



## Trauma and nonmonogamy

**Guest: Mel Cassidy**

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### **[00:00:09] 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 happy to be joined by Mel Cassidy. Welcome, Mel.

### **Mel Cassidy**

Hi.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for being here today. Mel Cassidy is a relationship coach and creator of the "Monogamy Detox Course" and is dedicated to creating somatically integrated and trauma sensitive spaces where all can flourish. You can read Mel's full bio below.

So Mel, let's dive straight in. Why do you believe that so many therapists are opposed to non-monogamy, even when it's fully consensual between all parties?

### **Mel Cassidy**

Well, if you look at most of the ways that we've learned about relationship therapy, most of the traditional forms of looking at relationships are all based in upholding patriarchal monogamy. And there's a lot of historical reasons for that. We can go into the history of how monogamy came to be and the whole piece of guaranteeing who inherits your land and your wealth and all that kind of stuff. But we are at this point where almost all the literature on relationships and attachment theory and all these other pieces that tie into what creates a healthy relationship is all based on this monogamous construct.

And so there's no framework for understanding what non-monogamy can be other than the non-consensual, dishonest form of non-monogamy, which is cheating. Historically, cheating is something that has brought about a lot of disruption to relationships and to an individual's sense of self, and can bring about trauma from betrayal and that break of trust. And so if the only concept we have of non-monogamy is a model that is about betrayal and deception, then of course, we're going to see it in a negative light.

And thankfully, we are at a point now where there's more research coming out. There are more advocates within the therapy and coaching worlds for non-monogamy that are able to give

frameworks and offer other perspectives. But there's still so much training that is rooted in this idea that the only way to have a healthy relationship is to have an exclusive dyadic relationship. And so that's where we come from in it. And then a lot of therapists who might be working with non-monogamous people today, they aren't going to see the successes as much as they are going to see the messes.

**[00:02:55]**

And there is a lot of mess that happens because, again, with a lack of proper support and guidance, a lot of people who are exploring consensual and honest non-monogamy are kind of stumbling in the dark. And there's going to be a lot of stuff that comes up. We don't have enough mentorship, we don't have access to eldership in the world of non-monogamy. And so we stumble. We go to a therapist hoping to get support. And so the therapist is going to look at this and go, "Wow, what a mess. Why did this person do this to themselves"? And so there's a bias that gets put onto that. So I think over time there's been a lot of stigma around consensual non-monogamy, and some of that definitely comes from more conservative elements in our societies and cultures. But some of it has also been enforced by well-meaning therapists who are just looking at what they see and reporting on what they observe. But they're not getting to see the full picture because they don't see beyond their own bias.

**Jaia Bristow**

That makes a lot of sense. And it just makes me think about how important it is for therapists to have more of a rounded view and learn more about non-monogamy so that they're not repeating those patterns and they're not reinforcing the trauma that can already be there for a lot of people.

**Mel Cassidy**

Absolutely. We'll probably go into this in more detail, but there's a lot of therapists who will think that someone pursuing non-monogamy is doing so as a trauma response as a way to avoid their trauma. One of the common misconceptions about non-monogamy is, "oh, you must be afraid of commitment", or "maybe you're running away from something", or "maybe you have a sex addiction you're trying to satisfy". I think that there's a lot of value to consider those things because I think they can happen. But that's not the only reason why somebody might explore non-monogamy.

And unless we have an open and honest conversation about trauma-informed non-monogamy, how do we know the difference whether someone is pursuing non-monogamy as a trauma response and as a way to avoid things in themselves or to dissociate, versus pursuing non-monogamy because it's really authentic to who they are and the values that they're looking to explore in life and love?

**Jaia Bristow**

That's so important. That's a great distinction. And it makes me think of Martha Kauppi's work, she's written a book on polyamory specifically for therapists to be able to support their clients navigating non-monogamy. So tell me more about the relationship between non-monogamy and trauma, and whether being non-monogamous always leads to trauma, not always, but whether it does lead to traumatizing experiences.

