

Redefining love as the act of showing up

Guest: Dr. Stan Tatkin

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Alex Howard - [00:00:09]

Welcome, everyone to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Stan Tatkin.

Just to give people a bit of Stan's background, also, I should say welcome Stan. Thank you for joining me.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Thank you, Alex.

Alex Howard

So, Stan Tatkin is a teacher, clinician, researcher, and developer of the psychobiological approach to couples therapy, known as PACT. He's beloved by colleagues and clients alike. Stan is an expert on human behavior and couple relationships.

He speaks and teaches around the world on secure functioning relationships, how to understand them, create them and support them.

Stan has written dozens of academic articles and 6 bestselling books, now translated into Spanish, Chinese, Turkish and Romanian, and more than 1.1 million people have tuned into Stan's TEDx talk.

Stan, I'd love to start a little bit just exploring some of the importance of our biology and our wiring in connection.

I think it's a piece that often people miss and forget. We can get very caught in the intellectual, the psychology and forget that ultimately we're animals, and that has a big impact on our capacity for connection.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Right. It does.

People think this is negative, what I'm about to say, but it actually isn't. We know about our heritage as human primates and we know that we're, of course, brilliant. This seems to be the most brilliant animal on the planet when it comes to being able to learn and to change and to be able to predict things and to be able to create things out of whole cloth and things that don't even exist. We have a brain that's able to do that.

So there are a lot of features that the human brain has, but a lot of those features are also bugs in other areas. For instance, the human primate is by nature off the factory line, aggressive, war-like, self centered, selfish, impulsive, moody, fickle, opportunistic, always aware of what's missing, always

aware of how to compare and contrast this from that, xenophobic, racist. This is just built into the DNA of all human primates.

And then civilization is what makes us better people so that we can get along and we're collaboratively and cooperatively. But that's civilization. That's not exactly who we are at the base, and that's not who we are when we're threatened, because when we're threatened, we're really good at staying alive and not so good at being loving when we are threatened.

Alex Howard - [00:02:56]

And I think we can all resonate with that, right. The people that we love the most are perhaps the people we have the most fear about losing or things falling apart. So when we feel under attack or we feel threatened, we find ourselves feeling things and perhaps saying things that are not our ultimate hearts desire towards that person.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

No, not at all. In fact, people sometimes take verbatim what people will say when they're most threatened. That is an aspect of a person, but it's an automatic, reflexive, survival aspect of a person. We will say things and do things when we feel threatened, because we are not really thinking we're using lightning fast recognition systems, memory systems to protect ourselves. And a lot of those things that we say come right out of the culture we grew up in. And so we have to understand that in biology, energy conservation is the big law, right?

If we don't have to do something we don't, we conserve energy, meaning we're lazy, we do the least amount possible. And one of the things we never really do is connect our earliest culture to the one that we carry throughout life, unless we know better. And we are still doing what we learned and what we saw in early childhood, especially under stress. And nothing more creative than that, just automatic, just reflexive.

Alex Howard

Something about, I guess, having the awareness of where we're responding from that can be very important. If we can feel that we're activated, we're responding from a survival or defensive place, that that's probably not the most helpful place from which to communicate or to speak in that moment.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

No, it's not. And it's not personal, even though it feels personal and ends up being personal, but again, these are automatic reflexes that have been there since the beginning of our species. We're really good at threat cues and picking up threat cues, and that's based partly on our nascent ability to pick a threat, even as infants. But then our accumulation of threat cues as we move throughout time interpersonally with people.

So the more I get hurt, the more I'm aware of threat cues in the environment, in your face, in your voice and your movements and so on. Sounds and words and phrases. All of those things go into the hopper and now I have more to cue me in the environment that might not be safe for me. And as soon as I stop feeling safe, I'm not exactly myself.

Alex Howard

So I guess in that moment, what's really important is rather than trying to resolve things in the relationship in that moment, is actually what's going to support us coming back to a place of safety?

Dr. Stan Tatkin - [00:05:56]

That's right. In a union, that is, let's say, a couple union, but in any union, in a free society that is involving adults, this is a conditional system. And so people come together based on terms, what are we going to do for each other and what are we never going to do? And it has to be that way otherwise, we'll disband.

So we know this, when we're putting together a group or putting together a business or a Church or a temple or government, we have to have a shared vision of what we're doing, a shared mission, a shared purpose to get people on board. And it has to be based on fairness and justice, and into some measure, sensitivity, or people will split off.

