



Conscious Life presents

How to Understand Your Relational Trauma

Guest: Dr Meg-John Barker & Dr Alex Iantaffi

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[00:00:09] Jaï Bristow

Hello and welcome to this conference. My name is Jaï Bristow and I'm one of your hosts. And today I am delighted to be welcoming two wonderful speakers. We have Dr Alex Iantaffi, a family therapist, sex therapist, gender specialist, and award-winning author. Welcome, Alex.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Thank you for having me here today. So excited to be having this conversation with you and MJ.

Jaï Bristow

Hi, great to have you back. And we have Dr Meg-John Barker, an internationally renowned speaker and writer with a background in therapy, academics and activism. Welcome, MJ.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Hi.

Jaï Bristow

Lovely to see you both again. So we had a conversation together in the Heal Toxic Relationship Super Conference, where we talked about how to understand your toxic relationships. And in today's topic, we're going to talk a little bit more about your upcoming book *How to Understand Your Relationships*, focusing specifically on relational trauma.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah.

Jaï Bristow

So, do you want to get us started by telling us what relational trauma is?

[00:01:18] Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. Are you okay if I get started, MJ? A little transparent process. I think relational trauma can be so many different things, which is why it's a little tricky. Because, in a way, I think there is a level of relational trauma within dominant culture. Capitalism, I think, it's not very relational, for example. And so that creates a kind of historical and intergenerational trauma that gets passed down about how we do relationships and how we treat one another.

But of course, there's also interpersonal relationship trauma. So, maybe things that we've experienced growing up, and now we've experienced relationships, and then we bring that into our parenting, we bring that into our friendships. We bring that into our intimate partnerships. Because when MJ and I talk about relationships, we're really talking about all relationships, right? So not just intimate relationships, but also our relationships with our kids, if we're parents or caregivers, our relationships with our neighbors, our relationship with our friends, our relationship with the ecosystem around us, right? Our relationship with our pets. And we try to meet our relational needs in a lot of different ways as humans. And that trauma piece is really...

Sometimes I describe it as those very thick window glass panes that you can have in the shower, where decorations are really thick. You can still see through that glass pane, but everything is distorted. And I think trauma can be like that, right? It kind of distorts our experience of relationships. It impacts our thoughts and feelings. The last thing I'll say about relationship trauma is that "trauma" can seem like a really big word. And I know, as a therapist, sometimes clients really react to it, if I say "trauma." They're like, "I'm fine. I don't have trauma," or "My childhood was fine." And I think that we use this big word, but actually trauma can be many things.

Trauma can also come from parents that are too busy surviving under capitalism to adequately meet the attachment needs of their kids, right? Or parents who have their own complex PTSD or trauma from having been brought up in a war zone, for example, or having their own attachment issues, right? And even though they're wonderful parents and caregivers, their nervous system goes into fight, flight or freeze in a certain way that then impacts how as children, we're brought up and how we can manage or not manage different nervous system states very well.

And then when you bring all of that into relating, you can have what I sometimes call a 'trauma party,' which is when one or more people are kind of activated with each other, right? And now we're no longer relating, we're just having what I call a trauma party, which is we're having a mixture of fight, flight, freeze, fawning, and are we actually really present and relating with one another? I don't know if you want to add anything to that, MJ, in terms of what relational trauma is and how it might show up.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, I feel like just, again, acknowledging what tender territory this is and how much this stuff is present for us. Some of the most painful things in my life and most of the lives of the people I know is relational trauma. Because relationships are so hugely important to us, just as human beings. And then in our current culture, we put so much stress on relationships as the thing that's going to kind of save us, and love will save the day and people will complete us and all of this.

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So there's so much pressure on love. And often it is a place where initially we can experience so many good things and almost feel the absence of trauma. So it's just incredibly hard when we realize these traumatic patterns have found their way into our relationships, like you say, with ourselves, with intimate partners, with our kids, our parents, friends, colleagues. It's sometimes really hard to notice that that's even happened, because those things seem quite normal to us, if those are familiar from our childhoods. Or when we do realize how bad it's got, it can be really shocking and kind of retraumatizing to realize we've kind of gone there again.

So, I think that's the sort of territory we're in and how much it relates to emotions as well, I guess. How would I know that I'm in a traumatic relationship? It's often because either there's quite a lot of under emotion, this kind of a dissociation or repression of feelings, or often feelings have become very overwhelming and almost unbearable, at least at times. Whether that's feelings of fear, shame, rage, loneliness, loss, those feelings are kind of through the roof.

That's a real sign that something about how we were brought up in terms of feeling is in play here, as well as how our wider culture treats emotions. So, coming to a better relationship with ourselves and with others is what we're in this for, I guess, when we're tackling our relationship trauma.

