



Conscious Life presents

Trauma Through a Social Media and Dating App Lens

Guest - Dr Ava Pommerenk

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[00:00:09] Meagen Gibson

Hello and welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Dr Ava Pommerenk, an empowerment, relationship and sexuality coach and therapist. She shares today based on direct experience around healing her own trauma, having gone through her own deeper healing and spiritual growth journey.

She combines what she's learned through experience with her training and education in Transpersonal Psychology and Attachment Psychology and trauma to share a unique perspective on trauma and emotional regulation, cultivating joy and a felt sense of safety. Dr Ava Pommerenk, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

It's my pleasure.

Meagen Gibson

So you and I have talked about this a couple of times, but I want to ask you again, because every time I speak with anybody, they give a different answer. And that doesn't mean that there's an answer that's right or wrong. It just means that we're all growing and evolving as we go. So I want to start with what is trauma and how does it show up in our daily lived experience.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

So when we're having conversations about trauma, oftentimes we're talking about many different elements of experience. And there's a lot of assumptions about what part of experience we're talking about. So trauma can be either a traumatic experience, so an experience that feels overwhelming, that threatens a sense of safety, could actually be life-threatening, where the person doesn't have the right resources or support to be able to process and move through the emotions that this circumstance or situation brings up.

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So trauma can be one situation, or it can be a collection of experiences that create that sense of a lack of safety. Or the threat where someone is under-resourced or doesn't have the support to be able to process what's happening. So that's trauma in one way.

There's also trauma where we talk about traumatic memory. So trauma as a traumatic memory is basically something that was overwhelming and scary and painful for me, and it got logged into my memory system, and the whole limbic system got logged into my body. And when something happens in my life that starts to appear even somewhat similar to this traumatic memory, I get triggered and I have certain emotions come up.

I have a reaction. And it's usually a reaction that we all talk about in American culture, and I think it's becoming sort of globalized. We talk about the fight, flight, or freeze response. Now they've added in fawning. So you get triggered into one of these responses, and that determines the course of how you act or how you think or how you perceive.

Then the third one is strictly just talking about the responses that get activated in your central nervous system, which is your brain, and then your peripheral nervous system, your body, and the very physical set of responses you're having, as well as how that influences perception. How that influences, really influences the reality that this person is living in.

So when we're talking about trauma, we're speaking about all these different things. And it's difficult to determine what someone's actually referring to from person to person. And additionally, I would say often when people are talking about trauma, they're either talking about an event that was traumatic that they have a memory of that still impacts them, or they're talking about attachment trauma, which is trauma that occurs within an environment, in relationship, usually to your primary caregivers in childhood.

And based on the environment and the traumatic elements in it, that usually contain either enmeshment, abandonment, violence, abuse, or neglect, or other major situations happening outside of the home that influence caregiver behavior or influence the safety of the home environment, then that was traumatic, talking about the experience of that.

So it's very important to get clear, when we talk about trauma, what the heck we're actually talking about. But for the sake of our talk, I'm referring to the experience of acute stress responses. So fight, flight, freeze, and I'm talking about the maladaptive ways we engage in those stress responses. So I'm talking about ways that we engage in stress responses that are going to do harm to ourselves or others or perpetuates us not actually having a reality-based view of the world and encourages us to go into experiences like depression or anxiety or deep, chronic stress. That encourages us to go into compulsive behaviors.

So compulsive behaviors in this sense are when you have a really strong... It might be even a physical response that you're not even aware is emotional, but something intense is happening inside, and it feels very uncomfortable. So a compulsion is when we feel like we must do something or we have to do something in order to relieve this experience inside.

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Compulsions are always... I cannot stress this enough, always related to trauma. Always. Trauma in the sense of a trauma response, right? So it can be a trauma response that's activated in current time because of certain situations that are currently traumatic, or trauma responses that are activated in current time from memory.

Meagen Gibson

And when we're talking about... Sorry, I didn't wanna interrupt you. Zoom is so hard. When we're talking about compulsions. I also want to be just a little bit, not granular, but specific for people, because if they're wondering what would constitute a compulsion and could you give us a few examples?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. So we often only hear about compulsion in the context of OCD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. And many of us think, "Oh, well, just people like that with that diagnosis have compulsions". No, everybody has compulsions to a certain degree, depending on context. So a typical compulsion might mean, might be, or might look like... For a lot of folks, they have a stressful day at work.

