

Dr. Natalie Jones (NJ)

Welcome to A Date with darkness podcast, where I will be discussing the impact of hurtful and abusive relationships and how to overcome them so that you can move through your pain and get to the healthy relationships you want, need, and deserve. I'm Dr. Natalie Jones. I'm a licensed psychotherapist based in California. While I hope that you find this podcast educational and informational, please note it should not be substituted for treatment with a licensed mental health professional. Also, due to the nature of the podcast, some of the information presented on the show can be sensitive to some of my listeners, so please note that listener discretion is advised. Hi, welcome to the show, Diane.

Dr. Diane Poole Heller (DPH)

Oh, I'm thrilled to be here. Thanks, Natalie.

NJ

Hi. I am so excited. It's like, oh, I get to talk to all the greats on my show. So I love doing this. So for people who may not be familiar with you or what you do, can you tell us who you are, what you do, and the passion behind your work?

DPH

Oh, okay. My name is Dr. Diane Poole Heller, and I specialize in trauma resolution and also early attachment injury. Because one of the things I discovered in working with trauma for 35 years is that one of the biggest problems with it, there's several different challenges, but that we experienced broken connections. Then I got really interested and passionate about finding out how to repair relationship after we suffered from trauma that may have not been resolved for a while. I decided to go to the very beginning, which is attachment theory. Like, what happens from the moment of conception in the womb all the way into how we imprint caretaking styles, and sometimes it's medical conditions or our own temperament that we come in with. But what is influencing our relational template? Then if we subsequently experience stress of life, which is going to happen in some way, shape, or form, how do we then recover into healthy relationship again? That's one of the reasons that I got so excited

about attachment work. I find it just a really great metaphor for the human journey. We're all struggling to have healthier relationships and also to overcome stressful events. It's part of our life.

It's, I think, a natural part of the human journey. I find it really relevant and a great entry point for working on ourselves and understanding ourselves and other people a little bit more compassion without shame and blame. I find that's really helpful.

NJ

I love that, and I appreciate you for saying that. I totally agree with you. I feel like, as a therapist, as a clinician, regardless of what your specialty is, I do think that attachment always plays a key piece in that. Whether it's depression, anxiety, whether it's weight, whether it's sexual trauma and things like that, I think at some point during your therapeutic journey, I think that attachment always comes into play.

DPH

Yeah, I think it's highly relevant. Really, when you think about it, we have a relational brain. We regulate through co-regulation. It's really important that we're able to connect deeply to our authentic self, but also be engaged with other people in a way that really supports us and we feel is authentic and it's okay to be vulnerable. You pick the people that you feel deserve to hear your story, but also just to have the skill of relating is, I think even today with kids growing up with so many devices in front of their face, our face-to-face time, not FaceTime on a phone, but actual 3D face-time, is really important to help us develop some of the social engagement skills. That got interrupted with the pandemic and all the isolation that ensued from that. And then also that we are using technology often like we're doing right now for very prosocial great reasons. But also sometimes, if we're only doing technology, we're not as relationally fluent as we might want to be.

NJ

Connected, right. For you, what are your own thoughts or connections that you've made between trauma and attachment?

DPH

Well, I feel that trauma challenges our nervous system in terms of if we can regulate or not, how we might get stuck in a pattern of always being in a stress response too often, which really is debilitating to our immune system and our health. Trauma might include reiterating what happened, like through images or dreams or flashbacks. There's all sorts of different ways that affects us. But like I said earlier, I think one of the most devastating parts of trauma is that it sometimes really interferes with our ability to connect to ourselves and sometimes even our own body, like we're a little bit disconnected or dissociated. Our own body, our own grounding, our own centering, and then also our ability to be present to another person and be aligned and attuned in a way that we are actually being empathetic to what their situation is. We can step into their shoes, we can resonate, we can be unflappable when conflicts arise, we can recover relatively quickly, we can feel safe in the presence of another person, we can have protective support systems. I mean, there's all these different things that attachment influences. Then there's just elements of secure attachment that we can actually break down into learnable practices.

If we weren't born, I think of it as hitting the jackpot, born into a prosocial, really safe family that was very relationally skilled from the get-go with our parents and our siblings. I mean, that's a super gift because you don't even realize you have that gift, except that you might notice other people don't. If you have it, you just take it for granted. But it's a really important basic foundation because your early imprinting is also tied into your brain development. Your brain is trying to help you survive. It wants you to be around. If you're born into a really scary family or a family struggling with poverty or addiction. Life is tough. Could be born into a war zone. Different things could happen that your parents have no control over. Some things they do have their control over, like how they parent.

When I talk about parenting, I always want to say, if you're listening to this and you're parents, most people listening maybe are parents, you want to just take that weight off your shoulder. We learn this and we know it as we know it. It's never too late to start to infuse secure attachment habits into your relationships with your family or your partner, your kids, or your grandkids, or your work colleagues, or your friends.

