



Conscious Life presents

TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

Navigating relational trauma

Guest: Heather Monroe

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[00:00:10] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Trauma Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Heather Monroe, an integrative psychotherapist who specializes in the healing of relational trauma. Heather's approach to helping people is creative, open and flexible as she understands that just as the context of trauma is individual, so is the process of healing. Thank you so much for joining me today, Heather.

Heather Monroe

I'm so excited. Thank you for having me.

Meagen Gibson

So Heather, I'd love it if you could start with kind of a basic, brief understanding of the context of relational trauma. What is it and how do we understand it in our lives?

Heather Monroe

Sure. I define relational trauma as... The origins of relational trauma are usually rooted in childhood as the consistent disruption in a child's sense of safety, both emotionally and or physically, in a primary relationship.

However, we can experience relational... Because we are so relational as a species. Relational trauma can happen at any age, in any primary important relationship in your life, so that's why we see relational trauma all the time in toxic relationships, because your sense of safety, emotional safety, and sometimes physical safety can be consistently disrupted in those adult relationships too.

Meagen Gibson

And I love that you say it like that too, because with relational trauma, I find that most people aren't dealing with relational trauma until adulthood. They're not coming to terms with the fact that they might have it and they're not trying to repair it and often it creates this kind of us versus them

dynamic between adult child and adult parent where they like, what do you mean you had everything you needed?

[00:02:03]

And so I love that you name kind of relational trauma as being emotional, because it doesn't mean that someone was obviously it can show up as that, but it doesn't mean that someone was intentionally hurtful, neglectful. It can show up as that, but it also can just be like a mismatch of needs or the way that you were.

Like for me growing up, I had a chronically ill parent, right? So my safety was incredibly threatened. So I had some relational trauma to deal with because of that. Now, that wasn't the malicious intent of my mother to be sick and give me a felt sense of a lack of safety, right?

Heather Monroe

100% and when a parent is under consistent stress themselves, as anyone who's a parent is listening to this, we are not our most unconditional, loving, patient, nervous system stable type person when the stress of the outer world is consistently upon us. And so if we come from a family where our parents were just really stressed out because working two jobs, trying to make ends meet, all the things that life brings and they didn't have a way to understand what self care is to practice self care.

They're going to be less attuned to their own needs and to their children's needs and their partner's needs. So I also say relational trauma, it's universal. There is no way to go about being in this world without wounding and without that wounding needing to heal from it and so it's a really inclusive, lovely thing that we all go through at one time or another in our lives.

Meagen Gibson

I love that you said that because it really does normalize it and make it so that it's not that you had a bad childhood, it's that every single relationship is going to incur, hurts.

Heather Monroe

And what I will also say is trauma is not what happened to you, it's what happens inside of us and so that is why relational trauma isn't about, this person did this to me and that was the thing. It's like my nervous system, my body is wired a certain way, I have a certain temperament and when I continued to not feel seen I bottled that up inside my body and acted out in that in other relationships in my life.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I was thinking today about something one of our other contributors, Britt Frank, says, which is that people often have emotional regression and they act from a different size than their actual chronological age, sometimes when under pressure and under stress. And it also explains why you can have multiple siblings in the same home and they will deal very differently.

[00:05:18]

When I was a child, I was the kind that would disappear and isolate and my sister was going to be in your face screaming at the two, if you're in conflict. Like completely different temperaments, same environment, same parents, completely different ways of dealing with stressful situations.

Heather Monroe

100%. I also like to look at relational trauma as if veterans coming back from war, someone who has PTSD, they hear a loud sound and they duck for cover, right? They're hyper vigilant around sounds and extra sensitive around loud noises coming from other places. Relational trauma, the relationship is the loud sound. So like, something in the relationship becomes a loud sound and all of a sudden we're ducking for cover, whatever that looks like for us, whether that is emotional outburst or something but we're no longer in control of our reaction, just like someone with PTSD.

Meagen Gibson

That is a fantastic explanation and I'm going to remember that. What a beautiful comparison, that's really easy for people to understand. And so I know a ton of this in relational trauma has to do with attachment. We've kind of talked around it but I'd like to really explicitly talk about attachment theory and understanding how a person's relationship with their caregivers, specifically in their childhood, informs how they relate to people as adults. And if you can give us kind of different descriptions of each attachment style.

