

Hey John Howard, welcome to the show. We are really excited to have you on Therapists Uncensored.

It's always an honor and a pleasure. I've loved spending time with you and Ann, and I'm so glad we get to have this conversation. We're colleagues we're shared, we're both podcasters that are having active practices, which is really unique.

And I've always had such respect for your work and your program that you've put together because together all of it. So why don't we start with, why don't you just orient the audience to who you are and what's happening right now?

I love that your audience is a mix of professional therapists and just members of the public, because that's usually who I speak to as well. So that's a really neat crosssection. So I am a licensed marriage and family therapist. I've been a couples therapist for about a decade and I also teach spiritual programs. So I do a lot of work with mindfulness and personal growth. I have been doing that for about 20 years. I teach at the medical school here in Austin. I supervise resident. And I've also developed a couple of therapy training programs for different institutes. So I would say my work is half clinical working with actual clients and half education doing trainings and couples therapy and also just workshops for the public.

That's incredible. And I've had a chance to see you teach and it's very exciting. And what I particularly like about what you do is that you're incorporating you are so on it with the interpersonal neurobiology, more of the modern attachment stance. It's very updated, but can you tell us a little bit of how has your thinking changed as a couples therapist?

I'm very PACT informed, as people know, a lot of my early training was with Dr. Stan Tatkin. **And can you say what pact is?** Yes. Pact is a psychobiological approach. It's a couples therapy and Dr. Stan Tatkin was instrumental in weaving in some neuroscience, understandings and modern attachment understandings into couples therapy which was very helpful. And so it changed how couples therapy is practiced in many ways. What used to be a more didactic, psycho-educational conversational kind of. Method became much more practice-oriented and experiential. And so I'm definitely informed by pact. My work prior to being a therapist was living in villages and studying indigenous healing systems. And so for me personally, I've put that, neuroscience understanding and methodology into that context. And I think a lot about the existential nature of relationships, not just the neuroscience, but the experience of being in relationship is such an existential one. It's a very spiritual event in people's lives.

What does it mean to share life with somebody else? What is it, what does it mean to be fully present with someone? What does it mean to give and receive love? And so my work always has this sort of spiritual side to it. And I've been able to meld that with neuroscience. **And as there's this really interesting cross section of the science of connection along with, ancient, spiritual understandings about what it means to be human.**

So say more about the anxious. The spiritual understandings. Spiritual schools around the world for a long time, I've tried to help us understand that we're not just individuals, we're connected to it all. And in order to find peace in our minds, in our hearts, we have to understand ourselves, not just as independent people, but in terms of how we're connected to others and how we're connected to our environment and relationship is really the proving ground for that, are we willing to give up a little bit of our individuality in order to merge with someone and create a shared reality?

So to me it's very similar to meditation. Are you willing to give up a little bit of your thinking and analytical mind in order to experience more peace and connection in your heart relationship is a kind of meditation. Even though it's a very active one that requires much the same. I love that's a kind of meditation the idea of secure functioning couples. A lot of times we think of that as they are doing a certain thing versus really what security is an experience.

It's a feeling and it's a co-created experience between the two people. And I think that's some of what you're getting at with this.

Absolutely. If you look at how advanced couples tend to operate, they tend to process more than the outcome there. They're less communication focused and they're more interaction focused. What that means is they're tracking moment by moment and they're attuned. So if something goes off in the process, they can handle it in real time.

Whereas dysfunctional couples tend to not do that. They just go on try to make their point, regardless of what the interaction feels like. So I think when we're mindful and we're in the present moment, we can much better take care of each other's nervous systems and make sure. That safety and security is being developed into the relationship.

So can you give an example then of that you have a couple in front of you and there is the, just some of the drive to be heard or drive to understand, that they're caught they're in the content. What happens? So most people think you have to have good communication to connect.

Those of us that understand the nervous system, would say you need to have good connection to communicate well. It's the opposite of what most people think. So if I have a couple in my office and they're arguing about money or parenting or cleanliness, their idea of connection is resolving the dispute, trying to bridge their differences and also using, decent communication skills as they go. But none of that really solves the underlying issue, which is that they may not trust each other very much or feel connected or emotionally safe enough for the Goodwill to overcome the difference they're trying to manage. So we understand that as therapist, but I think that concept is something that more people need to understand is the way you interact. Is what elicits the Goodwill that lets you bridge differences. So you can't argue your way, to a shared parenting strategy. You can't argue your way into bridging your personality differences. You have to be in the moment and have a secure process, really watch each other, take care of each other in the moment when you do that, you create the Goodwill that allows those differences to exist without being threats to the relationship.

