



Conscious Life presents

# TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

## Understanding and healing relational trauma

**Guest: Dr Meg-John Barker**

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

Hello, everyone, and welcome to this Trauma Super Conference. My name is Jaia Bristow and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am so, so thrilled to be welcoming the wonderful Meg-John Barker. Welcome, Meg-John.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Hi. Great to be here.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Great to have you. So today we're going to be talking all about relational trauma. Now, this is a juicy topic and I'm excited to see what comes up. Do you want to start by telling us a bit about why you feel this is important territory for you and maybe in general as well?

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, absolutely. I mean it's been brought home to me in recent years. I guess it feels like so much out there is about all of the kinds of structures and systems crumbling and being laid bare and seeing just how shaky the foundations were of everything. How we relate to ourselves, how we relate to each other, how we relate in communities and how we relate to land and the world.

It feels like all of that has sort of come crashing down and, again, this sense of out there, but also in here for me personally because a lot of relationships have had that sort of falling apart in my life in the last few years just before and just after the pandemic, which has left me really searching for answers about, seeing, I guess, my ways of relating really revealed to me painfully how I relate to myself and others.

Also seeing how I respond when other people are relating from a place of trauma and really questioning, how can I do that better? Seeing relationship trauma showing up a lot in the community as well and lots of painful rifts and ruptures that don't get repaired.

And so it feels like this urgent set of questions and it feels very interrelated at all those levels for me. So I've just been really looking into relational trauma, like where does it come from, what can

we do about it, how can we relate differently? Who's exploring that territory? It feels like the urgent question of our times in a lot of ways.

**[00:02:20] Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think you've written a lot of books around relationships and different ways of relating and your most famous book, *Rewriting The Rules*, which is also the name of your blog, is all about finding the right relationship for you. It's not about applying a set of rules and it's not about whether you're monogamous or non-monogamous, or straight or not straight, or anything like that, right?

It's about really questioning for yourself, and that's wonderful, but as you say, when we have trauma and trauma is ingrained in so many different relationships and, as Conscious Life, we hosted a whole Relationship Super Conference and there is so much material there and you were a guest on it and it's fantastic.

And we really see relationships, it's such a big word, like there's so much relating. And I love that you include relating to ourselves because that is, for all of us, I think, our primary relationship. And when we have trauma, our relationship with ourselves is going to then impact our relationships with everyone else, whether it's with family or lovers or friends or groups or individuals or small groups or work.

And I've spoken on this conference about trauma in the workplace. I've spoken about, we talk about family trauma, we talk about all these things and they're all covered by relationships. So I think this is a great place to begin exploring this territory.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Jaia Bristow**

How do you understand cultural and developmental trauma and how those combine to produce, or reproduce, relational trauma?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, and this is something I'm so drawing on my co-author Alex Iantaffi who wrote this book *Gender Trauma*, and I think that was my starting point for learning about this. But I've been reading everything I can on these topics ever since. I guess in terms of developmental, I feel like between them, developmental trauma and cultural trauma form this relational trauma that we then experience.

And however much I've been looking for the right person or the right way of doing relationships, the right style or something, this traumatized and traumatizing way of relating still comes in to the point where, I guess, what I'm seeing now is I have to address that. I'm not going to find a relationship that doesn't have that in with that particular person or particular community.

**[00:04:55]**

I'm not going to find a way of doing relationships like monogamy or polyamory that gets rid of this. It's like it's relational trauma and it comes from the developmental trauma piece and the cultural trauma piece and that they're interrelated...

### **Jaia Bristow**

Because some people might be new to all of this, let's just talk and define maybe a bit more, what is cultural trauma and what is developmental trauma and then we'll go into how they impact relational trauma.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Well, yeah, I think I might say these different elements of developmental trauma and how each of them does sort of play out later on, because I feel like one piece is this idea that it's not so much about what happens to you as a kid, tough stuff is going to happen as you grow up, but it's about this question of is it held and heard by anyone?

And a lot of this research is finding that even if people go through really tough stuff when they're growing up, if it's held and heard by the people around them, their community, their family, then they can do all right. But if it's not, we're left with these unbearable feelings. So if we have really difficult emotions that are dismissed or they're blamed on us or we're punished even for having them, and, again, it may not be in explicitly abusive or violent ways, but not being held and heard means that we're left with all these feelings and, generally, find ways to kind of push them down.

But then when they come up as adults and they tend to be triggered again by relational dynamics that echo the things that we experienced in the past, so that is one way that we're likely to bring our early trauma into later relationships.

We're also quite likely to look for what we lacked or lost as kids in our later relationships and not be aware that we're doing that, these unconscious patterns, which means we might well just replicate the same traumatized dynamics. Or sometimes we find ourselves even acting out the other side of the trauma and causing that sort of trauma response in other people and harming other people from that. So that's the sort of emotion piece.

Then, the research on shame and trauma suggests that when we're brought up in these kinds of ways, we tend to assume there must be something wrong with us. If we're not getting held or heard, or if people around us are saying there's something wrong with us, or just simply not being safe enough for us, then we tend to assume there's something wrong with us.

Because as kids, it'd be way more dangerous to realize that the people we rely on aren't safe enough than it is to think there's something wrong with us. And the idea that something is wrong with us gives us at least some sense that we might be able to do something about it and have some kind of control.

