

## Recovering from betrayal

**Guest: Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

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### **Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]**

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

Today I'm speaking with Dr. Ava Pommerenk, an empowerment relationship and sexuality coach and therapist. She shares today based on direct experience around betrayal and relationship having gone through her own deeper healing and spiritual growth journey. She combines what she's learned or realized through experience with her training and education and transpersonal psychology, attachment psychology and trauma to share a unique perspective on betrayal and the ways to heal from it.

Dr. Ava Pommerenk, thank you so much for being with us today.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Thank you for having me.

### **Meagen Gibson**

So I would love it if we could start off, since it's the Relationship Conference, in that context, talking about what is betrayal?

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Well, the simplest way to describe what betrayal is, is that in relationship to whatever degree, there are usually agreements or promises or spoken or unspoken contracts. And when somebody breaks one of those, it can be experienced as a betrayal.

I'm speaking about it more in terms of interpersonal dynamics right now, but this can go between groups of people or institutions or workplaces. Betrayal can happen between two people, or many, or one person with a society. It's a human dynamic that can span into all sorts of contexts.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Because the betrayal happens not just in romantic relationships, it happens in our family relationships and our work relationships. These types of betrayals happen in all kinds of relationships.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. There's even a theory out there that talks about betrayal in a cultural context. There's actually a theory called cultural trauma betrayal theory. And it talks all about the experiences people of color have in societies that are racist and the betrayal dynamics that are built into institutions, too. So it can get very complex looking at different dynamics around betrayal. It's not just romantic relationships.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:02:27]**

So what would help people understand the different types of betrayal?

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

I'm keeping it to speaking about interpersonal betrayal in this interview because I want to present something that feels applicable to a lot of the people listening. I feel like everybody has some experience of betrayal in larger scales as well, but I'll keep it to interpersonal betrayal here.

So I created a diagram to try to talk about betrayal and the different processes around betrayal, which will also help us later on in the interview talking about recovering from betrayal.

I named it interpersonal betrayal, and these are nested circles, and you may have seen this before. I'm not going to get into the theorists that have also used nested circles, but I am not the first one to use nested circles, I'm just putting that out there.

The way I like to see this is that the center circle is encapsulated by each circle moving outward. So everyone is capable of what I would call normal betrayal. And then you get further out and there's insecure attachment betrayal, there's addiction, compulsive behavior and severe codependence betrayal. And then the final one is psychopathic, sociopathic, narcissistic and complete desperation betrayal.

So I'm first naming the betrayal process context because I want people to be able to see that, for instance, people in the process of psychopathic or sociopathic, there might be these other types of betrayals happening from the other circles. So it's not when you transition to one circle the other one's not possible.

**Meagen Gibson**

It can be concentric circles of betrayal happening simultaneously.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yes. Alright.

So normal betrayal is betrayal we are all capable of. It's really important to understand that there is probably not a single person on this planet that has not engaged in betrayal at some point. So normal betrayal is simply when we make a promise or an agreement or a contract, or we've got a shared value with somebody and we choose to actively go against it or break it. And there's been a temporary rupture in trust. So that's normal betrayal. Betrayal is kind of a strong word for that, but it is a form of betrayal.

But I'd like to start first with just helping everyone understand that that is the foundation. We all tend to do this where we prioritize the needs at the moment over agreements we made with other people. And this is the foundation of what builds into other types of betrayal?

So the next piece is in secure attachment betrayal. The reason why I put this here is also because, for many of us, when we are in the right context, we might feel insecure. So it's not just people who certify as anxiously attached or avoidantly attached, because technically, according to attachment research, only about 50% of the population is insecurely attached.

However, what I mean in this context is when there is insecurity fault in an attachment bond and somebody is presenting as insecure, they have a tendency to also commit betrayal. And this is something most of us are capable of as well.

So it's on a spectrum. Some people are going to present as insecurely attached in certain contexts so it's not going to be very defined or extreme, whereas on the other part of the spectrum, there are people where their set point is to be very insecurely attached and portray very standard patterns of relationship that go through every, generalized basically, through every context.

So for instance, a big one is, if somebody is anxiously attached, they might stop sharing or may never start sharing what their emotional process is for fear of rejection or abandonment. And that is a form of betrayal because over time your partner doesn't get to know who you are or what your feelings are.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:06:54]**

And it's like betrayal by withholding.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yes, betrayal by withholding.

Whereas somebody who's avoidantly attached, stereotypically they may not be so aware of the emotional process they're having or that there is a process happening at all, and they might instead feel just apathetic or shut down or disinterested in their partner, or they might feel really annoyed and they might actually scapegoat their partner for the problems in the relationship.

Because of that, through the routine of doing that in relationship, it builds to actually a pretty big betrayal. So it starts small but if it's a dynamic pattern that happens over time, it becomes a pretty large amount of betrayal to build other issues on.

