

## Rewriting the rules of relationships

**Guest: Dr Meg-John Barker**

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**Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]**

Hello and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow and I'm one of your hosts.

And today I'm really excited to be welcoming Meg-John Barker to the conference. Welcome, Meg-John.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Hey, thanks for having me.

**Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for being here.

So Meg-John Barker is the author of a number of popular books on sex, gender and relationships, including graphic guides to queer, gender and sexuality.

They've also written *How to Understand Your Gender*, *Life Isn't Binary*, *Enjoy Sex (How, When and IF You Want To)* and *Rewriting the Rules: An Anti Self-Help Guide to Love, Sex and Relationship* as well as *Hell Yeah Self-Care!*.

They have also written a number of books for scholars and counselors on these topics, drawing on their own years of academic work and therapeutic practice.

Now, when I found out this was going to be the theme of our next conference, Meg-John was the first person who came to mind. So I'm particularly excited to have you on board. A bunch of friends and I have done a book group on your book, and I've learned so much. So thank you for being here.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Thank you for that introduction.

**Jaia Bristow**

And let's start with, do you want to just tell us a little bit about you and what brought you to writing these books and just a little bit about your story?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. Well, I always think back to when I was, I guess, late teens, early 20s, and I would go into the bookshops and look at the self-help section, trying to find some way of understanding why I was struggling so much, why my friends were struggling so much, my family.

And so that stayed with me that sense of like, I want something on this self-help section that's genuinely helpful. And I wasn't finding it back in the 1980s. And I'm not sure there's a lot of it there now, even. Because the kind of ideas that I've come across that feel really genuinely helpful around sex and relationships and mental health, particularly, they just don't seem to filter through. And so the popular kind of messages that come out. I mean, hopefully this conference will do a bit to help on that.

And so I went on a quest, really. I did a psychology degree and a PhD. Then I kind of moved more towards sociology, philosophy, like I wasn't really finding the answers in psychology either. I trained as a therapist as well. I went to Buddhism and all kinds of activism as well. Who's doing this differently? Who's doing, particularly sex and relationships differently? And what are they learning about it?

And really now, I'm a writer full time now, and my passion is just getting this stuff out there, trying to bring together all of these ideas and practices that I've found the most useful that I've found in all these different places. And bring them all together. What's the message? What can people hopefully find genuinely helpful when it comes to navigating their relationships with themselves and others and the world?

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:03:13]**

That's fantastic. And I'm so glad that you're doing this kind of work. I think it's so important. And do you feel that there is more people doing this work now? Do you feel that there is more stuff out there around these topics?

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, I think so. But it still feels like some of the most helpful ways of understanding things aren't necessarily getting out there to everybody or if they do it's in a form that sometimes misses something, I guess.

I mean, maybe it comes to the next question that you're going to ask, but I guess a big passion of mine is recognizing that the wider culture and the systems and structures around us are a huge part of the problem. And what you see generally, again on the self-help section, or programs about that or podcasts about that or whatever, is it's still quite individual. It's like, what's wrong with me and how can I fix it? Rather than really situating it in this wider culture that has all these ideas around how we should treat ourselves and other people, which are actually a big part of the problem.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Amazing. And it sounds like what you're pointing to is looking more at the systems rather than the personal and the individual, which I'm all about, I lead workshops on exactly that. Yeah.

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

I think it's so important. And even things like mindfulness, which is really helpful practices, often by the time it's kind of filtered through to the general public, it's lost some of that, which is that in Buddhist understandings and originally is very much about power structures and the impact they have on people and the wider culture, but it kind of gets a bit lost along the way. And then it's just like, oh, here's this practice you should do. And if you can't do it, you're a bad person or something.

It gets a bit twisted in our culture because we're so keen to see something wrong with us and go on this journey of self improvement rather than this collective piece that's so important.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. That makes a lot of sense.

So if we're talking about that and the systems and relationships in general, I know that one of your books and the blog is *Rewriting The Rules*, why does it feel you would need to rewrite the rules of relationships?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker - [00:05:26]**

Yeah. So that was my first attempt at a self-help book and called it an anti self-help book because it's not locating the problem in the self. It's more like, hang on a minute. If we're trying to navigate the world with the rules that we're getting in Western culture about how to do relationships, we are going to really struggle, because that's just not possible. It's completely impossible.

