

Understanding conflict and connection

Guest: Jayson Gaddis

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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 Jayson Gaddis, an author, relationship expert, and coach who teaches people the one class they didn't get in school, how to do relationships.

Jayson leads one of the most in depth and comprehensive relationship education programs and trains relationship coaches all over the world.

Jayson is the host of *The Relationship School* Podcast with over 4 million downloads. He's the visionary behind The Relationship School, and his book, *Getting to Zero* is out right now.

Thank you for joining me, Jayson.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Thanks, Meagen. Glad to be here.

Meagen Gibson

So I loved your book, and especially that there isn't any message about avoiding conflict or demonizing conflict in any way. In fact, your book takes more of a, not an if, but a when approach to conflict. So I'd love it if we could start with what you would say is conflict.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, you got it.

I define conflict as a rupture, disconnection or unresolved issue between two people.

Meagen Gibson

All right. And reading your book, I was reminded in some of the exercises around figuring out your conflict story that I come from a long personal family lineage of grudge holders.

Jayson Gaddis

Okay.

Meagen Gibson - [00:01:30]

If you could talk about the, because you acknowledge in the book that there's a certain type of person that you can't necessarily repair a relationship with. And so what does that look like?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. I mean, that's the difficult, probably the most difficult relationship that all of us encounter is someone who won't meet us halfway and won't come to the table. That could be a family member, a co-worker, a friend, or a spouse.

And those kind of relationships become impossible because of the stonewalling or just the resistance of the other person. And I always recommend people move on from those relationships rather than trying to change that person. So we're starting with the person you don't want to try to work through conflict with. Skip that one and move on.

Meagen Gibson

Exactly. Get them out of the way. Because especially, we're doing a relationship conference and we think of relationships as inherently being things you're going to work out and things you're going to fix. So I'd just like to acknowledge that there are some people that are not going to meet you halfway, not going to take responsibility for their part in the relationship. So let it go.

Jayson Gaddis

And that said, I do provide in the book, toward the end, I think it's in one of the last chapters, how to try to clear that resentment on your own without them. Because sometimes people just leave us hanging and we have an open loop and it feels stressful. And so there are a couple things you can do about it.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you acknowledge that, because even if you don't have a partner relationship that you can work through that thing with them, you're still going to need some kind of closure. And there's a lot of grief associated with those relationships, a lot of the time. The relationship is over and you've lost a part of yourself, even if it was a good loss, that hurts.

Jayson Gaddis

Totally. It hurts and it might come with some feelings, as you're saying, and we might feel powerless to try to feel differently without the other person present. And I'm definitely here to say you can feel differently without the other person present.

Meagen Gibson

Awesome.

So moving on from the people that we can't change and don't want to be in relationship with, I've noticed that several times in the last couple of months over social media you have brought up the idea of over functioning in relationships.

And I noticed a couple of times when I saw that I felt personally attacked, so it really, it was fun for me to identify, like, oh, I guess there's something that's true about that in me and analyze that.

So I would love if you could talk about, and I think that's kind of an occupational hazard for me, but if you could talk about that role of over functioning in relationships, because I feel like a lot of the people that are at a relationship conference might also fit that role in that definition.

Jayson Gaddis - [00:04:25]

Yeah, for sure. And, you know, you're a parent, and I think parents probably over function in general, especially the primary parent, whoever that is, because there's so much to do and your kids just aren't meeting you halfway. It's not really a mutual relationship where they do things for you and you do things for them, like an adult partnership.

So over functioning is not necessarily a bad thing. It becomes problematic when it starts to build a resentment in the giver, the over functioner, and then in the under functioner, if they start to feel judged, criticized and made wrong for how they're being, that's when it becomes sticky and challenging.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And I know we have kids that are kind of similar in age and you brought up parenting. And I've heard many people say that the relationship at this age starts to shift and that there's that process in that relationship is that you become more of a consultant than a parent. You're not telling them what to do. You're advising them about how they should do what they already know what to do, or you're just kind of giving advice. I've held that as one way that I can change my role from over functioning primary parent to middle school consultant, if you would, in my relationship with my children.

