

Four core skills for polyamory & open relationships

Guest: Martha Kauppi

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 - [00:00:09]

Hello and welcome back to the Relationship Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. Today I am very excited to be joined by Martha Kauppi. Welcome, Martha

Martha Kauppi

Thank you so much for having me. I'm super happy to be here.

Jaia Bristow

I'm super happy to have you on board. I'm really excited about the conversation we're going to be having today.

So Martha Kauppi is a marriage and family therapist, an educator, author, speaker, and AASECT-certified sex therapist and supervisor. Her private practice in Madison, Wisconsin specializes in complex relational therapy, sex issues, and alternative family structures. As the founding director of the Institute for Relational Intimacy, Martha offers unique educational offerings to help therapists all over the world become comfortable, confident, and competent working with sex issues. She is the author of the groundbreaking new book *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and Their Clients)*.

So, Martha, let's start with how did you come to write about polyamory?

Martha Kauppi

It's such a good question. And in order to answer it, I have to go back a little way, of course, because it didn't just bring forth fully formed.

I know lots of people who are in open relationships, and it was a normal part of life as I was growing up. My brother has always been polyamorous. And so I've had the opportunity to be front seat observer in lots of open relationships that he had, and with friends of his. And our parents also had a monogamous agreement that we were both aware of. So, I think I was raised with a mindset that you figure out what works for you and what shape you want your life to take, and then you go get it.

So then I was going to therapy school, and what I was learning in therapy school was not that. I was hearing things like, there's no such thing as a secure attachment in an open relationship. It could not work for the long haul. Monogamy is the only real form of intimacy. Stuff like that.

And I thought, gee, this is interesting because that's not what I observe, you know, at all. And so how do I make sense of this? And the way that I made sense of it was to do a piece of research as part of my master's degree, looking specifically at longevity in polyamorous relationships. So how long do they last? And a few other demographic issues and also intimacy.

And what I learned from my study bore out what I observed, not what I was learning. So I definitely learned that there are long-term relationships that do very well. People are happy in their long-term polyamorous relationships, and it doesn't seem to disrupt the intimacy, in an earlier relationship, to add another partner.

And then I also gathered a bunch of super fascinating demographic information. I go over it all in my book. But I think that, for me, it was a pivotal moment, because I realized, okay, what I'm seeing in real life is not what therapists are being taught, and it's also not what the public is being taught. So as we're thinking about what's a good fit for me? And what do I want in my life? What kind of relationship do I want? What makes sense for me? It's not on the menu.

And if it is on the menu, very soon, somebody's going to say, that should not be on your menu, because that is not a good idea.

So I think I wrote this book because I ended up building my career as a sex therapist, partly around working with clients. But as one person, I can only see so many clients. And so I started training therapists to work effectively with sex issues.

And it was just very clear that one of the issues that therapists needed help working with was open relationships. So I've been training therapists in this area for quite a while, and then it just seemed like, well, it would be logical to make a book about it. So long story, but that's how it all kind of evolved.

Jaia Bristow - [00:04:28]

Brilliant. Well, thank you for sharing that with us. And I really appreciate in what you're saying, just showing that polyamory, non-monogamy, it's not some new occurrence. It's been around for a long time, and you talked about your parents, your brother. And no matter how long it's been around, there's always people saying it's not normal, it's unconventional, it can't work out, even though it's existed for a long time, and you've seen through your own observations how well it can work.

So when you've been working with therapists and as a therapist, what kinds of issues can come up for those in non-monogamous relationships?

Martha Kauppi

Well, the first category that I think is important to acknowledge is just plain old life human stuff. Like depression, anxiety, whatever not related to polyamory.

So we're all human beings and we all have challenges. And I wouldn't want to assume that just because somebody identified as polyamorous or was in a polyamorous relationship or some other form of open relationship, that that was really the nexus of their problems. You can't assume that.

However, open relationship structures can be really challenging for people. And so, more than with some other marginalized groups, I would say polyamory often is the thing that brings people to therapy. They're looking for help specifically navigating the challenges that they're finding themselves faced with.

