

Radical relating with self

Guest: Mel Cassidy

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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'm one of your hosts, and today I am delighted to welcome on board, Mel Cassidy.

Welcome Mel.

Mel Cassidy

Hi. Thank you so much for having me here.

Jaia Bristow

It's so nice to have you.

So Mel Cassidy is a relationship coach and sex positive nerd who guides social misfits and cultural rebels to experience a joyful, embodied, authentic, open relationships.

Creator of the Monogamy Detox Course, she is dedicated to creating somatically integrated and trauma sensitive spaces where all can flourish.

Mel is a sought after expert in nonmonogamy, presenting with conferences and institutions internationally, is a frequent podcast guest and has been featured by numerous media publications. Co-founder of the Solo Polyamory Group and a prolific writer, she is currently working on her first book.

Mel is Queer, explores relationships as a polyamorous relationship anarchist and lives, loves and dances on the unceded territories of the K'omoks Nation in BC, Canada.

So Mel, I think before we get started, I'm wondering if you could just define some of the terminology you use in your bio. So, what is polyamory to you? What is relationship anarchy? Why monogamy detox? Let's start with all of that.

Mel Cassidy

These are good questions to start with.

So polyamory is the practice of having multiple intimate relationships with the full knowledge and agreement of all involved. I've been practicing polyamory actively for about 10 years. I had non-monogamous experiences before that, even going back to high school, but those weren't polyamorous because they weren't necessarily with everybody's knowledge. I think a lot of people have probably experienced that.

And what makes polyamory unique is that it is with all this knowledge with everybody. What makes polyamory unique is that everybody has knowledge and as much information as they want to have about the other relationships that are going on. It's not something that's done in secret.

And then you asked about relationship anarchy. So relationship anarchy to me, it's more of a philosophy, and that's what inspires my polyamory. For me, relationship anarchy is about doing relationships without being confined into specific boxes.

We have a box of monogamy that says there's a certain way you're expected to behave in relationships and with exclusivity. And just because people leave monogamy behind to explore polyamory doesn't mean that they're not also trying to create new boxes to put themselves into.

And in relationship anarchy a lot of it is around not having these prescriptive labels. So there's a lot of freedom to allow each relationship to grow into what is authentic and natural for it. And also with relationship anarchy, there's a sense of you're not prioritizing a relationship just because it's a sexual relationship, or any other reason that you're non-romantic relationships, if you're someone who does romantic relationships, they're not put above your platonic relationships. There's more, again, it's that space for each relationship to be what it naturally is.

Jaia Bristow - [00:03:50]

Wonderful.

And for people listening, if you're interested in that topic, Meg-John Barker and I had a wonderful conversation about not putting things in boxes and rewriting the rules of relationships and finding your own rules that work for you, rather than either staying in society's current rules or creating opposite rules, but that are just as strict and just as box like.

And I love when people talk about going beyond boxes because that's my whole brand. I have a podcast coming out called *Beyond Boxes*. I have a YouTube channel called *Beyond Boxes*. So I really like that.

Mel Cassidy

And I love Meg-John's work. I think they're incredible, and that breaking out of those boxes is what my monogamy detox course is all about. So we grow up with these stories about monogamy, and it's mostly patriarchal monogamy, and that everyone's in this hierarchical pecking order and that you need a relationship to feel complete or successful as a grownup.

And the hangover of that affects everybody. It affects people who are trying to do conscious monogamy. It affects people when they're going through a breakup or grieving the loss of a partner. And it affects people who are exploring non monogamy.

So the monogamy detox is a somatically informed, trauma informed process that we go through to let go of those ideas and create a liberating structure through which we can understand our relationship landscape in a completely different way, without all the narratives that are tied to that patriarchal monogamy.

Jaia Bristow

That sounds fantastic. And I can't wait to hear more.

And I'm curious what brought you to this work? What's your journey?

Mel Cassidy - [00:05:33]

So I think I've always had this way of looking at things. I've been the perpetual outsider. I'm a second generation, third culture kid, so my mother was born in Northern Greece, grew up in South America, immigrated to Canada, and then married my dad, and they had me in England, and then I grew up in the Middle East. And then, the family is very nomadic. And I think being someone who's displaced culturally always makes you more curious and more questioning of the things that people just accept as the norm.

And so that was definitely part of my journey. And I mean, having said that, at the age of 22 I did what I thought you were supposed to do to prove that you're a successful grown up. I just graduated University, and I'm like, okay, so the next thing is I should get married. And so I was in a mostly monogamous marriage for 7 years, and that marriage ended because I started to realize that there was this whole other aspect of myself that I wanted to explore.

