

Healing relational trauma

Guest: Heather Monroe

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:09]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today, I'm speaking with Heather Monroe, an integrative psychotherapist who specializes in the healing of relational trauma.

Heather's approach to helping people is creative, open, and flexible, as she understands that just as the context of trauma is individual, so is the process of healing.

Today, we're going to be talking about relational trauma and trauma bonding. As this is a relationship conference, it's helpful to talk about the patterns of behavior that explicitly shape who we are and the relationship patterns we seek out in adulthood.

Thank you so much for joining me, Heather.

Heather Monroe

Oh, my gosh. I'm so excited to be here talking about this really important subject.

Meagen Gibson

So, Heather, in many of our conversations featured in the Relationship Super conference, we've mentioned attachment styles, and we've referred to family systems as in forming our relationships in adulthood. But I'd love if you and I could really break it down for people and talk about how our childhood, family systems and relationships impact our adult relationships. And then kind of explicitly talk about what happens if those included traumatic experiences.

Heather Monroe

The way that I see and treat trauma is that I view trauma as not only what happened to you that shouldn't have, and that's what we're talking about, like neglect, abandonment, physical abuse, sexual abuse, all those really horrible things that should never happen to anybody.

So my definition doesn't only include what shouldn't have happened to you but did, it also and very importantly, includes what should have happened to you and did not.

And so taking that into account, my definition of relational trauma is a consistent disruption in the area of emotional and physical safety in a child's mind.

So a consistent disruption in the child's emotional and physical safety. That would be love and acceptance as well.

And so when we look at trauma through that lens, we're going to be looking at what happens inside our nervous systems when we have withholding parents, when we have parents that are perfectionists, when we have parents that use shame in order to get us to do things that they want us to do, when we have parents that might be workaholics, that have mental illness, that are so preoccupied with their own anxieties or own depressions that they fail to see and become attuned to what that child needs emotionally and physically from that parent at any given time.

And that's when we really start to see issues in the way that that child grows up to see themselves, how that child relates to other people and how we relate to the world around us.

Meagen Gibson - [00:03:14]

And that's one of the things that people always make jokes about starting therapy or starting work with a therapist is that, why do they ask about my mother? Why do they always ask? I don't want to talk about my mother. I want to talk about why I can't find a life partner. And therapists are like, well, there's a really good reason for that, because the patterns of behavior that you're unconscious of and the ways that you relate to people in intimate relationships are deeply impacted by those things and those experiences.

Yeah, you said a lot of things that I want to circle back on, but one of them, especially is that attunement factor. Is that, and we've all had relationships with family members where we dismissively say, well, my mother never hugged me. I never got any physical touch from my mom, but that was just her, she was just kind of cold and in this dismissive way.

But I'd love it if you could talk just a little bit about how that subtly over time affects not only your messages about yourself and what you deserve in relationship, but also just what you feel like is safe in relationship.

Heather Monroe

Absolutely. So let's go over the four main attachment styles. I think that that would be really helpful for people. And I'll also talk about how those attachment styles develop.

I just want to say there's a caveat to all of this. Depending on the way that our nervous system is programmed, whether we are more parasympathetic or sympathetic oriented. Parasympathetic would be like rest and digest, mellow, could be more easy going, but also it could be more shut down. We could be more susceptible to depression, susceptible to shutting down, to numbness. That would be more parasympathetic.

Or sympathetic, which would be more susceptible to anxiety, but also much more of a doer, much more keeping busy, much more of a warrior. So that's when our nervous systems go awry when we're not feeling safe in some way, we're not feeling seen. Do you go more towards depression or more towards anxiety? More towards shame or more towards hyper vigilance?

Meagen Gibson

And how much of that would you say is nature or nurture?

Heather Monroe

That is nature. We're all wired with a certain nervous system. That's why you see some kids that are much more like, so, for instance, like my little girl, she's much more like me. She'll sit down and play with a flower and not very active. My little boy is super sympathetic. He is wrestle rough, needing a lot of physical things. So he's more wired towards sympathetic. My daughter's more wired towards parasympathetic.

Meagen Gibson - [00:06:15]

It's fascinating too because it explains why different family members of the same family system can cope and deal with and have the literal physiological effects of the same experience be completely different.

Heather Monroe

Yes. Exactly. And that's also why I think in parenting we don't talk about this enough. If a parent feels like they don't connect the same way with one of their children, a lot of the times that has to do with your nervous system is different. You're trying to match a nervous system that doesn't match yours, and that can feel harder than a nervous system that does match yours.

