



Conscious Life presents

Understanding the Impact of Psychological Abuse

Guest - Dr Avery Neal

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[00:00:05] Meagen Gibson

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, your conference co-host. Today I'm speaking with Dr Avery Neal, a psychotherapist, international author, and speaker. In 2012, she opened Women's Therapy Clinic, which offers psychiatric and counseling support to women.

Avery is the author of *If He's So Great, Why Do I Feel So Bad?: Recognizing and Overcoming Subtle Abuse*, which has been translated and published into 12 languages. Dr Avery Neal, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr Avery Neal

Hi. Thank you so much for having me.

Meagen Gibson

I'd love it if we could start out just by defining what is psychological abuse, and how does it relate to trauma?

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. Psychological abuse happens in all abusive types of relationships, whether we're talking about physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse.

There is a psychologically abusive component to any type of abuse. And that is actually the part that allows the abusive patterns to continue, and to really take hold and diminish the recipient of the abuse, making them more dependent on the abuser.

Psychological abuse is often the part that is harder to see. And so if somebody isn't experiencing overt physical aggression or abuse or name calling, verbal abuse, that type of thing. A lot of times it goes undetected, even though it actually is more damaging than all other forms of abuse.

[00:01:44] Meagen Gibson

I'm glad that you named that as overt, and I guess we would call it covert the other way. But all of us, I think, have a working definition that we're familiar with. We've either seen it depicted in movies or in books, or we've experienced it ourselves. You mentioned name calling and physical things.

But there's that more subtle, more manipulative, a lot of times unconscious, even in the abuser, psychological abuse and mistreatment that often the victims of that abuse...

The psychological damage is twofold in that they're not sure what's happening. They can't really name it as this overt thing. Also everybody else is like, "Oh, but they're so charming or charismatic or such a pillar of their community" or "They're always so great when I'm around." How do you deal with that and how do you alert people to what's actually going on?

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. Interestingly, this is something that was really a neglected area of research for... Well, really up until very, very recently. Psychological abuse on its own and the effects from it. All of the research up until very recently has been focused on physical abuse and the lasting impacts from that.

So used to, they referred to this as "the problem with no name." So that was how they described the women in research who were experiencing psychological abuse and some of these covert, subtle abuse tactics in their relationships. But they didn't know exactly what was going on, even in the academic research. So they just called it "the problem with no name."

And what happened is that there were a cluster of symptoms, physical and mental health conditions, that women in particular were experiencing... Although anyone can experience these things if they're in a psychologically abusive relationship, or any type of abusive relationship.

And so that became what they began to look at. It's still, sadly, something that isn't studied enough, and it's not known about as much as it should be. So a lot of times, there are these physical, mental, and emotional issues that are going on, and it's still hard to know. Wait a minute, this is because of abuse. This is because of psychological abuse.

So that's particularly the case when it's a dynamic like you just described, where maybe the person is very charismatic. Maybe they're a pillar of the community. Maybe they're well-versed in psychology and psychological jargon.

And so nobody would ever expect that behind closed doors, they're diminishing and degrading their partner. It makes the person that's on the receiving end of the abuse feel more and more isolated, and alone. And often it makes them feel crazy like, "Well, what's wrong with me? Everybody else thinks this person is so great and wonderful. What is my problem here?"

Meagen Gibson

You named so many things that I need to come back to. But one of them that I'm thinking of as you're speaking is, to that... Once you understand, you're like, "Oh, it's so obvious."

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But the victim of the abuse is going to hate themselves before they hate the other person, especially if it's a parental figure. But even if it's a romantic partner or a trusted friendship, because that's the thing you can control.

And in order to maintain that connection, that's the most important thing to you. You'll do anything to maintain the connection, even if it means blaming and hating yourself in order to stay connected to that person that's so meaningful to you, right?

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. I mean, that's a totally insightful point and something that a lot of people don't understand unless they've lived in this type of relationship or they've grown up in this type of family system.

Our desire to be connected is so strong. And of course, there are all kinds of reasons for that... For the attachment to be stronger in an unhealthy, abusive relationship and trauma bonding, and all of those things. But that's it.

Typically, the person that is on the receiving end of the mistreatment has learned all kinds of coping mechanisms and strategies in order to manage the abusive person's reaction to things. It's almost like you become an expert in these emotional and mental acrobatics in order to just keep the peace in the relationship and in the home.

