



Conscious Life presents

# TRAUMA SUPER CONFERENCE

## Breaking free from relational trauma

Guest: Terry Real

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### [00:00:10] Alex Howard

Welcome, everyone, to this interview, where I'm super excited to be talking with Terry Real.

We're going to be talking about how trauma can show up in relationships, and particularly some of Terry's framework from relational life therapy to help unpick some of these different dynamics in relationships. I'll also ask him, how do you know that it's time to leave a relationship?

To give you a little bit of Terry's background, Terry, Terrence Real, is an internationally recognized family therapist, speaker, and author. He founded the Relational Life Institute, offering workshops for couples, individuals, and parents, along with a professional training program for clinicians to learn his relational life therapy methodology. He is the best-selling author of *I Don't Want To Talk About It*, *How Can I Get Through To You?*, *The New Rules of Marriage*, and his more recent book, which is called *Us*.

So welcome, Terry. I always enjoy our conversations together, and it's great to have you back.

### Terry Real

Thank you, Alex. Thank you for inviting me. It's always fun talking to you. You have an interesting mind.

### Alex Howard

So I want to start a little bit with, in your latest book, *Us*, which, by the way, since we last spoke, congratulations on New York Times best-seller on that, you talk about the role of neurobiology, and I feel like that's a good starting point. So do you want to say why that understanding is important and how it helps us give some context to understanding trauma and relational trauma?

### Terry Real

Yeah. Great. Well, at a number of levels, it's really critical to understand our neurobiology. First of all, as you know, the book, I happen to have a copy here, the book *Us*, New York Times best-seller, is a critique of what I call the culture of toxic individualism. And one of the things we know from neurobiology is that this idea of humans being freestanding, autonomous individuals is nonsense. It's patriarchal bullshit.

**[00:02:25]**

In fact, our central nervous systems are not built to self-regulate. That's a myth. We co-regulate with other central nervous systems all day long. And we need to, as Dan Siegel, the great neurobiologist, put it, social interaction is not a luxury item for the brain. It's an essential nutrient. Without it, we go mad. I say in the book, if you want to see truly what being a freestanding individual does to your nervous system, look at the effects of solitary confinement on people. We literally go crazy.

So we're social animals as a species. So this whole myth, which is critical in psychology, the individuation, separation, autonomy journey, particularly for boys, turns out to have nothing to do with real psychology. It has everything to do with our social notions about what makes an individual.

The Middle Ages didn't think of themselves as individuals. If you thought of yourself as an individual with individual rights, you'd be burnt at the stake. That's not how it went in the Middle Ages, as Meister Eckhart put it, only self will burn in hell. So this idea of the great self is a modern invention by a small group of gentry white men in the Enlightenment. It is great. It created the American Revolution. Sorry, Brits. And the French Revolution.

It's wonderful in its place, but it's an idea that has a particular history and political context. It has everything to do with white privilege and colonialism and it's going to kill us. The essential delusion of individualism and patriarchy, the two traditions that fuse, they really exist hand in glove, the essential delusion is that we stand above nature and in control of it. The word individual means apart from nature. I'm a distinct person apart from my environment.

And what we know from neurobiology is there's no such thing as apart from your environment. Apart from your environment, you die. That's what happens to you if you're apart from your environment. So the whole thing is just a bunch of nonsense. However, the idea is that we stand above nature and control it. We dominate it. You've heard me say this, Alex, at least in the King James version, I don't mean to offend anybody, some people say it's a mistranslation, I don't know, but God gives Adam dominion, that's the word, over all the things that walk and crawl and swim and fly on this earth.

Bad idea. The Greeks knew better. They called that hubris, overweening pride, it's what brought down all Greek tragic heroes, was their pride. Today we call it grandiosity. Superiority. The delusion that I stand above nature and in control of it is lethal. Whether the nature I think I should and can control is my wife, my kids, my body, I've got to lose ten pounds, my thinking, I've got to be less... If we don't trade in the power and control model for what I call ecological wisdom, ecological humility, you're not above nature, you're in it, dummy.

Wake up and smell the coffee. You rely on it. Our relationships are our biosphere. We breathe them. And you can choose to pollute your biosphere by indulging your temper over here, but you're going to breathe in that pollution and your partner's withdrawal, lack of sexuality, whatever, you're an ecosystem. You can't escape. Thinking that you're unaffected is a delusion.