And it's just way harder than it should be to find a therapist who can help well with that. And it's also really hard to find any kind of self-help guidance. So that's another reason I wrote the book was because not everybody has access to therapy. Not everybody can afford it. Not everybody can find a polyamory friendly therapist. So I wrote a book that can be, on one hand, a textbook, but on the other hand a self-help manual, but I digress.

So you have a very specific question. Sorry about that. So regular people stuff. But I also see people with differences of opinion about opening up. It's very common for people to struggle with difficult emotions related to jealousy, managing their internal responses when things are not going their way, when it can be tough.

I see a lot of difficulty making and keeping agreements and difficulties understanding what is the makeup of a strong agreement? And how does that work? It's not just a behavioral thing. Make an agreement, keep it. It's not as simple as that. It's much more complicated and developmental. And I think we'll be talking more about that a little bit later.

I see people with coming out issues because this is clearly a marginalized population. You can lose your job, you can lose custody of your kids, you can lose friends, you can end up with a big family rift. So people don't always just come out as being in an open relationship. And when, if you can imagine, for instance, a situation where there are three people in an open relationship, like a triad or throuple, there might be differences of opinion about how out to be in different kinds of contexts. So where do you go for holidays? And whose family do you go with? And what do you tell them? And there's a lot of complexity around that, where it's very easy for one person to get sidelined a lot or for a lot of complications to come up.

I think a lot of people struggle with just managing the complexity. The needs and wants of multiple partners is a handful. If you think about a monogamous relationship, there's plenty to handle. You know, there's all the communication, there's all the negotiation, there's all the decisions to be made. And polyamory is just exactly like that, except a little more.

Jaia Bristow - [00:08:27]

Yeah, definitely. And I really appreciate you talking about all these issues. I myself, I'm non-monogamous and have accounted everything you've just spoken about. And so it's really yeah, it's really helpful hearing you talk about that.

And I think you talking as well about how number one, the issues people have is just normal human stuff. Often when non-monogamous relationships or polyamorous relationships don't work, people blame the fact that they're polyamorous, whereas there's plenty of monogamous relationships that don't work out either.

So what would you say are the main skills needed therefore, in a polyamorous relationship to make it work?

Martha Kauppi

You know, the interesting thing about that laundry list of things that come up that are challenging is succeeding with any of that is built on a particular foundation. And spoiler alert, succeeding in any relationship is built on the same foundation. So this is equally relevant to people who are in monogamous relationships. It's equally relevant to people who have work relationships, friend relationships, parental relationships. It's just a relationship blueprint.

But it's for sure important when you're working with somebody in an open relationship to be able to break it down in some way so that you can understand what the problem is if the problem isn't polyamory. We can't say the problem is the shape of your relationship. There has to be something more than that. We know that from the research about successful relationships. If you're in a monogamous relationship, I wouldn't say, well, there's your problem. Your problem is that you're in a monogamous relationship.

So there's got to be another way of thinking about it. And this is how I think about it. I think there are four skills. One is, the first is being able to look inside of yourself and take an internal read on what you think, feel, believe, desire, prefer. And some people have a really difficult time getting in touch with that because there's a lot of noise. There's my partner might want this. My other partner might want that. My mother believes this. My father believes that. My siblings, blah, blah. And then the cultural thing in the article I just read this morning over coffee. We have all this noise pressuring us, and it causes us to feel like I should do this. I shouldn't do that. I should want this. I shouldn't want that. So taking an internal read from your own psychic core is the first thing.

The second thing is taking what you learn there and then expressing it to somebody else, even if you think they're not going to be comfortable hearing. So an example in this context would be, my darling, I've been thinking about open relationships. Could we talk about it? I'd really like to explore this topic with you? That might feel like a very difficult conversation to bring up.