Sometimes we just don't know. That's a funny thing about relationships. Everybody has this idea, you should just know how to do it. I don't think that's true at all. I think this should be taught in schools from kindergarten on up. It just could be so helpful. I got up on a left there a little bit, but I'm just trying to say that I think there's lots of ways we can learn, and we can learn as we are ready in little steps. There's lots of ways to move in a direction that helps us feel more connected and more supported and safer in our life.

NJ

Absolutely. And I think the thing to understand, and I think also a great part of your work is that relationships can be traumatic. Like the very earliest relationships can be traumatic in a number of ways.

DPH

And that's really what happens with the brain development that I was starting to talk about earlier is the parts of the brain that are hyperreactive to threat, the amygdala, the limbic brain, the reptilian brain, they're going to get really wired to be on alert all the time because they're experiencing their environment as dangerous. So they're really going to amp up. Your brain is going to amp up and have more access to all the threat responses. So that's why it's a little easier to get habituated to a stress response or hyper alertness or easy startle response with the tiny triggers if you were raised in a somewhat dangerous situation or a really chaotic situation. Then you have that basic training in your brain. If you hit the jackpot, like prosocial families, then the parts of the brain that are about empathy and attunement and the medial prefrontal cortex that's about social engagement, your facial expression where you're communicating emotional states, and you're able to read other people's cues through your face. We have very intricate technology, in a sense, in our face that gives us the ability to be empathetic and compassionate. That's going to get really emphasized if you're in a prosocial family.

That doesn't mean if you were born, because many of us were, and me included, born into a pretty challenging family circumstance, that's too bad and too bad for you. It's not at all like

that because we can learn the skills because they're natural to our biology. I really believe we're programmed inherently biologically for a secure attachment. And then sometimes a lot of things get dumped on top of it that we need to peel off and heal from. But it's there, and our body knows how to do it, our brain knows how to do it, our nervous system knows how to do it. It's just that if you start out with a traumatized situation that your brain is acclimatized to, it takes a little longer, a little more practice, because you just don't have that foundation of secure attachment. People that have foundation of secure attachment, if they run into trauma later, which often brings us really challenging things a lot of the time, they usually can recover quickly, or sometimes they don't even get PTSD because it mitigates against PTSD if you have a foundation of secure attachment.

But you can also learn secure attachment—you can have that anyway. You just have to go through the steps of learning it, where if you came by it naturally because your family was so prosocial, then you have that built in.

NJ

I'm wondering if you could share a little bit about how someone who is maybe I would imagine there's a different process. If you're anxious, if you're avoidant, or if you're anxious-ambivalent, anxious-resistant, all the other website, or disorganized, how would they go about learning how to become securely attached?

DPH

Well, I do have a book. I'm not trying to sell books, but I do have a book that outlines this much more than I'm going to be able to do right now, just in case somebody wants an extra resource. It's just called *The Power of Attachment*. Then I also have CDs called *Healing Your Attachment Wounds*. They're both published by Sounds True, and you can get them on Amazon if you want them. But we also have a free attachment quiz. If you're curious, I want to get a little idea of a thumbnail sketch of where you might be landing. This It's not a research document quiz. It's really purely for personal exploration. It's on our website. You're welcome to take that as many times as you want. It's free.

I suggest you take it and you think about when you're not on your best day, because that's your default to your attachment injury, or maybe when you're tired or feeling a little sick. Then also one relationship at a time. So think about, Okay, this is how it was with my dad. This is how it was with my partner. This is how it was with my eldest child. You want to focus on one relationship at a time because our attachment system is very fluid in terms of who with. So when we're stressed, it will default to your original injury, but it will respond. If you're talking to someone who's extremely avoidant, you might find yourself becoming more anxious just in response to the other person. So that's why I'd like you to take the quiz specific to somebody, and then maybe not on your best day.

For the avoidant, just a thumbnail sketch of this, because I know you guys talk about attachment a lot on the podcast. Basically, what we feel a child will adapt towards an avoidant style would be if parents are just, whatever happened in their life, they're just not present. They don't have a capacity really to show up in a warm present eye contact impactful, juicy way. If you think about being a baby and you're reaching out for your... You're 100% dependent on this person, you're reaching out for mom or dad, and there's this feeling no one's home, that's really terrifying. For a little infant. That's not just like, Oh, too bad.

That's really terrifying because you need that person and you need them to be there. The other way it can set up is if a parent is actively rejecting, so they're looking at a child with anger or contempt or hatred, even. Maybe they just have this reaction to the child for some reason. That's really debilitating and will cut the ability to connect for the avoidant.