So that's in all unions, for some reason in couples it's the only system that does not go in with a mission, a shared purpose and shared principles of how they're going to govern each other and what they're going to do, what they're never going to do. And so we have a problem in couples.

Alex Howard

We can have quite different stories of how it should be?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Yeah, exactly. I'm governing according to the way I was in childhood, and you're doing it the way you were in childhood. Let the stronger family win. And that's no way to run a free union. It's going to end up being too unfair.

And so, we have to really rise above our basic, off the factory line abilities and start to become more aware of how difficult it really is for human beings to work over the long run without building up resentment or threat. And that's what ultimately breaks all unions up is too much threat.

And I'm talking about small threat. I'm not talking about running after somebody with a hatchet. I'm talking about repeated injuries that don't abate, no repair, and then accrue and inflame and then become a biological matter, actually, where people can barely be in the room together without feeling that they're going to be lied to or they're going to not get relief.

Alex Howard

And I think part of what's really important to reiterate here is that this is a biological survival state that our nervous system and our body goes into and it's there to protect us.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Yes. And it's universal. It knows no actual culture. It knows no gender, it knows no age. It is built in and part of the human primate. And it's part of all mammals, really. But it's really acute in humans because we have brains that other mammals don't have. We can make stuff up. We can come up with beautiful ideas or horrible ideas. We can come up with nation states that are built on beautiful equality and freedom. And we can come up with systems that are draconian and horrible and sadistic. We can make up cues, we can make up anything and believe.

So we have to understand that the mind's ability to make things up is what allows us to build things, to create things, but also is what destroys things as well. Every feature that we have can be a bug in other areas.

Alex Howard

What comes to my mind as you're speaking is that, it's that place of defensiveness we can go tonight. And get the image in my mind like a tortoise going into its shell, which is if you're a tortoise being

attacked by a predator is a really good thing to do to stay safe. But the problem is when we're in intimate relationships and we shut down or we go into our shell because we feel we need to defend. Actually, it's not the most helpful, and often not the most helpful response.

Dr. Stan Tatkin - [00:10:04]

No. If our father was a tortoise or our mother was a tortoise and we needed him or her the most and then they saw that as threatening and withdrew. That's a threat to us, right. Because they're unavailable, I'm being neglected, I'm being abandoned, I'm not being cared for.

Just the other side, if I have a very needy and clingy and forceful parent that won't allow me to be independent, won't allow me to be myself. And I'm always feeling pursued and I can't really get away. That's another problem. That's a threat.

So, in love it's different. In love we need to have a culture that puts the relationship at the center of the universe. Think of it as a pro-relationship culture as opposed to pro-self culture. Most of our families are pro-self. And we know this by their behavior and the offspring, the culture that they create is too often unfair and unjust and insensitive for the children. And that's because the parents are oriented to be pro-self under stress.

So we're really talking about stressful situations, which can be anything from a headache to we're in financial disarray, where people can start to choose their own interests over the collective interests, over the relationship and holding the integrity, the relationship together. That is a culture, that's a mindset, it's an orientation that's hard to get people to do if they didn't grow up in it.

Alex Howard

And, of course, we all have different patterns or strategies. So for some people under stress, they become very defensive. Others will become very attacking. Others will go into place of panic and anxiety. How do we start to work with those responses?

To put it another way, what helps to start to cultivate a secure, functioning relationship when we can see that we've got these reactivities and these biologically informed patterns that we're going into?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

That's a really good question. We're hurt by people and we're healed by people. This is all interpersonal. If we were raised by wolves we'd have a different set of conditions. We wouldn't have a lot of the language that we have about being heard, ashamed, guilty, and so on. Those start interpersonal notions.

And so, most of our suffering is interpersonal. We can think of another human being as being pretty much the hardest thing we'll deal with ever. Another human being is the most difficult, more complex. But we need human beings, and that makes it also difficult. We can't just go, okay, well, I'm just going to be alone and do it by myself. Some people can. Most can't.

We're interdependent animals. We even started that way. We needed to. We started as dyads, and then we moved into groups because we weren't strong enough to master the environment. So we relied on others to band together and help us survive. The same is true today. We need other people to survive, and it's not just a luxury.

So how do we do that, but maintain a sense of safety and security in that system, and also a sense of we're going to profit from that union. One of us isn't going to lose. We're going to make sure that that doesn't happen. That's a very hard thing to do with human beings. That's the only condition that will ensure relationships will last a long time.

