

Self-consent as the foundation for relating

Guest: Dr. Sophia Graham

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

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

And today I am delighted to be joined by Dr. Sophia Graham. Welcome, Sophia.

Dr. Sophia Graham

Hi, everybody. I'm delighted to be here.

Jaia Bristow

So, Dr. Sophia Graham is a sex and relationship coach to quirky queers and cultural renegades who have had enough of out of control emotions or stressful and conflict filled relationships.

She works with groups of like minded folks to upgrade their skills at coping with distress and difficult emotions, creating clearer and deeper communication in relationships, and ultimately having more independence and control in their lives.

So that sounds awesome, Sophia. And today we're going to be talking about self-consent. So let's start with what exactly is self-consent? Where did this idea come from? And what's it all about?

Dr. Sophia Graham

So it kind of came from my own experience of life, which I think is where lots of ideas come from, isn't it? For me, in my 20s, I was just running around rescuing people. I spent all of my energy focused on other people's emotions, other people's needs. And, of course, that had biological, psychological and social reasons for it. I was biologically predisposed to having a hard time finding my own emotions. I had some trauma in my childhood, and I was the eldest child, so I was predisposed to looking after other people and rewarded for that. My parents were really encouraging about anytime I was independent, anytime I was looking after my brother.

And I did lots of things related to that. I learned to be a lifeguard, and I learned to do lots of first aid stuff. And all of that kind of reinforced this idea that I should always look after other people. I should always be the one doing things for others.

And I really lost a lot of insight into myself in my own emotions to the extent that I didn't even recognize my queerness until I was nearly 30, and it all came to a head at that point. I fell in love, and it was nothing like a fairy tale. I was supposed to be marrying this amazing man, and this woman came into my life, and it was like my emotions had gone from black and white into glorious technicolor. I just felt stuff I'd never felt before.

And I realized there'd been this massive gap. There'd been this gap between what I was feeling and my awareness of it, my awareness of all of my emotions.

And I'd been to a bunch of workshops on things like how to communicate around consent. And I think all of us have probably seen at least some of them. The tea example, what kind of tea would you like? And the handshake workshops on how do you communicate and negotiate a handshake?

And I was at one of those that was run by Hannah Darvill and Meg-John Barker in Portugal at the nonmonogamy conference there in, I think maybe 2014, maybe 2015. And I asked a question about, but what if you don't know? What if you don't have that sense yet of what kind of handshake you want and what kind of tea you want to drink?

And we had a little bit of a communication around that, around slowing down, but there wasn't much of an answer. And I'd worked some of it out myself because I'd been working on this for a few years by that point. But at the end of the workshop, someone came up to me and said, how do you do that? How do you know? I've never heard anyone talk about this before. And I was like, oh, my goodness, this must be quite a common experience. There must be lots of people out there that feel like this.

And I started really thinking in much more depth about self-consent then. So before I talk a little bit about what consent is, I want to say what it isn't. It's not navel gazing. It's not like a set of rules that you can just memorize and remember and always know what to do in every situation. It's not something you can do just intellectually. You can't just think about it and problem solve in your head. It's really a whole body experience. It's really something you have to be in touch with your body and the sensations that are going on in your body.

So what it is, is it's kind of a process and it's also a set of skills for attending to what you want and need, what your own boundaries are, what is going on in your body, recognizing when just the edges of resentment, just the edges of anger. Sometimes it doesn't come up in emotions. Some people have it come up in behaviors instead. Some people have it come up in fatigue because they're not able to recognize emotions.

So for some people, the signs that they're actually going past what's okay for them are in emotions and sometimes they're in physiological other sensations, fatigue, pain, tiredness. And I know many of those things have come up for me.

And so learning more about self-consent is really about learning how to tune into those things and how to be able to act on them, how to be able to accept that sometimes there's going to be some pushback. And the discomfort with pushback doesn't mean that it's not the right thing for you. It might still be the right thing for you.

So learning skills around that. Learning to recognize the difference between an intense, unwanted emotion and danger, or a real no. And figuring out that yes, no, maybe. And then those contingent yes if or no and less type things. So that's a little bit about what it is and where it came from for me.