And when we think about this, one of the joys of my work and my book is that I'm very particular, when you're confronting your partner to say this, not that, but I also fade out at the broadest level. If we don't trade in a power and control paradigm for a collaborative paradigm, our relationship to

ourselves will remain screwed up, to the people we care about, to other races, cultures, and to nature itself, to the planet itself.

**[00:07:39]**

We are literally putting our world in jeopardy with this delusion. So this work is a clarion call to come out of the grandiosity of power over into the wisdom of living with, whether it's living with our own experience with others, with the world, and once you shift from power over to living with, everything changes.

The method I've created, Relational Life Therapy, is a map and a toolbox. Both. But the toolbox, and it's a revolutionary set of new tools, comes from the new map because the new map changes everything. For example, from an ecological perspective or a relational perspective, the question who's right and who's wrong is who gives a shit?

We don't know that. Who cares? What matters is how are you and I going to work this thing in a way, it's going to work for the two of us? All of the terms change, right or wrong, fair, not fair. None of these things really matter. What matters is how are we going to work like a team? Can I give you a simple illustration of that?

**Alex Howard**

Sure.

**Terry Real**

Okay. For those watching and listening, I want to see if you can relate. This may be a particularly American thing, but I doubt it. I'll do it straight up, heterosexual, heteronormative, stereotypical. She to him, you're a reckless driver. Him to her, you're overly sensitive. Anybody recognize this one? She to him, you tailgate, you drive above the speed limit. Him to her, I know, but I'm in total control, and you're just...

Okay, this couple is about to launch into what I call an objectivity battle. Is it this, or is it that? Were you rude or were you emphatic? Are you reckless or are you aggressive? And they marshal their evidence and argue their case. And this could go on for 40 years. Literally, for 40 years. Here is the same, true story, same couple after one session with an RLT, not me, therapist.

She to him, sweetheart, let's start with that, shall we... Wel, I call it soft power, we're going to talk about that. Sweetheart, I know you love me. I love you, too. Listen, whether or not you're a reckless driver, you know you're a safe driver, but you're the one driving. I don't know if you're a safe driver. I'm in the passenger seat. When you drive 20 miles above the speed limit and you switch lanes and you tailgate people, you may feel perfectly confident, but I'm in the passenger seat, out of my mind.

Call me crazy. Call me in erotic. Okay, fine, whatever. But look, here's the deal. You adore me. You don't want me sitting in the passenger seat every time we're driving together, being terrified out of my mind, do you? Why would you want to do that? Hey, as a favor to me, could you please slow down and drive more conservatively so that I don't have to make myself crazy every time I'm in the car with you? Would you do that, honey?

**[00:11:15]**

And he says, true story, to his own amazement, he says, okay, and they're done. And what might have taken 40 years is solved in ten minutes because they're not thinking about it as two individuals. They're thinking about it like a connected team. And shifting in your brain from me me me versus you to us, as a team, is a revolutionary shift in your neurobiology.

### **Alex Howard**

And of course, one of the challenges, Terry, when we experience trauma is it causes that separation. It causes that individuation where it's like, I don't want to be connected to this or being in connection is painful, which is one of the key things that causes us to separate.

### **Terry Real**

Yeah, one of the dicey things in life is that when you've been traumatized, closeness itself is a trauma trigger. Intimacy, which we long for, can itself be a trauma. Love hurts in its absence. And for those of us with a painful background, love can hurt in its presence and we have to deal with that, which brings me to the other aspect of neurobiology.

The autonomic nervous system scans our bodies four times a second, four times a second, well below our conscious mind. Am I safe? Am I safe? Am I safe? Am I safe? Four times a second. If the answer is yes, I'm safe, we stay seated in what I call the wise adult part of our brain. It's a prefrontal cortex, super cortical. The part of the brain that develops last. 26 years old. This is why all our ADD boys get better when they get older. 26 years old, the prefrontal cortex takes to develop.

And it's the last part of the brain that develops in us evolutionarily as a species. It's the most mature part of the brain. The part I'm talking to you right now that can stop and think and observe and make deliberate choices. The key question I ask when I'm sitting with a couple is which part of you am I speaking to? Am I speaking to the present based wise adult? If the answer am I safe, am I safe, am I safe, am I safe, is yes, I'm safe, we stay seated in the wise adult.