And then part three, being able to get curious and stay grounded when your partner brings up something that might be difficult for you to hear. So then that comes right on the heels because oh, my God, my partner wants to open my relationship. So instead of spinning out into what does that mean about me? What does that mean about us? Probably they're just trying to break up. They're not attracted to me anymore. Any of that spirally business, instead to ground and get curious. What is it about that that is interesting to you? How did you start thinking about that? What sounds like fun about that? Is there anything about that that sounds a little scary to you?

So accessing curiosity and leaning in towards the person who's trying to express something. Which is a boundary project. I have to be clear, they're expressing something about themselves that they want me to understand. And even if I'm really rocked by it, if I can get grounded and stay in it, I can be, first of all, a good partner. Secondly, I'm going to learn a lot about my partner and probably about myself in the course of a good conversation about that.

So the fourth skill that underlies all of that is the getting grounded holding steady skill. So in order to take an internal read, I have to get grounded in myself, as opposed to thinking about what my partner wants. In order to say something to my partner that I think is going to be difficult for them to hear. I have to get grounded in myself, so that whatever their reaction and response is I'm going to be okay, and I'm going to stick with it. And I certainly have to get grounded in myself for my partner to be able to express something about what they want, and for me to lean in with curiosity.

So this is just a big relational foundational toolkit. But when it comes to managing jealousy, making and keeping agreements, figuring out how to open your relationship, making coming out decisions, having discussions where you disagree, whether it's about a coming out issue or opening up issue, any of that, you can see that you'll very soon notice which of these skills you're better at than others.

So for me personally, I finally have learned how to figure out what I want. Mostly I can say it. I still have to really get a hold of myself when I'm hearing something that's hard for me to hear.

So most of us are stronger in some of these than others, but thinking about it like this and breaking it down gives you a way to strengthen the skills that are going to make a difference, as opposed to, well, if you were just in a monogamous relationship, you wouldn't have this problem. I would say if you're in a monogamous relationship you're still going to have that same problem with that third part. So it helps in every single kind of relationship, in every context.

Jaia Bristow - [00:14:28]

Yeah. They sound like very crucial skills and very essential in any type of relating. So thank you for bringing those up.

And so, how do these skills then relate to making strong agreements with partners? You've talked about strong agreements. Could you develop a bit more on those?

Martha Kauppi

Yeah. I think making and keeping agreements is one of those things that, it's incredibly difficult. And I think it's because we're thinking about it wrong. So I think sometimes people will make an agreement because they think they probably can keep it, even if they haven't in the past. And they're just thinking I'll just muscle through it. I can do it this time, even though there's no reason to think that. But the willpower model of agreement making, which, you know, what could go wrong?

And then I also think that sometimes we agree to things that we already know we don't even believe in. I'm just going to agree to this so that you stop bugging me about it. I'm just going to say yes and push it down the road. I'll deal with it when it happens, it'll be a while. So I'm buying some quiet and some conflict free, theoretically, space between us for a period of time, suspecting it'll probably blow up at some point in the future.

Jaia Bristow - [00:15:58]

Short-term gratification rather than long-term gratification.

Martha Kauppi

Exactly. And I would call it conflict avoidance. So I'm just gonna avoid getting in trouble with you. I'm gonna agree. It's a people please thing. Let me just give you what you want. Sure, honey. Yes, I'll do it. Absolutely, good idea. Yep. Yep. I was an ass in the past, and I shouldn't have done that thing, and I'll never do it again. It's very magical thinking.

And I think instead, if we were thinking about it in terms of those four skills, which I'm gonna call the skills of differentiation, by which I mean, I am one person. You are another person. We are different from one another, and we can be in relationship and connection with each other without having to be exactly the same as each other.

So it's okay for us to disagree. It's okay that we see things differently. It's okay that different stuff gets under my skin than yours. No big deal. But it sure would be great if we could relate. If I could understand how it gets under your skin, you could understand how it gets under my skin. And together, then we could decide some things from a stronger place.

Okay. So back to negotiating and agreements. If we were thinking about it in terms of differentiation, my first question for somebody who wanted to make or keep an agreement would be, what do you actually want for yourself? Is this an agreement that interests you? Does your part of this agreement sound like a good challenge for yourself that you believe in? Can you back it with your value system? Can you back it with true desire?