**Meagen Gibson**

Sorry to interrupt you. I know from speaking to the wide variety of experts that we've had for the Relationship Conference that, a lot of times these avoidantly attached people and anxiously attached people find each other because they fit well together.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

And a lot of times they can form a secure attachment together. But during times of relationship stress or personal insecurity, because of a variety of different factors, we can retreat back into our old attachment relational style and, I imagine, that that's where these normal betrayals can occur, is when we've retreated back to an unhealthier, less functional, if we want to label it like that, or just different modality of relating to our partners.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. As you increase stress for any person, their way of presenting and relationship is going to become less skillful. I guess you could say.

**Meagen Gibson**

There we go, yes. Thank you. Well said.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk - [00:08:46]**

So with insecure attachment, you may have healed your attachment wound and you've built a secure relationship bond with somebody, but if you have just the right amount of stress or just the right context where you get very triggered, you might betray.

So another really common experience is in relationships where people have in secure attachment patterning and it's been going on long enough, people are capable of starting to practice a level of self betrayal or self deception where they're able to make excuses to do things that are actually really damaging for relationship, but in their mind they justify it.

So, for instance, cheating is a big one. Cheating is extremely common, and the desire to cheat is very common and not just physical cheating, but even emotional infidelity.

So with these attachment patterns over time, as people go on, they practice self deception, they're more deeply disconnected with themselves, they're more dysregulated, they get to a point of justifying, well, I'm just going to talk to this other person outside of my relationship. It's easier to talk to them than talk to my partner.

And it builds, the betrayal builds you become, I guess, desensitized to the amount of betrayal that you're practicing. And then before you know it, you're justifying doing things that are actually big in terms of betrayal even if it is in the realm of normal betrayal.

**Meagen Gibson**

And a lot of that, I imagine, feels like a means for survival. If you're under stress, if you're in duress and you are not paying attention to that and what that feeling is trying to communicate to you, you're going to seek a soothing mechanism outside of your relationship in order to get what you need, which feels like a survival.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Another thing to mention here with these nested circles is that as you get further out into these outer circles, people tend to justify certain behaviors more. The amount of stress, regular stress, running through somebody's system is higher. People's trauma responses are more active and they're running from that as a default rather than being, and I'm when talking about a trauma response I'm talking about, do you want me to give more of a definition of what that is? Would that be helpful?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah you can absolutely. Sure.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

So running from a trauma response means, in our culture, we talk about it in terms of fight, flight, freeze. So trauma responses are created in, not just the brain, but in the body to help us cope with situations that are really overwhelming, which is trauma.

And many of us have trauma from early childhood that's related to attachment experiences. So related to the caregivers that took care of us and the environment we were growing up in and the things that were happening in that environment.

So oftentimes in daily life when we're adults, there will be certain situations that trigger trauma, or just by virtue of existing in that context, we have trauma running in the background that's controlling perceptions, that's controlling our experience.

Many of us don't realize that. Like, for instance, somebody with avoidant attachment, the reason someone with avoidant attachment might perceive that their partner is criticizing them, or they can

never do well enough or they'll never be good enough for them, that's actually something happening inside of them.

Yes, their partner might be reacting to them and being critical, which is a bid for connection because they're probably dealing with there being avoidant. But this experience of, I need to get distance from you because you're attacking me, that's a set point, that's a trauma response. That's part of a trauma response running in the background that impacts somebody's perception of what's going on.

So as you go further in these circles, the more and more people are controlled by their trauma.

So you get into this outer circle and you notice that people are, this is like ultimate trauma territory. People who are extremely traumatized end up fitting into the category of psychopathic, sociopathic, narcissistic and then complete desperation I'll get into once we're there.

But I want to highlight that as we move out from normal betrayal outward, trauma is more activated in the body, the mind, it's wreaking havoc. And with trauma, we are kind of, delusional is a strong word, but we do, I like to call it a distortion field. There's a way to really distort reality and to practice self deception, to practice all sorts of defenses where you're justifying the actions you're taking. Whenever people do that, betrayal gets a hold with that, and it's harder to be connected to your authentic self and your sense of empathy and your capacity to make sound decisions when trauma is running in the background like that.

So as you notice, empathy decreases as you move out of these circles too.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:14:18]**

I had this mental image as you were talking, if somebody burns themselves on a hot pan, so in order to make that feel better they put their hand in the oven and then they set the oven on fire. Just like these varying degrees of heat, if you will, exacerbating what's already a bad situation.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. And when we get to recovering from betrayal there clearly is a way to undo this pattern. But it really is like that, one betrayal can build up the other one distorted experience based on trauma being triggered, can build on the other. Before we know it many of us are capable of all sorts of betrayals we never thought we'd be capable of. And I think we need to normalize that so none of us end up feeling, shame is appropriate in some context, of course, but if we can take a lot of the shame out of the fact that most of us are capable of betrayal, if not all of us, I think there's a better way to work with the betrayal.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I was going to ask next, so what's the pattern, or the coping mechanism, for becoming aware of this? Both on the receiving end of betrayal and, I don't want to say perpetrating end of betrayal, but on the actor versus person affected by it. How do we develop an awareness for those cues?

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Well, I think that's part of the reason why I made this diagram is because it can help people start to reference. Okay, I've committed something, somebody is really hurt by something I did. Let me consider if I betrayed myself and if I betrayed them. If I did do this, what category does this betrayal belong in? And if we can look at this category it gives us insight into where our work is, where we need to be accountable.