If the answer is no, I'm in danger, boom, automatic knee jerk, this shuts down instantaneously and subcortical parts of the brain take over the limbic system, the amygdala. Instead of the wise adult, we move into the two immature parts of the brain all the way back, the amygdala, the wounded child part of us, which trauma work for the last 20 years has been totally focused on, very young.

When I do personification work with inner children, their first moments of life up to four or five years old. The part of you that was on the receiving end of the abuse or neglect, they just totally flooded, reactive, wounded children just want to crawl up in someone's lap and cry for about 1000 years and be held. You just feel it. Totally flooded. Between this adult self and this very young self is a critical part that I call the adaptive child. Adaptive child.

This is a kid in grownup clothing. It's a kids version of an adult. It's what you cobbled together as a template for an adult in the absence of healthy parenting, either violating or neglectful. And it's what you did to get by in whatever the craziness was that you were in the middle of.

Congratulations. Good work. But what you did back then, which was perfect, may be very imperfect.

**[00:15:53]**

Let me tell you a story, and then I'll entertain your next question. Let me tell you a story. This is the story I'm illustrating everywhere. It was a true story, one of the first stories in the book. So I specialize, as you know, with couples on the brink of divorce that no one else has been able to help. So I get this couple on the brink of divorce. Why? The guy's a chronic liar. Lies about everything.

His wife says if you ask him what color his shoes are, he'll say they're not shoes, they're sneakers. I mean, he'll just lie about anything. He will not give you a straight story. And indeed, the therapists listening to this podcast, to this summit, rather, and I hope you all come and visit my website and get training in Relational Life Therapy, in the words of the great gay activist Harvey Milk, I'm here to recruit you today. I want all of you to come to [relationallife.com](http://relationallife.com), my website, and learn about my dream.

But anyway, so this guy is on the brink of divorce, and the therapists listening will get this guy. I say to him, the sky is blue. He says it's aquamarine. It's like he's not going to give me blue. It's like too much of an admission. So I get what this guy does. We call it his relational stance. The thing you do over and over again that blows your foot off. His relational stance is evasion.

This guy has a black belt in evasion. His wife says he lies about everything. I say, the sky is blue. He says, no, it's not. He's an evader. Got it. So then I ask him a question that if you're not thinking relationally, it sounds like, oh, that's brilliant. If you're thinking relationally, it's tell me the thumbprint, and I'll tell you about the thumb. In RLT, we have three phases of our work. The first is carefrontation. This is what you're doing that's blowing your foot off.

The second is inner child work, deep trauma work. Where did you learn to do this? And then the third is teaching and skill building. Let me teach you how to do it differently. And I think, Alex, by the way, it's a combination of all three of these together. I don't know any other school that does this. Confrontation, deep trauma work in the presence of the partner sitting next to you, and then skill building and teaching.

I think it's a combination of all three which produces such... RLT is known for producing profound change quickly, and I think it's these three together that produce trauma work, confrontation, skill building, and education. Anyway, so I say to this guy, who tried to control you growing up? Once you get the adaptive child, what was that child adapting to? Or more precisely, who were you adapting to?

Because our adaptations are forged in relationship. People don't get that. So, who tried to control you growing up? My father. Tell me about it. Military man. How I ate, how I sat, the clothes I wore, the friends I had, the classes. Okay. How did you deal with such a controlling guy? I lied. He smiles. That smile is important. That's the smile of resistance. I like that. He smiled. I lied. Brilliant boy.

Dad says don't be friends with Henry. I was friends with Henry. I told him I was friends with John. Smart kid. Okay, good. I always teach my students, be respectful of the exquisite intelligence of the adaptive child. You did back then exactly what you needed to do. Well done. Smart boy. But adaptive then, maladaptive now. You're not that four year old boy. Your wife is not your father.

It's a true story. One session. They came back two weeks later, hand in hand, all smiles, were cured. And they were. It was a one session cure. Tell me. So over the weekend, the wife sends the

guy to the grocery store to pick up twelve things. True to form, he comes back with eleven. She says to him, where's the pumpernickel? He says, every muscle and nerve in my body was screaming to say they were out. And in this moment, I looked at my wife, I thought of you, Terry.

