

Cultivating intimate communication

Guest: Dr. Kathryn Ford

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Alex Howard - [00:00:06]

So, welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm really happy to be talking with Dr. Kathryn Ford.

Firstly, Kathryn, welcome and thank you for joining me.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Thank you for having me.

Alex Howard

So I've been looking forward to this interview. I think this is a really important practical piece which is really at the heart of what happens in relationship.

And I think sometimes we can get caught too much in the stories, the ideas, the history, the theory around it and what I'm really excited about getting into is just this really critical piece of presence and awareness and the place from which we meet people.

Just to give people a bit of Kathryn's background. Dr. Kathryn Ford is a teacher, clinician and developer of the Learning Partners and Aperture Awareness.

Through her method, Kathryn guides couples in staying in the present moment, which she explains is the key to a successful relationship. It's where the learning and development takes place.

Kathryn has been practicing psychotherapy and in private practice for more than 20 years. She received her MD from Brown University Medical School and completed her psychiatry residency at the Stanford School of Medicine.

She specializes in relationships of all kinds and is available for private consultations and workshops for couples, teams and therapists. Her workshops are also available through Stanford Continuing Studies.

So, Kathryn, I think a helpful foundation here would just be to open up a few of the core pieces of the work that you have been developing. Particularly this idea of emotional aperture and aperture awareness. So when you're speaking of emotional aperture, aperture awareness, what do you actually mean and why are they so important?

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yeah. So let me start by saying how I came upon it because this certainly isn't an idea that I was taught in medical school or in my training in psychology.

I started out as most people do, well, actually, I started out a little differently than most people. I knew I was going to be a therapist but on the way to doing that I decided to go to medical school because I did already feel like that the mind body connection was going to be a lot more important, increasingly, during the course of my career.

Alex Howard - [00:02:36]

I'm going to interrupt you, you knew you were going to be a therapist as a child? I'm pretty curious about that.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Certainly by the time I got to college. Probably the story actually starts with my mom and dad. My father was one of the very early pioneers in the psychology of the business place. He went around the country teaching seminars to people who had workplace dilemmas and basically talked to them about their interactions.

So I was growing up on that. And my mother had a late life career as a psychologist. So by the time I was off to college I was very interested in psychology and became increasingly interested in, not just the metaphysical part of it, which was kind of where psychology was then, but also the physical part of it.

I had the good fortune when I went to medical school, the chairman of the department of psychiatry happened to be a family systems expert. And I found that my tour on his ward, where we were looking at human beings in their relationships, was about the most exciting thing I had seen.

And so at that point I had a strong hunch that I was going to end up working either with couples or with families.

The next piece that kind of entered in there was as I was doing therapy, and I started, like most people do, working with individuals one on one. I began to get stuck, and I would realize that the ideas I had, and the ways that I was trying to process what I was hearing from the person I was talking to, we're not quite big enough for what I was hearing.

During that same time I was also starting to learn mindfulness and become a student of meditation. And there was a point at which I remember thinking, I'm just going to jump the fence. And jumping the fence meant I'm going to go outside of the playground that my training has provided for me, and I'm just really going to listen and see if I can find something new in this.

And that was probably the first moment that I was pulled away from my thinking process and trying to figure things out according to the models that I'd been very well taught. And simply trying to figure things out based on listening more carefully and being more in the moment.

The other thing that happened about that time was I decided that I would do an experiment. Usually when you're doing therapy with people you see them individually and you don't bring in their partner unless they ask you to.

I decided that, as an experiment, I would work with people for a while where, early in meeting them I would also meet their partner, for just a social visit, not a therapy visit, not trying to work with them just to get to know them. And very quickly what I realized is that that gave me a window on who this person was, without which I would have been stumbling around in the dark for quite a while.

Alex Howard

That's such an interesting point because one of the things that I've noted over the years, working as a therapist, is that people can build a story and a narrative and how they describe the people in their lives, which inevitably informs the perspective we have. And sometimes when you meet that partner,

it's completely different to the story that's been built, and it gives a whole different, as you say, a different frame of reference.

Dr. Kathryn Ford - [00:06:06]

Yes, exactly. So that turned out to be really important. And soon thereafter I really shifted towards this feeling. Tony Kushner, the playwright, says the smallest human unit is two. And I shifted strongly in the direction of, right, the strongest human unit is two. We are so well built for relationship. And many a times I would be talking to people, they would be talking about their relationships, that was the story they were telling me, and the pain that they were in. So pretty soon I decided I'm just going to work with people as a couple.