## **[00:05:58] Mel Cassidy**

Yeah, well, there's a lot of complexity that comes into non-monogamous relationships, and I think when we don't have a framework for understanding that complexity, our nervous system is more likely to get overwhelmed by what's going on. So most of us have had relationships where we might have a small handful of intimate relationships in our life. And maybe only one of those is a relationship that is sexually and romantically intimate. But we have close relationships with family members, with friends, maybe with coworkers, chosen family. But as soon as you are engaging in romantic relationships with multiple people, there's an extra layer of depth to that.

And because we seek out romantic relationships as part of creating our secure attachment, the idea that someone that you've developed secure attachment might also have secure attachment with another person- in addition, not as a substitute for you, but in addition to you- the nervous system doesn't know how to process that. And so that alone can feel overwhelming. As we know when we go through circumstances of overwhelm and don't have the resources to support us, then we might be left with an impact of trauma. Now, in the non-monogamous community, up until very, very recently, there has not been much conversation about this.

A lot of the literature on non-monogamy has really focused on the logistics and explanations of how to create your relationships and what to do in them and how to talk about difficult things. But there hasn't been that lens on, well, what do we do when someone's overwhelmed or feeling wobbly or has strong emotions coming up as a reaction to what's going on? A lot of the time, the polyamorous community has kind of avoided talking about that, and that avoidance of that always caught my attention when I started exploring non-monogamy and looking at all the different forms.

There's polyamory, there's swinging, open relationships, and nobody was talking about, well, what if these feelings are valid? What if the wobbliness that someone feels needs to be listened to? Instead, a lot of the literature was saying, "you've just got to push through, you've just got to fake it till you make it". Just convince yourself that you're not jealous. And I would go on forums and even read people saying, "well, if you're jealous, you can't really be polyamorous". And I was like, but no, there's so many reasons that people can feel the feelings that they feel and people's feelings are valid.

And so there's been kind of a cultural history within consensual non-monogamy, where people have, without malicious intent, I'll say, have minimized each other's feelings and potentially even gas-lit one another in intimate relationships because they don't know how to deal with the strong emotions that are coming up. They fear that these strong emotions coming up might be some kind of evidence or proof that what they're doing isn't healthy for them. And so they want to push them away, and they want to push them away in one another.

And if you have multiple partners who are all experiencing a wide range of different kinds of emotions in a single moment, that might be very overwhelming for you, and you might just want to push them away and dismiss them because you don't know how to engage with all these different experiences happening at the same time. I hope what I'm doing here is kind of painting a very rough sketch of the layers of complexity that can come into play with the emotional reality of non-monogamous configurations.

## **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think it's also true not just of non-monogamy, but just in general, this idea that when you have a difficult feeling, you should push it away or ignore it, when actually it's normal to have a broad range of emotions. It's normal to feel jealousy at some point and all kinds of other emotions,

anger, jealousy, being upset, being sad, as well as happiness, joy, gratitude, and all kinds of other emotions. So often we work in these binaries of good and bad, right? Whereas if we try and remove ourselves from those binaries and think of them just as "some emotions are easier to feel and some emotions are more difficult to feel, but they're all valid".

**[00:10:44]**

So I think that it's definitely applicable in non-monogamy. But I think what you're talking to is also applicable in all kinds of different areas of life.

### **Mel Cassidy**

We see those same emotions come up when people are experiencing challenges to monogamous relationships, and I look at it as monogamy is one of the primary strategies that we've been given for creating safety and security and stability in our lives, and the moment that is challenged, however, it's challenged, whether it's through a breakup, or a big transition in life, or opening up a relationship, or even just a time of conflict in a relationship. Anytime that structure of monogamy is challenged, our nervous system feels the loss of that safety net, and we react from that place.

One of the interesting dynamics that I think is more specific to polyamory to look at, Murray Bowen talks about how in family systems therapy, a two people system is inherently unstable, and we seek out a third party to triangulate with to create stability. And we can do that in healthy ways. And we can do that in unhealthy ways. And in polyamorous relationships, there is a sense of we are creating new relationships and connections because it does enhance the experience of stability and security, and that can be done in a healthy way.

But there are also times where it can be done in an unhealthy way. So bringing another person into your relationship, whether that's a partner that you share with an existing partner, or someone that you're dating independently of other partners, that can sometimes fall into a negative kind of triangulation where you set up cycles for drama. And so that whole Karpman drama triangle, we take on the role of victim. Maybe we project someone else as a persecutor or someone else is the rescuer, and that can get amplified big time in polyamorous configurations and non-monogamous configurations.