So I'll get into that in a second. I'm going to just finish the circles, but I get very excited talking about this. Betrayal is such a heavy topic but I think it's really important that we're doing this.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:16:41]**

And it's fascinating. And I love that you just set the context of, especially with urge, if you will, around betrayal is super normal and that there's a path through it.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

There is, yeah. So if we go into, another piece I didn't mention, along with trauma responses is disassociation. Disassociation is when, a lot of people in our culture describe it as being checked out or numb for apathetic or shut down. Those are usually signals when people are dissociated.

Another signal of dissociation is feeling foggy, or unable to think or make sense of things. Another kind of dissociation could be literally not remembering something that happened to you or that you've done.

So as you move further out in these circles, dissociation is also increasing as well because that is an element...

**Meagen Gibson**

As far as the severity of it.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. The severity is increasing.

So I mentioned dissociation in this circle for the first time with insecure attachment, but it gets increased in severity as you move forward into the other circles.

So going into the other outermost circle, or the second to outermost circle, there's addiction, compulsive behavior and severe codependence. So the reason why I put these couples or triples together is because they all relate to some of the same core behaviors.

So a lot of folks, I hate to say this, but a lot of folks who identify as empaths are actually codependent.

**Meagen Gibson**

And dealing with trauma.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yes. So I used to think I was an empath, and I mean, I think I could be an empath in a sense.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah me too.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

A lot of people who are healers. And I think empath is the less shame based way of describing, I'm a codependent. So I want to put that out there. I didn't put empath there. I put codependent because I think we need to really address some key behaviors.

So the reason why I put addiction, compulsive behavior and severe codependence together is because the core of it, the core of these behaviors and ways of relating to the world and to self, have to do with some really intense feelings that people are having a hard time coping with and end up feeling completely overwhelmed where they use a way of being as a crutch.

So addiction is one that gets a lot of play in our culture. People are really aware of addiction and why people are addicted nowadays. I would say that everybody is addicted to something. Especially with social media now we all...

**Meagen Gibson - [00:19:36]**

Agree.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

And we're all set up for it, we're actually all wired for addiction. So that's another thing to take shame out of it. But there's a compulsion that drives addiction as well as severe codependence and then I put compulsive behavior in there to fit other compulsive actions that maybe don't readily fit into the category of codependence or addiction.

So there's a compulsion. Compulsions are like this strong feeling that's driving you where you have to do something. So for many of us, our compulsions are functioning so subconsciously that we're not even aware that they're pushing us to want to get that drink or to want to send that text or to want to check the phone or to need to do it. It's not just to want to, it's a need to, I have to.

**Meagen Gibson**

I was talking to somebody earlier today who admitted that they were refreshing dating apps, just repeatedly. That is kind of compulsive.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. And for a lot of folks, what they're trying to avoid with these intense feelings are usually trauma based feelings. It's not just attachment stuff, but it can largely be attachment stuff, and that's why attachment stuff is in there.

But I would say for a lot of folks it's feelings like, not belonging, or feeling alone, or feeling uncertainty, or feeling lost, or feeling issues from self worse, or feeling unwilling to face a loss. So these are, again, coping patterns that I think really help people survive and get through codependency.

It's really easy to get in relationship with somebody where you're managing them, and they're the chaotic one, and you get to be the one who has it all together because this helps you feel like you've got a purpose and somebody needs you and you don't have to face feeling like you're not worthy. I hate to say it like that but that's essentially what it is.

**Meagen Gibson**

Ignoring the fact that you're also compulsively going after a dopamine rush of that rescuer and you're like, I feel good and I feel flooded with this righteousness of how well I can help this other person or save them, or fix them.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

And I'm a recovering codependent. I think a lot of people who get into doing this work, healing work or coaching or therapists or people who are helpers, we come from environments where we were taught to be codependent. For many of us, we come out of homes that are dysfunctional. I had a dysfunctional home. We learn that our way to gain our sense of worth is by being ambitious, having it all together and helping people. And we feel good when people need us.

**Meagen Gibson**

Or having lesser needs, like diminishing our needs and asking for what we need.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk - [00:22:56]**

Exactly. And on one hand, we can play the angel and go, oh, yeah, we're so great because I'm denying my needs, and I'm just there helping other people and giving altruistically. But if this happens for an extended period, people who are codependent get resentful, they get very angry and they start to practice self deception, and they start to justify taking liberties to do certain things that are betrayals.

And so many codependent folks who identify as empaths would not readily acknowledge that they are capable of betrayal because they are so disconnected from their capacity to do harm, because that is outside of the realm of how they identify themselves.

So I put that up there because it's like none of us get to be out of this.

**Meagen Gibson**

It's true. There's two parts to every relationship, and both parts are equally 100% responsible for how things go down.

