

## Episode Transcript

### TAOLC EP: 027 -

"Transforming Love and Connection: Discover the Healing Power of Intimacy with Relationship Expert Dr. Todd Berntson"

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Welcome to the Art of Living Consciously podcast, a show designed for out-of-the-box thinkers and mindset shifters who are looking for new ways to evolve. This is an intimate container designed to uplift, inspire and motivate you on your own growth journey. I'm your host, Dannie Reeve. As a certified BNE or Bio-Neuro-Emotion practitioner, I empower men and women to turn their conflicts into stepping stones for growth, because when you question your own beliefs and perceptions and take responsibility for your life, everything else follows. If you ask me, earth is a place where souls are sent to evolve and in this podcast, we will discuss the best tools for our evolution.

00:00 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Hi Todd, Thank you so much for coming on the show. I'm very excited for our conversation.

00:05 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Thank you very much for having me. I appreciate it. I'm excited.

00:08 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, and we are in for a treat. Because you are a relationship expert and I was listening to your podcast and I really love what you have to say, and so you do have extensive knowledge and background in the sphere of relationship and conflict resolution. And what I was curious about is what drives you to help people to restore a sense of connection with each other. What is your why? Why do you do what you do?

00:36 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

You know I think it's just a truism for a lot of people who go into the field of psychology and therapy. They're kind of trying to figure themselves out and through helping others there's actually a sense of healing that happens. I came from a family where everybody on both sides had very horrible relationships and a lot of divorce and all of that, and so when I came into adulthood and I met my current wife, I really wanted to figure out a way of how do I stop that pattern right? What do I need to do differently so that my marriage doesn't end up like the marriages of everybody else around me growing up? And so, you know, part of this journey really has been a journey of discovery for me. From a very, very young age I've been very, very highly attuned to relationships and how different things feel and what are some of the characteristics of relationships that seem to be going well, and not because I

wanted to be in one of those relationships that was great, because I saw the horror show of when relationships don't go well.

01:50 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So it really is that we teach what we most need or needed to learn at some point in our lives, right?

02:00 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

I think that's absolutely true.

02:03 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Right, and so obviously you know you grew up with this background where relationships were something that was kind of horrible. That's what you said, Right and a lot of people find themselves trapped in relationships or don't know how to navigate relationships and they're like. So why do we even need relationships? As human beings, Would we not be better off by ourselves? What do relationships do for us?

02:29 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

You know that's a question that is often not asked, but it is kind of an important question, right? Why would we even do this to ourselves? I mean, so many people struggle with relationships and the arguments and the stress and the disagreements and all of this kind of stuff and the breakups are really hard and dating is really hard. It's like why would we even do this, right? And what it really comes down to really is about how human beings evolved to need each other. We need to be emotionally bonded with, with a few people who are closely around us for a couple of reasons.

03:06

If you look at human history and how long we've been on the planet, human beings have been here for quite some time, right? If that timeline was just one hour on a clock, what we consider to be civilization, you know and this is starting with, like the Egyptians and the Greeks and all of that around that period, that would only comprise four seconds at the end of the hour. The entire rest of the time, people have lived in very primitive conditions that were very frightening and many people didn't live very long, and to be separated from your group literally meant death. An infant who was separated from their mother or parents usually would be dead in a couple of hours. An individual who was separated from their community usually would not survive more than a couple of days.

04:04

And so there is this innate need to feel a sense of connection and a sense of belonging, to feel as though you are protected and safe and surrounded by people who value you, who love you, who will protect you, who love you, who will protect you.

04:28

And when we are separated from that, our nervous system is wired to go into a bit of a panic response. Right, and studies have shown you know things like isolation in prison. When people are put in solitary confinement, it doesn't take long before they completely psychologically disintegrate. Loneliness, even when you live in a society but experience loneliness. Studies have shown that that carries with it the same risk to health as smoking or obesity or diabetes, because the human brain is wired to be in relation with others. It helps us regulate our own emotions, it helps us feel safe, it helps us feel that we belong and that we're valued and that we're important and loved. And it's really hard because of the way that we're wired. You know, we can do that to ourselves to some degree, but not to the same degree that others can do that for us.

05:31 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yeah, I also read not so long ago, I think it was, in a book called Attached, and they said that people who had secure relationships were actually people who were able to do better in life. The quality of your relationship determines how you do well in other areas of your life. So depending on a person and on that intimacy with them will help you then be more independent in the rest of your life. Would you agree with that ?

05:59 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

100%. What they've seen in children is that children who have a very good emotional connection with their parents are much more able to go out and explore. They're much more able to engage with other kids, they're much more adventurous, they seek out new experiences. They do better in school. It's the kids where that emotional bond has not formed very well who tend to be very emotionally dysregulated. They're very afraid of leaving the proximity of their parents to go out and explore the world. And the same thing is true with adults who are in very stable, bonded emotional relationships with their partner. There's not this sense of paranoia of oh my God, are they going to leave me. I mean there's just much more of a kind of freedom to go out and explore the world and they just tend to do better in life as a whole. And, interestingly, people who are in healthy, bonded relationships tend to experience a much, much lower level of anxiety, depression, stress, stress-related illness and even things like cancer, type 2 diabetes and all of that.

07:23 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So it really affects the quality of our lives.

07:26 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Totally.

07:26 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So you talked about two aspects. You talked about childhood, which is such an important stage of our lives where we learn how to bond and to communicate and to attach with other people. Could you give us a bit of an overview of how childhood can affect the way we later on relate to others in our romantic relationships, but also - if you don't have a relationship- with other people in your life?