So that is nature that we are born with a certain type of temperament.

And then where nurture comes in is, so a secure attachment is when our parents are able to attune to a baby, toddler, kid, preteen, teen to attune to their child needs.

And when I say attune to them, it's not all the time. It actually doesn't have to be, you just have to be good enough. This is not like perfectionism. We are resilient.

Meagen Gibson

Sometimes we can hear the word attunement and as parents, we can just superimpose the word like anticipate, that we're just constantly one step ahead of their needs and desires. And that's not it at all.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So, if a baby is crying and you pick up that baby and you're like, oh, maybe they're hungry, the last feed that they had was 3 hours ago. You feed them, they stop crying or they have a wet diaper or they need to go to sleep.

So a mother or father that's attuned to that child is going to get it right quite a bit of the time, at least 50% - 70% of the time they're going to get it right.

And because of that, as the child grows up, let's say they continue to be attuned. So if somebody, if their kid falls and cries, they get down to that child's level, they see if they're okay, they see what that child needs emotionally at that point.

And because of that attunement, that child is going to get the message that my voice matters, that I make an impact, that I am worth something and that when I say something, when I cry out, when I need help, someone is going to help me.

So think about all the subconscious messaging that just has to do with my voice matters in this world. I have the right to take up space in this world because my space doesn't overwhelm my primary caregivers. If that makes sense. So that's a secure attachment.

Heather Monroe

If mom or dad, or your caretaker, get it right sometimes, but mostly don't get it right. So they pick up the baby and all of a sudden they get really anxious by the crying, they're flooded, their nervous system's flooded, so their reasoning brain goes offline and now they're in their fear based brain because of their own anxiety or depression, or their overwhelmed at work or whatever, or in the relationship, or have a mental health issue, or have addiction issue like, you name it, whatever.

They pick up that baby and they go, it must be tired. I need to put it to bed. Or they hold the baby really, really tight because they're scared. Well, now that scares the baby. The baby cries even louder.

They put the baby down to go to sleep. The baby doesn't need to go to sleep, so it cries even louder. Okay, fine. Pick it up really harshly and give it food. It's not hungry. Finally, they realized that maybe it has a wet diaper and then the baby stops crying.

But in the midst of that, there is a lot of anxiety, there is a lot, sometimes they don't get it right at all, and the baby just gives up. But the baby has these mixed signals of sometimes they get it right, and sometimes they don't.

So if that continues through infancy, toddlerhood where the baby cries and the caretaker gets really anxious or overwhelmed and says stop crying, what's wrong with you? And it has again that anxiety, that baby is going to feel anxious too. Like is mom or dad going to get it right this time? Or are they not? And that creates an anxious attachment style where that child grows up to not trust if someone's going to leave or not. Because when mom and dad aren't attuned most of the time, that is abandonment.

Meagen Gibson - [00:11:10]

It feels like abandonment. Yeah yeah.

Heather Monroe

Feels like abandonment exactly. Because that's their survival, that child's survival.

So that child will grow up being very anxious in relationships, meaning we are hyper vigilant around, is this person going to leave me? What are the cues of that person leaving me? People with anxious attachment when given faces, in research they'll be given different types of faces to categorize them as happy, mad. And anxious attachment style will think that the most subtle difference in a face means angry. So we are always looking at where is the abandonment coming? When is it coming? And we do this self fulfilling prophecy, almost, with pushing people away because we're so scared of abandonment.

Heather Monroe

The other way that we can go is if our parents weren't attuned at all. If they were attuned maybe 3% of the time or less, 5% let's say. So just like anxious attachment that the parents are attuned like, most of the time they aren't but sometimes they are. And so with avoidantly attached people, their parents weren't really attuned at all.

And when a parent isn't attuned to a child's need at all, that child will give up trying to get that parent to pay attention to them. And they will create these walls, these relational walls in their life where they aren't going to let anybody in. So they look anti dependent. They present as an island on to themselves. They are very ambiguous in relationships. They don't like labels. They present with the primary fear of intimacy.

But underneath that fear is actually the greater fear of abandonment because they will do anything not to let you into their life, because if they do, what happened to them with their most precious caretakers that they let into their life, they were consistently abandoned.