And I think that is something to just be aware of. That the same thing can have both a positive and healthy expression, and it can also slide into a negative, dissociative, unhealthy expression.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And again, this idea, it's not always binary. Sometimes not all relationships necessarily are 100% healthy and then other relationships 100% unhealthy. Whether that's monogamy or non-monogamy, it's about figuring out. And I think that's what I really love about non-monogamy is figuring out more what works for you as an individual. Rather than applying a template of how you should be in a specific relationship.

### **Mel Cassidy**

Yeah. Absolutely. And for a lot of people exploring non-monogamy, a big part of the journey is challenging those "shoulds". Monogamy gives us a lot of "you should be", and "you're supposed to be". And all those expectations of what a healthy relationship looks like.

**[00:13:54]**

And when you're exploring non-monogamy, you really have to question all of those pieces. And that can be scary because we get into questioning really significant pieces that we've been told, even the whole idea that you have to have a partner, a life partner, that you are going on that what they call the "relationship escalator trajectory" with, that you're on this inevitable path together, challenging that idea. And what does it mean to step off of that model and be perhaps your own primary partner? And what happens then? How do you now source your safety and security and relationships? And there's so much to explore there. And I think it's really important that we get to explore that from a trauma informed perspective. Yeah.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I'm curious as well, if we look more specifically at what kind of traumas can show up for people exploring non-monogamy.

### **Mel Cassidy**

Yeah. So one of the things that I think is really important to recognize, first of all, is that because non-monogamy is more of a fringe relationship, there is a sense of isolation that can come with that. And when people who are exploring non-monogamy don't have access to a wider community of peer support, regardless of whether they have therapy support or not, not having that peer support means that if they're experiencing a situation that's unhealthy, or potentially even abusive, because there are abusive people in all forms of relationships, it might make it harder to recognize.

And I've definitely seen harmful behaviors and abusive behaviors get dismissed as just "this is part of non-monogamy". And I think without the support system and support network for understanding what non-monogamy looks like in a healthy way, those things fly under the radar. So I think that's really important to recognize that the isolation of being a fringe form of relating can make things invisible. And it means that we don't catch things in time. So that's one thing to consider. I think as well, when we start exploring non-monogamy, you're engaging with new people.

And anytime that we develop a relationship with a new person, whether it's a romantic, intimate relationship or otherwise, that person has the potential to hold up a mirror to us. And the deeper we go into connection with a person, the more likely we are to bump up against each other's past wounds. And so if you have been used to being with the same person for a number of years, you've probably gotten used to where each other's traumas lie, and you've maybe figured out a way to navigate around that maybe without triggering each other too much.

But when you're engaging with new people, then all that flies out the window. You have to relearn how to engage with somebody in a new way. And maybe you have to become more clear in communicating your own boundaries and what's good for you and what's not good for you. There's a lot of trauma memory stuff that can come up. And again, if that's not held in a respectful and honorable way, then you run the risk of retraumatizing. So, for example, childhood abandonment wounds can come up in a big way when you have a partner who's starting to date someone else, and so they're off on their date and you're home alone, and suddenly your inner child is freaking out.

And if your partner doesn't come home and really speak to that part of you that's freaking out and give that part of you what they need to settle down and be reminded that they're in a good space, then there is a risk that that wound resurfaces and starts to play out again. I think as well, keeping in

mind that this is a very complex form of relating, we can get overwhelmed. And I've seen people tap out of their capacity before they realize what's happening.

### **[00:18:15]**

One of my favorite things is love is infinite. But time is not. People who are new to non-monogamy have this feeling of being a kid in a candy store and just wanting to date all the people. And I definitely did that when I started practicing this. But you get to a point where you tap out. And if you don't catch yourself or if you don't have people who can catch you when you hit that point, you do burn out, and then that burnout has additional consequences.

Any time that we get burned out in our lives, what happens? Our nervous system is more activated. We start playing out all those fight, flight, freeze, fawn behaviors, so we might be more aggressive and snappy with people. We might be isolating ourselves. We might just go into people-pleasing mode, which is a really interesting one to see in non-monogamy when people are still caught up in that infatuation phase with multiple people, the people-pleasing mode and how that plays out. And then they realize like, wait, who am I?

