



## Restorative relationship conversations

**Guest: David Cooley**

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### **[00:00:10] Jaia Bristow**

Hello and welcome back to the Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow, and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am very pleased to be welcoming David Cooley. Welcome David.

### **David Cooley**

Hi, Jaia. Thank you very, very much for having me.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for joining us.

So David Cooley is the creator of the Restorative Relationship Conversation Model, which facilitates new and healthier models of conflict resolution that offer legitimate means of reconciliation, particularly in the context of intimate relationships. And you can read David's full bio below this video.

So, David, let's start with what is the Restorative Relationship Conversation Model? How did it start?

### **David Cooley**

Well, this comes from an emerging field of new ways of handling conflict. It falls under the umbrella of what we call restorative practices. And so this is a shift away from the punitive or shaming blaming model that we typically use when we think of conflict, especially when we think of the courts or the judicial system. This is a turn away from those. And so within that expanding field of restorative practices, you see these new ways of dealing with conflict showing up in places like schools or other institutions, especially in the judicial system, like I mentioned earlier. It has a taste or feel of meditation, but takes it a step beyond.

And so it's exciting because it's giving people an opportunity to really manage conflict in a way that's very humanizing. It gives people who have harmed other people the chance to sit down and face those individuals, have a conversation and take full responsibility for their actions, hear how they've affected someone else, what has that been like. And then be in a process that's really proactive, that allows people to restore the relationships that have been disrupted through the incidences and figure out a way to move forward.

**[00:02:18]**

So I was working specifically in the field of restorative justice. And so I was working with the court system, I was working with law enforcement agencies, and I was part of a non-profit organization in Colorado for several years. And so we were working with individuals that were referred to us by the police department who had committed some crime, and given this opportunity to sit down with the people, like I said, who have been harmed, and sit in the context of restorative justice circles.

And so I was facilitating those circles, training volunteers to facilitate those circles. And as I was going through that process, I was struck by how many people that walked through our doors were families or people that had already known each other. And often their conflicts came down to simply not knowing how to manage, one, their emotions, or two, the intensity of a complex situation.

And so after walking away from that field of restorative Justice, I started realizing there was an opportunity to use that model for couples in a way that was more intimate, more immediate, instead of having these larger group circles. I was seeing that there was just a very tangible way to help people work through conflict that is extremely powerful and transformative. So I started playing with that idea, and the more I started to apply it to the field of intimate relationships, I started to be excited by the potential for it. And so I eventually came up with the Restorative Relationship Conversation Model.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And so, why do you think this particular model is especially relevant, as you say to couples, but also how is it connected to trauma? And why is it relevant to people working with trauma?

#### **David Cooley**

Absolutely. Well, as we know, one of the major consequences of trauma is that it keeps us stuck in the past. If we haven't had the opportunity to work through a problematic situation or a hurtful situation, then our nervous systems have an uncanny way of re-living that, replaying that situation. We're constantly, often at an unconscious level, looking for ways to process that situation. But if we don't have an avenue through which to do it, we just get stuck on repeat.

And so for many individuals interpersonal conflict is very traumatic and can leave them feeling stuck in the relationship. And so this model is really good for anyone who's having any kind of relationship trauma, relationship conflict that feels like it's not resolving itself. And so they need a structure that's proven to work, to really help them move through that and let go, as much as possible of the past and figure out, in a very pragmatic way, what they need to move forward.

#### **Jaia Bristow**

And you say that whilst you do work primarily with romantic relationships, it's applicable to all forms of relationship. It's including family and friendships that kind of thing?

#### **David Cooley**

Absolutely. It's really for anyone that feels like they're stuck in a relationship conflict that relates to something in the past, some incident or series of incidents that have happened, and just continue to linger and feel like they're just not resolving themselves spontaneously. As much as we'd love to believe that hurt will just go away, it doesn't, it lingers and it's recorded in the body. And so that's

another powerful element of this work is that it has a somatic component, ie, the relationship to emotions.

**[00:06:00]**

And so often, working with emotions is a much more effective way of transforming conflict because emotions are the key to unlocking our behavior. So that's one of the critiques that we often hear of classic talk therapy, is that it doesn't go far enough because it doesn't get to the way that trauma gets ingrained or recorded or stored in the body. And so there needs to be some kind of release of that. And so this work is really good for just giving people a safe space to be seen and heard in that emotion and touch it.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And as we often know, a lot of our romantic relationships are replaying patterns from our history, and are replaying patterns with our primary caregivers, so it makes sense that, as you say, this works in those situations, but with other situations as well. And for anyone who is stuck in the past, as you say, or has conflict relationships, which, let's be honest, is most people, very few of us have totally conflict free, easy relationships with everyone in our lives.