But that seems to be where the real fundamental sense of, I'm bad and the shame gets in and then we come up with all these ways to kind of block that shame by avoiding or by withdrawing or by attacking out or attacking in, and all those responses get in the way of intimacy. So, again, once we're in our later relationships, we might be very avoidant and not go towards intimacy, or we

might be trying for this really close intimacy and leaping in and then having all kinds of problems because we haven't really got very firm foundations for the relationship.

**[00:08:15]**

And then the last piece I would say about developmental trauma is this piece about rupture and repair. So, again, they find with what we could call developmental trauma and, again, it doesn't have to be very obviously abusive childhood experiences, although it can be, is that ruptures are left unrepaired. So conflicts or tough times, or times when a parent does blame a kid or can't hold them very well, there isn't that attempt to repair it.

So they're left unresolved and, again, that really lingers in the body and it's really easy to retrigger and, again, it tends to be in our more intimate relationships, and relationships of all kinds. I wouldn't say it's just romantic relationships, but close relationships as an adult and relationships with community, colleagues, that retrigger those kinds of things.

And, again, the real danger is that we're causing these kinds of relational dynamics that just perpetuate and we don't get the chance to be held and heard as an adult or to learn how to do rupture and repair. We simply don't have any sense of how to do rupture and repair because we haven't learned how to do it.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's so important that you're bringing in all these different elements because so often, I think more and more people understand now that trauma isn't just these big, huge scary things that happen, right, that trauma can be caused by all kinds of things and that it's much more to do with a holding environment of whether we feel safe and secure, whether our nervous system has been re-regulated after it's been jarred by an event or a thing.

And that there's physical and emotional trauma, caused by physical and emotional hurts often, but that, again, it's the holding environment which either causes or perpetuates the trauma as well, which I think we'll get into later on about perpetuating or healing trauma. And so often people can be like, but I don't know what's wrong with me that I have all these difficult relationships, that I'm bad at relationships when I have a perfectly decent family, my parents are still together, love each other, I've not had any big trauma, like what's wrong with me?

And so then it adds this layer of there's something wrong, there's something bad, rather than what you're talking about is just understanding and seeing how this trauma is created and developed and played out and then perpetuated.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

And I think we all do, again, in our, this is where the cultural piece relates to the developmental because I think in the dominant cultures that we are brought up in, these things are, it's the intergenerational piece, for start, that these things aren't healed at any point along the way and heal is a difficult word, but they're not addressed at any point along the way.

So our parents would just likely bring us up in a similar way to the way they were brought up. And, again, it doesn't need to be explicitly abusive things, for parents just not to be okay with their own emotions, not to model self care, not to know how to repair ruptures. And if there's that shame in

the parent, it's really hard for them to go to a child and say I'm really sorry, I didn't do that right, which would be the way to kind of repair the rupture.

**[00:11:33]**

So the child is just left with rupture after rupture and blaming themselves because that's all they've got, right? And I think there's so little support for parents to learn how to do this stuff and actually so much encouragement for them to parent in ways that are traumatizing.

If a parent themselves had this developmental trauma as a child, they're likely to then look to their own kids to give them what they lacked and lost. Often, if they haven't got that from partners or from other people in their life, again, unconsciously, they're hoping a child will be able to make it right. And then they play out this stuff with the child, and then the child goes on to...

And we know this now, but there's still very little support for learning how to do it differently. There's still explicit parenting advice that says leave your child alone when they're upset, rather than going to them. It's really still the kind of thing that was there in the parenting I received. And also then the other way the culture is part of it is our really stretched stressful lives under capitalism, that means that even if parents really knew how to do all of this stuff, they don't have the time or the space to do it.

They're so stretched themselves, they're likely to behave in ways that repress feelings or react out of feelings, rather than having the slowness and the space that we actually need to be able to hold and hear people, to be able to do rupture and repair. So I think just under capitalism as it is at the moment and under the crises that everyone is facing, makes it even more likely that these things just keep getting passed on.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think it's so important, all these different elements that you bring in, the intergenerational piece, that, yeah, that if we have trauma and we haven't worked on our own trauma and we have kids, of course we're going to pass it on. It's kind of natural.

And then, as you say, when you bring in the layers of parenting books which literally give advice on basically how to traumatize your child, it's that that they're doing and there's all these different methods that people do and someone can be very willing to do the right thing, but you get all this conflicting advice, it can be so confusing and you do what you think is best.

And so, again, I want people who are listening to know this is not a criticism of any parenting style or anything, and I think we're going to get into this bit in a bit as well of just how hard it is, all this stuff, but that it's really important to understand the intergenerational piece. And I talk a lot about ancestral trauma healing with Jonathan Meenagh in a different interview which I recommend people check out.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Because it goes back generations. Really seeing in mine, it's not just and, again, caregivers, parents, it's not just the generation before, but it's often the one before that and what they're all carrying in. So, we're still really impacted by things generations back in our family of how the

culture was back then, stiff upper lip, or dealing with the war or whatever, it's like that's still there, isn't it? And it's playing out in us if it hasn't been addressed along the way.