And also what I thought of while you were speaking, is how much we've upheld, as a virtue of value, selflessness. Literally without a self. And I have to constantly remind myself, like, no, I am a self. I do have needs.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

And I would say the couples that I've seen where there's been infidelity, a good chunk of the time is because somebody's severely codependent, they've eventually sought another partner or an emotional bond with somebody else because they don't feel safe in the relationship. That's their set point, to actually bring their full self, ask for what they need, set boundaries. And they've actually cheated because they felt desperate enough to do that after a while.

So even the best of us are capable of cheating if we're not paying attention to what our core patterns are. You are probably in the circumstance because of something you were also doing. Even if your partner is an alcoholic and they relapsed, it's still not justified. And that's a piece that I'm going to bring up a little later on here.

**Meagen Gibson**

Or at least your part in the relationship.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly.

**Meagen Gibson**

The part you're responsible for.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. We all have to look at what we're doing. And our partner can be the worst alcoholic, not engaging in recovery at all, but it does not justify us going out and cheating. We have to look at what got us there and what we're doing to perpetuate being in this circumstance. And that's a hard one for people to be responsible for.

So I put that in there because it's not just people who are addicted and who are doing the route of drugs and alcohol that are capable of some really big betrayals, but I think equally so. You draw the



people to you that have a similar thing they're working out sometimes. And I'd say in the case of codependence and addiction, that's a really common one.

So compulsive behavior would also be like behavioral addictions, anytime that you feel a sense of compulsion that doesn't fit within the category of codependence or addiction, but it's just umbrella-ing.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:26:35]**

A very nonspecific way.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yes. So the final circle is psychopathic, sociopathic, narcissistic and complete desperation. So what I've written is extremely disconnected from authentic self and empathy, survival/victim trauma lens.

So what I'm talking about here is when you get to this final circle, people in these contexts, so it's not just the person, but it's also the context, a combination, are very disconnected from their authentic self. They're deeply disconnected from a sense of self that has its empathy intact that has a sense of a moral compass intact. Is more in a sense of survival, so we brought up survival.

So as we move through the circles, survival, a fear of survival, fighting for survival gets higher, even if it's only just perceived threat rather than actual threat. And these folks function from a space, first three, function from a space of people being a means to an end, or a circumstance being a means to an end or an agreement being.

**Meagen Gibson**

What I was thinking was that the threat can be just a loss of power, not an act. Which isn't a threat against yourself or your life, but if you're being threatened with the power that you hold, then that feels like you're going to be destroyed.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. And for people who are wounded in this way because they don't have a sense of self they're deeply connecting to, they are really heavily identified with a sense of power.

And so that is their self or the role of power. So if they're threatened in that way, they will do anything they can to maintain it.

And it's not even a conscious process for most of them, that is just the set point, the default that they're functioning from.

And then as you get into the victim trauma lens, what I'm talking about here. So there's a tendency for folks who have a ton of trauma who've gone to this degree of woundedness, they have a tendency to have a set point of perceiving the world where they're really entitled to the world giving them something because the world needs to compensate for how much they have been exploited or harmed. And they look at the world as being a threat. It's more, there's paranoia, there's a way to get one over on someone else before they get one over on you.

So there's betrayal that's really heavily ingrained in the way people who are like this interact. And instead of just trauma being what's functioning through them, they're also inherently traumatizing in the way that they interact. And that's something that increases as you move out circles as well.

Like normal betrayal people are not inherently traumatizing. As you get further out, when people are heavily in their patterns, how they're acting can be traumatizing. So it can be like, there was a term

that I picked up as I was just generally reviewing all literature on this, catastrophic betrayal. Which I thought was like bam.

Catastrophic betrayal, that way of looking at it where it's seriously traumatic betrayal. So this is the level we're talking about here. And in this area, you've got sexual assault, you've got all sorts of violence that is happening as a part of a human really violates basic human decency.

So the last piece here, though, is complete desperation. I want to highlight that if you put people in desperate enough situations they will act like psychopaths, sociopaths or narcissists.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:30:41]**

Like an animal backed into a corner.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. Oftentimes you see people who come out of really violent environments who are just trying to survive, who are stealing because they're trying to survive. Refugees who have a lot of trauma ripped from their homes. They're very, very desperate. There's lots of desperate situations that we could think of here, but it's important to look at that when people are in the space of desperation, they're in a process of being actively traumatized by the context they're in.

And when people are being actively traumatized you cannot depend on them to act in a way that follows human decency.

**Meagen Gibson**

Or cultural norms.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

That follows the rules of human relationship, because that would be ridiculous. Their needs are not to get along. Their needs are to survive.

So I want to highlight a piece that I think a lot of people don't understand is, people in abusive relationships can look this way too. Often I get a question from people, because I do a lot of work with people who are recovering from narcissistic abuse. I work with a lot of people who go, well was I narcissist because I did all these things? I really committed a lot of betrayal. No, you are in a context where you are being actively traumatized. Of course you acted this way.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

So I wanted to include that there for people who are looking at this going, gosh, am I a narcissist? No.

**Meagen Gibson**

Most people ask themselves, am I a narcissist? You automatically get disqualified if you're even considering it.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

True.