There's a loss of self.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely the loss of self. But also how do you please all your different partners if they have different expectations and demand on you? At some point, if you're a people pleaser, you try to please one person, and by pleasing that one person, it might upset one of your other partners. So you get completely torn in all directions, and it's exhausting.

### **Mel Cassidy**

Yes. And so people have had that people pleasing, perhaps even a martyrdom complex, from past life experiences that's going to come up big time, and they're going to be confronted with that. I've already touched on this, but the potential for hurting one another in non-monogamous relationships. I think we need to be really mindful of that, because if we are dismissing the feelings that someone is having, if we don't know how to handle the strong emotions that's going on for a partner or even in ourselves, we are creating a situation of harm. And speaking from a somatic perspective, what happens when we have a response or a need that doesn't get met, but we're still in connection with this person that we are no longer sure how to trust.

What manifests is a kind of physical armoring. That's the next step that our nervous system has for taking care of itself, is to create this buffer, and that armoring might come through as a physical thing. So tension in the body, all sorts of other physical dysfunctions. But it could also come through in forms of dissociation. It could come through in escapism. There's so many different ways that can show up. So I think there's so much to just be aware of, and really the key to working with all of that is- I think of it as a threefold approach.

It's, what traumas are we each working with? What do we hold in our own trauma body already? How do we engage with that in a kind way to support healing from that and integration from that? And how do we engage in such a way that we're not creating new traumas? That's applicable to any kind of relationship style, but working with non-monogamous clients, which is the people I work with, that's what I'm always looking at with them. So anytime that there's strong feelings come up, it's like, okay, let's not rush through this.

**[00:21:54]**

Let's not push our way to the other side because it's not going to help anybody. We need to actually slow down and get to the bottom of what is going on here. And very often it's not just one person's trauma that's getting activated. One person's trauma will get activated, and then another person's trauma body gets activated, and then another person's trauma body gets activated. You're dealing with three or more people, all of whom have their own trauma that's coming up, and they're trying to engage with each other.

And of course, the moment we don't feel safe, our brain will separate, right? Like there's parts of our brain that kind of push to the side and shut down, because all our energy is trying to focus on "how do I get safe?" And so people are not in their full capacity, trying to figure out how to navigate their way to safety with each other. And it gets very complex and messy and without support to hold that, the risk of trauma is much higher.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think any relationship, especially romantic relationships, intimate relationships can mirror trauma, can bring up baggage, can bring up our history and our patterns. And so when that's amplified by multiple relationships, of course, it's going to come up even stronger. And as you say, how one trauma, one person's trauma can then trigger someone else's trauma, and then you can bounce around like that. And that point about peer support as well. Or any support, support from a therapist who understands non-monogamy, as well as support from peers is so important.

I know for myself, when I first started my non-monogamous journey, my very first non-monogamous relationship was an abusive one, and I wasn't aware of it. And I just thought every time I felt something wasn't quite right, and I mentioned it, the person would say to me, "no, that's because you're not used to non-monogamy. Don't worry, this is normal". But luckily for me, I happen to have fallen in a crowd of fantastic, wonderful sex-positive, queer, non-monogamous people who are all very good at communicating, were all very open, very good with consent.

And when I shared what was happening in my relationship with them, they were like, "that's not non-monogamy. That is abuse. That is not okay. You need to either end that relationship or set boundaries, or do something". And if I hadn't had that, I would just have believed what this person was telling me and internalized everything as, oh, I'm the problem rather than not just it's hard enough exploring non-monogamy. If it's new. To be fair, most of my relationships have been non-monogamous. I started quite young, but nonetheless, I still had all these beliefs that society puts on us around monogamy and around how things should be like we were talking about.

And so not only is it difficult to begin and to start that journey, but if you have someone telling you, this is the way things should be, and it's all in your head and you start believing, "oh, maybe non-monogamy is not for me, but monogamy didn't work for me either. Am I the problem?" So I really appreciate everything you're saying.