Then the other way avoidant shows up, interestingly enough, is if parents are present, but they're only present when they're teaching you something. They're really accessing the left brain. They're teaching you to read, they're teaching you to write, they're teaching you to ride a bike, they're teaching you to, I don't know, play golf or play chess or whatever, or your words or how to spell. But they aren't present emotionally. They're not attuned to what you're feeling, how you might feel sad with one of your friends rejected you at recess or whatever. There's pretty much three ways avoidant can arise as an internal working model, an internal reference point for a person in terms of caregiving. Now, remember, this could also happen for medical

procedures. Maybe there's birth trauma, maybe your mom had to be in the hospital, or you were premature and you had to be in an incubator.

There's different things that can impact that that can take people to avoid that have nothing to do with parenting. I just want to mention that. Then in terms of healing, it was what you really asked. One of the things that's so important, because often when somebody has then felt isolated, like nobody else is there. They feel like they have to do it themselves. As an infant, you know you really can't. It's built on deficiency. There's a capacity for self-efficiency, self-efficacy. But then there's also underneath it this feeling that nobody's there for me. Often, they deny their own needs or they feel like they're the only person that can meet their own needs, so they never ask for help, which means they don't often have a support system that is such an advantage in life to have people that are there for you. Then, of course, you can be for other people, too. They often will feel like they just want to do things alone. They're into just, Okay, I'm going to be on the computer. I'll just play games. I'm not really involved in things that involve other people, or it doesn't mean I don't have friends.

I want to really emphasize that people that tend towards avoiding, they want relationship just like everybody else does. It's just that their way of reacting to the threat and the difficulty of their particular situation was to turn the attachment system off, put the brakes on it, just to disengage from the cues to connect because their early experiences where it didn't work, that was really painful. What you need to know if your partner is that way or you are struggling with that a little bit, I think I have a little bit of all three of them, so I have a little access to all of them, is if your partner or your child, you feel it's tending towards avoidance, one thing you want to do is give them time to adjust when they're coming up from... If you're inviting them to go to the movie or their favorite restaurant or something, they need time to go from their deep aloneness into connection. A lot of times when you invite them, if you don't give them time to transition, they'll act really annoyed. Why are you bothering me? And you're just trying to give them something. It's confusing, causes arguments that aren't necessary.

And if you just say something like, Hey, sweetie, I want to take you. I want to have a dip some time with you. How much time do you need to surface? I'd really like to go to the four o'clock movie. That gives us an hour. Is that enough time? You give them time to transition. Usually,

that works really, really well. So just little tips. There's little things like that. And then if you happen to be avoidant yourself, the other thing you might notice, or you might notice about an avoidant partner, is that emotional states are a little challenging, your own and being around other people that are having emotional reactions. Like maybe your partner lost their parent or their pet or something, and they're in grief, you might have this feeling like, I got to get out of here. It's uncomfortable. And if my partner is having that reaction, and I'm attuned, and I'm not taking it personally, because if you understand attachment, one of the gifts of it is you stop taking a lot of things personally. You realize a lot of this happened a long time ago and doesn't have so much to do with your current relationship.

If I had an avoidant partner and I was really upset about something and I have every right to be really upset about it or grieving or whatever, I might say, Honey, I can see that your eyes are glazing over. I can see that you're just getting really uncomfortable. How about this? How about you go walk the dog for 30 minutes and then come back and get yourself centered and everything? When you come back, I do really need you to be here for me emotionally. Can you do that? Can you lean in? And you give your partner a break instead of going, You're never here. You're not paying attention. You're not listening to me. It's a very different communication if you really understand and take into account your own attachment system and the other person. Now, if I'm the person reacting to emotions, I might say, Hey, sweetie, I really want to be... I get that you lost your mom, your grandmother. It had this really big disappointment. I really want to be here for you. But you know what? I'm getting really overwhelmed. Would you be okay if I took a 15 minute walk the dog?

I'll be back and I will be here. So you can communicate it in a way that's really supportive to both people. Does that help?

NJ

It does help, I think. And those sound very reasonable and logical, like those explanations. But I know that a lot of times with avoidance or with ambivalence, communication is often the hardest part. Communication and understanding what they're feeling.

DPH

Exactly. So if we go to ambivalent, one of the things that's really important to understand about ambivalent is they reacted to their early challenges with caregiving or whatever the circumstances were by overactivating their attachment system. So they are hyper alert to social cues about connection and disconnection. And the problem is they're really good at reading cues. The difficulty is they tend to misinterpret them gravely towards the negative. So you could be smiling, and they might somehow figure out a way to think that that means rejection. I mean, it's just they are so hyper focused on, Am I being liked? Am I being rejected? Am I... And boy, social media just kills us on that anyway. So If you're a partner to an ambivalent, one of the things you can do that really helps them relax that over-activated attachment system is a lot of reassurance. It's, Hey, you're my guy. You're my gal, you're in my heart. When I go on my business trip, I take you with me everywhere I go, texting them, Hey, I'm at the airport. Hey, I arrived in Chicago. Hey, I'm at the hotel. Just staying connected, even through a few text, just keeps their attachment system calmer because they're always ready to be rejected.

