

How to Heal Your Attachment Wounds with Rick & Forrest Hanson, featuring Dr. Diane Poole Heller

FH

Hello and welcome to Being Well. I'm Forrest Hanson. If you're new to the podcast, this is where we explore the practical science of lasting well-being. If you've listened before, welcome back. I'm joined today, as usual, by Dr. Rick Hanson. So, dad, how are you doing today?

RH

Really good and really looking forward to talking with today's guest.

FH

Yeah, same. Really looking forward to it. Today, we're going to be focusing on two of our most important and most frequently tread subjects, attachment wounds and traumatic experiences with a longtime therapist, trainer of therapists, author and expert in the fields of child and adult attachment theory and trauma resolution, Dr. Diane Poole Heller. Diane has been practicing for over 35 years and focuses on using somatic or body-based approaches to resolving the painful experiences and negative patterns that hold us back. Her work on adult attachment has forged a path for adults with childhood attachment injuries to develop the secure attachment skills that tend to lead to more connected and fulfilling adult relationships. And her expertise in trauma healing has supported survivors in the families of highly publicized traumatic events like the Columbine and Boulder shootings. So thanks so much for taking the time to join us today, Diane. We really appreciate it. How are you doing?

DPH

I'm thrilled to be here. I'm so excited to be with you both.

RH

Well, Diane, the feeling is mutual. We're friends. We've known each other for a long time. I was talking with my wife, Jan, just before we were doing this today about how you and I met long time ago at a conference, and there was an immediate simpatico. And your feistiness and genuine brilliance and huge heart have just drawn me all the way from the very, very start. So I'm very glad you're here.

DPH

Yay! Virtual hug.

RH

There we are. Hug, hug, virtual hug. So we're going to be talking about relationships and healing of relationship wounds and healing broadly in relationships, drawing on relationships for resources. Inside that framework, we'll be touching on a lot, I'm sure, what's called attachment theory, which is your specialty and expertise. You're a genuine world-class expert on this. For regular folks, and just to reset it for everybody else, could you just briefly summarize? This is your elevator speech. You get to get to the 100th floor, but no higher, no longer. What is attachment? What are attachment styles or patterns? And why should we care?

DPH

Okay, that sounds great. Well, first of all, I was teaching trauma recovery, Dr. Peter Levine's work, Somatic Experiencing for over 25 years. And I just noticed broken connection was a common, if not always present issue for people crawling out of trauma experiences. And some of them, of course, were like car accidents or natural disasters, but many of them are around a relationship where we're wounded in a relationship, but we also heal in a relationship. So I thought, well, I'm going to jump into the very beginning of a relationship, which is what's happening in utero and the first few years of life, how do we build a relationship template? Then came upon attachment theory, which just for me was the missing link to understanding that mystery. So attachment patterns, the idea, the theory is that even in utero, you're sensing how your mom and dad are relating, you're sensing how they're relating to you, and you're starting to get a feeling for the relational world. As we even develop language, we're developing attachment patterns at the same time as language. Sometimes language can help define or help us understand our attachment patterns. It just gives us a chance to see when we win the jackpot and we get born into a prosocial family, we tend to tilt towards secure attachment.

I can describe that a little bit later. Then sometimes it's less than ideal, and sometimes that's parenting, sometimes that's medical procedures, sometimes that's you're born in a war zone, your parents were great, but the circumstances were really stressful, can all impact how we embody and internalize our sense of relationship. It's a really rich area to explore. What I love about it the most, I want to make sure I say this, is when you really understand attachment, your own and have compassion for other people's, if there's injury involved, is that you'd stop blaming yourself and you also aren't blaming other people, like projecting that on them, because so often what's occurring in our current adult relationships stems quite a bit back to our early patterning, which can shift depending on the relational environment. So it's a very forgiving system in a

way. First of all, secure attachment. A lot of people think of healthy attachment as you had a roof over your head, you had three meals a day, you got trips to the doctor. Well, of course, it's a great baseline, but it's so much more than that. It has to do with your parents helping feel safe, protected.

They're available for connection, but they also, as you individuate, they're okay with you separating a bit. There's an easy flow between connection and separation. There's playfulness. Playfulness is a big marker for secure attachment. I think in our culture, especially, we all need to get out and play more. I just came from a week of play in the mountains. I'm so glad I was doing that. So play, play more. That's a takeaway. Also parents that align and have empathy to their child state. They're attuned in secure attachment. There's consistent responsiveness. That doesn't mean you always get what you want, but it means that your parent is there and understanding and available a significant amount of the time, not all the time, because that's unrealistic. But there's a relational resiliency. Even if there's a misattunement that happens, parents model how to repair that misattunement. Okay, maybe you were not willing to get out of bed to go to school in the morning or something, and your parents got to shoving clothes on you and pushing you out to the school bus. Later they might say, Hey, I know that was a rough morning. Let's have a chat about that.

The repair doesn't mean you have to be perfect. It just helps if you recognize when things are a little out of sync and you acknowledge it and you compassion connect around it. It's not about being perfect. We really want to get that thrown out the window. The reason it's important to understand what secure attachment is, is we want to be moving back towards that. We want to find ways to support our ourselves and our partners and our kids and our friends to be more in that relational environment. There's all these things that are easy to do if you understand what they are. That's what we're trying to reveal today, that strengthen an attachment bond and encourage it towards secure attachment. So that's the game plan of why I'm teaching this and why I think it's helpful because I think relationship is the name of the game anyway. So why not have a good one?