This kind of idea that you need to find this one person who's going to be the one, who's going to be your best friend and your perfect sex partner forever and co-habit and bring up kids and joint finances, and it's going to be this really long-term relationship. It's just really quite an impossible goal. And the sense of happily ever after that's put on that, this is going to finally make you happy.

So in that book, my suggestion was that we look at the rules. We try and say, instead of just taking them for granted, we try and say, what are they? So when it comes to love or sex or monogamy, what's the accepted way of doing things that we're kind of immersed in? And then why might we question it? What might be problematic about it? What might cause suffering?

And if we do want to change it, what else is out there? How are some people doing it differently? Maybe other cultures found the world at different times and also within Western culture on the margins. Who's doing it differently and how?

And then each chapter ends with an embracing uncertainty, like what would happen if we went beyond this idea? Instead of just replacing one set of rules with another set of rules, like monogamy rules with polyamory rules, like what happens if we completely embrace uncertainty in this area and really question the idea of even having a set of rules that we follow?

**Jaia Bristow**

And I think that's what I really appreciated about it. You weren't saying mainstream structures and rules are wrong, and here different set of structures and rules you should adopt. You were saying, let's question things. Let's find out what works for each of us as individuals. Let's find out what we're expected to do, whether that does work for us, or whether to explore other options. And it's going beyond binaries, which leads us perfectly into the next section.

So I know you identify non-binary. So do you want to just first talk a little bit about going beyond binaries in terms of gender and sexuality? And then we'll talk about going beyond binaries in terms of relationships as well.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Right. Yes. So this really relates to a book I wrote with Alex Iantaffi, who's one of my main co-authors. We wrote a book together called *Life Isn't Binary* because we were both outside the binary in terms of sexuality and gender. So we're both bisexual or queer, and we're both non-binary in terms of our agenda. But we felt like, actually, that's where it often stops with people. This idea of beyond the binary or non-binary, it's like it's just about sex. Most people only really know about it in relation to sexuality.

And then some people are beginning to understand, with a few non-binary actors out there and things. There was this idea around gender as well, but actually it's just a super helpful idea for all kinds of things. So that was the idea of the book.

And yeah. So in terms of sexuality, I guess there's this real strong idea in our culture that people are either gay or they're straight. And of course, actually in terms of the number of people who are attracted, for young people the statistic's about 40% of people will say I'm attracted to more than one gender. So it's not even a minority who have a non-binary sexuality. You could say it's a majority or certainly a significant group.

And then in terms of gender, we're talking about anyone who doesn't experience themselves simply as male or female or simply as the gender that they were assigned at birth. That there's some sense of gender shifting over time, or there's some sense of being in between or beyond or both.

And again, when you do the study, the number of people who identify as non-binary is still relatively small, but the number of people who experience their gender as like, to some extent, the other gender or both genders or neither gender or beyond the whole concept of male and female binary, that's over a third of people actually, according to one study.

So, again, a lot of people just don't fit these binary boxes. And so, yeah, as I said, Alex and I thought that this is a much more useful idea than just sexuality and gender. So why stop there?

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:10:05]**

Amazing. Yeah. Well, first of all, Alex is also one of our speakers on this conference. So anyone watching who's interested in this topic also check out Alex Iantaffi's talk.

And I myself, I identify as pansexual, which for me falls under bisexual, which I consider more an umbrella term for if you're attracted to more than one gender. I don't identify as non-binary because I'm comfortable in the female body I was assigned, but I definitely have lots of moments where I forget I'm a woman or don't feel particularly feminine or like a woman. And I do lots of gender questioning. So I really appreciate you bringing this into the space. And I have so much I want to ask you about, but I know I'm interviewing you for my Beyond Boxes podcast, so we can go more into it then.

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I guess something that just occurred to me there when you were talking is that I guess we can think of this non-binary category as including the people who don't fit the one or the other, but also people who don't have a relationship to it. So you were talking about sometimes not really feeling that strongly identified with being a woman. And so people who are agender are people who just don't have a strong affiliation with gender, similar to people who are asexual not having a strong sense of sexual attraction to others at all. And aromantic not having a strong sense of romantic attraction to others.