So I could talk about this for hours but I know we have a limited amount of time. I'd love to move on to the next part unless you've got any questions.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:32:42]**

And I love the different degrees and the explanation that you gave because we can paint betrayal with just one brush, and it's very much layered and multifaceted. So I love the context that you said. And normalizing it.

I know that I asked earlier and you were like, hang on, let's circle back to that. But after we've normalized it, looking at how we recognize these stages. What are our cues that we can look for in our behavior, in our tendencies, our desires, that signal, hey, there's something to get curious about here?

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

I think the biggest thing to look at is getting honest with yourself about the level of self deception that is active in all of this. So if you're in an argument or a repeated argument with somebody and they are accusing you of betraying them. Yes. It could be an abusive dynamic, and you could be being gaslit and they're projecting all over you. But ordinarily if somebody is saying, you really hurt me, there's the possibility that you did betray them to some degree.

And it's a good idea to look at what liberties you might be taking in your relationship with the assumption, oh they'll understand, or I have a good reason to do this. Whenever you just have to justify something, it's a good idea to circle back around and go, what am I doing? It might be betraying.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Yeah, because most of us, I'm going to use some aggressive words, but are confronted or accused of something, our automatic first response is to deny and defend. That's human nature.

Because most of us walking around aren't trying to hurt the people that we're in relationship with, it's not our intention. We're going to deny, we're going to defend. But in so many cases, if you can pause that tendency and understand that that's their truth, so I want to understand more about what's happening for them, even if that's not my truth, even if that's not my experience and it wasn't my intention, how can I understand, how can I get curious about what their experience has been?

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. We all come from very different contexts, whether it be with our family or our cultures or class or society. And there's scripts we get taught as a part of these different contexts we come from about what betrayals are okay, what betrayals are not, what the consequences of betrayal are, what is a betrayal and what is not a betrayal?

So when we come together with somebody in partnership or friendship or even a group of people, to recognize that we need to really look at the context we're coming from. And if there are some patterns there run by trauma, both of those things, look at that to be able to work with finding a place of agreement about how to move forward.

So I was going to give some more life examples about other common ways we betray, but I feel like I may have covered them. I included them already when going through the models, so maybe.

### **Meagen Gibson**

I was thinking of some as well. And you talked about the relationship dynamics that we're taught and the scripts that we're given, and I can't tell you how many times, in my own relationships and in talking for the conference, and talking to other people about what they council people through, there's this dynamic, and it doesn't really matter if it's male or female, in a relationship there's somebody who is, the roles divide often very much the same, despite whatever your gender is.

And a lot of times there's a person who is feeling disconnected, they want to connect with the other person, and the other person says, I don't know how you could possibly feel abandoned and disconnected, all I do is everything, everything I do is for you.

And so there's this dynamic of my idea of connection is this, but your idea of connection is something entirely different. And so we're feeling betrayed, we're feeling abandoned, we're feeling like our needs aren't being met, and the more we claw and scratch at that connection, the more the other person is throwing their hands up. How do we resolve this? So a lot of situations like that where we're not communicating those needs.

You mentioned situations under stress earlier. If you, I'll just put myself out there, if you grew up in a situation where there was financial instability or financial stress, and then you, in your partnership, run into a period of unemployment or financial stress again, it's going to exacerbate all of that old situational, relational trauma, and all of a sudden you're going to feel disconnected from your partner just because of that familiarity of the stress.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk - [00:38:00]**

Exactly like I was talking earlier about our trauma being primed. There's a topic of financial duress or the possibility of it. And to protect yourself to go, I can't, I don't want to feel this. It's subconscious, I don't want to feel this. And so you disconnect. And the other person is going, what just happened here? And you're probably not in a place of going like, oh, my trauma is active. I'm disconnecting because I have trauma from growing up in a low economic status. But it can be as subtle as that.

**Meagen Gibson**

And you're disconnected and you feel insecure, because it does, it fires up all of your insecurities and all of your feelings of safety and all of that and all of a sudden you're disconnected from your partner when actually your partner is not responsible for any of that trauma or any of that history, that it's informing the way that you're relating to your relationship.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. I mean, what's the saddest, and also the most beautiful thing, is that in relationship we often don't realize that our perception of our partner often creates the behavior we don't want.

**Meagen Gibson**

Absolutely.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

So if you're engaging with your partner like they're a difficult person to be with, guess what? They're going to be difficult.

**Meagen Gibson**

They become difficult.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

I'm laughing because I've done this, and I do this. Even with all my training my trauma comes in and goes, okay, well, let's see about this.

But, yeah, that's where betrayals happen. It's like, why did you go ahead and buy that thing without me? Or how come you haven't talked to me about the fact that we don't have money in this account?

When it's like, oh, well, I guess I grew up with shame around talking about money, and I was scared you were going to be really angry and critical with me. And I'm hyper vigilant and scanning to really perceive ways you could be subtly critical with me. And I'm taking that. And that's my confirmation bias as drawing this bigger picture of you being someone who can accept me for the ways that I have challenges with money.

### **Meagen Gibson - [00:40:14]**

Yeah. Absolutely.