Jai Bristow

Yeah, absolutely. Thank you both for bringing in these really important topics and also great images. Alex, I loved how you talk about that sort of thick glass and that sort of misty glass, and that trauma has that thing... It's sometimes really hard to see through it. And if I keep that analogy, sometimes, if that's all you've known, then your eyes get used to it and you don't even realize that you're not seeing clearly anymore.

And that trauma party you were describing, sadly I can relate too well, when everything gets activated. And then MJ, I loved as well how you were talking about recognizing... Because that was going to be one of my questions. You're both talking about how complex it is and how much it's integrated into our lives often, especially because relational trauma particularly starts a lot of the time from very early on, starts from childhood, starts with our conditioning around, our early family and caregivers, and also cultural conditioning. So, it's so hard to see.

And so I appreciated you bringing in that element around the emotions as a way of recognizing if we're experiencing this relational trauma. Alex, I was wondering if you had anything else you wanted to bring in, specifically around recognizing not just what it is, but recognizing that we have it or that we're in a state of trauma in our relationships.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yes, that's always very tricky, because, like you said, if we are immersed and we're having that moment where we can even feel very grounded and very clear, like, "I see very clearly and I feel like I'm right and this is wrong and what's happening is objectively wrong and the other person is at fault." We can feel so righteous within ourselves. I definitely know I've had those moments where I'm like, "I am seeing the pattern clearly. I know that this is what's happening, and it's not about

me." And then I'm like, "Oh, hang on a moment. Actually, this is about me, and I am seeing things through that kind of misty glass, or things are not quite as clear as they seem."

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And sometimes it takes another person's perspective. And so it can be very tricky, and I think what's helpful is having a solid network of friends and trusted people, or even a therapist or a close friend or somebody who knows us, where we can kind of check in sometimes. But things to watch out for are things like all-or-nothing thinking, "Things are this way or that way."

If we are kind of engaging in all-or-nothing thinking patterns, that's probably something to be questioned. If we feel 100% sure that it's all the other person's fault, that's also a red flag. I often say it takes two or three or four to tango, whichever combo and whichever dance we're doing. Not all dances are, like, just dyadic partner dances. And so whichever dance we're in, it takes all of us to contribute. And if I'm so certain that I'm doing nothing wrong, well, maybe I can be a little bit more curious about what's the other person's experience. Because also, trauma makes us self focused, right?

To survive, we need to focus on ourselves. And so if we are so self-focused that we lost perspective about what's going on with the other person or the other people, we lost curiosity. That's probably a good sign that there's some trauma reaction at play. And then the only other piece I'll bring in is getting to know our nervous system, right? Getting to know our nervous system responses. Like, do I know what fight feels like in my body? Do I know what flight feels like in my body?

Do I know what freeze feels like in my body? And do I know what fawning, people pleasing, feels like in my body? Those four major trauma responses... And recognizing that they might change as well. Maybe I knew what those felt like in my body ten years ago, but now I'm in a different place, and those felt differently, so that there's also a constant relearning that we need to do about ourselves.

Because also, we show up differently in different relationships. So those responses might look very differently now than they did ten years ago or 20 years ago.

And I know this might sound like a lot of work, and I also know that some of our brains are not always necessarily very good at interception, the ability to perceive our inner state. And so it is like a muscle that we're constantly exercising. And for some of us, we need to put a little bit more of a workout in that muscle than other people, but it is possible to, I think, recognize some of those things within ourselves.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Lots of things pinging... And some of it, I'll go into a bit more when we talk about plurality, but I was struck by the all-or-nothing and good-bad. A lot of the theories I'm playing with at the moment, they're about the kind of selves, the parts of the self, or the selves that we're in in relational trauma or in trauma in general, having this very good-bad thinking.

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So, as well as you saying, Alex, if you feel like, "I'm completely right, I'm completely good, the other person's all bad" being a sign, the flip is also a sign, where you think, "I'm completely bad and this other person's all good," which we can have in a really wonderful way in the early stages of a relationship, but it's also a little red flag flying when we have that.

Because if we really think this other person's all good, and certainly if we think they're all good and we're all bad, and if they start to say things to us and we completely accept their truth over ours, that's another sign. There's lots of different ways these dynamics can play out. But I would say when you're in blame or shame completely, that's a sign.

And the other thing I just wanted to pick up on was your thing about building the relationship support system. Because of where these things are coming from, we're not always best placed ourselves to know, "Is this relationship a good idea for me? Might there be some of my old patterns?" And unfortunately, in the dominant culture we're in, there's often a lot of pressure to keep the doors closed on our relationships, to keep these things private, not to tell people about them.