So as a therapist, what I try to do is not interrupt their conversation too much, but just toss things in that they have to adapt to that will hopefully make their interaction more secure.

So if they're looking at each other and they're arguing about some difference, I might just say to one person, what do you see on your partner's face? What do you notice in their tone of voice? What do you see in their body language? And this is a PACT method to help people be more aware of other when they're upset and when they're stressed so that they continue to live in a two person psychology.

So what that does is it reminds people, oh, the moment matters. The interaction matters. If my partner looks stressed or annoyed or frustrate. Why am I still going on and talking about this thing I was talking about? So in that way, people practice being more process focused and less outcome focused, and this is something we can all do in our personal relationships.

So if you're not a therapist, you can practice this. Anytime you talk to someone, you can just have the focus of your mind be on, am I creating security in the process of how I'm speaking? My tone of voice, my facial expression, my eyes, my body, or am I just content focused? I'm just trying to make a point.

Unfortunately, too many of us get lost in the content and we forget to communicate security in the process. And that also does that assume that the per when you're aware of your eye I love even just thinking in terms of your eyes and are your eyes soft or your eyes hard, like even just that, but when you have to have some level of regulation, To be able to do that, that like. Your mindfulness is going, you're able to think you're able to have the third, like watching how it's going. And so I can imagine there being resistance to this because that's a more vulnerable, like if you're dysregulated, that's a vulnerable thing to do to move into more of a process.

And people may not be able to regulate, which is what makes relationship work so special in a way, because hopefully the relationship can, when the individual can't I expect people to work as a team.

So if one person gets dysregulated, I'm gonna, put some pressure on the partner. I want to see what they do. I want to see if they notice and what their move is, because it is a tall task to ask someone who's dysregulated, to just use mindfulness or internal regulation strategies to come back into the moment in some regulated way.

But I do expect to see it in the interaction. I expect the partner to be helpful and I want them as a team to learn how to co-regulate each other, when either one of them gets in a tough spot.

I love that. I love that. I love that. This is such a common mistake to make with couples is really doing individual therapy, as while they're both there. And what you're saying is the patient is the couple, is the relationship.

Even in relationship works, sometimes we're doing too much individual therapy in that context. And what you're really trying to do is promote the health of the system. So as much as possible if the system can regulate itself, That's a really big win for the couple, if you intervene too much and help that person regulate individually, which sometimes we need to do, if the partner is not showing up but if you can avoid that, it gives the relationship and opportunity to practice.

And I really love it when people don't just talk in I-statements, but they talk as a, we, because to me, that's evidence that they're thinking as a team. So sometimes, people come in and such dysfunction that they're insulting each other. They're being rude. They're saying you do this, you do that. And so obviously we're trying to move people into more. Self-responsible I statements, I feel frustrated. I feel threatened, which is a great evolution, but it's not enough. To capture the team or the co-regulation concept. So I train the couples I work with to use we language when they can, which is why is this hard for us?

What do we need to do to be better at this? How do we support each other to do this better right now? So what that does is it recruits team? So if someone's dysregulated, I don't think it's quite enough to say, I'm having a hard time here. That's a good signal,

but it's it recruits the partner more easily to say we need to pause for a minute here and help me because I'm struggling. That naturally supports the partner to step in.

I love that. That's a great example. That's a great example as well. And. Is this different? So the other thing I wanna mention is that Stan Tatkin, I think, was our very first guest interview. And we've had him on more than once. Absolutely love his work. So folks might reference that episode as well to deepen their exploration of this.

And what else are you doing? What like how have you, again, with this notion of your evolution what other things are you incorporating going back to the spirituality and things like that?

Yeah. So with spirituality, I find neuroscience informed therapy is important and helpful, especially in the couples space, but it can get really heady. For the therapist. It can be a lot to be keeping track of. And so sometimes it takes the therapist out of their own grounded presence and too much into their head and for the client, it's a lot of psychoeducation that can come across as didactic and analytic. And what we're really trying to do is promote love and connection. So this is where I find spirituality to be helpful. The neuroscience informs the method, but in the moment we want to be as present and as grounded and as fully in that moment as possible, this is what Stantec and might call the jazz of therapy, where you let go of what you know, and you trust, but the problem is you have to be an advanced practitioner to really pull that off.

And I think when people meditate on the spirituality of relationship work, what does it mean to create an opportunity for intimacy? What does it mean to be really fully present in the moment and awaiting, the opportunity for care instead of continually interrupting it. And a lot of this comes down to the presence of the therapist, because what I noticed is couples therapists in particular get anxious.