FH

I love how very early on, you immediately use the word patterns, which I think is such a huge part of your work in general and is also such a huge part of what we're doing on the podcast. We often talk about the patterns of behavior that people internalize over time. Often, they have their roots in childhood, not always, but often. Our experience is the things that happen to us, create different patterns of behavior. In the case, whether it's traumatically oriented or there are attachment injuries that happen in childhood, these can be more problematic patterns of behavior, ones that make it hard for somebody to get the most out of life. At the very beginning,

you mentioned a couple of examples of potential situations that could be challenging for somebody. I was hoping that you could give a couple of practical examples here of attachment injuries and then maybe some of the patterns that those injuries could create in our adult relationships.

DPH

I'd love to do that. That'd be great. There's really three different attachment styles that we tend to identify in the writing and everything. They're avoidant. They use sometimes different terminology, but I'm using the word avoidant, ambivalent, and disorganized. I'll give you a little brief overview of that.

RH

These are insecure forms of attachment, distinct from secure.

DPH

Yeah, this is when there's been a bit of a deficit for whatever reason in the environment, whether it was a parent just had unresolved issues from their childhood, which, attachment is very easily passed down through the generations, attachment patterns. Sometimes we have to have the compassion for what our parents went through as well, and maybe their grandparents and the other way up. You can also have a mix of attachment styles because we're highly sensitive to the relational environment we're in. You might have one attachment style that relates to how your father was or one with your mother was, that thing. So avoidant tends to be a situation where a parent, for whatever reason, wasn't able to be present. Sometimes it's just this absent vacancy, which is if you think about being an infant, you're reaching out for contact, right? That's really scary. You're 100% dependent on mom or dad and both. You're reaching out and it feels like nobody's there. That's terrifying to an infant. Now, sometimes avoidance will happen if a parent is actively rejecting besides being neglectful. Sometimes the other way it can set up is a parent is present, but they're only present when they're teaching you a left brain skill, like how to read, how to write, how to ride your bike, how to make change, things like that.

So they're present, but only usually for tasks or skill focus. So that's something that will affect a child's attachment system, usually by them internalizing this feeling that nobody else is there. They're on their own way too early. I call it reactive autonomy. They become very self-sufficient. Self-sufficient is a good thing. They develop skills out of that later in life, and they can use those skills. They're often very, very productive, that thing. But underneath it, sometimes, if they're still an attachment wound, they might be feeling unsubstant, supported and they can't really rely on

anyone else. They can't ask for needs because they won't be met. They have this assumption before they even ask. It's not going to happen, so they don't even tend to reach out. Then they often miss connection. If you think about attachment as either a little bit of an overfocus on separateness or a little bit of an overfocus on connection, if it's not secure where there's a balance, we're trying to come into balance. For the avoidant, helping them, say if you're avoidant or your partner's avoidant, to let it really help feel that eventually relationships are nourishing and that connection is safe enough to have, that's one of the repairs.

RH

I was definitely avoidantly attached. I had parents who were loving and decent, but in different kinds of ways, they were unreliable sources of empathy and attunement, that sense of real rapport at an emotional level. For different reasons; they were busy, they were preoccupied, they grew up under harsh conditions themselves, not abusive, but economically harsh conditions during the depression. And the other element was that they, in different ways, kept me at arm's length. I was allowed to maintain a relationship with them as long as I didn't ask for too much. Also, as you well know, in addition to parents, we can form, in effect, models of relationship, paradigms of relationship. These are attachment patterns with our peers. So I skipped a grade. I have a late birthday. I was very young going through school, and I always felt on the outside. So I was orbiting, orbiting the cool kids, longing to belong with them, but also disdaining them as well. Anyway, so all that was where I began. And so I just want to make it personally intimate and personally real in terms of my own attachment background, which implicitly, of course, is also a way of saying that, as you, again, well know, you're such an expert here, we can heal this over time.

I no longer feel avoidantly attached in my important relationships. I am definitely not avoidantly attached to Forrest, for example. Anyway. Okay. So I just wanted to toss that in as a personal example related to avoidant attachment and then maybe cue you up to talk about ambivalent or anxious ambivalent attachment. And I love how you put it about how people I can tilt too far either toward separation or joining. I definitely tilted too far toward separation as an adaptive response, right? These attachment styles are adaptations. There are ways of being related that are functional and okay, given what we're dealing with and our own temperament walking in the door.

DPH

I'm so glad that you've mentioned that and all the healing that's been implied in that as well. It's really beautiful. It really speaks to how much healing can happen. I'm very optimistic about the degree of healing that can happen with attachment injury towards secure attachment. Also, I

just want to say that kids make the smartest, most resilient, most loving response that they can to their situation. Whatever we reacted to was really intelligent way to try to forge connection, even when there wasn't connection. That's something that I think is really important for all of us to respect about ourselves and about our partners and our kids and everybody that we're close to, because we did the best we could with what the situation was. Really, our parents were doing the best they could with what their situation was. If you're a parent and your kids are older, you can still do things that will help bridge a gap if there was something that got in the way a bit. I just really want to emphasize so much healing can happen. I mean, I probably have a little bit more disorganized the tangent. My mother was very loving at times, but also had a little bit of a challenge, I think, brain disorder or mental illness, I'm not quite sure.

But she would sometimes be very quick to shift from joy to violence. So there was really a lot of unpredictability and also scary stuff.

RH

Again, just to clarify, we can form our attachment styles without any trauma. We can become insecurely attached without any trauma. I would not say I experienced trauma myself as a kid, either with my peers or with my parents. And still, the nitty-gritty of thousands and thousands of little interactive episodes beginning in utero, but especially really beginning after birth, can gradually accumulate, particularly as it lands on a certain temperament to develop a certain attachment style, right? You would agree with that? You don't need to be traumatized to become insecurely attached.

DPH

No, not at all. Not at all.

RH

Now, sometimes trauma does happen. It's in the mix as well. But I just I wanted to distinguish between trauma and insecure attachment in general.