I really wanted to explore my queerness. I really wanted to explore what polyamory was and what it could actually look like in my life. And my spouse and I went our separate ways. And after a bit of stumbling and running into my own monogamy hangover still looking for that soul mate image, I made a choice. I made a choice to become my own primary partner.

And the way that I phrased it at the time was I'm going to be in a primary relationship with myself, and I'm still going to have an orgy with the whole universe. That's how I'm going to approach this.

And it became the most profound journey. And it was a journey of self development. It really brought me to look at myself in a completely different way and to heal from a lot of the codependency things that I carried with me, a lot of trauma that I haven't even realized I had.

And along that journey, I started writing a blog called *Polysingleish*, and people started to email me through that blog and asked me questions. And I was like, I don't know, I don't feel like I'm qualified to give you advice on this. I'm still figuring it out myself.

But then after a few years of that, I decided, you know what? I think I'm going to go back to school. And so I went back to school, and I got my certification in counseling for intimacy and relationships. And I had the incredible fortune to study with some incredible coaches and teachers. And I started to develop my own practice as a relationship coach, focusing on non monogamy and really focusing on working with folks who are also similarly looking at, how can I get into that stronger relationship with myself?

Jaia Bristow

Incredible. There's a lot I can relate to in your story there and thank you for sharing it with us.

And so would you say that your realization, do you believe that independence, then, is the solution to that feeling of being suffocated by the constraints of culture, and other people's expectations and patriarchal monogamy?

Mel Cassidy

I think there's an interesting dance and tension in there. We think of independence being an opposition to codependence, and this idea of being solitary or isolated, in some ways, liberating from a dynamic where you feel like you were owned or obligated.

And I feel like, as much as there's a tension there, we shouldn't get trapped into the binary thinking of it. I think that when we have been mired in a dynamic that's codependent or a dynamic that feels like we're just acting out of obligation, it's very healing and liberating to assert our independence, to return to a sense of agency. For some people it's the first time that they get to experience what agency and autonomy and sovereignty really feels like in their body for their nervous system.

At the same time, though, I look at it as human beings, we didn't evolve, we didn't emerge on this planet as isolated beings, we emerged in community. And so there's a value to having community as well. And the word that I love to explore with that is interdependence. Interdependence is the sense of I know myself. I have a sense of my boundaries, my capacity. I know what my own domain is, and I engage with others and our domains interact and we can co-create and build things together. But I don't lose my sense of self in the process of doing that.

And I think that's one of the key things for those of us who are coming out of a culture that is very patriarchal or has a lot of religious or cultural narratives that we feel limited by. It's hard to step out of those limitations if you don't develop that strong, powerful relationship with yourself first.

Jaia Bristow - [00:10:51]

100% I mean, a friend and I were just talking about something similar earlier today and around feeling responsible for other people's emotions or behavior, and especially for those of us who are survivors of abusive behavior, that it can be so easily caught up in that codependent relationship.

So I love the idea of interdependence where it's not fully independent because, of course, we're all connected and we're all relating to each other all the time. But this idea of interdependence sounds very healthy. This focusing on oneself and one's boundaries and one's sense of relationship with oneself primarily, and then also being connected to others.

Mel Cassidy

I think of it as, there's three different spheres that we can develop a relational awareness around. And one is community. We have awareness of community. We look at how we support community and how community supports us. Another sphere is family, whether that's your biological family, your chosen family, maybe it's just you and a partner, maybe it's you and your kids. It's that close unit that you are responsible to and that support you. And then the third sphere is the self. And I think if we don't do the work to develop self-awareness then the other two become a lot harder to engage with and maintain in healthy ways.

Jaia Bristow

Absolutely. That makes a lot of sense. And I think it's often forgotten in the society in which we live. It's not the messages we get. We get this message of we're going to meet the one and they're going to solve all our problems rather than, hey, have you checked in with yourself first?

Mel Cassidy

And that messaging of the one, it really sets us up for a lot of disappointment. And it puts a lot of pressure on partners when we do find somebody that we click with. When I pull those ideas apart I see how much that is grounded in the patriarchal monogamy construct, and it keeps us very very limited.

It's tied in as well to colonialism and different kinds of religious doctrines as well. And a lot of that is about disempowering the individual. If we're in this, if we exist within a hierarchy, in a culture of dominance, then you are constantly in a state of anxiety if you don't have a partner to support your security and stability in the system of dominance. And if you lose a partnership it feels like the world is ending because you have suddenly lost status. And I think that's very harmful.