Jaia Bristow - [00:06:26]

That's amazing. I can relate to so much of what you said. I was just like, wow, I felt like you were telling my story in some ways. And again, I know how much I've struggled with this issue of, I learned the basics of consent and saying yes or no, but I remember especially early on in my active sex life, for example. And people ask me, what do you like? And it was such an overwhelming question, especially, and it felt like the way it was asked felt like, oh, this is something I should know the answer to. And I didn't.

And then that's a sexual experience but it's true of so many other situations in life. And how do you focus on consent? And how do you express what you like or don't like or say yes or no or maybe if you don't know yourself? So I think this is such an important topic that we're covering today, and I'm really grateful to you for sharing with all of us.

Dr. Sophia Graham - [00:07:23]

I think it's such a common experience that people have that they just don't know. And I think it's particularly common among people who are neurodivergent because lots of us have interceptive difficulties. So interception is that sense of knowing what's happening in your body. And part of it is knowing the emotions you're experiencing. But it's also knowing when you need to pee, it's knowing when you're hungry or when you're thirsty. And so those of us who have real difficulty identifying those sensations are often at a biological disadvantage when it comes to figuring out what we want.

And of course, there are then also psychological and social factors that add on to that, because for neurodivergent folks we're much more likely to have been bullied, we're much more likely to have been in abusive relationships. And so we're much more likely to have experienced trauma, which again makes it more difficult to find those signals.

And then there's a social environment. We're in a world that's made for neurotypical people. And just the stigma and the constant experience of that is another thing that makes it more difficult.

So there's lots of compounding factors for lots of people, especially neurodivergent people who have that difficulty with either the interceptive stuff or the psychosocial stuff.

Jaia Bristow

Again, hard relate. Yes. I hadn't even realized that was a neurodivergent thing. That difficulty sometimes even knowing what my body needs, like noticing when I'm hungry or when I need to use the bathroom, which is something I struggle with a lot being neurodivergent myself. I'm still new to that journey.

So I'm curious then, what do you feel are the big changes? What changes happen in one's life, when we can tune in and start applying this self-consent that you talk about?

Dr. Sophia Graham

Well, I think at the very foundation level, you know what you want more and what you don't want. And then the next layer up is you're more likely to get it, we're all more likely to get more of what we want if we know what we want.

So for me, my relationship with my mom has been a bit challenging for a number of years, and when I'd visit her, she would make little comments about my weight and my size, and I think this is not a specific thing, lots of people have this experience. But I'd come away from those interactions feeling a bit pissed off, feeling very disinclined to visit her, feeling resentful and annoyed.

And as I got into this work, I was like, hold on. I know what it is that's making me pissed off about my visits to my mom. It's this fat shaming stuff. I should probably do something about that. So having noticed it and having recognized, okay, here's a boundary. I don't want people talking about my body in judgmental or negative ways. What can I do about that?

So I set a boundary. I said, I really want to enjoy visiting you, and I love you very much. I also have different values than you do. I know you're going to visit your dad however unkind is to you, but that's not true of me. If you continue to say these things, it's going to make me not want to come and visit you. So I'd really appreciate it if you'd stop. And it worked for a decade.

Jaia Bristow

Wow.

Dr. Sophia Graham - [00:10:56]

Not a single comment about my weight for a decade. She's sort of started to come back now but I'm pretty impressed with those results.

Jaia Bristow

Maybe it's time to refresh that boundary.

Dr. Sophia Graham

I think it might be. But that's not the only area that it can be impactful in.

There's this person, Adam, who would default to saying yes to all kinds of social stuff. So if he was invited to something, he would always say yes and off he'd go, and he was running from pillar to post. And this guy's kind of introverted. So I was a bit surprised that he was so flat out busy all the time, because my assumption was that he wanted more time to have down time on his own.

And when we talked about it, he was like, well, I do. But also, if I said no to people, then they'd stop inviting me to things, and then I'd be all alone. And when we got to the bottom of that, it turned out he was this geeky, lonely kid who was not invited to birthday parties, who had a really hard time socially. But that was no longer true of him as an adult, because he had all these invites, he really was going to all kinds of things.

And by recognizing that firstly, there was an underlying belief that was getting in the way of him being able to operate in his current social circumstances, he started to be able to notice, okay, there are things I want to do, and there are things I don't. He didn't really like loud nightclubs. He didn't really like going to club nights, he didn't really like going to the beach. He found it kind of unpleasant, he didn't really like sand. He loved going to gaming nights. He loved going to barbecues, especially with small groups of friends. And it was really important to him to go to special events. So, like weddings, birthdays, that kind of thing he really wanted to always go to.