### **Mel Cassidy**

And I just want to tag on to that phenomenon of people going, "this is the way polyamory is supposed to be", that is coming from a place of not feeling safe. Right? That is people not having frameworks for understanding what the possibilities are, how to navigate this uncharted terrain and deciding "this is how it's supposed to be", and then trying to impose that order onto others without consideration of what's authentic for them. I've seen that happen in very malicious ways. There are people who have

been leaders in the non-monogamous community and polyamorous community who now have been called out for their abusive behavior because they've done this imposing their way or the highway on multiple partners.

**[00:26:01]**

And then people start looking at all the things that they've written and they're like, "oh, right. This is all right there". And this is where I think it's so important that we get into the basics of what is it that we're really doing? And I think non-monogamy can be such a rewarding path for so many people. It opens us up to the possibility of developing secure attachment, not just with one person, but with a whole community of people. And I think that is so valuable.

And certainly non-monogamy is not the only way we can explore that. But I think it's a very valuable way for people to explore that. It's a good match for many people in the world. And if we aren't having the conversations about, "well, what is it you want to explore? Why do you want to explore it? Where do you want that to take you?" Then we're losing that perspective that everyone's got a different path in this. There's no one way to do it. And when people think there is just one way to do it, that's when they're more likely to be abusive and try to impose their way onto other partners.

**Jaia Bristow**

Because that's what I love about non-monogamy. Non-monogamy is just we're not doing the standard relationship structure, but non-monogamy can be so many different things. It doesn't even have to be romantic and sexual. Lots of romantic and sexual relationships. It can also be about exploring friendships in a different way, exploring one's relationship with oneself in a different way. It can mean so many things. And as you say, open up so many possibilities. But people can be just as rigid with what they believe non-monogamy should be as they can be with people who are monogamous.

And that's why I think everything you're speaking to is so true. But it takes a certain amount of self awareness, a certain amount of ability to check in and be like, "okay, this is what works for me, or this is what I want", and it's really okay for people to be like, "this is how I do non-monogamy. Take it or leave it" the same way some people are like, "I'm monogamous, take it or leave it. I'm never going to be non-monogamous", for example, but it's important to have that nuance between.

This is how I do it, as opposed to this is how you should do it.

**Mel Cassidy**

Yeah. And a big part of trauma informed non-monogamy is finding that space of mutual consent. Where do we authentically overlap? And there's always going to be a margin where we can stretch ourselves, without feeling that this isn't in position, or that we're exhausting ourselves. But we want to start with where do we mutually overlap? Where do we authentically meet each other in that space of mutual consent? And we don't get to that place unless we, first of all, have that self relationship. And that self relationship involves so much unpacking of, well, what's true for me?

What's actually real for me? What's been a trauma response for me? What's something that I've internalized because my parents or my religious upbringing or my teachers told me that I was supposed to want this. And that is a profound journey to take. It's a journey that I think is worthwhile for everybody to take. But in non-monogamy, if you don't take that journey, then you get stuck, I think.



**[00:29:24] Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, absolutely. And it's really noticeable. Like most people who are non-monogamous have to be better communicators than the average person, for example, and have to have a bit more self-awareness. But not everyone always does. And those people or those relationships become much more jolty, I want to call it, much more quickly.

**Mel Cassidy**

Yeah. I always tell people "telepathy would be great, but unfortunately, we can't rely on that."

**Jaia Bristow**

And so the other way of doing it is actually expressing what you're thinking.

**Mel Cassidy**

Yeah. And there are challenges to that kind of explicit communication. So again, going back to what is the trauma we hold already, there's so many reasons why we avoid having explicit conversations and communication. A lot of the times in our early life, we've learned that there are negative repercussions for having those kinds of conversations. We fear that if I set a boundary, am I going to be rejected? If I speak up for something that I need? Is the other person going to feel that they're insufficient because they weren't meeting that need already?

And we might have fears of even worse repercussions, right? What if I ask for something and I get punished for asking? So there's all sorts of pieces that can play into why are we having a hard time having the kind of communication that we really aspire to have? And so this is where in terms of how do we work with our traumas, I take an approach that I call the pillars of trauma-informed relating. And so there's four of these pillars. There's safety, resilience, healing and engagement.

And I look at them as pillars because it's not a linear thing. This isn't a journey that you pass through one and then the other. You actually need all four of them to support the foundation of a trauma-informed relationship. And these are applicable to any kind of relationship style. But when I'm working with people exploring non-monogamy, this is what I'm working with, and I may not explicitly describe them as that with my clients when I'm offering suggestions, that they play into all the different things that I'm encouraging people to do to take a more trauma-informed approach in their relationships.