That is exactly what happens. Those coping mechanisms end up being responsible for staying in the relationship and creating a dependency on the abusive person. That's when we get into a very codependent dynamic, where the recipient of the abuse is often really, really heavily enmeshed with the abuser and more isolated from their healthier support systems.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. The better we get at it and the more super strength codependency we have, the more the other person relies on us staying and being in that role. It almost gets stronger and more prevalent as it goes because the connection is even deeper.

If you become alert, aware, strong, get some agency, start to set some boundaries, it's going to almost get worse before it gets better because they're dependent on you to be in the role of tolerating.

Dr Avery Neal

Yeah, and compliant, acquiescent. Yes, absolutely. When you start to set a boundary in an abusive, unhealthy relationship, it causes the abuse to rise to the surface, usually in very overt ways.

So even if the relationship has been subtly aggressive and controlling up until the point when you start setting boundaries, usually the abusive person cannot handle that feeling of being out of control, and you're disrupting the balance in the relationship. And so the abuse rises to the surface, and you see more open displays of hostility.

[00:08:18] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I'm taking a tiny tangent. We're going to come back to something in a second. But just this week, where I live in central Florida, a woman tried to break off her engagement, and was killed.

Just because we're talking about it now, I just want to bring it to the surface of, if you become conscious of this dynamic in your relationship, how do you safely extricate yourself? What are the things that people might not think about?

Because if you're thinking you should sit down and have a rational conversation with this person, and that they'll be understanding and become cognizant of their actions and behavior. And be willing to change to save the relationship or to help your hurt feelings, or help you feel safer and more secure, I don't think you could be farther from the truth, right?

Dr Avery Neal

Exactly. And this is such an important thing to talk about. So remember, the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. So if you have a partner that has demonstrated any overt abuse in the past - any blocking, hitting walls, preventing you from leaving. And then, of course, actual physical contact and violence, hurting, shoving, punching, strangling. All of those things.

Those abuse attempts are likely to escalate over time. And so particularly if you try to leave, that's when they are likely to occur. Actually, if there's a history of using violence with weapons, that increases your risk of mortality tremendously.

So it's really important to look at behavior and what your partner has done, because that's going to inform you how they are going to respond, when and if you do decide to break up with them.

It's imperative that you do not do it when you're alone with that person. Listen to your gut. Trust your gut. I mean, that's your sixth sense. So if you feel afraid of somebody, don't worry about having to have tangible proof as to why you feel that way. Listen to it because it is so much better to be overprepared and stay safe, than to underprepare.

So you want to be really conscious of breaking up in a public way or over text, email, something where you are not actually anywhere near that person. Be aware that if you have any tracking devices turned on, make sure those are turned off.

It's also important to break any routines that you might have. If you usually go for a jog at 6 o' clock at night in your neighborhood, don't do that. Make sure that you are breaking... Your changes in routine as much as possible so that you don't have a predictable schedule where you can be stalked or found.

And then it's also really important to not be alone. If there's any question or concern about your physical safety and security, the most dangerous time to leave a relationship is right during and after.

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And so you want to make sure that you are not alone. There's safety in numbers. So stay with a friend, stay with family. If you need to go to a shelter, they are there for a reason. You will be safe there. Nobody wants to go to a shelter, but they are there for a reason.

Meagen Gibson

Every single person who's ever ended up in the shelter has shared the shame or embarrassment or hesitation that you have felt in trying to make that call. You will be amongst supporters.

Okay, I'm glad we named that. Thank you for just explicitly talking about it because we were there and I was like, this is an opportunity to just say explicitly what people can do to stay safe.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. It's so important to know. I think just briefly, nobody ever thinks they're going to end up in this situation. You don't go into a relationship thinking that you are going to be afraid for your life, or for your children's lives.

And so there is no shame in this. This can happen to anyone. Blaming yourself or second-guessing yourself, or beating yourself up for not getting out sooner. This is not your fault, and this is something that can happen to anyone. So please just take care of yourself.

Meagen Gibson

I really like, too, that you named the evidence thing, because I think... We've definitely seen the trends, especially on social media, where people are presenting evidence of, "This is how I was treated, yada, yada."

And while it's good that they have that, and that's part of their healing process, you don't need to obtain it in order for your feelings about how you're being treated and how you feel and your safety, fundamentally in your relationship, to be valid.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. In fact, that's the number one thing I tell people. Pay attention to how you feel in your relationship when you're around that person. Most people say, "Oh, yeah, I felt this fear, or I felt my stomach clench, or I started to get nervous or tense when I was around my partner."

