

Managing mental health in relationships

Guest: Dr. Patrice Douglas

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

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

And today I am so excited to be joined by Dr. Patrice Douglas.

Welcome, Patrice.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Hi. Thank you for having me.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you for joining us.

I think we're about to have a really interesting conversation.

So, Dr. Patrice is a licensed psychotherapist and Doctor of psychology based in Southern California.

She is the owner of Empire Counseling & Consultation located in multiple States. She specializes in many subsets of psychology, including anxiety, addiction, relationship health and multicultural issues.

Her worldview and understanding of black and brown issues has stationed Patrice as a leading expert whose words and work is referenced by such publications as *Forbes*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vice*, *Oprah Magazine*, *HelloGiggles* and many others.

She was featured in *Cosmopolitan* as one of the *21 Black Relationship Experts* to follow on Instagram.

So, Patrice, why don't you start by telling us a bit about you and what led you to be interested in the topic of mental illness and how that impacts relationships, which is what we'll be talking about today?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Sure.

So my Master's degree is in counseling psychology with the emphasis of marriage and family therapy. So my graduate program was really focused on the components of couples and family relationships.

And so during that time in school, we really focused on the importance of, not only doing things to make families come together again, to heal families, to heal couples, but also it was important for me to realize that a lot of people find it complicated to tackle issues such as mental disorders or mental

health conditions within a relationship because they don't know where to start, they don't know what to say, they don't know what to do.

And so that became my mission, as I talk about it often, about what are some things that you can actually do to support a loved one without feeling like it's your obligation to take care of their mental illness or walk around on eggshells because you don't know how to help them or assist or even accept that someone you love as having mental health conditions? And so that's why this topic is one of the favorite topics that I love to talk about.

Jaia Bristow - [00:02:27]

Brilliant. And I think it's such an important topic to talk about, it's something that often gets overlooked.

So just to make sure everyone's on the same page, what exactly are you referring to when you talk about mental illness?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Oh, that's a good question.

So of course, everybody has their own lingo and their own definitions of how they want to define their mental health challenges. So when we're talking about mental illness, it can be a mental health disorder, it can be a mental health issue, anything that is related to a disorder.

So whether it's anxiety, depression, a mood disorder such as bipolar, a thought disorder such as schizophrenia, we're talking about anybody that's having challenges with their mental health that affects their ability to show up in relationships, show up at work, school. Overall, their quality of life is affected by the mental health challenges that they have.

Jaia Bristow

Alright.

And so I guess, how does mental illness impact relationships and the way that we show love and support? Because, both for the person with a mental illness and the person in relation to them, whether that's a romantic partner but also a friend or a family member.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Absolutely.

So, mental health issues, concerns, can affect relationships in many ways because it affects how you show up in those relationships.

So if you're dealing with more of a depressive type of disorder, you may be more isolated towards others, you may be a little bit more snappy, you may not want to communicate as much. With those that have more of moods where you're maybe extremely up sometimes, you may be all over the place, you may be talking really fast, doing a lot of things and they can't keep up, or it just seems like you're all over the place and chaotic and missing appointments because you're just not really focused. To maybe you're just a little bit moody and you're not really communicating very properly and you're very snappy.

So we have these different things going on. To the outside world it looks like that maybe there's conflict in the relationship, or that two people are really not getting along, or maybe one person is not really feeling the person as they once were, or there's some disconnect.

It's human nature to assume that when there's an issue it identifies as it's our issue, something that we did, something's wrong with us. But a lot of times it's that things are happening so rapidly with emotion. Or maybe you're not comfortable talking about it because, I mean, let's look at the world. The world is not always very accepting of certain things. So a lot of times we feel we have to suffer in silence, and so we're not talking about it. And then we get to a better place and we feel more confident than we are able to talk these things out.

Mental health issues fall in line with all those disconnects within communication and nonverbal cues. So when there's something that's off, of course the relationship suffers. Because a lot of time we really don't know how to communicate or express something's wrong without taking it personal.

So my advice is always to, if you love somebody and you may think they have a mental health concern, or they have established that they have, try to take yourself out of it and not assume that if they are changing their behaviors, it's because something that you did, it may be something that they're going through. And until they're ready to talk about it they're going to just go ahead and do what they need to do.