And so many years ago, I decided that's it, that's what I do, and I love it. And I find it very energizing. And I feel, I don't know, I guess the word calling has some overtones, but I do feel like this is what I was meant to do, is to talk to couples about their relationship and help them find their way through there. Including the fact that it works really well for me that it doesn't, a couple usually is not in difficulty because something's wrong with one of them.

And so this is not about the medical model of pathology. This is about understanding that couples are a developmental unit. And that we are meant to, as our recent neuroscience tells us so well, in terms of neuroplasticity, we're meant to continue to develop throughout our lifetimes. The old idea that we get the brain we've got, and by age 7 or 12 that's it, we've thrown that out now. We realize that we continue to learn as long as we're alive. That's what we're built to do.

Alex Howard

Although interestingly, you say that often people do come to therapy ultimately because they think something is wrong, and normally they come because their partner is wrong and they want you to fix the partner. That's often what instigates someone coming to couples work.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes. And it's also what discourages them. Imagine you're in a couple, things are not going well, as they often don't in couples because it is a developmental path and you're supposed to be learning things, but they come in very discouraged because they feel like, either something's wrong with my partner, or something's wrong with me, or something is very wrong with our choosing each other. We chose the wrong person.

And it's quite a relief to discover that that's not really what's going on. And it's not at all a helpful way to look at it. And instead, what's going on is that being in a relationship, especially at that time. These days people and couples expect a lot of being a couple. This is no longer, for most people that I work with, this is no longer about survival issues, this is no longer about they won't make it physically unless they have a partner. This is now about, I want you to be a best friend. I want you to understand me. I want us to think about things together. There's a very big agenda there.

And so it's very important that people understand the big agenda is fine. The other thing people come in with is saying, well, probably my expectations are too high. We should just realize that being a couple isn't all it's cracked up to be and you have to settle. And I don't think that's useful at all.

Being a couple is so hard that, in fact, you need a very big vision to inspire you to go forward. There's one variable missing from that vision, usually, and that's understanding that that vision is about what you're here to learn. And so when you change we're here to support each other through thick and thin. We're here to learn how to support each other through thick and thin. Then the whole thing opens up.

Alex Howard - [00:09:53]

That's beautiful. That's beautiful.

And I think it is one of the real challenges of relationships these days that it's never been easier for people to leave a relationship. And yet the demand on what people expect from a relationship gets bigger and bigger and bigger, which I think is difficult.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

It is very difficult. It's very difficult. I realized I have wandered away from your early question, and I actually wanted to go there.

Alex Howard

It was a great answer. But I think that also gives us a really helpful foundation to you and your work, which I think is really important.

But you touched on a little bit, a few times as you were talking, I think that this piece of, it's not just the story and the history. And it's interesting to me, particularly that a practitioner such as yourself, who clearly has a very strong intellectual background, having been a medic and a psychiatrist and the rigor that one has to go through to be successful in that work, that actually this key building block of the way that you work is actually not all of that. It's actually coming into the present moment.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

So let's talk about that. So now we're into the part of my work where I was working with the couples all day long. That's what I did. And I had always been involved with other therapists as a teacher, and so I began to teach about couples.

And as I started to teach about couples, I started to ask myself, so something that I'm doing is giving me a clear path as to how to work with a couple and making it not so hard and complicated, what is that? And I started to ask myself, what is that I'm using as I'm doing a session to guide me forward? And I realized what I have my eye on is the openness for connection between these two people. Are they open for connection? And if not, what's in the way? And then, of course, that's what I would try to help them with.

So I began to think of it like a road with big boulders, and I was the person to come along and move the boulders and clear the path for the connection. I also began to very strongly believe that the most important thing someone can do for you, if they're helping you with your relationship, is clear the path between you. Two people that are connected enough that they're coming in as a couple definitely have the resources on board if they can only put them together, but they can't put them together when the path is blocked, and when they're not talking well to each other, when they're not trusting each other to listen, etc.

So one day, as I was working with a couple, I just grabbed out of the air the word aperture, from a photograph, as a way of describing to them what I wanted them to pay attention to. I said, I'm noticing that your aperture to each other is closed. And they kind of looked at me quizzically and I said, here's what I mean by that.