So, I'm all about getting out of those paradigms.

Jaia Bristow

I love that, I'm fully with you on that one. And talking about security, why is it that knowing your secure attachment network, why is that important for having a radical self relationship?

Mel Cassidy - [00:14:05]

So traditional attachment theory work, a lot of the studies, not all, but a lot of the studies were done on nuclear families. So looking at infants who had one or two caregivers. And that's not the way that human beings evolved. Our nervous systems are not wired to just securely attach with one or two people.

If you look outside of Western and colonial culture you see that people live communally. A child isn't just raised by its parents. It's raised by their whole extended family. Raising children is a village effort.

And so having secure attachment isn't just about finding one person that you secure attach with. You can have a whole network of secure attachment. And that creates a much wider base of security and stability in your life.

And many of us have this in the form of friendships. Our friends might be our ride or die person, that's a secure attachment relationship. It doesn't have to be someone that you're going to make out with, or you're going to be intimately or romantically involved with. And I think that knowing and identifying who is part of your secure attachment network is liberating, because suddenly it frees you from that quest and that hunger and that obsession with, I have to find this one. And if I don't find this one, then maybe there's something wrong with me, or I'm broken, or I'm not gonna succeed in life, etc, etc.

And I know in my own journey having that realization of, oh, I don't have to put all my eggs in this single basket. I can actually actively cultivate having secure attachment relationships with a whole network of people. And reaching out to those people and going, hey, this is what I want to do. I want to spend more time with you and hang out and get to know you and be part of each other's lives.

And cultivating that immediately freed me up to have more capacity for myself and more capacity for my intimate relationships, because suddenly the pressure was off. There wasn't this, okay, we have to get onto that trajectory of that relationship escalator. And we have to do that because our survival is at stake.

Jaia Bristow

Yeah, it resonates so strongly, what you're saying. And again, for people interested in finding out more, Jessica Fern did a great interview on attachment theory, specifically in nonmonogamy, because, as you say, so often it gets talked about in very traditional nuclear families. So I recommend that interview to people.

And I love what you're saying about the example you're giving about your best friend, for example, so many people who are very monogamous, when they find out that I'm non-monogamous, it's like but how? How could you possibly love more than one person once? And it's like, don't you have multiple people in your life that you love? You might only have one romantic or sexual partner, but what about your friends? What about your family members? What about your chosen family?

There are so many, and for me I have a circle of really close friends who are my support network, who are my everything. And one in particular, my best friend, my ride or die. I often joke, I say, you're my real soulmate. I don't, when we get caught up still in these ideas of meeting the one or when one of us has had a difficult breakup or struggles with a relationship, it's like we don't need those people, we have each other. Or when we're talking about the ideal partner, it's always like, it's basically the way I feel about you, but also with that romantic and sexual connection which we don't have with each other.

Mel Cassidy

Yeah. Absolutely.

Jaia Bristow - [00:18:11]

And so, what do we do then, when going against the grain of culture feels really scary? Because it's nice to talk about this stuff, but it sometimes feels easier said than done.

Mel Cassidy

Well, I think it's important to acknowledge that our nervous system is wired to seek out safety. And there's this interesting thing where we interpret what is familiar as being safe. Because what's familiar we have known what it's about. We have known variables within that. We know how to ride those waves, even if they aren't great.

I think about when you have an old pair of shoes that's falling apart and you're like, I don't want to get it fixed or I don't want to get a new pair of shoes because this pair feels familiar to my feet, even though you're getting blisters or water is getting in or whatever.

So I think it's important to recognize that all the stories we have about monogamy and that soulmate mythology and that idea that we have to put somebody else before ourselves, all of that is very compelling because it feels familiar. And what is familiar gets interpreted as safe. And just because it feels familiar, it doesn't mean that it's healthy. So when we're going into a process of going against the grain, of challenging any kind of normative way of being and relating, is going to feel a little bit destabilizing for your nervous system.

And so remembering that stepping into unfamiliar territory is going to have a mix of exhilaration and anxiety, I think we can work on resourcing ourselves. And so again, that's where that secure attachment network comes in useful. You have your allies and supporters around you, but also taking a titrated approach.

So this is something we talk about in somatics. Don't just dive straight in, go a little bit at a time. It's like getting into a very cold body of water. Some people want to just dunk themselves in, that might work for them, but some people like to just slowly ease into it and get used to it. And as you get more used to it, your body adapts and gets to feel more familiar with it. And then you're like, okay, I can immerse myself in this and I'm comfortable in this temperature.