Heather Monroe

Yeah, and I'm going to put this in terms that I think is really bitesize-able for people, and hopefully people can relate to this. So if we're looking at attachments well, let me start, first of all, we are biologically hardwired for connection. It is science that we need connection in order to survive. As babies, we can't state our needs, we cry and the different tones of our cries create a reaction in our primary caregiver and hopefully they read that signal correctly most of the time, and we get fed or we get soothed or we get our diapers changed or something.

But that is literally how we survive for all of our life, is in connection with other people. And so, for instance, like we were talking about earlier, when we grow up in a household where our primary caregiver has a hard time reading. So when we're babies, it's crying, right? As we get older it becomes more emotional. And so when our caregivers have trouble reading our emotional cues, it becomes problematic later in life. So let's talk about the four attachment styles. There's anxiously attached, avoidantly attached, anxious avoidant attachment, and securely attached.

So anxiously attached, the way that I describe it is when caretakers sometimes got it right, like sometimes got our emotional cues right, but a lot of the time they got it wrong. Just talk about our resilience as humans, attachment has shown that we just need about 70% of our caretakers to get it right. There's a 30% margin of, you know, error here for us in order to still feel securely attached to someone. But let's say your parents. I'm saying parents just because it's easier right now but I mean caretaker. Let's say they got it right 50% of the time, 40% of the time. What's going to happen is you are going to develop almost like a 6th sense around disconnection, and it's like holding your breath.

[00:09:28]

Anxious attachment is a constant sense of, are my needs going to be met this time? And it's a holding, even as I'm talking about it that anxiety fills up in our body. Like, am I going to get as a baby, am I going to get my diaper changed? Or are they just going to let me cry it out because they think because they think that I'm tired or something like that.

Meagen Gibson

Or attention seeking, all these narratives that sometimes we've had generationally like don't pick up a crying baby or you'll spoil it and those kinds of things that added to a caretaker's lack of response sometimes.

Heather Monroe

Or even getting a toddler in a car, and they're screaming and your caretaker is getting more dysregulated by your screaming and so they pick you up and they shake you and they're like stop screaming. And all of a sudden you're getting more, your nervous system is getting more dysregulated with their nervous system.

So a lot of times, anxious attachment can also happen because your caretaker has a very sensitive nervous system and gets very stressed out with needs when needs happen, in a way that children seek needs out which isn't verbal so much. Sometimes it's crying, sometimes it's screaming, sometimes it's an outburst. And so when you grow up in a family where sometimes your needs get met emotionally but a lot of the time they don't, there's this sense of are my needs going to get met? Holding my breath? And always it's like a superpower.

It's almost as if you have this antenna towards disconnection. So there's research that shows that people who have anxious attachment style pick up on cues like the smallest face gesture of discontent or something like that and they'll label it as a negative. So we are as anxiously attached to people, we are hypersensitive around other people's cues, social cues we're always looking for where is disconnection happening in relationship?

And that can make us feel like we never can get close enough. There's also this belief that I'm too much, that can come with it, I'm too much to love. It looks like I never can get close enough but I think underneath that there is also this feeling of if I do get too close they might leave. So there's this push pull happening in relationships with anxiously attached people a lot of the time.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah and as you were speaking I was thinking about what you said at the beginning about both emotional and physical safety and how sometimes those emotional antenna that are picking up on face gestures and tone of voice, things like that are also trying to physically get closer or physically meet needs or physically feel secure as a compensation for the emotional distance, even.

Heather Monroe

Yes and so in relationship anxiously attached people, we tend to think about our partners all the time, especially if there's a queue around disconnection like they don't text us back or there's too much time in between a text that makes us feel uncomfortable. Almost like over functioning in our

partner's life on an emotional and mental level and under functioning in our own life on an emotional and mental level.

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Another trait is we feel super anxious about the connection unless we are with that person and even when we're with that person we can still feel anxious. We're always looking for reassurance around the connection and the relationship and that can lead to constantly needing approval and constantly needing.

Meagen Gibson

Reaffirmation.

Heather Monroe

Reaffirmation, exactly. And what I always say is like reaffirmation is like the band aid and then we rip it off and need another band aid because we are masters at finding the loophole of like but where could that go wrong? So that is another thing that I see with anxiously attached people is that we have boundary issues, I like to call us boundary less. There tends to be things around like I'm so scared they're going to leave if I state my boundaries that I often don't or I'm not quite sure who I am, tell me who I am, just tell me who I am.