And something else that you talked about in the book that I really appreciated was your explanation of the drama triangle. And I have something I want to say further about that. But first, I'd love it if you could explain what that is to people.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, for sure. So basically, sort of after Murray Bowen in *Systems Theory* talked about the triangle, the family triangle, the drama triangle, the conflict triangle, the victim triangle, or whatever you want to call it, as an upside down triangle.

So you can see if I drew a picture with you here right now, the bottom of the triangle is a V, and it's shaped, and I call it the valley of victimhood, and in any triangle, when I'm the victim, I'm gonna look for a rescuer on one side of the top of the triangle, and then on the other side, I'm going to look for who did this to me or who wronged me. And that's the villain or the persecutor.

And family, usually these play on families, but also relationships, is they're very stable. When I stay in my victim position, and I look for a rescue, and I look for someone to blame, that becomes a stable system. And we often draw in the third, like the rescuer, just so the system can become more stable.

But people stand entrenched in triangles for years. And so I'm all about trying to turn that triangle upside down. So it looks like the letter A for author, and where we start taking responsibility for our part in the dynamic so that we can get empowered and become an author and get out of that valley, we're on the mountaintop where we can see better and we feel better. And maybe there's still some pain there, but largely we're becoming a leader because we're climbing out of that victim position.

Meagen Gibson

And that rescuer position can be a little insidious, right. Like you said in the book, when you are consistently going to brunch with a friend and complaining about your relationship or calling a family member to complain about your spouse or that form that just feels like venting can be a rescuer role that we're not quite aware that we're creating in our relationships.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, totally. And that's where our friends can start to disempower us and enable us to stay stuck right where we are.

So a good friend, in my mind, is someone who challenges us and supports us, someone who calls bullshit on us, someone who says, hey, yeah, but what's your part in that dynamic? And what are you gonna do about it? Because if, I call it off gassing, if I just go to my friend and I off gas, I get some relief, and it feels like connection, but it's actually not moving my life forward.

Meagen Gibson - [00:08:13]

And I just want to compliment you about the book, because I noticed that after these exercises, especially this one where we would identify the drama triangle in our life, situations where we've enacted this model and identifying the players in that model and who we might identify with.

And then you have this call to action where you say, now share this with somebody. And what I noticed was that if you decide to share this with somebody, you immediately turn yourself into the author role and you're questioning your rescue. You're basically inviting your rescuers to become better agents in your authorship.

And it's almost like a little litmus test. I know I've come to you as a rescuer often, but if I'm going to come to you now as more of an author, and I want to entrust you in this and ask you to hold me accountable to it. And if they don't pick up that ball in that game, then you know that this is not a person that's going to support you down that path of more authorship in your life and your relationships.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. I love that. Nice job on that exercise.

I should have added that little instruction there. That's awesome.

Meagen Gibson

I didn't know if it was intentional or not, so I just want to reflect that to you. I was like, oh, it's kind of insidious there that enacting you, or in asking someone to have an accountability partner, share this exercise with someone, you're just kind of automatically doing that in your relationship. So good job. Nice work.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Right on.

Well, I'm challenging people to get accountable with other people because we can get in our silos about our relationship problems and then just reinforce the story. And then we go to the same old friends that also reinforce the story. And so when we try to get in a relationship and talk about how I'm learning about conflict, and actually, yeah, I have a part. You know, it does start to put us in more of a responsible seat.

Meagen Gibson

And especially in family relationships, as we've talked about, whether it be our families of birth or the families that we create, these patterns of relational stuff, it's just hard to break. It's hard, especially if you don't have any allies in those systems, it's hard to be the only one that sees the way that we're all interacting, tries to highlight it, tries to change it. But you can also be alone in that effort to change that dynamic. So I understand.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, totally. I mean, the growth path in general, as you know, is we can lose some friends along the way. Right?