So it could be a big stretch. It could be, I've never done it before. But if I believe in it and it represents the person I want to be, then there's something there in the department of motivation that might help me actually express differently than I have in the past. And that would be the first part of differentiation. Look inside yourself, figure out what you actually want. What do you want for yourself truly?

And then the second part, say it to your partner. So let's imagine my partner is asking me for a particular agreement to not date this particular person. I'm making this up, obviously. And so, I take an internal look, and I figure out, what do I actually believe about that? And what I actually believe about that is I'm not ready to let go of that other person. What if I say that instead of just saying what I think is going to please my partner? What if I actually say what's true for me and just trust that we will get through the hard conversation and that the hard conversation is a smaller price to pay than the broken agreement downstream if I don't do it. So it's going to lead to a broken agreement if I don't do it, pretty much money back guarantee. So that's the second part of differentiation.

Third part, when my partner says, oh, my God, I can't believe you're saying that to me. Absolutely freaking not. Then can I hold steady and stick with what's true for me and also stay in relationship with my partner? Let me understand better what it is that you're worried about here. Talk a little bit about what it is about this particular person that is hard for you. What's getting under your skin about this? Walk me through. Not so I can talk you out of it, but so that I can truly understand it. Because if I truly understand it, then something that I haven't experienced is different for me can now come into my experience, and we can begin to solve our dilemma and make some decisions that could potentially work for both of us.

Jaia Bristow - [00:19:54]

I think that's really crucial what you're saying about actually understanding, trying to understand what the other person is saying to us, rather than assuming based on our own experiences with either we fear what they're saying or what we assume they're saying. And actually, so I really think that third point you're talking about is really important, actually understanding what it is the other person is saying rather than assuming we understand.

Martha Kauppi

Yeah. And there's a fine point there, because when you're leaning in and getting curious about what your partner's experience is, some people find that to be really invasive, like interrogation. And I think that points to a really fine line between, I want to know you so I can understand. Let me stand in your shoes, paint me a picture, make it technicolor so I can get it. I want to get the experience that you're having. Versus, so what's your complaint here? Why do you think that? Because I need to know all the stuff so that I can be a debate team. And I'm going to come back at you, and I'm going to talk to you out of those points. That is not what I'm talking about.

So that's not, I would call that not a relational approach. It's not a relational stance. So all this stuff. Yeah. This is a huge reframe for agreement making, though, right? Because if I'm working with a couple and they're trying to make an agreement and one partner says to the other, this is what I want. What I'm going to do is I'm going to turn to the other partner, and I'm going to say pause. Now, your job is to figure out what you want.

If somebody says this is what I want you to do. You have to take a pause. There should be a space, and there should be time right there. And I want to make sure that I'm giving permission to take that internal read. And for some people, that internal read takes a split second. And for some people, it takes a three week solo retreat. It varies depending on how much practice you have and how tough the topic is. But without the internal read, you get a people pleasing answer. And none of us want our partner to just be people pleasing us. We actually want the truth.

And that's the other half of how I think about agreements and negotiation. I think the partner who's being asked for something needs to figure out what they really want. The partner who is doing the asking needs to get really good at that third step. So I want my partner to know. Tell me, just tell me. Tell me all of it. There might be tears coming down my face. I might need to talk to my therapist later, but I will not hold it against you. I will thank you. And I do want it all because I want to know you.

That's really, really different from bursting into tears or yelling at somebody, don't ever bring this up to me again, which is more of a strategy of if I'm histrionic, I can shut them down. And that's a way, realizing that is a big realization. I have the power to pressure my partner into becoming conflict avoidant. So that's where the holding steady part comes in, the fourth part.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And so, I'm sure you discuss this more in your book, but do you have tips for each of these steps? Like, how does one figure out what one actually wants? Because I think for me out of everything you're saying, I think that's the hardest thing, because often, especially with a partner, if I know what they want, I'm just like, okay, how can I provide that for you?