So just like the anxiously attached person presents that their fear is abandonment, their greatest fear is actually intimacy, because what if someone has staying power? I don't want to be a part of a team that I'm chosen for, that kind of thing.

Meagen Gibson

That must feel too vulnerable, right?

Heather Monroe - [00:13:46]

Vulnerable, yeah.

Another way to describe it is avoidantly attached people are protected but not connected. And anxiously attached people are connected but not protected. So it's a sense of that balance. Securely attached people are protected and connected.

And then the last attachment, the last attachment style that we see not as often is the disorganized attachment style. And this is what happens when you have complex trauma, physical abuse, sexual abuse, when you live in an environment at home where the person who's terrorizing you is supposed to be the person to make you feel safe.

So your world oscillates between safety and terror, safety and terror. So you never know what you're going to get. And because of that, your attachment style is very rightly named, disorganized. Anxious and avoidant attachment styles are very prescribed. You can tell, you know what's coming with each of them.

With a disorganized attachment style, one minute you're very submissive, the next minute you're raging at that person. One minute you're scared of abandonment, the next minute you're pushing that person away. And there's no rhyme or reason to it because your nervous system is so jacked up by your family system.

The other thing I want to say...

Meagen Gibson

Sorry, just a pause really quickly. And that comes from that disorganized family system when you were growing up. If you had a chronically depressed parent who sometimes had good days and then also a parent that was maybe a substance abuse user or had explosive moments of anger that you couldn't predict that would come out of nowhere, like that kind of unpredictability. What kind of safety and security am I getting from this parent on what day? Sometimes they're super secure and very loving and attached and giving and generous. And sometimes they're completely unrelatable and distant and explosive and unsafe.

Heather Monroe

Yes, completely.

So there's like the overt ways that this can look. And then there's the more covert ways. And the more overt the trauma, so the more that there's physical abuse, there's incredible rage, rage in the household, sexual abuse in the household, the more the disorganized attachment is going, the more severe it's going to be. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

So, we've got some people at home, this might be the first time that they're hearing this broken down in this way. In your assessment, the first step if you've identified as one of those or you relate to some of that, how does that relate to your relationships in adulthood? And how can you break that relational cycle?

Heather Monroe

Yeah. Exactly.

One thing that I want to stress to everybody, because this can be very triggering when we first learn this information, I know it was for me, is that your attachment design shows that your attachment style can absolutely change at any point in your life.

So there is hope for everybody out there. I really just want to stress that.

So let's first talk about how this looks in relationships growing up, and then I'm going to talk at the end about the healing and how we tend to ourselves to break the cycle.

So even for people that have a secure attachment, I want to say that when there is conflict in a relationship, so even people with secure attachment, when there's conflict in a relationship, you will go one of two ways.

You will either shut down and kind of turn away from your partner, or you will become more anxious and want to reach out and sometimes in productive ways, but a lot of time if you're really triggered, it can be in not productive ways, like nit picking or picking fights or engaging in conflict. That's more of an anxious attachment style type, protest behaviors we call it, in adult attachment science.

So just know that. But in secure relationships, we veer towards one or the other. And it's just good to know that about our nervous systems. Oh, I go more shut down and avoidant. Oh, I go more anxious.

Meagen Gibson - [00:18:27]

Especially not just in conflict, but in times of stress, if you're dealing with an ill parent or an ill child or a global pandemic or in times of stress, you might revert to those old attachment patterns.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Exactly.

So what it looks like in relationship, or what trauma bonding looks like in, my definition of trauma bonding. So trauma bonding mistakes intensity for intimacy. It mistakes really high highs and really low lows for what is an intimate relationship.

And what it does when we get into relationships like that, we're just playing out our childhood drama and trauma in relationships. It's like hysterical is always historical. So whenever something is super intense, there tends to be some history around intensity.

So why do avoidant attachment styles and anxious attachment styles always tend to find each other?

One of the reasons is that attachment, anxious and avoidant styles tend to be more recycled in the dating pool. Because a secure attachment tends to find someone, they're not perfect, but I'm much more willing to compromise. And I'm much more confident in myself to know that I can compromise, as well as, if someone shows me a lot of red flags, I'm going to leave and move on to the next. It's just, it's not for me.

Whereas an anxiously attached person is going to cling, we are going to cling to something that feels dangerous to us because maybe, just maybe they'll change, and that will prove to us that we are lovable.

Avoidant attachment style, you're going to be recycled quite a bit because we are constantly dating crazy people. We are constantly...