And the first of those, the safety, actually, all of them, there are aspects of it that are about internal resourcing. So going back to that self relationship. But there are also parts of it that are external resourcing. So how do you invite your partners to be part of that process for you? And how do you as a partner support that process for someone that you care about?

**Jaia Bristow**

And so can you tell us a bit more about these four pillars and how someone exploring non-monogamy can work with their own traumas as well as support partner or partners with their traumas?

### **[00:32:29] Mel Cassidy**

Absolutely. So safety starts off with that somatic inventory of self. What is it that helps you experience a safe space? And I think this is very important to get clear first off, because any time you have a freak out or feel wobbly, you need to know what your resources are. So I love working with nourishing the senses. Create that safe space, that cave, that comfort space in your home. Have practices that you can do. Maybe it's going for a walk. Maybe it's dancing. Maybe it's making food. Know what helps your nervous system get back into a state of regulation when it's been feeling wobbly or activated.

And then the other part of that is to invite your partners to support that. So how can your partner support you in returning to a space of safety? Like, do you need assurance? Maybe you need to hear words of affirmation. Maybe there's something else that's going to speak to you. And I think love languages are very useful to look at in terms of how we create safety in our relationship spaces...

### **Jaia Bristow**

And also attachment styles, I guess. I always... have started associating love languages and attachment styles recently. I've got really into it. I've been reading a few books on it, including Jessica Fern's *Polysecure*, which is fantastic, about non-monogamy.

### **Mel Cassidy**

I love that. Yeah. And so once we've got a sense of what helps to keep us in a safer environment, we can start exploring resilience. And so resilience is about taking ourselves out of safety in small doses. And that's how we build up that tone in our nervous system. That's how we build up more strength and bounce back, so that we can sit with experiences that are uncomfortable and not feel like the sky is falling. Our brain is not catastrophizing the situation. So an example of this in a relationship, maybe your partner is going on a date with someone new for the first time.

Maybe they come to you and they say, "Look, I'm just going to go for this amount of time. I'm not going to do more than maybe make out with this person. And I'll be back by 11:00". And so you have a container around "hey, this is the amount of time where I'm going to be feeling wobbly and uncertain. And I don't know what's going on. And then when my partner comes back, I'll be able to return to a space of safety". And so you get to experience, what is it like to go to that edge and come back?

And so then that plays into the next pillar, which is healing. So this is teaching our nervous system that it's okay for us to get this regulated because we will come back into regulation. And I think that's important in general, to just know that our nervous system can get dysregulated. It's okay. It's not the end of the world. Most of the time we can come back into a state of regulation, especially if we have all the external resources to support us.

When it gets into healing, part of that is knowing what is it that we're working with? What are the core wounds that we want to heal? What are the tender places that are maybe still figuring out how to show up in the world? And then in our relationships, how do we create good experiences, multiple good experiences, that help overwrite the traumas of the bad experiences? So I think about betrayal trauma. This comes up a lot. If someone's in a relationship that maybe was monogamous and has become non-monogamous as a consequence of "okay, well, let's explore non-monogamy because you cheated on me."

**[00:36:07]**

That happens a lot. There's still that core wound of betrayal at some point. Or maybe you were betrayed in a past relationship, and now you're in something new, and the non-monogamy is going to bring up the trauma around that betrayal in the past. So it's not as simple as "well, I came back and I did what I said I was going to do and that's it. You should feel fine". No. We need to have multiple good, positive experiences, so that I can trust my partner now and this is good, before the trauma of that betrayal gets overridden.

And then when we get into that fourth piece of engagement. This is a piece that I've caught myself on this as well. You know, sometimes we get complacent in our relationships. And I think in any kind of relationship over time, we get into a nice rhythm, a groove, and we might kind of take it for granted. And we sit back on the conscious relationship work. And that pillar of engagement is about not sitting back.

It's about keeping that engagement. So maybe that looks like having a regular check-in with your partners. I love to do what I call an "open window" with folks, and it's just a chance to share openly. How are you doing in your relationship with yourself? How's your relationship with people in the outside world? How are you feeling about this shared relationship? And going through questions like that together can bring so much. It can shed so much light onto the unspoken dynamics that could be at play.