And so when we're going against the grain, when we're challenging cultural ideas and trying out new things, there are moments where it's going to feel freaky and it's going to feel scary and you might find yourself going, what have I done? But remember that it's okay to feel that. Your nervous system is reacting to the things that are unknown.

And I think another thing that really helps with validating the new experiences that you're having is seeking out community. And this is one of those interesting places where, yes, we are focusing on our self relationship but also seeking out the community of people who have had this experience and who can help validate what we're going through.

And maybe you find that through an online community where you can connect with likeminded people and get that peer support. Maybe you find that validation through working with a coach or a therapist who has had that journey or finding an elder or a role model. But finding those role models, finding those other people who've been through a similar journey who can help validate your experience and affirm that you're doing okay, and your nervous system is going through the process that it needs to go through.

Jaia Bristow

Brilliant. I love that distinction. I often, in the workshops I lead, I often talk about the difference between uncomfortable and unsafe. And uncomfortable discomfort is needed for evolution. You can't progress without a bit of discomfort. Whereas unsafety, like being genuinely unsafe, can lead to trauma. So it's so important to be able to differentiate.

And I love, uncomfortable can feel unsafe, but is it actually unsafe? We learn to check in with ourselves, then we can often find out what's true and notice the differences.

Mel Cassidy - [00:22:52]

Absolutely. Yeah.

Jaia Bristow

And so do you think that you can have a radical relationship with yourself and also have relationships with others? And how does that work?

Mel Cassidy

Absolutely. I think that if we try to have relationships with other people without having that self relationship first, it's very easy to drown ourselves in other people's desires, and other people's will. Part of that patriarchal monogamous paradigm is this concept that martyrdom and self sacrifice is a love language, and so many of us have internalized that. It shows up in the rescuer dynamics that we might try to engage in. It shows up in the way that I see a lot of parents do this, like putting themselves last to put their children first. And I keep going back to that metaphor of you've got to put on your own oxygen mask before you assist others. The kinds of relationships that we have with others are going to reflect the kind of relationship that we have with ourselves.

And that doesn't mean that you have to immediately be like, oh, I love myself unconditionally, because I think there's a lot of emotional bypassing that can come into that. What I think matters is that you are actively engaging in your self development and that journey of self questioning and moving into greater self awareness and figuring out how to move yourself into a greater space of authenticity. Sophia Graham talks about self consent, and I love that concept and being able to tune into, what does my body authentically need in this moment? Where are my boundaries? What is my actual capacity?

Because it's knowing the answers to this that's going to help you determine how you can engage, and to what extent you can engage with what other people are bringing into a relationship space. And I think when we don't know the answers to that, that's when the relationship that we're engaging in can become unhealthy, and we also start to feel drained in our own self relationship, we start to feel exhausted.

And there's all sorts of physiological things that can happen. I mean, when we don't have awareness of our own capacity and our own boundaries and we don't know where to set the line and what our limits are, then our nervous system is getting over activated. It's getting overworked. We're taking on too much. We might get overwhelmed with stimuli or overwhelmed with information.

And when that happens, our body releases more cortisol because it's stressed. And if you exist in a state of chronic stress with cortisol going all the time, there were all sorts of physical health repercussions of that.

And figuring out that cycle was just mind blowing to me in my own journey of going like, oh, I'm actually physically feeling fatigued and unwell and having all these other issues because of the stress. And the stress is related to not figuring out where my own boundaries and limits are in these relationships.

So having that radical relationship with yourself actually sets you up for having a much healthier relationship with others, which in turn nourishes back into a healthier self relationship.

Jaia Bristow - [00:26:06]

That sounds fantastic. And again, I can relate a lot as someone who has many chronic health conditions. And I really appreciate you talking about that because I think that's an element that often gets overlooked, is just the societal stress and pressure and the stress and pressure we put on ourselves to perform and to succeed and to have the "right relationship", in big quote marks for those who are only listening and can't see it.

And I love that you referenced Dr. Sophia Graham, who is another speaker on this conference as well. And who also referenced your work in her talk.

So tell us a little bit more about the monogamy detox course and about this book you're writing and a little bit more about other projects you're working on.

Mel Cassidy

Oh, my goodness. I don't talk much about the book that I'm writing. I should probably do that. So the book has come out of the course, and the book is really about giving people the tools to create their own journey.

So I've read so many different books about non monogamy, and I find that a lot of them, certainly not all of them, but a lot of them really focus on the author explaining how they did non monogamy and guiding people through that. And I think that's great. And that's going to work if you, as the reader, have a similar cultural background, or socioeconomic background, or previous relationship history as the author. But it doesn't work for everybody.