Meagen Gibson

We all know somebody that's, like every single person they've ever been with has been the crazy one.

Heather Monroe - [00:20:43]

Exactly. We are also, no one ever tends to be good enough for us. We're always comparing, there's always a fantasy of I just haven't found the one yet. That might be true or really, if there's a pattern of that and a pattern of short, intense breakups and intensity in the relationship, you might also tend to have an avoidant attachment style.

So what does this cycle look like? What does the insecure attachment style look like?

So anxiously attached people, let's start with that attachment style. We are going to be attracted to the fantasy. So we will find someone and think, oh, my gosh, this checks off all the boxes. I feel there's an intensity, like an intense draw to that person, and then towards you. This mistaking intensity for intimacy. So there's not a lot of warm up. It's like we jump into this fantasy of who this person is and what this relationship, the potential of this relationship, is going to be. Oh, my God, this is the person I've waited for my whole life. I almost feel saved in this way.

And then what happens is we lose our autonomy, our world gets smaller and smaller, and the relationship gets bigger and bigger. So that's the second thing that happens to us when we're anxiously attached.

Meagen Gibson

And say if it's, sorry to interrupt you, in those is that where you can get kind of enmeshed, like a chameleon where you just turn into a good partner for whoever it is. If that person likes fishing, all of a sudden, you're an avid fisher. And I don't think that's the word, is fisher a word? You know what I mean.

Heather Monroe

Totally, completely. That's a great point. We tend to be chameleons for sure, because we're hyper vigilant around what is going to help us not be abandoned. So we're like, we're ahead of the game. We're already going for, oh, they like this, okay. I like this. And it really feels in that moment like we do like that because it's so exciting, because we're high, we're literally high on the relationship.

So then these red flags start popping up. There's some relational walls that we see, they won't let us completely in, they're ambiguous, there feels like there's some ambiguity around labeling the relationship, you feel like you can't get quite close enough, but we're in denial. We're like, no, that's not happening. But then they brought me flowers. So we're making up for the little slights by saying, oh, but then he called me or she then said hi to me. It's like we just are in denial.

Then there's a catalyst. Something happens that breaks the denial. And it becomes very clear to us that that person is not invested the way that we are invested. And when that happens, we go through emotional withdrawal. And this can almost look like a mental health crisis. We become beside ourselves with grief because it triggers in us that initial wound, that initial abandonment.

So again, hysterical is historical. So all of a sudden we are on the floor hysterically crying. We can't think of anything but that person. It becomes very disorienting. Again, it might be a mental health crisis where we have a panic attack or our friends start worrying about suicide with us, things like that. We will obsess within, then we go into obsession and medication.

So if we might drink too much, we might medicate ourselves, we become obsessed with getting that person back. So there's this obsession with getting revenge or getting that person back. And then lastly, we will either return to the fantasy or we will leave the relationship and do the cycle over again. So we just keep repeating the cycle.

Meagen Gibson - [00:25:01]

So in between that cycle, too, in the part where you're trying to get the person back, there's a, I can fix it, I can change, I'll be different because it reinforces that message of this was my fault, I'm not good enough, I'm not lovable, I am not whole in and of myself and not deserving of a relationship, so I will change.

Heather Monroe

You got it. Completely. And so it puts it back to us.

So now let's look at the avoidantly attached person, and this is their cycle. The avoidantly attached person is attracted to that vulnerability that the anxious attachment, that the anxiously attached person has. So it's almost like they're attracted to the damsel in distress or the tragic hero that needs, there's like a brokenness that the anxious person might put off, that the avoidant person picks up on. So they are attracted to that vulnerability and they go into the phase of seduction.

The avoidant also knows how to show up in relationship in order to create power. And I'll get more into what that power means. So they go into the phase of seduction. We are going to seduce that person and be everything that that person, it's like we know what that person is attracted to, and we pop up ourselves. So can take on anything, can save anyone, don't need help, really strong, really independent. And of course, that anxious person is very attracted to all of that. So there's that phase of seduction.

Then there is the next phase, we move on to the next phase, where we see that person's world getting smaller and smaller, and we are attracted, we value the power that we hold. So there is also that seduction of power, I'm becoming that person's God, to a certain extent. I am no longer Heather. I am capital letters, HEATHER, to that person. And that's very attractive to me because I hold all the power in the relationship.