So for him, the difference it made was recognizing he could shortcut decision making by having categories, for starters, like automatic no's, unless there's something very big to change. Automatic yes's and things that are in the middle where you have to make a one by one decision. And it completely changed his life in such a really wonderful way because he was able to look at life and go, okay, these are the things I want to be going to, these are the things I don't. He started going to all of the things he wanted to be going to, none of the things that he didn't really.

And suddenly he got deeper friendships with those people who did things that he really wanted to be doing, and he was able to get more of the life that he wanted. He was able to have the downtime he needed. He was able to recognize that that belief that he had wasn't true because if he said no to things, no, I don't really like going to the beach, but if you're doing a games night sometime, I'd love to come to that. He was able to choose what he wanted and have the life he wanted, much more of the life he wanted rather than that default, yeah, let's do it.

Jaia Bristow

So what I'm hearing is that it enables a more fulfilling life, because if you're more in touch with what you want and what you don't want, you can learn to express that in a healthy way and reprioritize things. And it enables you to be more fulfilled and to prioritize the areas that you do want to invest in and the people you do want to invest in.

Because I think this example of this person is particularly interesting because sometimes we think about consent as saying no to things or as a sexual thing. But this idea that this person was burning out, and I've definitely been there, because they were going to all the things and trying to do all the things without it always being things that they wanted to do is really useful. So it makes a lot of sense.

Dr. Sophia Graham - [00:14:55]

And I think this is true relationally as well. I mean, I think there are complications because when it's just a yes or no at the beginning, that's one thing. I think there's another, if you've made a plan, but then something happens.

So Lisa has a cat that frequently vomits at night. Well, during the day too. And even if she's been awake with her cat all night, if she's got a plan with someone, she'll still go to it. But she's not good on no sleep and gets really emotionally dysregulated, snaps at her friends, gets tearful much more often, has much more difficulty managing her emotions.

And for her, it was really ineffective to be going to those things when the situation had changed. And figuring out, okay, it's damaging my relationships. It's damaging my self respect because I don't want to be a person who behaves in this way. I don't want people to see me this way, experience me this way, and it's not in line with my values to treat people this way.

I helped her to recognize that actually there were benefits to changing a plan to saying, okay, it's your birthday so I'm going to come for an hour, but I really didn't get very much sleep, so I'm not going to stay. Because otherwise she was starting to resent these people that invited her to lovely things that she wanted to go to because she was sleep deprived and not very comfortable.

And then in relationships, it happens a lot too. I think this is a different thing. So Bobby is someone who is great at self-consent and able to reflect really deeply on what they want and also ask for things very freely and also say no or yes depending on what happens.

But their partner, Charlie, is someone who doesn't have that sense of self-consent and really feel it's very important to say yes when somebody needs something because they wouldn't be asking you if they didn't really need it. So their values are all about, you must always do things for people that you love because otherwise they're not going to get what they need, and that would be terrible.

And in relationship with each other this is really terrible. It's really destructive because it means that Bobby is asking freely and always getting what they would like all the time. And Charlie is running around like a blue-arsed fly, trying to meet all of their needs all the time. And then if Charlie wants something, Bobby will take a moment to check in, that's not really very convenient for me. I don't want to do that thing. Or yes, I'm happy to do that thing. But when there's a no, Charlie was feeling terrible and rejected and resentful. After all these things I've done for you, how could you say no when I finally need something? I wouldn't ask you if it wasn't really important.

And it just builds up this massive resentment on both sides because eventually, when they figure it out, a huge pile of stuff has already arisen because it takes a while. We all think the other person is like us. We all assume if you're really great at self-consent, you assume the other person is too and if you're on the other side of things and you haven't managed to get in touch and your value is you should always say yes. Then you assume the other person is operating from that, too. They only ask when they really need something and they'll say yes if you really need something.

And Bobby felt really betrayed that Charlie didn't trust them to say no or with their no. And Charlie felt overwhelmed, resentful and pissed off that they'd been running around and doing all these things, and Bobby didn't value their requests at the same level, wasn't willing to give as much to the relationship, was just taking all the time.

And I think self-consent helps, understanding self-consent helps in this scenario because you can start to understand where that miscommunication happens. Bobby is really able to center what they want and need, center their own boundaries, and they're assuming Charlie can, too.