And I think those fall under this broad category of non-binary as well. It's if you're both things, it's if you're between them, is if you're beyond them or if you just don't have any kind of relationship to them. And once you expand it out that much it is a lot of people we're talking about.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, definitely. And it's definitely something that we could talk about for hours.

But just to stay on track with this conference, which is the Relationship Conference.

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Nicely done.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:11:53]**

Thank you. Let's talk about relationship diversity and what that means to you and why diversity is important in relationships and how going beyond binaries in terms of gender and sexuality also links into relationships.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. Absolutely. So I feel like they're really linked together, gender sexuality and relationships. So in a way that sexuality and relationships is the main place we express our sexuality. And as we've seen, sexuality is all tied to gender in the popular culture. That sense that it's all about the gender we're attracted to. So this narrow box cultural way of understanding gender, sexuality and relationships is you're looking for a monogamous relationship or maybe a serial monogamy, and that's the place you're going to do heterosexuality or maybe homosexuality. But it's got to be one of those boxes, and that's going to be all about your gender and the gender you're attracted to.

And particularly we have this real ideal of the heterosexual romantic monogamous couple, right. And so yeah, that's just super super small. And then for each of those, instead of the binaries, what we want to get to is a sense of diversity. So this massive diversity of sexualities about all kinds of things, like not just the gender of people we're attracted to, but all other aspects of what we're attracted to and the things we like doing or don't like doing and the feelings in our body.

It's just sexuality is just so much bigger than that. And then again, gender is so much bigger than that. It's such diversity in ways of being transgender or cisgender and binary gender, non-binary, masculinity, feminine, hugely diverse, androgyny.

And the same with relationships. Again, we might get stuck on. Oh, well, there's monogamy. And now we're aware there's non-monogamy. There's some people doing that polyamory thing, for example.

And then it's like, no, it's massive diversity in the ways that people experience and express their relationships. And that's a much more useful model than a binary of one or the other.

**Jaia Bristow**

Amazing. And what is it exactly that you're referring to when you're talking about relationships? And how do we relate? And is it just romantic relationships? Let's talk more about relationships if we're going to be rewriting the rules.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely. Well, again, I think the big thing is people get fixed on romantic relationships. And that was what I was quite focused on in the book *Rewriting The Rules*, because that was my question of how can we do romantic relationships differently?

But yeah, as well as seeing this diversity of ways of doing romantic relationships, which includes all kinds of different monogamous and non-monogamous and also monogamish styles, they're in between. There's also this massive range of relationships in our lives. And again, culturally, we've become very focused on romantic love as the place we're going to get everything.

And that's partly because of a move away from communities and move away from religion. So a lot of the things, historically, a lot of the things people used to be getting from their community and from religion, like a something to believe in and a sense of meaning and purpose and people to support them, they're now often looking to the romantic relationship to give them all of that.

So a big binary I try and question is this kind of romantic partner vs friend. Where the friend is just seen as so much lesser and we don't do the kind of conversations about relationships and friendships that perhaps we really need to do.

So that's a big one for me is like, leveling those up and then thinking why are we prioritizing certain kinds of love over others? And what would happen if we flatten that hierarchy and thought about all the people in our lives as important?

### **Jaia Bristow - [00:15:41]**

Absolutely. And I know for myself, my friendships are so important to me and my family, I'm also very close to my family, and I don't like having that hierarchy. I don't like the expression, like friends or more, as if friendship is not enough.

And for me, this is very much a personal thing, but I often sometimes talk about having a Venn diagram of relationships where I have friendship feelings, romantic feelings, sexual feelings, and sometimes those overlap, and sometimes they don't. And I definitely have people in my life where I have very romantic feelings for and friendship feeling, but not a sexual attraction or sexual chemistry there.

So I think it's so great to talk about the different ways in which we relate. And so, I guess we've already touched upon it, but why is it important to consider how we relate rather than focusing on the one perfect partner or even the one perfect relationship style? And what is it exactly? Is that what you mean by relationship styles? What is it you mean by relationship styles?