They're just ready. They're ready and waiting. They're sure it's It's going to happen. They just don't know when. So they tend to be anxious. You can imagine if you're always thinking it's around the corner, it's tricky. But the point I also want to make with dealing with attachment injury, as you start to help and avoid and feel the nourishment of connection, that's a corrective experience to the isolation and the rejection they might have experienced or the lack of presence, they will start to move towards secure attachment, and they become more engaged and less isolated. But it just takes some transition time. And an ambivalent person, as they get the reassurance and they start to feel the relationship is stable, and you say things that you keep reinforcing that, they start to relax and they don't need so much reassurance. It's not like you have to do it forever. That it usually takes, depending on how much you are on the continuum, probably a year to a year and a half, two years, maybe, for some of these things to really sink in a new relationship because you're learning each other. It takes a while, and you get through the honeymoon period, and then all the attachment injuries start to show up.

You need time to navigate that. But if you understand your own, you can say, Hey, you know what? I tend to really think you're rejecting me. When you don't smile in the morning, I'm making a story up in my head that you don't love me. You're out the door, you're never coming back. They're like, No, I'm just not a morning person. I need my cup of coffee. You need to

communicate those things because an ambivalent is going to interpret all of that as you're leaving me, you're out of here. Then, of course, they get needy. They're trying to stabilize the relationship, so they're sometimes over-gripping on their relationship. Then sometimes it's really sad because they push away the people they want to be the closest to them, not meaning to because they're really trying to have the relationship work. So they're very obviously interested in relationship unlike avoidant. Sometimes people read that as they don't want a relationship, which I don't believe it's true. It's just a reaction to the stress of being rejected. They turn the attachment system off. The opposite is true for the ambivalent. They amp it up. And it's easier to calm down and amp it up attachment system than sometimes to lift the break on a shutdown attachment system.

But there are definitely ways to help with both of those dynamics.

NJ

The thought I had is with these, which we didn't get to disorganize, which is, I feel like, disorganized.

DPH

We can talk about that.

NJ

Yeah. Let's talk about that because I have some questions about, again, there's this period of understanding and relearning about each other, which you speak of and communicating in a way. But I also imagine that for folks, there's like a storm before it gets to that calm, and that storming might look like lashing out, that storming might look like ghosting for a while or just of these repressed feelings or suspicions and doubts that push people away before they can even get to the point of moving towards security, even with a healthy person. So a healthy person, for lack of a better word, has to be able to withstand some stuff, some abuse there or can be emotionally abusive or taxing. So there's got to be that labor that's put in and adjusted for. Does that make sense?

DPH

Yeah, I think so. Just to say a little bit about disorganized. First of all, disorganized is a little bit of the more severe reactions of both avoidant and ambivalent. So it can go from extreme dissociation, isolation, and ghosting to emotional flooding and hyper neediness and just emotional flooding. Or you can have your system wired, where when you go into the disorganized, disorganized usually happens when there's been trauma, like abuse, sexual, emotional, physical. It can also happen when there's too much chaos or too much I think sometimes too much uncertainty, too much chaos, when there's custody battles or kids just get in the middle of all that, and sometimes it's really challenging. And you can have situational disorganized. Maybe you had a parent that yelled at you, so loud noises trigger you into this dissociative or fragmented state. It doesn't have to be constant. You could be mostly secure and then situationally disorganized when a certain trigger happens from trauma. Or sometimes you're continually disorganized because your whole family dynamic was abusive and difficult and challenging. We don't make up our attachment reactions. We come by them honestly, and usually there's a lot of fear. It's really important when there's a disorganized reaction that we emphasize safety, that we try to work out what works for a person in terms of feeling physiologically, emotionally, or psychologically safe.

We need to help people regulate because their nervous system just immediately goes into extreme limbic reaction, and that's when they lash out or they just completely shut down, go into a freeze mobility response. They can't talk or feel paralyzed, feel cold. They just can't really access any of their higher brain function. So reasoning with somebody when a dorsal vagal or freeze response isn't going to work so well because they don't have much access to their prefrontal cortex, and they're not really interested in relationship at that point. They're interested in surviving in the next 2 seconds. So they tend to go to fight or flight, which means they run out of the room, I'm never going to talk to you again, or they get duke-y, they want to punch, or they want to hit, or they want to throw pillows, and that's, of course, not going to help resolve the relational trauma. We're trying to be aware that when somebody's in a shutdown state, they're going to have limited access to their relational skills, almost none. You basically lose connection to the higher functioning parts of the brain. We want to address safety first, because if a person feels safer, they move up into the higher parts of the brain, and they actually are interested in resolving something in the relationship.