### **[00:14:54] Jaia Bristow**

100%. And even when we start the, so I think trauma can be perpetuated and take on more through generations, and even when you start the trauma healing, I think it can take multiple generations, because there's a lot of stuff, and I think it's really interesting you talk about the culture, especially the capitalist culture, in today's society, I'm at the age now where my friends are popping out babies left, right and center.

And what I really notice is that, previous generations, there was a very, often very, gender based way, but there was a parent that went and worked and a parent that stayed at home with the child. Now there is the expectation that both parents do it all and that's if the child has two parents, again, I don't want to, I know that, as you say, there's lots of different caregiving situations and family structures and sometimes there's more parents, sometimes there's less parents, sometimes there's grandparents, sometimes there's all kinds of different things.

But I really see how there is that expectation of you keeping a full time job and you become a great parent and you have a social life and you make lots of money and you buy a new house and it's literally impossible. So then the caregivers, I'm going to call them, have all this stress and then that stress activates their own trauma and means that they can just be less present with their children which adds all these extra layers.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, completely. And I do think, thinking about that normative ideal, the kind of hetero-patriarchal norm of this atomized couple who's doing it all, the move away from communities, the move away from extended family models, it's far too much. It's far too much. And you're sort of stuck in both the romantic couple and the nuclear family, it's very stuck together in this private sphere where you're not supposed to show any failings or any problems, and there's not much support.

Often very isolated, often moving around for work, it is very difficult to form supportive networks. So, yeah, I think all of that modern mode is part of the problem and there isn't much out there saying this is what we're up against and this might be really part of this huge burden people are facing. It's much more like here's this ideal that you're supposed to live up to and you must pretend that you're living up to it at all times and not admit how incredibly hard it is.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. And I think it's interesting you're talking about this moving away from community, and I'd love to get into that a bit more as well, and something comes to mind around that word community because whether we have chosen community or not, we're never bringing children up in a tiny microcosm either, right. The children are going to be exposed, whether it's through schooling or friends or aunties and uncles or caregiver's friends or peers, you know, whoever there is, or these days with the internet and...

And we're constantly exposed to so many messages. So however fantastic the primary caregivers are, there is all this stuff going on. And, as you say, it's really hard. So, yeah, let's talk some more

about how our current dominant culture sort of traumatizes relationships and encourages traumatizing relationships. I don't know if you have any more you want to add about that.

**[00:18:31]**

And I'm curious to see what other relationship models there are, how we can step away from that and into something that's more supportive, not just for the children, but for us as adults as well. Because most of the people listening to this, okay, maybe the way they raise their kids is one thing, but they're no longer kids, they've already dealt with all the trauma. They've got all the trauma. So what do we do now?

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Absolutely. And I would definitely say as well, I'm planning to write about this with Alex soon, we're going to do a book called *How To Understand Your Relationships*, and I always defer to Alex on the parenting piece because they've done it and I haven't and I'm very aware of, you know, it's all very well to say how damaging that developmental trauma can be, but, as you say, it's not about laying blame, it's about recognizing the intergenerational model of it.

And I suppose I'm more focused on relationships between adults and I've been for many years focused on romantic relationships particularly, and the pressures that are brought to bear there. And I suppose, going back to your first question of how does this dominant culture show up in our romantic relationships, I think if we're talking about sort of capitalist, colonialists, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal culture, all of these oppressive systems and structures that we're in, we can't step outside of culture, all those things are going to show up in the way we relate.

So just going through those words, I was thinking, yeah, we have the normative ideals of relationship, have this capitalism built in that almost like other people are property, that we want to get them, we want to get them, or we want to get their love. This is a really familiar model that isn't challenged enough, that you fall in love with somebody and then you've got to get them, and you've got to keep them and they sort of belong to you.

We use words like you belong to me. And it's really like treating people as property. And people like Bell Hooks and Erich Fromm have written about this over the years, this idea of having somebody else, rather than being with them. And you could almost say a lot of us don't really know love, another love, the kind of love that Bell Hooks really points to where we value ourselves and others, and where we know that we're all interconnected.

It's like we're just so used to this mentality of I want to get them, I want to get these feelings. I don't want those feelings. It's a very capitalist model. And then also I was thinking of colonialism as well, this sort of idea that we can and should shape people into being something for us, that we almost need to colonize their lives and their feelings, that we need to make them feel certain things.

And we're sort of betrayed if they don't feel towards us how we want them to feel or they don't want to live the life that we want to live with them...

### **[00:21:37] Jaia Bristow**

Fascinating. Yeah, I've never thought about that way, but that whole emphasis on fixing someone and especially if we're looking at the hetero-normative model, for example, often the women will take on broken men and fix them, for example. Not to go into super stereotypical territory here, but...

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

It's seen as romantic, isn't it, to want to fix.. That romantic idea of Beauty and the Beast or the Pygmalion, the idea of that's more the man making the woman into what he wants.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Exactly, into the ideal, yummy object. In some of the work I do, we talk about object relations and the way we project onto other people. And one is the yummy object, it's like that ideal, that desire. And, again, all this is reinforced by all the messaging in society from Disney to romcoms. And I think there is a huge shift that is happening now and I really want to acknowledge that.

And still the main message is this idea of finding the one and living happily ever after. And the one has to be, you have your checklist of what that person is meant to be like and then when they don't meet that, you fix them into becoming the right person...