And I think then Charlie can start to recognize, okay, so I'm not checking in with myself and the resentment is coming up from that. It's not just what Bobby is doing to me. It's actually also what's

happening within me. What am I doing to myself by overriding what I want and need and not sharing what I want and need, and letting things build up?

And so some of the skills in self-consent are about recognizing when that's happening sooner so you don't end up at breaking point before you start trying to grapple with this.

Jaia Bristow - [00:19:51]

I think that's so important. And first of all, I want to thank you for these examples you're providing to illustrate the points you're making, because I think it's really helpful to hear these concrete examples from different people.

And one of the things I'm hearing is that it's similar to Justin Hancock's talk on this conference about consent as more than yes or no. Self-consent is also more than yes or no. There's all these different areas that you're talking about.

And another thing that's really resonating is this idea of tuning into oneself and not just focusing on external validation of someone else meeting one's needs or saying yes or no. And it can be hard receiving, I've spoken about this with some other people on this conference, including LaShelle, about receiving and giving a no can be tricky sometimes. So that ability to tune in and see when we're being truthful to ourselves and fulfilling our own needs without always focusing on an external person to do that for us.

Dr. Sophia Graham

And it's really hard. It's so much easier to be focusing on someone else and giving and giving and giving. It certainly was for me in my 20s. Mel Cassidy has a wonderful piece on this around how martyrdom isn't a love language. And I think she's absolutely right. That kind of giving and giving and not giving yourself space to have needs, not giving yourself space to have wants is crucial. It's really, really important.

Jaia Bristow

Mel Cassidy is another speaker on this conference so that's someone else's talk to keep an eye out for.

So I'm curious, with this idea of self-consent then, it sounds really important. And who exactly does it benefit?

Dr. Sophia Graham

So I think first and foremost, it benefits people who abandon themselves in relationships. So people who just aren't able to be with their own needs and desires. People who default to yes, like Adam did, and just say yes to everything I think can really benefit from doing this work. Nearly everybody who has childhood stuff around neglect and around self sufficiency. So if you've been rewarded for being self-sufficient, like I was, if you've been rewarded for always taking care of yourself, being really low maintenance, those things are really wonderful traits to an extent.

But when they go too far, it means that you're often not getting what you need in relationships. You're not able to communicate what's going on for you, what's important to you, what boundaries you have, until everything is really, really intense. And then there's this massive explosion.

So this is about finding out how to bring it down a few notches and notice things a few notches sooner so that you're checking in and saying, okay, I actually do need something to be a bit different here.

It really helps people who have a bad case of the should's. So people who should all over themselves with rules and with, well I should be always going to every birthday party no matter how inconvenient. I should never change plans. I should always say yes because otherwise nobody will love me and I'll be rejected and alone forever. I should always do what my partner needs. All of these should's, I should always put my partner first, are really unhelpful.

So people who have a bunch of should's it's often helpful to interrogate those and the self-consent process can really help with looking at, is this useful in your life? And as well as defaulting to yes, some people default to no. So defaulting to avoidance and getting away from things, don't come near me, saying no to everything. I think some people swing from defaulting to yes to defaulting to no, especially if you've burned out.

And that's also unhelpful a lot of the time. It's a lot more helpful to have something in between that's more centered and in touch with actually where you are, rather than an outright ban. We're talking about things across people's lives. We're definitely not just talking about sex, we're not even just talking about relational stuff. Sometimes it is about bodies, sometimes it's about the food that you're eating. Am I consenting to eating this food really? Or am I forcing myself to or forcing myself not to? So it's across lots of areas of life.

Jaia Bristow - [00:24:31]

And I think that's helpful again, for people who are neurodivergent, for example, and what you were saying at the beginning about sometimes not even recognizing our own bodily needs. And so again, that questioning there. And I think this is why this self-consent as an act of self-love questioning, what is it my body needs right now?

And I know, I'm someone with chronic fatigue and a bunch of other chronic health conditions, and the number of times I don't want to rest because I feel like I should, there's that should again, be doing something else or being productive.

And I think that's true in this society, not just for those with chronic health conditions, but this idea that we're not allowed to rest and we're not allowed to slow down and we should always be productive and on the go and having a fully active social life and a complete career and a bunch of hobbies and all of this stuff, which is just impossible standards to live up to.

So I really like what you're sharing around this idea of just checking in. It's like, what does my body need right now? Do I need sleep? Do I need food? What kind of food?

