

Connecting through self-love and pleasure

Guest: Jamila Dawson

Disclaimer: The contents of this interview are for informational purposes only and are not intended to be a substitute for professional psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. This interview does not provide psychological advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your physician or other qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding a medical or psychological condition.

Jaia Bristow - [00:00:10]

Hello and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am thrilled to be joined by Jamila Dawson.

Welcome, Jamila.

Jamila Dawson

Thank you so much. I'm really glad to be here.

Jaia Bristow

I'm really glad to have you here. I'm super excited because today we're talking all about self-love.

So, Jamila Dawson is a sex therapist and speaker, and her goal is to break down sexual stigma to help people design relationships that center imagination, connection, and liberation.

I love it. I love that as a description of you. And I can't wait to find out how to do all of that.

So, let's talk about self-love. Has self-love become understood as a concept? What is self-love to you?

Jamila Dawson

I'll start with I do think it's become a little commodified in this idea of that you can buy self-care and that self-care is doing things, usually buying things. Let me take a bath. Let me join this yoga thing. Let me go buy, buy, do, do, do. And instead I think, I have this idea of, I don't want people to sell our liberation back to us. I want people to realize they already have that.

And so to me, self-love is this idea of what is love in and of itself? It's caring, it's respect, it's sometimes doing things that are difficult because the larger outcome is going to be better for us.

And so if we think of love as these verbs, then the answer lies in that. How do we treat ourselves with more respect? How do we treat ourselves with more care? How do we walk with more sense of principle in the world? How do we parent ourselves or lead ourselves more effectively to be the people that we want to be, not perfect, but just better versions of ourselves?

So I think of it like a practice more than something you can buy or do.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love everything you've just said. And so how do we do those things?

Jamila Dawson - [00:02:25]

I think it starts, one by making a promise to ourselves of what if I want to be more self-loving, not just do self-love in this kind of mechanical way, but if I want to be more self-loving. What's the smallest thing that I can do today? How can I be more full of care? I don't like to say careful, but full of care for myself.

I'm also a big believer, and science supports this, of we need community. We need community. And so, are there other people, either that people that an individual knows, or that they can go find that can help them? Also, I'm trying to read better books. I'm trying to donate my time. I'm trying to come back into my body and find a community based on those things.

But I'm a big fan of reading. There's a great book called *Pleasure Activism*. There's my book, *With Pleasure*, which literally gives different exercises of how to come back to your body, but in a principled way, not in this individualistic way. I'm going to get healed and then I'll be fine and why can't I be healed and perfect now? We're not doing healed. We're not doing perfect as absolute states. We're doing it as a practice to just be more human with other humans.

Jaia Bristow

That's beautiful. I love that. And I think one of the things that you've said there is around... So often when people think of self-love or self-care or one's relationship with oneself, it feels like it has to be very individualistic. But what you're talking about is that we can practice being self-loving within community, but that's part of actually being self-loving is connecting to community, connecting to others whilst remaining connected to oneself. And I think that that's phenomenal. I love that.

Jamila Dawson

That's the thing, with a lot of my clients we're working on this idea of interdependence, because a lot of us have either been taught that we have to be hyper dependent, there's no space for boundaries, there's no space for one's own autonomy and one's own creativity. Or you've been taught to be independent of, I am not going to rely on anybody, nobody can be depended on, I'll figure it out.

And neither one of those gives space. It's like a plant that's either too closely rooted with other plants or it's completely isolated and is receiving no nutrients from the system. We need to be interdependent.

Jaia Bristow

That's such a beautiful metaphor, the one with the plants. I'm a very visual person so having a metaphor of, oh yes, of course, we're like a plant growing, like a tree in a forest. This tree still needs its own sunlight and its own space and its own nutrients and soil and all of that, but it's still the tree in the forest. A tree on its own is different.

Jamila Dawson

There is no such thing. You never see just one of anything. One of anything means that, this is so sad, but one of anything means that it's going to die. We are designed to be... I mean, nature is telling us. Community, ecosystem.

And it can be fun, there is a group of sex educators that were doing bubble baths. They weren't completely nude, but they were having conversations. Each person would be over Zoom in their bubble baths. And I thought that was just the coolest thing.

Jaia Bristow

That's wonderful.

Jamila Dawson - [00:06:13]

We can find ways to care for the self in connection with others, in whatever version, of course, works for people.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. And you've talked about pleasure. Obviously you have your book, and you've talked about other books focusing on pleasure. So what is the relationship for you between pleasure and self-love or self-care?