DPH

If you want to think of it in broad terms for everyone, it's like whatever your family was comfortable with, maybe they were really comfortable with exuberance and joy, and maybe they were comfortable with sadness, then that's something that you usually keep in your emotional range. But if, say, your family was uncomfortable with anger, or maybe they were uncomfortable with joy, sometimes a family doesn't quite know what to do with exuberance, too much energy,

even though it's positive. We tend to disown what doesn't fit that's repeated. Every time we go into that state, there's a not responsiveness or maybe an active rejection, then we tend to just separate. We tend to put that in the background. And we're just trying to create environments for ourselves and for those that we care about where there's a container for all of human experience in its fullness and in an appropriate way. And understanding attachment fits into that idea expanding our range of full humanness. Really, we're talking about how do we get back to full humanness.

RH

That's great. I would say for myself, feeling vulnerable and exposed, being emotionally vulnerable. Being rational and well-behaved, that was acceptable. Being emotionally vulnerable and exposed, that usually didn't go well. So then that became what I learned not to do. And avoid people. Okay, insecure Insecure-ambivalent.

DPH

Okay, insecure-ambivalent. Very often this pattern arises when parents are loving and there's love there, but it's a little bit too inconsistent or unpredictable. So when the child is trying to... You know how kids drape over you like wet noodles when they're really relaxed. When they're really going into the relationship and being the wet noodle, there's too often it happens that the parent gets preoccupied with something else or their own attachment history wound comes up or something disrupts it. So then it's like the gets pulled out when they start to relax into the relationship, which causes anxiety. So very often, and sometimes anger, very often what will happen is the pattern keeps happening too much of the time. It's like an inconsistent responsiveness. So then you're internally going, well, is my parent in a good place now? Are they going to be loving now? Are they going to stay there long enough for me to stabilize? So instead of feeling like, oh, there's mom, there's dad, and yay, it's more like, Where are they? You're trying to figure out how you can mold yourself or some do behaviors in the past have worked to get them in a good place.

You're always over-focused on them, the other person, to try to regulate yourself and to try to stabilize and try to get a source of soothing and a source of safe haven. It's just too unpredictable. It's there sometimes, and sometimes it's not. The pattern that can evolve out of that is an expectation or a projection on other people in the world that everything's unpredictable and that you're chronically disappointed. If this happened a lot and more severely, you tend to be angry and frustrated a lot. It's going to be this feeling like, I just can't be satisfied. I want relationship, I want relationship. But coupled with that, like a package deal, is fear of abandonment. As soon as I let somebody in, then I immediately have to deal with the feeling of

like, They're going to leave too soon. They're going drop me. Then that becomes uncomfortable because in our culture, especially, we are not cool with clinging us. Our culture is like Independence Day. We need actually as a culture to get more okay with dependence because we all have independence. We all have dependence. The truth of it is, if we have a balance and a capacity for both of those, we can be interdependent, which is the truth of how it is relationally.

Partly, what has to happen, what helps if you have that particular pattern is to learn how to self-soothe, how to self-regulate, but also how to be mutual in your relationships and not always be scanning for how a person is slighting you. They're always looking for the signal of abandonment or disappointment or negative reaction. Ambivalent folks are really good at reading facial clues. Avoidant folks aren't because they're avoiding contact. There's like a time lag. So they often don't see facial expression or relational cues. But ambivalent see them hyper in neon, but they misinterpret them. And what I want people to understand compassionately is that there's a misinterpretation because that fear of abandonment is exaggerated. So you're trying to calm down an overactivated attachment system with ambivalent, and you're trying to lift the brake on the avoidant attachment system so that they even allow attachment, the awareness of I want to belong or I want to connect to come up. What I want to say about avoidant, when that comes up, I want to connect. I feel longing to be with you. That's an extremely excruciating vulnerable state in the beginning because everything in them saying, No, this isn't going to turn out good.

I'm going to get hurt. If you can make sure that you stay present or you say, Oh, I see that you're really present with me today. I really appreciate that. That's really helpful. Sometimes for the avoidant, when there is deep connection, that's a lot. Sometimes they need a couple of days to process it. You might have the experience of they really connect, and then maybe they distance a little bit till they metabolize that, and then they might come back again. Again, this is what I want to emphasize about not taking that personally. If I understand that about my... Say I have an avoidant partner, I understand that, then I'm not thinking, Oh, my God, we were so close and he disappeared. You start to understand these patterns and you can interact with them more compassionately. When you feel the avoidance starting to disengage or stonewall a little bit or shut down a little bit, that can be read as rejection. If we just start to understand very often it's not rejection. It's just what we're dealing with internally until we get more comfortable and move more and more, like Rick said in the beginning, towards secure attachment.

FH

To complete our quick movement through these different patterns, and then we can talk about what to do about them a little bit more. You referred to yourself a little bit ago as, or I believe it was in terms of your relationship with your mother, having more of a disorganized style. That's

the final one that we haven't really talked about yet. Would you mind explaining what that looks like?

DPH

Sure. What happens with disorganized? First of all, disorganized in a way is a combination of avoidant and ambivalent. You can have disorganized tilts towards avoidant, and you can have disorganized tilts towards ambivalent, and you can have disorganized that oscillates between the extremes of both of them. Just basically what disorganized means is it's not a pattern. It's not as an easily formulaic pattern as the other two, because what's happening is the parent is either highly chaotic, which might happen if they're addicted during your childhood or something. They are often scary. It could include abuse. It could include a lot of intense anger, yelling kinds of things. It doesn't involve physical hitting or anything like that. It could certainly include emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. What you're having is your attachment system as a kid is trying to connect. But you're survival system against the trauma or the fear is trying to get the heck out of there. You're in this natural approach and then avoid. Now, sometimes little kids, you'll see in the studies, they'll go up and they'll hit their parent, which is an approach, but it's a defensive fight or flight. You get fight or flight or freeze.

