

Attachment styles in nonmonogamy

Guest: Jessica Fern

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Jaia Bristow - [00:00:09]

Hello and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow and I am one of your hosts. And today I am super happy to be joined by Jessica Fern. Welcome, Jessica.

Jessica Fern

Hi. Thank you.

Jaia Bristow

Hello. I'm so glad to have you with us today.

So, Jessica Fern is a psychotherapist, a certified clinical trauma professional, and the author of the book *Polysecure: Attachment, Trauma and Nonmonogamy*. In her international private practice, Jessica works with individuals, couples, and people in multiple partner relationships who no longer want to be limited by their reactive patterns, cultural conditioning, insecure attachment styles, and past traumas, helping them to embody new possibilities in life and love.

Jessica, let's start with defining a few things. So, for example, what is nonmonogamy?

Jessica Fern

Yes. That's a great first question. So nonmonogamy is an umbrella term that can mean many things. But what it's capturing is people who are not practicing sort of traditional monogamy, where they are not doing emotional and/or sexual exclusivity.

So people who are having multiple partners, whether that's sexual or romantic, but everyone involved knows. So cheating would kind of be non-consensual nonmonogamy, and it's not cheating that everyone knows this is the relationship structure that we are involved in and everyone is consenting.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. So that includes open relationships, polyamory, swingers, all types of consensual nonmonogamy where everyone's aware and everyone's consenting.

Jessica Fern

Exactly. Relationship anarchy, solo polyamory, monogamish. It has all of these different expressions and ways that people do it.

Jaia Bristow - [00:02:07]

Wonderful. And so, what do you define as attachment?

Jessica Fern

Yeah. So attachment came from John Bowlby in the 1960s, a British psychologist and researcher, and has had many decades of research around it. And what attachment is getting at is, as humans, the need for emotional bonding and attachment that's wired into us and sort of expected immediately as our first survival strategy. That if the baby infant does not bond to someone who bonds to them and wants to meet their needs, the baby will die.

And the needs of attachment are not just my physical needs for food and shelter are being met. It's the emotional needs of being attuned to and having this warmth and availability and responsiveness from our caretakers. So it's setting the stage that these are our needs that we all have. And then depending on how well our caretakers, parents can meet those needs, we either feel very safe and secure in our attachment with them, or we feel more insecure in our attachment with them.

And what's interesting is what we find is that our early childhood experiences create the blueprint for what we then expect in our adult sexual or romantic relationships.

So do I expect my partner to be there and available for me and safe? Or do I kind of expect my partner to not be available? To be inconsistent, to be hot or cold with me.

And then there's different ways that the attachment style looks. So there's the secure and then the insecure has three different expressions which tends to be, on one end, more of this withdrawn avoidant, dismissive style, which tends to keep people at arm length.

This more anxious, preoccupied style on the other end, which is more leaning in and grasping at relationships and partners.

And then what's called the disorganized or fearful avoidant, which goes back and forth between the two. But usually it comes from the experiences of trauma where the person who's supposed to be my safe haven and protecting me is also scaring me.

And so there's this paradox in the nervous system of, I want you, but you're not really safe. I need to defend against you.

Jaia Bristow

And so how does that work in nonmonogamy?

Jessica Fern

Yeah. Well in nonmonogamy many different things happen. So one of the myths or the misconception is that people think that people are going towards nonmonogamy or non-monogamous because they have an attachment insecurity. And just to debunk that right off the bat, that's not the case at all.

And that's already backed up by some early research that shows that people who are non-monogamous, who are polyamorous are just as secure in their styles of attachment as people who are monogamous.

And what you see is you really need to be more secure in nonmonogamy for the reasons I'll explain. Is that, what happens is, people transition. Let's say they already started from monogamy, which is most people's experience. And just that switching to a new paradigm is a big deal. And relatively less secure of a relationship structure than monogamy is.

Monogamy has all of the knowns. We know the math. We know the territory. We know the story of monogamy. We get a lot of support to be monogamous, whether it's from family, culture, work, legal benefits, you know, citizen benefits, all of that stuff that we get from being monogamous.

And polyamory or nonmonogamy doesn't have the same structure and support in play. It has other benefits and freedoms. But just that switch can be really jarring for people. And so, what happens sometimes in that transition is people, their own insecure attachment style gets exposed. So the structure of monogamy kind of buffered them or even hid from them an insecure attachment style that they have.

So they open up and go, well, I'm actually not as secure as I think. Or maybe it's a couple that's been monogamous and married and they felt like they were secure. And then they open up and that process of switching paradigm structures exposes, oh we actually weren't as secure as we thought. We were relying on the structure of monogamy to feel safe, but relationally I didn't feel as safe with you as I could have.

And that's one of the important distinctions I make that can apply to nonmonogamy or monogamy is, get your secure experience, your secure attachment, not from the structure of your relationship but from your relationship experience.