Dr. Sophia Graham

Yeah. Yeah.

And sometimes it's very annoying. I really like cheese, but I'm lactose intolerant. And so I know my body does not need cheese. I know when I'm in emotion mind, when my emotions are very strong, cheese is definitely something I'm attracted to, but when I'm in that centeredness, in wise mind, as I would talk about it, I know that that's not actually what my body is looking for. What my body is looking for is something that's going to feel good to all of me.

And there's nothing wrong with eating for pleasure. But if it's going to make your body feel really terrible, it's always a good idea to take a moment to sit with it. Is that really what's okay for me?

Jaia Bristow

100%. And it's that kind of needs and the wants and how to fulfill those different ones. And I've done quite a lot of nonviolent communication work, which is all about getting to the core need. And my question at every workshop is, what do I do when I have conflicting needs that arise at the same time?

So again, as someone who has chronic health conditions, but also needs to look after my mental health wellbeing, sometimes I'm physically exhausted and there's a party that I really want to go to because I have that need to socialize and to connect with people, but I also have a need to rest and look after myself. And what do I do in those moments? And your example of the cheese reminds me of that.

Dr. Sophia Graham - [00:26:56]

I think that's so right. I relate to having chronic pain. And recently I went to a funeral and I was told in advance, it's not very far from the seating area to the car park where I would be parking. So I didn't need to bring my wheelchair.

And that was true. I didn't actually need to bring my wheelchair to get to the seating area, but it was an outdoor funeral, and most of the talking to people was happening on the road away from the seated area. And so I both had the need to sit down on the seats, and also I had the need to comfort people who are grieving, to be there for family members, to be there for my nieces. And it's really difficult to manage that if I had known in advance, I probably would have brought my wheelchair, but it's difficult.

Jaia Bristow

So I think I have two questions. Number one is what do we do when we have those two opposing choices like that? And then number two is what about people who feel like they don't have a choice? What happens, because in both situations it can be difficult to make choices. And a lot of the time consent is about choice. So what happens then?

Dr. Sophia Graham

Well, I think in situations like the one that I was talking about with the funeral, I made a both and choice. So I can stand for about 14 minutes. So I spent some time standing and wandering around and speaking to people with my lovely mask on. And then I went back to the car and sat down for 10 minutes and gave myself that opportunity to rest. And then I went back again and did another round. And then I sat down again, and I made sure that I was acknowledging that my body was in pain. And if I put my left leg up I can stand for slightly longer. So I found some places where I could do that.

But I was really led by what my body was needing in that moment, because that was the most important priority to me. So I had to sit with, what are my priorities in this situation? How can I look after myself and look after people around me? And I definitely have the, you need to put on your own mask first before tending to others approach. So in the situation where I was balancing stuff, that was how I found the balance for me.

But I think it's very situational. And I think we all have to look at, okay, so if I have a need for both rest and also connection, yes, I might want to go to this party, but how can I get that need for connection met in other ways that are not going to abandon what needs to happen for my body?

So in NVC you look at lots of different ways of approaching how to meet a need. You don't just look at the specific, well, this party would be a great way of doing it. You'd also look at, what are the alternatives to this? How can I find connection in ways that actually honor what's going on in my body?

And I think what you're getting at here is that lots of people feel like they don't have choices. Lots of people feel like there isn't any choice that they can make. And we're more likely to feel that, and it's more likely to be true, let's be honest, if we lack privilege.

So the more privilege we have, the more choices we have. Particularly financial privilege, but also racial privilege. Also, if we're able bodied, if we're nondisabled in general, choices open up to us. There are lots of ways in which we can solve problems with money or not experience problems

because if you're a white person you typically don't need to take a receipt with you when you checkout of your local grocery store. Whereas lots of black and brown people definitely get that receipt every time because they're more likely to get stopped by security.

And a white person might not even think about that choice. They might just be like, well, whatever, I either get it or I don't. A black person might not have the choice, they always have to get it. So I think privilege definitely limits our choices. The amount of disprivilege we have limits our choices.

And also we're not just talking about one area here, we're talking about whole lives. We're talking about areas where we actually, each of us have a lot of control, like over the foods that we eat, or over the clothes that we wear when we're not working, or over the things that we do in our own homes. So there are lots of areas where you can have choices that you're not conscious of or not making there. And then there are also interpersonal choices that we have some control over.