07:53 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Yeah. So childhood attachment, the experiences that we have with our parents, is huge in a number of ways, and when I say parents, this could also just represent other family members as well, because sometimes there may be a father that's absent, but there's an uncle that's very involved, right, or a grandparent that's very involved. Really, what is important for a child is to have a caregiver or two who are very emotionally invested in the child and that the child feels that sense of value, feels that they are relevant, that they're loved, that they're safe. But even more than that, one of the things that happens when there's a good parent-child relationship is that the parent actually helps the child learn how to regulate their own emotions. This is kind of an emotional co-regulation that happens with a child and most people have seen this right. Like a baby cries and the parent picks it up and caresses it and all of a sudden the baby calms down or a toddler will be running down the sidewalk and trip and will fall. And all of a sudden the baby calms down or a toddler will be running down the sidewalk and trip and will fall and all of a sudden will become really upset and look at their parents and depending on what their parents do will impact the child and how they emotionally react.

09:20

If the child like, let's just say, you've got a little four-year-old kid that's running down the sidewalk having a good old time and trips on a you know little crack in the sidewalk, that's up a little bit and they fall down, they scuff their hand and all of a sudden they're kind of scared. They're, you know, they feel hurt, they don't know what to do and they start to become upset. Right, they start to become upset. Right Now, if a parent runs up to the child and is like, oh my God, oh my God, are you okay, are you going to die, you know, then the kid just all of a sudden is like, oh my God, oh my God, oh my God, you know, because the parent's distress actually stimulates the distress in the child at the same time. Right, if a parent approaches the child and just says you know, oh, that must have been really scary. I know you're going to be okay, let's take a look at your hand. Oh, let's brush off that dust. You know, here, give me a hug, it'll be okay.

10:17

What's happening is that that calmness, the calmness that the parent displays, actually will stimulate a calmness in the child. And so what happens is that when that is the pattern that happens between a parent and a child, then when a child gets into adulthood and they bang their head on the cupboard or something like that, right, they don't necessarily freak out. I mean, it hurts, they might be frustrated, but there's, you know, or something bad. They lose their job or they get in a car accident or anything like that. That happens. That would normally be really distressing and may trigger some real stress and anxiety. Their brain has the ability to self-soothe because they've developed that in childhood. There's this truism in neurology that says what fires together, wires together. So we are constantly in a state where our parents are helping us calm ourselves. Those self-soothing circuits will develop in the brain so that when we reach adulthood, when we're experiencing distress, we'll have the ability to self-soothe. If the opposite happens and either the parent is absent or not emotionally available, or the parent's distress leads to an increase in our own distress, that too will tend to get wired in the brain. And so when kids reach adulthood, oftentimes they'll have this experience where, once they start becoming distressed, it's like it just builds and builds and builds and keeps going and they can't shut it off until it just that circuit just kind of exhausts itself. And so you may be in this period of like an hour or two hours where you just can't get out of this sense of agitation or anger or whatever it is. It just has to kind of run its course, so to speak. And so it's not just the you know, the feeling of being valued and the feeling of being safe, but there's also this emotional regulation component that also impacts how we show up in life as adults.

12:48

In life as adults, as well as when we, you know, as kids, when we observe how our parents are interacting with each other, if they're interacting emotionally in a, you know, in a healthy way, then we internalise that we have this thing called the mirror neuron system in our brain. Right? That essentially what the mirror neuron system is? It's these circuits in the brain that will fire when we observe somebody doing something, they will fire in the brain as though we are doing it ourselves.

13:18

And that's one of the ways that we learn language, right?

13:20

I mean we learn and dialect, and all of that is that when we see people talking, our brain starts, you know, starts developing these patterns of speech and tempo and accent and all of that, as though we are doing it, and then all of a sudden, like a kid, we'll just one day start talking. And the same is true with emotional skills as well. When we observe parents who do things well, we come into adulthood with kind of this innate sense of how to respond to somebody at an emotional level, right when they're distressed or we're distressed, stressed. And when we, when we don't have those experiences growing up, then we tend to come into adulthood with this, this kind of blind spot, this kind of blank space of what to do when, like, we're upset or our partner's upset, or something is going on in the relationship that's not going well. It's almost like I don't know what to do with that. And so we tend to react out of what are called secondary emotions, like anger, withdrawal, things like that.

14:34 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So, basically, what you're saying is that we've internalised the way our parents reacted to us, but also amongst themselves, and we've learned to navigate relationships that way. And so most people I mean most people have had parents who have not mirrored back to them stable, secure ways of relating to others. I mean, some people have, and that's great, but most of us, and especially the people listening to this podcast, myself included, did not have those kinds of role models, right? So what could be the different ways in which people can relate to others because of what they've learned from their parents? Could we go into the attachment styles, because I think that will be interesting for people, because I don't think everybody knows about attachment styles and I would like to delve deeper into that, if that's okay.

15:28 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Oh yeah, totally Well, and what I will say is that you know I've been married. For what year is this Actually? We just had our 34th wedding anniversary.

15:43 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Congratulations.

15:44 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Thank you, and we never fight and we've, like, we've never called each other a name in that entire time. And the reason why I say that is not at all to go. Ha ha ha look at how great I am it's to talk about a point that just because you come from a family where it's, you know, emotionally a horror show, right or absent, where it's just kind of a Stepford kind of situation where there's just complete emotional absence, it does not mean that you're condemned to a life and relationships where you can't emotionally regulate and communicate with your partner. It's not the case.

16:26

A lot of people do, because they never try to address some of that internal woundedness that happened. And if you are willing to become vulnerable and really explore some of the ways in which you were affected from your childhood experiences with your parents. And this isn't about blaming, it's not about saying, oh my God, ha ha ha, look at what awful people they were, at all. It's just really trying to take a factual inventory. These are some of the things that happened. These are some of the ways that I was affected. Now, what can I do now? Right, in order to get better, in order to heal myself? And you know, one of the things that you brought up and you wanted me to talk a little bit more is about attachment styles and some of the ways that our experiences in childhood can kind of manifest.