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

In such insidious ways as well, that seems like, oh, I wouldn't do that. But unconsciously it's like we just can't bear it often when... We get very invested in partners or maybe sometimes friends, colleagues, and then their difference to us becomes unbearable or their feelings become unbearable. And it's when we can't be alongside them, we have to try and downplay what they're feeling or deny it or that feels like we're sort of colonizing in a way.

When your partner says they're upset about something and you just can't sit alongside it, you have to try and fix it or try and tell them it's not really that big of a deal. It's like those little strands really come into our relating all the time I would say. It's almost like a real effort to not do it and to really be alongside somebody as they are and not try and fix them into something for us.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And often the fixing comes from a place of love, like when someone's going, I have a caregiver who does a lot with me, where I just want to express my feelings and they're looking for a magical fix for me to help me feel better. And it comes from a place of love. What I actually need in that moment is for just my feelings to be held and met.

And I see how, through the trauma lens, what you're describing, how traumatizing it is, because we see that trauma is created when the holding environment isn't there and when our feelings are dismissed or belittled or we're told to feel something different. All these things are how trauma is created, especially early trauma, in childhood and stuff.

And so then, we're in a relationship and suddenly it seems so innocuous and innocent, that kind of wanting, because the aim behind that is just, I want my partner to feel better. So it's like, oh, it's



not that big a deal. Oh, no, you're fine. Oh, just cheer up. Oh, look, let's do something different. What will cheer you up right now?

**[00:25:02]**

Or things like that. It's not holding space for the person, and so it reactivates that small part of them, that child, that traumatized part. And suddenly I'm seeing all the patterns of how easy and how often and how obvious it is that we're constantly relating from the places of trauma.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, absolutely. And then the ways also that the things that we didn't get in childhood, we're really looking for in the other, we might project that onto them at the beginning and assume they're all those things. But it's so much our projection and then we feel let down and abandoned when they're not that thing. Or projecting onto the other the things that we don't like in ourselves and then attacking them in the other is a really common way of relating.

### **Jaia Bristow**

And in today's world, with modern technology, the opportunity for projection is enhanced because so often people meet online and you're texting, so you don't even have a person there, and so the projections are enhanced even more and then we all naturally project anyway, right, even when you do have someone there. But yeah. Fascinating. Tell me more, Meg John, tell me more.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Well, I was thinking about what I've been reading recently from black feminism about white supremacy and the sense of perfectionism in that and how it's unacceptable to admit failings and flaws and how that plays out in relationships. Again, there's this real idea that it's not okay to show that you're struggling. And I think, then, relationships become very insular.

Again, the extreme on all of these is really abusive and coercive relationship dynamics, which are incredibly common, but even in ones that don't go to that extreme, this idea that you have to present this Instagram relationship that's all lovely and there's no transparency, there's this sense of privacy and people in your community and your friends feeling like, oh, I mustn't say if I think it's a bit off or something, because you're not really supposed to intrude in that private sphere of the relationship.

And then another thing I was reading along similar lines was about this, again, in dominant culture, this criminal justice system idea that to cause harm to another person means you are bad, not that you've done bad, but that you are bad. And I think that's so entrenched in our culture at the moment, which makes it almost impossible to do rupture and repair because that involves being able to say that you have caused harm.

And it feels like this is really big at the moment, the sense that you're encouraged to be accountable and responsible, but it's almost impossible if we buy into this dominant culture idea that causing some harm means that we're a bad person, because who could possibly admit also that we've got all that developmental trauma and all that shame where we're scared stiff that someone's going to think that we are a bad person. And we've also got this model that says if you harm anybody, and of course we're always going to be wounding each other and being wounded.

### **[00:28:08] Jaia Bristow**

It's massively enhanced by cancel culture, right? So we see that today, which really enhances the idea that if you do something wrong, you are bad and you don't deserve in your rights, you don't deserve to exist, you don't deserve to have a say, you don't deserve to defend yourself, you are bad.

And of course, that divisive rhetoric and that, rather than that learning to take responsibility and learning to apologize, that would be such a better culture, right? Like supporting people in, oh, you've caused harm, how do you take responsibility, apologize and repair for that harm, but instead it's just you're bad. The end.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Exactly. And then if you look at any of the therapeutic stuff around trauma, it's like we need to learn how to do rupture and repair. But that way of relating, whether it's in communities and social media or in our close relating, it's far too scary. Rupture is far too scary. We're not going to experience rupture and repair. So therefore we're left flailing and rupture is likely to just lead to completely break up or break down or canceling rather than this sort of potential for repair, transformation, healing, whatever we want to call it.

Sort of showing how all of those aspects of culture keep the traumatized ways of relating in place and make it really difficult to access support around them. And then I guess the hetero-patriarchy bit is there's these real norms of what does a successful relationship look like, and what's the script for it? And ticking these boxes at certain times and going from dating to moving in to relationship commitment to having kids, whatever.

All that kind of escalator model, as Amy Gahran has talked about it, there's this default script for success for a relationship and, again, then it makes it very hard to do anything else. And it does polarize into either we stay together or if we fail at any of these levels, we break up. Rather than a sense of relationships could go in different directions, they might get closer over time, they might get less close, that we could keep an eye on that process of relating rather than having the fixing of a relationship.

And it could be this dynamic, ever changing thing that we're able to check in about and how's it going now and sort of ebb and flow, and that's so hard in this kind of fixed script model of relating.