**David Cooley**

Absolutely. And one of the things that we're learning, the field of attachment theory is continuing to grow and with reason. Because I think it's really touching on a cornerstone of conflict in that, as you say, these past patterns that we've developed through the relationship with our caregivers, which in those early years are obviously unconscious and not explicit to us, they just recapitulate themselves, they repeat and play themselves out as we go into adult partnerships. And so if we're not aware of our attachment styles, if we're not aware of our attachment traumas, then we are doomed to step into these vicious, repetitive cycles. And so there needs to be a way to work with the nervous system in a structured context, to release some of those traumas and consciously work towards new ways of moving forward and doing things differently.

**Jaia Bristow**

100%. And I love that you talk about that and the fact that it has a somatic approach and that it's going beyond talk therapy, as you say, which is a fantastic resource and tool, but it's great to also have the somatic work and to use that as a framework. And so, who is this work specifically designed for? Who is best served by this work?

**David Cooley**

Absolutely. That's a great question. This work is really for people that recognize that they're stuck in a pattern or have some kind of conflict issue resulting from something that's already happened in the past, it continues to linger and they know they need help with it. And so it's really for people that are aware of their traumas or aware of their hurts aware of the conflict cycles.

It's also for people that want to step into this process. And so it's different than a mediation situation in the sense that everyone has to be really on board. It's an invitation to step into a process that's facilitated, that's structured, that can really bring healing, but people have to really want that for themselves. And so if that desire to participate, even knowing that it's scary and going to bring up all this stuff, even though there could be resistance, there is a willingness and desire to work through it.

So it's for people that are really motivated and wanting to take a proactive approach to lingering conflict issues.

**[00:09:28] Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And I really like that piece, the fact that there's consent needed at the beginning. The idea that everyone has to come to the table and so suddenly it opens so many more possibilities because no one's there because they're feeling forced to be there or against their will, or because no one's resentful to be there or rejecting being there. It's like people are there because they want to work on it themselves. People are there because this is important to them to create healthy relationships, to work and evolve themselves and become, hopefully, better, more evolved people, more evolved versions of themselves I should say.

**David Cooley**

Definitely. One anecdote that really was a game changer for me in my experience working in the field of restorative justice was again, like I said, we were working as a non-profit organization, typically an overwhelming majority of our cases were people that have been referred to us by the police department of the town I was working in. And so those are people who are essentially given a choice between restorative justice or face criminal charges. And so it's like the lesser of two evils in that sense.

So there is this leverage that still is pressuring people to make one decision versus the other. And so you can feel the ways in which people step into restorative justice circle and feel, I don't really want to be here. This isn't my choice necessarily but it's better than that. And often those people had a very transformative experience, even within that context, and left feeling grateful for the experience.

But I remember that there was a situation where someone came to us, they weren't referred to us, they found out about us. And so it was an incident that happened at an elementary school in the community. And so the principal was a huge fan of restorative justice. He heard about our organization and he was like, hey, I've had this incident between the 6 and 7 year old's. It's like 5 or 6 families, the kids got into this really intense fight on the playground. And this is a small community school where everyone knew each other and so this rupture was so impactful, so disruptive to the relationships, not just between the kids, but the families and the school administration.

And so this principal really felt the need to find a way to work with this conflict that was going to bring resolution for everyone involved. And so I remember seeing people just participate with a hunger to resolve this issue. Everyone was there on their own accord, no one's being legally pressured to be there. And it was amazing. And I remember thinking, this is my audience. These are the people I want to work with. I want to work with people that recognize the importance of this, and they're stepping to the table on their own accord. Because the process has a much different energy in that sense, you're not pulling teeth or coercing, for lack of a better word, people into the process. So that was a big transformative experience for me.

**Jaia Bristow**

Yeah. I can imagine that whilst it does work for people when they're reluctantly there, it can work so much better when everyone really wants to be there and wants to do the work. And I think that's true of so many different situations and types of, either therapy or healing processes. Can you tell us a bit more about what's actually involved in this RRC model? What does it look like? What happens?

**[00:12:58] David Cooley**

So basically what the process looks like is there's two parts. So the first part is just an initial conversation with me. So all the participants show up, usually online, and what we do is I start with guidelines. So I describe what's the protocol for the process so everyone has a really clear sense of what to expect in the session that follows. And then after that, I just get a sense of why are people coming to me? What are the incidents that people are still carrying? What do they feel like they're needing resolve around? We talk about the power of intentions and setting intentions. I ask people to ask themselves, why are they coming here? What are their intentions? And what are they hoping to get out of the process?