And I like to think about this as we have a window of choice. And if we're extremely privileged, that might be a penthouse on the top floor with floor to ceiling windows. And if you're very disprivileged it might be a basement apartment with a tiny little window. But either way, we usually have some form of blinds over the window. So we're usually not seeing all of the choices that we have. And whether that's in your penthouse apartment or in your basement studio, that blind, that inability to see through that part of the window, limits your choice.

So one of the first things that it's really helpful to do is to figure out which area you want to be working on and to expand how much choice you recognize that you have.

Jaia Bristow - [00:32:54]

It's interesting, because I definitely appreciate you bringing in the privilege aspect. I lead workshops on power, privilege and prejudice where we touch upon exactly that. Especially what you're talking about around racial privilege, for example.

And I think, so there's the reality that some people have more choices than others. And then there's also the reality that sometimes people feel like they don't have a choice, when in actual fact they do. And sometimes the areas in which they have choices, which I think is what you're describing by the window, are larger or smaller, yes that way and that way.

And sometimes if, for example, if you're not wearing a uniform to work, then you have a choice in what you wear that day. And your choice might be limited. Maybe you only have three different outfits you can choose from, and maybe you have 50 different outfits you can choose from, just as an example. And I think that's what you're getting at, or that's what I'm understanding.

Dr. Sophia Graham

Yeah, absolutely. So in my life this has definitely been an issue where I have not seen the choices that I've had, particularly when I'm catastrophizing or really stressed.

So last winter it was really cold here. Where I live it snows in the winter. And I am, as I've already said, a bit rubbish at walking. So I can walk for about 14 minutes but that's about it. And lots of people do a lot of movement through walking. And I know I need to do movement in order to manage my pain. I need to, like I have a Fitbit. I need to do 3000 steps as a minimum, and I need to do no more than 6000. So that's my perfect window. If I do between that my pain is usually managed as well as it can be.

But when it's icy and snowy outside, it's very not nice. And I'm scared of slipping, and I just can't walk 3000 steps in those circumstances. And I can't use my e-bike, which is the way that I usually do movement, and the lake is frozen. I swim in the local lake in the summer. So a lot of the options that I would usually choose are closed.

And last summer I started getting really stressed about this and feeling like, well, I don't really have any choice, and it's because I'm disabled and it's so snowy, and all these contextual factors are making it so hard for me. And when I was able to calm down a little and talk it through with some of my disabled friends, they were like, well, have you thought about some of the indoor movement options?

And I was thinking about my partner's bike, which is on a treadmill thing, so it turns into an exercise bike. I definitely did not want to be doing that. And the way that it's set up wouldn't work for me. But I do have some financial privilege. I have enough means to buy myself something. So I bought myself a yoga mat and a cube which is like a little pedal thing that goes under my desk. And those things together meant that I actually could do movement in the winter.

So I went from having the, there are no options available to me, everything's terrible. To, okay, no, I actually do have some choices here. And this is what I can do about it. But it was a process.

Jaia Bristow - [00:36:13]

I appreciate that as an example, because it brings into account some of the things you mentioned, in terms of the reality that you are disabled and you are limited in what you can and can't do, and you can't go outside like other people might be able to in that situation. So that's a reality and that's partly on the privilege scale.

But then within that once you've seen that actually it's not that bad. And again, this is where things like intersectionality come into play, where you might be disabled, but you still have financial privilege, which enables you to buy a yoga mat or pay for some online classes if you wanted to, perhaps, or whatever it is.

So that's a brilliant example of finding choice even when we feel like we have none, and everything is terrible, and life's completely unfair and poor me, which is an easy route to go down.

Dr. Sophia Graham

And it's an understandable place to begin. So I think it's helpful to recognize, okay, these are the barriers and also there are ways to notice where the movement around the edges is.

And so the first thing I talk about when I'm working with people on self-consent, is it's really helpful to figure out what your areas of choice are. And I already mentioned some people might look at resentment or strong emotion for a way to understand where they're frustrated by not having a choice.

So I definitely had strong emotions about the movement thing. I was really like ah, there are no options. And other people might experience fatigue or pain, or be doing some self-soothing type things like playing games on their phone or trying to avoid particular activities. And I think one of the first things to do is to notice, where are the areas that are bringing those things up? Where are the areas that I feel a lack of choice? But maybe there is something around the edges that I can start to engage with. Because I think finding that arena, where you are going to work, is really crucial.