### **Jaia Bristow**

I love that. I mean, I don't love the heteropatriarchal model, but I love everything you've just shared because I think when I first heard you say our dominant culture, capitalist, colonialist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal, all this impacts our relationships, I was like, oh, God, here we go. Where is this going?

I can imagine so many people just switching off because those words themselves can activate a lot of trauma in people. But hearing about how it's not really about those words, it's not even really about that. It's just noticing that there are elements in our culture that are so embedded, and I work a lot with this, I lead workshops on power, privilege and prejudice, where I look exactly at this, but that is so embedded that they impact every aspect of our life and they're invisible.

**[00:31:41]**

It's very difficult. And so to see there's so many things, despite the fact that I've been doing this work for a long time now, there's so many things you've just illustrated, and the way that you can assign each thing to the culture, to oh, this is because of capitalism culture, capitalist culture. And, again, whatever words people use to understand, oh, yeah, that is the culture and the messaging that we receive as individuals.

It impacts the way we raise our kids and therefore impacts the way we were raised and therefore the way we raise our kids. It impacts our relationships with our loved ones, impacts our relationships with ourselves. And it's so important to bring light to this. So I'm so grateful for this conversation we're having today and the way that you illustrate all of this and it brings an extra lens of understanding, I think, to a lot of the work people are already doing, whether around these topics, or around trauma in general, especially relational trauma. So it's fascinating.

So yeah, the next question is, again, what do we do to counter all of this? What models exist out there? What are some ways that we can start being kinder to ourselves and to those around us? Working, doing more repair than canceling. Because I've just had a chat with someone else where we talked about understanding the patterns is the first step. But once you understand them, what do you do with it? Once we see this is the way we're impacted, what now?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, it's a really tough question and, again, I suppose I'm almost wary of anyone setting up any kind of relationship style as having the answers to this. I think we're all flawed and fumbling our way along. And I guess it's about, part of it, is just seeing the extent of what we're up against in terms of that developmental trauma that's lingering in our body minds and is operating through us all the time.

As long as we're not conscious of it. And, like you say, even once we're conscious of it, that's basically us watching it happen over and over again. It doesn't go from being conscious of it to completely not doing it anymore...

**Jaia Bristow**

If only. That would make life so much easier.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

And then realizing what we're up against in terms of wider culture and how it's operating through us and trying to alleviate some of the shame around that, that when you see that operating through you and you hear those words come out of your mouth or you observe those actions, it's like knowing how hard it would be to just to somehow step outside of that or do it differently.

So my history is I have been really interested in relationship diversity and I think you might link to the Zine I've done on this. There are diverse ways of doing relationships where people have tried to address some of this. But, again, I wouldn't want to say these non-normative ways of doing relationships are somehow superior to normative ways. I think we're all up against this, whether

we're single, whether we're in a normative couple relationship, whether we've moved outside that and tried polyamory or something like that.

**[00:35:03]**

However much we've tried different models, they all struggle with this stuff, again, it's going to play out whether we like it or not. But I think it is worth reading some of the things that have been written from some of these alternative perspectives, of people trying polyamory as a way of getting away from this ownership of one person model.

And the scarcity model of love that says that you can only love one person at a time, and really challenging that idea and seeing love as much more of a flowing thing and attempting often to build different kinds of networks of love. But again, polyamory, as I've written about a few times, can easily fall into traps of hierarchies of romantic love still being hierarchical over friendship love and other kinds of love.

And sometimes, again, primary relationships are treated in some ways as superior to other kinds of relationships as well. And I was really interested, Victoria Brooks has written this book called *Mistress Ethics*, and she's saying a lot of things, but it really questions the idea of consensual non-monogamy as this really superior way of relating, as it sometimes is presented as being, and saying, well, mistresses, people who are having affairs, are really challenging.

This is something I'm really ethical about this position of recognizing that that person loves you and loves somebody else and moving away from ownership. She's kind of arguing that's a moving away from a sense that you could own somebody and really accepting that you don't, that even polyamory and other consensual non-monogamy still seem to sometimes bring in this idea that you own these people in some ways.

And then there's relationship anarchy, which is a bit more explicitly political and really believes in radical freedom and not hierarchizing different forms of relationship, really trying to get away from this idea of ownership. I think I get a lot out of the asexual and aromantic communities as well, that really question the central role of sex and romance in relationships.

And, again, challenging these hierarchies and also these ideas that our partners owe us sex or owe us feeling a certain way about us, really troubling that sense that there's this sort of obligation and duty in relationships to perform certain emotional or erotic labor.

So, I guess, thinking about relationship diversity and really trying to question the idea that any style of relating is kind of better than any other, certainly practitioners watching this, so we want to really affirm, just as you could affirm multiple sexualities and multiple genders, also affirming multiple relationship styles as equally valid. And seeing everybody on a journey or a path to finding the ways of relating that fit them better, rather than a sense of any being right or wrong.

**Jaia Bristow**

Oh my God. Yes. Everything you just said, yes. I think what I most love about what you said is that, again, it's not about the model you choose. It's not about there is one correct way of doing relationships and one incorrect way. It's not just even about finding what works for you, it's about learning from the different ways. There are a multitude of ways of relating.