Then I move into putting up relational walls. Again, being ambiguous about labels. Relational walls can look like not being specific about what you're doing or where you're going. Or not texting, not texting the person back, like waiting a whole day. That's what I mean by ambiguous behaviors. Being afraid of labels, holding your cards really close to the chest.

And what that does is it creates suspicion, it triggers that abandonment from the other person. So they're acting a little bit more and more like, crazy and clingy. And you, through that clinginess, are just going like this, you're repelled by it. So we are being even more repelled by that person's anxiety. The resentment starts to build.

We move into the phase of resentment where we're like, I don't want, like, this person, I feel smothered. I literally feel smothered by this person, and I'm resentful that they need me to take care of them emotionally. I feel resentful. I feel like numb, almost. There's a numbness there within the relationship.

I will say, with avoidantly attached people, there's a sense of, so we're hardwired for connection, just physiologically. And when we cut off that connection, because it's not safe, which is what avoidant people have had to do. When we cut off that connection, there's this numbness that we feel on a pretty consistent basis, which is why we mistake intensity for intimacy a lot of the time, because intensity is the only way that we can feel emotionally alive.

So that is when we move into outward intensity. So we start acting out outside of the relationship. So while the anxious person acts out in the relationship, we act out outside the relationship. Whether that's workaholicism, drug addiction, having sex with other people, having emotional affairs. We're looking outside to get our emotional needs met all of a sudden.

And, of course, that is felt by the anxiously attached person. There is that mental health crisis with our partner. There is the guilt that we might feel through that. So the intensity that comes from our, the intensity internally in the relationship that comes from us acting out can then pull us back into the relationship. So then we have our triumphant return, going back to attracted to the vulnerability and seducing, or we leave the relationship and we get involved with another really clingy person that we can then blame that I just tend to date crazy people all the time.

Meagen Gibson - [00:30:27]

Right. Right.

Heather Monroe

So that is trauma bonding from an attachment lens. And as you can see, it is a cycle, a roller coaster, it is incredibly difficult to navigate in the relationship when you're in it.

Any questions about that, or should I go into?

Meagen Gibson

No, absolutely.

And one thing that, when you were speaking about that last cycle that occurred to me is that in a secure relationship, if you text somebody, they're at work, you text somebody and they don't answer, you don't all of a sudden spiral and start questioning the security of your relationship. You assume they were busy, they were in a meeting, they were out of cell service. You just assume the best. You don't start calling hospitals, you're just like, okay, I'll find out why they didn't return my text later when they come home or when we reconnect. You know that you're going to reconnect with that person and there's not any of that fear there.

Yeah. So I just wanted to name that for people who were like, what does it look like when it's good? I know what that feels like, that sounds familiar to me, but what should it feel like?

Heather Monroe

Completely.

And I also would say that for the anxiously attached identified people who are listening to this, if you get involved in a relationship with the secure, securely attached person, I've seen a very distinct pattern with anxiously attached people with securely attached people.

So there's that initial fear of, they didn't text me back, but there's always, the securely attached person will show up and will reassure. And so a lot of our fears are squashed and taken away through the securely attached behavior.

Then what we're up against is that secondary fear of intimacy. So what happens to us when someone has staying power? It's like then we can switch to a more avoidant a little bit. So all of a sudden we're a little repelled by them and we're nit-picking them and we're thinking that there's something wrong with them, or I don't really like this about them. And I always say to people, if you find yourself doing this, stick it out. If you get past that initial repulsion from someone sticking around for you, the sky's the limit. But that is a very distinct phase in an anxiously attached going into securely attached relationship.

Meagen Gibson - [00:33:09]

I can imagine that, because what's always felt safe is insecurity. So if something feels safe you want to pull the escape hatch because this doesn't feel good in a way that you're familiar with. Not that it is actually good.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. And one thing I want to say about these cycles is people might be listening to this and saying, well, it kind of goes back and forth with me and my partner. So this is true, too. Someone cannot avoid you. And once they out avoid you, you become anxious and they become avoidant. Or if someone comes in anxious, more anxious than you, you become avoidant. It's like this flip flopping of roles because of what I said in the beginning that underneath the primary fear, there's the secondary fear.

So anxious and avoidant are different sides of the same coin. So if you can out avoid someone and then all of a sudden they become anxious and then you're in this complicated, it's more instead of like this, it's more like an infinity cycle where you're just going back and forth with different roles that you're playing. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And I've said this before, that what I found in the relationships that I have where some of that avoidant style shows up is that my anxious brain, I'll just name myself, wants to create stories about what that avoidance means, right?