In order to figure out what's going on I would always say, hey, if you see somebody that's having an issue, just say, hey, I noticed that you haven't been yourself lately. Hey, I noticed we haven't been talking as much, I just want to make sure that you're okay, or when you're ready to talk I'm here when you're ready to talk.

And a lot of times you may not get the instant results of they'll tell you right then and there because it's on your own time to establish when you want to divulge some of the personal stuff. But if you set that safe space where they're like, hey, somebody actually noticed that I'm not doing very well, and they're giving me the platform to talk about it when I'm ready, nine times out of ten they are going to tell you what's going on. It may take a while, but at some point you will understand where they're coming from. And then from there you establish how to move forward so that this doesn't happen again.

Jaia Bristow - [00:06:34]

I think that's really helpful advice. I think that idea of creating safety and security for the person who is impacted by the mental health issues and concerns, by the other person and just saying, hey, I'm around, if you need me, I want to support you, I care about you, I love you, can be life changing for someone, especially if they haven't had that support in the past.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

And then I guess, for the person who is impacted by mental health issues, what advice do you have for them? When do you think is a good time to disclose? How is the best way to ask for support? What about feelings around guilt and accepting support?

Sorry it's a big question. A lot of questions, but yeah, what advice do you have for the person who is impacted by mental health concerns?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

I think the biggest component is owning that you do have a mental health illness or disorder but it doesn't define who you are as a person. It's important to separate the fact that you're a human being that's dealing with an illness or a concern.

And that's why I discourage people from wearing the label, I'm bipolar, I'm depressive, because when you talk like that, that's how you form yourself to be. And so if you feel that way, you're not comfortable with the fact that you do have some concerns, then it does show up in your relationships as you're not really able to communicate with people, you assume that people don't understand you and they really don't know how to understand you.

So one of the things that I always tell people is that, first of all, it's really important to educate yourself about your disorder. The more you know, the more comfortable you are. I'm a therapist so of course I'm going to tell you you should go to therapy if you're dealing with any type of mental health disorders, concerns, because those are the coping skills that you need to not only feel comfortable and get some solutions on how to support your disorder, but as well, it gives you an idea of how to allow others to embrace you.

So that's always a disclaimer, always go to therapy. Everybody can go to therapy whether you have a disorder or not. Therapy is important.

So once you take the title off of that is who your identity is, depending on how comfortable you feel, because everybody has their different levels of comfort, some people at the gate when they meet somebody, hey, I have anxiety so sometimes I say I want to go out and then I'll cancel at the last minute, or if there's too many people coming at once, then I don't want to go because I'm not sure how everybody is going to feel, so I do better with one on one's.

Once you figure out what works for you, as far as routines and things like that, you can introduce it to people so that they understand. Maybe you would benefit from going to the movies with me, but going to Disneyland won't work because there's too many people.

A lot of people just need guidance and directions on how to support you. But if you don't feel comfortable about what's going on with you, it shows up in your relationships as negative qualities.

So depending on if you're a person that likes to wait to get to know somebody before you express that you have a mental health disorder, there should be a conversation like, hey, there's going to be times where I'm going to be fully present, and there's times that I'm not. I can't tell you to take it personal because I'm sure it's impacting you, and it's something that I'm working on. But I just have things that sometimes I just don't feel very well for the week, and the best I can do is just focus on myself.

When you have those type of conversations, or if you're in a romantic relationship, inviting your partner maybe to come to a therapy session with you so that the therapist can explain what's going on or talk about what you guys have been working on. Or coming up with a plan of those weeks that you're not feeling very well, what are some things that your partner can do that maybe won't overwhelm you or mundane with a bunch of questions.

Coming up with those things is really helpful for people to assist you or support you when you have a mental health disorder.

Because when you have people that love you, they want to fix it, right? And as we know, disorders are not always fixable. Some things are just, we have to live with them.

So the more understanding you have about your own illness, the more understanding you have about what works for you, what doesn't. The more disclaimers that you have when you see me acting this way, just know that I'm just going through something. If I don't talk to you for a few days, and you want to leave me a text message, I welcome it, I may not get back to you right away, but please know that I am not ignoring you. That way that can alleviate a lot of their anxiety about how you feel about them.