And so there's no real I call it a watery sense of self. We are on shaky ground when it comes to what we believe in, what we value because we're always looking to what the other person values and what the other person is looking for and that's a part of being boundaryless around ourselves and our heart. And the other thing I would say about anxiously attached people is that we can be very self sacrificing but there's also a people pleasing that can happen. And I know that this might be a trigger for some people, but I mean it in a way that's really empowering.

The people pleasing can be a way of manipulation because we're getting our needs met in some way and in order to get our needs met instead of stating it because we're scared that they won't meet them, we kind of do get our needs met in these roundabout ways that can happen that aren't serving ourselves or the relationship really.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Heather Monroe

Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

Relate to a lot of that boundaryless, anxious, overcompensating for other people's emotionally... Carrying the emotional load is what I like to call it

[00:16:16] Heather Monroe

I was just going to say I think that there's this cultural phenomenon called codependency and I'm sure maybe other people will talk about it in this conference. I personally don't believe in codependency. What I see what people define as codependency is just insecure attachment styles being played out. It's just anxiety and avoidance being played out in order to find connection with each other, in order to find interdependence.

That thought that we need to be self-sufficient and my worth needs to come from within all the time and I need to have boundaries and if your partner is upset, that shouldn't affect you. All the science says the opposite. We are interdependent species and so when our partner is upset, of course we're going to be affected by that. It's actually shown that blood pressure is affected, heart rate is affected, all those things. It's more about where's my anxiety level around connection with my partner versus where's my anxiety level around disconnection and connection.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely and also because as you were talking about it, it's kind of like apathy to me right? Of course you're going to get upset. If you don't get upset, you're apathetic and that's not that's like the opposite of love and relationship and care, right?

Heather Monroe

Antidependent.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. Which I guess kind of tees up the next attachment style being avoidant and us anxiously attached people often find an avoidantly attached person. So what do we have there?

Heather Monroe

Yeah, we'll talk about why the two get matched a lot. I think culturally we very much praise avoidantly attached like avoid an attachment. It's like the antidependence you are an island onto, you should be an island onto yourself, you should not be affected by other people's emotions, you should be self-reliant. Self worth should only be about your relationship with yourself versus your relationship with the world around you.

So avoidingly attached people we are a product of our parents almost never getting it right so like complete and utter emotional kind of abandonment and there's real survival reason for that. Like a primitive survival reason is I'm not going to attach to just one person or fully attach because what if that person dies? What if that person leaves? I can only rely on myself for security. The problem with that is we are hardwired for connection and so I find that the avoidant attachment style is really a very lonely one.

And because there is a craving, a biological craving for relationships in our lives, avoidantly attached people, we are always in this push pull with it and I find it's actually harder to recover, to get earned secure attachment from than anxiously attached. Because with anxiously attached at least we've got the concept of connection happening and the concept of what connection looks like. The problem is that we're mistaking intensity for intimacy with anxious attachment but you've got a concept there.

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With avoidantly attached we don't really have a concept, a foundation for what intimacy looks like. And so with avoidance, we often mistake intensity for intimacy as well because we get into these relationships where we can have a very strong pull, but then we pull back once it gets too much for us. So avoidantly, some traits of avoidantly attached people would be we tend to have deactivating strategies and what I mean is like deactivating towards connection. We deactivate our connection with partners by doing the following, always looking for the faults like anything from little faults to big faults like weaknesses in our partners that turn us off.

The imaginary, always looking for the ideal, having this and a lot of the time the ideal becomes our exes so we can't fully commit to our partner but then when it dies, when that relationship ends, the next relationship we get in that X becomes this pedestal that no one else. So it's called, I call it the phantom X. So comparing a lot and that would be putting down our partner in a lot of ways. Another thing that we do as avoidance is we don't say, we're not specific about the way that we feel or hard to make plans, hard to pin down.

Everything's kind of open ended, hard for us to state our feelings or like there's an emotional suppression there and that's because again, it's terrifying and it almost feels like smothering, like it feels like too much. It feels like impending doom to a certain extent for an avoidantly attached person.

Meagen Gibson

I'm sorry to interrupt, but it almost feels like if you ask an anxiously attached person like how are you feeling? They're going to have a lot of things to say and if you ask an avoidantly attached person, well, how are you feeling? They're going to be like, I don't know, I just feel like I want to go get dinner. They're not going to have a feeling, they're going to have an avoidant action to say about the thing, right?