So the other steps are communicating what I want, being grounded in myself I think I can manage. But how do we start with step one and figuring out what we want? And what are some tips for the other steps as well?

Martha Kauppi - [00:23:53]

That's such a good question. And yes, I have 25 worksheets in my book. And this is my book right here. It has 25 worksheets and big chapters about all this stuff. We're doing a quick redux but there certainly is more.

I think when it comes to figuring out what you think, feel, desire, prefer it takes practice and asking yourself those questions pretty regularly, beginning, I would say step one in a low stress environment. So you're still half asleep. You're starting to blink awake in the morning, and you're like, it's a day. That's a good time. Before anybody else's opinion has come into your space. What do I want for myself today? At the end of today, what do I want for myself? The one thing. If I could give myself one thing that's going to make a difference to me.

Or sometimes I ask myself at a break in my day, whether it's lunch or I'm pouring tea or whatever. I'll just take a minute and ask myself, how's it going? You know, how am I feeling? How's my energy? What do I need? And we do this automatically, but making it explicit so that we know we're doing it helps us to build the skill to do it when it's a little harder.

And then I think you can talk to any partners, friends, relations that you're going to be having conversations with and just tell them. I've got a little self-help project here. I'm practicing figuring out what I think and feel and prefer and believe and want. And so when you tell me something, I want you to tell me, I might just take a little break. I might just take a little time out so that, or I might take three breaths, or I might go walk around the block. Or I'll often just go to the bathroom and splash water on my face. Take a little break, because nobody's going to bug you in there, and nobody needs to know you're doing a thing.

So right in the middle of your work day, you can just be like, excuse me, I'll be right back. And then you can just get grounded, take a couple of breaths, check in with yourself.

And if you're feeling like blaargh, spoiler alert, again, I'll give you a clue. That is a sign that you have not yet figured out that it's time to say yes. Don't feel like you're going to throw up and then go say yes to the thing. Don't do that. Instead, take your time figuring out what's going on.

And this is a lovely self-help project. There are lots of ways to approach it. It's also a really lovely therapy project for an individual therapy or coach or consultant to just help you figure out who am I? What do I want? And in quick action, like a discussion with my partner, how do I continue figuring out in real time as things unfold?

And then once you know can you say it? So sometimes we know it, and it's like we're screaming in the back of our head, no, no, no. And then what comes out of our mouth? Sure.

Jaia Bristow

I've definitely been there.

Martha Kauppi

I think we all have. I certainly have. Yeah. And you do that a few times and they get kicked. Something goes sideways, of course. And after a while, you start to think, oh, gosh, what went wrong there? Could it have been something I did?

So if you're having a strong emotion or feeling in your body, just listen, let it help you figure out and maybe experiment with saying no on some small things and then watch and see what happens. Usually the world doesn't actually come tumbling down the way that you're afraid that it might.

Jaia Bristow - [00:27:45]

Yeah. Great. And so I guess you've talked, how can therapists, because in your book you talk a lot about teaching therapists to support clients going through these kind of relationships or open relationships, polyamorous relationships. So what tips do you have for therapists supporting polyamorous clients and helping them figure out these skills, I guess?

Martha Kauppi

Yeah. I want to make this question broader because I think it also relates to friends of people who are in polyamorous relationships, relatives of people who are in polyamorous relationships. So how do we relate to the people that we care about who are in some form of open relationship, even if we might be a little uncomfortable with it?

And I think the first thing is of all the work that I do about polyamory, the one message I really want to get across is polyamory absolutely can work. There is no reason to think that this is unhealthy or unworkable. So that's my first tip. You've got to start from a mindset that this can work. And I think you also have to start from a mindset that the client or loved one that you're talking to knows themselves best.

And even if they're making a horrible mistake, it's their mistake to make. They are trusting their internal guidance. And if you want to be a good friend and a good support, you need to help them trust their internal guidance, even if you're not so sure.

Occasionally I watch somebody make a choice or a decision, and I'm not so sure that it's a good decision, depending on what it is. I certainly have ways of challenging that and questioning about it, but it would never be to say something like, your judgment is wrong here. I would never say that to somebody. My assumption is that by and large, people are doing pretty well. And it's okay to run a relationship experiment. And also, polyamory works a lot.

