

A blueprint for a solid relationship

Guest: Dr. Daryl Johnson

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

Hello and welcome to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts, and today I am super excited to be joined by Dr. Daryl Johnson.

Welcome, Dr. Daryl.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here today.

Jaia Bristow

I'm so excited to have you join us. Thank you.

So, Dr. Daryl Johnson, affectionately known as your favorite couples therapist, is a psychologist and licensed therapist in the Washington, DC, area.

Dr. Daryl helps her clients break through the obstacles that seem to be holding them back in their romantic relationships. She specializes in guiding singles and couples towards healthy, fulfilling relationships.

She has been cited by Cosmopolitan as one of the 21 black relationship experts to follow.

Dr. Daryl is a published researcher and has been a contributor for *Marriage.com* and *Digital Romance*. She has been featured in major publications such as *Redbrook magazine*, *POPSUGAR*, *Bustle*, and *HelloGiggles*.

So, Dr. Daryl, let's start with, in your line of work what are some common relationship questions you get asked?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yeah. So common relationship questions that I get asked is how do I deepen the connection with my partner? How do I get my partner to go to couples therapy? I get these a lot and also varying degrees of it. And sometimes one partner doesn't feel heard by the other, or they feel that their partner just doesn't get them, there's a major disconnect. It's also a common feeling that couples start to feel like roommates, especially now during quarantine. And there's such a huge disconnect that they feel like there's no longer a bond with the person.

So those are really common ones that I really often get. It's mostly about really the connection, the bond, feeling good in the relationship.

Jaia Bristow - [00:02:07]

Right. And so, how do you respond to those questions? What are some ways that couples can strengthen their relationship? Especially if they feel like they're having that roommate vibe or if they're caught in a pandemic and in quarantine, what support do you offer in those moments?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yeah, for sure. So for some people, the closeness that the pandemic has brought has been a silver lining. It's an opportunity to spend more time reconnecting and getting to know each other and strengthening the bond.

But here's the thing, couples who typically only see each other on the evenings or weekends, they're now together all day long. And so whether one or both are working, or even if one or both are currently unemployed this creates a shift in the relationship. So for some, it can be a wonderful time to deepen the bond. For others, it can lead to tensions and clashes that could potentially be a precursor for tension, separation, divorce.

And speaking of divorce, in China once the quarantine protocol was lifted they actually saw a spike in the number of couples filing for divorce. So that was alarming. And that actually says a lot right then and there in that statistic.

But on the other hand, there's other couples that experience an increase in their connection. So we also saw an increase in birth rates months later. Another interesting tidbit is that the sex toy industry also saw increased sales.

So there's a little bit of everything going on with the pandemic here, but as far as how to address them, I always encourage my clients to set aside time to have conversations about what's really going on, how they really feel. Because oftentimes we just skim the surface with a lot of things, even in our daily interaction. Even if we ask a friend, how are you doing? We always go to, I'm doing well. I can't complain. I'm okay. But really getting to, how are you really feeling? Is really important.

Especially when we talk about our romantic relationships, because we often have a tendency to go into autopilot too. Especially with those couples that are conflict avoidant. They're not going to really express how things are going.

Another thing is to take turns expressing gratitude for what is going right. It's easier to focus on what's going wrong or the things that you're frustrated with. But gratitude is really healthy in relationships.

Another tip is to take some time on your own to do something that you enjoy. I always, always encourage individual time. You need your alone time, but then you also need your together time. Both are important, but you have to keep your individuality too.

Also use the time that you do have together to explore and expand some things that you wanted to experiment with in the bedroom or outside of the bedroom, wherever it happens at, but really use the time to dig into other levels of intimacy.

Let's see, another tidbit could be to pick a new activity to do together. Spice it up a bit. Get interested in different hobbies to enjoy together, something, even that you used to enjoy to do in the past, because with life, work, children, things could definitely get lost in the daily routine of things. So you can also revisit some things that you guys like to do, that you guys used to do in the past.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. I love that. I think that's a great list of tips, and I think, I'm not surprised of the spike in the sex toy industry. A lot of people were quarantined alone. But it's really interesting to hear that stat about China after quarantine ended because that was something I was going to ask, what about, how

does one find that support and that connection with a partner once quarantine is over and things start adjusting and shifting and transitioning again?

So I think all the advice you've given is so poignant both during a pandemic, during lockdown, but also afterwards. And just remembering to reconnect to each other, to communicate with each other, to be real and to not just fall into routines and habits and autopilot as you were saying.

Dr. Daryl Johnson - [00:06:48]

Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

And so, in your opinion, what are some common predictions of successful relationships then?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

So the first step toward improving or enhancing a relationship is to really understand what happens when relationships fail. This has been really, really documented by extensive research into couples that weren't able to save their relationship or marriages.