So you need to understand where you are and where the other person might be when you're in a conflict-related related to attachment, but also the nervous system and how the brain is functioning. Because a lot of times people try to even do family system work or something, and when partners are dissociated and shut down, it's not probably going to be very effective at all. But once you are able to work with that defensive energy, help that regulate and calm down and discharge, and then people have access to their prefrontal cortex, then they are actually really available and interested and have the capacity. They're hooked up to the right software to work on the relationship. It's challenging. Sometimes you have two disorganized people together in a relationship, and you just need hope to hope that they don't both dysregulate and go into extreme reactions at the same time. Hopefully somebody can be the stable one, the other one's freaking out a little bit, and the other one, and you can trade off and on. But ideally, as people learn self-regulation skills and they learn how to help their partners and themselves feel safe at those times, That will make it a lot easier to access the higher levels of the brain.

You get a lot further with working things out in your relationship.

NJ

Can you talk a little bit more about self-regulation?

DPH

Yeah. Self-regulation, like right now, if everybody listening would think about, just for a moment, where you feel just a little bit more centered, or a little less anxious, or a little more calm, maybe this week, When did that happen? Were you with a certain person? Did they have that calming effect on you? Were you out in nature, in the beauty, or were you gardening in your flowers? Were you dancing? Were you doing art? Was there some song that really means something to you that just seems to have a calming, heart-opening influence on you? And just to take a moment and bring that into your awareness, whatever it is. It could be more than one thing, but just at least one thing. And just notice, then switch your focus to your body and sensation, and just notice what happens in your body as you find that resource. And now, sometimes when we find a resource, it will immediately be heart opening, warming. We feel

more energy. We feel our body more. Other times, when we find a resource, it actually opens us up into a wound because your distraction or your emotional reaction or whatever you're doing, your shutdown, might be in reaction to a wound.

So sometimes it'll actually support you to feel what's actually there needing to be felt. So just be gentle with yourself. If that vulnerability might show up or that tenderness might show up. That's okay. Then just see if you can continue to imagine this person that has a calming effect or that you really feel loved by and supported by is there with you, beside you, behind you, in front of you, however you want them to, or this activity that you really enjoy, or hanging out with your dog, or whatever it might be. That's just one example of finding resources and then feeling. Finding resources is one step. The second step is really feeling what happens in your body on a sensation level when you see the image of that, or you hear the voice of that person, or you smell the flowers, or whatever the trigger is for you for resource can be really powerful. That's just one way we help the nervous system. The nervous system is supposed to take in some energy, discharge some energy, take in some energy, discharge. When it's in trauma, it's like going like this way outside its normal range, its normal range of resiliency.

We're just trying to invite it back into that center, being in the flow and actually increasing the range so that maybe we might start with a resiliency range like this, but we want to grow it. And we grow it partly through self-regulating and co-regulating. Co-regulating is a little bit more what's happening with you with another person energetically.

NJ

And can you talk a little bit about that and how a person with these different attachment styles can get to a place where they can co-regulate. Specifically, for example, if you're an avoidant in an anxious and you're in a relationship or you're a disorganized in an anxious in a relationship or you may be ambivalent and with a secure person. So if your styles don't match- Yeah, very often it happens a lot that different people come together with different...

DPH

We can have a mix of attachment styles. Like I said, I do. You can easily have a mix of attachment styles, and that's very common as well. In certain situations, you might react as an avoidant. In other situations, you might react as an ambivalent. It's fine. There's no problem there at all. That's why we like to give people the quiz. It gives them a little bit of a sense of that. The challenge for the avoidant is that because there wasn't the presence of another person in the caregiver enough that was safe enough. They often have a nervous system that's trying to self-regulate without co-regulating very much, because when they start to access another person, that feels a little scary or like it's not going to work. I mean, Most of this isn't conscious. This is just knee-jerk reaction because it's what was programmed in the beginning. But you can change that programming, so I'm going to keep underlying that. Their learning edge is learning how to allow another person in. You can suggest things like when you're driving in a car that you actually have a conversation with the person with you. You're not just driving and staring at the road, but you're saying, Oh, wow, there's this or there's this interesting scene.

You're talking and engaging with another person. The other thing, when another person is emotional, you're leaning into it, you're learning how to tolerate it, but also take breaks if you need them. You need to do this in the way that's paced right for you. But that will start to allow you to have access to co-regulation, because the biggest challenge for avoidance is not really having access to co-regulation, because the other person wasn't in their life in a way that felt supportive of the other, whoever represents the other. That's something that somebody can work on and learn how to do more, to do things where they're participating with another person. They're not just lost in their computer, but they're actually coming out and having dinner and having face-time with the family and engaging. That takes practice because sometimes that doesn't feel so easy. They're getting used to emotions, getting comfortable with different emotional expression. That can be really helpful for regulating and healing the avoidant. In ambivalent, they tend to be, from a regulation point, they're so focused. Like avoidants are really focused on the self because the other felt not like a good thing, right?