Heather Monroe

100% and also with avoidant attachment, it's also like there's like a numbness inside and that is why we seek intensity and relationships because it's like the only time we really feel a little bit alive. There's like a real sadness there that I find with those of us that experience avoidantly attached. You ask avoidantly attached person, they will be the first to be like I love love, oh my gosh, I'm always looking for a relationship. I just find these really intense people and I don't know why that kind of thing. I would also say that avoidantly attached people, there is an external focus on self esteem as well because it's all about autonomy.

It's all about the things that I do that make me self sufficient or that make me successful. Look at how impressive I am as an island onto myself. However, studies show that under stress, like birth of a disabled child, military trauma, divorce, an avoidantly attached person can look exactly like an anxiously attached person and that's why there's some flip flopping that happens in relationships too. Like you start out anxious and then you become avoidant, that kind of stuff. And so lastly of the insecure attachment is I'm just going to call it anxious avoidant and you can bet you're a double winner.

[00:24:45] Meagen Gibson

Is this also what people call disorganized? Are those the same thing just by a different name? Okay.

Heather Monroe

It's disorganized. So avoidant and anxious have a very organized reaction. You get too close and avoidance is going to push away. Anxious, it's going to be I can't get close enough to you, that kind of thing. And when their attachment system is triggered, an anxious person is going to become anxious and when avoidance attachment system is triggered, they're going to be pulling away. When a disorganized or an anxious avoidant attachment is triggered, we don't know what we're going to get.

It usually happens when there is the kind of trauma where a caretaker is both, the person that's supposed to take care of you is also traumatizing you or terrifying. So if you had a parent that had a substance use disorder, you never knew what you were going to get. You never knew if it was going to be angry drunk or happy drunk or if there was physical abuse in the family. If you had a caretaker who was a rageaholic and again, you never knew what you were going to get. So you are constantly in this push pull of attachment styles and it's incredibly dysregulating and it's a long term recovery like all of these.

But here's the great news about all of this is that there is something in adult attachment called earned secure attachment. Our attachment system can be changed at any point in our lives and I'm just going to say that again because it's so important, we can change our attachment style at any time in our lives. As a matter of fact, studies of young children when parents were under socioeconomic stress and there was insecure attachment and then let's say the parents got some help with they got some help, things changed, the parents stopped fighting as much, all these things.

Not that much longer did the child attachment style change into secure. So that's why I say we can do all the healing we want and a lot of the time when we're in a toxic relationship or an anxious avoidant relationship, we leave and we're like, I just need to heal, I need to work on myself, I just need to get better and do all these things. We can try and do that and do the prep work. And I think that it's important and we can talk about that more in a little bit, but we heal relationally. It is in relationship that I find the most profound healing and that we really work on that earned secure attachment. So I can go into secure attachment really fast if you want.

Meagen Gibson

Please.

Heather Monroe

So secure attachment basically looks like I know my value, I know my worth. I'm not scared to be vulnerable with it and to be vulnerable with my feelings, to be vulnerable with my needs, to state my needs directly. And if that person can't meet those needs on a consistent basis, I leave. So it's not that securely attached people don't match sometimes or date insecurely attached people, it's that securely attached people leave.

[00:28:25]

And the other thing about securely attached people is that they're not looking for perfection, they are looking for connection and so like an avoidant will always be looking for the perfect one, right? That person a securely attached person is looking for. Yeah, this shirt fits. It's not perfect. I change the buttons maybe, but overall the shirt fits me. It's comfortable, I'm going to stay in this until I see otherwise. So that is one of the reasons why securely attached people get out of the dating pool pretty fast. They cycle, they find a match and then they kind of like leave the dating pool.

You can imagine that anxiously attached and avoidantly attached are kind of always circling cycling in the dating pool. So there's a little bit more of us, I would say. But more importantly is that research has shown that avoidantly attached people end up prefer anxiously attached people and anxiously attached people tend to prefer or end up with avoidantly attached people.

And the theory is that both, they complement each other, they reaffirm the underlying belief. If I feel like I can't get close enough and I'm too much to love, well of course I'm going to look for evidence of that belief that I'm too much and I'm too much to love. And what a more perfect store of evidence to go into than an avoidantly attached person?