In a way, it's a recipe for freeze on some levels because all your attachment instinct is going this way and your trauma instinct is going this way. You're in this back and forth a little bit. It can take you into a freeze, which just means you're immobilized. Sometimes you can't talk, sometimes you can't move, sometimes you're very cold. These are trauma responses that are mixed in with the attachment system. When we're trying to untangle that later, safety is super important, the sense of safety and protection that somebody has your back. That can be happening in the context of the relationship. Sometimes therapy is helpful in a situation if it's really severe. The thing that I think is confusing for a lot of people, and when disorganized attachment is in a mix in a relationship, adult relationship, is that you hit a certain level of intimacy, and it seems to be that's when the disorganization hits. It's like all this fear comes up, and you might even recognize my partner is a really good guy or gal. They're even securely attached. They're really good for me. I really love being with them. But then this unexplained fear, terror comes up.

That can create a lot of confusion in relationships.

RH

Pardon me, what's it a fear of, would you say, even at the primal, very young level?

DPH

Because the original relational patterns included a scary parent or an overly chaotic parent, as soon as the attachment system activates and wants to connect, it remembers that it might have gotten hit or it might have had somebody cross boundaries sexually, or there might have been excessive yelling or maybe one parent got drunk a lot or was drugged a lot or whatever. That is all mixed in the attachment system. When you start to connect later, even though your partner doesn't even have any of those things, or sometimes we reenact and pick a partner like our parents. But even if you have a pretty healthy partner, that has to get sorted out in your own attachment system at some point to help you fully relax into the relationship and be able to have your own autonomy and also have your own ability to connect and be intimate.

FH

I'd love to ask a little bit about how you actually work with people, particularly the different methods that you use in order to help them disconnect from these problematic patterns, build more positive ones, all of that good stuff. I know that you have a really deep background in somatic work, body-based work in particular. You worked with Peter Levine for a long time. You did Somatic Experiencing. You've developed your own methodology as time has gone on. You're incredibly well-versed in I was watching a video a second ago of you working with somebody. You don't have to remember this specific video, don't worry about it. But you had a very funny moment with this client who was a woman, and she was talking about these painful experiences that she had suffered when she was quite young with her mother. You asked her, I believe, a question along the lines of like, okay, if your mother was here, what would you want to do? The woman immediately replied, I'd want to run away. Then you asked her, Really, really, really, really, really, Really interesting question, which is, which foot would you start running with? She immediately answered, I think it was her right foot.

That created a cascade into the rest of the process. The reason that I highlight this really tiny sliver of moment with this one person is that I think it gives real insight into what this can look like. I would love it if you could speak to that, why you asked that question and why these body-based approaches help people deal with stuff that we feel like is up here.

DPH

Well, first of all, trauma and early attachment getting coded into implicit memory. They follow the fast circuit learning, which just basically skips the higher function of the brain, the higher regions of the brain that are more developed in a way. And it goes straight from the amygdala of the reptilian brain and into implicit memory, which implicit just means not conscious yet memory. And one of the ways to unpack implicit memory, to move it to explicit, which means we're aware of it, is to either find an intervention that triggers that or have a person really track and be aware

of their bodily sensations and their impulses to move and any emotions that come up and sometimes thoughts that come up. We're just trying to take whatever the body is broadcasting as signals to become aware of them. What's interesting, if you're not familiar with this, is that very often we're not aware of them, but our body is broadcasting them anyway. Okay, but we're just unaware. We're not paying attention. I mean, I had a guy that I was... One intervention I use is I roll this big physio ball. I say, Okay, let's make this physio ball the person you care about the most in the world that you feel the safest with.

And they identify, Okay, it's Jim or Jane or whoever. And then I said, When you tell me it's okay, I'm going to roll this ball towards you because that's going to trigger the attachment system, right? And I'm going to do it really slowly. And you just tell me to stop whenever you get any feeling inside that you want the ball to stop, this person to stop. It's that way. I did this, rolled this ball. One gentleman said, Okay, roll it. It's Jim, let's say. The one person he could trust in the world, and I moved it a few inches, and he was in a chair. I was standing up with the ball, and he went like this. He leaned back as far as he could and put his hands out. I stopped the ball. He didn't say stop, but I stopped because that was a clear signal. He was not aware he did that. As big of a movement that is, I said, because as soon as I moved the ball back, he dropped his arms and to move back into normal position. I said, Were you aware of what your body just did?

He says, No, what are you talking about? I said, Well, let's try it again. This time, I really want you to pay attention to what's happening in your body. He went, Oh, my gosh. I had no idea. I said, What signal do you think that sends? Because he had never had a relationship with a woman. He only had one friend in the world. I said, what? And that's to his best friend, he's doing that gesture. I said, What do you think the message is that that sends to people? He was, Oh, it's really like, Stay away from me. I said, Yeah. But he wasn't aware of it. He had no memory of any trauma in his history because he had some pretty significant relational issues. That's what I mean. It can be as dramatic as that, or it can be just a very slight movement. To go back to your example, I love this example. When somebody is dealing with threat, and I might say, and you probably saw this in what you were watching, I might say, Well, let's put whatever was threatening. I usually take the threatening behavior, not the whole parent, because there's a part that they love, the part of their father they love.

Let's say the father yelled a lot or something. I'll say, Okay, well, let's keep the part of your dad that worked really well with you and you love and everything and no problem with that. Let's just put the yelling behavior as far away from you as you need it to be and then locate it. You tell me where it is. Some people say, I want it in the corner of the room so I can watch it. Other people will say, I want it on the edge of the ever expanding universe, right? As far as the way as it can possibly ever keep getting further. It doesn't matter. It's just you need to locate threat when you

understand how the threat response works. Then I'll say, Okay, so now I'd just like you to look at that threat. This time the threat is immobilized. I'm reversing the immobilization. The client's not frozen, but the threat is frozen. It can't speak, it can't move, it can't do anything. Then I have the person imagine, what is it you want to do or say? If this goes back to really early years, sometimes they just can't do it.