"But I just ignored it. I just figured it was just my anxiety, or it was just me being overly critical or whatever."

Especially as women, we tend to dismiss our feelings in order to be nice, or to love everyone enough or be empathetic enough or kind enough, or give everyone a chance, etc. The problem is that when we override those feelings, we're actually overriding our intuition, which is there for a very important reason.

[00:14:07] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. You actually jumped ahead to one of my last questions. But we'll come back to the other questions I had, which is that people who have experienced abuse...

From my own personal experience and also talking to hundreds of survivors, we tend to be people who over-empathize and are centering the experience of our abusers. We're worried about the consequences on them.

If I call the police or if I tell my partner's parents, or if I reach out to our friends, or I'm trying to find either collaborators or witnesses or whatever. We're not only worried about not being believed, we're worried about the consequences of our actions on them to our own detriment.

But also what I'm thinking about is things that can feel conditional. We're under a new stress. Somebody's had a job change, job loss. We've had a new child enter the relationship. We've got a baby at home or something.

There are stressors that bring out the worst of us. All of us. It's happened to all of us. So how do you discern the difference between, this is a period of stress we're in, where we're not all acting at our best.

And I'm in a psychologically, physically, emotionally, financially unsafe situation for myself that I need to extricate myself from as soon as possible.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. So there are a few things to really pay attention to. One is, does your partner have the intention to dominate or control you? Does your partner want to be in power, and to have you down here and your partner up here?

Like you said, we all have stressful moments when we're not our best. We all get defensive sometimes. We all go through periods in our relationship where we may feel a little bit more disconnected from our partner. That is all a normal part of being in a relationship.

But at no point should we question that our partner loves us or respects us. We also should not feel afraid in the relationship. If there's fear in your relationship, there is a problem.

Meagen Gibson

I just wanted to let that sit there for a second. I have no notes. I want people to hear that.

So you've mentioned physical symptoms, like stomach clenching and the things that we physically experience. That's one of the things that's really at stake for people when we're experiencing this. And we've mentioned physical symptoms, psychological symptoms.

So what are some of the other connections that we can make between trauma and psychological abuse, and then physical and mental health conditions?

[00:16:51] Dr Avery Neal

Yes, absolutely. Typically, when there is any type of abuse, and of course, psychological abuse, we see depression, anxiety, insomnia. We see gynecological problems in women, addiction issues. IBS is common.

These are our body's response to stress and fear over a prolonged period of time. Whenever there's a trauma, our nervous system goes into overdrive. You can imagine if you're living in an abusive relationship or in an abusive home, your body doesn't really come out of that stressed state.

And so that stress takes a toll on your body, and those stress hormones absolutely affect physical and mental health.

So a lot of times, people... If they aren't experiencing physical abuse or overt aggression, but they're experiencing the more subtle psychological abuse... A lot of times they'll have recurring pain syndromes, or chronic migraines or IBS-type issues, but not recognize...

Wait a minute, there's something going on behind that that I'm not looking at, because it's easier to focus on the set of physical symptoms and going to the doctor and trying to figure it out, than it is to confront what might be going on emotionally in the relationship.

Meagen Gibson

I have a ridiculous analogy that I want to make, but follow me. It's like if you went to... I have a teenager now who has a phone. And I remember he was like, "My pinkie hurts." And I was like, "Gosh!" He plays volleyball. I was like, maybe he jammed it or something.

And then I figured out it was occupational. He was just holding his phone in a way that his pinkie was under stress. Eight hours a day, seven days a week.

And so I think of these types of pains and developmental things that we develop over time, as just the accumulation of hundreds of interactions on a daily basis over years. Adding up to this dysfunction and pain that we've got to go see somebody for. And there's only so much medicine can do for us if we don't change our environment, right?

Dr Avery Neal

Well, that's it. We can't get well in an unhealthy environment. It's not physically or emotionally possible. I think that's a perfect analogy that you used.

If we're under that stress and we're internalizing that mistreatment, the body keeps giving us messages... Especially if we are shutting down our thoughts and our feelings.

If we're suppressing them and we're minimizing them, our body starts talking to us because then that's the next way that it gets our attention. Some of these physical and mental health conditions are the way that it starts talking.

[00:19:55] Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. You mentioned earlier that research shows that subtle psychological abuse is more harmful than physical violence. Why is that, and why do we also find it so hard to believe?

Dr Avery Neal

I know. This is amazing, and I'm so happy that we actually have research to back this, because this is... I mean, in clinical practice, you hear victims of abuse say over and over and over again, that is that the psychological damage and the psychological trauma from abuse is harder to recover from than actual physical violence.