You know that's, something's not happening, something therapeutic isn't happening. So then they intervene with a lot of fancy explanations about attachment theory or, they come in with fancy experiential methods. But a lot of the times they're interrupting what could be a moment of intimacy in the couple. And so if you orient your own presence as the therapist to emotional intimacy and you slow down a little bit, then your clients will take their cues from you in a sense from your speed and from your presence. And they will more naturally be able to connect in that space with each other. So you're using your nervous system.

To signal their nervous systems, how to manage this with the whole idea of, we call it neural wifi that by you being able to occupy that space, you can get more of a right to right connection happening. And it reminded me what you said sort of Alan shore, how he'll talk about people popping left, like when they get anxious, particularly in therapists.

So it's I really understand what you mean. I'm definitely have done it, where that we move into role and action. So basically it's us not just feeling our feelings, but we act on it and the act might be, I need to be helpful. Now I need to explain something or teach or, oh, let's try this just to get me out of my discomfort rather than really modeling, holding that discomfort and staying present.

That's exactly right. And I think couples therapy in particular elicits a lot of anxiety in the clinician because there's so much going on and people are disagreeing and sometimes arguing and there's a lot of intensity and drama and it can be uncomfortable, but as you said, the task here. And I think of it as a very spiritual exercise is to be grounded in oneself, to breathe, to be mindful, to be present, to not get pulled in to the stuff that doesn't matter. And to really template for the couple, what it means to pay attention, what it means to regulate what it means to offer support and care and be vulnerable.

And that's a different speed than when we're explaining things or we're trying to make something happen. And how does this translate into consensual non-monogamy. The variations of just your CIS hetero couple that's sitting in front of you. Have you had much, are you seeing that very much in your practice? How does this translate, especially the idea of secure relating.

We'd normally think of that as diadic. , I think this has been an unfortunate interpretation of attachment theory, which is that secure attachment needs to be dyadic. I do see a lot of open and poly couples in my practice. And I think it's important for anyone who's doing relationship work to understand that we're trying to use a science-based definition of relationship health, not a cultural one, not a religious one, not one that's based on our own understandings and preferences from our own life. And if you look at the science on, what I would call secure functioning, which is a little different than secure attachment Stan Tatkin originated this term secure functioning because we need some way to point to the process of interaction, not just an attachment style or something that's wired.

So the brain, and obviously any couple can have a secure process. It doesn't matter if they're monogamous or non-monogamous, it doesn't matter. Culturally what the, what their style of relationship is, what we're really looking at is how healthy is the process of interaction? Is it mutual? Is it attuned?

Is it sensitive and how it cares for feelings that come up in the moment? And you can definitely be a poly couple, an open couple you can be a throttle, you can have any type of relationship structure and still be mutual, still be attuned, still be sensitive. These are the things that make for healthy process, and that allows secure functioning to exist.

And, going back to attachment for just a second, that when you're in a situation like the. Poly sickle I think is what they call it that you can have different attachment styles with different partners. And it really highlights that. Yeah, it's not just you, it's what happens between the two of you.

And then I could be secure over here, but over here I'm quite stirred up and get a little preoccupied. And what the new thing is that the research says that doesn't mean that won't impact your secure connection over here, which is really great.

And you have been able to talk about this, John in your book in an incredible way, which one of the things I wanted to ask you about is this notion of talking about the process, like not the content, but the process and what's happening between and writing about that. Can you say a little bit about that?

Sure. Absolutely. So I have a new book coming out. Maybe it'll be out by the time this episode airs, it's coming out February the first with Simon and Schuster. And it's called more than words. The science of deepening love and connection in any relationship. And the reason I wrote this book, Was to really popularize the science that you and I both are well aware of, but I've always felt like it's too closely held in academia. And you hear about it at therapy workshops, if you're a professional, the public really needs to be exposed more to how powerful these understandings are when it comes to promoting connection.

So the premise of the book is that connection matters more than communication to relationship health communication skills only gets you so far with the nervous system really cares about, is a sense of safety and security. And once that box is checked, then it's willing to do a lot of other fancier stuff, Parenting, sex, travel intellectual interests, romance, money management.

But if you don't really trust the person you're with, if there isn't that overriding sense of Goodwill that you have with a best friend, for example, communication skills are not going to get you over the line. And too often, **people are trying to rely on communication to get to connection when what they should be focused on is how to create safety in the nervous system and emotional security that opens the brain up to be interested in all those other areas.**

I love how you said that. And I have seen the book and it is so great.