So how can I support you? How can I help you? What skills do you need? Let me buy you a book. What can we do to help you be as strong as possible in this situation, is a much better supportive stance than tearing you down and saying you're making a wrong decision. You're doing this wrong. This is a bad idea. You need to get out of this. Assuming we're not talking about domestic violence, it's okay. Just go run your experiment.

So polyamory can work. And then I also think it's so important to know there are skills you can build that help. It's not just like, I was born good at this. It's more like, somehow we figure out what we need. And differentiation of self is a project that I think is a lifelong project. And I don't think I'm done or anybody is done with it. There's always a new challenge, but realizing what the parts of that are so that I can see in myself when it's breaking down, where it's breaking down, and then start working on shoring it up.

So if I'm getting swamped by my emotions, I'm going to do some work on working with automatic responses and difficult emotions. If I'm having trouble figuring out what I want, I'm going to do some work about that. If I'm having trouble speaking up about what's true for me, then that's where I'm going to focus my energy. If I'm having trouble sitting still and managing all my feelings while my partner says stuff to me that, really a part of me really wants to know that stuff, and a part of me is like, I don't think I can handle it. I'm going to coach myself. I can handle it. This isn't going to kill me. Everything's fine. We're not making a decision here. We're just looking it over and turning it over.

If you think about it like a stone, a beautiful stone that you pick up, it's got many different views, and you turn it over in your hands, and you look at it from all different ways. You get it wet and you check it out, like that. My partner and I are looking at something together. We're thinking and talking about ideas, feelings and desires that's very different from you are trying to trap me and this could not go well, right?

Jaia Bristow - [00:32:10]

Yeah.

Martha Kauppi

So those are some of the tips, and they're for therapists, but lots of other people, too. And then the other one I just have to mention is, you've got to know and take a look at your own biases. Because of the way that I was raised, I have a strong bias that people are unique and strong individuals. Our individuality makes us stronger, and it doesn't matter what shape our relationships are. It matters how we show up in them.

But that's biased, not everybody would agree with me about that. But if you're a therapist and you're working with people who don't share your perspective, it's important for you to get clear about whose goals are important and whose feelings should be guiding this. So it's my clients emotional guidance system that should be in charge of their decisions. I'm just part of the advisory staff, and that's the same if I'm talking to a friend over tea.

Jaia Bristow

Interesting. And do you have any advice when it comes to, for example, jealousy, which I know is an emotion people talk a lot about around polyamory? Both non-monogamous people are always like, how do you handle the jealousy?

And I think jealousy comes up for some people and not for others, regardless of the type of relationship they're in. I know plenty of monogamous people who get very jealous and others who don't and I know plenty of polyamorous people who experience jealousy and others who don't.

So do you have anything to say around jealousy?

Martha Kauppi

Sure, I do. I have a big, big chapter about it. It's an enormous topic. Managing emotions is a really, really big topic, and it's complicated because there are automatic responses, which are your triggered responses and those are all lodged, they're like chemical markers of something that happened in the past that still resides in your brain that causes you to respond to something in the past because of some little cue in the moment.

So that kind of thing, an automatic emotional response, my partner says to me, darling, I would like to talk about opening our relationship, and I freak out. Well, that's out of proportion to the conversation, right? If I were managing my emotional responses, I would say, what is it about that that interests you? I myself never thought about it, and it sounds kind of scary.

So there's a huge difference between those things. So managing automatic responses is really important. And it's quite different from acknowledging and validating your emotions. So that thing where you go to the restroom, you splash water on your face, you take an internal read, you still feel nauseous, you realize that's telling you something, don't say yes to the thing. So that's acknowledging your emotions so that you don't go too fast for yourself, and so that you're making decisions that are a good fit for where you actually are, rather than just wishing you were somewhere else and imagining that somehow you're going to grow into that.