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I think initially when I was using relationship styles it meant the different versions of monogamy and polyamory and other things that are out there. And now it's like, yeah, much more moved into this sense of how do we relate with others? And then that being something we think about across all our relationships again, rather than a sense of like, we need to work at a romantic relationship. And there we might do all kinds of conversations, especially if we are polyamorous or non-monogamous in some way. There's this real idea of working at relationships and doing a lot of conversations, but that we wouldn't do that with our family, or friends, that we just take it for granted of this is how you do those kind of relationships.

And, yeah, I think it's that we're really sold this message that love is the answer. And that it's about finding the right person, the one to complete you, all of that kind of romantic idea. It really hurts people. It hurts people who can't find that and they're this sold message of this is the most important thing you can do in life, particularly for women still, and that somehow you're a failure if you remain single or solo.

But it hurts people who get into relationships as well, because often the relationship cannot stand the pressure of trying to make that person into the perfect person. Or they feel like it to start with, and then they stop feeling like it and there's a constant sense for both people or all people that there's some kind of failure going on, there's something wrong with them. Instead of a sense of actually, relationships are really hard, and one person is never going to be able to be all those things.

And I think it also keeps people in pretty damaging relationship dynamics. I think we have a really poor understanding of how traumatized a lot of us are around relationships and how much we're trying to make somebody make it all better. And when we're going into the relationships over and over again with that implicit agenda, we're setting ourselves up to fail. And it just perpetuates this horrible cycle where then it goes wrong, and then we think we're even more broken and we're even more looking for someone to fix it and make it all better. And this continues.

So I'm really wanting to help people get out of that cycle. And I do think, and this comes from very personal experiences, that I sort of saw this and I thought, okay, I'm going to stop looking for the one. I'm going to stop looking for a monogamous partner to save me and make it all better and be happily ever after.

Oh, I know. I'll go to polyamory. That's the other thing that people are doing over there. Maybe that's the answer. And then, of course, I just did it in the same way. I was like, ok polyamory is going to fix me. And if I find the five perfect partners then if it's just about not putting the pressure on one person, I'll just put it across five people. That didn't work. And then I moved to more relationship anarchy, which is where you're trying to deemphasize romantic relationships and come up with your own ways of relating in a consensual manner.

But again, I still kind of gripped that one as like, okay, that's going to be the answer. And then again, putting a lot of pressure on people and myself. Yeah that's why I think we need to shift away from this idea that any kind of model is going to fix it. And it's more to how do we relate with others? How can we relate in ways that are safe enough for everyone that keep people free and flexible to change over time?

Where we're looking constantly at our patterns and whether they're showing up and doing our work, where we're supported by others to do this. So we're not in this little tiny unit where we're playing out all our stuff with each other and trying to pretend to everybody else that it's all perfect when it's really, really painful. Just a whole different way of relating, I guess.

#### **Jaia Bristow - [00:20:29]**

Yeah. And I think there's something really key in what you've mentioned about, especially within the polyamorous community, there's often the idea that monogamy doesn't work because it's impossible to find one perfect person to meet all my needs, but if I find five perfect people to meet my five essential needs then I'll be fine.

I think it's so important to mention that because I really notice that in the polyamorous community as well.

#### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Or the right set of rules. It's like, okay, monogamy didn't work, we'll do polyamory? Okay. Well, actually, we don't like hierarchical polyamory, we're going to be egalitarian polyamory. It's like, we're going to be solo polyamory and that's the thing that's going to work.

And again, all of this diversity is wonderful. It's great that there's different ways of doing relationships, and people can find the best fit for them. But as soon as you're in it for, like, this one's going to save me from pain, forget about it. It's not. It's like trying to find the perfect drug. It's just not going to work.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

And I think what I'm really hearing, it's almost like you're talking about it's never going to work if you're trying to fit yourself into an existing model. And it's more about finding either, which model or what just in general works for oneself, and that that often can change and develop over time. That's definitely something I found.

#### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, will do inevitably. And again, with all these things we're sold this idea they're fixed, that we're born with a sexuality and a gender, or there's a natural, normal way of relating, and that will stay the same over time. Or that in marriage that we can commit to exactly the same relationship with this person and they all last 50 years.