And one... Two of the things I guess I've really started to do in terms of my own relationship trauma, and hopefully not perpetuating it further, is to make sure that anyone I form any kind of new relationship with knows the doors are going to be wide open. I'm going to be talking to a lot of people, therapists, friends, often Alex, about how my relationships are going.

And if somebody's not open to the doors being open, then I'm going to step back from that relationship. And the other thing would be going fairly slowly. So that, again, I can keep feeling into how this is, rather than kind of going really fast into relating, where I might not notice some of these signs until it's not too late, but until the dynamics have become really entrenched.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah, I love that you said that. Absolutely... Because often, I think, we go into that place of "What's wrong with you" or "What's wrong with me," when it comes to trauma and relationships. And I think a really useful question to ask is, "What's happening between us right now?" I think it can be so easy. Trauma really pushes us to be like, "Well, what's wrong with me? What's wrong with you?" That shame-and-blame game...

But when we can be curious about what is happening between us, "What is this dynamic? Does this dynamic feel familiar to you? Does it feel familiar to me? Do we remind each other of specific people? Do we understand who we are drawn to and why?"

Usually that imprint is set pretty early on in our lives. If somebody is emotionally unavailable, it's like catnip for me. I recognize that pattern. I feel that intimacy pattern from my childhood, and so, do I know that about myself? And can I be curious about what is happening between us, what's happening for you. When we lose that curiosity and we go into the blame-and-shame game, then we know that we moved into relational trauma territory, as far as I'm concerned.

[00:15:28] Jaï Bristow

Absolutely. Thank you both for bringing in this super important piece. And I really like the idea of blaming as making it all the other person's fault. Shaming is making it all our fault.

And as you both have mentioned, or as you've all mentioned, that is very much something that is all too familiar, and we can fluctuate between both. So sometimes it's all your fault, and then it's, "Oh, my God, I'm terrible. It's all my fault."

And there were some really key elements you talked about. I can't remember exactly what you said, but there were some fantastic elements there around recognizing the toxicity of that thinking. That was it. If we take the word of the other as truth over what we're feeling, for example, that's a major red flag.

So I think there's really great material in what you've just shared. You touched upon, towards the end, MJ, about that slowing down piece. And so I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about that slowing down.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, definitely. And I think it sort of relates to something as well. I was thinking when you're talking that what we explore in the book is also about relational fit. We have such a one-size-fits-all idea of what a romantic relationship looks like, what a friendship looks like. We get that from our culture, and then we often have our own individual scripts of like, "This is what a partner should be, this is what a friend should be, this is what a colleague should be."

And I think those really can further relational trauma because there's no flexibility. And there's sort of this idea that if we connect, then we must become partners, friends, colleagues, and it must look a certain way. And I think one of the things is moving away from that to a much more flexible and slower kind of model where it's like...

You know, we write about this in the book. Alex and I had exactly this experience of getting together as partners and then that didn't really work with us. And then we found our way to colleagues, and then we found our way to really close friendship and colleague relationship, over the 20 years or so we've known each other.

And I think, because we're all different in so many ways, we bring different trauma patterns, we have different neurodivergences, we have different relationship styles, monogamous, non monogamous, all kinds of ways of doing friendship and colleague relationships...

This idea that it's actually about finding where's the fit, where's the overlap here... What's the container or the conditions that make this relationship work best? Rather than, again, that all-or-nothing, i.e. either we're partners or we're nothing. Or, even worse, either we're partners or you're my enemy forever.

So slow is kind of having that openness to flexibility over time, recognizing everyone's going to change, really being up for exploring what are our patterns, what are our neurodivergences, what are our preferred ways of relating, finding the overlaps, moving back, moving forward. But also, for me, as somebody who got into relationships very fast, it's always like, "Oh, I feel a connection with

you." Next thing, "I'm in love with you," or next thing, "You're my best friend." Maybe having met someone once or twice, I just thought that connection meant, that's good.

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And sometimes that gives you that bit of a honeymoon period where you have this new shiny friendship, you have this new shiny partnership, and all the fear and shame kind of drops off for a while and you think like, "This is amazing."

And then those patterns really sneak back in. And often they really come back because some element of maybe why you were drawn to that person was because there were familiar patterns there. Not always, but sometimes for sure. So now I'm kind of like a real advocate, for me at least. But for others who find a useful idea of this slow relating...

And I read some research recently about the average length of meeting with somebody that would take for someone to become acquaintance to friend, friend to closer friend, close friend to one of your best people in your life, and it was like 90 odd times you need to meet someone to go to that level.

And it's like, well, yeah, could we not necessarily impose that model on everyone at all, but just invite that that's really okay to take your time to really feel into how you are around a person, and again, maybe have some conscious conversations about what friendship means.