Meagen Gibson - [00:10:31]

Absolutely.

So, actually I wanted to ask you, what is the relational blueprint that you talk about?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. So the relational blueprint is basically I'm just saying, all of us come into the world in the family we came into, and they teach us about relationships mostly through their way of being, and we get a transmission and a download, and that becomes a blueprint for how we're going to do relationships for the rest of our lives.

Now, it doesn't have to be a life sentence. We can actually change the blueprint over time. But it's very important to know, in an adult relationship, all of your relationship habits and patterns and strategies and triggers and all that are likely built across time from all your relational experiences. And that's the blueprint.

And the blueprint includes the attachment relationship with your primary caregivers, which I talk about for at least a chapter in there. And why that's so important in conflict, because sometimes just you looking the other way or not returning a text from me, that's conflict, and that can create a lot of stress over here, depending on my upbringing.

And if I don't know that and I don't know about my relational blueprint, I might just blame you as giving me the silent treatment. And I have no awareness that I have a sensitivity here, given how I was raised, to facial expressions, to people turning away from me, to silence in my house. And then that's all very activating for me.

Now, someone else might have a different relational blueprint, and that doesn't bother them. And of course, we're going to be paired with someone like that, because we often attract our opposite it seems.

So I'm just saying, look, if you understand where you come from relationally, it's going to give you more choice in your adult relationships, especially under stress.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Absolutely.

And I've seen this dynamic play out in my marriage where for a good 10 years of our relationship, I would be speaking and my husband would have a facial reaction, and then the whole conversation would get sidetracked because what was that face?

Jayson Gaddis

Totally.

Meagen Gibson

He had no facial awareness. I just made a face, my eye twitched, it's not a thing.

Or, he asks a lot of questions in conversation, it doesn't matter what we're talking about, there's a lot of questions. And because of my relational style and upbringing, those felt like attacks. Really he was raised by two attorneys. He's just like a tiny little baby litigator. That was just his relational model was to ask a lot of questions. Now that I understand this is just his communication model, I know he's just going to ask a lot of questions. I'm just along for the ride here, and I'm still safe.

These are things that we need to know about ourselves so that we can understand that the patterns and the relational habits that we've developed were meant to keep us safe, but that we might not be presently in any kind of danger.

Jayson Gaddis - [00:13:33]

Yeah. Totally. And that's so cool because that tells the listener, probably, and me that you and your husband are willing to talk about these kinds of things, and then they can take the edge off.

And we can even begin to have a sense of humor or just compassion for the other person. Like, right, gosh, that must have been rough as a kid to just have the facial expression thing or the questioning thing and how stressful that might have been as a kid. And then we can empathize better with our partner.

Meagen Gibson

Yes. And it takes the air out of everything. Another example is, and all family dynamics from growing up, but if something happens in our house, my immediate reaction every time is who's to blame?

So if there's no paper towels or if somebody loses a soccer ball outside, I'm trying to find who's to blame. But now I identified it, so I know that that's something that I do. I'm trying to break that habit. And so now the family calls me out on it, and they're like, who's to blame? They anticipate who's to blame? And then once we figure out who's to blame, they're like, oh, thank God, mom can rest now she knows who she needs to blame.

But there's no charge, there's no energy around it, there's no conflict. As we would say, there's no negativity around it. We can make something that could be very aggressive and very conflict oriented into something playful. That's just kind of mom doing her thing, and that's just mom looking for somebody to blame. Don't pay attention to it.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. And you're also doing a lot of cool modeling there for your kids that it's not about being perfect and not going into that place of who's to blame. But it's about, yeah, I do that thing. Here it is again. We all know that we're all educated about it. So when your kids have these funky patterns, they're not wrong for it. And you're also creating, to me you're creating, just by doing that, having that kind of culture, you're creating security in your family.