And this just isn't how people work. And where the relationships do work actually best is where they can flex and change over time as the people in them change and as the relationship changes.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:22:14]**

Absolutely. And I think another really key factor in what you were talking about is that feeling of failure. If I can't make a relationship work then I am a failure. Rather than just, and I remember there was a time I had a really beautiful relationship. It lasted about 7 or 8 months. It was actually with, we were all non-monogamous as individuals, but they were actually a married couple, which it was the first time I'd done something like that.

And it wasn't like a unicorn hunting on Tinder type of situation. It was two individuals I met at a party, and then they happened to be married and then we dated as a triad for a few months. And it was a very beautiful relationship. And it went really well. And we had very open communication. And we went through a lot of the traditional steps of a relationship where we met and we went on a few dates. And then after a while we had a conversation about what we meant to each other, and we talked to our families about each other. And we went on a holiday together.

And then at some point we realized that we were wanting to go in different directions. And I wanted to go off traveling, and we didn't want to live in the same areas. And we ended up, and then I fell in love with someone else, somewhere else. And there was a whole bunch of factors. But in the end, we decided that it was time to end our relationship, and it ended very amicably. And we're still in touch. And we're part of a relationship anarchy support group with an international one where we meet on Zoom every couple of weeks and it's really lovely.

And I remember crying on the phone to my dad and saying, oh, another relationship that hasn't worked out. I'm a failure, all this. And he says, it doesn't sound like a failed relationship. It sounds like a completed relationship. You met, you had the chemistry, you connected, you did all the things. And then after a while, it just felt like you'd got what you needed from the relationship. He didn't say it quite as eloquently as this.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

This is a great dad.

**Jaia Bristow**

There was something really beautiful in that sentiment of, oh, yeah. And I really know that in myself. Every single relationship I've had, I feel like I've learned something.

And I was just talking to a friend the other day who's going through some relationship difficulties. And I was saying that for me, yeah, it's about, every relationship I have is about what can I learn about myself and the way I relate in general. Rather than, is this the one? And how many babies are we going to have together?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

And will it last forever?

**Jaia Bristow**

Exactly.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

I mean, I remember early days when I was doing talks about polyamory and somebody at a conference said to me, can these relationships be successful? And I turned it back on them and I said, what do you mean by if it's successful? Because what everyone seems to mean is if it lasts forever, right.



And your Venn diagram is super helpful here. This is something that Justin Hancock, who I write with as well, who I think again, is also going to be in the conference perhaps. We talk about Venn diagram of, like, overlap. So it's just about tuning in. So, where you're at and what you want in relationship and how you want to do it and where they're at. And then where's the overlap? Or what way of relating might work for that?

And it might be that, actually we're in such different places now than we were two years ago. Let's go our separate ways and feel fondly towards each other. Or it's like, oh, maybe we can re-navigate this to be like a comet relationship where we're going to meet up once a year or something and have a wonderful conversation and a couple of days together. And that's great. Maybe it's going to be like, the romantic part's not there anymore but actually it's still really good sex, let's keep that bit. Or let's co-parent together.

And it's just that separating out all these different dimensions of relating, like you said, your Venn diagrams, and also keeping having that conversation of where's our overlap without that sense of shame?

I'm really with that at the moment the cultural senses that we sign up for something, even if we don't get married, that we've signed this kind of implicit contract that says, I'm going to be this to you forever, and you're going to be this to me forever in all kinds of ways and in all kinds of relationships. And then if you break it, it's like your fault. You're a terrible person and they get to be really angry with you, or you get to be really ashamed of yourself or maybe both. Or all people go off and they all feel that sense of failure and shame. It's just so unnecessary and so sad. Yeah. I think your dad's way is a better way.

#### **Jaia Bristow - [00:26:46]**

Completed rather than failed.

#### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. Exactly. Sometimes it's like this little, here it goes around, and then it's complete. And sometimes it's a much bigger circle over the whole course of our lives. And that's just okay. And again, with all relationships that you're not obligated to anybody, it's about that ongoing navigation together and separately and just finding what works for those people concerned.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And in the same way often our friendships can fluctuate. We have friends where, depending on geographical location and circumstances and where we're at in our lives, there will be moments where we're really close, and then we might drift apart because we take different directions or end up with different romantic partners, often is a reason for friendships to drift, and then come back together. And I think that can be true in all different types of relationships.

#### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

And so, we're also talking a lot about what we're, or I mentioned, and you're talking as well about what's right for us as an individual. So let's talk about the way we relate to ourselves and how that has an impact on the way we relate to others, whether in romantic relationships or friendships or other types of relationships.

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker - [00:27:59]**

Yeah. I keep coming around to this one. As I said, *Rewriting The Rules* was my first book on these topics, and I started it with your relationship with yourself. That was the first chapter, which felt really important.

And I was kind of interrogating this common idea of you have to love yourself before you can love anybody else. And I was like, well, that's hard. It's really hard to love ourselves in a sense that a lot of these big philosophies, like Buddhism and existentialism are pointing to. It's almost impossible.

It's almost like the definition of an enlightened being is somebody who's just okay with themselves, let alone loving themselves, just thinks they're an okay person. So literally can't, and what are you going to do? Go away and be in a cave for your whole life and then come out at 86 and be like, I love myself, I'm ready to love other people.

But I kind of return to it over and over again, because there is a really deep truth in it as well in that, certainly my experiences, I don't love as well or I don't love well at all when I'm coming from that place of not loving and valuing myself.

And again, the other big influence on my thinking is black feminism and bell hooks says that we have to value ourselves and others equally, and we have to have this mutual love. Like that is love in fact. These are the things that we call love that are really about trying to turn ourselves into something for somebody or trying to turn them into something for us. It's not a loving thing to do at all.

So I do you think that ongoing kind of, I want to say working on the self, but I don't know again, about the concept of work, because that's so twisted in a capitalist context, but certainly an ongoing, deep relating with ourselves and learning ourselves very honestly and very kindly. Because the only way we can be really honest about the stuff that goes on in here is if we've got a lot of kindness, right.

That that for me is essential to all relating. That we're not going to relate well or we're not going to love well unless we're doing a lot of that. And unless our relationship systems really support us to do that and that the other people are also on side with it, that's an important thing to do.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I love that. I love that idea of being kind to oneself, being kind to others. And it reminds me of the quote I heard, I can't remember exactly, but it's something around, like kindness, it's honesty without kindness is a form of cruelty or brutality, but also kindness without honesty is a form of enabling. And I think that's so important when we talk about communication and relating and it covers all kinds of relationships. But to have a combination of kindness and honesty with ourselves first, as with others.

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. And again, this is where both Buddhism and black feminism and many other philosophies really emphasize practice. We have to practice that. We can't just do it intellectually. It's like it has to be our practice, deep inner practice, but also our practice in the world with others. Again, a collective practice.

And this is where it relates to such big, relates entirely to wars and human conflicts. It relates to climate crisis how we treat other species. It's not just this, I want to get more sex or I want to have better partnerships or do more dating or something. It's like you can't, in a way, separate that kind of micro level relating from this really big stuff that's happening in the world.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. Absolutely. Because what you're talking about on a much broader scale is all about relationships. It's all about interpersonal dynamics.

## **Dr. Meg-John Barker - [00:31:40]**

How we relate.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Exactly.

So shifting gears slightly, but actually very in line with what we're just talking about on a bigger scale, but why are cultural and developmental trauma understandings vital for understanding our relationships do you think?

### **Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Well, I think you just said it. It's genius because I totally put two and two together in a way I haven't before. But if you think about, so developmental trauma is this idea that most of us as kids go through, it doesn't have to be big traumas, but relationally we take on board some of these messages within our families, within our schools, about how we should be. We aren't taught well how to deal with the difficult emotions that come up. And we're taught ways of relating that are very much the kind of thing we've been taught about.

And what you said about kindness without honesty and honesty without kindness. These are two ways we often go. So the fawn response that a lot of us learn as a survival strategy, certainly I did, to people please. It's kindness without honesty. It's like I'm going to shape myself into something for you and then you'll love me, please. Because you've been through being abandoned or being really hurt by others. And this is a strategy that's just about worked once in a while. So you're going to keep doing it.