If it's the burgeoning friendship, "What does friendship mean to you? And what are your boundaries around that? What are your wants and needs around that?" Rather than just like, "Oh yes, we connected, we're best friends." And then, "Oh dear, okay, we had a pretty different understanding of what that meant."

And that's felt like, say, as a betrayal by someone or as an abandonment by someone. And again, you come with sort of a retraumatizing experience rather than what could have been a really healthy and happy relationship.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah, I love everything you're saying, MJ. And I want to also add how challenging that is for some of us, as somebody who comes from a culture where... In Southern Italy especially, you can just connect so quickly and feel so intensely, "We've had this deep conversation on this 1 hour long bus ride and now we are besties and we have exchanged numbers, right? And we are connected."

I know that for me that slow relating, I totally see the value of it. And it goes against everything in me culturally and also everything in me connected to my anxious attachment style. I'm an anxiously attached person by and large. And so when we are anxiously attached, sometimes we want to kind of bypass and accelerate commitment, because that makes us feel secure.

And actually I've really had to learn over time, over the last five decades of life that you really cannot bypass and accelerate that. And for me it's like this both and dance. I do feel an immediacy of connection culturally. I can totally go to the place of like, "We're besties now" and also, can I have it both and?

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Can I recognize this cultural pattern around relating fast? Can I recognize my anxiously attached nature? And can I have compassion for myself and also maintain... Can I hold the relationship with some open hands? Maybe I am feeling this intensity and I'm okay with that.

And also I recognize that there are certain things that build over time. Trust builds over time. Like you said, we have 20 years of relating to one another in lots of different ways, which is amazing. And partially, I think, what enabled us to stay in a relationship over 20 years is having both that self-compassion and compassion.

"Hang on a minute. Okay, I'm feeling upset or this is happening when we broke up, but I'm also curious about what's happening for you. I'm also curious about what's happening between us. And I'm also curious about what's happening around us."

Because also, relationships don't happen in a vacuum, right? They happen in the context of our lives. And sometimes there are stressors in our lives that really contribute to putting pressure on that relationship, right? And so sometimes I'm just amazed that we manage to relate to one another at all in the world. Because it's so hard.

And I think we talk about relationships like they're this easy thing, but actually they're really hard. And in a way, they're harder because we are under pressure from capitalism. We do have all these expectations of what a relationship should look like, right? What love should look like.

But if we really approach love and relationship from a lens of, "I really care about this person and I really care about their well being," then I think that shifts the relationship. Because then it's not about, I see this person as an object or I see this person as somebody who can meet my needs, but actually, hang on a minute. Relationships are about what we create between us.

And I think that slowness allows us to explore what it is that we're weaving between us and does that need to change? And it's okay for relationships to change over time, but trauma doesn't want that.

Trauma wants absolutes, and trauma wants speed. And trauma makes us feel like everything is urgent. And so that's the other thing. If I feel a sense of urgency, I probably know it's trauma, because if there is no fire, blood, or flood, like one of my teachers, Kathy Kain, says, there's actually no crisis, then it's trauma. Then I'm feeling a sense of urgency, but there is objectively no urgency, if that makes sense.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, but I love Alex that what we emphasize in the book, too, is this is incredibly hard. This is what we're up against. We're almost programmed on every level, from our culture to our upbringing, that we should treat people as things, as objects for us to try and possess them. It's in every pop song, "You belong to me," and all of this.

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And it's actually the work of treating someone else as another free human being who we value their well-being over what they are to us. I think it's put across like that would be an easy thing to do, to sort of actually care about others.

Actually caring about others is one of the hardest things you'll ever learn how to do. It's a reason why a whole kind of world religions and philosophies are devoted to how on earth would we actually manage to be caring and compassionate and kind with other people. Because it actually is really hard not to just see people through the trauma lens or the lens of what they are to us.

And that's what we're doing here. So it's also a real spiritual journey, I think, in terms of learning how to relate well with others, with ourselves and with the world.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. I think it really interrogates our values around love and care. And I think that our culture is not well when it comes to relationships. And so when the culture is not well, when there is this cloud of trauma in the culture around relating, how can we find our way to this beautiful, slow, intentional relating? And also, slow doesn't mean...

One of the things I've learned is that slow doesn't have to mean a lack of commitment. Slow just means, "Can we be slow enough that we can really get to know each other, so that I can love you the way you want to be loved and make you feel loved, and you can love me in the way that makes me feel cared for and loved."

And that's going to take a minute to figure out, even for the speediest of us, it's going to take a moment to learn each other.