I mean, I've personally experienced, and I want to talk through this a little bit because there are definitely times where our perceptions of our relationships, like relationships end and a lot of relationships should end. And it doesn't necessarily mean that you have one of these concentric circles going on. It means you're listening to your intuition in your gut.

But there are definitely situations where, I lived through this 8 years ago, I was married. I'm still married. I have a wonderful husband, I had two very, very, very small children and just felt this absolute desperate, life saving urge to just pull the ripcord, the eject button on the F-15 or whatever. I was like, I've got my shoot on. I'm out of here.

And was able and couldn't, like you were saying, none of that stuff was running in the background. I didn't know, oh, this is this insecurity and this is this insecurity and this is this. All I knew was I was desperate, clinging for air, couldn't breathe metaphorically and was like, I've got to escape.

And was able, thank God, to communicate that to my partner. And we were able to very slowly work through that. And what is this? Unpack it. There's a lot going on here, but go through it and get curious about it. Instead of him feeling like he's been abandoned and I don't love him anymore. Because that was very confusing for me. I was very, very deeply in love with him and my kids. I was given everything that I wanted in the world, and yet I was absolutely, totally trying to escape. I could've invented a lot of stories in that self betrayal pattern to justify doing that.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. I mean, it just goes to show the amount of work you've done on yourself, as well as the secure attachment bonds that you built and enough history you had with where you've been able to see, oh wait, we do have a solid relationship, this just a little weird. But if that had happened, I know that it would be challenging for it to happen in the very beginning of the relationship because you had some children, and I'm clearly elapsing, but if there is a similar way we could put you into the first year of the relationship and that was happening, that would have been a lot harder to navigate.

So I think this is another thing that a lot of couples need to hear, is when you've been together for 10 years and you're finally coming to get help because somebody's done something and betrayed, there's actually more of a foundation to work off of, theoretically, to heal from that, because you have shared experiences that have gone well, that prove to you that this person is really not the person you're fixated on them being right now or during this time. As opposed to people coming in who have only been together for 6 months.

So it's granted, staying together a long time, you could just be repeating really dysfunctional patterns over and over again. So I'm not talking about those folks, maybe another category, but what's beautiful is that you were able to talk to him. You clearly had a history that was based on some really positive, beautiful experiences. And I think people tend to take that for granted when a betrayal happens that you have a foundation, you can actually, that will help you recover from that. It starts to, people tend to fixate so much on the betrayal itself rather than looking at the larger picture of, like, wow, this is an opportunity for us to get curious, to work it through, to actually heal something big in our dynamic.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:43:56]**

Because when you're feeling desperate and you're clinging to that feeling of security, try and get after that feeling of security and feel secure again, and safe again, your mind makes up a lot of stories. So it's easy to get lost in that. And the last thing you want to do is get introspective. You just want to fix it, you just want to numb it, you just want it to go away. You don't want to get curious about it and say, let's unpack all of this. Let's really feel into why this is so hard and difficult.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. Exactly.

I mean, it starts to get into compulsive territory. Like, I have to go do this. That's because there's some really strong feelings we don't want to face. But yeah, face them. And we all have that opportunity. We just have to know that that's what we're doing and start to get curious, like you're saying.

**Meagen Gibson**

And it's really easy to point outward. To say that the reason I feel like this is circumstantial. If these circumstances only change, I wouldn't feel this way. And I can just tell you, spoiler alert, it's an inside job. All circumstances can change and it won't really deeply affect the change in you that won't just occur again if you don't do that really deep investigative work to see what's going on.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. I mean, sadly, for a lot of folks who have more extreme attachment trauma, there's a tendency, what comes along with that is the tendency to think that the world is just filled with this one type of person who's really messed up, who doesn't understand you, who can't meet your needs. And you keep searching for that partner.

And I'd say, especially for folks who are avoidantly attached, they're looking for this fantasy partner in the future. And many of them get into their 40, 50s and 60s and don't ever seriously commit to a relationship because anytime something gets hard and they get really triggered, it's really easy for them to go, oh, well, you're messed up. I'm out.

But yeah, I mean, betrayal can be a really good crisis to get people to go, wait, I'm capable of that? I need to really look at what I did and why. It's a signal, oh, maybe I'm not going to find the perfect person until I actually start working with my own stuff.

**Meagen Gibson**

Start trying to be the perfect person myself.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

And, none of us are ever going to attain perfection, but we're going to be a little bit more self aware, be a little bit more responsible.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. Yeah. I actually came up with an acronym. I know I'm kind of moving us ahead a little bit here. Would it be okay if I shared an acronym that relates to what we're talking about right now?

## **Meagen Gibson - [00:46:45]**

Absolutely. Please.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Okay. So I was, in my geeky way, I was just sitting around, what acronym can I create about this? And I came up with the acronym RAAG, but R-A-A-G. And R being recognize. So recognize is the ability to be able to stop and go, what am I actually doing here? What's actually happened here? And to be able to say, okay, betrayal has happened. This person is not just crazy telling me I betrayed. Or on the other side, somebody who's been betrayed going, I've actually been betrayed. So to really recognize it and to come to terms with, okay, this happened. And to come out of that space of just back and forth, like, did it happen? Did it not? Recognize it. Start there.