An avoidantly attached person believes intimacy is smothering. Intimacy takes away my autonomy and takes away yeah, intimacy takes away my freedom, all that stuff. Well, what a perfect way to look at that belief and to have evidence for that belief than to date an anxiously attached person.

Meagen Gibson

And I will just say that the chasing the evidence part is the false currency of safety. Like, it's not that you're chasing something you know is bad for you. It's that you're looking for a way to reaffirm your safety and what feels safe to you is an avoidant person if you're anxious and an anxious person if you're avoidant, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes. I love that point, it's so true and it's also so familiar, because if these things were percolating, let's say as simple as this, your dad worked all the time. It was like one of those very traditional marriages where mom stayed home and dad just wasn't around during the weekdays, you might have gotten a kiss good night and on the weekends he was doing his hobbies.

So you had no attachment to your father. You had a very emotionally avoidant father just by the workload and him doing self care on the weekends and not prioritizing the relationship with you. You are going to tend to go towards avoidantly unavailable men that can look like people with substance abuse disorders, it can look like just avoidant attached attachment, it can look like people who cheat. It can look in all different ways, but still emotionally avoidant people, right?

Meagen Gibson

And I just want to reassure anybody who's listening, who has identified as one of these types perhaps, and you're already in relationships, and you're already partnered up, or you're in a long term relationship or married, it's okay, you don't have to start from scratch. Yeah. You can both recover for yourself once that work is done because I would start with yourself first, obviously. Then you can invite your partner into kind of your knowledge and once you're insecure self, you

can start to work on getting a secure relationship as a whole. It doesn't mean that you've got to burn everything to the ground and start from scratch.

[00:32:38] Heather Monroe

No and it usually wouldn't help either because the cycle tends to be we break up and then the fantasy begins again and so we reenter the fantasy. And either we break up and we don't reenter to the fantasy with that person, but we're going to reenter the fantasy with another person that's exactly the same. I would say I would highly suggest if you are meeting couples, go look for emotionally focused therapy. It is the gold standard for couples therapy and it is completely evidence based. It works with attachments, with attachment styles, and it's wonderful, it's a wonderful type of therapy. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And especially, I would just advise anybody, even if you've got a really great relationship, maybe look into emotionally focused therapists in your area so that when... Because every single relationship incurs stress, the world is not under our control and so you could be in a very secure relationship and outside factors can affect the people in your relationship in ways that will then bring up whatever your tendency toward attachment was and create an insecurity that you're like where did this come from? Why all of a sudden does this feel like it did when I was 14 and I watched this happen with my parents even though this isn't the relationship I have right now.

Heather Monroe

Yes, exactly and when our attachment system is activated, whether you're securely attached or not, just like you can have earned attachment you can also become insecurely attached within a relationship. I've seen securely attached people stay too long in an avoidant relationship with someone who's avoidant and they become anxious, anxiously attached to it. So it is important and I would also say that just to make this universal, we all lean towards one way or another. There are certain things that we see that can repel us, right?

And there's our avoidance, like there's that repelling that's happening and then there's other things that we see in our partner or that happen in relationship that make us want to reach forward and desperately grab onto. Well that's your anxious, that's your anxiety being kicked in. So it is really important that in relationship, I mean, I'm a huge proponent of my husband and I are in EFT just to look for those patterns of anxious and avoidant as well as just understanding the emotional world that each partner has.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I mean, I just went through a cycle of this last year with my own partner where things were feeling really good, a new stressor was introduced and all of a sudden I was like it felt like I was on a carnival ride I didn't buy a ticket for, just like what is happening? How do I make sense of this? And I wanted to go back, actually, to disorganized attachment for a minute. Because what I forgot to say was that if you're in a relationship and I'm not associating that with the anecdote that I just shared about my relationship, just to be clear.

But if you're in a relationship with someone and you're just confused all the time. So I went through this with a family member and went to my therapist and said this person was being extremely kind

and outgoing and generous. And then once I was in their presence they were mean and vindictive and manipulative and it doesn't make any sense, right? And my therapist was like I don't know this person, I can't diagnose this person. I would have to speak to them personally but what this sounds like it might be right, is disorganized attachment and I was like, oh, it was like the thought bubble exploded over my head. I was like, that makes sense now. That all tracks, right?