Alex Howard - [00:13:51]

So in the day-to-day care of a relationship, what are some of the building blocks? What are some of the pieces that are really helpful to stop us going into those reactive biological responses?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Well, it starts in infancy, but most of us can't do anything about that that are talking right now, but it does start in infancy. And it starts at the top. It starts with the parents, starts with the environment that the baby is born into.

And so what we have is nature repeating itself as nature does. It's not personal, good or bad, right or wrong, just nature repeats itself. So at any point in our life span, we can forge new relationships based on our human ability to create something new.

So let's say you and I get together and we know that we're going to be automatic. We're going to, in the beginning we're going to be swell, we're going to be incredible because we're strangers and because we're on drugs in the beginning.

Alex Howard

Literally. Yeah.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Literally, because we're novel to each other. But as soon as the novelty wears off, we automate each other. And that means that I think I know you, but I really don't. But I'm going to operate as though I do. And I'm going to make many, many more errors of attribution appraisal and so on. And I'm going to match you up against history. So that's what we're going to do with each other.

Now, if we know this, then you and I can forge a union based on what we want going forward. We are the architects of this culture. We are going to co-create something based on today, not on yesterday. And it's what do we want and what do we never want? Do we want to be absolutely safe and secure in this union? And we say, yes, we do. Okay. Now, how are we going to do that? Well, I have to guarantee your absolute safety and security. And by the way, I mean, felt sense, that means how you feel, not how I feel. You have to guarantee my felt sense of safety and security because it's done crossways.

And therefore, we're both holders of that responsibility. We both have a mutual stake. We both have the same things to lose and the same things to gain. That makes us equal. And that makes us interdependent because we depend on each other for the same thing. We want to survive, and we want to feel safe and secure. That can be done by two human beings of different cultures, of different personalities. It's always done. It's been done throughout history. Yet people don't see it that way until they have to.

Put cop partners together. They don't know each other. They may not even like each other, but because they depend on each other for their lives, they become fast friends. The same in the military. You're told you're not important. The person to your left and right are more important than you, they're going to save your life. These relationships that have been culturized by the military that you're interdependent, last a lifetime.

And so, we know that when people come together based on a single interest, like survival, they find other ways of getting along. That's the very bottom, that's the very foundation, but let's also thrive.

Alex Howard - [00:17:20]

Before we come to the thriving on that foundation, that often those agreements might be somewhat implicit, but what you're saying is there's a value in making it explicit.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Absolutely explicit, because it is written in stone. It is a principle that we consider perfect, though we are not. And so what that means is that the person who fails at any given moment can only do two things, beg for forgiveness and do something to make it right. That's all that person can do. So that makes governance easier, right? We know when we've fallen out of agreement, we know our lives depend that we stay in fidelity to that agreement, and all we can do is apologize and fix it.

Now, that is a good recipe. So we're just taking one thing. I did something. You feel insecure. I'm on it. I don't argue with you. I don't say, hey, that's your problem. I didn't make you insecure. I take responsibility for it, and I fix it. And you do that with me and everything's ducky with lots of mistakes, lots of mistakes that are repaired right away. And that's how you do the human shuffle. That's how you do a relationship.

Alex Howard

So what you're saying is that at some point relatively early in a couple being together, having these really clear conversations about these aren't the words you use, but using a military example, like these are the rules of engagement. This is how we're going to care for this relationship together.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Or we're dead, or we will perish. This is not a luxury. This is a necessity. There's no game here. It is reality because we exist in a dangerous, unpredictable, uncaring world. The only way that we make the world more predictable, safer and easier to live with existentially is by creating this pact that we have a mutual interest in doing this in a world that does not have the same agreement. Therefore, this is good. This is good, and this is essential. Otherwise, what's the point? What's the point?

Alex Howard

What might the wording of that pact be? Can you give us an example of how one might state that?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

We protect each other in public and private at all times. And again, if you feel that you're not protected in public, that's what counts, not that I think I protected you, that you feel unprotected. I take care of that.

If one of us is in distress, the other one drops what they're doing in minutes to that person post haste. We're each other's confidence. We share information freely. There is no hiding of information. The left and right hands know what they're doing at all times. Why? Because as partners, we are head of state. We are at the top of the food chain. We're governors, bosses, generals. We have to share information or people suffer.