How are you treating each other? How are you showing up to each other? Do I feel safe with you? Do I feel like I can turn to you? Do you encourage me to even go do other things in the world and your support in my life? Are you attuning to me? I'm I attuning to you?

So that's one thing that happens is people open up or they transition to nonmonogamy and their own attachment style or the attachment experience of the relationship they've been in gets exposed, and it's difficult.

Jaia Bristow

And it's been there all along. It's not like nonmonogamy creates that, those difficulties. It's just that it exposes it more fully. It sounds like.

Jessica Fern

Exactly. It's not that it creates it. And I see this a lot because there's also the stigma that you're going to open up and it's just like, the pathway of divorce for couples that are married. And all of the couples that I've worked with and seen, when we start to dig, I see, oh, there are some big issues here already in your monogamous partnership, but they were either underground or invisible or they were tolerated.

And then the transition makes it so, oh I can't tolerate this anymore. And there's other people come into your life. There's other eyes on the relationship that go, I don't know if this is very healthy. Like, you've been doing this for how long? It's not that nonmonogamy causes it, it's more that it exposes it.

Jaia Bristow

I think that's a really important distinction to make.

Jessica Fern

Yeah. I think it really is because people want to blame polyamory, nonmonogamy and it's like, no, it's more the paradigm shift that either puts the spotlight on the relationship or it's pressure, so the cracks in the foundation aren't as sturdy.

Jaia Bristow - [00:09:27]

And do you see that as well in relationships that begin as non-monogamous? Because you've talked about people transitioning from monogamy to nonmonogamy. But what about those who start off non-monogamous?

Jessica Fern

Those who start off non-monogamous I see a real advantage because they're not necessarily having to do this clean up work in the same way from their monogamous relationship. And so what I see is the partners that come to me that started non-monogamous, we spend less time together. Maybe it's like, great, we're working together for 9 months, and then you're good. You're sailing.

But it doesn't mean they don't have any stuff around attachment, they will. They say, how do we create a secure relationship in this non-monogamous paradigm?

And so we'll focus on, okay, how do you do that? Because it is different. Whereas in monogamy, you're like, oh, the security comes from just I'm the only one. Or we're living together, whatever the structural things that we rely on for that security.

Jaia Bristow

So what are some of the challenges that come up in non-monogamous relationships?

Jessica Fern

You mean just being non-monogamous? Or I can say more about the other attachment things that come into that?

Jaia Bristow

If you can say more about the other attachment issues that arise.

Jessica Fern

Yeah. So the other attachment things that can arise are nonmonogamy can unintentionally replicate some of these insecure environments. So for someone who maybe had a history of their style with their caretakers parents was more anxious, preoccupied, that usually comes from you're here with me, and then you're not. You're available, and then you're not.

It feels so good when we're together, but now you're gone. It's the inconsistency. There is love, but I can't really depend on it. Which is different than a child who takes on more of the avoidance style where it's like, no one's really here attending to me, and I kind of have to be on my own. Or maybe my physical needs are met, but the emotional needs are not being met.

So what can happen is when someone has a lot of different partners. They might love all of their partners, but they can't be as available or accessible in the way that someone might have been used to them being available or accessible.

That can create this like, wait, I've been used to a certain amount of contact with you or a certain quality or a certain rhythm with you, and now you have a new partner that's important, and that changes the whole system. So people's more anxious attachment experiences can start to get inflamed by that.

And that's the way I work with it is seeing, okay, is there neglect that's happening in this partnership? And there's ways to remedy that. Or do the expectations of this relationship need to shift? Where someone isn't able to be as available as an attachment partner.

So that's one of the other things that happens in nonmonogamy is there can be this mismatch of do we want to be attachment partners or not? No judgment. We do not have to be in attachment based relationship with all the people that we're dating, sleeping with or in partnership with.

But what I make sure is important, let's be clear though, are we doing that or not? Because if we are going to be attachment based partners, then there does need to be like, I'm showing up for you pretty consistently. You might not be the only priority in my life, but you are one of the priorities in my life, and we both feel that and vice versa.

Jaia Bristow - [00:13:13]

And I guess the most important thing is that each party involved is on the same page. And that's, again, why communication is so important in nonmonogamy. Communicating, are we attachment partners and what does that look like for us? And all those different details which aren't needed as much in monogamy because that's all implied or assumed.

Jessica Fern

Exactly. It's all assumed with that relationship escalator and we just go on it, and here we are.

So that is the beauty of nonmonogamy is there's just so much more intentionality, there's so much more communication, there's so much exposing in a good way of what are my expectations? What are my wants and desires? And do they match with yours? How do we bridge the gap if there is one?