I actually ask people in between sessions to think about that and write that down so that we can start the proceedings or the following session with those intentions clearly stated so everyone gets to hear those, which is a very powerful exercise. So that 1 hour conversation is to get to know each other, get to know the process, and then figure out what do we need to move forward in the larger restorative relationship conversation.

And so that's scheduled for later. It's 2 hours. And that's where we really get to dive into the heart of the issue. And so I give everyone a chance to really talk about how they've been impacted, what's the experience been like. And then I have people turn to each other and they talk from the emotion, from their own experience.

And so a lot of the guidelines that I offer are really based on systems like nonviolent communication, where people are taking full ownership for their personal experience. And that's a big part of keeping people safe in the context of the dialogue, making sure that people follow that rule of engagement so that they're not attacking each other or retriggering each other. It's really coaching people on how to step into a listener's role and then also how to speak from a place of full ownership of their own experience.

And so when people are facing each other and talking about how they've been impacted, and the other person has to just hear it and just receive it. It's incredible what happens. And so I'm guiding people after that to respond and say, yeah, I hear how much that hurts. I'm sorry it's been this hurtful. And then we work on affirmations about what does it mean to move forward and let go of that hurt?

And it's really amazing. And one of the interesting things about this process is that the concept of, or the title of conflict resolution is a misnomer. And it implies that conflict is something that we just need to get over with, resolve, get done and move past. And so what I actually like is moving towards a new culture of conflict transformation. And so starting to reframe a lot of what this process is about, is starting to reframe conflict, not as something problematic, but an amazing opportunity or invitation to step into our higher selves, to learn something really critical about ourselves. What is this hurt from the past that keeps coming up? And how can we work on it together? Not just alone, but in the context of a relationship and collaborate and find ways to move beyond it.

It's so powerful. And one of the reasons why I love this work is because I've seen time and time again the power of one conversation to literally change people's lives forever. And I love that. I love that about the capacity to connect with someone in a space that's legitimately transformative.

**[00:16:31] Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. I love that. And I love that concept of conflict resolution not being so much about resolving conflict and making conflict better, but using conflict as an opportunity to transform and grow. I think that's a wonderful concept. And yeah, I love it.

And so a few questions around everything you shared. Number one is, how many people do you tend to work with? What are these conflicts? Is it just a group of usually 2 or 3? Is it larger groups or does it depend?

**David Cooley**

It really depends. I work with a lot of individuals who have alternative relationship styles. I have a lot of individuals, clients, who identify as non-monogamous. And so I've worked with collectives of individuals of up to 4 to 5 people who are all in relationship together. I've also worked with people who are not in intimate relationships together.

So I think probably in this particular model, I don't think I've worked with any groups larger than 5 to 6 people, but that's just because that's what comes to me. I've done groups in the context of restorative justice that have gone up to 15 to 20 people. But in general this model is really suited for smaller, more intimate settings.

And then I even work with individuals. I have people that are coming to me just for coaching. And if you go to my website you can see that there's an option for people that are just wanting to work on a specific conflict, but their partner, for whatever reason, or partners, aren't there or just can't participate for whatever reason. Or someone's not even in a relationship but they know that they have these things that they want to keep working on. They want to develop skill sets for changing and developing their own self awareness and communication skills. So there's a variety of offerings there.

**Jaia Bristow**

That was going to be my next question so I'm glad you answered that about individual sessions and coaching. That sounds fantastic.

And then you talk about NVC, nonviolent communication, which I'm very familiar with, as one of the tools you use. How is it different from NVC? What is there that's extra? What is it that goes beyond NVC?

**David Cooley**

Again, there's a real, that somatic component is something that goes beyond NVC. I like NVC because it's a solid foundation upon which to build a skill set on. It gives people a place to start. But in terms of learning how to sit with emotions, that's a different skill set. And so I really think incorporating what we're learning about attachment theory is critical, understanding how the nervous system works, especially in the context of conflict.

Because in conflict most of us tend to go into our own version of parasympathetic response. We're either fight or flight. So people either shut down, dissociate or they start to exacerbate the conflict by attacking or pushing back. And so there's some mindfulness exercises that also inform my process, really train people, especially when sitting in the listeners or the speaker mode, or roles rather, how do you sit in that space? How do you occupy that space in a way that allows you to feel everything

you're feeling without either shutting down or attacking? How do you stay anchored in your own experience?