And I do want to say that the attachment styles you know, like anxious attachment, avoidant attachment, disorganised, insecure. They're kind of helpful in a way, just to kind of give a picture of what a set of experiences look like if we didn't have good parental attachment, or even in adulthood. But even more importantly, what I'd like to talk about is kind of what's behind some of those. I mean, you know it's like what are some of the human needs, what are some of the emotional needs that are not being met when we demonstrate anxious attachment, for example? Because, I think that's really important, because if we understand where those things are coming from, we understand these kind of fundamental human needs that we have, these emotional needs that we have. It gives us a sense of clarity about why things are happening in the way that they are and then we're equipped to actually be able to address them directly. So there are four basic attachment styles that have been identified by mostly attachment researchers and one of them is secure attachment. Another one is what's called anxious attachment, another one that's called avoidant attachment and one that is referred to as disorganised.

18:48

And how these look in children typically is with a secure attachment. A secure attachment child is kind of by definition. They don't become terribly distressed if a parent leaves the room for a while. They tend to be very happy to see them when they come back. They tend to engage and play with other children, whether the parent is in the room or not. When the child is distressed they can approach the parent for comfort. And, in adulthood you know a secure attachment essentially is not that much different.

19:25

The difference, really, when you look at attachment between adults and children, is that a parent-child attachment relationship is one of dependence, where the child needs to get all of the emotional regulation and all of the emotional training stuff, so to speak, from the parent. And in adulthood we break out of that dependence thing during adolescence and usually that's when teenagers become completely unruly and they're like shut up, mom, you don't know anything. They're trying to break that parent-child emotional bond and then when all goes well, are able to form attachment bonds as adults. And the difference between the parent-child and the adult is that the adult is an interdependence where there are times when one partner will be in distress and the other partner can be the caregiver, and then

those roles can switch right so that there are times when you know I may be the caregiver, so my wife might be really distressed and I'm like you know, oh, let's go have some dinner, let's go talk, and you know and support her, and then there are times when I'm really distressed when she does the same for me. And in a healthy, secure adult relationship there's that ability to be flexible. The partners can turn to each other for support when they're feeling distressed. They feel valued in the relationship, they feel safe in the relationship, they feel like they matter, they feel like their partner is there with them, as though there's like a piece of themselves that exists in the heart of the partner and vice versa, that you know that their partner exists in a place in their heart for them. So if there's, if on a one of them has to go on a business trip or goes on a vacation with friends or something like that there's not this huge sense of anxiety or distress that happens, you know, from that separation, right.

21:38

And then there's another one called anxious attachment, and essentially an anxious attachment comes from a sense of not being able to trust that I am going to be okay, and this usually comes from inconsistent presence of a parent, either emotional or physical, with a child.

22:01

And you often see this in parents who are either just overworked or distressed and just have just no emotional capacity to be present with their kids.

22:13

You see it in alcoholism or addiction, or in parents who they may be struggling in their own relationship or have some types of mental illness, and it's not that, you know, every once in a while on the news you hear about these parents that just do horrifying things to their kids.

22:35

But in the vast, vast majority of cases it is not that the parent is trying to be mean to the kid. It is not that the parent is trying to or is even aware of the effect that their behaviour is having on the kid right, even though the way that a parent and a child organise their relationship when the child is growing up can end up being fairly emotionally toxic to the child. I think it's important to remember that that's in most cases that that's not intentional, you know, by the parent. You know because a lot of times people are, you know, really harbour a lot of anger towards their parents, and I think it's understandable because there's a sense of self that is really damaged from the way that they grew up. But I think at the same time, the process of healing almost necessitates the ability to just forgive them for being imperfect human beings.

23:36 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, totally Sorry, I'm just cutting you off there because I think it's a really good point. And then we can go again in the other attachment styles point, and then we can go again in the other attachment styles. But yes, I feel like the process of healing is like when you're an adolescent you need to hate your parents for a bit in order to individuate and go out into the world. And I feel in the healing process it's a little bit the same. You need to become aware of what your parents did and how that affected you. And once you become more and more emotionally mature yourself, then you are in a position where you can say oh, I understand my parents, they did the best they could with the tools they had. But I feel sometimes what

happens in the healing process or in the healing world, people are very quick to jump to forgiveness and if the whole process is not being done, then it's sort of this kind of false forgiveness or false understanding that doesn't really help the healing either. Does that make sense?

24:26 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

100% agree, 100% agree. The forgiveness oftentimes I feel, when it's done authentically, is a byproduct that runs parallel to the healing. Because it's not as though I've been in recovery from you know, from addiction for many, many years and have worked with a lot of people in addiction. And there's so many people that they'll come in and they've been drinking and using drugs for 20 years and have destroyed everything in their life and they're sober for a month and they just think, oh, my God, you know everything is so perfect now and you know it's like well, you know it takes some time, right and it's. You know.

25:08

It's kind of the same thing, you know, when it comes to emotional stuff, when it comes to healing from some of the emotional fallout from our childhood, is that, you know, the first step is really being able to identify what happened and start to address it, and it is kind of through that process of healing that our healing with the relationship that we had with our parent can happen, and part of that is forgiveness. But I 100% agree that a lot of times people will say, oh, that's water under the bridge. You know I've forgiven them, and all of that as a way of not having to actually experience the emotion of difficulty that they've had. Right, it's a way of trying to distance themselves, of trying to, like, put it in a closet and say, oh, that's all gone, I'm better now, you know, when, in fact, there's still a lot there to be healed.

26:08 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, so acknowledging that emotion, acknowledging that emotion and understanding that it's okay to be angry, it's a normal emotion and the more that you recognize it, then the less hold it has on you, and I feel that's something that we often forget.

26:22 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

That's absolutely correct. You know, one of the things that I often tell clients who really struggle with some of the emotional fallout of how they grew up is I kind of liken these things to demons, right? I mean, it's like some of these memories and negative emotions and all of that are things that kind of chase us wherever we go, in a sense, and you know they pop up at very inopportune times, you know, and it may be something like we forget our keys in the house and just become completely emotionally unglued and it's just such a disproportionate emotional response to what was going on. Right, and a lot of times these are driven by parts of ourselves that are wounded, right, and instead of trying to eliminate those, trying to get over those.