Jaia Bristow - [00:11:07]

Amazing.

So what I'm hearing is, number one, not being too identified with it. So it's, I have a disorder rather than I am a disorder. And then once we establish what the disorder is, really understanding it so that one can better understand oneself and why we react in such a way, for example. And then once we've established that, it's really communicating to people so that others can also understand where we're coming from and what's happening for us and why we're acting in certain ways and why the way we act might change at times.

So I think that's already supportive, both for the person who has a mental illness as well as to someone who is relating to someone with a mental illness.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow

What about when both people have mental health concerns, for example? I guess those things are still applicable, but does that create more of a solidarity, or can it create more of a clash? Does it depend on the mental health concern? What advice do you have when relating to someone, when two people are relating who are both impacted?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

I think it's a good question because in ways it seems like it would be more solidarity because it's like, we both have issues, at least we're understanding of that it's a safe space to just let things be as they are without any type of pressure of explaining certain things because we both rely on an illness perspective.

But depending on what the disorders are, they can clash. They may be on different cycles where one partner is up and feeling great one week, but the other partner is very low, and so they're having a hard time. And then when that person gets back into their peak of happiness and the other person is lower, it can create a shift where you guys are not on the same page often.

More than anything when you have a couple or a friendship that both people are dealing with mental health issues, it's important to still have those safety measures that we talked about. So the plan of, hey, if I'm low these are some of the things that I'm going to need from you. And what are some things that you're going to need for yourself?

As well as, I'm a really big component of including your partners into your care plans with your therapist.

So the more information and the more conversations that you guys have, when the person is having a mental health concern and nine times out of ten they really want to be left alone, it's important to have those activities in place to keep you busy.

Or if there are conversations that need to be had that are a little bit more on the serious side, having a plan of when to talk about those things versus not. It's really important not to have really huge conversations when somebody is in the middle of an episode because the outcome may be different versus when they're out of the episode.

It actually can be very endearing to have somebody that you love dealing with the mental health disorder with you as well. But more than anything, you have to be really conscious about bringing up

certain topics at certain times and dealing with certain activities with that person because you may not be on the same wavelength as far as when you're dealing with your challenges.

Sometimes those that are in relationships, and they have that commonality, they feel like they still don't have to go back to the basics of those foundations for the relationship, because they feel like if two people are not feeling well, we'll figure it out. You always need a plan when it comes to dealing with a mental illness, mental disorder in loving on someone or having those that love you so that everybody's on the same page about what to do.

Jaia Bristow - [00:14:41]

That makes a lot of sense.

So it's using a lot of the similar things we've previously spoken about, but it's even more important when both people are impacted.

And so I'm curious as well, when in a relationship with someone who has a mental illness, and again, I say relationship in a broad sense, whether that's romantic, friendship, family member, and you've offered the support and they've accepted the support, how does one engage with someone whilst still looking after one's own mental health? Or one's own wellbeing and care and not getting too sucked into the other person?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Yeah, that's a great question, because sometimes, especially in family relationships and romantic relationships, there's a codependency that can happen where the person that is supportive of somebody with a mental disorder or illness, they become more attached to the fact of helping them. And when their partner is not receiving the support that they want to give, it kind of lowers their self worth.

So what's really important is to identify that this illness is not yours, it's theirs. It does not define them. They do not fall apart if you're not there 24/7. A lot of times, it's more of the support from, hey, can I be supportive in helping you take your medications? Or leaving positive affirmations for them throughout the house. Or just saying, hey, I noticed that you're not feeling well today, after work would you like to talk about it? And giving them space is really what's going to be helpful.

A lot of times we saturate ourselves amongst the individual that's not feeling very well, and we're mundane in what questions, how are you feeling? What about this? What about that? Let's go to dinner. Let's go shopping. You're a beautiful person. You don't have anything to be sad about. Smile, smile, smile. It's like.

So I know that you're trying to be positive, but if I'm feeling depressed, the last thing that, I don't think that I am as worthy, but right now my hormones are telling me that I'm not. So you telling me that I am at this particular moment is not helping, and it's almost establishing you're actually ignoring what's happening right now. Instead of you doing that, just offer a place for me to communicate when I want to and give me some space.