Dr Meg-John Barker

But it doesn't preclude those moments of beautiful presence and connection with strangers. I guess, again, it's such a work progress for us both. But I'm really with that. How can I be completely present and available to those beautiful, kind of fleeting moments with a stranger without them or me putting on this cultural kind of piece about it's got to escalate, it's got to suddenly become, it's got to have that urgency.

Can we just be open to fleeting moments with somebody or a comet star relationship where we meet once a year and have an amazing time? Or can we be open to all these different ways of relating, where we can be super present and super connected without having to put it on the kind of relationship escalator of getting more and more intense over time or making that person a thing for us because we had one good experience with them.

Jaï Bristow

Yeah. Thank you both for bringing in this really, again, important piece. And I really appreciate how you talk about the value of slow relating and seeing what it is and isn't, and then also recognizing how hard that is and how the ways our brains are wired, the way trauma works means that it's a nice idea, but it's really hard.

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So bringing in that both and being able to hit the brakes and take one's time and do slow relating is really beneficial and really supportive, and it can be incredibly difficult when we're not conditioned to do that and our brains aren't wired to do that, and especially with trauma.

Like you say, there is that urgency. And we are speaking specifically about relational trauma. So if you are in a relationship where you meet someone and you have that urgency feeling, yes, it's probably to do with your trauma. It's probably to do with your patterns. And that's okay. There's nothing wrong with that or with you.

And like you all have said about bringing in that compassion and recognizing that and the both and. And I was really struck as well about the relational fit you were speaking about, and about these ideas and expectations of what a relationship should look like and how it should progress... And all these "shoulds."

And this theme of 'should' has come up a lot in this conference, in a lot of my interviews. And I was talking to Akilah Riley-Richardson, actually, earlier today in another interview about the glitch. And the glitch is an acronym she uses where she's talking about the glitch, a bit like *A Glitch in the Matrix*, where all these shoulds and expectations, where something subverts that and suddenly doesn't go in that way.

But glitch is also an acronym and an opportunity through which to discover something different, to heal, to find the juiciness, and to reconnect with life and with oneself, as opposed to how we think life should be lived. So I really recommend people go check out that talk as well, if they haven't had the opportunity to do so yet.

Now, there's been some fantastic elements brought in already. And Alex, I was really struck by what you were saying. Instead of asking, "What have you done wrong?" or "What's wrong with you?" or "What have I done wrong?" or "What's wrong with me?" It's asking, "What's happening between us?" So it's not asking, "What's *wrong* with our relationship?" either. It's asking, "What's happening?" but taking that even one step further.

So it's, "What's happening between us?" whoever us is, but also, "What's happening with you, what's happening in you right now?" Not "What's wrong with you?" or "Why have you done this?" and "You are wrong!" but "What's going on for you right now? What is being activated? What's being triggered? What patterns are coming up? Who are you seeing me as in this moment?" And really being curious.

And then, same thing. Bringing that same curiosity to oneself. Okay, "What's going on in me right now? Why am I acting this way? What is the history? What is the pattern?" So again, looking at it all from that place of curiosity of "What's happening between us? And why is it happening between us? Probably because of something that's happening in me and something that's happening in you." And you can be one, two, multiple people.

And so I think that that's really helpful when our relational trauma is activated or when we're aware that it's something that's happening. Like, "Why do I feel uncomfortable at this moment? Not

immediately because of the other, whoever or however many people the other is." And then from there, we can have the questions and the conversations which can bring clarity.

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And that's when we see, "Is it a relationship that we are able to work on together, that can become healing? Or is it a relationship that is just retraumatizing, and there's fundamental either incompatibilities or lack of capacity or lack of whatever it is to actually heal it? And instead it becomes retraumatizing, because often it's one or the other."

So I'd really like to explore that. How about having those conversations, having tools, having the opportunity, when we recognize our trauma and our trauma responses in a relationship, and again, relationship in the broadest sense of the term? How do we then figure out how to take the path of healing as opposed to retraumatizing?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

I love that question. I think one of the things that's really important to recognize is also which parts of ourselves are getting activated. I think whether we are plural or singlet, so whether we see ourselves as a singular self or as plural selves, we all have different parts, right?

And of course, if we're plural, then our parts have parts, right? But if we look at it from an internal family system perspective, or just from a systemic perspective, or even a cultural perspective, not every culture looks at the self as a singular entity.

But first of all, recognizing which parts of me are getting activated in this relationship... So, for example, is it my child self that's really feeling abandoned over and over? Is it my teenage self that's getting really activated, and it's getting pretty protective? Often our teenage parts can be a little bit more fighty, a little bit more mouthy. Often I ask clients, if I'm working with a couple or a polycule, "Let's take a break. How old is everybody right now? How old do you feel at this moment? I know it seems like an odd question."