I'll say, Well, if someone was protective with you, then I'll do an exercise of installing a protector. It could be I don't know. It could even be something like the giant green hog or the Wonder Woman. It can be silly, fanciful things. Or it can be like your uncle that was really protective or your dog that was really protective, anything. To them, that boost up their ability. Sometimes I have them have the protector say or do whatever they want with the person. Sometimes I have them do it. If they go to a flight response, I want to run away, like you mentioned. The reason I ask, it is no wrong answer to this. It's not like right foot's better than left foot. It's that you have to access your preparatory movements, your rehearsal movements in the body to answer that question. You have to feel your body organized to run. That's what I'm trying to get to, is the organizational movement that's underneath gross motor movement. I don't know how people run around the room. They just feel the impulse to run. Then as they're following that procedural memory, that implicit information, they'll start to feel their legs might start moving a little bit.

They actually feel like they're running, even though they're sitting, they're not moving anywhere, they're just running. Then they'll say, Oh, I'm getting really tired. I'll say, Oh, yeah, take a break, find a rock, be by a river, whatever. Now, where do you want to run? I fill out the whole sensorium. As they initiate and complete a running response or a fight response, then their body moves out of threat into the completion of the threat response, and they relax. Then naturally, it's a sequence that's natural physiologically, they'll move into exploratory orienting, what's called, which means sometimes they'll be sitting across from me and their eyes will pop open and all of a sudden they're really present. They have this light coming out of them. I go, Hi, how are you? It's nice to see you. Then they start looking around and they go, Oh, wow. Gosh, I never saw that painting in your office before. It's been there forever. I had one woman, I had a 100-year-old pine tree out the window, and she goes, Oh, you have a lovely tree. She'd been coming to me for three months or something. I said, Yeah, I just planted it yesterday.

We're joking, but the reason she could see it was she wasn't in the narrow focus of the constriction of the threat response.

FH

A part of what it seems like you're doing, and again, I'm a non-clinician, so let me know what you think. It feels like you're moving people out of that, just like you're saying, that very, very

narrow threat response into a much wider seeing of the world, where from they can theoretically help themselves create a new pattern, see things freshly, respond in a different way, reconceptualize what happened to them in the past, whatever it might be.

DPH

Yeah, it's like whatever you ate for breakfast yesterday, you probably don't even remember. But your body, you trust your body to metabolize it. You're not micromanaging it. You're not going, okay, I'm going to work on the toast, and then I'm going to work on the eggs, and I'm going to work on the orange. You just trust your body knows how to do that. Your body knows how to process overwhelming life experience, but it needs some help. Just like sometimes at Thanksgiving, we eat three meals instead of one at one time, and then we have to go for a walk because we over ate or we over-celebrated it or something. If you get too much stimulus in your nervous system that's unable to process, then you start getting symptoms. The symptoms actually have a job to contain the excess arousal. To reverse that process, you touch into the symptom and then you make it slow it down a little bit and you help certain physiological processes happen that were blocked. And then it naturally releases it. And a person will naturally go from their threat response or their reptilian brain or their amygdala into their prefrontal cortex.

And all of a sudden, they'll be want and experience authentic connection with themselves and the desire to have authentic connection with another person.

FH

Yeah, that's lovely. I want to ask you about some of the specifics of this because for starters, of course, it's wonderful to work with a clinician, particularly a very experienced clinician like you, somebody who can really help people walk through their problematic patterns, get into that sense of safety, which can allow them to access a new way of being, like triple thumbs up for everybody all involved. Okay. At the same time, there are a lot of people, we get a lot of comments, questions from people who listen to the podcast who say some version of, Okay, it's challenging for me to work with a clinician for whatever reason. We're in the business of trying to help people figure out how to go through this process to the extent possible in a safe way on their own. It's all well and good to tell somebody, Okay, you move to a more place, you tap into the body, you see things newly. But a lot of people go through really challenging stuff in their life. Many of these experiences that people are trying to unravel from are extremely painful. They're very, very challenging. They're very traumatic. And even beginning to access that material in a small way can be really hard for people.

So what do you do to help resource people so they can get to that place where they can start to work with this content? Is there a way to that you help people touch things softly or get into their body, feel their body as a safe container initially before they can start working with it?

DPH

Some of the things that are very learnable, teachable and learnable, are learning secure attachment skills. So for instance, eye gaze. If you're traumatized or you're having a shame attack, which we all know shame, you have a tendency to gaze avert, that you just do not want to make eye contact. It just feels way too scary. You're just expecting that what you're going to see is anger or rejection or shaming or blaming or something. If somebody has a strong orientation to avoid, sometimes when you think they're making eye contact with you, they're actually looking at your chin. It's a cheat. If I look at your chin right now, you can't tell I'm not looking at you. Because eye contact often... I mean, eye contact can be an issue for any attachment style, but generally it is a little bit more for avoidant. We think of eye contact as a basic thing, but it can be a really big One of the exercises I sometimes give when a person is ready, you can't do this. If somebody is really dealing with a lot of shame, you have to wait to process some of that before you suggest they look at you or look at another person because the shame is taking up all the room.

It's not allowing it to happen in a comfortable way. It's too overwhelming. But one of the things that I do, and I think I even have a YouTube on this on the internet, it's called a kind eyes exercise. It's just like looking out into the world and just imagining you see kind eyes. Everybody can do this while they're listening if they want to. Kind eyes, looking back at you. For some people, that's really easy exercise. For some people, they might see the face of the Dalai Lama or the face of a spiritual teacher, or they might see their dog or a whale, or they might see their best friend or their child or their partner, whoever it is, their grandmother, grandfather. Just to notice out there that there's these kind eyes looking back at you. That's the first part of the exercise. For me, that used to be challenging, but for me now, that's very heart-opening. I can immediately see people that I feel love me. But the second part is, can I allow that to come in? Can I receive that? I've had people that could see it out there, but then they notice when it starts to come back in, they have an invisible wall that blocks it.

