did a decoupling ritual where we basically did vows of how is our relationship going to be now? And we did this beautiful ceremony of letting each other go, honoring what was good, acknowledging what didn't work, what didn't serve us, and then making new commitments as co-parents moving forward. That was a very intentional process of separating or transforming, dissolving the arrangement we had before.

In general, what I say to clients, I'm very explicit about this, this is my job, and my interest is not to keep people together at any cost. My interest in my work is to help people get clarity, maximum clarity around what they're needing and wanting as individuals first, and then figure out how to negotiate those as a partnership or multi unit situation.

What I want people to do is be clear about what they need and want, communicate those in ways that are skilful and healthy, differentiated, and then negotiate. Are these things that we can give each other? Are these things that we can live with? Are these things that are still in alignment with the nature of the relationship as it is? And then, if not, how to find a way to then change that relationship.

Sometimes it means altering the relationship even though the connection remains. Other times it really means creating separation and moving away from each other. But either way, I don't believe that any ending has to be inherently traumatic. It can be painful, but pain doesn't have to be inherently traumatic. And I think that's an important distinction. I don't want to avoid pain. Pain is a great teacher, but I want us to be able to handle it in ways that doesn't then propel us to become hurtful.

So for me, it's really about teaching people to get clear about what you're needing, particularly around your values. What is it that feels most important? I mean, this is one of the most fascinating things to me about being human, is that we're so motivated by our values, and so few of us spend the time listing them, articulating them, getting to know them, and then prioritizing them, especially in the context of relationship. Why don't we do that?

So it's something that I really guide people through. I've had several clients that they've had ruptures, they've ended the relationship, but they want to be friends and they want to have peace between them. And so they're coming to me, like, how do we relate better in the ending? How do we redo the ending? How can we create new terms between us that feel healthy for both of us? And it's beautiful work. It's really powerful work.

Jaia Bristow

Well, thank you for sharing your own experiences. That's really touching and beautiful to hear the process that you went through in decoupling and creating new vows for what co-parenting would look like and what your new relationship would look like. I think that's really beautiful and really inspiring as well.

I love what you're saying about the difference between pain and trauma, that, yes, things can be painful without being traumatic, and you can support each other in that pain and you can get support from other people. And I know that when I've had relationships that have changed and taken on different forms, sometimes it's also okay to ask for some space. And during a transition period sometimes people have the expectations, especially when you go from a romantic partnership to a friendship, that's going to happen instantly. And it doesn't. It needs some time. It needs some processing. It needs to process all that pain, as you say, and to grieve the end of one type of

relationship, but then also the celebration of a new chapter and a new type of relationship. So I think that's really great.

[00:45:50]

And my favorite thing in everything you've just said is intentionality. And I think that that's so true when you're changing relationship forms, when you're ending a relationship, but in all types of conflict. And it's a bit like what we were saying around conflict and the skills in bringing conflict to someone and receiving it with openness, that also requires intentionality. You have to set an intention and question what is your intention? What is at the core of what you're trying to do right now?

Again, in NVC, in nonviolent communication, we often talk about if you have an issue with someone or with something, trying to make sure that when you bring it to them, you're bringing it as a gift. Your aim isn't to just dump what's going on for you and to just unload and de-charge. But instead it's bringing it as a gift because you care about this person because you love them and you love yourself and you want to make it work. So you're bringing it to them. And if you have that in mind, it can really change the way that you approach these kind of things.

David Cooley

I really love that extension of the intentionality that I was alluding to. Another thing I want to add to before concluding is, as I said before, changing the way that we experience, in real time, conflict, is about really getting in touch with the opportunities that conflict are for us. And so one of the things that I think conflict is inviting us to do is recognize the elements of the relational experience that needs to be changed. It's really a sign that something needs to be different.

And so in that sense, it's very shamanic, because one of the things I have to coach people through is, you've come to me, if we make these things explicit and start to do this work, there's no going back to what was because what was didn't work. We have to move into the uncertainty of something new. And I want people to be emotionally and intellectually prepared for that and embrace that. That shamanic undertone of there will be a death, there will probably need to be grieving. However small the dynamic may be, we're letting something go to experience something new. And when that's explicit and woven into the fabric of the process, I think it's easier for people to surrender to it.

Jaia Bristow

100%. I think that's beautiful. It's really helpful, as you say, to know that and for people to create space for grief and not give themselves a hard time, because sometimes again, there's this idea that it's still okay. It's still good. I'm happy with the way the relationship is now. I don't want it to go back to what it was. And yet that suggests that it's not okay to grieve. And it's like, yeah, I am happy with how the relationship is now. No, I don't want it to go back to what it was. And yet what it was was also a beautiful thing and beautiful in the moment. Or maybe it wasn't beautiful, but it was something. It's still the end of something. A transition can bring up feelings of grief and mourning, and that that's okay to acknowledge and feel those if they are there.

David Cooley

Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you so much for your time today, David. It's been a really great conversation. How can people find out more about you and your work and the RRC model?

David Cooley - [00:49:22]

So the best way to find out about me and my work right now is to go directly to my website, restorativelationship.com website. Feel free to send me emails directly from there. I'm pretty accessible and I will be in touch with you within 24 hours of receiving a message.

I do training, so I've just recently completed my first training for practitioners that are wanting to learn this method. I'm slowly building a community of people who are interested in integrating this modality into their professional practices. So I really encourage people that are interested in the model from a professional standpoint to make contact with me. Let me know what you're doing and what your interest is.

Aside from that, it's really working on seeing clients and just developing the model more. The one thing I'll say about the other project that I have going is I'm working on a book, co-writing a book with, actually my ex-wife who I mentioned before, Jessica Fern, her second book is coming out and we're co-authoring it together, which I'm super excited about. So that's something that people will be able to find hopefully at the end of 2022.

Jaia Bristow

Amazing. And I wasn't sure if I was allowed to say who your ex-wife was, so I'm so glad you mentioned Jessica because she's also on this conference and we talk about attachment theory in non-monogamy. So for anyone wanting to check that out, I highly recommend that. And what is this book that you're co-authoring together all about?

David Cooley

So it's the follow up to her phenomenally successful first book, which is *Polysecure*, which again, as you just mentioned, really focuses on how to create secure attachment in the context of ethically non-monogamous relationships. *Polywise* is the second, and so this is really about the paradigm shifts that are necessary to make and just how we underestimate the profundity of making that shift. What are the elements of that shift that have to get made to step into that new worldview and experience?

So it's a really deep dive into the dynamics that are related to making a pretty big decision around how people want to relate. So it's been so much fun to collaborate with her, and we get to tell a lot of the old anecdotes of our own experiences, there's moments where it's painful, but others where it's really hilarious. So it's going to be just a really fun shared project that I'm really excited about.

Jaia Bristow

Amazing. And if this isn't a testament to how well the RRC model works then I don't know what is. The fact that you both have such a beautiful relationship together now and have gone through that process, and it sounds like you're committed to your new vows to each other, is really inspiring.

So thank you so much, David, and thank you to everyone who's been listening and watching.

David Cooley

Thank you so much, Jaia. It's always a pleasure.