Can we ask ourselves, "How old do I feel right now?" Recently I've been feeling very teenage-like, in a new relationship, which can be exhilarating, all this new relationship energy... But also, developmentally, in adolescence everything is urgent, everything is big, everything is now!

And so if we can recognize how old are the parts of ourselves that are getting activated, we can also slow down and be like, "Hey, my child self feels really abandoned" when you need to take a break during conflict.

And I wonder if there is a different way we can approach that. I think that is helpful because then we're starting to recognize that also. We don't always operate in the same way with everybody. We are different in different relationships because different people bring out different aspects of ourselves or different people within our system.

And I think that it's important to recognize that, because when we can recognize that and then we can recognize what's also happening for the other person or people we're relating with, again, we

can go back to that place of curiosity of like, "Hey, maybe we're actually a really good fit in terms of peer to peer, but our child selves are actually not fitting very well."

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So what's happening there? Or "Our teenage selves are not fitting very well. When we are in our adult place, we can really connect in one way, but then there are some other times when we don't connect in that way. So what's happening?"

But if we look at ourselves as one singular block who's always the same in all circumstances, I don't think that's as helpful. I don't know, MJ, you're so much better than I am on this aspect, so I'm sure that you have many wise things to add to this.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Oh, thanks, Alex. But no, that was really great. Yeah, I mean, really for us, we're a plural system, so there's five of us in here at the moment.

And yeah, relational trauma was really why we decided about five years ago, four years ago, to kind of take a step back from a lot of relating, in order to do a lot of inner work relating within that system.

And I think, again, as you say, for everyone, really some kind of plural work or parts work or voice dialog, it's called... There are so many different systems for understanding this. And recently, the twelve-step programs, a lot of them are doing a lot of stuff around reparenting, the ACA approach...

So whatever language people use or whatever way you find towards it, just this sense that there's different parts of you or different aspects, and that some of those have traumatized and then have traumatizing ways of relating.

And the model that we've come across recently, that's very simple, but really helps us, is this idea that from developmental trauma, the good kind of experiences are when we were met by others growing up and when our emotions were held and heard by adults, parents, or caregivers, and when we had that sense of being met and being looked after. And then the bad experiences were all those experiences, like you said, Alex, earlier, where we didn't get met or we didn't get held or heard.

And the idea in this model by Ronald Fairbairn is that we create this kind of central self out of all those good experiences, who's kind of up here, and then below in the shadow or the unconscious, there's two selves. There's the needy self, who's always trying to get the good back, who holds all our experiences of losing that good met experience and is very scared of losing it again, but always trying to get it back. And that's a lot of that anxious attachment you were talking about.

And then we also put away in the unconscious the rejecting self, who contains everything bad we met in the other, all those experiences of not being met, and also everything we were told was bad in ourselves. And that really maps onto what you were saying, the inner child and the inner teen or the inner child and the inner critic.

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And the needy self is desperately trying to get it back all the time, but underneath is that self that carries all the shame, that believes that there is something wrong with us.

And the rejecting self is also the rejected. So they're kind of the one who blames out, but also the one who shoots all the anger in at us. Understanding those two, and those two having quite a lot of parts, as you said, parts within parts, it's been for us a really deep learning of trying to bring those two out of the unconscious into the light, really, and understand all our mechanisms.

And we have certainly found that our relating has become less traumatized and traumatizing, as, for example, the needy self learns to feel connection with all kinds of people in all kinds of relating, rather than going after the one true that's going to rescue him, finally.

And the rejecting, rejected self is learning what her capacities are in the world, that she's not all bad, that she includes a lot of clarity and a lot of power and a lot of compassion actually.

So there's a lot of material in our book and also on our website around how you might do these plural journeys. But I can so encourage people to kind of do those journeys in therapy or in support groups like Twelve-step or in their spiritual practice or in their relationship, starting to learn how to use this language. It's just really helpful.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Yeah. And I think what's helpful about that, it's also accepting our complexity and accepting each other's complexity. I think there is this idea...

And I love social media, don't get me wrong. I think there's amazing things that we got from the Internet and social media, and also sometimes everything can be reduced to a sound bite. And it makes it sound like, "Here's a list of red flags in relationships, or here are all the things that you deserve to be loved in a certain way." And I'm like, "Yes. So does everybody else, though."

So the reality is the relationships are so much more nuanced and complex that we can sum up in a quick reel or a quick TikTok. I'm not saying that those are bad, there's a lot of really amazing education that's going out there and community building. But I think it can give this idea that there are ideal relationships, that there are things that are red flags at all times, or people that are always toxic. And actually there's so much more complexity. Our inner landscapes are so much more complex.