That's really what the downfall is a lot with relationships is that one person becomes very invested in the care of someone's mental health, not recognizing that maybe the steps that they're taking to support them is the last thing that they want. The person wants a support.

So it's not your job to heal or to treat the mental disorder, the mental illness. Your job is to support it. So give them space. And while you're giving them space, maybe it's important for you to go to your own therapist.

It can be very challenging to love anyone that has an illness, whether it's mental or physical, because you see, 1 minute they seem like themselves, 1 minute they're not. And so that plays a lot on your emotional wellbeing of, I feel helpless, and that's a lot of times why we over extend ourselves to help people is because we feel helpless.

So talking to someone about how to cope with dealing with the ups and downs, spending more time with friends, picking up a hobby. Those things are really helpful for you to have your own self-care plan, so then not only are you focusing on their mental health, but you're also focusing on yours as well.

Jaia Bristow - [00:18:09]

I think that's really, really helpful to hear, and it makes a lot of sense. That idea that if you want to support someone with a mental health disorder, then keep the focus on them and don't center yourself. And at the same time, in the same way that if you have a mental health disorder, it's I have rather than I am.

I think it's similar for the person caring. Don't get too identified with the carer role is what I'm hearing you say, and instead be supportive, check in, see what the other person needs. Let them know that you're there if they need you, but also give them space to process for themselves and don't overwhelm them more than they already are.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Absolutely.

And one of the biggest components too, is keep the schedule as routine as possible. So if you notice that they're not feeling like themselves, if you still have dinner plans, if you still have movie dates, if you still have things going on like that, don't cancel them unless they say they don't want to go or modify.

A lot of times when we need a support is the routine going. As you've probably seen on social media and things like that, people are like, the only thing I have to look forward to going to daily is to work or to see my friend or my co-workers at work. So if that was to be removed that would impact them even more. So if at all possible, even though they're struggling, keep the routine as going because that may help them get out of the episode a little quicker.

But if they're like, hey, I know we had dinner and a movie, can we just do dinner instead of the movie? Be flexible with that, but try to keep the routine as much as possible if everything is going as planned.

Jaia Bristow

Yeah. So it's again, it's that don't cancel plans on them, but be flexible and understanding if they have to cancel or modify.

And I think, I know from my own experience of both mental health conditions and physical health conditions, that the hardest thing was when people stopped inviting me to events. Often I couldn't go, but I still wanted to be invited. And as soon as the invitations stopped that made it so much harder to continue with day-to-day stuff. Because like you say that was something I was really looking forward to. And sometimes it was like, how about you come around and we get takeaway instead of going out to a restaurant, for example, if I wasn't physically capable of going out. But I still enjoyed those connections with my friends and loved ones.

So that's great advice. Thank you.

And so I guess I'm curious as well, how does one know when the relationship is being impacted by the illness?

We've talked a little bit about how to recognize when someone's illness is being triggered, when there's symptoms that are noticeable and how to offer support in those moments and let the person know that we care about them. But how do we respond when we notice the relationship is being impacted? And how do we notice that the relationship is being impacted?

Dr. Patrice Douglas - [00:21:02]

Good question.

So I think that's the hardest component, what is the person without the illness? And what are their characteristics when they do have an illness?

So we always talk about we want to focus on the person and not the illness. One of the things that impacts a relationship when it comes to mental health disorders is when the person that is experiencing the illness is not caring for their illness.

So if they stop taking their medications or they're not taking their medications on schedule or they're reducing the amount of medications they're supposed to be taking, already right there we've got a lot of ups and downs with the mood imbalances, so they may be okay one day, snappy the next, crying the next. So that's one component where that can affect the relationship.

If you do have someone that's having mental health challenges and they don't believe in therapy or they don't think getting help is important, they can figure it out on their own, but their tone is becoming more aggressive, the way that they communicate is becoming more hostile, they're starting to use terms that are very harmful or nicknames or name calling that's impactful. And then when they snap out of the episode or the moment they have, they're really apologetic saying, that's not me, that's the disorder.

But when you talk to them, they're like, oh, well, you know, I was just having a really bad day, it probably won't happen again. And it's a repeated pattern. Then it's alluding to that they're not able to handle these challenges on their own and they do need to get support.