27:21

I actually tell people to embrace them, right? I saw this movie back in, I don't know 1990s or something like that. They're called Jacob's Ladder. There was one line in there that really stuck with me and I because I thought it was beautiful this guy always had these visions that he was being chased by these scary demons and you know, kind of the big sage, you know truth-sayer of the whole film, was his chiropractor, which was hilarious. But what he told this guy once while he was adjusting his back is that



demons are just a part of ourselves that are trying to reach us and if we just turn around, and face them and embrace them.

28:06

They cease to be scary.

28:09 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

I love that.

28:10 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

I do too, you know. And the rest of the movie was really pretty dumb. But that one phrase really stuck with me because for so many years, because of the way that I grew up, I constantly felt like I was running. I constantly felt like there was this sense of I have to get out of here.

28:27

When I was in chiropractic school, it was very difficult for me to sit in a chair during lecture because I just had this, like these racing thoughts and this just sense of urgency that I just had to get out of there. And these were, these were actually wounded parts of myself that were chasing me. And it wasn't until I just turned around and really just embraced the kind of wounded part of myself and allowed that to start to heal and reintegrate, that all of that kind of stuff went away.

28:58 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

And you said the word reintegrate, which is important to integrate, so I don't know what you were running away from. You were saying from the environment in your home back where you were growing up. Is that what you meant?

29:09 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Well, one of the things that happens. I, like many, many people, have what's called complex PTSD, and complex PTSD is a little bit different than regular PTSD. What we know as PTSD usually revolves around a single event, like a soldier watched his buddy get blown up, or we were sexually assaulted, or we were in an aeroplane crash, or our house blew up, or we watched our dog get run over. These are like very intensely stressful, traumatising events that were, you know, kind of external to ourselves and or I mean, even if they involved us, it wasn't relational, right. I mean, these are things that kind of happened to us that were a single event or a couple of events. With complex PTSD, it's a little bit different. For one, the trauma comes from the emotional relationships that we have with those who are supposed to be present with us and support us and be our source of safety, and so parents who are emotionally abusive, for example. What that does is that harms the sense of self in a child. Where there's this sense of I'm worthless, nothing I can do is right, I'm always wrong. In some cases it's: I feel very unsafe and I have to get out of here, but you can't because you're a kid, right? So you're trapped in this pattern where there are these negative messages that keep affecting you and your nervous system is like trying to figure out how to deal with this, and a lot of times, what happens is that kids will just start to dissociate from those feelings as a way of just kind of surviving, right? Well, those dissociated emotions don't just go away. They stay there and when we reach adulthood, a lot of times they emerge in what are called emotional

flashbacks. And so, and what's different from, like, a typical flashback, from a regular PTSD versus complex PTSD, is that when we have PTSD let's say I was in Fallujah, for example, and you know our convoy was attacked and a bunch of people around me died, and that happened when we were going under a bridge. Now, when I'm back at home, I'm no longer in that environment and I'm starting to go under a bridge. It's like all those images of being attacked from going under a bridge come back to me, right, that's kind of traditional PTSD. Or I see a, you know, I see an aeroplane and the memories of the aeroplane crash come back to me, right? Or I'm in a situation similar to when I was attacked. All of a sudden those images of that attack kind of come back to me.

32:16

With complex PTSD. It's a little bit different, because a lot of times kind of the factual information about what happened is oftentimes not stored, but the emotions are, and so we can have an emotional reaction as though we are responding to something very terrifying, but we have no idea what it is. It just is like it has this just, you know, ill-defined, amorphous kind of form to it and we just are like why am I feeling this way? What is going on? And so a lot of times, particularly if we didn't feel safe in childhood, or some bad things happened, there will kind of be this, not necessarily a constant hum, but some noise in the background, where there's a sense of urgency about not feeling safe or never being able to just quite calm down. So you're always kind of feeling a little on edge and a little alert and a little tense, and sometimes that can manifest as just this sense of needing to run, just needing to get out of there, just needing to, and for no particular reason. Does that make sense?

33:29 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

That makes total sense. And actually, what the brain does right is like it takes the past experiences and it projects it on your present experiences, doesn't it? And so the way you felt in childhood is then projected on the people that you meet in your relationships. That's why relationships are so healing, because they are going to trigger all that in you. Which brings me back a little bit to what we were talking about, the attachment styles, right? So somebody who wants to run? Does that mean that they're going to then turn into a bit more of an avoidance style? Or is that me who's just adding, adding interpretation to that?

34:07 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

The difference between the anxious and the avoidant attachment style really has to do with how the brain attempts to cope with distress right and so most of us have heard of the fight or flight response where the brain, when we're, when we're under distress, one of the things that the that the brain has is this alert circuit that starts going off and saying there's a threat, there's a threat, there's a threat. And some people will tend to run away to try to avoid the threat and some people will attempt to confront the threat. And when it comes to attachment style kind of, the difference between the avoidant and the anxious is that the anxious is a bit more of kind of the fight response, but with a feeling of ineffectiveness. It's kind of like you know, there's nothing I can do here. There's not, you know there's. I don't have a sense of agency here. I feel threatened, but I feel like, you know, I just am bewildered by what to do with that right, and usually that kind of anxious response comes from childhood. The other one is just I'm just going to go away, you know. I mean the threat is there and in order to avoid the distress from that threat, I'm just going to dissociate from it, and that is what's kind of more the avoidant. And so these are the people who in a relationship and again this is a big generalisation because this isn't always true, but typically in a relationship women tend to be more on the anxious side and men

tend to be on the more avoidant side. So a woman would tend to be and again, you know they're. Certainly this isn't 100%, but this happens enough that it's. You know, it's a very, very common pattern where a dude will tend to just clam up emotionally and just emotionally shut down when there's some kind of distress in the relationship, 36:10

And women oftentimes will from the anxious response will be like why do you always just shut down and kind of get a little bit more on the aggressive side, trying to get them to re-engage right, trying to get them to re-engage. The vast majority, vast majority of fights that happen in relationships. I would say 95%. There are some legitimate things where there's been a violation of trust or things like that, but most of the time arguments happen in relationships and they escalate because the way in which people are trying to connect with each other is actually pushing them apart rather than allowing them to be in a collaborative space.