And even, how much attention are we paying to the relationship with ourselves? Because we've been talking about relationships with other people. But for me, I'm in this phase of healing in my 50s where I'm like, "Hang on a minute, how's my relationship with myself going? Am I constantly trying to get my needs met through other people?"

Developmental trauma often makes us feel like there is a core of "unlovability," I call it. Somehow we're unlovable. Everything we touch turns to crap. We couldn't possibly be loved. And so there's

almost an element of looking for validation and rescue from outside ourselves, because we feel so unlovable.

[00:41:05]

But then if somebody loves us, first of all, what's wrong with them for loving us when we're unlovable? Or if there's nothing wrong with them because we're idolizing them, when is the other shoe going to drop? And when they're going to realize that we are bad and unlovable?

And so if we don't address that core of unlovability that so many of us with developmental trauma experience, we're never going to be fully satisfied when relating to others, because we're trying to meet needs that ultimately need to be met within our system.

And I'm not saying you can't love others until you love yourself, because again, that is too simplistic. It is much more complicated. We get hurt in relationships and we heal in relationships. We actually do need to feel love from others to also learn to love ourselves. So again, it's a both and. It's not one comes before the other. It's not linear, but there needs to be time and effort that we spend on the relationship with ourselves and not just the relationship with other people.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Absolutely. And I think that, again, up until about five years ago, I think, what we thought of as an 'I' at the time would have been like loving yourself. It doesn't even compute. How could a self love a self? And this plurality has opened up. How that might be possible?

Because you can cultivate aspects of yourself that they might call parental selves or witnessing selves or holding selves, who can kind of love the ones who are more traumatized. And again, as we're finding, then it becomes actually more reciprocal relationships and more like a team, where everybody loves and respects everybody else.

And again, once you have that model internally, it is much easier to get that everyone's that complex and to realize, "Oh, when that person said they'd love you forever, they were talking from that needy self." And it's understandable that the same person another time was being really avoidant with you because then they were in the rejecting self. And everyone is that complicated.

So we're not being so confused by other people's relationship trauma. We're able to understand it and treat ourselves and others as that complex, and recognize what we can actually give ourselves, as well as giving to others.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

And I think when we can more easily recognize that, we also know our needs better. And we can ask and receive care more easily from others, because sometimes we know we want to be loved. But what does that mean?

But if I know what gives me, all of my selves, pleasure and joy, then I can ask for it from others, right? It's like if I know that having fresh flowers when I'm feeling down and this specific tea is what brings me joy, then I can also more easily say to others, "This is how I like to be loved. This is how I

like to be cared for," because I know what feels nourishing for me. But often we're trying to piecemeal it from popular culture or trying to adapt to what people give us without actually really knowing ourselves and having that deep relationship with ourselves.

[00:44:27] Jai Bristow

I really appreciate how you all have brought in the complexity of humans and of relationships. And of course, it makes sense, if each human is complex and made up of different parts or different cells, and then relating with another human, who is also definitely made up of different parts and different cells, of course it's complex.

And then again, the importance of the relationship with oneself... And the more we get to know about our relationship with ourselves and our do's and don'ts in relating, the more we can communicate that and share that. The more we get to know our triggers and what supports us and what we need in what given moment, the more we can communicate that. So I really appreciate you bringing this in.

I just want to make a slight clarification, perhaps for the audience, because you were both talking about multiple selves in a slightly different way. So, Alex, you were talking very much specifically around multiple parts of oneself, and you were talking that we can have our internal child, we can have parental voices, we can have teenage parts, we can have all these different parts.

And then those different parts of ourselves, some might work really well with someone else's parts. And then there might also be parts that don't get on so well with someone else's parts. So you're talking perhaps child and child might not work, or teenager and teenager. But then I think sometimes also what happens is, if we're in a childlike state, then the other might become a parent, because they might be responding to where we're at and vice versa.

So that's also why dynamics can play out. And often we attract people... We cast people in our lives who are going to play out those patterns for us. So we often also end up, for example, attracting someone who, when they're in a parental mode, might mirror a parent that we had, and we'll go into child mode, or vice versa. And so again, when we're relating from a very adult, mature self, it might work, and then there are moments where it doesn't.

And again, MJ, you also talked about that contradiction, where someone might say one thing 1 minute, and then two days later or 2 hours later, they're saying almost the opposite. And it feels like, "How can this be the same person?" And if we recognize the complexity of humans and the different parts, then it makes sense that...

And some of these parts are often traumatized or frozen in time, and others less so. And then, MJ, I really want to bring in this piece around plurality that you were sharing as well, because it's a different flavor to the parts work, or the multiple selves work. It's one step further, where you talk about being plural.