I stand by The Gottman Institute, John Gottman and his wife Julie Gottman, they have been doing relationship research for a really, really long time, probably as long, or almost as long as I've been born. But they are an excellent resource for the predictors of successful and struggling relationships.

But, learning about the failures can prevent relationships from making the same mistakes, or at least repair or rescue those that already have. And so based on The Gottman Institute research, there's at least six predictors of failure. And so starting with the first one, it's a Harsh Start-up. So the most obvious indicator for them is that a conflict discussion, it's not going to go well if it begins with conflict.

So when a discussion leads off with criticism or harsh sarcasm, which they consider as a form of contempt, it begins as a harsh start-up. That is what a harsh start-up really is and if your discussion begins with that, then it will most likely end on a negative note.

And so what they found is that 96% of the time you can predict the outcome of a conversation based on the first 3 minutes of that interaction, which I think is really, really good. I love to sit in session with my couples, kind of like a fly on the wall, to see like, hey, you guys talk about something that has stirred up some feelings. I'll just observe for a few minutes, almost always that is present.

And so, the next thing is The Four Horsemen, which goes back to contempt, it's one of The Four Horsemen. And so basically, the Gottman's say certain kinds of negativity it is so powerful, it's so lethal to a relationship that they actually call them The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which is criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. And those things really do hurt the relationship in the way that communication is really impacted.

And so one of those ways that they found is through flooding. Flooding is when your partner's negativity, whether criticism, contempt, or even defensiveness, it's so overwhelming. And it almost feels like it came out of the blue, like it's so sudden that it leaves you kind of on this fight or flight mode. It activates you in some way.

And so that's another big predictor of the downfall of a relationship is that when flooding comes up we shut down, we shut down. There is not a lot of logic happening or reason happening there. We flood with emotions that allows us to either shut down or we get into overdrive, this emotional overdrive, where we're just trying to make our point, we want to be heard. But when two people are flooded, we can't be heard.

Jaia Bristow - [00:10:44]

That makes a lot of sense. It's very similar to what I refer to as like the tone reinforcing the dynamic and the dynamic reinforcing the tone. When we get caught in this vicious cycle we get very reactive when someone says something to us if it's been said to us many times. And then because we're reactive, that creates conflict and the other person gets defensive. And then because they're defensive, we get reactive and etc.

And I think it's so true, especially in relationships, like romantic relationships, but in all different relationships. And I, for example, lead workshops on power, privilege and prejudice and I really noticed that in systemic dynamics around gender and race and sexuality and those kind of things as well. So I think it's so important to bring that to light.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

So I absolutely agree that cycle definitely can continue, and we nurture that if we're not careful.

So another point made by the Gottman's in their research is that body language is so important. I encourage my couples to monitor themselves. Bodily changes during conflict discussions, which proves to them that there are changes in our bodies that happen when we get into conflict or distressing conversations.

In session or outside of the session, I have them keep track of their heart rate or be more intentional about paying attention, like if they're flooding or not, because one of the biggest physical reactions that we get is that a heart rate's speed up. And hormonal changes happen too, including our adrenaline kicks in and our blood pressure increases.

So the physical sensations and the physiological responses to stress and the feeling of being flooded actually makes it impossible to have a productive problem solving discussion. So instead of, I mean, I provide psychoeducation to them about it, but of course, people will always be more convinced if they feel it themselves and be able to see it for themselves.

So I always have my couples do that fun and insightful little activity to realize themselves when they do start to feel flooded. And something easy that some of my couples do use is they have a Smartwatch or Apple watch. They'll keep track of their heart rate. And so as soon as they see, oh it's my heart rate is increasing, we need to take a break. Then I guide them on how to handle that.

So as far as the last two tips from The Gottman Institute, they say that failed repair attempts are also a predictor of a failed relationship, because if there's no repair attempts made then the cycle continues. The couple makes no effort to really de-escalate the tension in a discussion. So that's definitely a marker of an unhealthy or unhappy future.

And then lastly, we have bad memories. So when I have my initial sessions with my couples, I always ask them, take me back to the beginning. What's the history of the relationship? And most of the time in happy relationships, couples really tend to look back on fond memories, right? Like happy times.

They remember how positive they felt early on and how excited they were when they met. And it definitely indicates the level of admiration that they had for one another back then. But then when they talk about the tough times they had they can also appreciate that and discuss it more in terms of a positive lens. They glorify the struggles that they've had drawing on the strengths that they were able to develop as a couple through the adversity that they weather together.

So there you have it. Those are the six predictors. And so by understanding what unhealthy couples tend to do, you can actually flip that and say, okay, so that's what I shouldn't do. So here's what I can do.