And even together as a couple, you can recognize it and work through this acronym together, even if one of you is in disagreement in the beginning that a betrayal happened.

So recognize it and then go into the first A which is authenticity or being authentic. So being able to share your authentic feelings in the moment, being able to share your authentic reaction, but in a way where, instead of it coming out as blame, learning how to share authentically what is yours.

So instead of saying you're being ridiculous, being like, I feel really inadequate right now. To work at putting a label to what is happening inside of me that makes me want to evaluate the other person?

And then that naturally leads into accountability. So accountability is not just looking at what it is you did in this situation, in the replay, that contributed to the experience of betrayal, so both by the person who's betrayed and the person who is the betrayer. But also looking at what are the cultural contexts? What are the familial contexts? What are the childhood experiences that maybe you brought with you? So some of your trauma, your training, your conditioning that you brought with you in this experience that is impacting your perceptions and your justifications for what you're doing.

So it's really seeking to get fully accountable for the different angles that you're bringing and doing it together, not just a person who betrayed. So agreeing to do it together is a big one because it helps take the shame out of the process. And it helps couples work together, or any two people, or group work together, to look at, how are we responsible here for this? And work collaboratively rather than just the shame and blame game which really isn't anywhere.

So accountability, and then from accountability, not just admitting what you've done, but also talking about ways to make amends and ways to set up, set certain behaviors in place or communication in place that can repair. So an actual change in behavior. Because accountability isn't just saying, oh, yeah, I did that wrong, I'm sorry.

It's, I did that wrong, I'm sorry. Here's how I understand why I did this. And I'm sincerely sorry for how it impacted you. And this is what I'm going to do differently. And this is both by the people who, not just betrayed, but the person who was the betrayed I guess, I'm getting mixed with my wording here, but the person who didn't do betraying, to be able to go, you know what, I self betrayed, or I totally see how I contributed to this. And this is what I'm going to do.

The final thing is grieving, that's G. So what's interesting is...

### **Meagen Gibson**

I thought you were going to say growth. So grieving, I like it.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk - [00:50:51]**

Growth is inherent in all parts of this process. But grieving is something that's not talked about enough, especially in American culture.

So to grieve is really recognizing that there's losses that happened as a part of this betrayal experience, and they're going to be a natural set of emotional responses as you come to terms with what happened. And of course, when it's a more severe betrayal, the grieving is going to be more intense, whereas if it's a normal betrayal maybe the grief process will be pretty important.

But grieving is an important one here. So, in our culture we commonly refer to the research by Kübler-Ross, so the stages of grief. And I would say it's pretty important to just look at, okay, well, am I denying? Am I bargaining? Am I angry? Am I depressed? Have I gotten to a space of acceptance? And by the way, they don't need to work in that order. They can be combined, you could go back and forth. It's really deliciously messy being human.

But grieving is a really big aspect of overcoming a betrayal. And most of us try to just jump ahead and not breathe, and then we end up really fixated on what happened because we still have feelings about it. And knowing what channels to vote for, maybe a trusted confidant, or a therapist, or a coach, or a spiritual advisor that can help you work through some of the feelings there. And then looking at grief that's maybe being triggered that's unhealed or has not been resolved from your past. So a lot of people when they're betrayed, have betrayal trauma, get triggered from prior experiences in life, and they need to be able to look at what grief from the past is being triggered that they're making meaning of in a really strong way that's driving them to feel so strong about this.

So, for instance, somebody betrays, say the example with money. Say I grew up in a family where nobody ever wanted to talk to me and I felt like my voice didn't matter. I didn't matter to the people that I cared about, and my partner betrayed me and didn't talk about money. If I've got that meaning that I've made based on all this traumatic grief that I haven't resolved, where I go, I am unworthy, no one cares about my voice, no one cares about me, guess what? All that grief is going to come up when my partner does this. And I have to be able to resolve some of that grief or at least know it's there and be actively consciously working through it. Be able to move through this situation without constantly needling my partner every year. Like, I remember when you did that.

So to actually move through it you have to grieve and that's one of the hardest parts of the process for people. But if you can do these four things together as a couple and collaborate and be curious together, come into a space together in this way, it gives you a foundation to be able to actually heal from betrayal.

Granted, not everyone can heal from betrayal. Some betrayals are not healable. And that goes back to these concentric circles, chances are if somebody's on the narcissistic, psychopathic, sociopathic.

### **Meagen Gibson**

Because their access to accountability and genuine repair effort it's not present, normally, I don't want to paint everybody with same brush again, but once we get to that level, that's really where, I mean, I've heard a lot of narcissists recognize and then look and sound very authentic, but then the actual accountability and the repair isn't there.

### **Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yes. That's why this acronym, recognize, authentic, accountable and grieving, that's why it's really important together to try to engage with your partner this way. Because if you're with somebody who's a psychopath, sociopath, narcissist, you're going to get the answer you need. Or even somebody in the other categories, like codependent, heavily codependent, addicted, very compulsively driven. If they're in a space where they're completely unwilling to get authentic and



accountable and to grieve, then no matter what work you do on your end, you're not going to inspire them.