36:57

And so, for an example, if something is going on in the relationship and, let's say, one of the partners comes up and is like I'm just feeling like, you know, we just don't talk much, I just don't feel really connected right now. Right, I mean, that's kind of a bid for some connection from their partner. And you know, I hate to say it because I don't want to throw guys under the bus, but a very, very common thing that I see all the time in practice is that, guys hear that, as you know, you really suck as a human being and you're not doing anything right and you're completely failing me and I'm really upset because of you. That's oftentimes the interpretation that, even though they may not say those words, that's exactly what's going on in their mind. So they just kind of go into a withdrawal, they just go into a shell and then sometimes, they'll physically leave the room.

37:51

Other times they might get defensive from that and just say, why is it always my fault, or something like that. And then what's happening? I mean, the two people are now pushing each other apart rather than being able to connect and so kind of tying that in with, you know, with the complex PTSD or some of that emotional baggage that we bring in from childhood. One of the things that does happen is that when we are interacting with our partner and we feel distressed in some way because either they say something that didn't land on us well, or it's like we don't, doesn't feel like there's a good connection there, what starts to happen is that all of that emotional stuff from the past gets brought into the present and all of a sudden makes things seem more extreme. You know: where it's. It's always this way.

38:40

I could never have you know, I mean it's, those are the kinds of comments that sometimes come out. Things all of a sudden that are really quite minor can feel catastrophic. It can kind of get into the all or nothing black and white kind of thinking.

38:57

Things feel very extreme and a lot of that is because of unresolved emotional harm that we had in childhood, that that just gets pulled in. At least the, at least the emotional component of that kind of gets pulled into the relationship that we're having now because it's another attachment relationship. So, it tends to get pulled into the, the current attachment relationship

39:19 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, I love how you said that, and what comes to mind is a bit to sort of add to that is when someone has had trauma, or around relationships and around a scene that intimacy or connection were not safe when they were young, they are wired for protection. Unconsciously, you're seeking protection over intimacy, even if you really really, really want to be connected and intimate with your partner. So that's when, then, you and I believe that relationships are there for you to do that work. Right For you to have a container, for you to be able to start to rewire the way that you are actually doing things. And obviously now the question is how do you do that? And I know there's not a simple answer to that right.

40:19 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Well, actually it is not that complicated. The challenge is just knowing what to do. But, the actual techniques of change are really not that difficult. I had a surgeon once tell me, he goes once you learn where to cut, it's not hard. You know, the challenge is knowing where to cut. But once you understand that, surgery is pretty straightforward. And it's kind of the same thing with relationships.

40:50

And unfortunately there's not a lot of good information out there. And I'm not here to throw anybody or anything under the under the bus right, because I think that there are a lot of different things like the you, the Mars and Venus concept and love languages and things like that, that can speak to people in certain periods of their life when they have particular needs or something feels relevant. So I, you know, I certainly don't want to dismiss any of that. Unfortunately there's really not that many resources out there that help people develop a kind of a model, give them a set of tools that they can use to effectively heal and change the way that they are interacting with their partner at an emotional level. And I, you know, I would be remiss to not mention the work of Leslie Greenberg and Sue Johnson, who both did some absolutely groundbreaking work, and John Bowlby, of course, the originator of attachment theory. But Sue Johnson in particular has just done some amazing work. She's got a couple of books. One of them is called Hold Me Tight, which is a very good book about restoring good emotional bonds and some techniques for doing that.

42:16

What I've found is that a lot of the books that are out there are pretty academic, and what a lot of people need are like okay, okay, just give me like a couple things that I can do, because a lot of this information, while it's valid, just seems like it's too much to think about, it's too abstract, there's just too much here, and so I just need to know, like, what do I say to my partner, what do I not say to my partner? How do I recognize when something is not going well and what do I do when I recognize that? Because if we can recognize when things are not going well and we can speak in a way that allows us to remain in collaborative space with our partner, then we can do a tremendous amount of healing.

43:05 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

How can you recognize when things are going wrong for somebody who's like oh how can I recognize that something's off or that I'm overreacting or that you know?

43:14 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Yeah yeah, yeah. So I think that the first question is how do you recognize when something is going wrong? And the way that I kind of explain this to my clients is that most of us have been to parties or have had conversations where there's like a particular emotional tone to them, right, it's like, you know, we're having a conversation and everybody is just kind of laughing and everything is going well, and then all of a sudden something changes and just the feel of the conversation is different, like we just went from talking about our vacation to all of a sudden, getting into politics, for example, and now all of a sudden it's like, ew, you know, now it just there's this kind of this sense of something just changed. And those are what I call emotional inflection points. And most couples I'm just going to say most, I mean every single couple I've worked with kind of nod their head.

44:11

Yeah, I can tell when that happens, right, they're having a conversation that seems to be collaborative and then all of a sudden it's like we're fighting. All of a sudden what just happened? There's like this little switch. And so one of the things that I do is I have people really pay attention to those inflection points because something emotionally relevant happened there. Otherwise there wouldn't have been a change in tone. So something was said that caused a shift in how we're emotionally experiencing each other in the moment. We just went from a place of collaboration to a place where now we're in competition.

44:56 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

And would that have to do, obviously, with what we were talking about before? Like, your past experiences are kind of projected on that person and maybe a person says something in a certain tone of voice or something that reminds you or reminds a part of your brain and triggers you, and then you tend to act from that place. Is that what you're saying?