It's activating acute stress responses from the actual work environment and being out in society and dealing with all these overwhelming, intense things. Maybe some history stuff, too. And in that context, at the end of the workday, it feels very uncomfortable to make the transition to come home and to be in silence.

And a lot of people in silence, where the stimulation stops externally, have to add something so they'll get on their phone and start scrolling. So what I'm talking about here is the impulse to get on the phone. That's a compulsion. The scrolling behavior, when it becomes a pattern, becomes an addiction. And I want to talk about both in this interview, too.

Another example of a compulsion would be, many of us with social anxiety. We just call it social anxiety, right? Just leave it at that. However, if you really look at the pieces or the building blocks of social anxiety, a lot of people, it has to do with trauma and trauma responses getting activated and not knowing how to self-soothe.

So in a social environment, somebody who has social anxiety might have a lot of obsessive thoughts about how others might be perceiving them or judging them. The compulsion that follows from that is to either have to entertain people, to want to hide somehow. Some people will actually go pick up a drink and have a drink in their hand and be drinking, or they might go to smoking. Again, there's a compulsion, and then there's maybe going into some addiction.

But this sense of, I have to be doing something in order to tolerate being in this group of people. So it's a strong sense of feelings that we cannot soothe in the moment, or we haven't even become aware that there are feelings happening there, and we feel compelled to have to do something to be okay in the moment.

[00:10:15] Meagen Gibson

I can deeply relate to this, and it took a long, long time, several decades. But from the earliest memory of being alive, my mom tells me, and I also have this memory that I used to pick at my fingers, right? And then for 35 years, I was made to feel like that was just a bad habit. A character flaw. And then the DSM-5 came out, and that's called Dermatillomania.

And so I didn't have a character flaw anymore. I had a maladaptive stress response that was based on overwhelming feelings of either stress from being in an environment that was uncomfortable for me or also boredom. And boredom can also be uncomfortable. And so I will just give that example. I've since kicked it.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Good job.

Meagen Gibson

That's not what this is about. But, yeah, it was seven years of therapy. But I bring that up because I think a lot of times we don't. Some of our compulsions are more socially acceptable and less maladaptive to others or rewarded. Nobody sees the harm in looking at their phone. We've normalized so many of these compulsive behaviors that we use to self-soothe. So some of them can be more clearly maladaptive, and others are more subversively maladaptive.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. So, culturally speaking, in the US and in a lot of more western cultures, we have a lot of stigma around compulsive behaviors that have to do with addiction to substances or alcohol. And people who are seen as addicts or alcoholics, they get a lot of finger-pointing at them about lacking discipline and just control your compulsions.

All of us struggle with compulsions, and just using what they've learned helps them deal with the emotions underneath the compulsions, which has led to an addiction. But, yeah, all of us. I'd say not all of us, but a lot of us. Which is what I'm wanting to talk about here today. A lot of us have really strong addictions to social media and dating apps and streaming services.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Myself included.

Meagen Gibson

I talk about this, coming by it honestly, right? So how else is our trauma connected to the ways that we engage with social media? And you touched on that a little bit. But I also want to get into

dating apps, because this is not something that I'm engaged in that you can definitely enlighten us on. How are dating apps factoring into this?

[00:13:03] Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. So I want to mention that what I'm talking about here is not my unique idea. Yes, I engage in dating apps. I am a single woman, so I've had personal experience. But what I'm talking about here, you can actually find empirical research on this. Okay, so just want to highlight that before I go into this.

Meagen Gibson

Save your emails until Ava finishes what she's gonna say.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

There's been... In the past years, there's been some movement in American culture, and I'd say in western cultures, to really address the ways social media and dating apps are created to engage the reward system of the brain. To get us hooked on hits of dopamine and to get us in this endless experience of scrolling or liking or commenting or posting or swiping.

You can even look at it legally. Like recently, actually. This week, there was even this article that came out that talks about many Attorney Generals in the United States suing Meta for Facebook and Instagram, and the mental health effects that it's having on children in the US.

So there's a lot of research out here that talks about the ways that these apps or these services are created to appeal to our reward center and our addictive wiring. We are wired in such a way where we can become addicted. So through the way that these apps are created and their algorithms are created, it is what they call "gamifies", being on these platforms.