Meagen Gibson

Well, in the personal development world, especially people on the pursuit side, we often think that if we just figure out enough, if we breathe enough, if we do enough work, that we're gonna fix ourselves. So we're gonna be different or better, and really, we're the same. We're just higher functioning, the same people. You're just running away from your own shadow, and there you're gonna find yourself again.

Jayson Gaddis

People think, oh, you must not have any conflict because you wrote a book on it. And I'm just like, dude, no, I have as much conflict as you, probably. I just know some things, and I have ways of getting out of it and working through it that are pretty effective. So I'm just trying to share that.

Meagen Gibson

And we anecdotally shared some of that before. But I would love if you could, from your perspective, go through conflict triggers and the dos and don'ts of conflict.

Jayson Gaddis - [00:16:24]

Yeah. I think the first thing that we have to, that I always tell people is, look, you have to have the right view here with conflict. Which is, most people, when we hear the word conflict, there's a lot of negative associations that come up with it. And it's important to just try on the frame and the view that conflict is a doorway, and it's an opportunity to get to know ourselves and the other person better. And that on the other side of it, we actually might feel closer and more connected.

So if we come in with that kind of mindset and that overlay, I think we're going to set ourselves up for a lot better experience during conflict. And then the next thing would probably be that conflict is never going to go away. And I call it the conflict repair cycle. And it's really just about getting good at repair.

And in the book, you saw the diagram where it's a circle and it's just disconnection. We disconnect. We have some issue between us, whether it's the facial expression thing, my tone of voice, or we actually get in a fight. We disconnect. And that feels bad. And it should feel bad because we're social mammals. We like feeling connected and safe with other people.

So that motivates us to reconnect, and that's the reconnection process. And then we get back into connection. And that's just essentially the conflict repair cycle that I think will last a lifetime. Now, I'm only half my life has been lived, but I can pretty safely assume that that's going to be the case.

And so if I know that, that conflict is always a part of good, strong relationships, it might come and go, we might have patterns of a year where we're really in it because we had a move, or one of the kids, something happened to the kids, or COVID happened and there's more stress in the system.

But overall, we're going to come in and out of conflict forever, and we want to get extremely good at how do we reconnect? That's really the whole point of the book is how do we reconnect it as quickly as possible?

Meagen Gibson

And it was interesting that you made that distinction between disconnection, reconnection and connection. So I would like if you could piece that apart just a little bit more for people at home. And what's the difference between reconnection and connection? And I know that you inferred repair, but what's that really look like?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. So you could say it's the reconnection and repair process. And let me back it up with Ed Tronick's work, who did the 'still face' experiment, where he studied the mother child, basically the parent child relationship.

And the 'still face' experiment, to set it up briefly is, the researchers had the mother look away and then come back to the baby, 6 month old baby or whatever, and have a still face, a flat affect. And then watching the baby just try to reconnect with the mother and have the mother unresponsive, the baby escalated and got extremely stressed to the point of screaming and looking away and just writhing in its crib or whatever, it's a little chair.

And then the mother finally comes back and says, just kidding, I'm here, that was just an experiment. And then very quickly, they're back in harmony again, back in connection.

But too many kids are going through experiences where mom or dad don't change their affect and are mad or are unavailable because they're staring at their phone all day or they're at work holding down three jobs or something. And so the reconnection doesn't happen enough. And if that goes on too much, too often, too long, we create a tremendous amount of stress in the baby and a growing child, even on the brain.

And they've shown research that brain development slows. And kids who grow up in these, quote, unquote "insecure families" with insecure attachments do worse in just about every area of life.

So if we extrapolate that into adult partnerships, it's really no different. Where if I'm married to you and I just keep looking away or I'm just too busy to repair after we have a snag, the chasm between us is going to grow. And so we've got to put our attention on, how do we not tolerate, how do we reconnect here and feel good again?

And that's what zero is in the book. Zero is just a place where we're connected again. And reconnection is the process to get to zero.

Meagen Gibson - [00:20:42]

And what's the first step in that, in conflict? I assume it has to do with just being aware that you're triggered. In my old conflict style in my partnership, we would get so heated for so long that we didn't even remember what we were fighting about in the first place. You can get so far along in a conflict that you're like, how did this even begin?