And ambivalence that are anxious, they're really focused on other. They're like trying to figure out, how do I connect to this person? They're like a moving target. And so they're so focused on the other person. They're often not focused on themselves. So they often have a deficit around self-regulation. They don't have the idea or the experience that they can soothe themselves.

They think that always has to come from the other person. So of course, if you have that experience, it's going to lead to putting a lot of pressure on other people to regulate you, like externally, not external to yourself. So it's important that we learn when we're in our ambivalent space, we learn how to self-soothe. And that little exercise I did earlier was self-soothing. And just to see if we can start to learn how to start to regulate. You can do vagal toning that helps you get the prefrontal cortex that also is regulatory. Just by certain... Like humming and singing helps your vagal tone to the prefrontal cortex. If you speak Spanish, you do these R's, trilling. This comes from Lisa Wimberger's work on neurosculpting. Just shaking, when you're really activated, just shaking it out can really help you release and discharge some of the excess arousal in your nervous system helps you regulate.

Cold water on your face, cold shower, cold dips at the gym, if you have it. Cold exposure really helps vagal toning that helps you access social engagement. So there's different things that you can do. I think also having rituals around coming and going. If you're in a marriage or a partnership or something, how do you, or even putting the kids to bed, how do you do night time rituals? I have friends, I love this ritual. They both love chocolate, so I can totally relate to that, and they love truffles. So they will buy each other these really special truffles, and they'll share one at like maybe 10:00 at night, and they debrief the day, how it all went, if they have any debris in their relationship, they clear it up. And they don't necessarily go to bed at the same time. One goes to bed earlier, one stays up later. It's just their pattern. But they have this time. It's a ritual. They do it every night, and that's very good for the attachment system. It's also regulating. You feel like you're connected. When we feel connected, supported, and loved by somebody, that's very regulating.

That connection is very regulating. I think that's one of the most damaging things about COVID and the pandemic besides the whole illness part of it, which is devastating enough, is the isolation, and it broke a lot of our patterning around connection. But this truffle ritual is a great... So figure out your own nighttime ritual with the people that you're living with and just see if you can do something really loving or yummy, like going off into sleep, even if you don't do that at the same time, but you have a night time ritual. Same thing in the morning. Do you get up and immediately get on your computer or do you cook breakfast together? Do you have

a conversation about the day? Hey, what are you hoping will happen for you today? What's your high that you're looking hopefully to happen or something? You're connecting.

And this is true for coming back from work, too. If one person's home already and they're cooking and maybe dealing with kids' homework or whatever, the other person comes in, very often the first thing we say to our partner is, Hey, did you take out the garbage or did you fix the car? Did you change the oil? We task people, which is not the most yummy thing. If you can stop cooking and let the kids do their homework for a minute and turn the fire off your food or whatever, and meet your person at the door and actually hug them, my full body hug, not a triangle hug that a lot of times we do. Full body hug, if it's appropriate to the relationship. You can feel your bodies regulate each other. You want to stay belly to belly. If I have a headache, my partner puts his hand on my head. If they have a low back ache, I put my hand on their low back. So your two bodies regulating each other, whether parent, child, partner, partner. People want to be with bodies that regulate them. You think about the people that are regulating in your life, you want to spend time with them because it feels really good. You want to develop.

These are practices that you can easily adopt. I mean, this one is called the Welcome Home Hug from Stan Tatkin. I did this with a couple that was just getting a little snarky with each other. They really loved each other. But we just installed the Welcome Home Hug, and it just shifted their relationship so quickly. It's not rocket science. When I explain these things, they make sense biologically, right? It's not like you think, Oh, well, where'd she come up with that? It's like, Oh, yeah, I could do. And they're doable. There's things you can do. It could be you have a little resistance at the beginning because you're not used to doing it, but you can get there. It's not that hard, and it can really make your attachment bond stronger, which is very regulating. When we feel connected and really in a healthy way, it just changes everything. It's a gift that keeps on giving. So I just try to make practical suggestions because there are things you can do right as soon as you get off this call, probably.

NJ

Yeah. And I love that. And I think a large part of learning the regulation, self-regulation or co-regulation or just becoming even more secure in attachment, I think a large part of that

involves physical touch, platonic non-sexual physical touch, because I think touch is also an awesome co-regulator, like you were saying.

DPH

Oh, definitely.

NJ

Just having this exchange where, yes, we're talking, but also learning that there's this emotional safety in this other second co-regulator, which is touch.