And that is because the very nature of psychological abuse is to diminish our confidence and self-worth. It's meant to dehumanize so that we are easier to control. And so what happens is the longer we're in that type of situation or that environment, the more we start to believe that it's true.

That becomes a really terrible thing. It reduces our self-esteem, it reduces our self-worth. We become smaller. We become a shell of our former self. We shy away from healthy support systems and our interests. I mean, we lose ourselves.

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. It's so funny because I've done hundreds of these interviews for our conferences. And in moments of great difficulty or challenge or discomfort... I will hear some of the people who I've interviewed. I'll hear their voices and their encouraging words, and the things that they've said that really resonated with me.

But the reason I mentioned that is because I also did a documentary about a cult, and I interviewed a bunch of survivors of this cult. That was the thing that they named. After they were gone, the psychol... So it works both ways.

The things that had been said to them to dominate, take power and control over them, to dehumanize them, stayed with them for so long and took so long to remove from their systems.

They were like, "I still hear it. I just don't believe it anymore. But it will never really truly go away." I don't think we can minimize... Or maximize the effects of this kind of psychological abuse on people.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. It's also what is responsible for keeping the person in the abusive relationship. That belief, "Well, maybe my partner's right." Or the fear of what would happen to my children, what would happen to me if I leave?

These are incredibly difficult dynamics to navigate, and that's what most people don't understand if they haven't experienced it, or they haven't known someone who has lived it.

[00:22:42] Meagen Gibson

Yeah. And then if you throw in... If this abuse is happening in a spiritual context where it's interfering with your relationship with God, it can infiltrate so much and be so deep.

So let's assume we've given everybody the tools that they need to acknowledge and remove themselves from the situation, and get to a place of safety where they can start to heal. What are some of the methods that you recommend to help people heal from this kind of psychological abuse?

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. The very first step is psychoeducation. I think it's incredibly important for people to understand what's happened to them. Because when you're in it, it is so confusing, and it's easy to believe all of the things that you've been told.

It's extremely important to understand the mechanics behind abuse, and how it wasn't about you. This was a systematic way or method to reduce you, and diminish you, so that you were easier to dominate and control.

And so it's really important for people to understand exactly how that happened so that then they can go back in their relationship history, and reprocess all of the things that happened to them, in this new light or through this new lens.

It's incredibly healing to be able to look back and say, "Wait a minute, my intuition was spot on, or that was really happening, and I just chose to ignore it, or this really did happen to me, and it was incredibly painful and damaging, and I didn't deserve it. This was a part of a bigger unhealthy pattern."

So that's really the first thing that has to occur. Then it's important to address the trauma and the stress that your body has physically endured. And when we're used to operating in that chronic state of stress and fear, the nervous system, like we were talking about, is on overdrive.

Most people are operating from that place without even consciously realizing it because it's just so familiar. And so having... Through different methods and techniques, to actually calm the body and calm the nervous system so it comes out of this hypervigilant state, that allows for deeper healing and for your body to recover from all of this.

And one of the most beautiful things that comes out of that is not just allowing your nervous system to relax, maybe for the first time. But also the connection that we're able to make with our bodies when we do this work. It's incredibly healing.

And for instance, victims of sexual abuse often have disconnected so much from their bodies to be able to make that connection, and love their body for the first time.

And to be able to appreciate their body, and everything that it's survived and overcome, and everything that our bodies have given us in order to get to the point that we currently are. It's a beautiful and very healing thing.

[00:26:06] Meagen Gibson

I imagine, too, that all of those steps into an integrated awareness allow people to... Because without all of this healing, you're almost doomed to unconsciously repeat the same patterns and get into the same types of relationships, whether they be directly the same.

It doesn't necessarily mean you would be in another bad romantic relationship. You might go to a religious community of seeming safety or be in a toxic work environment. It could be a pivot. It wouldn't necessarily have to be identical. It could be a pivot, unless we're creating all of the steps that you just talked about.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. It's imperative to know what characteristics we've learned, or we've gained through these different experiences that actually no longer serve us. They serve us in order to survive. But then if we continue to hold onto them, they act to our detriment, and they put us in the position of ending up in another unhealthy dynamic.

Most people who are in an abusive relationship tend to be empathetic, tend to be conflict-avoidant. And even if you didn't start out that way, you learn. It's like if you put your hand on the stove and you get burned, you learn not to put your hand on that stove. So you learn how to avoid conflict in order to avoid the abuse.