Jaia Bristow - [00:15:11]

Amazing. I think that's really helpful and supportive to keep that in mind. And you know, what you were talking about, those positive memories also makes them think of what you were talking about earlier, about the gratitude. And again, it's those, if we create positive associations and we're connected to our body and the way we feel and notice when we're being triggered, then that's going to be a great foundation for a healthy relationship.

So I'm curious, you know, you're talking about established couples, established relationships, how about new relationships? What are some tips for starting a new relationship on the right foot?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Oh, that's a good one.

So always, actually, at any point in a relationship, communication is so important. You have to develop that muscle of speaking up for yourself, being assertive and feeling okay with being vulnerable.

So many times people starting out in relationships, they want to play the dating game or not texting back right away or having all these rules or lists and things like that. But really, I encourage people to exercise some form of emotional intelligence and actually aim for healthy relationships and not try to play this game, or go by societal standards of what should be or what it should look like. Get to communicating. Open your mouth about what you need, what you desire, set healthy and reasonable boundaries, know when to walk away.

And when I talk about red flags with, I see individuals too but I also see couples, but in my work with individuals that do have relationship challenges, I like to think of red flags and the no's no's as a stop light. So you have red, yellow, green. Everything isn't so black and white. And so when we talk about what we want in a relationship, I like to think about it in terms of okay, so the red is the absolute no's, this is not what I'm putting up with. The yellow's, it's okay, so we'll talk about that a bit more. Maybe I could deal with that. And then the green's are obviously this is what I would like.

And I always get people out of the mind frame of thinking about things in terms of only surface level. Thinking about values and how you want to feel in the relationship and really start to think critically about what it is that you need and why.

Jaia Bristow

That's amazing.

And you mentioned red flags there. What are some red flags then to keep an eye out for at the beginning of a relationship? And of course, one has to assess on an individual level, as you're saying, what's a red flag for oneself? For example, But are there any common things to keep an eye out for?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yeah, for sure.

So first we ignore red flags because we're afraid that they're actually telling us something, that they're true, that it tells some kind of painful story, it hits on something for us.

So we may ask questions of our partners about their behaviors. We receive the answers, but we leave the answers alone, even if they don't quite fit. So often, we don't want to know the truth. We want to change something in our lives, the place that we live, ourselves, but it's exhausting to think about. It's exhausting to think if we had to change X, Y, and Z.

And so, in toxic relationships, or when we realize that we do need to walk away, we don't want our partner to say that, or we don't want to say or admit to ourselves that the person that we're dating, or our partner, they're cheating on us, or they're too controlling or whatever it is, because of what it would mean for us, what our families, what our friends would think, what our future would be like, because we've been invested in this relationship for a while. Even if it does have hidden benefits, we still question that. So that is also something that keeps us stuck.

So determine what specifically you're getting from the relationship and does X make you feel attractive? Does helping X with the kids, even though it exhausts you, relieve you from guilt in some way? Whatever it is. If they don't treat you well, does it remind you of your verbally abusive mom? And so it brings you some kind of comfort level because it is familiar. Whatever it is, we have to take a look at it and be honest about those red flags and start to think about, hey, do I need to remove myself from this toxic relationship?

You have to step out of denial and rely on the support and perception of our friends and family. Because sometimes when we're too close to a situation, we can't really see it for what it is, especially when we talk about romantic relationships. It's easy to ignore the red flags when there are green flags. When the person does make us feel good and they do contribute to our lives in some way, we make excuses.

And so another way to combat that is to have healthy ways to improve relationships that do have the red flags. Because even though we have red flags on our relationships, it doesn't mean that it's over. Like I said earlier, it could be that you need to walk away, other times it's, okay, I need to set this boundary.

And so therapy, I'm a huge component of therapy, so therapy is good. Fill the gaps that this relationship, the toxicity is leaving. And so if it's time to find an alternative source of peace or wholeness, go for it.

I do acknowledge that romantic relationships do fill a certain need of ours that other friendships or interpersonal relationships they don't really meet. So romantic relationships, they could feel good. But until you can establish that I need to walk away or this issue can be fixed, definitely make sure that you have a good support system in place to be able to fill that gap just a little bit.

Jaia Bristow - [00:22:16]

That makes a lot of sense. And I really appreciate the distinction, again, as you say, not everything is black and white. So we might notice some red flags and it might be hard to accept them because as you say, there are also green flags.

So I guess as you say, it's taking stoke of the situation and being like, stock of the situation, not stoke, and it's just assessing and as you say, being in touch with oneself again and asking oneself, why am I continuing this dynamic? What is familiar here? What's the object relation that's being brought up here for me?

And again, not being afraid to walk away, getting support, I think. And this is true of monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, that ability to get support from other people if we're having issues with a partner and get some sort of outside advice and support and understanding as well to help make decisions around that.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yeah. Absolutely. We have to depend on our tribe.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely.