And so what I started doing with my monogamy detox course, when I was creating I wanted to create tools. I wanted to empower people with everything they needed to know to navigate their own pathway through this vast, open landscape. And I think that's important because monogamy is this linear trajectory, generally speaking, we're on this escalating pathway of relationships. And the minute we step off of that, it's like, oh, my gosh, where am I? There's no Google Maps to guide me through this. What do I do? And so we will follow somebody else's guidebook.

But I was like, no, what if we can teach explorers how to find their own pathway? So that's what the course is all about. And the course runs over 6 weeks. But I'm under no illusion that we're going to undo patriarchal monogamy in 6 weeks flat. So you get lifetime access. So every time the course runs again you can tune into the calls, you always have access to the course materials. And then I have monthly calls with the group to keep that work ongoing.

And it's grown into such an incredible community of people who are social misfits and cultural rebels and radical relators. And it's been incredible to see the journeys that people have gone through. And there are people who are exploring monogamy who joined the course. And there are people who are exploring non monogamy. And then some people join the course because they're interested in nonmonogamy, and they arrive at a completely different place. And they're like, actually, I think I want to do serial monogamy and just not live with a partner. They find how to create an authentic path for themselves.

And so the book is going to condense all that information and guide folks through that journey. And there's a lot of trauma informed work that comes into this. I've been inspired by a lot of the incredible people out there. I mean, Meg-John, I kept mentioning them, but they are definitely one of my role models and heroes in the relationship world.

And so it's really about the practical steps of what we can do to work with our own nervous system, work with whatever traumas we're coming into a relationship space with and figure out what do we authentically need? And how do we explore getting that? And how can we understand what's happening in our relationships in a different way, in a way that creates possibilities rather than limitations?

Jaia Bristow - [00:30:22]

I love that. And what I'm loving in what you're sharing, and in Meg-John's work, I'm also a big fan of theirs, is this idea about really finding what works for you and for each individual. Not following a set menu, not following a set of instructions, pre-existing instructions, but tuning in. And that's why work like Dr. Sophia Graham's work of tuning into yourself and really understanding your own needs, and then from there, discovering and understanding and knowing that there are so many options.

And for myself, for a long time, I identified strongly as polyamorous, when I discovered, that was my first experience of nonmonogamy. And the reason I no longer use that term is because I found that within the community a lot of people had strong identifications with that word and what that word meant for them. And that's why just identifying as non-monogamous, actually for me, is easier because it's like, I don't do monogamy, but I'm not telling you exactly what I do do, because that depends entirely on each person that I relate to.

I have all kinds of different relationships, whether it's my really close friends or someone I met recently where I have a really intimate affectionate relationship, but it's not sexual and it's not romantic. And it's just that opportunity, that sense of possibility and opportunity, which I love in identifying as non-monogamous. And in which I think also comes in with relationship anarchy and a lot of the other points you've made today.

Mel Cassidy

And that's beautiful. I love that you have gotten to explore and flesh out this rich tapestry for yourself.

A lot of folks don't even know where to begin with that. A lot of people don't even know, how could I differentiate between these different kinds of connections?

And one of the things I look at is that we do have different types of relationships. There are emotional relationships. We have social relationships. We have erotic relationships. We have practical relationships. And these are all important parts of our relationship landscape, and you get to choose what you cultivate in each part of the landscape.

Jaia Bristow

That's wonderful.

So for anyone curious in detoxing from patriarchal monogamous norms check out Mel Cassidy's monogamy detox. How and where can people do that Mel?

Mel Cassidy

So the monogamy detox has its own website. Very easy.

monogamydetox.com

You can go on there and you'll find all the information. I run the course twice a year, usually in the fall and the spring. And if you go to that website and registration isn't open, you can always sign up for the wait list.

And then the rest of my work, my coaching work, and everything else that I do, you can find on radicalrelationshipcoaching.ca

You can also find me on Instagram and Facebook [@RadicalRelating](https://www.instagram.com/RadicalRelating)

Jaia Bristow - [00:33:20]

Wonderful. And so just to sum up, what would you say radical relating is for you?

Mel Cassidy

For me, it's about boldly going against the grain of patriarchal monogamous normative relationships. So challenging heteronormativity and cisnormativity and mononormativity and giving space for your own radical spirit to shine.

Jaia Bristow

Wonderful. I love that.

Thank you so much for making time for us today. I really appreciated this conversation.

Mel Cassidy

Thank you.