This one client, joyful little sprite of a person just beaming with enthusiasm as a body worker, trauma healer person, a lovely person. But she said, Oh, my gosh, I just have this wall. She wasn't aware of that until we did that exercise. Then as we investigated the wall, she realized what came up for her was in that wall. The wall was actually a condensed trauma memory of her stepfather looking at her as a sexually inappropriately. That was just icky. She had this wall. We just investigated it, unpacked that, and then she was able to let this kindness come in. As we

were even repair eye gaze. Then she was able to look at her partner and really be fully present in her eyes and also take in his love. When I was married, my husband said to me one time, I love you so much, but you just deflect it. Of course, at first I was like, No, I don't. What are you talking about? I got pissed off. Then in the middle of the night, I wake up and I go, Oh, no, he's right. I do. Then we talked about it the next day and I said, I don't know what to do with love.

I know what to do with rejection. I had to be really vulnerable for a long time, and I made it a practice. I'm just going to stay present for his love. I'm just going to stay present for kindness. I'm just as hard as it is. Eventually, it was really nice. It became a really important thing.

FH

Yeah. I love what you said there just a second ago, Diane. I just want to flag it for people. That little sentence, I don't know what to do with love. I think that that's just a great way to return to some of the things that we were talking about at the very beginning of the conversation about what were the experiences or sensations that were permitted inside of your family of origin? What are the experiences or sensations that were permitted by the people around you who you really loved and cared about, particularly when you were a young person. And I think that it can really easily create that sensation in people of, I don't know what to do with love, or I don't know what to do with anger, or, I don't know what to do with fear, or, I don't know what to do with sadness. You're like fill in the blank. And I just think it's a great way to simply in like a one sentence summary of just this whole territory.

DPH

Thank you. Yeah, I think so, too.

RH

I want to build on that in a certain way because it's not just I don't know what to do with love out there coming toward me. It's also I don't know what to do with love inside here.

FH

And me going out there. Yeah, absolutely.

RH

That was definitely true in my own history. Further, let's say, I don't know what to do with anger coming at me, or I don't know what to do with a bid for relationship coming at me. Let's say,

similarly, I don't know what to do with my own anger. I don't know what to do with my own hurt. Let's say. So in effect, we're talking there in part about being able to reparent ourselves, a familiar term to you, Diane, and help ourselves become increasingly okay with experiencing these things within ourselves, and then over time, increasingly skillful about expressing them appropriately with other people, including expressing love in different kinds of forms.

DPH

And so much can happen in the context of an adult relationship, whether it's a really deep friendship or ideally it doesn't matter. That can be a partnership or marriage or somewhere where people are really committed to bringing well-being into their life or being well, as you would say. We can really help each other be aware and also create a condition where it's okay to feel the vulnerability, because usually when we're changing a pattern, if it's been based on an injury, it's going to be a bit uncomfortable at first. But it was what? I think about my own experience of trying to stay present for love or expressing my love more directly, that was really uncomfortable at first, but then it became such a source of I enjoy. So it's worth it. But sometimes we needed a little help to have a direction of what practice am I really working on? How do I design a practice for myself in a way? If I run through just some examples, like how you... Coming and goings, coming and goings are really a big thing with attachment and with relationship in general. How do you, let's say, if somebody is working outside the home, when they home, the other person is maybe at home.

How do you greet each other? Because a lot of times it happens when you've been in a relationship a long time, you immediately go into tasking. Hey, honey, take out the garbage, or pick the kids up for school, or What took you so long? Yeah, and why did you forget the milk at the grocery store?

RH

Why is the house such a mess?

DPH

Exactly. I had a couple that absolutely loved each other. I could tell they loved each other. It was in a workshop in Denmark. They were just off. They were getting really snarky with each other, and they really wanted some help with I said, Well, how do you greet each other? He said, Well, as soon as I get to the front door, I'm just like, I don't know what I'm going to walk into. He really tensed up. She said, Well, I've got the kids and I'm cooking dinner and I'm trying to have the dog and all this stuff. I said, Okay, so let's just reenact that in the workshop. I said, Okay, this time I

want you to just have a focus of as soon as I know my partner's coming, I'm dropping everything if it's okay to do that, and I'm just going to focus on them. Then that you come together and you have this full body hug. Not like sometimes Americans, we triangle hug. It's really important that you belly to belly, body to body hug. Then you fully have that body to body hug and you stay in the hug until you feel each other's body regulate.

You feel each other relax. For instance, if, let's say, my partner has a headache, and he mentions that, then I might put my hand I would put my hand on his head to help just soothe that. Instead of him putting his own hand on, and maybe I have a lower back pain, he would put his hand on my lower back pain. The other person is helping regulate and soothe their partner. And bodies love to be with regulating other bodies. I mean, think about in your own life right now, everybody listening, who do you like to be around? You like to be around with somebody. You can be relaxed in the relational field. If it's appropriate to the relationship, you're comfortable physically. It's regulating energy, whether it's emotional or physical. That's a major attachment, attractor. Sometimes when couples are getting off, if you really boost their attachment signals in a secure attachment direction, it really, really, really helps. That's just one that's coming and going. Another couple's friend of mine that I love what they do is they sometimes go to bed at different times because you think about sleeping as another leaving. You're leaving each other when you go to sleep.