And I very briefly explained it's all about being open to each other. And when I say aperture, I mean, how open are you to each other. That couple, and then a few couples, subsequently, that I tried out this new term on, it worked so easily, like it wasn't a very big reach for them. They quickly got what I was talking about. And so I began to use that term more and more.

At that point, I thought, okay, I've got it. My job here is to teach people to be aware of their apertures, to be able to send their own aperture and their partners aperture to them.

And then there came a session pretty soon after that where I was working with a couple and he's talking to her, and she's starting to close down. And the more she closes down, the faster he talks, the louder he talks, he starts to repeat himself, he starts to just stipulate, and he's really going at it. And she's getting more and more closed.

Alex Howard - [00:13:52]

You're not describing me talking to my wife earlier on.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Or me to my husband, right.

So I stopped him and I said, hold on a second. I said, what's going on with her over there? And he said, well, she's closing down to me. And I said, right. And so if you noticed that, why did you keep talking? And he said, I didn't know what else to do. And the light bulb went off for me. I went, oh, my gosh. People do sense this. That's, in fact, what we get so mixed up about and nervous about as we're talking when we start to sense our partner closing down. We do sense it. We just don't pay attention to it, and we don't respond to it because we don't know what to do with that information.

And at that point, I realized, no, actually, people are probably very well equipped to sense aperture. They just don't pay any attention to it because they don't know what to do with that. My job is to teach them what to do with it.

Alex Howard

I think that's a great analogy. And I'm still tracking it into my own relationship. I notice that what happens is that my wife can respond in certain ways, and exactly as you described, I do what I do faster, harder, quicker as a way to try and fix that.

And what's been very helpful over the years is to try and catch those patterns and go hang on, my wife is closed, me trying to analyze and fix the problem right now closes her down more, gets me more frustrated. And it's like having the language and the awareness to catch that can be very powerful can't it?

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes. And what you just said is excellent. You realized that what you are doing wasn't working, and that's actually the first piece of learning anything, but learning this is to bring yourself present enough that you notice what your usual pattern is. And then step two is to not do the usual pattern.

Alex Howard

I guess the challenge is often that one can identify what's happening conceptually or intellectually. They can say, hang on. My wife is shut down. I'm trying to force her open, and it's not working. But often in those moments, we're also emotionally charged and driven. And so we've lost contact with our own ground.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

That's exactly it. Which brings us to the fact that our apertures are very resonant with each other.

I happen to have a drum behind me here. I used to play the drums. And what I realize is when you're in a room with several drums and you hit one drum head, all the drum heads vibrate. And that's who we are emotionally. We resonate with each other very powerfully and the more connected we are overall to the person we're with, the more resonant we are. So the big asset and the big problem in couples is that they're very resonant with each other.

So if you look for why your wife is shutting down, the most likely thing is that you had started to shut down before that and didn't realize it. Or maybe you started to shut down because she started to shut down because you started to shut down and that's the resonance.

And we love that resonance in wonderful moments. That's actually what we love about being a couple is, she smiles and you smile and you smile bigger and then pretty soon you're both giggling. But when it's a bad feeling or a difficult feeling or some tension, the most likely thing that will shut your aperture down is her aperture starting to shut.

And so often we notice our partner's aperture shutting before we notice our own, which is interesting. And it should be a clue to us, oh, wait a second, let me check and see is it possible that my partner's shutting down because I had started to close down and I wasn't really aware of it?

Alex Howard - [00:17:51]

And I think it's also difficult, and I'm thinking about why are relationships often so difficult that these are really deeply trained patterns. I seem to be using examples of my own relationships, so to take that step further...

Dr. Kathryn Ford

That's what we all have, right?

Alex Howard

Well, exactly. So to take it a step further, I can imagine coming home from work being in a wired, stress state where I've been very much in problem solving mode. So I've been in lots of meetings solving problems, doing this, doing that, coming home and I might see that my wife is drained and tired and maybe the kids have been acting up, whatever.

So my instinct is, in that moment, because I'm disconnected and I'm stressed, is to start solving problems. So to start, tell her to do this and sort that out. And of course it doesn't go down very well. And actually what's happening is, I might have the story that I'm being open and I'm being practical because I'm trying to help, but actually, I'm doing it from this disconnected, and from this, effectively, emotionally shut down place.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes, exactly. And so she is going to respond more strongly to your aperture, to your shutting down, than to anything else. She's not even probably going to notice that you're trying to be helpful.