Jamila Dawson

I think pleasure gives us this, I call it this dynamic roadmap, because so often I think when people have got trauma or they're trying to better their lives, there can be this very harsh, mechanistic way of looking at it. Like I have to get better, I have to do all the things, eat healthy, exercise, do all the things.

When I talk with my clients and people that I'm paying attention to, I'm not seeing a lot of joy, I'm not seeing a lot of sense of spaciousness and I don't think the end result is going to generate a sense of true wellness.

And so looking at my own life and looking at as I supported my clients over the years, I realized pleasure is that road map as you track your own pleasure and become invested in other people having, again, ethical pleasure, it just unfolds. And it's not in this, again, linear way.

I had a friend visit just yesterday, and I was just getting my favorite candles. I was opening up, because they have these candles that I just love, and I was opening them up, and my friend was like, I didn't realize I could do that, just buy my favorite candles and give that to myself. So I had her smell them. And we just talked about that. I made her some tea. And again, making tea doesn't take very long, but we just smelt the tea bags. And there is a delight in sharing this very simple thing.

And I think when we become invested in our own pleasure, it will lead us into discovery like this. I was like, oh, a whole conference talking about self-love and connection. If I hadn't started on that path, we never would have met and this conversation wouldn't have happened.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. And I think one of the things that's standing out for me in what you're saying is around what pleasure is. I think it was with Rafaella Fiallo that we spoke about pleasure and that there's so much more to pleasure than just sexual pleasure or just sex. So when you're talking about smelling the candles with a friend, making tea together, sharing, being intimate with the scent, with yourself, with the other, and that's a form of pleasure.

So let's talk a little bit more about pleasure and self-love. And yes, you've given a few examples there, but about how you define pleasure.

Jamila Dawson

I would say it's an affirmation of life. I would say it's the thing that tells you you're alive and it's the element, the experience that pulls you forth into life.

One of my favorite examples is, you go to a museum or you go somewhere and you see that painting and you move towards it, or you see that sculpture and you move towards it. Pleasure is the thing that moves you towards life.

And sometimes when I'm working in groups, I'll have people call up, they don't have to share it, but I'll have them call up a memory of pleasure and then describe, not the thing itself, but the feeling in their body. And usually there's glowing, golden, expansive, luxurious, space, warmth. Those are the things

that if people slow down enough to pay attention to, that's your body telling you, oh, that. I want more of that. That's pleasure.

[00:10:20]

And I think sometimes we've made it more hedonistic or only sexual, and sex and pleasure is fine and great and phenomenal. And it's like this prism or this, really, I think maybe almost this chemical that can be spread throughout all of our lives.

Did that describe it?

Jaia Bristow

I love that description. And I'm sure when people see this and know that we're talking about self-love and pleasure, minds may go straight to masturbation and self pleasuring and things like that. So I love that we're talking about both self-love, self care, pleasure as these much greater things.

And I'm wondering if we can bring in some practical tips and practical examples. Obviously you spoke about the candles and the tea and community and self, but for people listening, practical examples on how to connect to one's own pleasure and to loving oneself and caring for oneself.

Jamila Dawson

I would say it definitely goes back to, start with your body and taking one's body seriously as a site of information. And by that, so sometimes with my clients I'll have them pick one of your senses for the week and then just focus on that. So what are you listening to? And can there be more things that you listen to that bring you pleasure that you can experiment with?

Because sometimes we actually don't even know what brings us pleasure. So I'm like, are there bird sounds that you want to listen to? Is the crackle of fire something? Is there an app that you can listen to? Spend even 30 seconds of your day, stop for a moment and what can you hear?

Or sometimes people don't know what sense they like. So I'll say, well, go to a store where they've got different essential oils and go smell a bunch of them. Find the ones that you don't like, find the ones that you do like. And again, go and be in your body.

Another thing people can do is in the morning we're usually rushing to get ready, or in the evening we're like, I just want to get to bed again, even 30 seconds or a minute to massage one's face or just gently squeeze one's whole body or lotion. It's still winter time in a lot of places, we need to be moisturizing. So people can just slow down and let your body tell you what it needs. And it will tell you. It might be strange the first few times. And the body's like, oh, you're listening to me now. Let me tell you, let me tell you. I like this. I don't like this. I like this.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. I love that connecting to the body, connecting to the senses. I myself have recently taken on a practice in the morning where instead of doing formal meditation, which I find very rigid and reminds me of being at school, I do a body and a movement meditation where I basically stand and I connect. First I take a moment to just connect to the ground, connect to my body, turn my attention inward. And then I just ask my body how it wants to move. And it sounds very simple.

Jamila Dawson

I love it.