They love really really high-quality chocolate. They'll buy each other these really special truffles, and every night it's a different truffle, and they'll put it on their pillow. They have this debriefing time where they eat the chocolate and they debrief the day. They repair any misattunements. They say, Oh, honey, I know I was supposed to go with you to that thing, and then this emergency happened and I couldn't go, and I'm really sorry. Whatever. They have all this, and then one of them might go to sleep, and the other one might still stay up and work a little bit and then come to bed later. But they make sure they have that ritual every night. That's just an attachment. That's a secure attachment skill. You could do the same thing in the morning. How do you do breakfast? Do you rush off and immediately get on your computer and shut everybody else out? Or do you actually connect and maybe make breakfast together? It's very simple, but it makes a gigantic difference.

FH

Yeah, I just really want to highlight here, Diane, what I think is living right underneath what you're saying, which is just how delicate these patterns are, how they are to create in particular, and maybe even more particularly, how easy the more problematic ones are to create. I think about that example that you both gave around somebody comes home from work and what's the first interaction that happens at the door? Maybe even more so than that, what is the feeling

inside of the person as they are approaching the door? What are they expecting to receive when they walk into the room? And that's just a very small thing. That's something that's created based off of 20, 30, 40 little moments walking up to the door feeling some anxiety. Your partner responds to that anxiety in a awkward way. And here we are, we're off to the races. It doesn't really take a lot. I think back through my own life of all these little patterns that I created with other people based off of what I think were pretty objectively minor interactions where they did something a little bit funky with me. Maybe they just weren't aware of what they were doing.

It could have just been a lack of consciousness or whatever. I really internalized it as this pattern of behavior with another person that spiraled and spiraled until somebody finally created an intervention around it, one of the ones that you're describing, where you move back toward connection with each other. For a lot of people, that movement toward connection can evoke a lot of emotion, a lot of painful emotion, sadness, anger, fear, whatever it is. As we move toward the end here, I'm wondering, for people who are able to see that they're in some a pattern, maybe particularly with another person, they would like to repair it, but they feel that emotional space as being very uncomfortable for them, what are some of the things that you do with people to help them move back into your connection in that way and feel comfortable with it, to manage their emotions around it?

DPH

That's a great question. Personally, I'm actually doing a practice right now to allow myself to maintain in a vulnerable state and checking my heart for open-heartedness. I'm taking responsibility for all of my own reactivity. If somebody steps on my toe, I'm going to go, Okay, now, why was that so painful? Usually, if you have a reactivity to something, sometimes it's just what's happening in the moment. But often it is a double whammy or a triple whammy because it ties back to something. Sometimes I investigate for myself I suggest people when they ask me these kinds of questions is, okay, when that person, let's say, said something that you interpreted as rejecting or didn't include you in a party, or people have different things that happen, what story do you tell yourself about that? Because it could be very different. They might have just only say that, for whatever, they might have had their own reason. I had a friend recently who excluded me a lot, and I was not understanding it. Then I realized that she has a very big history of pain around triangulation, so she can never be in a group of three.

That meant I could never come with this other person was around. I didn't understand that because I always include her and everything. I was like, I'm inclusive. I don't have that issue. That's all that means. It doesn't mean I'm any better. It just means I don't have that pain. So once I understood, for her, it was for her was a... So sometimes really understanding what's going on for the other person, if you can have a conversation about it. But sometimes just

looking in your own process, if you don't have that information, is what is this hitting in me that it's such an intense emotional reaction? And especially if you're not sure what the other person meant or you know you're taking it a certain way. It does require being okay with leaning into uncomfortable spaces. You want to make sure you have enough support to do that. Sometimes you can have a friend that explores that with you or a partner or a spouse that's willing to listen to you or hold space for you, and you're obviously able to reciprocate and hold space for them when things come up for them. That reciprocity is also a secure attachment skill, the mutuality, knowing how to have true mutuality.

In terms of supporting each other or regulating each other or sharing emotional vulnerability or affection at holding.

RH

So let's say that a person starts to recognize that they've gotten triggered in way or stuck or they're upset about something.

And what would be on their own, without a therapist, what would be three questions they could ask themselves in an exploratory way that would tend to uncover and unpack and begin the process of healing and growing related to getting, as we used to say back in the '70s, plugged in about something that somebody else has done.

Three questions for themselves.

DPH

I love that. I love that. I would say, first of all, for me, sometimes I'm a little slow to really identify what I'm feeling, and sometimes what you're feeling on the surface isn't the deeper feeling. I think in our culture, men are conditioned to feel anger pretty easily in some cases, and women subvert anger into sadness often. And often with men feeling angry, they're feeling angry on top, but underneath it, they might be feeling fear or vulnerability. There's often a primary feeling and a secondary feeling. Often we feel our habitual feeling first. So the first question I would ask is, okay, if I sit with this sadness, what else is there? If I just embrace the sadness, if I embrace the anger, what else might be happening? To just be with it, like welcome. I think Pema Chodron just wrote a book called Welcoming the Unwelcome. So welcome the experience, whatever it is, and see if it unpacks for you in your own awareness.

Then the other one I love is, what story am I telling myself about this? I think that's Pia Melody's insight. What's the story? Okay, this person did this. I'm interpreting it as this.

What story am I making up about this? Then I'm like into the he said, she said, you know how your mind can just go. Then you start making a case against the person and all that, and you start getting to that activity. I try to rein myself in when I'm running down that track. But sometimes it takes a while.

Then the third question, I think, would be to have a kindness to the pain and vulnerability that I discover in myself. What I found when my friend was excluding me, this took six months for me. This was not fast. I was in a lot of pain. What I realized was because I wasn't raised, it took a lot of unpacking, and I really was looking at a blind spot for six months. I was like, I know there's something important here because I'm so upset, but I can't see what it is. Sometimes you do hit a blind spot. I did myself. When I finally started to see it more clearly, I was waking up with all of this self-love, this experience of self-love. I thought, That's the hole I've been in. My family, they were wonderful in their own way, but love was not exactly how I would describe the predominant experience in my family growing up.