45:18 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Hundred percent, and it wouldn't necessarily have to be something from the past, but it's something that's relevant, Oftentimes it is, but especially for like I don't know why that just upset me. Usually it's because of something from the past, but it could even be something like oh my God, those are the dumbest shoes I've ever seen.

45:28

Right, I mean it's like, well, that was kind of insensitive Thanks. It Could be something that's completely in the current context, has nothing to do with what happened in childhood, but oftentimes when couples are unable to resolve the current conflict, it is usually because some stuff is being pulled up from the past that is not being identified and addressed. That is one of the reasons why it's very difficult. If I were to say you know, oh my God, those are really dumb shoes, and you're just like, well, that was kind of a crappy thing to say, I'm like, oh, yeah, sorry. Then it's just like we just go on our day, right, it may alter the mood for a while, but as soon as ice cream, you know, as soon as you get an ice cream cone, it's like on to other things. But had a childhood where you were constantly being criticised. Nothing you ever did was right and it felt like you always had to prove yourself. It's like that could be debilitating for the day, for days where you just get into this kind of internal emotional collapse where you just can't get out of anything. You can't seem to snap out of it. You know, when somebody says, oh my God, what's wrong, it sounds almost absurd to say, oh, he didn't like my shoes. You know, it's like what You're really reacting

from that and it's like, well, no, in reality you're not reacting to that, you're acting to what that represented as well as kind of a history of struggling with those kinds of things throughout childhood that are still left unresolved, if that makes sense. And so recognizing these emotional inflection points are really critical.

47:17

And another skill that I have people do is communicate state. I have my couples practise this every single day where they literally sit down across from each other every single day and just it's like they're taking a little emotional thermometer and just stick it in their belly and just reading what it says, like they're like they're reporting the temperature. And just saying something like right now I'm feeling calm, or right now I'm feeling happy, or right now I'm feeling stressed, or right now I'm feeling upset and just reporting that and that's it. No additional conversation, no, nothing.

48:04

Because getting used to just being able to communicate what you're experiencing in the moment is critical when you notice one of those inflection points because if something just changed in the conversation, being able to say what just happened there, and the other person would say, well, what did you experience? Like well, it felt like we just went from a state of being in a good place to being in a place that's bad. Just as though you're observing the weather. It's like, man, the sun was out a minute ago. Now, all of a sudden, clouds came in. What just happened? Right, it's really that kind of talk, because when the value of that is that when you're in a state of distress, when you're starting to go down a place where the two of you are going to lose your ability to remain connected and in a collaborative space, being able to stay in a collaborative space by simply observing what is happening without getting into the well, you made me feel.

49:06

You know, just like what just happened? It felt like things didn't go well. What did you hear me say? I heard you say blah, blah, blah, just kind of reporting, as though you're observing what's happening rather than being immersed in it, especially when emotions are being triggered that have baggage associated with them. It's hard to process through those when you're flooded with them. And so, by trying to take on the role of an observer, then you can discuss those emotions, but you're kind of hovering over them in a sense. Instead of being on the side of the hill as the landslide is happening, right, you're on a helicopter just observing what's happening without being swept up in the landslide of emotion, and so it's just the wow.

50:03

I really felt myself getting upset, you know. And what happened? Well, I totally feel flooded with anger right now, or I totally feel flooded with frustration right now. Right, being able to just objectively state the experience will allow people to remain in collaborative space during times when those emotions get triggered. And that is actually where a lot of the healing happens is the ability to remain present, kind of like the parent when the child was really upset, right, and instead of the parent freaking out and then interacting with the kids, where both of them are pinging off each other and then escalating, the parent is like I know you're upset, it's okay, you know you must feel really frustrated right now. You must feel very angry right now. I get it, I understand it's going to be okay. The parent kind of reflects back to the

child kind of an objective sense of what is happening in them when their subjective sense is getting flooded and they're unable to navigate through that. Does that make sense?

51:15 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

It does so it's kind of pausing and observing and that avoids you from reacting and overreacting and you can calm down and come from a different place. That's what you're saying. Okay, so you create that container as a couple, and obviously that's kind of an ideal situation, right? What if things escalate and you're unable to have that awareness in that moment and you're in the heat of a conflict? What would you do in those cases?

51:43 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Yeah. So that's a very good question, because it is very rare that a couple will come in. I mean, they typically come in to see a therapist, you know, like me, until they're almost like considering divorce because things are just so bad,

52:02

Or they're just like I can't stand this anymore. And they have developed such an ingrained pattern of interacting with conflict that there just really isn't a frame of reference for being able to navigate through particular certain types of things without getting into conflict. Even during therapy we have to start with baby steps, but one of the things that I do is I have couples create what I call an emotional fire escape plan, and it essentially is that you know the time to figure out how to get out of a burning building is not while it's on fire. And so what people do is they say, okay, if the fire alarm goes off, this is what we're going to do. We're going to go to this stairway, we're going to go down the stairs, we'll go outside, we'll call the fire department. There's just kind of a plan in place, and when it comes to emotional conflict, I have them do the same thing.

53:05

It's like you know we talk about that inflection point, right? I'm like, if either of you notice that things are starting to escalate, the two of you have to agree on a phrase, a word or something that you will both pinky swear that you'll honour. If one or the other of you just says something like you know what, I'm starting to lose my ability to be here, to be present in a good way. I would like to ask that we take a pause and come back and talk about this later, and sometimes it's really hard,, but I have both of them actually practise saying that to each other, or even write down a phrase that they can use and pin it on the fridge. Because what happens is that if we don't have that, then we can become flooded with emotion, and have no way of getting out of it, because when emotion starts getting high, one of the things that happens is that our ability to think logically just goes offline. And this is one of the reasons why people panic and they'll drown when there's a lifeboat like two feet from them. Right, it's because their ability to strategize or problem solve, or you know, and you'd be like, oh, if I was there, I would have. Well, you probably would have reacted in the very same way, because emotions can make our intellectual brain, our ability to think, just go completely offline, and this is why we have fire drills in buildings, and it's the exact same thing in a relationship.