**[00:20:31]**

He was borrowing my prefrontal cortex. We therapists lend our clients our brains. I thought of you. I took a breath, I looked my wife in the eyes and I said, I forgot the damn pumpernickel. I said, I forgot the damn pumpernickel. And she, true story, burst into tears and she said, I've been waiting for this moment for 25 years. He said, I'm cured. And he was. Stopped lying from that point forward.

That's recovery. That's gold. That's transformation, that's characterological transformation in this man. That's what we're looking for. And I have a name for it. I have a name for everything. We call it relational mindfulness, just like any other mindful. It's when you are in that triggered moment, when you're in that adaptive child, knee jerk response, take a break, take a breath, take a time out, go for a walk, do what you need to do to get re-seated in the adult part of you and then go deal with your relationship.

This is the most important skill that we teach. People say relationships take work, but they don't tell you what it is. The work of relationships is in this minute, this moment right here. Am I going to go with my knee jerk trauma-informed, trauma-flooded response, the same response I've been doing for the last 30 years? Or at this moment, like the guy in the story, am I going to take a breath, move to a different part of my brain, and use some of these relational skills?

It's only the wise, adult part of us that will use relational skills. The adaptive, child part of us doesn't give a good goddamn.

### **Alex Howard**

What's also really interesting in what you're saying, Terry, is the power of really naming what's going on. Because often we're almost misdiagnosing the problem, or we're dealing with the symptom of the problem or the behaviors of the problem, and then all the energy goes into managing that, as opposed to what you're describing in the example, is really getting to the core of it and then working with that.

### **Terry Real**

Yeah, that's exactly right. And it's phenomenological. The core of it is what's in front of your face. It's what we therapists go over and under and around. Forget it. Just deal with what's in front of you. This guy is an evader. Okay? Deal with it. This woman is relentless. Okay? The first of the three phases we call joining through the truth. And let me be clear, I don't want to do damage. Anybody can clobber their client with the truth.

The art is a two and a half year training program. It takes a while to learn that. The art is telling the truth to our clients in a way that's so loving, so impactful, that they feel closer and more trusting because of the confrontation, not less. So, if I can tell you, Alex, this isn't you, I'm sure, but I'll role play on. Let me tell you something, Alex, my friend. You are caught in the dysfunctional stance we call angry pursuit.

**[00:24:07]**

Angry pursuit is a dysfunctional stance. I'm going to turn you into a gay relationship. You and your partner Dan. Dan will never get closer to you because you're angrily complaining about how distant he is. That is never, ever going to work. I have bad news for you, Alex. You want to know what it is?

**Alex Howard**

Let's go.

**Terry Real**

Okay. Here's the bad news. Angry pursuit is not seductive. I don't know if you didn't know that before this moment. Angry pursuit is not inviting. The more you complain about him, the more he's going to distance. And the more he distances, the more you complain. Hey, I can get you out of this if you'd like. Would you like to?

**Alex Howard**

I mean, it sounds like I want to. Yes.

**Terry Real**

All right. We teach all of our RLT, Relational Life Therapy, that's the method, all of our RLT therapists, to name the more the more when you sit with the relationship by the end of the first session, the more you pursue, the more Dan distances. The more Dan distances, the more you pursue. The blame is on the pattern, not the people. Oh, you poor guys. You got seduced into this. Once you're in this pattern, you wind it up. It just keeps going until usually somebody outside the system helps you stop it.

I think there's a lot more to the two of you in this pattern. Would you like to get out of it? And Les Havens once said the goal of a first session is generally a second session. So once you say, this is the pattern you and your partner are in, and you're right, poor guys, it's not you, it's the pattern, I can get you out of this, they're yours. You've got a buy in for as long as you need it.

**Alex Howard**

Terry, in relationships, often the goal or the expectation is one of always being in harmony and connection. It's like, often we have a preconceived idea, and often it's an idealized idea because that wasn't most people's experience growing up with their parents, right? But we have this maybe romanticized idea of what we think should happen, and then when that's not happening, we think there's something wrong with us or with the relationship or so on.

And you mentioned earlier in terms of the RLT framework around conflict, and I'm curious to hear why that is an important piece, and the recognition of that is important.