And this is something that I often talk about, emotional contagion. And emotional contagion is particularly noticeable often when one person comes home from work. And whatever each person is carrying it can be very contagious. And so this is a point to be very, especially mindful. And maybe as one is driving home from work or as you're opening the door, just kind of check in. How am I doing here? And am I carrying something that might possibly be contagious, but it's not in a good way?

And if so, maybe you want to say, hold on a second. I need a moment. Because I just got in off the highway and I've had a busy day at work and I'm kind of grumpy. Let me go wash my face and I'll get back to you. And taking a moment to re-group, re-center is a very important application of mindfulness. And a lot of people are learning mindfulness these days. As far as I'm concerned, the most important place to practice it is in relationship.

And aperture awareness is basically a subset of mindfulness. It's a mindfulness skill. Aperture awareness is not something you can figure out.

So when I'm talking to people about aperture awareness, as I said, I realized I'm not teaching them to do it, I'm simply pointing them to what it is they need to notice.

Aperture awareness is a felt sensation. It's like our vision. We don't see things by analyzing every quantum piece of light that's coming in our eye and figure out the blues and the greens and the reds. We look and we see. And aperture sensations and awareness is like that once we know where to look for it.

And for people that can't exactly, well, where do I look for it? Usually the first place to point them, especially if they haven't done any mindfulness practice, is just tune in right now. How open do you feel? Maybe even as you're watching this video, think about how open do I feel to watching this video? Is this great and I feel wide open and it's exciting? Or do I feel a little nervous? What's she going to talk about? Maybe I'm half open, half closed. And so just tuning in in the moment to open and closed, that's where you point your awareness to look for aperture awareness.

Alex Howard - [00:21:33]

And that is a real, it's a discipline, but it's also a practice, isn't it? Because learning through, for example, meditation and mindfulness practice to be able to bring one's attention back to their body and to the moment, that's often not easy at the start. And it can take some time to really cultivate that capacity.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes, yes, it can. It turns out about 100 million years ago, I think I just got the zeros wrong, but a very long time ago, when we were still in the cave, human beings learned a new skill. And what we learned to do was to think about things that were not present and we're not current.

So you often hear when people talk about mindfulness, they talk about being in the here and now. The reason we have to train ourselves to be in the here and now, the reason sometimes it's not so easy to be in the here and now is that we have a very, very strong survival advantage programmed into our brain because of the fact that we figured out how to not be in the here and now.

And so it turns out that we've over learned that skill, and we're very good at abstracting. And thus when we think too much, it gets in the way of this mindful awareness.

There's a study that was done, a couple of researchers put an app on people's phones, I think this was a group of students, usually these experiments are done with students. And every few minutes during the day a tone would go off and the person would need to log in about whether or not they were present in the moment, meaning their attention was on what they were actually doing. And then they would also give a rating of how happy they were at that moment.

It turns out 57% of the time we're not in the moment, we're not present with what it is we're actually doing. So more than half the time we're there and then, instead of here and now. And what also turns out is that we're not particularly happy when we're doing that. The moments that we're the happiest is when we are in the here and now.

So there's a big advantage beyond just getting along with your mate to showing up in the here and now. But it does take some retraining because we have centuries of evolutionary history that have sent us in the direction of imagining the animal that we were going to go hunt. Imagining the person that was going to come to our door and disrupt our lives. So imagining what could happen to us and where our food is going to come from became very important at a certain point. And so we have to retrain ourselves. Because it's really no longer about that level of survival again.

Alex Howard - [00:24:26]

Yes. And there's something also I think about being present to what is, even when it's painful or it's difficult, that somehow we're more connected.

I think it's the same in our own inner work. We can be in a really painful place but actually, in a strange way, we feel more alive than we do if we're just disconnected. I think the same is true in relationship that sometimes we can really have on the table some really difficult stuff, but somehow we feel closer because we're in truth, and we're in that shared experience.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Exactly. Exactly. And that's an important thing to learn. And sometimes it takes some risky feeling experimenting to learn that. And the risky experimenting can have to do with the fact that you're not quite sure it is a good idea to tell your partner that actually when they just shared their sad story about what happened to them at work that day, that actually you didn't feel compassionate, what you felt was anxiety because you got really worried about how they were going to be able to go back to work the next day if it was so bad.