What that means is if I stay a little longer or if I post something, then I'll get a hit of dopamine. Or if I swipe on just the right person, then I'm going to get my perfect person that I'm looking for. So maybe I can have sex, or maybe I can have my fling, or maybe I can get my relationship with this unlimited group of people you can supply.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

But additionally, these algorithms aim to give you more of what you prefer. This is both in dating apps... Actually, everywhere, algorithms are created for this. So it's supposed to be this intelligent design that picks up on your scrolling behavior and your likes and all the things that you're interested in that are being recorded online in different ways. That purchase that you're making, the swipes you're making right. The patterns there and produces more of what will get you to like it, which keeps you on these apps longer.

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That's the goal, to keep you on the apps longer and to keep you engaged with content and to keep you posting content on social media in particular. So at first glance, you might think, "Okay, well, great. These services are helping us organize as a community. They're helping us find people with similar interests. They're helping us find our matches", which I agree with. I'm not here saying I hate social media and dating apps because they have a lot of positive benefits, too. And that's found in research as well.

However, when you're on these apps and you're doing excessive scrolling or swiping, there's a way that's actually influencing your nervous system. Your nervous system being the parts of you, your brain and your body, that experience trauma responses and encourage you to use certain strategies to deal with stress. So not only strategies of getting the dopamine hit to make you feel better when you feel stressed, but it's also encouraging you to dissociate and go into this dissociated response from what's going on inside of you for the sake of consuming more.

Additionally, it's also teaching you to train your nervous system for addiction. It's training you to realize you cannot soothe yourself without the use of these things, of these platforms. And just with all addiction, you need to do it more and for longer. You need to do it when you sit down to do it. The duration increases as well as the frequency in order to get that same effect.

And for many, they have to keep raising the bar around their exposure and the ways they're engaging online in order to get that same effect. Which often leads to engaging in more content, it often leads to when you look at how algorithms on social media have created more extremism. So you're getting all these videos now specifically about these certain political views, because you liked these other videos, you start consuming more of that.

It influences you emotionally, it influences your whole limbic system, influences the stress responses you're having. Then you find other people online that you can talk to about the same experience. You both can stew in it and be in it together, and you create this little sphere of reality that is rather distorted. And everything I'm saying, research, it's been said, I'm just collecting it here.

So even dating apps. On dating apps, we're engaging with an app that's designed to give you the capacity to objectify other people and use them for gratification, just purely through swiping and engaging online. And it's also an environment that doesn't promote accountability or self-reflection, just the way many forms of social media don't either.

So because of that, and how addictive it is to try to get that next hit, a lot of people are in these unwell states, engaging on these apps, feeling worse because they feel more disconnected rather than connected, because they're not meeting with people in person. They're not feeling the embodied experience of community, or embodied experience of just connecting with somebody. And through both platforms, or both types of platforms, you're not getting an opportunity to practice accountability, to practice socio-emotional skills. You're not getting an opportunity to fully engage from a space of co-regulation together that has a slower pace to it.

There's a lot of emotion that gets missed. There's a lot that gets missed in these exchanges that could be a form of deep connection if it happened in person. And yet, because we continue to...

From using these apps and being on them all the time, we are replacing meeting with people in person and choosing to take the risk to try to meet new people in person. We're replacing the discomfort that it takes to naturally do that with the gratification and the ease of doing these things online.

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So we are being motivated to continue to choose more of the online sphere instead of in person, which is actually encouraging us to shift our views of what it is to engage socially, what it is to connect, how to deal with conflict, how to work with self-soothing in the nervous system, how to even work with things like emotions and trauma responses.

Instead, it's much easier to go, "This causes me stress. And because I'm not connected to a community where I know this person and the community can hold me accountable, I'm just going to say some really mean things. Block 'em. I'm gonna ghost 'em."

So it's encouraging us as humans to not actually do the socio-emotional work, to develop ourselves and to create that as a norm. And we're not held within communities where people will hold us accountable to that either. So I may have gone even further than answering your question.

Meagen Gibson

No, you were doing great. And I was also just thinking about... I think you may have said it, but I wrote down just the facilitation of the avoidance of discomfort. And while none of us want to seek discomfort. Discomfort, not a lack of safety, but actual discomfort is where growth happens. And it's just like when you're working out. My trainer reminds me all the time. She's like, "We're making tiny micro tears, and you have to experience discomfort to grow." And I'm like, "You should shut up." I pay her to do this to me, right?