**Terry Real**

We in the West, look, I got this from the wonderful child infant observational researcher, Dr Ed Tronick, and you can look up a bunch of his videos on YouTube. They're fascinating. And Ed, by

looking at first mothers and then all genders and infants, he was one of the first generation, along with Berry Brazelton, not to extrapolate early childhood relationships from adult patients, but to actually stick a camera in front of mothers and infants and film what happened and then do a close analysis.

**[00:27:43]**

He's been doing this for 30 years. And it was really Ed who came up with the basic rhythm of all relationships is harmony, disharmony, and repair. Closeness, disruption, and the return. You know, the infant is in the mother's arms, and the infant is all, like we call it, molded. They are a noodle. There's no bones. And then there's gas or a noise or something. Infant freaks out, and then the mother freaks out, and they're both freaking out.

There's an amazing tape he shows the infant is totally boneless and happy, and then something, and the infant freaks out, and then the mother tries to... And nothing works. Now the infant's getting mad, and then the mother gets mad, and the mother glares at the infant, and the infant puts up her little hands like this to protect herself from the mother's angry glare. And then the pacifiers, whatever, and we're back to...

And the whole thing takes 40 seconds. This is the rhythm of all relationships. Harmony, disharmony. It's like walking. Balance, imbalance, balance. You can have harmony, disharmony, and repair 30 times during one dinner conversation. Or you can think about it spanning over decades of your whole marriage. The harmony phase I call love without knowledge. This is the in love phase where you really think this person is going to do it for you.

What soon follows is the disharmony phase, disillusionment, which I call knowledge without love. Now you know all about what your partner does with her closet, but you don't love her very much. You're aware of your partner's imperfections, but you're not very happy about it. And then the third phase I call knowing love or mature love. And here's where you've seen your partner pick their nose. You've watched them pass gas. You've watched them make a fool of themselves.

They betrayed you. They've disappointed you. They've failed you miserably. And you know what? It's okay. But it's fine. You love them. It's good enough. I had a friend, gay couple. Married, well not married, but together almost 40 years, they had a party and one of them said, everybody's been asking us the secret of our longevity. There actually is a secret.

He said, I cribbed this, and I don't remember where but I read this somewhere, I've been doing it for 30 years. Every morning I wake up, I toddle to the bathroom. I go pee. I splash some cold water on my face. I look at my face in the mirror and I say to myself out loud, well, you're no prize either. That's relational esteem. That's like the equivalent of self-esteem.

It's understanding that your partner in the relationship is imperfect. And that's okay with you. You've done the work of digesting their imperfections. You've done the work of fighting for more of what you want, and it's okay. This is what I call learning to love the partner you're with instead of the one you deserve.

**Alex Howard**

But it's also, I realize in what you're saying, Terry, as well, is that love is a doing word. It's an act of showing up and being present and meeting someone, I guess in many ways, like a lot of the inner



work we do on ourselves, it's learning to love and accept ourselves as we are, not as our critical voices say we should be. And I guess it's that same principle.

### **[00:31:39] Terry Real**

It's exactly the same. I talk about individual shame and relational shame. Relational shame, if you walk into a party and you're convinced that the couples to the left and to the right of you fight less and have more and better sex than you do. And what you don't get is that they're looking at you thinking the same thing. We long for gods and goddesses. We long for the divine. There's nothing wrong with that. There's a spiritual impulse in it.

But we're stuck with woefully limited human beings. And that discrepancy is what intimacy is. It's dealing with the collision of my imperfections and yours and how we manage that collision, that's the character of our relationship in the West. We think it's all harmony. We don't prepare our sons and daughters and non-binary kids for disharmony. We don't even acknowledge it exists.

But I've gone around the world talking about what I call normal marital hatred. And I've been talking about this for over 30 years and never has anyone come backstage and said, what do you mean by that? A part of you is going to hate your partner at some point during your relationship. Don't freak out. That's normal. That doesn't mean you're in a bad relationship. What matters is what you do then. Do you deal with what is dissatisfying to you? Do you put it on the table? Do you fight for more?