Jaia Bristow

And so how do we get started with this self-consent? How does one tune into oneself and figure out where our areas of choice are and get started on this process?

Dr. Sophia Graham

Firstly, I do think that work of noticing the strong emotions and noticing of fatigue and pain and stuff. And once you have figured out that area that you're going to be working on, it's helpful to look at the barriers to self-consent. So what's getting in my way in this moment?

And there are a bunch of things that could be getting in your way. It could be feelings of urgency, or feelings of emotions or overwhelm. It could be the should's that we've already talked about. You should do this. You should do that. It could be autopilot. You've just made a historic decision that this is what you're going to do because possibly, it was passed down to you from your parents, but now you're just continuing to do this thing, even though it doesn't really fit with your values or what you want now.

It could be that in some contexts you have a really hard time with checking in with yourself. So for some people, it might be more difficult in a work context. Others might find it more difficult in a personal context. Some people find it really hard with platonic friends, others with romantic connections or sexual connections. So it's really helpful to look at, okay, is it a context thing?

And also the other parts of context, other vulnerability factors that are getting in the way here. So is it that I can check in with myself perfectly well typically, but as soon as I'm tired or I'm in pain, or I'm not at home or it's late at night, or I don't have as much energy as usual, I'm fatigued or I'm doing a particular activity, as soon as those things happen, it becomes much more tricky.

So it can be really helpful to recognize, are there contexts where I'm great at this and contexts where I'm bad at this? Or is it pretty universal? Am I always really struggling with this interceptive stuff?

And I think power is also a really important part of this, too. So in some relationships there's a power imbalance. And that could be a power imbalance because of social capital. It could be a power imbalance because you're engaging with your boss or parent or a partner who has more financial means than you do or more privilege than you do.

Or the other way around. You could be the boss. You could be the parent. You could be the person with more social capital or more privilege. And that can really get in the way, because either way, either side that you're on, if you have less privilege it may make you feel that you're not able to ask for things or you're not able to have limits. If you have more privilege, you might feel like, well, they might feel pressured if I tell them what I really like, so I can't really tell them. If you don't talk about that, that can really get in the way.

So there are lots of different areas that you can face barriers in. And it's really helpful to get into some of that. And there's a handout that I will link to that you can have a look at which have some of these barriers, and you can write in, what are the ones that are really there for you?

But a big barrier for lots of people is urgency. And sometimes it's real, sometimes a situation genuinely is urgent. But a lot of the time situations that feel urgent actually aren't. We actually do have time to respond. We can say, can I take 10 minutes to think about this? Can I get back to you on that invitation tomorrow? But we feel like we have to do it straight away.

And so slowing down, like Hannah and Meg-John we're talking about in the workshop that I went to in Portugal, just slowing things down, taking breaks can be really useful.

And there are different ways that you can do that. So in person lots of people find it very helpful to say, I just need to go to the loo. I'll be back in a few moments. Because that's not evading the question in any way that's just bodily function's call. Off I go. And I think that's a really helpful way of getting over that urge to just respond straight away.

But if it's in an email, if it's an email request or if it's a text request, lots of people also feel that urgency within them, even though nobody is right there, nobody is really trying to get them to do it straight away. You get the text, you want to respond. And it can be helpful to figure out how to notice that urge and notice that that doesn't necessarily mean you have to do it right now. So creating space for yourself to give yourself that moment to check in and respond in a way that really accords with what you want.

And another area that I think is a skill that's really useful is dealing with intense emotion. So intense emotion can feel like danger, and that gets in the way because danger and intense emotion are not the same.

So situations where you have a threat to your life or a threat to your well being or a threat to your income or a threat to somebody that you love, where that threat materially exists are very different to situations where you feel socially anxious and you're afraid of getting panicked. Or where you feel really stressed about asking for a raise at your job even though you know your employment is secure and your boss likes your performance. You don't have a threat to your job, but still you have the emotions that say this is dangerous, I shouldn't do it.

And I think recognizing and working through what are the signals that say this is dangerous and are they accurate? And what are the signals that say this is an intense and very uncomfortable emotion that I don't want to be experiencing now, can really help folks to tune into, okay, what do I really need here? Do I really need to focus on calming my emotion and still going and doing the thing? Asking for a raise or going to the social event that I'll probably enjoy once I'm there but I'm really afraid of in advance. Or is this actually dangerous? Does this present a threat to me? And how am I going to cope with that?