But we do this in relationships as well. When we change our nutrition, there's going to be a little bit of discomfort at first. And then we grow and we change through navigating that discomfort. Again, reemphasizing that we're not talking about fundamental safety here. We don't put ourselves in danger or major agony in order to grow. That's bullshit. But this chronic avoidance of discomfort and also that dopamine chase of responsiveness without co-regulation. Because that's what we get when we're in each other's presence, is our ability to just be with someone or to share coffee.

It's more than the conversation. People tend to navigate. They only tend to value the surface of the transactional nature of, like, I meet somebody for coffee, and we're talking, we're like, "Oh, we had a good conversation". But there's so much more chemically and neurobiologically that's happening when you're in the presence of another person having an intimate conversation than people understand and think they can replace through the screens, right?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. I mean, even, for instance... Even with Zoom, there are neurochemical changes happening in me right now and you through us interacting in real time. So through screens can facilitate that too. But yeah, when it's just through a dating app or Facebook or Instagram, where we're not

face-to-face with somebody and it's just through text, things get hairy. We're not fully going through a process that is natural for us as humans to go through as a part of growth.

[00:25:25] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

The thing is, for most of us, you know this saying, "Hurt people hurt people", right? Like, that's everywhere. We don't think, though, about where people end up getting hurt. Or if we do, we think about it, "Oh, well, your mama didn't raise you right." It's like something that you'll read, right? Or who hurt you? Like you had a bad relationship or something. It doesn't ever go further in our analysis going, "Wait, hold on. What is a hurt person?"

A hurt person is a traumatized person. And not just a traumatized person like that some bad stuff happened to you, but somebody who is running on chronic stress and acute stress responses all the time. And it's functioning from a place of wanting to survive and find a sense of compensating for this deep lack of safety within. This deep dysregulation.

So when somebody is traumatized and they're functioning from this place, they tend to build a whole reality, a whole perception of self. And this happens in the context of attachment. You see anxious attachment or fearful avoidant or dismissive avoidant. There's a very distinct reality that gets built around somebody from their attachment trauma in order to try to find a sense of safety.

Different strategies, a perception of self, a perception of reality. People don't realize that traumatized people have these very distinct realities they live in. And that it's not just people who are a narcissist or a sociopath or a psychopath. That actually we all engage in patterning where we're just trying to feel safe, find a sense of safety, and we have these patterns we play out, and then we end up hurting ourselves or other people because of it.

Additionally, when we're in this traumatized state, a lot of trauma is triggered. We're feeling very insecure. We do not have the capacity in a lot of those moments to truly have empathy, to really self-reflect to the degree we need to sometimes. We're not functioning from a place of being really fully relational. We're functioning from a place of compulsion and really, addiction...

Meagen Gibson

And self-protection and self-preservation, right?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. So where I'm going with this, with "Hurt people, hurt people. Traumatized people, traumatize people." But simultaneously, where this comes from isn't just childhood. We all might come into adulthood with these trauma responses all active in us and not knowing how to deal with them. But guess what? We create cultures and societies where that's the norm. And we create businesses, we create platforms where we're engaging with these apps, these social platforms, from these

trauma responses. These platforms are actually designed to target people who have less resistance to addiction.

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And guess what? There's evidence that people who are insecurely attached or traumatized have less resistance to addiction because they have a lot of compulsion. And these apps are created to exploit that. So here we are. Just consider this. Here we all are on these apps, organized around getting addicted to them, compulsively engaging with them. We are strengthening through our engagement. We are strengthening being in a trauma response. We are strengthening addiction. We are strengthening self-soothing through addiction. And we are strengthened by being dysregulated.

And guess what? We do harm on these apps as groups of people, or just through what we continue to do, being dysregulated that feeds into more use, the way more people use these apps, as well as feeds into people's experience of lived reality. So you've got all these people now who are feeling depression and anxiety from overuse of apps. You have a lot of people who are relapsing into their substance addiction from using apps. You've got a lot of people who are actually experiencing quite a lot of attachment disruption, like attachment trauma from these apps. Increased violence from exposure to people on apps.

We're not considering that it's not just traumatized people who traumatize people, but we're feeding a culture that continues to traumatize us and encourage us to run from trauma states and normalizes running from trauma states or existing in a trauma state. And there's an influence in both directions.