If it's coming to a place where there's things that are being said that can't be taken back or arguments that are lasting for days at a time, but once, maybe some of the issues of the disorder is settled, then it's getting back on track, those things are going to happen. But if it's happening more often than normal, then it's the illness that's impacting the relationship.

I'll give you an example for a physical element. So when somebody is dealing with a physical illness, like cancer, and their family or their partner has become their caregiver. As we know, when people are dealing with severe physical illnesses they can become very mean. They can be kind of pushy, they can say really negative things to you, they can call you names, they can yell at you. There's a really big component of when somebody is in a lot of pain they like to project it on other people.

While we know that it's because of the illness that they're feeling that way, it still impacts how we feel about us and how we feel about them, because we know that we're trying to help. But sometimes the more things that you say to people that are negative, you can't but help to start to believe it.

So it's the same component. So that's why when caregivers are like, you know what? I need to go take a break. They hire help, nurse aids to come in so that for the afternoon they can go to the movies. Or if some of the caretaking responsibilities are becoming too much, maybe they'll enlist others to help them with the support so they're not doing it by themselves.

Same kind of thought process when it comes to mental disorders. If you're noticing that the illness, when it's in its episode, when it's happening, is really volatile, then when it's not volatile, you guys should be reaching out for therapy support, looking at coping skills, making sure that medications are being utilized at the right times and actually being utilized.

Because if you don't, then those are probably why you see the rift in the relationship. And that's essentially what it is. People that have been in relationships for a really long time with those that are suffering from illnesses, they know when things are either getting worse because, maybe the medications aren't working as they're supposed to be. Maybe things are turning for worse. Or some of the coping skills that were once being utilized are not being utilized therefore the whole plan of how we support each other is falling apart.

So that's how you can tell when the illness is taking over the complication of the relationship versus the person. When they're not really taking care of themselves. When we're not taking care of ourselves, everything around us suffers. Our work ethic suffers, if we're going to school, how we show up for homework, our friendships because we're not communicating or engaging as much, our family relationships as well as our partner relationships.

So it's important that if you do have a mental illness or disorder that you take care of yourself so that you can show up the best way possible in your relationship and your partner can show up and support you the best way they can as well.

Jaia Bristow - [00:25:43]

That's brilliant. I think that's really important for people to hear.

And when people don't look after themselves though, you talked about getting extra support coming in, but what are some other things that people can do? And how does one protect oneself when we see that our loved one is not looking after themselves?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Once again as much as we would love to heal people and take on their burdens, we can't. At the end of the day we are not responsible for someone's mental illness. Therefore, we're not responsible for taking care of their mental illness.

So if you have somebody that is pretty much saying like, hey, this is who I am. I have my moments. I feel I can manage it on my own. But you're noticing that it's not working out the way that it needs to be for the relationship, then you've got to re-evaluate if this is a relationship that you can be in.

And I don't want to give any type of perception that if somebody has a mental illness they cannot be in a relationship, because that's not true. There's a lot of people in this world that are dealing with mental health disorders that are thriving in healthy relationships. But if you have someone that is blatantly telling you, and you're telling them, hey, in order for us to work, we're going to need to support each other more, and we're going to have to enlist some support outside of us, because whatever we're doing, it's not working and it's actually making us grow apart versus coming together.

Just like in couples therapy, if one person is not on board for that plan and the other is, the relationship is not going to withstand.

So sometimes you got to evaluate, do we want to stay in the relationship when somebody is literally hurting us and the illness is getting in the way? And I'm only staying because I feel guilty that I'm leaving somebody because they're sick. Or because I feel like if I leave them, they'll have nobody else, so I stay. But you're starting to develop your own mental health conditions, like anxiety, depression, feeling low self esteem, then you got to re-evaluate if you are able to deal or be capable of handling a situation like this.

You're not a weak person if you come to terms with you can't handle it anymore. Especially if you went to that person, of course, at a time where they're able to process what's going on, that these are the things that you're noticing, these are the things that are impacting you and that these are the things that you would like to take as steps to help the relationship, if they're not on board with that

and things are not getting better, you've got to re-evaluate if this relationship is healthy for the both of you.