**[00:39:00]**

Even if we're taking conventional relationships, there's friendships, there's family relationships, there's lovers, and there's committed loving relationships, committed romantic relationships, which are different, to casual lovers, which is different to friendship, which is different to family, which is different to your colleagues or your co workers, which is different.

We have all these different ways of relating to people which impact the ways that we show up in those relationships, which impact what we expect of ourselves and the other person, which impact all these things. And then when we take in all the unconventional, all the ways of relating, all the relationship models and formats that go against the mainstream, and what's fantastic with that, it's not saying, oh, non-monogamy is the way forward and everyone should try monogamy.

It's like, what can you learn about polyamory, about relationship anarchy? Read the books, not to do the things, but to see what people have found. Because when you go against the norm, you automatically end up being confronted and seeing all these things we were talking about earlier, the way that we're influenced by dominant culture. Because as soon as you step away from dominant culture, it's just in your face, right? And I see how people do polyamory but still apply some of the same rules that they were doing in traditional monogamy.

And then I was just thinking about this last night about how what I see sometimes is active monogamy and passive monogamy. So what I mean by that is, for example, people who haven't questioned any of this and are just going along because it's what's expected of them, it's what they expect of themselves. It's the message they get from society. They're not thinking about it.

And then there are people like one of my absolute best friends. She is 100% monogamous, right? But she's actively monogamous. And what I mean by that is she's read all the books, she's friends with me, so she hears about all these conversations I have. She lived with me when I discovered polyamory the first time and started exploring all of that.

And she questioned all the things and she realized that she is monogamous, but she's not just going along with it blindly. She's not just doing it because it's expected. And she's questioned and noticed the ways that she did have hierarchies in her relationships around romantic and friendship. And that's something she doesn't want to do anymore.

She notices what needs want to be met in what relationship. And so I think it's wonderful what you're saying is not for anyone listening of monogamy is bad, or non-monogamy is bad or polyamory is better or less good than, or the different ways of doing non-monogamy, or be a mistress or don't be a mistress. It's not about any of that.

It's about if we don't recognize the fact that we are being influenced by all this conditioning through our culture, through our intergenerational inheritance, through our early development trauma, through all of that. If we don't recognize that, then we are just going to continue playing out the patterns that are embedded in us. And I'm sure everyone who is listening can recognize that they have certain relationship patterns, right?

And a lot of those patterns are trauma informed. But we have a choice. We have a choice as individuals to open our eyes to that, to recognize that and to do the work which can be extremely painful and uncomfortable and isn't easy to, first of all, become aware of. And I think this

conversation has hopefully helped people become aware of some things at least. And there's a long way to go.

**[00:43:06]**

And then start interrupting those patterns. Do the work to start healing your own trauma. And in doing so, I often talk about the ripple effect, that by doing, sometimes we feel like, oh my God, it's so overwhelming, where do we begin? We begin right here, right now, with ourselves. And in doing so we have a ripple effect. You've been doing all this work which you're now sharing with me, which is going to impact me and then I'm going to have this conversation with someone and it will impact someone else.

And luckily for us, this conversation is being listened to by hundreds, maybe thousands, maybe tens of thousands, maybe hundreds of thousands of people. And so if each of those people are also inspired by something and start making a shift, start interrupting one of their patterns, then slowly we have this ripple effect where we start modeling the behaviors and the ways of relating that we want, the society that we want to live in, the relationships we want to experience.

And then we start attracting other people who are doing the same and then we start feeding from each other and teaching each other and it becomes this beautiful dance where we can learn from each other, rather than canceling each other.

### **Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, exactly. And yeah, I think you're right. I love a friend of mine, Anita Cassidy, who writes on the Alethya website, about conscious monogamy and conscious commitment. So it's about really moving from what kind of relationship style you have or who do you have it with, to this question of how do we relate, and how do we relate in a way that's more conscious, slower, more consensual, and very trauma sensitive.

Really aware of our trauma patterns and other people's. Really aware of our limits, where we can go and where we can't. And really slow down and to notice these things in ourselves and where we can to be open about this is my stuff and this is what I bring, and also this is how I'm working on it. But it is a long, slow, maybe lifelong, process, given all we're up against.

And it is excruciating to see, when you slow down and notice, you just see how much of it is playing out. Again, we said the beginning of your relationship with yourself, in your relationship with others, even when you're just imagining them in your head and having imaginary conversations with them.

In our communities, just how much expectation and hope we bring to these things and then how much those early patterns play out yet again. So the more we can slow down and notice it and name it to ourselves and others, and it gets into us in these multiple ways, like through the existential layer, I would call it, that just human relating is really hard and we tend to treat each other as objects.

That's what the existentialists and the Buddhists say. We tend to see ourselves as disconnected, when, actually, we're connected. Then the cultural layer that we've talked about, then the developmental relational layer, and then the embodied layer. That's how it gets, we're in the middle, and it gets into us through all those layers. So we need all those layers to find other ways.

**[00:46:31]**

So there is the solo doing the meditation practices, slowing down and noticing ourselves, just being with all those feelings that we didn't used to be able to be with, learning how to do that, learning how to ground ourselves and regulate our own nervous systems.