But sharing that, whatever the feeling actually is, is a lot better than not sharing anything or than sharing a false feeling. Because of this aperture awareness we have, we pick up very quickly on a person drawing the screen over what's happening. And we're together, whether we're in couples or in other relationships, we very much want the connection that we get from relationship.

So when somebody draws the curtain and hides what they're feeling from you at a crucial moment like that, it feels very disconcerting and it actually feels very threatening. It feels more threatening than if the person pulls the curtain aside and says, well, you know, actually, I know I should be feeling a compassion for you, but I got really anxious. I got worried that you wouldn't be able to go to work tomorrow. Now you're in a conversation where two people are sharing real feelings.

Part of why that's important, people think that when they're listening compassionately to another person, that what they're supposed to be doing is totally losing themselves in that person's story, feeling that person's feelings and feeling empathetic with them. But actually, especially between life partners, that's not what really happens. If I have a particular feeling and I share with my husband, there's no telling what he's going to feel, but he's going to feel something. Because he's so connected to me he may feel irritation that I shared that with him. He may feel sympathy, he may feel frustration, gee, she just keeps feeling that feeling. I wonder why she doesn't do something about it.

So he's going to have a feeling reaction and that's what gets very tricky about the kinds of conversations that couples most want to have, which has to do with that part of the relationship that's about shared experience and companionship and support during the hard times. But inevitably, my difficult emotional feeling is going to generate a somewhat tricky emotional feeling in my partner very often, not always.

And so figuring out how to share all of that, how to take turns, how to talk about all of it without any of it being the wrong thing to be feeling is a very complicated skill that gets a lot easier when you start to pay attention to open or closed. And that's why the simplicity of open and closed is so important.

Alex Howard

And it also strikes me, as one is sharing and communicating to the other half, to their partner let's say, sometimes one's using too many words and the other is closing down. Or sometimes one's blaming the other in a way, and it strikes me that the more sensitive one is to how open or closed their partner is, the more able they are to actually communicate in a way that's really going to be heard. As opposed to just vomiting everything they're thinking and feeling onto that person in a way that actually doesn't get them what they ultimately want, which is to be seen and heard by that other person.

Dr. Kathryn Ford - [00:28:44]

Yeah. There are two things that are really important about that. One is yes, when we're talking to someone we care about, what we most want is to be seen, felt and heard. We want to be understood. We want you to be heard accurately.

And so imagine if you're talking to someone who's aperture is closed, that's not going to happen. In a certain way the most important thing you can do to be sure that you get seen and heard by your partner is to help them have an open aperture to you.

And so, yes, that has to do with the way you talk to them and how fast you talk to them and how well you tune into, oh, I'm starting to lose them, they're shutting down.

I do a lot of exercises with couples to teach them this stuff. The exercise that seems to be the most powerful for people and people really relate to the most strongly, again, is quite simple, but I just have them in a very structured way, slow down a lot. And the way that I get them to do that is they're to only say one or two sentences at a time. And then they're to pause for a space of time as long as one or two sentences. So that's a long pause.

Alex Howard

And that's hard when you've got a lot you want to say.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Exactly. So we all feel, I mean, what could you possibly completely say in one or two sentences? And so this push to want to feel understood and connected with gets us to say 17 sentences without noticing that by the third sentence the other person's eyes are glazing over. They're closing down.

So if instead, you say two sentences, and then there's this big long pause so that your partner can absorb what you just said. And even you can absorb what you just said. And then your partner says two sentences back, which gives you a chance to hear right away, well, how did you feel about that? How did you hear me? Did you understand me? And then there's another long pause for both of you to work with all of that.

Things get really slowed down. It's like a very slow lobbying process in a tennis match. In a tennis rally most of the time the ball is traveling, it's only being hit a very small amount of time. And this rhythm is kind of like that. And it is hard. It requires some discipline and reminding each other, oh wait, that was two sentences. You need to pause.

But once they get the hang of it, inevitably, couples, it's like their base. It's like, oh my God, that changed everything. For the first time ever I felt like she was listening to me. For the first time ever I felt like I didn't have to rush to get it all out because I knew they were going nice and slow and pretty soon I was going to get to speak again.

The conversation unfolds in a very different way. And it's a very powerful way for people to learn to pay attention to aperture while they're actually talking to their partner. So this may be my favorite exercise to give people. It's just extremely powerful.

Alex Howard

Yeah. I think it sounds really helpful.