And sometimes you get into that cycle where you're trying to back piece it and do forensics on it so you can figure out, if I just don't say this one particular thing again, we'll never have another fight. That's a trap. How do we get to the point where we can recognize what's going on to even initiate that reconnection?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. I mean, again, it requires growth. You've got to be curious and interested in yourself and the other person so that you can learn. Because without the student mindset here, if you're expecting conflict to just go away or you've married the wrong person because you're in conflict, you're just going to continue to repeat painful patterns.

So we have to have this student learning mindset. And then I've got to be willing to be curious, interested and then as soon as possible on my part, in terms of your question about what's one of the first things we can do. Is, yeah, I raised my voice. I was a jerk. I didn't text you back. I didn't return the email. I gave you that look. I did that. Instead of defend, defend, defend, which gets us nowhere, which I did for years, by the way, and still do sometimes.

It's very important that we can own what's happening on our side of the street. That's probably one of the quicker ways for us.

And then as soon as possible, I want to listen to you and your experience. Someone's got to be, what I call the relational leader, and just say, okay, I will set down my sword here, and I'm just going to listen to you, and I'm going to do it until you feel understood. I'm not going to wait for my opportunity to say my side and go, yeah, but and you did. And whatever. I'm going to go, I want you to feel like I'm really here, and I give a shit about what your experience is. Even if I disagree with it. I'm going to listen to you until you feel understood. And that's one of the tools that I teach.

Meagen Gibson

Because it's not really about asserting your rightness in that situation, where somebody says, when you said this, it made me feel like this, and the person automatically comes back with, that's not what I said and that's not what I mean. That's not the way to resolve conflict.

Jayson Gaddis

Then we're in a ping pong match. That's not what I said. Yeah, it is. No, it's not. Yeah, it is. And it's going to go nowhere. We're going to go in a circle.

Meagen Gibson - [00:23:26]

Exactly. So let's talk through the situation of either you don't have any conflict or you're with a partner that's conflict avoidant, or this could even be a teenager. These are relational styles developed on, maybe dismissive stuff, but where people either shut down when there's conflict present or there isn't any conflict, and how people navigate that in their relationship. Because that also fosters disconnection, right?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, absolutely. It exacerbates it.

So I call when we perceive a threat, and a threat is usually too close, too much, you're in my space, or too far away. These are the two primary mechanisms that I've identified as terms of threats. It's just that scared animal in us that doesn't like too much closeness or too much space.

And then we disconnect. And we disconnect because we're trying to take care of ourselves. We're actually just trying to survive and get by. And so I call them the four disconnectors. We posture, which is when porcupine quills come out, we get big and aggressive. Or we collapse into maybe shame and quietness and shutting down, like you're saying. Or we seek, I want to repair this, I want to fix this, hurry up, I'm anxious. Or we avoid. And also, you're speaking about that. We avoid because it's never gone well. Why would I bother? I just get quiet, and I just walk into the other room and disappear. I could not talk to you for days and be fine. Some avoiders are like that.

So again, if we don't find a way back into zero, because those are going out away from zero. If we don't find a way back into zero, we're just gonna create more stress in the system. And so the question becomes, how do we get back to zero? How do we reconnect?

And there's lots of different ways. I'm sure you know many. But one of them is, like I said, taking responsibility, one of them is listening. But we want to have the other person experience a feeling of safety, emotional safety, primarily, that I'm not going to continue to be mean to you. I'm not going to continue to turn away from you. I care about you.

And then we want to feel seen, like the other person gets that this is hard for us and that we have a history here, and it doesn't feel good sometimes.

And then we want to feel soothed, like they are willing to wrap a metaphorical blanket around us and be there in our time of upset. And they'll also do that for us.