And if you have a regular practice of it, it's going to help you identify something that might have been wobbly, or ignored, sooner. And so we have a chance to address it sooner, rather than if we just let it sit and simmer and perhaps fester, and then it might potentially explode further down the line. So that engagement piece is about staying present with the process as much as you're able to. These four pillars work together, and there's things we can do that incorporate all four of them.

There are things that might focus on one and not the other, but they work together in a kind of synergy to create a stronger foundation for us to be able to have a relationship that's coming from a trauma-informed space.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. And I guess I'm curious because those four pillars require both engagement from oneself, and from one's partner or partners. So how do we navigate that? Whether the partners are open to all the different boundaries and requests within those.

### **Mel Cassidy**

I think in *Polysecure*, Jessica Fern talks about that difference between someone who is just a regular partner versus a secure attachment partner, and I think that is a significant thing to figure out. Not all partners are people that we're going to invite to be part of that secure attachment process for ourselves. And I think that you can also have secure attachment partners who are not romantic partners, but might be close friends. And certainly if you are dating and you don't have any romantic partners that you would have a secure attachment relationship with, I don't think you should try and forge one there just to do this work. I think it's really valuable to invite that support in from your close friendship network, but it's really about figuring out, where's your level of trust? So when I'm working with people, we look at the different layers of relationship. We start off by just having awareness of who somebody is and building that awareness. And over time, the more awareness we have with somebody, the more we feel safe with them and the greater the experience of safety.

**[00:39:56]**

We have repeated experience of safe experiences with somebody. Then we start to develop more intimacy. And the more we have intimate experiences with somebody, the more we start to develop that nervous system, co-regulation, resonance, and actually develop a relationship. And so I think as we move through those layers, you might consider, how do I invite this person into being more part of this process with me? Unless there's something that's really major coming up around a trauma response early on in a relationship, I don't think it's necessarily healthy to invite a partner to be part of your trauma healing process because there is a risk of trauma bonding.

If that's happening very early on, then your nervous system is going to attach to this person as the healer, as the rescuer. And we need to kind of create a buffer around that, so that when we're developing that attachment, we're developing it from an authentic and healthy place rather than from a dissociative "loss of our own power" place. Does that make sense?

**Jaia Bristow**

It does make a lot of sense. And can you say a few more words about trauma bonding and especially how it can show up in non-monogamy?

**Mel Cassidy**

Oh, my goodness, only a few words.

**Jaia Bristow**

But I'm mindful of time. So we can do a whole other interview on that some other time.

**Mel Cassidy**

Trauma bonding, put simply, is when we have an artificial experience of attachment with somebody because of a shared traumatic experience or a shared journey through a traumatic experience. And sometimes that can show up in the ways that we project a role onto another person. So a common one to do is- we project the role of a parent onto a partner, and we hold an expectation of them to come in and do the things for us that a parent didn't do. And if we are doing that early on in a relationship, then our nervous system goes, oh, this is great.

This person is giving me these things that I didn't get. Maybe there's something about it that feels familiar. And so we attach into that. And what is familiar is not necessarily healthy. Sometimes what's familiar, is familiar, because it reminds us of the unhealthy dynamics that we experienced in the past. And so in non-monogamy, again, we are exploring something that can feel fundamentally insecure at first. And so there's a lot of our nervous system that's geared towards getting to safety. And so we want to dive straight into that deep relationship.

And so there's a part of us that's wanting to project those roles onto these new people in our lives and get that rush of, "okay, we're going to work through this, and you're going to do this. And this is going to be amazing". And there's an intoxication that can come with that, that plays into that trauma bonding dynamic. So that's kind of my summary. I feel like I waffled around that a little bit, but it can definitely show up in non-monogamy, especially if we are avoiding trauma or difficulties in one relationship and dissociating into another.

**[00:43:18]**

That other relationship can become the source of, "I'm just going to escape here, and I'm going to bond and attach onto you because that feels safer for me because it's not as deep as the other relationship where I'm experiencing conflict right now".