What comes to mind, as well as you're speaking, you didn't quite use these words earlier, but you talked about this idea that there's the two people, but there's also this thing in between these two people. There's this additional being, living, breathing thing, which is the dynamic of the relationship.

And what I'm really hearing in what you're saying is that, that really respects and supports that really important piece.

Dr. Kathryn Ford - [00:32:25]

Well, absolutely. The other very important thing for couples to realize is that being in a couple is, by definition, a relationship that you've predefined as not adversarial. But many of the things we know, both instinctively and in our heads, about relationships or adversarial if, think about it, open the newspaper and what is every story about? It's about who done it, to whom and what price are they going to pay? This is all about adversarial relationships. But that's not what you're trying for in a couple so the rules are completely different.

And one of the rules that's completely different is the best way for me to get my needs met is to make sure that we're both getting our needs met and to make sure that we're both taking care of the relationship. What's going to make me the happiest, and there's research about this, of course also, is that when I get up in the morning I feel like I'm in a good place with my partner. He's in a good place with me. And it's probably going to be a pretty good day.

On the other hand, imagine those days that we all have when it's not quite like that. And you wake up in the morning thinking about the fight you had the night before. And you feel dreadful and it feels not easy to get up, not easy to go off to your work. You're kind of worried all day. Are we going to be okay? The variable of how's my couple doing? What's happening in my relationship? Turns out to be maybe the biggest factor in our happiness when we are coupled.

And so keeping an eye on, in any conversation I tell people, the most important outcome is, how did this conversation affect your relationship? It's more important than solving the problem. It's even more important than being heard accurately. Being heard accurately is very important. But it comes right after the interchange we have needs to leave us with a good feeling about ourselves, our partner and the relationship.

Alex Howard

And what also comes my mind as you're speaking, is that relationships are so much more complicated. You're talking about the news and for some reason I was thinking about it. I was re-watching some of the Star Wars films the other weekend, and it's a very simple portrayal of right and wrong. There's the light side, and there's the force side. We can very easily, in relationships, get into this, I'm good and my partner is bad. And there's a very black and white binary way of thinking.

And again, what I'm hearing you say is the importance of seeing the nuance and not subscribing to the rigid perspectives that then just get into blaming and shaming of the other, for example.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Exactly. Many of the tangles that people get into, couples get into, other relationships get into, in conversation, many conversations are about the need to integrate two people instead of just within one person. It's about the need. When we say two heads are better than one, we're not kidding, but we often don't know how to actualize that.

So a conversation very often is about bringing together differences, whether it's a literal conversation, me talking to you over coffee, or whether it's the bigger conversation in society. We're trying to bring together the differences and figure out how to make something that includes all of the differences and is even better than that. And it's bigger because of them.

And so couples get into this dilemma constantly. Couples are constantly disagreeing about where they want to go to dinner, about who said what that morning when they decided who was going to pick up the kid. Very funny, when one time was, no one picked up the kid. And listening to the couple

talk about it, she was absolutely certain that he was supposed to pick up the kid. He was absolutely certain that he wasn't and that she'd never said anything about it.

When we start it from perspective of let's assume that you're both right. That what you heard was she's going to pick up a kid. And what she thought she said was, you're going to pick up a kid. Now what do you see about this picture? And very soon they got to, oh, I see how we misunderstood each other. You said you weren't going to go to work today, and I thought that meant you were picking up the kid.

Alex Howard - [00:36:49]

Of course, no one deliberately didn't pick up the kid.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

No one deliberately didn't pick up the kid.

And so, very often, couples need strategies for figuring out how to get into the tangle where it feels like you're living in different universes, you're living in different worlds.

One of my favorite tools for that is to remind people to use grain of truth. When your partner says, especially when your partner's giving you feedback and they tell you something about yourself that you're not totally sure you like that and think that often happens. Instead of trying to figure out, are they right or wrong? Because you're never going to totally agree with them. They have an outside view of you, you have an inside view of you.

Instead, go for what's the grain of truth in what they're saying? What's the thing that I know about myself, or maybe about what I said this morning that might resemble what my partner's saying? It doesn't have to be identical just, where's the place that I can find, oh, I see what you're talking about. That's not exactly the way I think about it, but I can see why you would think about it that way, because from this angle.