[00:36:48] Heather Monroe

Exactly and I think part of the work, the self work that I do with individuals around attachment styles is checking in with how we feel in relationship in our bodies. So that person, it's like whiplash. That's how you're feeling in your body when you're with them, you're probably also feeling anxious and a little bit hesitant and you leave with this uncomfortable feeling in your stomach, all those things are information. It's like so even if they don't even have a diagnosis of disorganized attachment, that information is so important around how to go about being with that person in the future.

Meagen Gibson

And setting your own boundaries, right? Yeah you don't have to call the person and be like turns out the problem is you, you have disorganized attachment. That conversation doesn't happen, shouldn't happen. It's more it has nothing to do with them, it has everything to do with you. It helps you, gives you a lexicon of understanding of like, oh, this is what I'm dealing with. And with that information, I can make choices about how I want to be with, around and in relationship with this person.

Heather Monroe

Yes, absolutely. Should we talk a little bit about healing?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, that was actually going to be my next question. Thank you for participating, yeah so it's like on an attachment healing journey and especially where trauma is involved where do you even begin?

Heather Monroe

Yeah, so with anxious attachment I look at what happens in relationship with anxiously attached. We tend to lose autonomy, we tend to lose, so what I mean by that is that our world gets smaller and smaller and that person that we're with becomes capital, whatever their name is. It's like capital letters and like Broadway lights, you know? So in healing and also in even if you're in a relationship right now and you recognize that there's anxious attachment is to work on, continue to work on your autonomy.

So let's say you're out of an insecure relationship. My first assignment to you would be to get to know your world. What do you like to do? What friends do you like to be around? What are your hobbies? What are your values? Do you value honesty? Do you value consistency? Do you value stability? Also, there's some psychoeducation pieces that need to happen around intensity versus intimacy. So if our nervous system, if our body is used to love, feels like this right up, down the rivers, valleys, oh my God, it's so amazing when we're good but it's so awful when we're back.

[00:39:50] Meagen Gibson

Love bombing and all that.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. Intimacy is going to feel a little boring to you at first. You actually might not want it might make you uncomfortable because intimacy looks more like this, it doesn't have that same impact. And so a lot of people are recovering from insecure attachment. They admit that they don't have chemistry with somebody and I really look to focus on, okay, is it a chemistry thing or I'm not used to the slower pace, I'm not used to the stability, that kind of thing.

So I look at autonomy. I would ask you to look at the things you like to do. What do you value about yourself? That's like one of the biggest assignments. Is it your sensitivity? Is it the fact that you're really able to show up for people? Is it that you're able to understand people's needs right away? Because anxiously attached people tend to do that and tend to know that. So all these things that you value about yourself to kind of booster up your own internal resources. Also looking at ways that you do take care of yourself, ways that you have survived alone, that you're able to survive alone.

Another mindset that I look at for healing anxious attachment is an abundant mindset. A lot of anxiously attached people feel like I can't do this over again, oh my God I'm always going to be alone. It's like these negative belief systems that are happening and so to flip that script and come from look for evidence to the contrary. The other thing I would say is build community because one of the assignments I would give you once you are in relationship with a securely attached person is that you do not go to that person for reassurance every time.

You go to your community for that reassurance, you go to a trusted friend that doesn't trigger your attachment system because what we don't want to continue doing is relying on our partner as the problem and the solution. We want to look at this is an internal problem which means that it's an internal solution. I can pull from the external to help with it but I'm gaining my inner resources by doing that.

Meagen Gibson

And do you find often too that anxiously attached people that lean that way, they would go to their family system for support. That's where their thinking is their support system, when that's where it all kind of developed and so you might not get what you need there either. So it's like creating systems of secure relationship support outside of intimate relationship or romantic relationship I should say, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes. I call it going to the lemon tree expecting an orange every single time. And that we can take responsibility for us walking to the lemon tree wanting an orange every time and that might be our parents or whoever's in the family system. So yeah, looking at the family system for that, if the family system isn't always safe for that. For avoidantly attached this is going to...

[00:43:20]

One other thing is I do a lot of somatic experiencing. I train under Peter Levine, Peter Levine's work with somatic experiencing it's all body focused and with anxiously attached people our nervous system when our attachment style, when our attachment system is activated it creates anxiety which means that we become dysregulated in our body. So a lot of working with the body with a therapist is going to be incredibly beneficial for you. Learning how to regulate our nervous system and calm ourselves down, that's also going to become inner resources for when the attachment system is triggered in the future.