We are supporting people on apps by our use of the apps and us also being dysregulated as groups of people. We are supporting the worst people on the apps. Like, we are guilty here, too. We are all engaging in this together. And we're feeding this. So again, I want to highlight, in the midst of all this negativity about the apps, I love social media and I love dating apps. So please don't come for me...

Meagen Gibson

But it's about creating awareness, if I hear you right. That we need to be aware that this other dynamic is also happening in the background and that it was built for this as well. So that if you find yourself engaging with these tools in a way that feels like a struggle, in a way that feels like it's out of your control, if it's in a way that doesn't make you feel good. It's not adding to your life, it's detracting from it. That's your signal to remind yourself that it's built to do that. And this is your very biology that's being drawn to the ways that it's being built to manipulate you and control you.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. And I would mention, if you think that it isn't problematic for you, I would take even a further step. Be curious, right? Go take an Attachment Style questionnaire that's out there online. If you have insecure attachment, chances are you are on some level having some addiction to apps and to social media. It's very easy to get engaged in those centers through these apps.

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Additionally, if you don't want to go the attachment route, you can go take a questionnaire that's easily found online. The ACE questionnaire, Adverse Childhood Experiences. Because I know some people are like, "I had a great childhood. I got through everything. It's fine. I'm fine."

Okay, well, go take this questionnaire online. And I would recommend taking the international version, by the way. It's longer, but it's more thorough, and there's been research that shows that it is relevant to people across different cultures. So this Adverse Childhood Experiences questionnaire has pretty strong correlations to people who have higher scores on this questionnaire being that much more prone to high risk behaviors and addiction in adult life.

So if you're curious, go measure it for yourself, because there might be some things, especially in the ACE questionnaire. A lot of self-report questionnaires you can sort of say, "I am fine. I'm going to check the box for being fine." Self-report. If we're delusional, and we're all sort of delusional, in my opinion, myself included. If you're not really fully perceiving yourself, it's hard to answer a question in a way that's objective, and it's somewhat impossible to be objective, right?

But the ACE questionnaire talks about things like, "Hey, what was going on in your home environment? Did your parents know what was going on for you?" Which could signal neglect, right? "Were your parents available to you?". It asks these questions that get you to think.

And it also talks about things like, "Was there violence in your neighborhood?" cos that's a source of trauma too. We tend to take for granted that our environment, the many layers of environment we grow up in, set us up for having a nervous system that runs at a trauma response and gets us prone to addiction and prone to compulsive behavior.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, there doesn't have to be any intentional malicious abuse or neglect for you to have some of these contributing factors that put you more at risk for being susceptible to anxiety, depression, maladaptive coping skills and self-soothing.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. And I mean, I want to mention, looking at Attachment research. Of course, questionnaires can be self-reported. So I think we all have a tendency... Not all of us. Many of us have a tendency to answer them in a more positive view of ourselves. But currently there's the assumption, or there is the results in research that show that half the population is securely attached and half the population is insecurely attached. I don't think that's accurate. There is some research out there that questions that. Honestly, this is just me theorizing. Honestly, I think that it's more like 65% of the population is insecurely attached.

Meagen Gibson

Agreed.

[00:36:07] Dr Ava Pommerenk

And that people who were in these research studies that self-reported their attachment may have not been seeing themselves clearly. So think about that 65% of the population, and then you add in maybe some people who don't have much attachment-wounding, but they have violent environments they grew up in and their nervous systems are set at a trauma response. That's a huge chunk of the population that's engaging in apps addictively, which is feeding more of, I think, these large scale changes in mental health, social norms. What's considered normal for dating these days in these environments that really don't have checks and balances around accountability, personal accountability. So consider that.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Yeah. And something else that I want to talk to you about is around world events, big world events and social media. And how never before in history, in my knowledge, have we ever had the expectation and demand on us to have something of significance to say when a world event happens and to take a position, make a stance publicly, argue with someone, defend our position.

It doesn't end right. Something happens and we are assumed to have an opinion about it and it doesn't really matter what the issue is or what the world event is. Now everybody's got to state their very strong position. And it's such a strange thing to me that would not exist if we did not have social media.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah, I mean, it's replacing real life social discourse in person with what you're doing online. That is seen as what's most valid. And if you can demonstrate online that you know something about something and you have a position, then that is what's real. That's what validates the fact that you care or you're doing something in the real world. And look at the way that social media has replaced what validates our position on this planet.