So I think, it's complicated, is the only short answer. I would also say that some people think that if you're doing polyamory well or correctly you won't experience jealousy, and I just want to debunk that right off the bat. Lots of people experience jealousy in open relationships. Lots and lots and lots. And it's no wonder, because everywhere we look, we're seeing stuff about how only monogamy can be true intimacy. And also what true intimacy looks like is depicted for us in technicolor all over the

place. And we're mostly not seeing healthy role models of workable polyamory relationships with secure bonds, where everybody feels essentially, whole and secure.

So if we were seeing that as much as we've been seeing the monogamy thing, I think there would be a lot less difficult emotions and automatic responses, like jealousy in open relationships. But until that happens, there's a lot and it doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong. It just means you're a human being.

But it also doesn't mean you shouldn't try it. It doesn't mean you shouldn't lean into it, because figuring out how to manage and parse out what's going on for yourself emotionally is the most empowering life skill there is. I strongly recommend it. It's been a lifelong project for me, and it's made the single biggest difference of any life long project that I've done.

Jaia Bristow - [00:36:54]

Wonderful. And I think it's really important to note in what you're saying that, if one is embarking in polyamorous relationships, it's not that jealousy is taboo, it's just a difficult emotion that we experience along with other difficult emotions we experience.

We're not going to say, you should never feel angry, you should never feel ashamed. There's lots of difficult emotions we experience but jealousy is one that, because of the relationship format, I think you're right that there'd be a lot less if these relationship formats were more normalized.

But I think it's also just noticing it as in an emotion rather than that's uncomfortable, but not fully taboo. And I know for myself, I've been in non-monogamous relationships most of my life, most of my relationships, and I experience jealousy.

I was just on the phone to a partner the other night who mentioned dating someone new, and I could feel my body tense up but instead of immediately being like, oh, my God, this is terrible. I hate this. How dare they or whatever. It was just like, oh, noticing my body. And as they kept talking, I just sensed my body. And then eventually, expressed something, asked some more questions. And then I could really feel myself relax. And once I found out more and felt that our relationship was still very secure, then it was okay. And then it doesn't mean the jealousy completely disappeared, but it definitely dissipated, and the contractions in my body definitely relaxed.

So I think it's really important to note, like you say, to debunk the myth that jealousy doesn't exist and more think of it as just another emotion that we can manage along with all the other emotions you're talking about.

Martha Kauppi

I love that personal story because it's a beautiful illustration of a really important concept. When you feel an emotion, you can either just hold it lovingly and trust that it will take care of itself and that you'll take care of whatever needs to be taken care of. Or you can feed it. You can feed it a whole bunch of toxic thoughts. My partner is just looking for a way to break up with me. That fight that we had over breakfast this morning is going to be our undoing. This other partner has got everything that I don't have, and my partner is going to leave me so that they can go, all this stuff.

Comparison, self comparison, catastrophizing, imminent break up, my ass is too big. We have a long list of stuff that we tell ourselves that's bad news. And if you feed an emotion, a bunch of bad news like that, like imagines and narrative and projections, it will stick around and it will get much, much bigger and way more toxic until you really have your hands full with a great big trigger.

So I love your example, you just noticed it, you held it, and you got curious. So often, if you get a little more information, it helps because then the stuff you're making up gets debunked. You can even ask about the stuff you're making up. So what about this? And what about that? And then also as you start to feel connected with your partner, that security gets retouched, and then it's like, oh, yeah, we're

connected. And it can be really nice if the partner is able to help with that by reminding you there are things about our relationship that are irreplaceable.

There is nobody who could ever be who you are to me or to anybody. You are unique, irreplaceable, special, lovely, just right. Instead of all of that toxic thought that we feed for emotion.

So it was a great example of not feeding a bunch of bullshit to your already unsettled emotion. And that takes a lot of practice. I'm guessing that you have had to learn how to do that and deliberately practiced it until you could do it.