I mean, some people in small instances may get inspired, but honestly, if that is not how they're orienting because they have so much they've not resolved in themselves, and they're so heavily caught up in trying to avoid dealing with this core stuff and are not able to be accountable, then this gives you information about whether you're able to recover from a betrayal that's happened.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:55:46]**

Yeah because everybody's got their own timeline. You can't drag somebody along with you in progressing in your personal development. That's a singular job that people can do in parallel with one another, but you can't do it for anybody.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. And if you're heavily trying to do that with somebody, then that's also pretty codependent. And then you got to look at how you're practicing self betrayal and betrayal in the relationship by virtue of trying to drag them along. Because it's a form of betrayal to try to force growth on someone when they don't want to grow.

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. And especially when we're talking about substance abuse disorders and things of that nature, it's a perpetual cycle of betrayal because of their instinctual coping mechanisms of survival. All substance abuse disorders, my personal opinion is just trauma coping. And so you can't really fault somebody for perpetuating that cycle of betrayal when they're just trying to survive.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. No one's inherently bad. It's more just how much trauma do they have? What resources do they have available to them, internally and externally, to be able to deal with the trauma? And how much time?

And sadly, in a lot of circumstances, people don't have the privilege of getting healthier. And alcohol is the best thing they've got. But being in partnership with someone like that, you need to make an active choice. Like, okay, there is an inherent amount of betrayal built into dealing with somebody who's like this. Am I willing to try to have the best relationship we can have and stay in my lane, set better boundaries, do what I can for my own well being, if I want to keep this relationship? Or do I want to be done?

**Meagen Gibson**

Yeah. Exactly. Never an easy call.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

No. In lots of situations you may not have the resources to leave. It's an incredibly privileged idea to think you can leave a relationship sometimes, when maybe you can't.

But, again, this model is set up to be able to take and tailor to people's lives. Like, how can we create the best circumstance for repair that we possibly could given our context?.

**Meagen Gibson - [00:58:13]**

Without any moral judgment, this is just basically a methodology for information gathering. Here's the process. Everything that we receive during this process is information. And what we decide to do with that is up to us in our own journey.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Exactly. Yeah.

**Meagen Gibson**

Well, this has been quite a journey in and of itself.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah, it has.

**Meagen Gibson**

Super deep dive. I love it.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

I'm really grateful that you asked me to do this interview. I think the more that we address our inherent capacity for betrayal, the more we can all get as accountable as possible.

And for those of us who have a lot of privilege on this planet, I'd say it falls on us even more so to look at how we're engaging in betrayal dynamics. And that can go all the way up to cultural betrayal.

So I don't want to get on my high horse. I'm not going to go on a rant about privilege and oppression. But I think it's really important to get the message out there that betrayal, the more we're able to accept that betrayal is inherent, get honest with ourselves about it, go through the RAAG process just looking at, how do I engage in culture? How do I engage as a member of my society? If we can get right with ourselves there and hold the complexity of, wow, by virtue of existing, I'm engaging in dynamics that perpetuate trauma and betrayal for other people. What is that like to really sit with that? How do I be accountable there?

And have it be an ongoing question rather than falling into, oh, I'm a bad person because I'm involved in betrayal. To face the shame and go, you know what, this is normal. I need to sit with this. This is actually how you come out of fragility of privilege. So this can be applied to a much bigger, much bigger spheres of transformation and change. It isn't just interpersonal.

**Meagen Gibson**

And I think that that shame piece is why people often just deny that they have any responsibility, injustices and deny their privileges because they can't hold that shame. They can't sit with it.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

And you know what, shame is scary. And I'm sitting over here saying like, deal with your shame. I totally have times in hindsight, I'm like, oh yeah. I really defended and denied and was not very pleasant because I felt shame and I felt inadequate. And in hindsight, I'm like, look what I did. But you can come back from that and go, okay, so I'm going to get up and do better next time and monitor that part of me that has shame. Be gentle with that part of me, recognize it's okay, we all have it. Have some compassion for this part.

And overall, doing this type of work increases your capacity for empathy, compassion, for feeling connected with yourself, feeling connected with others. It's healing work. So, betrayal is like a great end point for doing the healing work I think a lot of us need to do.

**Meagen Gibson - [01:01:27]**

And I love what you said at the beginning, the first key point is just looking for the ways that you're referring to yourself first and foremost and get curious there before it perpetuates outward.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Yeah. Exactly.

**Meagen Gibson**

Alright. Dr. Pommerenk, how can people find out more about you in your work?

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

I have a [website](#) that I believe is going to be linked somewhere. I also have a [TikTok](#) and an [Instagram](#) and a [Facebook](#) as well as a [medium profile](#). So medium is a platform for writers.

And then you can find out, I'm writing a book and you can find out updates on the book through my social media and on my website.

**Meagen Gibson**

Awesome. We look forward to it coming out.

Thank you so much for being with us today.

**Dr. Ava Pommerenk**

Oh my goodness. Thank you so much. I had a lot of fun.