And so as governors to govern we have to have the same knowledge. We have to have the same transparency. We decide what is going to happen. Others don't.

And in this way, we look at the relationship as primary, because if we go down, nobody is going to be okay. Not our kids, not our families, not our jobs, not our creativity.

So again, this is a framing of an idea where we are going to be absolutely fiercely loyal and protective of each other because nobody else will. That ship sailed in childhood and probably wasn't that great either, maybe. But we're going to do it better. We're going to make it awesome because we can.

And that's really the thing. A relationship doesn't exist. It's a shared mythology in our heads. It's an abstraction. You can't take a picture and say, that's a relationship. You can say there's just two people. But a relationship is the mythology we create. It's one of our abilities to do.

So are we creating the same relationship? Is our mythology's on the same page? Are we aiming in the same direction? Do we want the same things? Are we trying to avoid the same disasters?

And of course, it's not perfect, but it's constantly being molded and shaped as we make errors, as we make errors. We're constantly building this structure, this ethos, this relationship, set of ethics that everyone will see, including especially our children. That's quite powerful because we're doing more than we're saying. We're showing more and telling less.

And that is again, two people can always do that. Always do that. And it's been proven throughout history. Arch enemies wake up one day because they can't move their countries. Hey, let's not kill each other's children anymore. I'm really tired, aren't you? I'd like to sleep at night. Let's not steal each other's crops. Let's go one better. You have technology. I have technology. Let's put it together and make a lot of money. This has been going on forever.

And when people put their mind to it, decide that they're going to find where they agree, because all people are alike, they can agree on pretty much everything. Everything. We want to feel safe and secure. We want to feel loved, we want to feel taken seriously, we want to be respected and admired, we want to be chosen, we want to feel that the other person is going to be there when we need them, we want loyalty. You can get an agreement on all of those big ticket items. The rest of it is mechanics. How are we going to do it?

And when two people know they want the same thing and they know they've got to get there, they'll find a way to get there. And by agreement, they'll make each other do it.

Alex Howard - [00:23:19]

And there's something you were just saying a few minutes ago that we're going to make endless mistakes along the way but there's actually something which is almost the repair of and the care of those mistakes actually becomes the glue that brings the relationship closer together.

I have this speech that I always give to new staff members. And I always say at some point along the way, you're going to make a big and expensive mistake. And in that moment you're going to have a choice. You're either going to hide it or you're going to be terrified or you're going to come to me, and you're going to tell me, and we're going to figure it out together. And that's when our relationship, our professional relationship is going to build trust. And it's the same thing in intimate relationship, right?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Absolutely. Repair, amends, apologies, making things right is the secret sauce of relationships. It is there. It is essential in infancy, when we miss attune with our baby and we work to re-attune with the baby. It's there when we say we're sorry to our child for acting badly as a parent, that shows humility. That shows that the relationship is more important than the self, than being right. It's always there.

What happens when people don't repair? They duel to the death. They start wars. They create lawsuits. They break up families, marriages because they simply won't fix what's broken and admit their wrongs and make the relationship more important than being right. That is the hubris of the human being, our pride, our belief that our communication is actually clear. It's not ever.

We believe that our memory is accurate. It's not ever. We believe our perception is actually clear and always the same. It's never that way. There is nothing we can count on that we can say for a fact, I'm right and you're wrong. That's a perspective that comes out of our heads, which, by the way, we never get out of. And so it's really human hubris that causes all these problems. We are prideful. We will fight to the death for our memory, and all of it is stupid, but it's human. We all do it, me included.

Alex Howard - [00:25:40]

So, having these explicit, clear agreements is a really important foundation. This repair piece is also really important. You said a little bit earlier though, that's the base level, but that's not what it takes for relationships to really thrive. So let's speak a bit more to that.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Well, on a technical level in the brain, we have a very, very fancy neocortex. And in particular, as we move toward the front, our prefrontal cortex, that has different functions in different areas.

The area that I talk about now the most is an area called the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. It is slightly above and to the side. And that area, we know is a little fancier of an executor. It more likely than not will do the right thing or choose the right thing when the right thing is the hardest to do.

And that is the best part of being human. Our ability to override our impulses or our animal senses. And if not in the reflex, then immediately after and going back and going, I'm so sorry. That was wrong. I shouldn't have done that. Here's what I suggest the next time. Next time I do that because I'm automatic. I'll forget. Just cue me, remind me, and I promise I will yield. I'll change my tone and I'll fix it. That's the way to govern.