And honesty without kindness is like the fight response, which is another way to go. Which is like, everyone else is bad, and I'm going to blame them and judge them. And I'm going to try and make them something, I'm going to try and control them and make them into something for me.

And so many of us have those kind of strategies or the flight or freeze, which is the other two that are often named as trauma responses. And they become these kind of, not just in the moment way we respond to a traumatic event, but more like a ongoing, relational way of being.

And again, if we don't really look at that, again with the kindness and the honesty, then we can be so stuck in one of those as our go to way of relating. And it is just going to keep hurting us again and again, because the fawn person is going to keep realizing they've just lost themselves in relationship and have to get out of that relationship to find themselves again. Or the fight person is going to keep pushing people away and then feeling more and more hurt by relating.

And again, the tragedy is it often reinforces the very thing that's hurting us, because the fawn person is then going to go even more to the next one, even more bend ourselves out of shape to try and get that love they're desperate for. And the fight person is even more angry when the next person lets them down. It's just a really painful.

So we have to have that going back, you know, and to some extent through trauma-informed therapy or through support groups or whatever way we do it of looking at some of those patterns.

You don't necessarily need to look at all of detail of where they come from. But I think feeling some of those feelings that I have got stuck in the body, those kind of somatic trauma releases is important to really feel it on the embodied level. And again, there's a lot of practices out there to help people do it.

And the other piece is the cultural trauma, which I'm sure you'll talk with Alex Iantaffi more about, which is that these messages that we've been talking about in these unjust systems that pass down

to intergenerational trauma, these ways of relating that we're brought up with that are just so problematic are another part of it.

So we need to examine those and shift those as much as we can systemically at the same time as working on our inner system and shifting that as well.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:35:25]**

Absolutely. That makes a lot of sense.

And I think it also links back to what we were talking about between the loving oneself before you can love someone else. Maybe it's not so much about loving oneself, but becoming, sort of understanding one's relationship patterns, understanding one's traumas, understanding and becoming aware so that we can at least understand if we're trying to get that external validation that we're seeking because we don't have it within ourselves.

And I think that there's definitely a link between those elements, and I was reflecting on what you were saying around that and just noticing again, for me in the way I relate, how so often I realize if someone says or does something that I don't believe about myself, then even if they're saying it in a hurtful way, it won't impact me as much as if it's like something I already believe.

If I already feel the deficient and unlovable and insecure and someone says something that will trigger that, or sometimes doesn't even say something but does something that I can interpret in that way, then that's going to be a lot more painful than, for example, if someone tells me that they don't like, I don't know, my communication style. I'm like, well, I feel like I have quite a good communication style. So let's have a conversation about this, for example, but it's not going to hurt me because it's not an area that I feel deficient about.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. So we need to think about the stories we tell about ourselves and how they show up in these ways.

And again, I think a lot of these practices are about trying to let go of a lot of that investment in how we're seen by others, and also recognize that a lot of the time when people are relating to us in painful ways, it's coming from their trauma. And I think the more you've done this inner work as well, the more you can see that and be a bit like, oh, okay, that's actually coming from a place of hurt in that person. And it's not really about me. Or this bit's about me, but the rest of it I can let that slide. Instead of that sort of when you're so hooked into how everybody else is being and either judging it and attacking it or trying to shape yourself to fit it or whatever.

**Jaia Bristow**

Which, again, links back to kindness and honesty with oneself and with others. So if you can see that someone's relating to you from their trauma, then it's just about being really kind and understanding that and being maybe a bit more flexible and coming back to the conversation not from a triggered state.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. Well, I think that's a huge piece that Alex and I are going to be writing about in our next book, actually. How do we then relate? And I think it's again, kindness and honesty is a good combo because it's not kindness as in, oh, this person is being really abusive, but because I recognize it's coming from trauma, I'm going to let them. It's much more like you said, not the enabler, but they're much more like, okay, I am not going to be around you when you're dysregulated like this because it doesn't serve either of us. I'm up for this conversation if you're up for these rules of engagement.

And if the person is saying, no, I want to be able to berate you for an hour, that's not okay. And you're giving them quite a useful message by holding that boundary.