Partly because you break it down in really practical terms. Was that difficult to do, especially because we're talking about things that are not related to language. Yes, it but I've done it for many years as a therapist, because again, the neuroscience strategies in psychology are quite complex.

So to understand them, you really have to study them for years and in some detail, but at that point it's not so helpful to be Hetty and analytic in clinical work. This is what we were talking about before. It's you have to learn how to just be in the moment and be present and be emotionally available.

Had some practice, taking these complex ideas and distilling them down to what really matters to people. And I think this is one of the helpful things that people will get from reading the book is yes, these connection strategies are incredibly powerful, but if you read them in the research, it's hard to really understand how to apply them.

Whereas what I've done in the book is really simplified. Okay. What are these powerful tools that I've seen, work wonders in the last 10 years of being a couples therapist and how do you apply them in a practical way into your relationship? What do you actually do? What do you actually say? What's the move. And so I think I've made it as practical as possible and it was a little bit challenging, but being a clinician I think helps with that. Totally. And I think that you have made it you have succeeded in being able to bring that non-verbal and like you said, we both are very interested in getting the complexity.

Delivered in a way that is usable to a much, in this honors, the researchers and the academics and the clinicians that have come before, because we are amplifying their message and getting it out. So I love that. We commune on that for sure.

But can you give an example though of one of these key concepts that have of how you've translated it and how you talk about?

Sure. If though there's a chapter in the book called the language of the nervous system and what this is just helping people understand how the brain evaluates connection. Because if you're trying to deepen connection in your relationship, it's very helpful to know what works and what doesn't. The brain is not paying attention to everything.

And it doesn't care about words as much as we think, in fact words and verbal communication can be mildly irritating to the nervous system. If you think about it, language is very subjective. So you have to interpret it to understand what it means. And people have these continual disagreements about what they're talking about, which then gets translated into different memories, different recollections, different perspectives.

All of that stuff is so subjective that if you're trying to mediate connection through words, you're pushing a boulder. What does the brain actually pay attention to? What are the things that give you connecting value? So the nervous system pays attention to proximity. How close is someone to me? People can think about this when they're watching TV or having dinner or walking in the park. Being a little bit closer, sends a message to the nervous system that says we're partners. We're friends we're lovers, we're safe people to each other because we can share a close physical space. It's a subconscious message, but it matters. The same is true with touch. If people use touch more, obviously appropriate touch, touch that is desired, and consent-based. But when people use a touch more, it communicates directly to the nervous system I'm here. I care about you.

I'm here for you. I'll support you. So holding hands or putting an arm around someone. When you're watching TV, if you go to a party, hold hands if you're sitting having dinner, you might just put an arm, a hand on someone's arm, just these opportunities for touch that subconsciously communicate connection. Tone of voice is the same. I hear from my clients over and over again, I can't change my tone. It just is what it is. Go to acting school where people learn how to change their tone constantly because actors are actually very aware of the impact they're having on the viewer. They know how to change their facial expression.

They know how to change their tone of voice intentionally to produce an effect. So it's a week out for the rest of us to say, oh, I can't change any of that stuff. It's just automatic. And it's built in that's not true if you're aware of it. And if you practice, you can change what your face does and what your eyes do and what your tone of voice does.

Instead of sounding loud or aggressive or threatening, you can learn to practice modulation of your tone of voice and sound sweeter and more available. So proximity, touch, tone of voice. I contact which people don't make enough of. The eyes can communicate so much, but people don't look at each other enough or if they don't sustain eye contact long enough.

It's these quick glances, but that's not real, really enough. And so using eye contact to communicate connection, using body language, to communicate connection so many times when people tell me that they've had an argument, I like to replay it in my office. Cause I'm always interested in the precursors of an argument..

And what I noticed is people are often multitasking. They're not focused enough in the present moment to really be attuned or provide care. So physically, we can move our bodies toward our partner. We can position our bodies to face our partners. We can signal that we're physically available and that sends a signal to the nervous system.

And the six-point I'm making the book is the speed of response. How long does it take you to respond to someone when they seek your attention? The nervous system calculates that as a signal of how secure you might be. So if you're checking your email and it takes you three seconds to look up well, that sends a signal that may be what you're working on is more important.

It's a subtle signal, but it registers, the time it takes for us to look up at our partner at the time it takes to answer a question, the time it takes to move away from one conversation into another. So these are things the brain is actually measuring when it comes to how connected people feel much more than words.

I'm totally cringing of course, because I imagine some might, because the examples you're giving are, that something that we do all the time well and not well, and I'm curious for you, what has been your journey on, on practicing these things?