And those stories, and what I've just started doing in those relationships is just naming it. Hey, I've noticed that you feel distant. I feel disconnected from you. My story is that this is what's going on, this is what you feel. And I'm always 100% wrong but that's the genius of just saying, here's the story I made up. And the avoidant person is always in some sort of shame about something that has happened between us. And I've taken their shutting down as a judgment of me when it's totally internal on their part, they're judging themselves.

And only through both of us being like, I can feel that I'm anxious here, I can feel that you're distant, let's name what's really going on, which is that we both feel like we're not enough here. We both feel like we're wrong. We both feel like we're disconnected. Then that is actually the thing, once we name it, we actually come back together and can just let it go.

Heather Monroe

100%. And so, I love what you just said because it dovetails perfectly into part of the healing. To have insecure attachment style or tendencies it also comes from our caretakers not doing a lot of repair with us.

So a caretaker loses their cool or doesn't see that child. Well, did that caretaker take a second to get down to that child, to your level and say, hey, buddy, I know I just lost my cool and I'm sorry, and validate your reality.

So in repairing our attachment styles in adult relationships, that is like the crux of healing is, how fast do we repair? How fast can we repair? And a lot of that comes through our own awareness of what we're looking at with each other.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I love that you named that too, because I think that has been the biggest gift of this generation's access to the knowledge and science that's available is this repair piece. Because I think we had just a dismissive attachment, especially in the Western Hemisphere, around the way we raise children. And it's like we were hard on our kids, we didn't do certain things, and that's just the way it

was. Everybody did the best they could. There hasn't been that acknowledgement or that repair of I really could have done better, in a lot of situations, not all of them.

It's just met with like, that's the way it is. Take it or leave it. My parents were tough around me, that hard life thing, and I feel like our generation is just much more prepared with that element of repair. I don't think anybody, you or me, would ever tell anybody that everything's going to be, all of this knowledge makes you infallible and not ripe with imperfection and humanity. And I make mistakes every day. But that repair piece has been remarkable in all of my relationships.

Heather Monroe - [00:37:42]

Yes. Completely. And I also want to say that the reason why our generation was even able to get to this place and to say maybe there's a different way is because the last generation did better than the generation before, that did better than the generation before. As much as there's generation trauma, I also believe that there's generational healing that gets passed on each place. And who knows what our kids are going to open our eyes to around parenting because we've made it that much more safe for them to explore their voice and etc.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. So let's talk about the hopefulness in all that the potential for growth and healing at literally any part, any point?

Heather Monroe

Yep. Okay. So I want to give, first I want to give all of you a very tangible resource. If you are really recognizing this inside of you and being like, oh, my God, this is my pattern of relationships. I mean, I know personally, when I was introduced to this work, I was literally on the floor crying because I couldn't believe how I was in this pattern my entire life.

So I hope you're not on the floor crying but if you are recognizing this in your own life, there is a type of therapy called Emotionally Focused Therapy for couples, and it is completely based on attachment science. It is research, evidence based, meaning that it works. There's been a lot of research done around this, and it's short-term.

And so if you are currently in a marriage or in a relationship where you feel like, we need some help, I would urge you to just Google Emotionally Focused Therapy International, and you'll get to their website, their official website and find a therapist in your area. And you just want to find someone who, if they're certified that's the best. So if they have a C next to their name, that's going to be the best thing. Supervisor is like, the top of the top, if they have an S near their name. But even if they've just got some education around attachment science, that's going to be a good thing, too, because at least they're coming from a relational place. But I would strongly suggest you get someone who is certified in Emotionally Focused Therapy.

So that's just one resource I want to put out there for all of you. Okay. So let's talk about the healing. I really look at all of this from a nervous system perspective. I am trained in somatic experiencing. So that is a part of just my training, my point of view, just very much like body focused therapy, experiential.

So if we're looking through the lens of the nervous system, we will see that the anxiously attached person when they are triggered, their nervous system is triggered, and they are going to, let's say, it's their sympathetic nervous system that's triggered because of the anxiety. So when that happens we are going to not be able to get back to baseline, we're going to be acting out of impulse. So we're going to be saying things out of impulse, we're going to be doing drive-by's or texting a thousand times because we are literally in our non-thinking brain.