54:40

You have to practise just saying. You know what? I'm starting to recognize that we're going into a place that's not helpful. Let's take a pause and come back to this later and then figure out how long is that, you know, is that two hours, four hours, the next day? You do want to come back to it. And if you come back to it and then have to take a pause again, then you just do that.

55:03 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

But it's important to come back. Is that what you're saying? It's important to fix a time.

55:07 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Correct. Otherwise what happens is that one person will call for a timeout and the other person will be like this always happens. Anytime that I have something to say you call a timeout and we never get to come back to it. It never gets discussed, it never you know, so you do have to get back to it. You do have to get back to it, otherwise it can feel just like I don't want to talk about this, so I'm just going to kind of pull the fire alarm so that I don't have to deal with this conversation and we'll never come back.

55:30 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, that makes a lot of sense.

55:34

One of the things that I developed to help with that is a set of - what actually my new book is going to be about: The seven rules of emotional communication, is that there are certain ways that we interact that tend to bring us closer together and there's certain ways that we can interact that will tend to push us further apart. So one of the big rules that I have and this is the first one that I teach everybody, is to never speak for the emotions or the experience of the other person. For example, if you say why are you so angry? I mean, what's the response? I'm not angry, right? I mean it's because as soon as you start speaking, for you know it's like well, you're always just sad like that. What happens if we could put on some magical glasses that allow us to see the emotional connection between two people and what is happening to that emotional connection during different types of communication? What we would see, when one person would tell the other person or state what the other person is experiencing, is that the other person withdraws their connection and goes into a state of defensiveness. Because now, all of a sudden, they're having to defend themselves instead of engaging with their partner. It is different if you just observe.

57:08

And so if you just say you're looking, really upset right now, what's going on, what's happening. Right and this is the second rule that I have is explore rather than explain. It's like. Help me understand that, because that's a bid for connection. I'm trying to draw you in there. What are you feeling right now? What's going on? What did I say that triggered that? Because what I'm doing is if we were to put on our magic glasses again, what we would see is that now the other partner would be emotionally reaching out and engaging. And the *explain* part which really shuts down a lot of communication is if one person says you know, well, I'm really upset that you're two hours late and you didn't call and we had, you know, dinner here, we had guests and you know what's going on. And instead of like taking accountability, kind of just engaging in there being upset, they go into this explain mode and it's like you know, well, I had a



lot of stuff to do, you know, instead of acknowledging what was going on, right, and then what we put on our magic glasses, what we would see is a complete breakdown of any emotional connection there.

58:20

And the whole key to healing, the whole key to communication, emotional communication between couples, is to keep them both engaged in what I call the space of engagement. That emotional imaginary space between two people where both of them come in to that collaborative space with their own emotions and vulnerabilities and all of that. And there's an interaction there. There's a place for the two people to support each other and love each other and validate each other and all of that kind of stuff. And when people are distressed, that's what they seek. They seek to have that kind of connection with their partner.

59:08

But oftentimes the words that come out of their mouth, such as speaking for the other person's emotions has the opposite effect. And then, they become upset because it feels like whenever I try to reach out to you, you're not here for me, and feeling really frustrated that there's no matter how much they try, they're not able to kind of bridge this gap between them that tends to form whenever either one of them needs some support.

59:43

And, another one that I talk about a lot, right, one of those rules that we already talked about was that emotional escape plan.

59:54

But another is, you know, never to try to manage the emotional life of another person, right, you don't want to try to say things in a way that will make them feel okay, or not tell them things because you're afraid that they might get upset, because then it's not honest for one and it requires denying your own needs in order to help emotionally regulate the other person.

01:00:30

And that is, in a sense, that is what I kind of call the definition of a dysfunctional family, right, I mean of a dysfunctional relationship, because a dysfunctional relationship, really, when you think about it, it's the denial of your own needs in order to regulate the emotional life of your partner, and so this is where you have to give up what is important to you. You have to not say what is important to you or what you need in order to help regulate the emotions of the other person, and that becomes kind of like an emotional hostage situation. And you look at any dysfunctional family system, right, that's what happens. Being careful about what you say around the alcoholic dad or the narcissistic mother, or whatever. You always have to try to pretend to not be you in order for the other person to be okay.

01:01:35 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

which is a form of manipulation as well. But it's a learned way of doing things. So I really liked everything you were saying and it just reminds me, or just that actually conflict can become a source of intimacy when it's dealt with properly, communicating properly and coming from emotional awareness. Because, your relationship is going to bring up things in you. You say on your website. You say people in a functional relationship have the ability to reconcile and repair after an argument and the ability for each partner to have their emotional needs recognized and nurtured.

01:02:19 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Correct.

01:02:20 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

So in that case, when you said at the beginning you were like with my wife, you said we never fight, but you do argue?

01:02:28 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

It's not that we don't have disagreements right. It's not that we don't have differences of opinion.

01:02:34

I mean, I think that a relationship where both people always think and feel and like the exact same things would be kind of a horrifying experience, because there would be no richness to the relationship. The difference is can we communicate in a way where we don't have to resort to anger and particularly weaponizing anger, which results in kind of cutting each other down as a way of winning an argument?

01:03:10 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

right, right.

01:03:11 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Because anger in and of itself is a very, very healthy emotion. It is what allows us to set boundaries Right. I mean, if somebody just walked into your house and opened up your fridge and started making a sandwich, I mean it's the emotion of anger that would be saying get out of here, what are you doing? Get out of my house. Exactly, yes, and that's about setting and maintaining boundaries, and anger, in that respect, is a very healthy form of anger.