Meagen Gibson

It's either we love the same things or we hate the same things, but rarely does that translate into our actions and behavior in the actual world, right?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yes. And again, social media can be used to report events before it even hits news channels. Provides a lot of different perspectives on an event, and can show real media footage of that time. There can be incredible ways that social media helps people in mobilizing to be politically active and to do it fast.

And it also has these effects, too. So look at the way that we're all taught to engage with somebody online when they're expressing an opinion we don't agree with, too. Like you look at the comments section and there's all this stuff out there about cancel culture.

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But really the core of it is like, "This content triggers me. I don't know how to regulate my process around it. This feels very important because this is my reality right now and I spend so much time here. I'm going to make this person feel horrible and I'm going to see if I can get a group of people to agree with it. And then I'm going to get the dopamine hit off of feeling right and feeling justified and feeling like other people also agree."

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. It's this false pedestal of power that is intoxicating and lights all the dopamine centers up, right?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Oh, my gosh. Yeah, but look how it reinforces. That feels so addictive and feels so good. But that is instructing what we're orienting toward in life. We're looking for those hits. Like we are addicts looking for those hits rather than looking for engagement, looking for connection, looking for mutual understanding, looking for personal accountability and growth.

This feeds how we show up in society and culture. It's changing our idea of what it is to engage as humans. This is stuff that I don't feel is being talked about enough. And there needs to still be a lot of research on the large scale social impact. Sociologists. I mean, it can be hard to draw causation from so many different mitigating factors. But there are ways. It seems pretty obvious that we're being influenced like this.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And for me, it's been an interesting study. Let me know if this resonates with you. But it's been to watch these sorts of things unfold on social media and the way that people talk about them and interact with them is, to me, just another way in which it's very clear how much attachment and trauma we as a society hold, but in different facets.

Because the same people aren't going to react in the same big ways to the same things. It doesn't matter what it is. It could be a water issue, it could be a civil rights issue, it could be any of the isms. It could be anything. And we're all going to respond from our personal relationship and growth and healing journey from a different place based on our relationship to that thing.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Totally. Our relationship to that thing. And at that moment, how many skills we have around self-soothing. And if we're engaging with this topic from a very compulsive, self-avoidant space, or if we're engaging from a more grounded, regulated space.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah. Well, where do we go from here? Ava, fix it.

[00:43:01] Dr Ava Pommerenk

Okay. So I think the number one thing that is important beyond nervous system regulation is making sure that we actually have interactions that have depth and mutual accountability in our daily lives. So building a life where you can have some level of community. Where you can have relationship connections where people will check you and say, "Hey, I see this differently. Let's talk about this."

So not just ending up around people who will agree with you and have the same thoughts and reactions to everything. But a community that has, in some sense, diversity. In a lot of ways, diversity. So there's many ways to interpret that.

But I find that a lot of folks end up in really troubled territory in their lives. Who are doing some very hurtful, harmful things. You look at the fact that they're isolated, and if they do have connections with people, it's very homogeneous. And they don't actually have the self-reflection and the growth mindset inherent in these relationships.

So I've got a lot of commentary on what's preventing diversity that I have to save for another talk. So I recognize there's ways whole societies and cultures are built around becoming more homogeneous, and that's a little dangerous. But the more you can seek out people who will actually check you, the better.

Like people who understand personal accountability and are living in that way and also encourage you to be that way. That's where you get practice. You get to really use that muscle of socio-emotional engagement. Additionally, I would say with these apps, now they're starting to incorporate controls that you can put on some of them to give you a time limit, or you can download an app to shut off the app.

Meagen Gibson

Yes, I have it.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah, me too. I would recommend getting the timer put on there. Get something that stops you after 30 minutes or an hour and forces you to get up and do something different. Be in the real world. Engage your body. Eat. Drink water. Go outside. Interact with real people. Well, real life, physical people.

But having a limit on the time can actually help your nervous system go, "Oh, yeah, that's right. I live in a body. I'm in a body. I'm not associated anymore. I'm in a body. I'm thirsty. I want water. I want to eat. Oh, yeah, it feels good to move. Oh, yeah. Nature makes me feel good. Music makes me feel good." To just get back in your body and get back into the present moment, you know, where there isn't this time warp of just scrolling and swiping.