Do you do the digestion of what you're not going to get and bear the grief of that like a grown up? Or you go into a kid state and insist that your partner change or retaliate or whatever? Dealing with this woefully limited human being is our Zen Koan. It's like the riddle that we roll around in our souls when we're with somebody, and it grows us up if we do the work. It will destroy us if we don't do the work.

### **Alex Howard**

I think a lot of what you're saying, which I think is really important, is that relationships are not perfect, they're not easy, and we have to show up and we have to do the work. But how do we know a relationship is one to leave?

Because one of the things that happens with trauma is that we can normalize to dynamics which are not normal and are not healthy. And so what's that crossing of that line or what's that recognition that actually we're staying because of our trauma and actually what we should be doing is leaving?

### **Terry Real**

Yeah, I'm glad you're saying that. I mean, people think that as a couple therapist, my goal is keeping every marriage or long term relationship intact. It is not. My goal, RLT goal, is ending the misery of the vicious circle that you're in. And if that leads to transformation, that's preferable, particularly for kids. I would prefer to save the marriage if there are children, but not if you're going to be miserable with each other. It's not worth it.

And I'm not convinced the kids do all that well in a loveless household either. So staying together for the sake of the kids doesn't hold a lot of water for me. Anyway, how do you do it? If you go to

my website, [relationallife.com](http://relationallife.com), one word, two Ls, you can download an article that I wrote for the Psychotherapy Networker called Rowing To Nowhere, When Is Enough Enough?

**[00:35:48]**

And it's about when to break up, and it's about what breaking up does to us therapists, what we put ourselves through when we break up a couple. I offer a tool, and it consists of a question. You want to hear it?

**Alex Howard**

I sure do.

**Terry Real**

Am I getting enough in this relationship to make grieving what I'm not getting worth my while? Am I getting enough in this relationship to make bearing the pain of what I'm not going to get okay with me? And if the answer is, you know what, my partner has a sexual abuse history, we're never going to be that couple hanging from chandeliers, I've been with a partner who was that sexually uninhibited and it was great, and my gal ain't one of them.

However, she is this and this, I get that and that. It is a fair deal. Is this the most riotous sex life of my life? No. Is this the most wonderful person I've ever had the good fortune of meeting? Yes. Do I grieve that wild, passionate sex life that I had as a younger person? I do. And what does that mean, I grieve it? Here's what it means. It means I feel bad. Okay? I hope that's not too technical. We are so afraid of feeling bad in this culture.

Feel bad. It won't kill you. Miss what you're missing, but don't walk around like a big resentful victim. If the answer is yes, I'm getting enough, then embrace what you're getting and appreciate it and celebrate it. Let go of what you're not getting and enjoy yourself. If the answer is no, I'm not getting enough, drag that son of a gun into good couples therapy. Find a couple therapist who's really going to help, which many of them don't. Someone who's really going to take your side and take your partner on.

But if at the end of the day, your couple therapist says to you, look, your partner is an incest survivor, they need a lot of control sexually and they need things to be kind of calm and quiet. That's who you've got. What do you want to do about that? You have to search your soul and decide whether it's worth it to you or not. And if it is, then let go of it and don't walk around with it and embrace what you've got.

**Alex Howard**

I think that's great, Terry. And I think I really appreciate the pragmatism in a lot of this as well. And it's bringing that rationality to an area where there's a lot of fantasy and a lot of idealization, which is rarely reflected in reality. I'm mindful of your time, but people that want to find out more about you and your work, you've mentioned a few things, but maybe just remind me of that and just give some signposts.

**[00:39:11] Terry Real**

Yes. That's marvelous. If you are a therapist, we would love to have you come and do some training with us. We have a whole rich, beautiful, two and a half year training program. But you don't have to commit to all of it at once. You can take a little piece and see how you like it. Go to [relationallife.com](http://relationallife.com). One word, two Ls, [relationallife.com](http://relationallife.com).

And it has all of our trainings on there. If you are not a mental health professional, but what I like to call a normal person, we've been offering courses for the general public. I'm really pleased. There's the US workshop, basic relational skills. We just did a relational parenting workshop for the general public, so come and find out more about what we're offering.

**Alex Howard**

Fantastic. Terry, I really appreciate your time. Thank you so much.

**Terry Real**

Alex, it is always so much fun talking to you. I love your energy. And good luck with the summit, and enjoy it.