01:03:38

When anger becomes damaging is when it becomes weaponized because we don't feel effective in getting our needs met in our communication, you know, with our partner. And it's either because we're not communicating well, our partner's not receiving it well, or there's some kind of breakdown, and that's when we start using anger as a way of attacking the other person. And that arises when we don't feel heard, when we don't feel that we have a sense of agency, when we don't feel respected or valued and don't have the skills for addressing that in a healthier way. That's usually when weaponized anger comes out. And so when I say that you know, it's not that my wife and I don't have differences of opinion on stuff. We do, I mean absolutely, but we're able to navigate through that.

01:04:32

There are some times when I can act like a jerk. I'm an imperfect human being who grew up in a very toxic environment, right? So there are sometimes things that get triggered in me and, you know, my wife has the ability just to go. You know that was not a good thing to say and I'm like, oh, what did you hear me say? What happened? Like, yeah, sorry about that. And we can have a conversation about where that came from and just kind of figure out how to do things differently in the future, how to communicate differently in the future, if I'm experiencing something or I'm feeling something.

01:05:06 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

If that makes sense, yes, it does, and I think it's a really good way to wrap up this conversation, because I'm very mindful of your time, although I would love to continue. But really, you can create the container in a relationship in order for you to evolve and grow. It's not that you're still going to be that imperfect human being and your partner is that imperfect human being, and you come with your wounds and you attract each other because of your wounds as well on a certain level. But if you have the awareness and the tools, then you can actually thrive from that, and I feel that's what your message is.

01:05:48 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

100% agree, and one thing that I would add to that is that it doesn't require you to stop having baggage. It doesn't require you to be a perfect human being in order to have a very happy and functional relationship.

01:05:52 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes I like that and one of my mentors actually says: You know you don't have to go to Tibet and worship a guru to heal. He's like actually your greatest master is the person usually who sleeps right next to you every night, because they're the person who's going to trigger the things in you. They're the person who's there to teach you and to really bring out the best of you in you, if you take accountability and if they take accountability. And the real work really is in relationship. And you know I'm going to be very vulnerable here. My lesson on this planet, I think, is to actually learn that, because you can do so much healing by yourself, but I think the real test is when you are in a relationship. That's the real test.

01:07:08 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

100% agree with everything you said. And your mentors comment about it's one thing to be on the mountain and do some self exploration, and there is some value in that, don't get me wrong. But, the person speaking next to you is the one that you're bonded to, and that's the one where a lot of the real emotional healing will take place that you just cannot do on your own.

01:07:19 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes I agree and I need to step into that myself. So I highly recommend you guys check Dr Todd's work out. I'll leave his website in the links below. It's drtodd.com. You also have a number of blog posts that are really interesting you have a blog post and I'll put it in the show notes: *Emotional hygiene*, and there are a number of tips there that can be really helpful for ways to communicate well, so go and check that out.

On his website. He also has a podcast which is called Man Talk on Marriage. It's not only for men, women can listen as well right? And where he discusses all things about marriage and relationships and how to navigate relationships, essentially.

01:08:10 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Thank you for the kind words. I appreciate that.

01:08:13 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

He also, as he mentioned. You mentioned you're going to have an upcoming book that's coming out and it's called *The Seven Laws of Emotional Communication: The Essential Skills for Resolving Conflict and deepening your intimate connections*. So when that comes out, make sure to check that out. You said it will come out around December, maybe?

01:08:31 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

That's what I'm thinking. Keep your fingers crossed.

01:08:32 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Yes, well, I wish you all the rest with your book publication. It's an exciting project and, yeah, I think I've told people where they can connect with you, if there's anything else you would like to add. I have a last question to ask you, but let me know if there's anything people need to know.

01:08:48 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

No, that's. I mean my website i is probably the best. I'm also on X as well, but most of my work is right on my website, okay great.

01:08:59 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Well, thank you for that, and I just have a little bit of a last question. It's a bit more of a creative question.

01:09:04 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Okay.

01:09:04 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

I'd like you to imagine that it's your last day on Earth. You're about to leave this Earth, and as you leave your body, your soul leaves your body. Right, you meet a being whose purpose is to guide new souls as they depart for their own hero's journey here on Earth, where they will learn to heal as well through how they relate to other people and through their relationships. So what three helpful truths would you share with them, to whisper to those brand new souls as they take the plunge into this journey that we call life?

01:09:40 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Don't judge what you feel, because people who say that you choose to be depressed or you choose to be anxious, that's just factually inaccurate. I don't think it's very helpful at all. I think that emotions come up for a variety of reasons, and oftentimes they come from places of fear and woundedness, and the more that we can not judge ourselves from having those, but the more that we can just simply understand where they're coming from, we're better equipped to navigate through those successfully.

01:10:16

I think the second thing that I would say is that when growing up, most of our woundedness comes through our relationships, and in adulthood, most of our healing comes through relationships. Most of our healing comes through relationships.

01:10:24

And it's not that we can't do individual work we certainly can but everything from getting over addiction to overcoming eating disorders, to all kinds of stuff, it's the relationships that really fill us with the resilience and a strength that we wouldn't have simply on our own.

01:10:47

And I think the last thing that I would say is that one of the most important things for human beings is a sense of being loved, and the word love gets thrown around a lot, and for me, the definition of love is really feeling as though we exist in the place of importance in the heart of another person and that our presence here matters to them and that we are important to them.

01:11:29

When we have that sense that we exist in the heart of another person and that other people care about us and our life, that gives us a sense of meaning and a sense of fulfillment that just can't be found in any other place. One of the most striking quotes that I've ever heard came from John Merrick, who was the elephant man, and at one point in his life he said that he feels happy every day of his life because he knows that he is loved. Coming from somebody who you know, who had to overcome so much hardship not of his own making, you know, the fact that there was somebody who loved him made all the difference.

01:12:23 - Dannie Reeve (Host)

Thank you for that. These are received by everybody here and we will close the podcast with those great three truths. Thank you so much for being on the show, Todd. It was a pleasure.

01:12:37 - Dr.Todd Berntson (Guest)

Thank you so much. It was wonderful.