Jaia Bristow

And I'm also reflecting what you were saying about often our relationships as adults are reflected or come from a blueprint of our relationships with our caretakers when we were younger. And for many of us, we had more than one caretaker when we were younger. So I guess it makes sense that more than one relationship when we're an adult as well.

Jessica Fern

Yeah. Exactly. It's so funny because we know in the attachment that a child, at minimum, is probably attaching to two parents. Of course, not every home has two parents, or every child. But it's not just two parents, too. There might be siblings, there might be grandparents and aunts and uncles that are also important attachment figures.

And in cultures that aren't as nuclear as Western culture, they show the attachment is more dispute in a healthy way. So, yes, of course, as adults, we have multiple attachment figures, but in this romantic monogamous ideal, we're really hyper and do this monolithic, there's one attachment figure to meet all your needs.

Like Esther Perel says, meet the entire needs that a village would typically meet.

So what can happen is that people in nonmonogamy can have different attachment styles with different partners. And that can be challenging because we're surprising. Because in monogamy you typically have one attachment style with your partner, and even that might change through the years, but you feel it changing. Oh, I was more avoidant, and now I'm more preoccupied or I got insecure.

Whereas in nonmonogamy, you might have three or four different attachment styles going with your different partners, and you're feeling that all in your nervous system at the same time. So learning how to manage that is one of the experiences or skills people need to learn how to navigate.

Jaia Bristow - [00:16:06]

Right. And then I guess people, even in monogamous relationships, who might have only one attachment style with their partner, they probably also are having other attachment styles with their close friends and their family members. And so I guess all adults or all people have multiple attachment styles, but it's just in nonmonogamy it's more obvious if one has more partners and different attachment styles with each of those partners.

Jessica Fern

Exactly. And the attachment literature tends to focus more on romantic relationships. And the research does show that that tends to be where attachment is most intense. But for many people, it's also very intense in friendships and non-romantic relationships. I just want to make sure that's clear. But however, in nonmonogamy you are pursuing more than one romantic partner so it's more obvious.

Jaia Bristow

Right. So what can people do when they're having attachment issues in their relationships?

Jessica Fern

So that's exactly the intention of my book, because one of the issues is that there's this wealth of attachment literature, but it's predominantly mononormative and then unintentionally or explicitly, it prescribes monogamy or very monogamous behaviors, things that only partners living together and married could even do to get your security in that relationship.

So one of the things I personally found, or my clients would complain about is, yeah, I know I need to be more secure in my attachment experience with my partner, but, like, everything I read or listen to, I can't do half of it.

And so people feel really discouraged or even pathologized. So my book is like, okay, there needs to be another resource here that tells people here are the things you can do, and I'm not telling you to be monogamous.

So in the book, I come up with the acronym HEARTS, H-E-A-R-T-S. And so do you want me to just go through what those mean?

Jaia Bristow

That would be great.

Jessica Fern

Great. Yeah. So the H is for being here, which is about present. Being physically present, being emotionally present, being with our partners. And when we're with them to our best of our ability, we're actually with them. We're not distracted. So that is, like foundational for just being able to bond. We can't bond to people that just aren't there.

Then the E is express delight, which is this experience of just I am delighting in your beingness. So not what you do for me, not the needs you meet for me, but just the fact of your aliveness. Who you are. Like, I take the light in that, and then there's an expression, and that doesn't have to be verbal. It's not just the love language of words of affirmation, even though it could be that. It's often just a look in your eyes, the way you touch someone, the way you smile at them, or the way you communicate to them that is like, yes, you are valuable to me. And you know it. And I know it. It's clear.

[00:19:27]

And that's so important in general for children to know that they're valued for who they are, not the grades they get or the chores that they do. Just the fact that you're alive and the parent just oozes that, I'm so glad you exist.

But in nonmonogamy, where there's multiple partnerships, we really need that sense of express delight to know, why am I special to you? Why am I unique when you aren't obliged to me because we're married or monogamous? Why do you choose me?

Then the next one, the A is attunement. Being able to tune into each other on an emotional or energetic level. The resonating with each other that I can see you and I'm paying attention. And I'm tracking you.

And in nonmonogamy it is a skill to know, how do I tune into one person? And then I have to separate and then now I tune in to someone else. And how do I stay attuned to myself while all of that is happening? Or if I'm with multiple partners, how do I simultaneously tune into all of them? Which might be very difficult or different. So attunement.

R is rituals and routine. So our attachment system really thrives on ritual and routine and especially comings and goings. That's one of the primary ways. We know that intuitively when we greet a baby or an animal, we change our voice and our face smiles and our voice goes up, and we kind of are sing songy. And it's this indication of, I'm safe.

And so there's a similar thing as adults, that we need ways that we come together and greet each other and ways that we part and say goodbye. But also just the rituals and routines of our daily rhythm. The mundane rituals of even if we're not living together, do we say goodnight and good morning? Or what are the little things throughout the week or a month that we feel connected to that keep this thread going? And what are the big rituals, the big ceremonies that people can take on to acknowledge relationships? Whether it's a commitment ceremony, whether it's a transition to a different kind of relationship together that's more or less committed. So those are really important.