So, what about, you know, we've talked a bit about some red flags, and there's a lot, I guess, around attachment and insecurity that can come up. And the question that sometimes happens, especially in this age of social media and all of that, is about how much should people share publicly about their relationship? Again, especially in the early stages, I guess maybe in later ages too. And that whole Facebook official became such a meaningful term. And it still gets thrown around. And so, what are your thoughts on that?

Dr. Daryl Johnson - [00:23:56]

I get the topic of social media so much. It's really no clear cut answer but it really depends on the dynamic of the relationship and both partners' attachment style. Which our attachment style influences our actions and motives. So the displays that we see of affection or posting someone, our partner, on social media, it's not necessarily entirely about connecting with your partner. It could be certain types of displays could involve over compensating for a less satisfying relationship. And people could also post about their relationships as a way to show off to other people.

Another motive could also be that there's some other underlying aspect of the situation that these kinds of displays, like posting so much, could be protecting your relationship from outside threats.

So, for instance, if I'm posting a lot about my partner, then it could be seen as, okay, so this person is taken. So there shouldn't be any outside threats if I'm always making it known that I'm with this person, hypothetically, it doesn't always work out that way.

But I've noticed that people with avoidant attachment styles, they tend to withdraw from their partners, but they also are slow to desire their relationship to be more visible.

And for those that are anxiously attached, they tend to need more reassurance about their relationship. So, in other studies that are done or that have been done, they actually, anxiously attached people, they actually would report a higher desire for visibility.

So one research study found that on a daily basis, when people felt more insecure about their partners feelings, they tended to make their relationship more visible. So they post it more. And so, I think that those studies really highlight the role of relationships and how people portray themselves to other people, especially depending on their attachments.

And so, social media is an opportunity for people to turn away from their relationship and turn towards some other stimulants. And so it makes sense why people do it. There's plenty of data about the dopamine hit that comes from getting the likes, that external validation. If they're trying too hard to protect a certain image that they have of themselves or their relationship, they're probably, sometimes, not saying that this is everyone or general across the board, but it could be something that they're protecting or over compensating for.

And so, as a therapist, of course, I think it's important to ask the question of why? Why I need to post this? Or why I feel the need for my partner to post me? And sometimes we won't have the answers, but ultimately, each couple's individual story is unique, and social media allows them, just on an individual level, to craft this version of that story, even if it's not 100% realistic.

Jaia Bristow

So what I'm hearing is, when you see couples posting online and you get super jealous and you're like, they seem to have the perfect relationship, it might not be 100% true. There might be something...

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Exactly.

Jaia Bristow - [00:27:36]

And like you say, it's true, I think, of couples and individuals. So in the same way that when one sees couple's posting loads of amazing pictures and seeming like they have the perfect relationship, there might be something else. If you, listener, person, as an individual, feel it's more important to show off how amazing your relationship is rather than actually be engaged in your relationship, that's maybe a sign that there's something to look at there. And maybe it's time to call Dr. Daryl.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Exactly.

Jaia Bristow

And speaking of Dr. Daryl, tell me about this new project you're working on.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yes.

So, exclusively for your audience I have just opened up the pre-order for my new book called *Love and Other Stuff: The no Bullshit Guide to Relationships When Love Isn't Enough*. And I have been working on this book for years. When I tell you years, I can pull up on my phone that I've had notes from 2017, 2016.

But this book is really about just having a real conversation between me and my readers. Someone who would read my book is someone who is frustrated with how their relationship is going, with how they probably may talk past, or their partner may talk past them.

They could also be curious as to what or if they even have any issues. Some people feel like, I don't have any issues, but let me take this quiz or let me Google this to see if this is a red flag in my relationship. Or just someone who's tired of repeating the same argument.

So I am so excited about this book. So the pre-order for my new book entitled *Love and Other Stuff: The No Bullshit Guide to Relationships When Love Isn't Enough* that goes live on Monday, October 4th.

And you can find that at drdaryljohnson.com

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic.

And so, give us a little preview. What is, you know, you talk about love and other stuff, and when love isn't enough, what else is needed when love isn't enough?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

I would say love is probably the last thing because as we know from our personal experiences, we have the tendency, or some people, to be hurt by people that we love and to hurt the people that we love in turn.

And so, love just isn't enough. And so we need communication. We need to feel good about being vulnerable about receiving and giving love and what that looks like and what that means. And what's the thin line between accepting too much or not giving enough?

Jaia Bristow - [00:30:20]

Amazing.

Well, Dr. Daryl, thank you so much for your time today. How can people find out more about you and your work and follow you and all your different projects?

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Yes.

So you can find me on Instagram [@dr.daryljohnson](#)

TikTok at [@drdarylj](#)

And my website, [drdaryljohnson.com](#)

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic.

Thanks so much for joining us, Dr. Daryl, really appreciated having you on board.

Dr. Daryl Johnson

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure being here.