Additionally, learning, putting in place different practices in your life that help with emotion regulation or just self-regulation. I can't stress this enough for people who have trauma, and I'd say many of us, or most of us do. Doing activities that engage your whole body, that help you enter a rested, safe state.

[00:47:02]

Seeing a therapist or a coach that has specialty in understanding trauma and the nervous system. Learning those different skills, having that relationship be something that feels very regulating for you. Even eating a diet that encourages you to feel grounded and well. And I know that there's limits on all these things, of what people are capable of doing based on time, energy, money, geography, accessibility.

And you do what you can, and you'd be surprised how much of a difference it makes to just limit the use of how long you're on the dating app. Put a limit. I'm going to swipe this many times and then I'm done. But having these different practices that help you connect to a sense of joy or awe or gratitude that have you connect to the real reason or the bigger reasons why we might be on this planet. And that, you know, that goes into, like, a philosophical, spiritual place. But really, are we meant... Ask yourself, honestly, am I meant to spend most of my waking hours referring to my phone?

Meagen Gibson

Not me.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Do you have a good feeling if you say yes? Probably not, right? I'm saying this from a place of constantly working on my addiction to social media in particular. I name it, right? And I've done a ton of nervous system regulation work. It is still very addictive to me. So be gentle with yourself. That's enough. Next thing, be gentle and kind with yourself. This isn't about perfection...

Meagen Gibson

Or judgment of yourself or shaming.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Totally. These apps are designed to be extremely addictive to all of us, and that's what helps them be successful. And it's possible to get off them. It's possible to stop engaging compulsively with them. But be gentle with yourself.

Just the same way somebody who's trying to quit alcohol. It's probably going to lead to more relapses and them feeling a lack of confidence or a sense of hopelessness if they're judging themselves and berating themselves all the time about this addiction. Really, you need social support. You need a structure in life that helps you fill the time you would have done drinking with something else. Which leads me to the next thing. Find what you're passionate about.

Find things that you really enjoy doing. Try not to be too scared. And it's okay if you're still really scared. Just try anyway. But try to discover things in life that you're excited about or that feel interesting to do. Because if you don't have passions or things that get you excited about life that are off the screen, you won't go to do them. There won't be motivation to fill your life with that thing.

[00:50:11] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely, yeah. It can be small, right? I am a typical middle-aged woman, and I'm really into birds in this season of my life. So into birds. It's not unique, but it's something I really enjoy. I go birding a lot. I have binoculars and special cameras. It's a thing, right?

So it could be apples. It doesn't matter. I had an apple the other day. Literally, my husband from the other room was like, "Calm down about the apple already." But getting into your life and enjoying things, without purpose. I don't have to turn my love of apples or birds into a career. I just have to really enjoy it and get passionate about it. And be enthusiastically engrossed with that thing.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Yeah. And the thing is, the more we engage in our projects or our passions, the more we gain a sense of confidence, the more it helps to regulate us. It helps us to feel safe and well, it helps us feel like we belong. The more we do that, the more it trains us to do it more. The more it trains us to have the default for a nervous system be in a more regulated state.

We are encouraged to do something if it feels good. And there are so many things out in the world, the physical world, that feel really good. We just have to take the risk of failing or that we won't like it. Just cultivate some curiosity in checking in with yourself. Yeah, I know for myself, I've ended up doing some really random things because I was like, "Well, what is this going to be like?".

And you know what? Great. Maybe I didn't like it, but it was something that maybe helped me meet people. It helped me get perspective on myself. I got confidence that I can do new things. Which will help you overall, by the way. If you have confidence, if you have more of a sense of a solid self-concept, it's something that actually helps prevent you from being more predisposed to addiction.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

There's so many different ways we can help ourselves not get caught as a culture, in a society, and globally in feeding this and then basically degrading how we interact with each other and making it the norm to respond and react to each other from this compulsive dysregulated space. Because that's what we're feeding all the time through being online, right?

Meagen Gibson

Yes.

[00:52:54] Dr Ava Pommerenk

Because I'm sure when you enjoy your birding, you are like the coolest person to be around afterwards.

Meagen Gibson

Well, I mean, it depends how much you want to hear. If you're into hearing stories about birds, then yes, I'm your girl. But for me, it's really about... Like one of the most wonderful things that I've learned in studying about trauma and talking to all of the experts that we have in the conferences, is that things like joy and curiosity and wonder are unavailable to you in a dysregulated state or when you're in a triggered state.