Meagen Gibson

And that's super trauma healing, right? It's not that you're not going to get dysregulated under stimulus. That's what's supposed to happen, that's what your nervous system is there for, right? Like that's a natural reaction to a set of circumstances, it's the ability to reregulate and reintegrate that experience and return to base level, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes and that hopefully when you were little and your attachment system was triggered you reached. This is what we do with humans, you reached for your caretaker. They turned away so then you reach again because you don't have those inner resources. What's going to happen in the healing is that in the reaching and them turning away, guess what happens to a kid? They get more dysregulated.

So that is what's happening in your relationships all the time. And it's like you're reaching, they turn away, you're more dysregulated. Then you reach again, they turn away, you're even more dysregulated. So it's in, yes, soothing ourselves, but also looking for who is an appropriate person to reach for. Where can I reach to actually get my needs met with avoidance. Let's go back to the numbness. Avoidance attachment has very low emotional literacy, meaning that it's hard to identify what we are feeling. I just came across this amazing free app that I just want to say is incredible for learning emotional literacy. It was made by researchers at Yale, actually, it comes from the book *Permission to Feel* by Mark Brackett. I want to say who's the director of the Emotional Intelligence at Yale University.

It's called *How We Feel*, and it gives you all the feeling words that you could possibly imagine, and you just check in and you track those feeling words. And so something that I am using with my clients who have avoidant attachment and want to work on it is using that app and also in session, checking in to see what am I feeling instead of good? Nothing. All right? That kind of thing to build on that emotional literacy. As you check in, you slow it down because an avoidantly attached person be like, good, I feel fine, let's go to dinner, right?

What's very uncomfortable would be to say, okay, let's check in with fine. What are the sensations in your body with fine? So avoidance, we are going to be doing very uncomfortable work, right? It's going to be checking in, staying in, examining, becoming a feeling scientist. And also as we do that, the fear that comes up, the resistance that comes up. So you're working with emotional literacy, gaining that window of tolerance around emotions and also tending to the resistance around wanting to expand your window of tolerance around emotions because you are terrified that if you allow yourself to be vulnerable, your needs will not be met.

[00:47:38]

It's not like sometimes it's like they will not be met, period. So I hope I'm making a case of why avoiding an attachment. I have so much compassion for us who are avoidantly attached because our needs were never met. We had to create our own system of defenses in order to defend ourselves against feeling, against connection and vulnerability. So it is a slow interceptive, meaning like looking inward, feeling inward into the body kind of work.

And there are fun little strategies you can do as well like avoidantly attached people have been shown in research that they do better holding hands when they're walking. So that would be an assignment I have for an avoidant person. Hold your partner's hand, but while you're walking somewhere, just grab their hand. It's stepping out of your comfort zone. Like being specific about plans, saying I love you. When we become emotionally literate, we have a better understanding of what our needs are and when our attachment system is triggered, like avoidantly attached people, we really need to take time around. When is it triggered?

Because you won't know. You don't have a landscape for it as much as an anxiously attached person. Absolutely. And then also just not doing deactivating strategies, not nitpicking, not looking at the ideal you're going to have to take those cognitive errors and start reframing them as well. No one's perfect dealing with the repelling.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, and I assumed also recognizing those strategies as being protective like my need to nitpick and put somebody on a pedestal. This ideal is my way of protecting myself because the only way someone could possibly meet my needs is if they were perfect and I have no risk involved in this affair.

Heather Monroe

Another fun thing to do with both attachment styles that I do a lot is this my worth is no greater and no less than anyone else's self worth because a lot of the time with anxiously attached our worth is below and with avoidingly attached our worth is above other people's. But it's different sides of the same coin because in order for an anxiously attached person to become more even, we have to put other people down and for an avoidantly attached person to stay their worth is above.

Other people have to lose their humanity too in their eyes and they have to put other people down. So coming at it as their worth is no better and no less than my worth. Our intrinsic worth is the same is a great kind of mantra as well.

Meagen Gibson

And to be able to see that in yourself and the other people, right?

Heather Monroe

Yes, exactly and with disorganized we are looking at most certainly looking at complex trauma and so that is a lot of the same but a much more contained, slower pace. Well, it's going to be slow for everybody, it's all going to take time but it's working with both of those healing mechanisms in

tandem and it's getting really good at bodywork. So figuring out what you're feeling at all times and what's happening in your nervous system at all times.