DPH

Touch, which is very powerful, really amplifies the healthy attachment system. Patty Wood wrote a book called Snap. And in that book, she talks about research that if, say, I'm regulated and I shake your hand or we do some, I touch your forearm or some touch, but let's handshake because everybody's used to that. That if I'm regulated, it sends a neurochemical message to your nervous system just like that immediately to regulate you. It sends a big message to your nervous system to regulate. That's the power of touch. She said the research shows that it takes three hours of supportive talk to do the same thing. It could take that long. It's just a matter of how important touch is. If you don't have, I know it's still COVID and everything. If you don't have somebody around that's your partner that's safe to touch automatically, pets are great. But also find a good body worker, get a great massage from somebody that is trauma-informed, if that's part of your history, that has that sensitivity, but also does touch in a way that you feel is really right for you, that can also be really deeply healing and regulating. I'm a big believer in good bodywork.

NJ

Absolutely. And I totally agree with you. There's nothing else like it. What if there's someone listening to you, and maybe they're cognizant that they have some pretty significant trauma wounds or attachment issues, but they don't want to necessarily go to a therapist or someone to help them with that?

DPH

Well, I think there's a lot of good books that give some good information on attachment. I mentioned my books, but also there's the book called *Attached* by Amir Levine and Rachel Heller. I think that's a good resource for people. The only thing I would say about that particular, and some writers, is that sometimes I disagree with how they describe avoidant, because sometimes you can get the impression that they feel like avoidant people don't want relationship. And I totally don't agree with that. I really feel that they just reacted to the wound around connecting in a different way. So if you're going to read those books, just make sure you hear me say that. Don't take that part. I just don't feel that is helpful. But there's a lot of good resources out there, I'm sure. Podcasts like this. I mean, attachment is something we're living every day, all the time, almost all the time. I just think learning, I call it secure attachment skills. Like I said, the comings and goings, the welcome home hug ritual, certainly repairing when somebody... You step on somebody's toes and you're attuned enough to realize, I said that abrupt, or, Oh, I just hurt that person's feelings.

You just acknowledge it as soon as you can manage it. Sometimes we can't do it immediately. But you say, You know what? I think when I was trying to get you ready for school this morning, you were late and you were messing around with breakfast, and the school bus was out there and I was going to shove you out the door. To say, We just need to get up 15 minutes early, so we're not so stressed getting you off, and I want to get you off in a really nice way in the morning. You're repairing, you're paying attention to the relational dynamics and attending to them. John Gottman did this wonderful research on couples and relationships. He's amazing. All his books are great, too. But he found that couples that knew how to initiate repair and to receive repair, because sometimes we block people's repair. We're like, Well, you didn't say you were sorry within the first 24 hours, so it doesn't count. Or, You bought me flowers and I really wanted candy, so it doesn't count, or, You said this word. I don't like that word. We make it hard. If you can just give your partner, your kids a break, just like, Okay, I get the intention to repair.

Let's think about how we would do it differently next time and repair it. Then, of course, you don't want to keep doing the same mistake because if you say, Okay, I won't do that again, you

do it again a lot, then that's going to not help for the repair. But couples and in relationships that people learn to initiate and receive repair, they have 85%, that's a lot, more chance of sustainable well-being in their relationship. I'm going to ask the audience, and I can't see your hands or anything, but how many people had parents that modeled that, that modeled repair? My parents very rarely did that. That wasn't part of their vocabulary. So a lot of us have to learn it. And it can be a little uncomfortable in the beginning. Like, Hey, I could have handled that better. I just didn't do... Or I broke a confidence. I'm really sorry. I realized you told me this was only to be said to me. And then I told somebody else, and it really hurt you. I'm really You need to do the repair and then make a big effort to have good boundaries in the future.

Repair is huge. I mean, if you made 85% on money, you wouldn't even be stopping at Starbucks in the morning because your compound interest would be so huge. So think about that. When you're feeling hesitant about repair, I think I get 85% return. And that's really, even if the person doesn't receive your repair, you still did the maturation process of growing yourself up to be able to do it and developed a skill that you can take forward into your life. So don't worry about it. You do your part. You can't be in charge of how people respond or if they accept your repair or not. Just let that part go. But just really practice keeping your own relationship world as clean as you can and what you're ready for. But that could be something you could challenge yourself to after the call today, too. You could just say, I have a little residue in this relationship, or there's something that needs a little tension here. I think I could address it and to see what happens in you and perhaps even in the relationship.

NJ

I'm glad that you brought up parental modeling because that was actually part of my next question for you in that, if you're a person that has attachment trauma and you're working on all these wonderful things like regulation and co-regulation, But you still have a relationship with the parent or caregiver that was very traumatic for you, and it still continues to be traumatic. Do you think that that will block or hinder any progress that we make in other areas?