**[00:19:55]**

And so we do a lot of preparation in the process before sharing. Working on our nervous system being like, okay, this is mine. I'm anchoring in this. I'm using breathwork. I'm using self awareness tools. So that somatic scanning component. And so there's an incorporation of various modalities, various fields into this work. And so NVC is really just about, what are the rules of engagement? What are the things we can and can't say to avoid triggering and being triggered? And to be heard, so if you're not triggering someone, it's much more easier for your message to be digested. As opposed to saying, you're doing this, and things like that.

But we also have to have that awareness, that body awareness, like, where am I within myself? And that's not something that I see as common. It's definitely not something we're taught in our society, at least this culture society of the United States where I'm from. And so a big part of this work for me is really, in a legitimate way, trying to change the culture of how we relate to conflict. And developing this culture that has included within it this nested model of skill sets. There's self awareness, there's mindfulness, there's communication, there's all these different pieces that fit together.

**Jaia Bristow**

Brilliant. Well, I think that's a really great explanation of the different modalities you use. It's something I resonate with a lot. I lead workshops on power, privilege and prejudice, so looking at systemic power dynamics. And same thing, I use NVC tools, I use mindfulness tools, I really focus on the somatic experience, so it sounds like some fantastic work you're doing. And I'm really excited to look you up and find out more about it all, as I'm sure are our listeners.

So are there any other services you offer? And how can people find out more about you and your work?

**David Cooley**

Yeah, definitely. So like I said, working with anyone that's in conflict in a small group setting is my ideal clientele. And then beyond that, it's the individual work with people that just want skill development or want to work with something from their past relationally that still continues to be problematic or difficult. So it's really those two for now. Those are the two markets that I'm catering to in this moment.

And then beyond that, just going to my website is the best way to get in touch with me. So there's obviously a contact page where you can send me an email, let me know what's going on, what you need help with. There's also a scheduling app so people that feel like they're already resonating with the modality and just want to jump in, they can go ahead and do that. It's a pretty straightforward and user-friendly interface point.

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And so can we maybe give listeners and viewers a little taste of it? What are some practical tips of ways people can get started before they jump on board and book a session with you? Is there anything that you want to share in that regard?

**[00:23:01] David Cooley**

Yes. Absolutely. A great preparation for this process is any kind of self awareness exercise, specially around the issue of conflict. One thing that I like to train people how to do is to really just observe, what are your patterns of conflict? Are you someone that shies away or recoils or disassociates? Are you a conflict avoidant or are you someone that starts to get aggressive and push against the person that you're working with? And obviously people can have both. You can vacillate. And it also depends on the relationship. What's interesting is, some relationships may trigger one response and others may trigger another, there's all the gamut in between.

So it's really about learning ourselves, that self awareness piece around, what is my tendency? Is a big deal. Also starting to look at the physiological responses that we have. Like, how do we feel when we're triggered? What does it look like for us? Is it a shoulders up thing? Is it a tone of voice? Do you start to talk faster? Are there words that you rely on or go to? Do you find yourself losing your capacity to speak? So really, just becoming familiar with our own automatic or unconscious responses to conflict is a huge step forward.

Another thing beyond that, which is an extension of that self awareness piece, is to start looking at our communication styles. Are we familiar with any? Have we studied it all? Ways of communicating that reduce conflict that are less provocative and more ownership taking. Another way to prepare for a session is to explore attachment theory in depth and figure out, when you're in conflict in relationship, do you tend to an avoidant strategy? Do you tend to an anxious strategy or disassociated? Or do you feel like you actually have a pretty secure attachment with yourself and then with another partner?

So those are all really good starting points to get a baseline awareness, like, okay, what's my orientation? Where am I grounded within my own process? And what's my own relationship to conflict? And again, starting to just invite people to look at conflict not as something problematic, not as something to avoid or run away from, but to really start to get curious. Like, how do we change our own paradigms around conflict and start to see it as this cool invitation?

And I like to invite people to get curious. Like, okay, wow, you're upset with me. Okay, what does that mean? Yeah, I want to know more. I want to learn. You're giving me an opportunity here. That can seem contrived or forced in the first go around, but as you really start to engage in, okay, what is this? What's there for me? It can start to change literally the way that conflict feels in your body. And that's ultimately the goal for me is to just get people to recondition, to look at conflict, not as something problematic, but really a doorway to a more expanded understanding of self.

**Jaia Bristow**

That's fantastic. I love that. I love all of that. I love all the preparatory elements you've given. So that self awareness and questioning what one's relationship with conflict is how we respond to conflict and especially looking at different individual relationships. Especially the relationships where maybe conflict arises more often, or relationships that we'd like to have less conflict. And then, as you said, that knowing our body and understanding and noticing the warning signals. Noticing how we react physically to conflict.