So what I would say is that any type of modality that you can start practicing that trains your mind and your body to regulate itself better is going to be the first step in your healing.

So there's lots of ways that we can do this. Exercise, I would especially pick mindfulness exercises. So that's what I mean by, Tai Chi, yoga, Pilates sure, but I actually think it's really going to be the mindfulness exercises of yoga or Tai Chi, I know that there's other ones out there. But when we do mindfulness, which means focusing our mind on the breath while there is movement and having our mind focused on one thing really, really effectively, what we're doing is we're creating more gray matter in our prefrontal cortex which is responsible for planning, for thinking, for impulse control, for long-term gratification instead of instant gratification, which would be much more of our primitive brain.

Meagen Gibson - [00:42:50]

Which I've heard other people refer to as upstairs versus downstairs brain. Like your initial reactions, or those desperate survival reactions of obsessively texting or driving by people's houses, that's your downstairs survival brain kicking into action, right?

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Exactly. Think of that clarification.

So, yes, we're going to be wanting to focus on just very mindfulness practices of movement. So exercise is great too, but I would say get into some sort of, two to three times a week, mindfulness exercise as well.

Another mindfulness exercise that I would strongly suggest too, and this is for avoidant, too, this isn't just anxious, we're gonna do, the reason why mindfulness, body-centered exercise is going to be good for avoidants is because as avoidants we are cut off from our bodies, we are cut off from our emotions. And emotions are the language of the body.

So when we do more exercises and more movement that really put us in touch with, oh my neck feels stiff, oh, I have a neck. I mean, that's how cut we are from things. Also, I'm feeling frustrated when I do that pose, great, you're feeling something, you're actually feeling frustration, that's amazing. Yoga and mindfulness practices are all about subtleties. The further we get into these practices, the more we get into subtleties of the body.

And so for the avoidant, that's going to be harder and it's going to be the gateway for our healing. The more we can become more aware of the subtleties of our feeling. So it's not just rage or bliss. It's actually like annoyance, frustration, anger.

Meagen Gibson

Then noticing the ramp up to those.

Heather Monroe

Noticing the ramp up, exactly, as well as anxiously attached people.

The other thing that I would suggest would be a meditation practice of some sort. I just want to preface this with, give yourself a break. I'm not asking you to do a meditation practice where you just concentrate on breathing, if you're new to meditation. I actually would say, don't do that.

Meagen Gibson

Not recommend that. Yeah.

Heather Monroe - [00:45:13]

Not recommend that because it can just be super triggering. It's like you've got so much junk in your mind, it feels like you failed even before you begin.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. I said to someone like a week ago or something when they suggested a meditation that, let's just acknowledge that for some people that can be a real hostile environment at first if you don't have a different kind of meditation practice.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So I would suggest guided meditations. I would suggest chanting. I would suggest mantra. So that mantra would be like saying a phrase again and again in your head, on a necklace, like Mala beads or something like that.

Do you want me to quickly show you what that is?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Sure.

Heather Monroe

Okay.

So Mala necklace looks like this. It's 108 beads. And what you would do is, let's take the really powerful mantra, Satanama. Okay. So this is one of the more powerful mantras out there.

So in your mind, not out loud, you would breathe in, each bead is a breath. So with every breath you would say, Satanama. Some people go Sa Ta on the inhale Na Ma on the exhale. Or some people do Satanama on the inhale, Satanama on the exhale. And that would be one bead.

So that's just a really quick crash course on using Mala and mantra.

Meagen Gibson

And not dissimilar to the more Western practice of Rosary beads and prayers, right?

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Yes. Exactly.

So I think that the only thing that this adds is that one bead is a breath rather than one bead is a prayer. It's kind of adding the breath to it. Which maybe people do that for Rosary as well.

So that is another healing modality for us to do. So this is our own work, right? I'm saying as far as the couples work, I would get into Emotionally Focused Therapy, for sure. That would be the tangible thing I give couples.

Meagen Gibson

And one of the, sorry just to interrupt, one of the hacks that another contributor gave me was to ask your partner for that for your birthday or Christmas gift. To say, I would like for you to go to this session with me or to start this with me. That's the only thing I want. And what they said was that most of the

time when that happens, it's the partner that didn't want to go that gets the most out of it. And is like, oh, my God, this is incredible.

Heather Monroe - [00:47:49]

Completely. I love that idea. That is such a wonderful idea.