And so we're talking about good faith. We're talking about character. We're talking about making choices that are the best choices that are the right thing to do when it's the hardest thing to do. And that's a higher level human. That's a more complex, socially emotionally developed human being who's willing to do that, because it's not easy. It's not easy, we're battling our nature. We're battling our nature, and we're raising the bar. You and I we're saying, you know what? I can't do this very well. I didn't know how to do this in my family, but I want that, the same thing you want. Let's say it's so, we'll put it in place and we'll make each other get there.

How do we do that? Well, you tell me, hey, wait a second. We agreed 3 minutes, one of us is supposed to come back together and say, we're okay. We don't have to fix the world, we just have to make sure we know we're okay. You've got to do it. I've got to do it. So do it. Well, that's easy to enforce, because I agreed to it. I'm obeying my principal, not you.

And this is a higher level human capacity to create principles that we abide by. It's not like I'm doing it because mommy or daddy tells me, I'm doing it because I said so, because I agreed to it. That's what I said was the best thing when it's the hardest to do. Therefore you got it.

And that's how we govern. That's how we get better and better. We make each other better because we can. And only two people can do that. One person alone cannot do this stuff. Cannot.

Alex Howard

But it also takes a lot of skill, I guess, and capacity in those moments where we feel triggered or we feel reactive. And it's like our biology, the animal is wanting to explode or to offload or to have that reaction. And what helps people to regulate, to self-regulate in those moments? Because one can have the awareness, I made this commitment. I know intellectually, it's the right thing to do, but one is, in that moment, feels a slave to the reactivity.

Dr. Stan Tatkin - [00:29:21]

There are a lot of tools out there for self-regulation. There's mindfulness meditation, which is a fabulous workout for the brain, particularly the areas I've been talking about. Building a witness, self equanimity, ability to deal with internalized pain, emotion, sensation thoughts, and so on. So that's out. They're plenty of resources for that.

There are other things, behavioral tricks that will help people self-regulate. But the actual best thing is to learn how to co-regulate with another person. Were built that way. In close up I can see what's going on in you, Alex, before I know what's going on in me. Therefore, I can regulate you when I see you shifting, which is faster, and that affects me. Anything I do with you affects me right away. Rather than sit there and try to self-regulate and meditate while Rome is burning, it is better for me to put Rome out by pouring water on you, to do anything to calm you down, to relax you, to return you to safety. That's the quickest way to do it.

So the first person who sees it does it because we're tied together. Where you go, I go. If I don't take care of you right now, we both go over the cliff because we're both responsible for this vehicle. If it goes over the cliff that was on both of us, neither of us did anything to calm, relax, to relieve the other person enough to bring them back to their senses.

And it's truly that way. We're talking about a state of mind that grabs us. We know the state well, it's fight or flight or freeze, or worse than that, it's faint. That's a life threat. So these are predictable states of mind that we get into that are action oriented, and they overtake thinking. I cannot think. As soon as my blood pressure and heart rate get up to a certain level, I change, my brain changes, chemicals change, and now I'm going to care only about my own interests.

Therefore, it's in your best interest when you start to see that happen to return me to safety, or you're going to have a lot of trouble on your hands. And you won't get anything from me. As soon as I feel the least bit unsafe I'm not influenceable. Therefore, as soon as we start to tilt into unsafety or lack of safety or security, we're going to walk away with nothing. Guaranteed every time.

Something that people don't know is that we are responsible to each other. That's not codependency, that's interdependency, that we're better at managing each other than ourselves. And that is how we actually manage ourselves is by being good at another person. I'm really good at Alex. There's nothing Alex could do that would throw me. I'm not afraid of Alex. I know exactly how to move Alex around without using fear, threat, or guilt or shame. I can use attraction. I'm an Alex whisperer because I made it my business to learn him. And Alex is a Stan whisperer. People don't do this because they don't think they should. And so we have people playing it only for themselves. And it's good for me if it's not good for you. Sorry, pal. And that's what starts wars.

Alex Howard

What strikes me though is what will bring us back to that feeling of safety and connection is, of course, as you say, it's different for each of us.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

You have to own your animal.

Alex Howard

I was going to say, because the tendency is that we often try to give to others what we want them to give to us. And so, can you give perhaps some examples of different ways that one might bring different tools or strategies that would help bring someone back to that place of connection safety?