Jaia Bristow - [00:13:44]

It's wonderful. And I do that. I don't set a timer. In my mind I say about 5 to 10 minutes. Usually it lasts longer. And I just move my body and then I naturally end up then doing a more seated formal meditation practice, but afterwards. And the effect is so different because, A, I'm choosing to do it. That's what feels right. And B, I don't have all this restless energy and this mind of I have to, because I've moved, I've connected, I'm much more present.

And so I love everything you're describing around the importance of connecting to one's body, of touching oneself, of smelling, of tasting, of connecting to the senses, of listening. How often do we really stop and listen to the sounds around us?

Jamila Dawson

And that's why there is so much distraction. And I don't want people to, again, put this in their 'to do list' to be better. But instead of can we think of it like a pool that you can dip into at any time. This pool is here for you at any time. And just dip in, 30 seconds, a few minutes.

And I love how you describe the difference when you let your body move. And it's like, thank you. Okay, now we can sit and also relax in this other way. So great.

Jaia Bristow

And I'm curious, obviously it's wonderful, but why is it important to connect to oneself? To connect to one's body, to learn to love and care for oneself, not just in a check off 'to do list' like, I'm going to have a glass of wine and a bubble bath now and buy the fanciest bath bombs. #self-care.

Jamila Dawson

I'm so glad you asked that because it's become, at this point, probably a multi billion dollar industry, at least a billion dollar industry. I want people to know it so that they can recognize it again and so that they can also, and this is the interdependence part and the relationship part, so that you can demand that other people have access to this too. That when you know relaxation, when you know that I will care for myself, that I know what it means to listen, I know what it means to have that sense of joy in the quiet or connecting with another person, when you know what it means to be fully human, I think the next inevitable step is, I want this for other people.

And because you know what it feels like, because you can recognize it in your body, you will then recognize when it's present in other people and in other systems, school, business, relationships, and you will also recognize it when it's not. And I think, and what I hope, is that it will then become this, oh, everybody should have this. Everybody should know what it's like to rest or to dance or to laugh or to be able to pluck an orange and smell when you first move the skin and get that first spray of scent, everybody should have this.

And I know that's not going to happen for everybody in my lifetime, but I think it's worth that practice. Because what happens if we forget? That's what haunts me. If we don't know what it feels like, then all the work we're doing, what are we fighting for?

Jaia Bristow

And just because this is the Relationship Super Conference, and of course, we're talking about our relationship with ourselves today, and we've talked about the community, but how do these practices also impact our relationships with others?

Jamila Dawson - [00:17:36]

I think when that friend and then the people who have done it for me in my life who said, oh, slow down, taste your life, like I needed that, not even a reminder, but they helped me recognize that I have this capacity.

And so I think what's so important about this conference is simply as a reminder what people actually already know, that's what's so amazing. Like humans, we do know this in our bodies. And something like this conference helps us remember, oh my goodness, I do want that. I do need that and there's a whole bunch of other people who also feel this way.

Because what I see a lot is a lot of isolation, particularly, of course, because of the pandemic. We're isolated in so many different ways. And so it becomes again, in realizing what our bodies are capable of, oh, let me find other ways to connect. Let me make sure that I, too, am connecting with others and helping them connect with themselves. And then hopefully on and on and on.

Jaia Bristow

That's wonderful. I love that. I really love that. And what I'm hearing as well in what you're talking about is, growing a capacity for pleasure and noticing when it's present with others and in relationships and all of this. And you're talking about liberation, about connection, about all these things, about agency and power. And so what does it mean to you to have a healthy relationship to that power, to agency? What are the benefits?

Jamila Dawson

I would say that ability to know what to ignore and then to know what to move towards. I think particularly in the United States we generate a lot of buy this, buy that and people feel like they're not enough all the time in all these different ways.

And I think the power of a conference like this is for people to be like, oh, here's a place where there's nothing wrong with me, but I can get support to become even more of who I am. And so that actually is your own power. That is your volition, your agency of I choose.

And I think when we feel comfortable and confident with I choose, and I choose a path of ethical pleasure, and I choose a path of interdependence, well, then so many things are possible. Again, this conference is possible, conversations are possible, personal transformation is possible.

And so I want people to realize that they don't need to be a CEO of something or have letters behind their names, and those things are fine, but you already have the power to choose. And again, when you know that you can trust yourself, you'll be able to suss out who else is worthy of trust. And there might be people who are not. And you can move closer to the people who do want to consent to exploration, whether it's sexual or professional or whatever. But that knowing your power, knowing that you can choose with intention, that person becomes ultimately unstoppable in the creation of their life.