And once you go looking for a grain of truth you're out of the dilemma of butting heads about who's right or wrong. And you have to know that as soon as you find yourself in a discussion about who's right or wrong, you're definitely in a conversation that's going nowhere faster than you want it to.

Alex Howard

You're on the wrong path. Yeah.

It also reminds me, I know in the notes that you shared before the interview, you make a distinction between accepting blame and repair. Say a bit about that. That's an important piece here as well.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes, that's really important. People get very nervous about apologies, and, in fact, don't offer apologies because we think that apology is accepting blame. We think that apologizing means, I was wrong, you were right, I screwed up, you were the victim.

Alex Howard

Like politicians. Never apologize.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Exactly. And so it's very tricky.

It turns out that when we injure each other, there are three things that can get damaged or broken. The first one is the empathetic connection. A lot of what couples have with each other is a tacit assumption that I care about your experience, you care about my experience. I care about how you feel, you care about how I feel. When you get injured, sometimes in a big way, sometimes in a small way that's called into question, like, did you mean to step on my foot?

And so the first thing to repair is the empathetic connection. Oh, sorry, I didn't see you there. I didn't mean to step on your foot. I'm really sorry. Are you okay? That reestablishes, of course I care about your feelings and how your foot feels. I made a mistake. I didn't see you. So that's the first thing to repair.

The second thing that gets broken when injuries happen is a consensual reality. That's a really tricky one. We all depend on seeing more or less the same thing in our world and especially couples. Part of what makes a couple is they build a reality together and they like that many things they see similarly.

So when there's an injury, there can be a bit of disruption about, wait a second, I thought you were picking up a kid. Are you kidding me? I think something's wrong with your hearing. In fact, I don't think you listen to me, etc. And so there's a disruption in what happened there. That repair is trickier. And so I often, that's the repair that sometimes gets into who is right or wrong.

And the third repair is about repair of agreements. The good thing, and you really need to repair all three of those things. Repair of agreements is about the fact that when there is a mistake made or a misunderstanding or somebody screwed up and wasn't kind, there can be a question of, I thought we agreed we were going to be kind to each other. Are you intending to be unkind to me?

And usually the repair of agreements boils down to simply reasserting, yeah, I know, I do agree that we should be kind to each other. I was in a really foul mood. I didn't control myself. Really sorry. And so that reasserts, yes, we do have the same goals here. We have the same agenda. We are trying to be kind to each other.

And so that repair is often very quick. First repair, the empathetic repair is the most important and fortunately the easiest. And part of why it's easy is you don't have to establish who did what or who's right or wrong to simply establish no matter what happened I don't want you to have a bad experience when I'm around. And no matter what happened, I know that you don't want me to have a bad experience.

And if you make the empathetic repair and you can't agree about, well, what did happen there, because that's really tricky. It kind of matters less. And people get so concerned with, was I right or was I wrong? Did I error or did I not error? That we go instantly, most of the time, go into a stance of, I wasn't wrong, or if I was wrong it was because you were cranky first.

Alex Howard - [00:42:03]

It's your fault that I'm in the wrong.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Exactly. I know I was cranky, but you were cranky before that.

Sometimes you want to not do that repair at all. And you certainly don't want it to be the first thing you attend to. But it's really not necessary.

One of my favorite cartoons that I saw is a man is going into a flower shop and he's saying to the florist, what kinds of flowers say I'm sorry without admitting to any wrongdoing?

Alex Howard - [00:42:29]

That's great.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

That's the concern, for men, for women, all of us. And that's what we need to learn to do, is to say we're sorry without admitting wrongdoing. And we need to learn to accept that kind of apology. That the most important thing is that you care about how I feel. And maybe I think you seriously screwed up, and maybe you don't. But overall, I know that you still care about such things, and you're not intending to do me wrong. And that's what's important. And that's what's important about the repair. And the really good thing is you can do that part, even if you can't do the other parts.

Alex Howard

It's like, someone once said to me, it's a choice between do you want to be right or do you want to be happy? Because you probably can't have both.

And it takes a courage and it takes a vulnerability to sometimes be willing to inquire into how we might have, perhaps unintentionally, but how we might have actually done something that hurt someone that we love. And it's not always easy to go there.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Yes. Yes. And it's so important to go there because very often, if you can both go there openly to the second part about, well, what really happened here? What you often discover, more often than not, what you discover is a misunderstanding. That's a real freebie because you simply didn't get your signals straight.