I had this big wound, giant wound around self-love and then also having my love be accepted by other people. Anyway, all that started to unpack. It took a while and I was uncomfortable. I was having dreams of being really angry, which is not my normal personality. I was just all over the place. I'm on to something. To actually welcome the unwelcome, I like that way of thinking about it, because when you're upset or in that much pain, my story, you you're on to something that's really important. I'm like, Okay, this person was the catalyst for this, but I don't think they started it. I think they triggered it. I have this in me. As much as I can need to surf the wave. Then, of course, I would fall off the surfboard and start thinking, They did this or they did that, and they hurt my feelings, and I never want to see them again. I'm going to do all my stuff. I try to get back on track. I go, All right, yeah, okay. They really aren't the problem. You have to figure out what this is because this is big for you.

And by the time I got to the other side of it, I was so grateful that actually it had happened because it helped me really become more connected to divine love and the love that's in generosity, the love that's in appreciation, the love that's in just spontaneous gratitude. I mean, it's such a blessing. But it all started with being really what I felt like was a deep betrayal.

RH

If I could say back to you my quick summary, my fortune cookie summary of your three questions. What am I feeling deep down? What is the story, the familiar story that I'm telling myself here? And third, how can I be a friend to myself? How can I give myself maybe some of what was missing when I was young.

DPH

And that I really believe that it will heal itself. And sometimes it happens spontaneously in your own process. And sometimes a friend helping, talking to a friend about it or a spouse about it can be really helpful. So it's a beautiful way that human beings are designed to heal.

RH

So when I think of you doing that for yourself, Giving yourself what was some of what was missing. If you were to imagine yourself, and I'm going to pick roughly nine years old, yourself as a nine-year-old, this is a question we often ask people, and we think about it ourselves for us. And if you could go back in time and bring your wisdom and your heart to yourself as a nine-year-old girl, what would you say to her?

DPH

I would probably say to her, you're in for a rough ride because I was, but you're going to make it. And it's actually going to bring all sorts of wonderful outcomes eventually. It's going to be okay.

FH

Isn't that what we all want to hear? It's going to be okay.

DPH

I know. It's going to be okay down the road.

FH

This was completely lovely to do this with you today, Diane. Thanks so much for taking the time. It was wonderful to talk with you. I love the questions that you asked at the end and just everything that you offered everyone today. Again, thank you for doing this.

DPH

I love being with you guys. This is really a treat for me and for everyone listening.

FH

Today, we spoke with Dr. Diane Poole Heller about what we can do to work with and repair our attachment style, hopefully over time moving toward more secure forms of attachment. We began the conversation with a quick overview of the four major forms of attachment, and included in that why it's useful to have a sense of what your attachment style might be. People use different names to refer to the different attachment styles. The ones that I'm most familiar with, are secure, anxious, avoidant, and then disorganized, which is sometimes also known as the fearful attachment style. Diane offered a great summary of this whole territory. At bottom, what a lot of this is about is what were the emotional experiences that were permitted or not permitted inside of your family of origin. Kids are big sponges, and they tend to internalize the things that happen to them. So if you're taught over and over again in many small ways that it's not safe to experience and express feelings of love, well, then you're not going to do it in adulthood. If you're taught over and over again that it's inappropriate to be angry ever under any circumstances, then you're going to struggle to express your anger, again, as an adult.

This can show up as these kinds of patterns that emerge inside of our relationships. That's what we really mean by attachment style. What are the patterns that you have and how do they show up for you? One of the parts of this conversation that I really loved was when Diane gave very specific examples from working with people about the ways in which their patterns showed up for them, and then the kinds of things she did with them in order to repair those problematic patterns of behavior. She then went through a variety of practices that people can try on their own. Diane's approach is predominantly somatic, and she explained during our conversation why that is. A line that she had that I really appreciated to paraphrase it here is that your body understands how to process painful experiences. But sometimes it needs a little bit of help. So one of the things that we're really trying to do is to return our body to the experience of safety. And from that secure base, we can then go out into the world and operate more effectively with other people. One principle from Peter Levine's work that Diane alluded to is the idea that we need to complete the cycle of the things that happened to us when we were younger.

This doesn't mean that we need to relive our traumatic experiences, but it does mean that we need to get an experience of escape and resolution around them. One of the examples of this that Diane gave is the idea of running away from an experience that a client had previously felt trapped by. In a way that you really cued them into the fully somatic experience of this is by asking them, Hey, which foot do you start running with? And this isn't really about which foot the client starts running with. It doesn't matter if it's the right foot or the left foot. What matters is that they're getting into a embodied experience. They're accessing their body, and they're allowing it to complete the cycle that it wanted to complete in the moment but was unable to. We then focused the end of the conversation on various ways that we can

repair our attachment style through relationships. She gave a really lovely example of a couple that likes to come to a resolution at the end of each day over all the little bumps and bruises that they had during that day. Their little practice is to put a piece of chocolate on the pillow.

They eat the chocolate together. They and they talk through everything that happened during the day. We can contrast this with other patterns that couples might have that are maybe a little bit more problematic or a little bit more painful. Somebody's coming home at night and they start to feel anxiety before they walk in the door because they're not sure what's going to greet them there. And what really struck me about this was how delicate these patterns are, how easy, in particular, problematic ones are to form, and how painful it can be to start to try to build more positive ones. And what we return to over and over in the conversation, at least in my reading of it, is the experience of safety, allowing the body to feel fully safe, allowing the mind to the extent possible to feel fully safe, resting in that safety and really operating from it and allowing it to be the foundation of any new relationship that is established. Because when we talk about security, we're really talking about safety. And that's a question maybe to ask yourself, do you feel safe inside of your relationships? And what would it take for you to feel more safe within them?