And for me, doing trauma work, doing healing work, talking about trauma, educating people about trauma, my whole purpose is to get people back to a position where they have access to joy and wonder and curiosity. Because it's not superfluous. It's not a thing only a select few people in the world are entitled to have. It is everybody's birthright. And it's literally the whole reason we exist, to me.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

Precisely. Yeah, I mean, that's the thing even if someone doesn't like to hear you all excited talking about birds and what happened. We don't realize that relationally, when we're receiving somebody who's that excited and that joyful and in that sort of state, our nervous system responds positively to that, usually in person. That's when we respond most positively. It gets a little more diluted when it's online exchanges, but still online, too.

But even if, I mean, I like birding, too. I don't get into it, I think, as much as you do. But if you were telling me a story where I was like, "Ooh, wow, Meagen's got a lot to say about this", I would still be like, "Oh, I feel really good. I'm hearing about something that's bringing her so much joy, and we can give that to each other."

We don't exist so individualistically. We encourage other people to regulate. We have to be regulated through ourselves to encourage our presence to regulate other people rather than harm them. And it's not either or. But I'm making a point, right?

So you got to start here. If you are not running from a space, if you're not in a space where you're experiencing regulation, you're not experiencing awe and joy and wellness, you're probably feeding in your regular life more of what causes societally dysregulation. We are creating this together from our individual experience. We can help contribute in a positive way and also get that from the people we're around, too.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. And I think, too, about all of the... My social media feed is very cultivated toward positive and good and growth. But for people for whom that's not the case, it can exacerbate feelings of lack or FOMO, missing out on things or feeling like everybody else has got it figured out. And that can be super-depleting. And if you're working on yourself and you then find things that you can share.

[00:56:17]

My kids and I, we are constantly celebrating, like, nerddom and geekdom in our house. But for us, the definition of that isn't like intelligence. It's this massive enthusiasm about something that's just unique for you. So for them, they watch YouTube videos of drummers, and I'm like, "Oh, that's good for you." But I love to hear them getting excited about a drummer.

For me, it's the birds. For somebody down the street. I have a friend from our conferences who loves gnomes and finds gnomes in the forest all the time. Like, these little ceramic gnomes appear to her. It brings me so much joy every time she posts a picture of a gnome. We pulled the car over yesterday and took a picture of a gnome to send to her.

I'm not into gnomes, but I know she is. So I'm going to share my joy with her on social media. So when we orient ourselves toward that, like you said earlier, it builds that muscle of being oriented toward what we can be curious and in wonder and leaning in, trying to learn and listen about.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

And then that plays into how we use social media and what we encourage on social media. It's just this feedback loop going in multiple directions. Yeah, I feel like I could talk for another 3 hours on this.

Meagen Gibson

I know. We got to wrap it up. Next time, Ava. I always say, next time, we'll get to that. But for people who want to hear all about your birds and what you love about birds, where can they find out more about you?

Dr Ava Pommerenk

I'm going to get a bunch of messages of people being like, "So what's your interest in birds?" Okay, so you can go on my website, avapommerenkphd.com, and there you'll learn a bit about me, the services I offer. But you can also just reach out to me through my website. You can also find me on [Instagram](#) and [Facebook](#). I'd say I'm more active on Instagram, for better or for worse.

Meagen Gibson

Right? No irony, here.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

I know, right? More active on my professional Instagram. And you can see some of the projects I do there. I do work with people that are centered around soulful authenticity. Something I've named myself here, which really does involve getting regulated while being able to have your full, authentic expression of you in a regulated state in this world.

[00:58:43] Dr Ava Pommerenk

So my Instagram has me doing that on it, and then also just motivational posts and stuff like that. And you can reach out and message me there, too. But, yeah, Facebook, Instagram, or my website.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

And then there's also, I've got a Medium.com account. I believe it's [Dr Pommerenk](#). And you can find some of my writings about random, different things there, too. I sometimes help people with... Another passion of mine is helping people recover from narcissistic abuse. So there's some writings I have about that on there, and you can reach out to me through that, too.

Meagen Gibson

Fantastic. Dr Pommerenk, thank you again, as always, for being with us.

Dr Ava Pommerenk

You're so welcome. Thank you for inviting me.