And so that's kind of one of those no fault mistakes. It's like, oops, I was rushing out the door, I didn't hear you properly about picking up the kid.

What you might discover in addition to misunderstandings, is mistakes. And when you can discover a true mistake, and can own it, that's practically as good as a misunderstanding. In other words, because what it asserts is, yeah, I'm still a good person, and I still do intend to do right by you. I still agree that raising my voice when I'm upset with you is not the right thing to do. I made a mistake. I got hot under the collar. You're totally right. I shouldn't have yelled at you. I do want to talk to you about what I was upset about, but you're right. I made a mistake in the yelling part. Really sorry. I'm going to keep an eye on it.

And what that says is we're in a relationship where we care about the standard of treatment here. We're trying to treat each other well. We're trying to give each other a good experience. So again, as you go through what actually happened, if you can keep your eye on, was there a misunderstanding? Was there a mistake? And quickly on those, sometimes you discovered that's all there was, was either a misunderstanding or a mistake or a little of both.

And you don't get into the territory that's actually much more serious, which is oh, no, wait a second. You actually do intend me harm. And you're not having a good feeling about me. And that's a much harder thing to deal with. But very often people spend a lot of energy and get very upset over things that, in the end, turn out to be a misunderstanding.

Alex Howard

And I think what strikes me is that putting the first or second, we assume they're the third. And that's the danger that you assume that a mistake or a misunderstanding actually has negative intentionality behind it.

Dr. Kathryn Ford - [00:45:44]

Yes, exactly. And we have a certain, a lot of our brain is wired so that we prioritize negativity and danger. So part of our brain, which is the amygdala, gets a signal really quickly from the outside world and quickly goes into snake or garden hose. I'm going to go with snake because if it's a snake I'm going to be in trouble.

And so part of learning to be a couple is learning to wait while that instant fear response calms down. And the fear response is what you just talked about, there's one version of it, which is, something happened that really injured you. And because of our fear response, we can go very quickly to, uh-oh, am I with the wrong person? Have you stopped caring about me? Have you suddenly overnight turned into a louse? What's going on here?

And so if we can take a minute and kind of, what I call ride the wave, of that fear reaction, watch it come and watch it go. And if we're in basically a pretty good place with ourselves and our partner, that process actually only takes a few seconds.

And if we can stop ourselves from speaking while we're in the fear response and instead let it come and let it go, that's another way of saying our aperture closes. So something happens, our aperture closes. If we speak at the moment that our aperture is closed, it's going to come out something like, I can't believe that you did that, you creep, what's wrong with you? And we're on the road to somewhere we don't want to go.

However, if something happens that we don't like, we have that response, I can't believe they did that, what's wrong with them? And we kind of watch it come, we watch it go, and on the other side of that, our aperture can start to reopen, and we go looking for our second response. What's the response that's open aperture? That might be something more like, did you realize that that hurt my feelings because I can't tell if you did? That's a response that's much more likely to help your partner's aperture stay open, which is what you want because you've been injured, and you want them to understand that.

So if you say I don't know what just happened, but I got really hurt, that's much more likely to elicit an open aperture response where your partner might say, oh, wow. No, I didn't know that you got hurt. Tell me about that. And that's what you want.

Alex Howard

I'm mindful of time. There's still many questions I want to ask, maybe another day. But for people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best way for them to do that?

Dr. Kathryn Ford

A couple of ways for them to do that.

I have a website. It's kathrynfordmd.com

And if you go to that website, you'll see things about who I am. And you'll also see things about where I'm presenting next and what kinds of things I'm writing. You'll see a blog post.

I'm also a blog poster with *Psychology Today*. So if they go to the blog called *Psychology Today* you'll find me there.

And I guess the third place would be, I frequently teach with Stanford Continuing Studies. And many of those courses are either virtual courses right now because of COVID. And so anyone from anywhere, from London, can take that course.

And also the courses are often recorded. And so you can also sign up for the course and then you have a recording and you can listen to it at your leisure.

And those courses are sometimes just for couples, but they're often, the one that I have coming up, I have a course of October 2nd and 9th that will be a course for couples, singles, therapists, anybody that's interested in learning more about apertures and how to have a relationship that is more open and connected.

Alex Howard - [00:49:33]

Fantastic. Kathryn, thank you so much. I really enjoyed this interview. Thank you.

Dr. Kathryn Ford

Thank you, Alex. It was great.