So then the other characteristic that is incredibly common is being overly responsible. So picking up the slack of others and making excuses for it. These are patterns that absolutely... And of course, the codependent patterns. These are patterns that absolutely have to get addressed if we're going to have healthier relationships across all areas of our lives.

Meagen Gibson

And just to... I don't know if this will be comforting or not, but this work takes time. It's hard work, right?

Dr Avery Neal

Yes.

Meagen Gibson

It's like one layer at a time. And once you get to a stage where you're like, "Okay, I'm safe. I'm aware. Now I've got to work on the somatic, and the nervous system stuff. Now I've got to start..."

I'm coming back to somebody like you. And I'm like, "Okay, I'm in a good place, but I just started dating somebody and my gut is telling me this doesn't feel great." And somebody like you is like, "And what do we do when that feeling comes up?"

[00:28:30] Dr Avery Neal

Exactly. It's so true. And that's a really good point. Anybody that has been in an abusive relationship and gotten out and starts to date again, they're going to have triggers.

And even when they find someone that is very loving and healthy... In fact, a lot of times when we are in a safe and healthy, loving relationship, it allows us the safe space to start to explore some of this pain, and some of the trauma. It brings up all these different layers to healing that you mentioned.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. I want to ask you, too, because when we're talking about the psychodynamic stage... Where you're educating people about the methodology, do you ever find that people go through stages in that?

Because as I was hearing you describe it, I remember the stages I went through where it was like... At the beginning, it was like, okay, this is what happened.

And your insides are objecting. But you wouldn't understand. Our situation was different. You want your situation to be unique. My situation was unique. If you only understood that it was different.

And then you finally get to the place where you're like, oh, this was all part of a rule book or a playbook that people who thrive on power, domination, control use.

I'm an idiot. I can't believe I fell for this. They're all the same. This happens to so many people, and I'm one of the lemmings that fell for... There's stages in this self-awareness journey that can be really hard.

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. Well, it's like the stages of grief, where there's denial and bargaining and anger, and all of these different emotions. And yes, usually in the beginning, people are very resistant to it.

A lot of times if someone gets a cancer diagnosis, that word is so huge. It's a lot to process, and it doesn't feel like that could be happening. And so it's the same thing, the word "abuse."

It's becoming a little bit more of a mainstream term. But the word abuse is a big word, and it's hard to swallow. And even interestingly, people that I've worked with that have endured terrible physical abuse often will say exactly what you said.

Well, it was just that one time. There's so many people that have it worse. He wasn't really physically abusive. It was just that one really bad night.

So there are all these justifications. And so it does take a little while to process everything that's happened, and to get to a point where you can accept it, and learn and grow from it and heal from it. And it's not about blame or shame, or any of those things.

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It's about really understanding what's happened so that you can heal and move forward and have a good life. Because if we don't do those things, if we do not learn from this and grow from this, it leads to all kinds of unhealthy things moving forward. Including our own self-sabotage, higher rate for self-destructive behavior, addiction, depression, etc.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. As I was talking about the Machiavellian playbook that I referenced, I also want to make sure people know that... I mean, maybe there is a playbook somewhere that people are referencing.

But most people got to this methodology of power, domination, and control... Abusers did, because it worked. Not because... The patterns of behavior are what work on humans. They're not necessarily a conscious choice or decision on the part of the abuser.

They're just doing what works to keep you in control and subservient. Not... I'm going to do X, Y, Z to make someone feel this way. It's just, I'm uncomfortable. I get comfort from power.

I minimize it, I'm oversimplifying. But I just want people to know that just because your person doesn't seem conscious of their actions and behavior, doesn't mean it's not the pattern of behavior that people use to dominate and control people.

Dr Avery Neal

Exactly. Well, that's exactly it. I always go back to that analogy about if somebody runs you over... You're walking down the street and they kill you, whether they meant to run you over or not, you're dead.

We can argue, did this person mean to do this or not? But if you're dead, you're dead. It's important to pay attention to that and not make excuses for that, because if something is unhealthy and harmful, it's not okay.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely. Well, Avery, this has been a lively conversation, and I know people are going to want to reach out to you about more. How can people find out more about you and your work?

Dr Avery Neal

Absolutely. The websites are really the best place. So averyneal.com and womenstherapyclinic.com. Those are the two best places to find out more about my work. We've got a great team of therapists as well.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you so much for being with us today.

[00:34:09] Dr Avery Neal

Thank you for having me.