So as you said, like shoulders hunched. I know I sometimes get quite anxious around conflict, so my heart can race and I feel a bit in flight mode. And so I think that's really great for people who are going to engage with this work, which is somatic work, to learn to come into their bodies and notice their physical reactions.



[00:27:07]

I think again, looking at communication styles, attachment styles, which there's a couple of great books on, including the book, *Attached*, but also for those interested in non-monogamy there's, of course, Jessica Fern's *Polysecure: Attachment* book.

And then I love what you're saying as well, conflict isn't something that needs to be scary. Conflict isn't something that needs to be shied away from but instead get curious about. And I know that on both ends of the conflict, if I'm someone who's angry with someone and I get curious myself about, why am I getting so angry right now? That can lead to all kinds of interesting things. But if I'm angry with someone and that person, instead of just getting defensive and being like, 'chill out', starts getting curious and is like, oh, I can see you're really angry with me, what's going on here? That would also be really interesting for me.

So I can see how it can suddenly have an impact on, you're saying, of course everyone needs to come to the table to do this work altogether, even just one person starting to do this work and starting to do the coaching and starting to question all these things and getting more curious rather than shying away from conflict must create a huge difference in their own life, in the lives of the people around them and then from that it ripples.

### David Cooley

Absolutely. And it's palpable. It's interesting. It's amazing how quickly you can actually defuse conflict with curiosity because that demonstrates empathy. Because you're showing that you're caring. It's a profound gesture of love and concern for the other person. And so someone comes to you and says, yeah, I'm really pissed or angry about something that happened between us. And you, instead of going into that explanatory or dismissive mode, you say, wow, yeah tell me about that. And you're sincere in that invitation. It's just neutralizing. The person is just like, oh, okay. All right. There's a space to share, and then you go into it, and then you can just hold it.

And so the trick is to not go into shame, is to not interpret the fact that someone is angry with you as problematic or a signal that there's something fundamentally wrong with you. So going to the Brené Brown guilt versus shame thing, doing something that's harmful to someone versus being problematic in your essence, which is the shame spiral, that's a really important lesson for us.

Another important reframe I think in this work is the way that we think about taking space. Because I'm also seeing a lot in the dynamic between people is they don't know how to disengage when they're triggered. And unless you can maintain your composure and stay within a really clean communication style while being triggered, it's often better to disengage. But with people with certain attachment styles, they can't, and they want to stay in that dynamic. And they often make it worse because they're just like, we've got to fix this. We gotta fix it. We resolve it. I can't walk away feeling uncomfortable.

So another part of the extension of that somatic self awareness piece is, can you deal with your own discomfort? Yeah, it sucks to have a breach with somebody and not be able to resolve it in that moment. And yet, as an adult, that's what we have to learn. We have to learn how to be like, okay, this sucks. We're not feeling loving and connected right now. It can be distracting, it's hard to move on with your day, and all you're thinking about is I want to get this done with.

But like I said before, can you stay curious about your own internal experience? Yeah. Okay. What is this about? What does this mean? I'm going to sit with this. I'm going to let the waves of feeling move

through me, and I'm going to know I'm going to have the security of knowledge that this is not destructive. It's not a problem. There's something to learn from here. There's a way to grow in the relationship. It's going to change and evolve us in a way that's important.

**[00:31:00]**

And so really teaching people how to sit in the discomfort of the tension that arises, but not to stay engaged if they're not capable of really communicating in a way that's healthy. And so learning how to take space until you're in a better place and you've had the chance to process. And then reinitiate, the trick is to make sure you reinitiate and not just avoid that situation.

So that's the trick. So taking space is critical when you need to, but you have to make sure that you're reinitiating coming back to the other person.

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense. And when you first said taking space, I heard taking up space, which is something very different and the opposite to what you're saying now. So it's really knowing when to set boundaries, whether you need to set boundaries with a person, and remove yourself from the situation for a bit.

And I think what's interesting in what you're saying is that a lot of the time working on relationships doesn't mean always doing it whilst in relationship with the other person. Sometimes it means going off and doing your own process and figuring out what's coming up for you. And then, as you say, super important is to then reengage. It's not to just totally break off contact and ghost the person. It's to then take space, process, then re-engage and come up with any insights we've had about one's self, maybe about the other person and why we're feeling triggered and all that kind of thing.

So it sounds like a really fantastic model, David. Can you share your website with us?

**David Cooley**

Yeah. Absolutely. So it's [www.restorativerelationship.com](http://www.restorativerelationship.com)

**Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it. This has been a great conversation.

**David Cooley**

Oh, yeah. Thank you. So much fun. I really enjoyed it.