DPH

I think any time you're working on yourself, you're going to have good results in a lot of areas, usually. But when we've had a caregiver that's been really challenging, sometimes as we heal our own attachment injury, even caused by that person, we can relate to them differently, and over time, sometimes their behavior shifts, or even if it doesn't, it's not injuring us over and over again. We have more resiliency around it. Whoever has the most secure attachment in the room is going to have a lot of good influence on people around them, whether the other people are able to respond to it or not. Because every time they're maybe attacking, you're not responding by counterattacking. You're just saying, I can see your feelings are hurt about something, but tell me what's really going on. I'm getting this complaint, but I'm wondering what's behind it. Where's this complaint coming from her? There's different ways you can react that don't keep hurting you and also don't keep fueling the negativity of the relationship. And that's advanced level work. It is advanced. That's advanced level work. I remember reading a book by Carlos Castaneda. This is a throwback to the '70s.

People don't even know who he is, probably. But he had this practice. He had a really terrible boss. I mean, this boss was attacking, mean, cruel, a real jerk, just completely awful. And he decided that he would stay working for that guy till nothing that this guy said to him had any impact on him. I thought, wow, that's a practice. That is a practice. I have a dynamic in my extended family where there's an Archie Bunker character, except that he's not acting. It's for real. So pretty negative interactions, and coming from a lot of paranoia. When I think about visiting or being with that person, I just I think about... Like I'm walking on the stage of Archie Bunker, and I just pretend I'm in a sitcom. And so when these really odd things come flying at me, I don't know. I can deflect it. I can just not take it in because I'm somehow connecting to this idea. And so I used to have my clients figure out the sitcom, and they wanted to pretend they went in when they went home for the holidays with their family. I mean, it just gives you a little psychological distance and not to take things so personally, because this isn't me.

It's about wounds. It's about unresolved trauma. When we have unresolved trauma, sometimes our behaviors can be pretty challenging, pretty ugly sometimes.

NJ

I would agree.

DPH

For all of us, it's hard. It dysregulates you in your limbic brain, and you're acting out all over the place when you're very limbic. If we understand and can help people move out of that... We aren't people's therapists, though. Everybody has their own homework. I think there's a lot you can do inside therapy, a lot you can do outside therapy, because you're really working with the human journey. We're all on this human journey, trying to do the best we can, navigating it.

NJ

I love that, and that is so true. And I guess the part that I'm curious about is if these people are able to do that, but they still get super triggered, because any time you go into an environment that's unhealthy, So I think it's a very individual decision.

DPH

I know some people feel like, this relationship is so toxic for me. I'm better off not participating and just either participating extremely minimally or not at all. And that's a very personal decision. You always hope that reconciliation can happen, but sometimes things are so toxic that it just might be a better choice to find your network somewhere else where it's empowering. I did a garage sale on my relationship in the year 2001, where I just looked at where do I feel supported, where I feel empowered, where I feel good in my relationship. I just put more energy in those relationships and less energy or maybe no energy in the relationships that I felt were toxic. Or not at all nourishing. You have a right to be in relationships that are supportive to you. Then I think as we all do our own healing, we're able to be stable and you're manifesting secure reactions to situations around you. I think that's a great gift. I think if the whole world took it seriously for a year or two, we'd live in a very... I mean, think about world leaders and corporate leaders and everybody just going on educating people in school.

We could do this. It's not that difficult. Really, it could be done. I'm still holding out for a relationship revolution. But I think this could be really powerful. And if we can do our own, our self, and then we can impact people around us. And it's a wave that keeps on growing. And that's one of the reasons I think it's so important. I keep talking about how we get back to

secure attachment because It's a researched area. It's biologically valid. But also, even if you just use it as a metaphor, moving into healthier and healthier responsiveness instead of reactivity in our relationships and not taking things so personally. So much of what happens in our life, take personally because we are subjective. Everything affects us. We think about it that way. But so much of it isn't personal. So much of it is people reacting out of their past or projecting their past on the present or projecting it on you, and you're going to peel off that projection. You're not that perpetrator in their life or whatever. So it's challenging being a human being. It's not easy sometimes, but I think it's so helpful to just have some practical practices that might bring us more joy and connection.

NJ

I love that, and I thank you so much for that. And it's been awesome talking to you, but we're almost at the end.

DPH

I know. That time goes so fast.

I so appreciate you coming on here and giving us some wonderful tools and gems. I definitely encourage people to reach out to you because you're the godmother of all things attachment, right?

That's sweet. Everyone called a godmother before. I'll take that. That's very sweet. Thank you. Made my day. Thank you.

NJ

You're very well. And thank you for coming.

DPH

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Thank you, Natalie, for having me. It's really sweet to be with you and all the gang that you've pulled together.