Jaia Bristow - [00:40:49]

I have, but I don't always succeed. That was a great example of when I succeeded. And yet, like you say, it's a practice. It's an ongoing practice. And with the same partner, just a few months ago, we had an interaction where I did the opposite, and I fed all the toxic thoughts, and I did exactly what you were mentioning. So, yeah, it's important for people as well, I think, to hear and to recognize that it is possible, but it is a practice, and sometimes we go either way.

And I love what you're saying about, I feel like I want to cut and edit that clip of you saying, you are unique to me, you are special and irreplaceable and important and just have that on replay whenever I start having toxic thoughts in my head and just listen to that. Because I think we can even tell ourselves that but it helps if the person tells us that and we get the external validation, but we can even remind ourselves that we are important and we have value and we matter.

Martha Kauppi

Absolutely. And I think internal validation, what you tell yourself is the most important thing. And then it's also very powerful if your partner can help. But it's more important that you elevate the importance of doing it for yourself because what if your partner is not available in the moment? Or they're just not on board? Or they're feeling triggered and they're having a crappy day? I just think your happiness and everybody, every individual person's happiness is too important for it to be dependent on somebody else's ability to rescue you in a particular way.

So figuring out some strategies to coach yourself out of it. And when, in an example where you're not able to stop the negative thoughts and feeding the emotion, if you can start to see that that's what's going on you'll handle it really differently.

So I might take a time out and I might go and find an alone spot and get out a journal, but if I start journaling about all the stuff that pisses me off about the interaction I just had, I'm just feeding it. Whereas if I start listing, okay, these are the faulty assumptions I'm making, or these are the things that I don't know if they're true or not, but I'm telling myself, then I can start seeing oh, yeah, I'm not actually sure about that.

You can ask yourself, are you 100% positive that that's true? Is it possible that that's not true? Is it possible that the opposite is true? And suddenly it's like, oh, my God, it is possible that the opposite is true.

And then it starts bringing down the emergency feeling a little.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly.

Martha Kauppi

I kind of made it all up.

Jaia Bristow - [00:43:25]

Exactly. And that's exactly what happened to me in the example I gave a few months ago with this partner, where I was feeding it all. I took a time out to assess what was happening. And then after I calmed down and realized I was exaggerating it in my mind and that I was feeding the toxic thoughts and stopped doing that, I was able to talk to my partner and say, when you made that joke earlier about whatever it was, it made me feel insecure because you've repeated all day long about this thing, and they were like, you do realize I never said that. You said that and I made a joke which didn't debunk that.

But not once did I actually say those words. Those were all your words. And it was like, oh, wow. This really has been me that's been feeding this thought and this insecurity the whole time and how easily we can, and that's why I was talking earlier about it's so important to actually understand what the other person is saying, because if we're feeling a bit anxious or insecure, it's so easy to misinterpret and see it through this sort of like the opposite of rose tinted glasses. Very dark tinted glasses.

Martha Kauppi

Yeah. I like that. Dark and slimy really.

Jaia Bristow

Exactly. Grey tinted glasses.

Well, on that note, I think we're almost out of time. So for people who want to find out more about you and your work, where can they do that?

Martha Kauppi

instituteforrelationalintimacy.com is my website.

And my book is *Polyamory: A Clinical Toolkit for Therapists (and Their Clients)*. And it just came out in May of 2021. And I've been hearing from people who are in polyamorous relationships and who are using it as a self-help project or a book club project, and I'm getting amazing feedback.

So that was the one thing I wasn't 100% sure when I put it out there. Are regular people really going to be able to do this? But they are. So if you're having challenges in your relationship and you want some help and you don't have a therapist nearby, I would just recommend diving in and giving it a try. If nothing else, you'll have a really, really strong support for whatever therapy you do find.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant. And I'll definitely be recommending it to all of my friends, because I know how difficult it is to find a therapist supportive of non-monogamous relationships. And a lot of my friends have that struggle, too. So to be able to have that book both to support oneself and also to have that book as a tool when we do find a therapist sounds brilliant.

So thank you so much, Martha. I've really enjoyed having you on board today.

Martha Kauppi

Thank you. Me too. It has been delightful to talk to you.