For individual, for our individual work it's about regulating our nervous system. So it would be meditation, movement, any sort of breath work that you can do. Kundalini yoga does a lot of breath work and so you might want to check out some Kundalini breathwork classes or just breath work in general.

And then I would also say two more things, nutrition. So what we put in our bodies. You know, I always say what we eat, we feel. So if you're on a high sugar, high process diet, you are going to feel intensity and mistake it for, just like how we mistake intensity for intimacy. We can mistake intensity for feeling good.

Meagen Gibson

Or caffeine for energy, right?

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Yeah.

So just look at your diet. If you're on a fast food, high sugar, high processed food diet, I would really urge you to take a look at that because it is affecting your nervous system and how fast you are able to get back to a baseline, to get back to seeing things clearly and being able to just regulate your feelings.

Meagen Gibson

There's a ton of energy involved in suppressing inflammation and digestion and all the things that are happening that you're unaware of in your body as a result of that eating pattern.

Heather Monroe

And we also know that, I think 85% of our serotonin is actually produced in our gut, and serotonin deficiency is shown to be a huge factor in depression and anxiety. So you want to be just looking at what you're putting in your body, what you eat, you feel.

And then lastly, is community. It's important in the healing journey to not go to the source of the perceived abandonment all the time. Because if I'm constantly going to my partner to tell me that they'll never leave me and they're here and blah, blah, blah, blah, my anxious attachment is constantly going to be looking for loopholes. And it's not going to be beneficial for the relationship at all.

So it's really important before you get to a place where you can go, like you were talking about Meagen, where you go and say, hey, I'm feeling this, am I feeling this right? Or the story I'm telling myself is this. If you're too dysregulated you're going to be looking more at protest behaviors. Why are you doing that? I'm feeling like this, and it's going to be very combative.

That is where we find community, and we reach out to our community for help in regulating our nervous system, which is, I really want to hone that, is that we are hardwired for connection. And so interdependency is actually the fastest way to regulate our nervous system, reaching out to someone else is the fastest way we can do it. We co-regulate with each other all the time.

Meagen Gibson - [00:51:01]

Especially in the beginning before we're really practiced at doing it for ourselves.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So if I'm super dysregulated and I go to my partner who has an insecure attachment style as well, I go to them just dysregulated, chances are they are not going to co-regulate my nervous system. They are going to co-regulate with their insecure attachment style. And then we're both dysregulated and it blows up.

So to reach out to your community to say, oh, my gosh, I'm feeling all this fear, and being able to process that about what's underneath that.

I think another really helpful thing to say to people in insecure relationships is this isn't about the person, this is actually about you. In the sense that, I found it to be really empowering to realize, oh, this was never about so and so, this is actually about my stuff and what I do with my stuff. Now they have their own part, but that's not in my business, right? This is my business.

Meagen Gibson

And will never be under my control. They have a part, but I'll never be able to control that.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. So, yeah, those would be the five things that I would suggest to people looking to regulate their own nervous systems. Really tangible, you can start today kind of stuff.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. I love that take away.

This has been a deep dive. I love it. And it's not directly like, here, how to communicate better with your partner, but it's the ground from which I feel like we should start trying to assess all the issues in our relationships. It's like the individual, looking at your history, looking at your patterns and being able to have tools and language and resources to say, I would like to change, I would like to heal and grow both in myself and with someone else.

Heather Monroe

100%.

And this is such a, I really believe that the foundation of wellbeing is rooted in awareness. So, yes, this talk is all about awareness, and it can be super triggering. And it's actually why I always do a part two of this talk, getting more into the healing modalities and how you figure that out with your partner. Because it is such a loaded subject and it's not something you can cover in just one.

Meagen Gibson

I would love to have you back for part two.

Heather Monroe

Sure, I can do it.

But I just want to acknowledge if you're feeling triggered, I get it. And all the things that I just said in the bottom half of this are going to be where you start.

Meagen Gibson - [00:53:42]

Well, Heather Monroe, thank you so much for being with us. How can people find out more about you and your practice?

Heather Monroe

Yeah. You can go to monroewellness.com

That is my website.

My Instagram is [@monroewellness](https://www.instagram.com/monroewellness)

And on my website I have guided meditations. I have a lot of videos, teachings that are on my website and also my YouTube channel is [Monroe Wellness](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...) as well. I do a lot of deep diving into boundary issues and things like that. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

Thanks again for being with us.

Heather Monroe

Thank you.