And I think that's a really important skill set, too. So that's how I would begin. That's how I think we get started. Does that make sense?

Jaia Bristow - [00:45:34]

Amazing. No, that's fantastic. I think that's some really useful tips.

And then I know from my own experience is, tools that have enabled me to put into practice some of those steps are things like NVC, which we've been talking about, nonviolent communication, where you learn to tune into your body and your own needs and other people's needs. Things like meditation or mindful practices, which again, it's about tuning into your body and coming a bit out of your head and your mind and more into what's happening on a sensorial level.

And so I know that for myself, those are tools, amongst others, that have really helped me put into practice all this beautiful list of things you've given. And they're also tools I use in my workshops, for example, because I think if we all stay too heady, it gets a little bit difficult and we can just get caught up in the stories and go round and round in patterns. Whereas if we come back into the body, the body has a huge amount of wisdom and then it's much easier to tune in and put into practice what you've been talking about.

Dr. Sophia Graham

Yeah, for sure. Our bodies often want to abandon them. We want to check out. Because emotional experiences are really uncomfortable sometimes. If you're intensely disgusted or if you're intensely afraid, that is not a nice feeling in your body. And abandoning it going up into your head is such an understandable urge.

And lots of the skills that I teach in dialectical behavior therapy work with those things, too. So the mindfulness skills in DBT are really specific and really focused on what do we do when we do mindfulness and how do we do it?

And I think that's very helpful because it helps you to get short, 2 to 5 minute mindfulness practices that are every day. So mindfulness with brushing your teeth, mindfulness with washing your hands, mindfulness with moisturizing yourself, mindfulness with taking a shower, washing the dishes. Lots of things that you can do day to day which helps lots of people to be able to actually connect to their bodies, connect themselves whilst they're doing stuff.

I think a lot of the times if our mindfulness practices are very formal, and like a seated breathing practice, it's less helpful at actually allowing us to use it when we're angry and when we're frustrated and when we're sad and when we're washing dishes, when we're doing boring things, when we're showering, when we're taking a swim, all the things that we do day to day.

My favorite mindfulness practice, which I do very often, is with my bike key. So I have an e-bike, which I love dearly. It's the best thing I've bought myself in my life. It's definitely my best mobility device. And I used to lose the key all the time. Like, my goodness, all the time. And I would be really freaked out and stressed because I couldn't go places anymore.

And someone said that they used mindfulness when locking their front door. And I was like, wow, that's genius. That is genius. So I started doing my mindfulness practice with my key, and it was really bringing my attention to the sound of it going in and the feel of it going in the lock and then the feel of turning it and turning the lock, and the sound of it coming out. And then that moment of holding the weight of the key in my hand and putting it in the place that I was going to keep it, which is the pocket at the front of my bike. And it's a 30 second practice, but it means there've only been two occasions in the last couple of years that I've lost the key.

And it's so helpful at building these other skills at being in touch with your body across different times. I love mindfulness practices for this, but especially those short, informal practices that really help you to put it into practice in your day to day life rather than it being this separate, okay, now I'm going to meditate. Does that make sense?

Jaia Bristow - [00:49:51]

I love that. Well, Sophia, I think we're coming to an end here today, but I've loved everything you've shared, and I'm sure our listeners have too. So how can we find out more about you and your work?

Dr. Sophia Graham

As you said at the beginning, I really primarily work with quirky queers and cultural renegades, so if you're one of them come to my website. And I'm going to be running a couple of workshops in November and December on self-consent. And I'm starting a new course, which is going to go for a couple of months in January.

And I'm also going to be running something on self-consent and family holidays close to the festive season because I think lots of us have that difficulty with parental sibling relationships and also overwhelm when there's just so many people and how to keep a hold, keep a handle on what we need in the midst of that chaos.

And I also offer DBT courses, Dialectical Behavior Therapy. There's a subscription that's the first and third Wednesday of the month, a new skill, and it starts soon. So take a look at my website to find out more.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. And your website is loveuncommon.com

Dr. Sophia Graham

That's right. And there's a mailing list sign up there if you'd like to get a mailing list to hear about all sorts of things that I'm doing.

Jaia Bristow - [00:51:14]

Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciated having you on board.