You use, for example, "we" and "us" when referring to MJ as a system, right? And you use the term "system," which is a bit different to what you, Alex, were talking about. So just for listeners who are unfamiliar with this plurality work, which is less common, I think, and less shared than the part work, I just wanted to make that distinction.

[00:47:29]

When MJ, you were talking, I know you mentioned, for example, at the moment having five selves, and then again that they're connected, these five selves, to the different parts that Alex was talking about, but it is a slightly different thing. I'm wondering if you want to add a bit more about that.

But I'm also aware of time.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, only briefly, I suppose. I think we're still having these conversations culturally. We're still only beginning to sort of understand that plurality of self. And maybe we could see it as a spectrum for people where it's a bit more metaphorical to those of us who very much experience five selves or however many selves. And so you can go and look online at sort of plural system communities where they talk about this.

There's also people who have experiences of dissociative identity disorder and would define themselves as somebody with DID, where it's definitely very trauma-linked and very much experiences of different selves. So, there's a nice book called *Your Symphony of Selves*, which I'd recommend, where they talk about all the different understandings and theories.

And a lot of different cultures, as Alex said, many cultures have understandings of self as plural. But I guess it's just as with all things. We mustn't put our experience on anyone else, because people have very different ways of experiencing plurality, again, from the sort of metaphorical to the very vivid, and from the kind of trauma-related to actually being quite a sacred experience, for example, and many other spectrums.

So, just like everything, plurality is also plural. And we've got a few resources on our website about plurality, if people want to read more.

Jaï Bristow

Thank you for explaining that, and I really appreciate you bringing it in as a spectrum, because I think every single person can relate to some form of plurality, whether it's just recognizing different parts of oneself or recognizing when we're feeling younger or older. That question, "How old do you feel right now?" my mom used to ask me this all the time growing up, and as a teenager, sometimes still does.

And again the other day... I transitioned relatively recently. I identify as nonbinary, and then I have these different alter egos, and I play with gender expression. So the other night, I got dressed up in drag for my friend's birthday, and it was super fun, and I chose a different name, and I had a different voice and different mannerisms, and I embraced my femininity in a very different way to before I transitioned, for example.

So, for me... And I'm naming this just to give another experience of plurality and selves, where we can have alter egos. Then I sometimes do burlesque, and I have a burlesque alter ego who is

different to my drag alter ego, who also has a different name. And then there's a drag king alter ego. I have a lot of alter egos.

[00:50:16]

But for me, those are very much external. They're to do with my gender expression and how I'm perceived in the world and how I present and how I play up certain parts of me and certain feelings.

And then again, like you say, there's the actual plurality of feeling within oneself completely, fully... I don't want to use the word "fleshed out" because that might not work in this situation, but fully form different beings. And then again, as Alex was talking, there's the different parts, and as you said, MJ, there's the more trauma related and then there's the more spiritual selves, and there's all these different elements.

And so it's really complex, once again that word is coming up a lot in today's conversation... It's a complex topic and unfortunately we don't have time to go into it anymore today, but I hope to have the occasion to go into it more fully. MJ, you and I actually did a whole interview on plurality on a previous edition of the Trauma Super Conference, which people can check out on the Conscious Life platform.

People can also find the interview the three of us did together for the Heal Toxic Relationship Conference there, which is how to understand your toxic relationships, where we also talked about your upcoming book and other elements therein, and which is very related to today's conversation. So I recommend people check that out. And then at this conference, there are many of the interviews that I have named throughout this conversation.

Alex and Meg-John, thank you so much for your time today. I wish we had more of it. How can people find out about your work?

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Absolutely. Well, I'm very easy to find online because my last name is pretty unique. So if you go to my website, alexiantaffi.com, it's all there. All the books are there. If you want to follow me on social media, I'm mostly on Instagram nowadays [@xtaffi](https://www.instagram.com/xtaffi). At some point maybe I'll start using TikTok, who knows? But you can find my work there. And I hope that people can relate to one another with curiosity, honoring each other and their complexity, and with intentionality. MJ?

Dr Meg-John Barker

Yeah, again, unusual first name in our case. So, Meg-John Barker... Googling that will get you to our website, rewriting-the-rules.com, where there's a lot of free zines and books that you can download. And then the book with Alex, *How to Understand Your Relationship*, should be out next year with Jessica Kingsley. But we have written a number of other books with Jessica Kingsley. So if you want to check out their website, it's a really good place for resources around gender, sexuality and neurodivergence.

[00:52:52] Jai Bristow

Fantastic. Thank you so much for your time today. This has been great as always.

Dr Alex Iantaffi

Thank you.

Dr Meg-John Barker

Thank you.