Then it's the relational piece that we can't learn how to relate in better ways unless we have relationships. And the more we can cultivate relationships where we can practice rupture and repair and we can co regulate, for a lot of people, therapy is one of the first relationships in which you can practice these things in a safe enough environment, but also support groups and other places where people are intentionally doing this work.

And then at that community level, can we find micro cultures and communities, again, where people have this shared understanding? Whether it's Buddhist communities where people have that understanding that we need to look at our habitual patterns, or whether it's twelve separate communities where people are doing this work, or whatever it is for you, really helpful if we can cultivate communities of support where this language is there, and these kind of practices are encouraged.

Rather than just keep on the search for finding the perfect partner or the mainstream. So I feel like for me it's about cultivating my own solo practices and stopping and stepping back from a lot of relating and just doing that work and then also finding relationships where I can be alongside others who are doing the same thing and who are up for doing that with me. And then containers of communities and micro cultures where at least people get this territory and are all working alongside on it.

### **Jaia Bristow**

It's wonderful. I love that. And I think it's a really great place to inspire people to continue watching more videos because what I mean by that is, like you say, it's a motivation. It's a motivation for these practices. Because so often it's like, why? Why should I question all these things? Why should I do all this meditation? It's just like, good for you, yes, so what?

Here, it's like, no, we really see that we are all impacted and not just us, but our relationships. And therefore, I talked about the positive ripple effect, but if we're not careful, there's also a lot of negative ripple effect. And I see that, I've had this conversation with people in my life recently where it's like that toxic relationship you're in, or that thing that you did, it doesn't just impact you.

It doesn't just impact you and me, for example, if it's happened to me because, for example, a partner of mine was in a very toxic relationship with someone else, so then that relationship would impact my relationship with that person because they'd come to me. And then I was impacted. So then I'd call my best friend up and cry on the phone to her and be like, well, this stuff is happening.

Or maybe I wouldn't cry. I'd process, whatever. So then her day, that was the first she'd wake up and have this voice message, for example, from me. And then her day is impacted. And then it's amazing how quickly things ripple out. It's what you were saying, we're all interconnected. So, it's so important to do this work for ourselves and for our entourage and for their entourage, et cetera.

### **[00:50:17] Dr Meg-John Barker**

Multiple encouragements. And I think it's this thing about slowing down enough to respond, rather than repress or react. This is what I get from Pema Chödrön, who I'm really into, but multiple people have talked about it in different ways, it's like the traumatized way of being is either to repress all the feeling and sort of dissociate, and then you're relating with people in a way that often is traumatized and traumatizing.

Or reactive into those four or five Fs, however many Fs we have these days, but immediately into a fight or flight. Freeze, flop, whatever. And it's like, how do we put that pause, however long we need till we can, whatever it is that's come at us, this is one of the biggest pieces of work I do at the moment myself is like, can I put a big enough pause that I can respond rather than repressing or reacting?

And that might be responding to that email tomorrow instead of right now, but it might be telling somebody, I'm not ready to have this conversation about our rupture for several weeks, for several months. It's waiting till I know that I'm in a place where I can respond, and also co-creating the conditions in which it's possible to respond rather than repress or react. Like a relationship rupture I'm navigating at the moment, we are going back to basics and just doing sharings with each other quite regularly, just really coming back to like, who am I? Who are you?

And putting those foundations back in place before we address the rupture head on. Again, I think there's so much encouragement in relationships either to, again, repress and avoid in those relationships where you never talk about the conflicts and the ruptures and that is a bit the death knell of that relationship or it's not real intimacy.

Or we go the other way and it's like we've got to react to this immediately and make this right. And it's still too raw, it's still too hot. How do we find this other way, this responsive way where we acknowledge, hey, this has gone on. How are we going to move forward together in this really careful, caring, kind, tender way that acknowledges something hard happened and co-creates a container where that can be addressed?

How can we draw on others for support if that's not possible to do between us? Again, these transformative justice and these approaches are moving towards containers where we do this kind of work, but we're still really fumbling in the dark for something different than our old models of just break up, cancel, withdraw completely from that person.

It's incredibly hard. But I think the more we can be having these conversations and between us trying to find new models or existing models from cultures that have more of a sense of here's how to find pathways to repair when rupture happens, whether it's internal or relational.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Absolutely. Yeah. I resonate with so much of what you've just said and especially the part that it's hard. We're not saying that this work is easy, but it's essential. It's essential for our own wellbeing and for others and it is doable as well. Like it's hard, but it's doable and it requires that, one of the things, I don't know if we've spoken about this before, but one of the things that comes up for me a lot in, especially, talks around relationship is honesty and kindness together.



**[00:54:03] Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yes, that's exactly what I was just going to say.

**Jaia Bristow**

Exactly.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

You can say what that means for you.

**Jaia Bristow**

It's exactly that. Sometimes in communication there's so much focus on honesty that people forget to be kind. There's radical honesty, but radical honesty can be really traumatizing or activate and perpetuate trauma in others. Or sometimes people are so focused on being kind and they're so afraid, and I see this pattern so often, so afraid to hurt people that they end up hurting everyone because they end up keeping things and then by the time they have a conversation about it, it's all come to a head and it's all boiled over and it's all...

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Exactly. You've never talked about any of it and then suddenly there it all is.