And then we want to feel supported and challenged. I believe in you and I'm challenging you to come back, because when you avoid for too long it's not good for either one of us.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. And something that occurs to me is that your relational style in that kind of cross hairs X Y that you just demonstrated can differ based on who you're in relationship with.

I think most people assume that they're going to have one relationship style. And I know that my relationship style with my spouse is different than it is with my kids, which is different than it is with my sister. I vary, usually on one axis, but I vary depending on my role in that relationship.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

I mean, most of us fall on the seek avoid spectrum somewhere due to our attachment dynamics or styles. One of us is usually a seeker, and one of us is usually avoider. Sometimes you get two avoiders,

but eventually one of the avoiders will turn into a seeker because their threshold of avoiding just ran out. And they're like, okay, this feels terrible. Let's reconnect. And so someone always will initiate some kind of conversation saying, this feels bad. Can we do something about it? Which is great.

We want to rely on the seeker usually is very helpful in a relationship because they're more anxious when there's disconnection. They didn't grow up in a family of disconnection, so it doesn't feel good to them. Whereas the avoider might have grown up in a family where that was the norm, and so they got really comfortable in that place.

Meagen Gibson - [00:27:28]

Yeah. I found that seeking out avoiders can be difficult and challenging, because as the seeker, sometimes you make up a lot of stories about what the avoider is experiencing. Or what that must mean. It's because that's the thing that we do to feel safe. I'm going to make up a story so that I can rationalize my security in this relationship.

And so that's been my approach as of late, probably in the last 6 months is to just say, I feel disconnected from you and here's my story. And normally I'm 100% wrong, but I'm not trying to be right. I'm trying to start a conversation. Trying to reconnect.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Another one you can do there, if you're listening and you're the seeker and you're with an avoider is you can say, I'm feeling a little scared right now. I'm feeling alone and a little scared, just letting you know. And I'm wondering if my alarm bell should keep going off right now.

And most avoiders, if they care about their seeker partner, they're going to, it's going to feel bad that I'm making you feel this way, in a way. Oh, that sucks that you feel alone and scared. Oh, that's not cool.

And that alone can draw an avoider forward, because what avoiders don't like is pursuit. If you continue to pursue from an anxious, that anxious, scared place, but you're asking lots and lots of questions, peppering them left and right and saying, hurry up, we have to get back to a good place. For most people that are more on the avoidant spectrum, that's going to probably drive them further away.

Meagen Gibson

And especially, I know in my case, my avoider is my impression of that relationship when they would go into avoidance, was that it was judgmental avoidance. It was like, this conversation isn't worth my time. What you said is stupid, etc etc. Those are the stories I was making up. And in my situation, the person was actually just completely in shame.

That's what had shut them down and got them avoiding, was shame, which was not on my radar at all. Which generated so much compassion. And compassion is the key to reconnection for me, and I assume a lot of people. It's like once you have that understanding, even if you've had a conflict, anything that's going to generate compassion is going to bring you back.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. This is why self understanding is so important. It's I want to understand me so I can educate you about me. And I also want to understand you and where you come from, because then it starts to make sense. And I don't make it all about me all the time. Because you're very normal there and you're making meaning out of someone's flat face or distance or quietness. It's what we do, we fill in the fucking void with all kinds of stories.

And so to know that a lot of times people are in shame and they're feeling just really bad. Yeah, it can take the edge of.

Meagen Gibson - [00:30:23]

Absolutely.

Well, Jayson Gaddis, it has been fantastic having you with us. Where can people find out more about you and obviously get the book?

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah. Well, the books in all the major retailers, as far as I know, Amazon, of course. And you can get it also on gettingtozerobook.com where we have some extra goodies if you want to get it through there.

And the podcast and everything else and me and what I'm up to, all the social handles are all at relationshipschool.com

And I'm [@jaysongaddis](https://www.instagram.com/jaysongaddis) on Instagram. But you can all find it at relationshipschool.com

Meagen Gibson

Awesome. Thanks so much for being with us today.

Jayson Gaddis

Yeah, you got it. It's a pleasure.