Jaia Bristow

Something that's coming up for me is around, when you're talking about choosing and connecting to oneself and with relationships and setting boundaries almost as an act of self-love, making requests as an act of self-love.

So I interviewed Betty Martin who's the creator of The Wheel of Consent, and we talked about giving and receiving as a practice. I think to be able to do that, one of the key things is to be able to feel that power that you're talking about, feel your own value. We talked about how awkward it can be and how few people often make requests and how it's uncomfortable asking for what you want.

[00:21:59]

But by doing these practices that you're talking about, that can become more natural, more an act of love to oneself and to others. We talked with Betty Martin about it being a gift. So I think there is that element that's coming up, that it is a gift, that it's a good thing to love oneself, that it doesn't make us selfish or egotistical or narcissistic. So I was wondering if you could say a few more words around that.

Jamila Dawson

Yeah, absolutely because I do see people struggle. If I have boundaries or if I say no to something, am I being selfish? Am I being narcissistic? Am I being rude? And the short answer to that is no, you're not.

But what's important is boundaries are there to protect that which is of value. And I want people to know that they are of value. They are a life. They are a person. Again, when you are just ethically living your life, trying to be the best you can, knowing that you're not perfect, we're all going to have days where we're like merr, when driving on the freeway or whatever or other things, but that you still have inherent value as a life on this planet.

And so if that's true, which it is, then that's worthy of protection. Not behind a wall, but certainly just behind a boundary that says, oh, I can offer this freely. I cannot offer this freely. I request this to help me navigate, and that will help me be more me. And another person who also knows their own power will be like, great.

And to me, that third piece is the collaboration of, it's not a compromise of oh, we both go away equally miserable. It's collaboration of given what your needs are and my needs are, what can we build? To me that's the question and that's where consent comes in of okay, let's consent to build this thing. You want to build it? You want to build it? Great. The way the kids do. You want to play? I've got this, I've got this. You want to make this spaceship? Somehow it got cloudy along the way.

Jaia Bristow

I love that. That's a gem for me, that piece about collaboration rather than compromise. And I think, like you said, this conference is a lot about learning the things we already know. And I think that's a really key piece for me. And something that will stick with me is that it's not about compromise, it's about collaborating together, including everyone's needs, and collaborating to create something that meets everyone's needs as much as possible. And of course, that's not always easy, but it's possible.

Jamila Dawson

It is possible. And it's not always going to happen all at the same time but that's relationship. That when I trust that somebody knows themselves that is coming in good faith, that over time my needs get met, their needs get met and there's this beautiful, again, if we think of an ecosystem, all the plants or all the creatures are getting their nourishment.

Jaia Bristow

100%. And again, that image of the ecosystem and over time needs being met. I think people sometimes think about equality or relationships as having to, you get this now, I get this now and it's like one for you, one for me. It's like when we were kids and you're learning to share with your siblings and it's like you have to have exactly the same amount.

Jamila Dawson

And you're measuring out the jelly beans.

Jaia Bristow

You have to weigh out the amount and measure it and be really precise.

Jamila Dawson - [00:26:00]

Exactly.

Jaia Bristow

What you are describing is so much bigger than that. You don't need to keep track because it's an ecosystem of love, and it starts with oneself and it spreads out to everyone in our ecosystem, in our environment, everyone we're connected to. And then it spreads out to everyone they're connected to.

And I think that's just so, so beautiful. And it's definitely something that I try to cultivate in my life. And I see the impact on myself, on my loved ones and the ones who are trying to cultivate that as well.

And so I'm curious if you have some tips, some practical advice and practices for people who are trying to cultivate? Because, as you say, it starts with oneself, with power, with value, with autonomy, and so a lot of people in this society, especially those of us belonging to more marginalized groups and dealing with oppression, really struggle with value, really struggle with self power and autonomy. So how can we cultivate those in ourselves so that we can work within this beautiful ecosystem?

Jamila Dawson

When I think of love, I don't think of it as this soft marshmallow. I think of it like an ocean, and like an ocean it can be rough and it can be ruthless. And I want people to be ruthless in the pursuit of creating the ecosystem that they need. And by ruthless, I don't mean uncaring. I mean focused.

To specifically answer your question, when I'm working with clients, I do an ecosystem overhaul with them. What are you listening to? What are you reading? What have you been taught about your value? Who have you been paying attention to? And then we're going to spend time essentially reseeding your ecosystem. Because certain plants aren't healthy in there. Plants that say, because of your hair you're not worthwhile, because of your skin color you're not worthwhile, because of your gender or your sexual orientation. Those are lies.