Then T is turning towards after conflict.

And so that is conflict management, conflict resolution. Ruptures and misunderstandings are inevitable and they will happen in secure, healthy relationships. The fact that there's ruptures that there's disagreements isn't the problem. What matters most is how we repair. The quicker we repair, the more secure the relationship is. And the attitude, you don't have to be perfect in your apology, but the attitude you come with of, I'm open, I'm curious, I'm humble. I'm willing to take responsibility for my part in this and hold you accountable for yours. So important to feel safe with people.

When there's ruptures that keep getting unaddressed, swept under the carpet, dismissed. We don't feel safe. We don't feel like I can come forward with this other important thing I need to bring up.

And then the last is asked is S which is secure attachment itself. And basically, that's a whole separate chapter in my book that goes through how do you apply the HEART to yourself? So I think for all folks, of course having secure attachment itself is important. In Nonmonogamy it's imperative. But I can feel that I am secure within and I know my needs, I know my boundaries, I know my likes and dislikes, and I can express that. And I know how to manage all the things.

Jaia Bristow

So it's being here for oneself, expressing delight with oneself and that one's own existence without feeling like we need to achieve anything or be particularly special just for existing. It's being attuned to oneself. It's having little rituals for oneself and making sure that we have time for ourselves and we're not losing ourselves in all our partners, I guess. Turning towards oneself after conflict as well, I guess. Not turning away, I guess it's not being conflict avoidant even.

Jessica Fern - [00:24:23]

Yeah. And that one it's more of how do I manage my triggers? Or how do I fix the inner critic that's the inner conflict that comes up when I do fall short of my expectations or I do mess up or I do miss a deadline at work? How do I manage that conflict inside? So you got it. Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

It's a beautiful acronym, HEARTS, I love it.

Jessica Fern

Felt appropriate. Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

And it's great advice. In a lot of nonmonogamy circles that I'm in, your book gets mentioned a lot, especially because, as you say, there's not that much out there for people in nonmonogamous relationships. There are not many therapists who are able to support and understand nonmonogamous relationships.

So it's really great that you've created this work, but it is such a beautiful acronym and therefore easy to remember as well, I think. And what's interesting is that whilst a lot of things that apply to only monogamy cannot always be translated to nonmonogamy, interestingly the opposite isn't, so a lot of things that apply to nonmonogamy can also apply to monogamy.

So, for example, how everything you've spoken about, how does it then apply to monogamy as well?

Jessica Fern

Yeah. And the feedback I've been getting has been so lovely, whether it's other mental health professionals or people just reaching out and saying I've been giving this book to my monogamous friends or family or my monogamous clients. Because just the description of attachment and then just the HEARTS is really for anyone, regardless of your relationship structure.

And often what happens is people realize, oh, yeah, I've been married for 20 years or 2 or in a monogamous relationship, and I'm just relying on the structure. So the HEARTS helps them really get more to, how do we do the secure functioning together in a way that we both really feel it?

And just bringing intentionality to, what are our attachment needs. What is our style together and separately?

Jaia Bristow

And is there any direct correlation between attachment styles and love languages? You've mentioned love languages a couple of times. And I'm curious how.

Jessica Fern

I don't know of any studies that look at it, and I'm just doing a quick inventory. I don't think there's a direct correlation. Yeah, I've seen all the styles express all of the love languages.

Jaia Bristow

I guess with all of it, once again just a good reminder how essential good communication is. Open communication. Honest communication.

Jessica Fern - [00:27:09]

Exactly. Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. Well, I hope that people will be inspired to get your book because it sounds like a really helpful tool.

So where can people find out more about you and your work?

Jessica Fern

My website is jessicafern.com

There's some free resources there. There's links to my book. My publisher, Thorntree Press has a page for the book, and you can see all the different ways you can access and buy the book depending on whether you want to go independent or big corporations to buy it.

And I'm not big online. I do have a [YouTube channel](#) where I put some videos or webinars up as I create them.

Jaia Bristow

Fantastic. And you talked about having an international practice. Do you see clients online? Because this is obviously an international conference. So if people are struggling and need some support in their open relationships or their nonmonogamous relationships, are they able to come to you?

Jessica Fern

Yeah. My practice is completely full with an overbooked wait list, but I do all of my stuff online internationally. But if people are really struggling I will also just sometimes do one time consultations, I can usually fit in and just help people, even if they already have a therapist, get a new perspective or help them, give them a path forward.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. That's so great.

Jaia Bristow

Thank you for your time today, Jessica, it's been really great, and I really appreciate everything you shared with us.

Jessica Fern

Thank you for doing this Jaia, it's wonderful.