**Jaia Bristow**

Thank you for that. And I know we're coming to an end soon, but you talk about these four pillars, and I'm curious about how much they are solely applicable to non-monogamy and how much they're applicable to other forms of relationships, including monogamous, romantic relationships or friendships, et cetera.

**Mel Cassidy**

I think they can be applied across the board. I don't have as much experience working with them in monogamous situations, of course. But I think that anytime that you are trying to work through trauma in a relationship, it's probably useful to look at, how are you doing that? And are you exploring how we create safety, how we build resilience, how we create spaces of healing and how we actively engage? Yeah, I think that's definitely valuable. And I feel like I want to add as well that just because someone has gone through trauma, it doesn't necessarily mean that non-monogamy is a bad idea for them.

And that's part of why I work with this process and this framework, because for some people, yes, non-monogamy is going to feel scary. And monogamy is what's going to offer them a better secure base. But there's just as many people for whom non-monogamy is actually offering them a wider base of security and safety, and that is supporting their nervous system through creating an attachment network that is vast and not just relying on a single person. So non-monogamy can be destabilizing, could hinder your journey of integration.

It could also actually really support your journey of integration. And I know that for me... I don't think I would have started doing my own trauma work if I hadn't started exploring non-monogamy, because it was all the different reflections I was getting from partnerships that got me to look at "oh, maybe everyone's onto something. Maybe there's something I need to look at". And I also wouldn't have been able to do that journey if I didn't have the support of the community relationships that I developed through my explorations in non-monogamy and polyamory.

So it's very much an integral part of my own journey. And I think that's part of why I've become so passionate about supporting other people to do that journey, too.

**Jaia Bristow**

I love that. And it's so true. And I think being non-monogamous, especially at the beginning, can sometimes speed up that process, versus monogamous relationships, because as you say, and as we've talked about, it's mirrored all around you. There's lots of different mirrors rather than just one. And it mirrors different angles and different sides of us and different trauma elements and patterns.

**Mel Cassidy**

Absolutely. Yeah.

**[00:46:28] Jaia Bristow**

And so I think you've mostly answered it already, but I just had one last question which was around, how can non-monogamy support trauma healing? And you've spoken a bit about it. I was wondering...

**Mel Cassidy**

I think the other thing that I would add in there is that the community building that we get to do in non-monogamy is really important. I've seen more of the conversation in trauma-informed, and somatic work over the last years talk more about this, about the role of community in healing. I think about how attachment theory, the flaw that I see in a lot of attachment theory, is that it revolves around having dyadic relationships. And it seems to forget that as human beings, we didn't evolve just in dyad connections.

We evolved in village, in extended community and extended family. And there are many cultures still in the world that practice that. And when we are in an individualistic culture, like we are here in the west, there's a lot of isolation that happens. And there's an expectation that your journey of healing needs to happen in isolation, that it's something you do by yourself or maybe with the support of a therapist, and you have to compartmentalize it away from other people. There's a lot of shame put on people who want to spill that journey out into the open.

But I think that non-monogamy can potentially create a much safer community space where you can be more open about your process. And through being more open about your process, you're able to access more support and more positive reflections, and feel that safety net, so that even when your nervous system is relearning completely new ways of being, new ways of thinking... Right? When we're doing trauma healing, there's always that scary moment of, "oh, my God, I know this is healthy, but I don't know how to actually do this because my nervous system is freaking out because it's so new." When you have that wider support in your intimate relationships to hold you through that, that creates that safety net, while you go through that period of discomfort while you're learning a new way of being. And learning that that new way of being is actually safe and good and nourishing for you.

**Jaia Bristow**

And just like when we were talking about, sometimes one person's trauma can trigger someone else's trauma. So having multiple people to hold it, sometimes one person's... As one is healing trauma, something might trigger one person, but it might be able to be held by other people or different compatibilities and stuff. So I love all of that.

**Mel Cassidy**

Healthy triangulation.

**Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. Well, Mel, thank you so much for your time today. I really appreciate it. How can people find out more about you and your work?

**Mel Cassidy**

Thank you, Jaia. So, you can find me online. My website is [radicalrelationshipcoaching.ca](http://radicalrelationshipcoaching.ca). You can also find me on [Facebook](#) and Instagram [@radicalrelating](#)

**[00:49:24] Jaia Bristow**

Fantastic. Thank you. Take care.