If somebody says they don't want your help and they want to be left alone, give them that space. You can always say, hey, I'm here for you when you're ready to talk and leave it at that.

If you can't get the support, like outsiders, as far as we talked about the caregiver and things like that, then maybe re-evaluating and talking to them what your role will be when they are going through their episodes.

So, hey, I know that when you get very depressed or you're having a manic episode, you don't like my cooking to the point where you throw it against a wall or you talk really negative about it, and then you talk negatively about how I don't know how to cook. And as much as I know that you're going through a really negative space that still impacts me. So when I know that you're in that mood, we're eating takeout, period.

So stuff like that where you can define how you're going to show up and how you're not. That is the best boundary that you can give to yourself, outside of looking over things and seeing if this relationship is actually healthy for you to stay in.

And that goes for somebody that is dealing with the mental illness. If you are in a relationship with somebody that is not experiencing the same things you are and you find them, as we call toxic positivity, where you're like, hey, I'm having a bad day. How can you have a bad day? It's sunny outside. You have a job, you have life. What are you so depressed about?

Or you feel like your self esteem or the things that your mental disorder may be feeding into you is being enhanced by what they're saying back to you, you've also got to take a step back and say, is this relationship working for me? Do we need to go to couples therapy? Do we need to go to some type of support so that we can understand and communicate better?

If that person is not on board because they feel like your mental illness doesn't exist, or it's an excuse, you need to re-evaluate if this relationship is healthy for you as well. So it definitely goes both ways.

Jaia Bristow - [00:30:26]

Yeah. So what I'm really hearing is communication is essential. And that it's important to be flexible when relating to someone with a mental illness but that doesn't mean you can't set boundaries.

And whether you're the person with a mental health concern or the person who loves someone with a mental health concern, in both cases you need to check in with yourself and see if the other person is being ultimately a caring, loving, supporting person, or if they're being just solely focused on their own needs and completely ignoring how you feel. Because whether or not someone has a mental illness, we're all humans, and we're all deserving of respect.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Absolutely.

And like I said, the number one thing is that I know a lot of people stay in relationships because they feel it's inhumane to leave somebody that is dealing with an illness. But at the end of the day, when you're in a relationship, whether it's a family, friendship or partnership, we are accepting each other's baggage.

So you have to be honest with yourself. Loving somebody that has complications such as physical or mental health elements is something that is a responsibility. And so if you feel like you can't take on that responsibility, the best thing you can do for them and yourself is to be honest about that.

And that's I think a conversation that a lot of people have to have within themselves without feeling guilt of abandoning somebody or leaving somebody because they have an illness. It's a huge responsibility to support.

Jaia Bristow - [00:31:56]

Absolutely.

And I think sometimes it can get to the point where the relationship does become toxic or even emotionally abusive, and someone might blame, I've actually been in this situation myself, where I was in a relationship with someone who had mental health concerns, but they were also emotionally manipulative.

And whilst their mental health sometimes explained some of their behavior, it definitely didn't fully excuse their behavior when they were crossing all my boundaries.

So when that happens what advice do you have?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

So, if you are in a relationship where everything is blamed on the mental disorder or there's gaslighting of that never happened, then you do have to read the red flags of this is what it's going to look like.

And if this is somebody that is on their medications, they are going to therapy, but this is the type of relationship that you have where it's manipulative and you don't feel comfortable and you are honestly starting to feel yourself crumble, then you need to take the necessary steps. Either have a conversation about the things that you need from this person, as far as how to communicate with you. Some of the things that are not sitting well with you and getting a professional involved. Or it may be time to walk away.

It's nothing different than if somebody was to put hands on you. We don't condone domestic violence. Physical violence is never okay on both parties to do. And the same thing goes for emotional abuse as well.

Even though individuals may be suffering from mental illnesses, depending on the severity they are still capable of controlling certain things.

Like I said, there's a lot of people in the world that's living with disorders, and they're living a healthy life because they are responsible for their actions.

If you have somebody that does not want to take responsibility for their actions and place the blame on you, that's a relationship that you need to exit. It's all about accountability.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely.