And I'm very clear with people, that's a lie that you're without value because of these things. They are your value. You are your value. You're already legitimate. And so I become, again, ruthlessly loving. We're going to connect you with community and then your own life. Who are you following on your social media? Again, create the world that you need and must inhabit.

And it's a fascinating process when people start reading new things, listening to new things. My cats in the background, of all the moments. In my home I have multiple paintings of dark black women because that's who I am. That is beautiful. And I'm going to have my home reflect who I am.

So I literally work with people of, how are we going to scaffold a new world for you so that you know that you have something worth fighting for because you are already legitimate? Does that make sense? Because I get real passionate about this one.

Jaia Bristow

It does. Not only does it make sense, but it's incredible. And again, because we're staying with this metaphor of the ecosystem, to have a healthy... Ecosystems aren't all super healthy and so we're creating a healthy ecosystem, which means doing some weeding, which is removing the toxic bacteria or weeds that are strangle weeds or whatever it is, and planting things and nourishing the soil, giving it compost, giving it everything it needs to create a healthy, balanced ecosystem.

And I love that. So I really appreciate what you're speaking to. And the idea that again, when you're creating an ecosystem, once it's balanced, it feeds itself. But it doesn't work initially to get rid of what's toxic and to add in things to support the growth.

Jamila Dawson - [00:30:38]

And letting people know that.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. So I was just going to ask if you had some more things people can add and things people can remove and how to do that?

Jamila Dawson

I'm a big fan of, get a journal or I'm a big fan of, there is neurodiversity in this world and so not everybody learns and processes and does things the same way. And I'm not interested in normal or abnormal. I'm interested in neurodiversity because that's what the nature is telling us. Different plants, it's not about normal. This is how I work.

So for some people, I'm like, okay, dictate who you want, what you want in your life. Pull up a Google Doc and just dictate who are people who inspire you? What are stories that you've heard, who are historical figures, who are fiction figures that give you that sense of pleasure, excitement? And not because of how they look, but because of the feeling. It's going to be about following the feeling.

Or if people do want to journal, if they do want to create, go through again, certain magazines. And so that, too, I'll say, let's create a collage, but what magazines are you going to be pulling from? I won't mention certain magazine names here, but let's pull from magazines that reflect who you are.

And so people, the more that we, again, an act of creation and act of power, the more that you create who you want to feel yourself to be, you will go in that direction.

I'm also a big fan of reading Frantz Fanon, reading Adrienne Maree Brown, reading Sonya Renee Taylor, reading Audre Lorde of course. Read the works. I've been reading a lot of Native American fiction authors. I think reading fiction is one of the best things people can do. If Audible works best for you, great. And don't feel like you have to finish the whole book. Please people, it's okay to dip in a little bit, one paragraph, come back to it next month. Again, we're creating an ecosystem. Lightly seed, trust it'll blossom. It's fine.

Jaia Bristow

That's fantastic. I love everything you've just said. And it really reminds me of Dr Sophia Graham and I, who's also on this conference, but I think it was for the Trauma Super Conference, we were talking about mirrors and windows. So how important it is to have mirrors of yourself reflected back at you and your experiences, and windows into the lives of others.

And again, people who hold more privilege in the world, who are part of more dominant groups, they have lots of mirrors and sometimes less windows. And so those of us who maybe have less mirrors of ourselves, how important it is to be reflected. And so what you're saying around art, literature, social media, everything, find things that reflect you, but not just that reflect your physical you or your social identity, but that reflects who you want to be.

And find voices that encourage you and empower you and make you feel good. Trust your feelings. This isn't a cognitive practice. It's not about thinking what's good for me right now? It's about feeling and getting back in touch, as you were saying earlier, with the body, with the feeling, with the senses, with focusing on pleasure, and how focusing on pleasure is the ultimate act of self-love, is what I'm learning from this conversation.

Jamila Dawson

You said it. I'm like there it is. Jaia wrapped it up.

Jaia Bristow - [00:34:34]

Wonderful. Jamila, how can people find out more about you and your work after being as inspired as I am by this wonderful conversation?

Jamila Dawson

Thank you. They can find me, I'm on Twitter [@Jamila_Dawson](#). I'm also on Instagram as [@jamila.thesextherapist](#).

And then my website is [fireandflowtherapy.com](#).

And then my book, with my wonderful co-author August McLaughlin, is called *With pleasure*. There it is.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful.

Jamila Dawson

That was so truly delicious.

Jaia Bristow

It really was. I definitely feel like we were practicing what we were preaching as we were talking. I definitely am very in my body and feeling all kinds of delight and pleasure connecting with you.

Jamila Dawson

Same. Thank you so very much for having me.