Dr. Stan Tatkin - [00:33:16]

I think, let me just start first with a metaphor. The reason that babies and animals are easier than human beings, although we're animals, but a non-speaking beings, is because we don't rely on talk, and therefore we don't see ourselves in the same way. We see ourselves in another adult human being that talks because we can project, we can apply our memory to other people, and our expectations are different. But if you were an actual animal, would I do with you the way I want to do it?

If I wanted to get close to you, no. If I didn't want to get bitten, no, I wouldn't. I would learn you and I would learn how to earn your trust. I would learn how to touch you. I would learn how to feed you, I would learn how to talk to you. I would learn how to move around you if I wanted a relationship with you.

But we don't do that with each other. I don't learn you. I think that you should think how I think, you should like what I like. I don't feel bad. I don't know why you don't. That's narcissism. It is. I'm not talking in a pejorative way. It's just a fact. It's an inability to see you as a separate person with separate mind, separate intentions, separate sensitivities, and so on.

And as long as I do that, I will violate you. And this is important. How do we fall out of favor with each other by assuming the other person is the same as us? And then we violate their rights, we violate their sensibilities, and we deserve what we get because we were not paying attention to our audience.

So this is simply respect. It is the opposite of automation. It's paying attention. It is being present with the person that we depend on, and they depend on us. And we are strangers. And this is important. We are always strangers, constantly working to get to know each other.

What happens with us human beings, when we automate each other, we think we're family. And that's an error. It's an error because we're not family. A family thinks they can get away with anything. I can do anything, we're blood, you can't leave me. That's not true actually because families do break up. But it is part of our energy conservation, our laziness, our doing as little as possible to assume the other person is just like me. That's an error. And that's what causes the feeling of threat from another person.

So as long as people respect what we're talking about here, the science of humans, the anthropological, biological, cultural, anthropological facts of human beings. This isn't that you can't wish it away. It is what it is, but you can be smart enough.

And that's what we're trying to teach people is to be smarter and to use our capacities to override and to do better than our basic functions, which is to Hulk smash or just procreate and do that or do whatever is expedient in the moment. That's the human being. I do what's expedient. I don't do what's best.

Alex Howard

But what I'm also really hearing you say is that if we want to be in a fulfilling, nourishing, loving relationship there is a level of responsibility, like an accountability that goes with that. And I think so often the stories we can have is, oh well, my relationship doesn't work because my other half does this. It's very easy to get into those stories. But what I really appreciate in what you're saying is that one has to act like a grownup. One has to really take responsibility for behaving in a way which is going to cultivate the kind of relationship that we want to be in.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Secure functioning is simply being an adult. What is an adult? An adult can tolerate loss. An adult can make decisions knowing that there is no decision without loss. An adult knows that all people are

unknowing. All people are a pain in the ass. All people are disappointing. All people are contradictory. So what. So am I.

And so, being that is the fact of human beings, it's never going to change. What can we do? And we can forge agreements and we can make our lives better. We can do better. We can have more than we would ever have by ourselves if we just think as a two person or three person or four persons system of fairness and justice. And when we fail, we fix it. We apologize. We don't argue. We don't make excuses. That's a child.

We're talking about stepping up to the plate. And in thinking, in terms of interdependence, everything I do to you is going to come back at me, good or bad. There's nothing I can do to you, Alex, that won't return immediately to me. If I hurt you, I'm going to get hurt now. If I just slung something at you, I'm going to get punched. If I do something loving and giving, I'm going to get that in return. This is the fact that we're dealing with and we're not alone. We're with somebody, we are responsible to that person, they're responsible to us.

And we have to rethink why we're doing this. What's the point of a union? It cannot be about love. It cannot be about emotion. It has to be purpose centered, purpose centered. What is our purpose? Because feelings come and go, they change throughout time. I like you. I don't like you. I'm attracted. Not so much. But what's going to keep us together is we have a set of purposes and principles that enhance our lives and protect us from the wild. And that always is there, regardless of how I feel.

So let's say you and I have a principle. You and I, we decide we're going to do loving, affectionate, romantic things for each other throughout every day. We're just going to do that, throughout every day.

Now, what about if we don't like each other? We still do it. What about if we're mad as hell? We still do it. What about if we're about to break up? We still do it. Because the principle is perfect. We do it regardless of how we feel because we want that thing. We want that thing. So grownups, select a purpose, and they do it because it needs to be done, not because they want to do it, but because it's the best thing that we decided is the best thing, we're going to do it no matter what. That's how we get things done.