**Jaia Bristow**

Exactly. And so to have the two together and to keep that in mind, that honesty and kindness can go hand in hand and using that as the basis for communication in a relationship as the basis, that's how you can express something in a loving way, is having those two qualities together.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

And it starts with ourselves. I think these solo practices that I'm doing at the moment, they're about reaching that place of honesty and kindness with ourselves. And you need a container of kindness. Again, this is Pema, of without a container of kindness you cannot look at yourself that honestly because you're going to see everything in you.

My work with plurality is really about tuning in and finding all of that within me, finding all the Fs, capacity for all those Fs within me, the oppressor within and the oppressed, the abuser and the abused. You need to be so kind to be able to be that honest with yourself and we really need everyone to do that work and be that honest with themselves.

But it can't come from pushing yourself outside the window of tolerance into overwhelm seeing all of this in yourself. It's about defending all those different parts. It's about defending all those feelings that we couldn't bear when we were younger and then moving into honest and kind relation with others where that's agreed upon and where we co-create a kind enough container to be able to be honest with each other and really think, what would kind, honest relating look like?

**[00:56:27]**

And really, annoyingly, there isn't one answer. It's like it is about every situation that we encounter, stopping, wanting to get to that responsive place and then what does kind and honest look like here? And it will be different from what it looked like the day before. Sometimes it does look like walking away, sometimes it looks like walking towards, sometimes it looks like being brave and saying the honest thing.

Sometimes it involves recognizing that person would not be able to hear that thing yet, and not saying it, or just leaving a pause, waiting till you get the sense that they might be ready. Every time it's different, and that makes it ongoing, hard work but beautiful, beautiful work. And again, I think, hopefully, the more you do it, the more you get positive feedback of that kind, honest relating with others, brings people into your life who are also into that way of relating.

And then you have these experiences of rupture and repair, and you have experiences of being alongside people in kind, honest ways, and you start to get a bit of positive feedback for this new way of doing things. But there's this really difficult phase in the middle. Pete Walker who talks about complex trauma talks about it doesn't just go from, as you were saying, notice the thing you were doing and then suddenly you're doing the new thing.

There's this really painful bit where you've let go of all your survival strategies that you were doing and you're left with this void. And it's incredibly painful to be doing something different because those survival strategies were keeping you feeling safe. And now you're going out into this really scary zone of more honest, kind relating with others.

### **Jaia Bristow**

Yeah, absolutely. And I'm really glad you brought in the reminder that it starts with oneself because that's the hardest bit, is being kind and honest with oneself. Learning to be kind and honest with other people, it's hard, but it feels more doable than doing it with ourselves, often. We're often our own meanest critic and I think that really appreciating, just that reminder and that it takes time.

And talking of time, I'm aware that we're almost out, which is frustrating, because I have like 50 more questions I want to ask and ways this conversation could go. And I really just appreciate everything you've brought today, your honesty and kindness. And that we're all working on it and that it does get easier the more we work on it, like you say, we start seeing that in others and once we get a taste of it, then it becomes something that we want more often, that feels more right.

And that was the other thing I wanted to say was how much I appreciate you saying that it is a case by case situation. There's not a magic template. Sometimes you walk away, sometimes you go towards. One of the things I had to do with one of my friends at one point was just put a pause on our friendship for a few months and now we're back in touch and it's great. And when we met back, we had what we call a clearing where we addressed any unspoken tension between us and understood why that pause needed to happen.

And it came from a place of love. We were both in our own journeys, working on separate things that were activating each other, and so that pause needed to happen so that we wouldn't have a big rupture. And now we're closer than ever and it's wonderful. And then other times you need to go closer to someone. Sometimes what you need if you're being kind and honest with yourself is to

reach out and get support from people. It's learning to accept help when it's offered at times and other times it's setting a boundary and saying actually what I need right now is to be on my own.

**[01:00:35]**

I could talk for hours. I think we could both talk for hours. If people want to know more about this topic, I really recommend they check out your Zine, which is on your website. The Zine is called Relationship Struggles, a trauma sensitive relationship diversity affirmative Zine. It's great.

And how can people find out more about you and your work and your website and all of that?

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yeah, well, [rewriting-the-rules.com](https://rewriting-the-rules.com), it's got all my published books, links to that, but I've also put out free books, which are collections of all the blog posts and essays I've written, and one of those is on relationships. That's got a lot about relationships. There's also one on consent, one on trauma and one on plurality.

And then there's a number of Zines which are basically what I'm making out of this journey of my own at the moment, of the things that are helping me. So, again, it's not going to work for everyone, my approach either, but hopefully there's some stuff there that might be of use. It's all there. And Alex and I, as I said, are hoping to write a whole book on relationship trauma.

**Jaia Bristow**

And I can't wait to read it. So that's Alex Iantaffi for people...

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Yes, and do check out them as well...

**Jaia Bristow**

Their website, I think, is [alexiantaffi.com](https://alexiantaffi.com), so people can check that out as well. They were meant to join us today, but sadly couldn't make it. But they're another fantastic author and educator on these topics.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

Everything I said is inspired by them. All the good bits. If I said anything wrong, that wasn't theirs. Again, it's that beautiful ripple effect of all these conversations we have with all of these folk who influence us and then we can share those on.

**Jaia Bristow**

Well, thank you so much for your time today.

**Dr Meg-John Barker**

You're welcome.