And talking of exiting relationships. How does one exit a relationship when it gets to that point? Because, sometimes the person can threaten self harm, sometimes the person, and it can also, like you've mentioned, sometimes people feel really guilty about leaving someone who is suffering and struggling.

So how does one exit a relationship if we realize, oh, there's a lot of red flags, and I love this person, and I understand that they're going through a difficult time because of their mental illness but they are also being, you know, there are red flags here, and it's time to leave. How does one do that?

Dr. Patrice Douglas - [00:34:27]

Yeah, I think there's a lot of different components to come up with a safety plan, but I will call it a safety plan of getting out, depending on how volatile the relationship is.

So if they are threatening, if you leave me I'll end my life or they're threatening physical harm or you feel like they're going to become obsessive where they're calling you all the time and things like that, you definitely want to get a professional involved so that you can come up with a plan as safe as possible to exit the relationship.

If you are exiting a relationship and you feel like you have safety, as far as your physical well being, is not going to be threatened and you're comfortable with their family, maybe having a conversation about, hey, we're going our separate ways, can you check on them as we're transitioning out of this relationship?

Because a lot of times if we have other people that can be involved, that's helpful for the person that we're leaving, they can be more of that emotional support because that's what's happening a lot of times. Somebody's like, I can't live without you, that co-dependency that we talked about earlier really manifests itself. They can't really see outside of the relationship of what am I going to do because they've been very dependent on your support.

So if other family members can come in and say, hey, it's going to be okay. Give his or her space, we'll take care of you, that's helpful. As well as enlisting a lot of support on your end. You don't have to tell them the nitty gritty of what's going on your relationship. You can just say, look, I'm going to end a relationship. It's kind of complex so I'm just going to need your guy's support to talk me through things or help me pack my things or whatever the case may be.

I would say that if you're dealing with this type of situation, you definitely don't want to do it alone. But if you do find yourself in a place where there are safety concerns, definitely get involved with a professional that specializes maybe in domestic violence or emotional abusive relationships, they can give you the best safety plan as possible.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant.

Well, thank you so much, Dr. Patrice.

I think that's really helpful to hear all these tools that you've given, all this advice. And what I'm hearing is, it's complex, but all relationships are complex, and mental illness adds a certain layer. And like any relationship, sometimes it can go down a darker path for certain people but that's not always the case.

And so as is always the case, it's important to communicate. It's important to ask the support for example, if we're exiting the relationship for the person with a mental illness and for ourselves.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Thank you.

And lastly, before I forget, because I don't think I mentioned it, if you are somebody that's loving somebody within mental illness or disorder, the best thing you can do for yourself is to also do a lot of educational research.

So somebody is saying they have anxiety, get on Google and understand what anxiety is, what it can look like, what are some things that they're probably doing for themselves? What are some of the symptoms that can look like? The more education you have, the more you don't feel blindsided.

I gave that feedback to somebody that is experiencing mental illness, but what's really helpful is to be involved as well as understanding what the illness is.

So pretty much to wrap it up, the more education you have, the better you can understand how to support your relationship, how to support somebody with a mental illness, how your family can support you if you're the one that has the illness, as well as when you have enough information and you see that maybe this is something that you can't be supportive of because it's a lot for you, to be honest with yourself, is this the relationship for you? And if it's not, it's completely okay.

Jaia Bristow - [00:38:07]

And therapy. Education and therapy.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Therapy, therapy, therapy. Everybody should go. You don't have to be going through something negative to go. It's good to just have somebody that you can express things that are going on in your life, and we can reframe it for you to make it more of a positive thing as well as giving you coping skills. Because I mean in a world full of a lot of things, today coping skills is what gets us by. So everybody, everybody, everybody should have a therapist.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant.

Well, thank you so much. I think the last piece of advice is super helpful. Whether you're the person who has a mental illness or you're involved with someone who does, education is key.

And before we go, could you let people know how they can find out more about you and your work?

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Yes.

So if you are on social media, like I am on all platforms, you can find me on Instagram [@thepatricenicole](#)

If you have Twitter and Facebook. I'm [@patricendouglas](#)

As well as you can check out my website [patricendouglas.com](#)

That's N as in Nancy.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant.

Thank you so much for your time today.

Dr. Patrice Douglas

Thank you.