Alex Howard - [00:39:57]

And how about those that would say, well, I can't be affectionate if I don't feel affectionate, for example. Affection needs to come from a place of in my heart, in this moment, I want to be affectionate.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Good luck with that. It means the other person can do the same thing. If that's me, then I'm saying you can do the same thing. And now we're going to go through a life of feeling rejected and feeling that we're not wanted. Good times. Grow up. This is about doing the right thing. This is not about feeling. If feeling ran our lives we would be where we are today. Oh we are today. We're in the middle of a possible Civil War. We're doing all sorts of things that are nasty to other people without thought and the chickens come home to roost very soon.

So, so much for feeling. I'm all for feeling. I'm all for feeling that we've earned the good feelings that we have because of what we do for each other. Not what we say. And not that we say, oh, but I love you as I'm screwing you, as I'm doing something terrible to you. But I love you. It means nothing.

This is about stepping up to the plate. And this is about using our God given equipment, which is to be able to think ahead. Downstream effects, to decide together as a team. What is the best possible outcome for us? Do this. Let's do it. And we're going to make each other do it. Remind each other this is our agreement. We're going to get there.

When people are focused on a third thing they want, they do it. They go, they do it. If we're focused on ourselves, we get what we pay for. We get another person who's going to do the same thing, and now we're not going to make it.

Alex Howard - [00:41:40]

What's really coming to my mind as your speaking Stan, is that it's really redefining what people think love is. Because I think a lot of people think love is those drugs that we experience, what you spoke to when we first meet someone, we get full of serotonin, oxytocin, whatever the kind of chemicals are. People think that that chemical high is love.

And what I'm hearing you say is love is really the actions that we take. It's the way that we treat that person in our lives.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

It's earned. The love that we feel that gets us into relationship is nature's love potion to get us to procreate. Not in all cases, but it gets reenacted in all pair bondings. Gee, you are really cool, I have great conversation with you, Alex, I want to hang out with you again and again. Okay, well, that takes us only so far, but when the rubber hits the road, and by that, I mean, when we start to experience load bearing, now will the wheels come apart because we have no structure? We have no agreements, we have no idea of why we're doing this, we have no plan.

A lot of couples will say, oh, we're so good at this. We've been so good. I don't know what happened a year ago, but now we just won't even talk to each other. Well, they were naturals. They got through naturally, but they didn't count for life. Life is going to add more load with the slings and arrows that life offers. Are you going to be able to handle it when the chips are down? Can you really work together in a fire? Collaboratively and cooperatively, and not bail and not attack each other?

Is the war in the foxhole, which is really stupid. How are we as a team when it's the hardest? That is what I hope to train people to do. Is that's what's necessary and it's not perfect, but it's the only way to go. So it's a practice until you get better and better and better at it. There's no other way to do it, is what I'm saying. There's just no other way. Any other method, any other way of approaching this is too unfair in the long run, and it will cause resentment, threat, and eventual bad things will happen.

Alex Howard

Stan, I'm mindful of time. I feel like we're just getting started on this stuff.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Yeah, I know. I know. It's a fascinating topic. And someday I'll tell you about how I have to apply this in my life. And how hard it is. It's hard. I'm as much of a asshole as anybody else. I do stupid things. I'm my own worst enemy. I'm selfish, I'm opportunistic. I'm all those things. But I also know that I want to be better. I want to do better. And so does my partner. And we do it every day. And it's not easy, but the alternative is terrible.

Alex Howard

And that's a great endpoint, Stan.

People that want to find out more about you and your work. What's the best way for them to do that?

Dr. Stan Tatkin

People can find me at thepactinstitute.com

And there we teach therapists worldwide who want to learn the psychobiological approach, a lot of science in working with couples, it's not just couples, but we started with couples, we specialize there.

And we also run international couples retreats. We have one coming up next year, if it still exists, in Spain at a monastery, because of COVID I meant. But we're still planning for that. But we do them online all the time. They sell out. We're adding more. And I do that with my wife. So people can find us there as well.

Alex Howard - [00:45:27]

Fantastic.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

And on social media as [@drstantatkin](#) everywhere.

Alex Howard

Yeah, you have a great Instagram actually. I enjoy seeing each day.

Stan, thank you so much for your time today.

Dr. Stan Tatkin

Alex, always a pleasure. Always a pleasure with you. Thank you.