[00:51:37] Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I keep having this visual of like when I used to start running over and over and over again, I would start running. I would run for a couple of years then I would fall off the wagon for whatever reason, sickness, illness, injury, whatever. And then starting again and I wasn't going to go out and run 4 miles the first day. I was going to take a walk and then ice my muscles and then the next day, maybe I tried to walk for 30 seconds and run for 30 seconds.

You're building up like you said the window of tolerance or like Cathy Malchiodi calls it the circle of capacity and there's all these names for it. But really what it is is just like an expansion and taking your tolerance level and just increasing it incrementally and your stamina and your ability to sit with discomfort.

Heather Monroe

And it doesn't look linear. Yeah, it doesn't look linear. It's going to be three steps forward, five steps back. We are dealing with a system here that's been in place for a long time that needs to be deprogrammed and reprogrammed and it happens. I mean I see it happen all the time with my clients. I've seen it happen with myself, I've seen it happen with other people around me but it happens with the right guide and the right work. The transformations I have seen from people going from an insecure attachment style to an earned secure attachment style have been breathtaking. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And I also want to say too that we've been kind of focused on romantic relationships, but intimacy comes in a lot of different places and you can be very securely attached at home in your intimate romantic relationship and then go to a really intense work environment and all of a sudden be insecure in that role. Different roles might bring out different parts of your attachment, right?

Heather Monroe

100%. It goes back to that relational trauma versus PTSD. Exactly. And we have this sense that like, oh, we go to work and we leave all our baggage at home. It's like, no, we go to work as a fully human being with all of our relational hang ups and triggers and attachment styles and things like that. I see a lot of insecure attachment styles show up in friendships. It depends, it depends what's happening and the other person and all that stuff.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, I can see that playing out. I'm always the one that calls them and I always invite them over. I plan nice things for them and then when it's my birthday, I don't feel... Yeah I can totally see that playing out in front of me.

[00:54:18] Heather Monroe

And so I'm not going to call them. That's a protest behavior of anxious attachment, I'm just going to ignore and then I'm going to see what happens and then I have more evidence to show that that person is not my friend.

Meagen Gibson

I was going to say, spoiler alert. Exactly what you think is going to happen happens because you're not communicating.

Heather Monroe

Exactly. You're being manipulative to a certain extent.

Meagen Gibson

I remember the day I learned that manipulation is not always a conscious thing. A lot of times people are manipulative but they don't know that's what they're doing.

Heather Monroe

That word needs to be rebranded I feel like.

Meagen Gibson

Before I saw manipulative actions and manipulative people as being these, like, scheming kind of cartoon characters, the Hamburglar to age myself.

Heather Monroe

Exactly.

Meagen Gibson

But that's not it, they're completely unconscious of their manipulative actions and behaviors.

Heather Monroe

100% and I always say to people, if it doesn't work for you it's not going to work for the other person either in the end. If this behavior isn't working, if the behavior and the friendship isn't working for you, then it's not going to work for the other person because they're going to lose you in some way. So it really is trying to find common ground and communication skills and vulnerability and all those things. Yeah.

Meagen Gibson

And sometimes these conversations when you're like, hey, I feel like I do a lot of things for you because that matters to me and I know it makes you feel good, here's what it would feel good for me. I know that this isn't necessarily your default or it doesn't come natural to you, so I'd love to help you do things that also feel good to me, maybe as a first step, right?

[00:55:46]

And sometimes the person is going to say, gosh, you know what? You're right, I am rotten at that. I know it means a lot to you, I want to make more of an effort because your friendship means a lot to me. And sometimes they're going to say that's just not who I am and I don't want to make that effort. And then you've got the information that you need to make choices.

Heather Monroe

100%. You said it very nicely. I've had friends just call me and say, get your head out of your butt. Friendship is, you need to water it sometimes and you are... And I was like I know, there's reasons for it but absolutely right and my bad and let me check in with you more.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Heather Monroe, this has been fantastic. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Heather Monroe

Yes. You can go to monroewellness.com, that's my website. And you can also find me on Instagram [@monroewellness](https://www.instagram.com/monroewellness) and subscribe to my newsletter. That's where you are going to find all the talks that I'm doing, podcasts, in-person workshops. That's going to be the best thing to do to kind of stay in touch. So that would be going to monroewellness.com and just subscribing to my newsletter. That would be the thing that's going to get you the most information on up to date things coming up.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Thanks again Heather.

Heather Monroe

Of course, thank you.