I'm saying it like I find this easy. This is the most terrifying thing I can imagine, but I can imagine somebody being able to say that.

**Jaia Bristow - [00:38:00]**

I think that what you're mentioning, I think it's really good to remind people that it's easy to talk about, but not always easy to put in practice.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Please, FYI, that thing I just said, I can't do, but I aspire to be able to do it someday.

**Jaia Bristow**

I think another thing is really important that you're mentioning is that kindness doesn't mean not having boundaries in place. And again, it's kindness towards oneself and others, and it's with honesty towards oneself and others, of okay, this isn't working for me right now. I need to be kind to myself, and that means putting up boundaries and being really clear.

And I've done lots of nonviolent communication courses and that kind of thing, which is all about getting to the core needs of each person in the relating.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Yeah. I think consent is really useful here as just a wider concept than sexual consent. For me it's about what's the consensual way of relating? And also the trauma informed way of relating, because I think there's often an attempt to do NVC or consent as a bullet point. This is how to relate, which misses that actually when people are in trauma, they're not going to be able to empathize with each other when they're in a trauma response. They're not going to be able to have that calm conversation or follow these rules.

So how do we, it's a really tricky piece in our relationships and our communities of how do we recognize that depth of trauma? And again, try for relating when we're not in that place and how slow then we have to go. And how do we even notice when we're in those dissociated or dysregulated places? Because a lot of us we've been there for so much of our lives, it's just familiar and we don't realize that we're responding in a trauma response way. So it's big, deep work I think. It takes a long time.

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. That makes yeah. And I'm so glad you're here and talking about it. And we're definitely going to have an interview as well around consent so for people who are interested in that topic to check that out.

And I think we're coming to the end here now. So everyone who's probably loved listening to you as much as I have, how do we find out more about you and your work?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker - [00:40:49]**

Yeah. Everything's on my website, which is [rewriting-the-rules.com](https://rewriting-the-rules.com).

It has all links to all the books, to independent booksellers and also lots of free materials. Last year I wrote so much on my blog about trauma and consent and plural and being plural there's now a free book on all those topics, which are a collection of essays that I wrote last year about those.

And there's a lot of zooms as well. I really like doing these kind of illustrated zooms. So there's a lot of those that are free to download as well.

**Jaia Bristow**

What do you mean by being plural?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Oh yeah. So this is the idea that we, our individuals, our system as well, that we have multiple facets. And one way you might think of it, it's like we actually have all of these trauma survival strategies in us. So even though I might have foregrounded fawn most of my life, I do have fight, and I need to get into a better relationship with that side of me in order to be honest and kind, rather than kind of the deficit of honesty.

So, yeah, I really experienced myself quite vividly as a plural system, and there's a lot more people talking about this these days. And so I tried to synopsizes the various therapy literature about plurality in a way that's accessible for people.

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. I love that. And I'm so glad you brought that in as well. It's what I refer to as the "both and". I'm full of contradictions and I'm not this *or* that. I'm that *and* this. I'm both.

And we're humans, and we all are full of contradictions and strong and vulnerable, and feminine and masculine. And we all have different elements, and it's so hard when we try and put ourselves in boxes to feel like, or society is trying to put us in a box, which is why I called my podcast *Beyond Boxes*, because we are going beyond the socially ascribed boxes.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

And I think it can really tear us apart mental health wise when we're trying to present oneself to the world but we're really aware, yeah we're kind, we have the capacity for kindness and cruelty.

And like you say, for deep agility as well as strength, and confusion as well as wisdom. And the way is to be able to contain all of that. How do we do that? How do we become strong enough containers for all of who we are instead, again, of just trying to be some bits and eradicate others, which is such a violent way of treating ourselves.

**Jaia Bristow**

So check out Meg-John's website [rewriting-the-rules.com](https://rewriting-the-rules.com)  
And what are your social media handles if people want to follow you?

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

[@megjohnbarker](https://twitter.com/megjohnbarker) on Twitter, and I think the same on Instagram, but Instagram is just pictures of nature, so don't be expecting any wise words on Instagram. And those are the only two I'm on. I came off Facebook.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for joining us today, and I look forward to talking to you again soon.

**Dr. Meg-John Barker**

Thank you.