I was completely awful at relationships.

It, if you know my story I'm a Cuban American. My first language is Spanish. I grew up in New York City and I didn't live with my parents. I was raised by my Cuban grandmother. She didn't play with me and I didn't have other playmates. And so I was by myself a lot. I was isolated. And when I got to school, I didn't speak the language.

So it was really hard to make friends. My grandmother died when I was nine. My family didn't talk about it. She basically just disappeared. I didn't even know what had happened. I grew up in a family where people didn't talk about emotions or what was going on or ask you how you're feeling. Everything was very transactional.

And so when I started having relationships, I had no idea what I was doing and I was terrible at them. And at some point I had to wake up and recognize I was very broken. I was very lost. I had no idea how to do the relationship thing. And so I needed to work on myself, to do a lot of self-healing and healing of trauma.

But I also needed to learn how to share life with others. And what really helped me the most was studying the new science of relationships, studying attachment theory, studying the neuroscience of connection. And that's why, my career has been based on that. It gave me a way to finally understand how the connection works, how to form healthy relationships, how to have a great life with others.

That was not something that I knew how to do coming out of my family. And I think that's true for a lot of people. So what I've put in the book is really the distilled wisdom of what worked for me, what works for my clients, what works for a lot of people when you're trying to learn how to form more secure connections.

Yeah. I appreciate you sharing that. I know a lot of people can relate to that around. I'm not coming by it naturally, and that we do what was done and wonder, and it's very easy to externalize, make it about the other person, all kinds of things. I'm curious though, is. Just to represent this, realistically, at least for me, I learned things I do better. As a matter of fact, part of that's what strong means to the profession. That's what I get to know. That's why I like to teach it's for me and the doctor heal thyself. But it's also not over. And in other words that I, that's why I was cringing. I was like, oh, I still do that. Or I do that. Is that true for you as well?

Absolutely. Yeah. I fail every day in my relationship. We know that from research anyways, we all make tons of mistakes every single day when it comes to a two. And that's okay. As long as there's a repair process and a sense of foundational Goodwill.

And that's why connection matters so much because we know we're going to make the errors. We know our partner's going to share emotion and we're not going to be very attuned to it. And we're going to ask about the grocery list. We know we're going to miss an emotion on their face.

We know we're going to, say the wrong thing sometimes when we don't mean to, or be out of touch or ignore our partners too much. And I make all those mistakes, every single day. Like most people do. So then the question is, what is it that overcomes that if we have a strong connection, nervous system to nervous system, it creates a baseline sense of trust and security that can overcome these daily mistakes that we all make.

So if there's an error in attunement, which there will be, we can rely on the fact that we know the care is there, it's available. We might just have to ask for it or ask for it again. My partner and I are very busy, we get stressed, we work a lot.

And I get it, which is a common experience in relationship to, can you just describe how you ask for care? What does that sound like? So I might say, I'm having a hard day, I could really use a little bit of extra attention or just a little bit of extra softness and sensitivity from you.

But when someone is in a stress state, they might not be able to shift like that. And I'm the same way. And my partner will ask me for something. I may not be very available at that moment to provide it. So the question is, what do we do then? If we trust that the connection is there, we're more likely to double down on vulnerability and inviting care.

So instead of just going away and going well, that, that was useless or my partner's useless, or, I knew they wouldn't care for me. Like these sorts of things, we doubled down at the moment and say, I know it may be hard for you to switch right now. And I know it's a hard day, but I really need you.

I'm really struggling. And I know that we can show up for each other. I need you to be here with me, would you reach out to me? Would you touch me? Would you walk with me? So sometimes we have to be very explicit and obvious, but what allows us to be that vulnerable is the trust that the connection is there.

If we don't trust it's there, it's very dicey to get that vulnerable. And so the lack of connection prevents a lot of these tools from being used because, people don't really believe that the care will be there.

That's so true. And again, that makes me think again about attachment and that we're fighting these internal scripts that we are not even aware that we have that, that got laid down so early that they're not in thought.

Yeah. That's what we're battling, I think is that, yeah, we're very driven by our trauma histories, it's hard to have that kind of insight, but again, relationship helps eliminate these blind spots and we can do it in therapy also, in a very close therapeutic relationship. Some of these blind spots can get illuminated, but they certainly can in a relationship because when you don't believe in yourself, somebody else might offer a different perspective.

When you're sulking and blocking everything out. Your partner may offer, something that's helpful that brings you back. There's a section of the book where I talk about inviting care and how that's a move that, that master couples make. So instead of getting critical and blaming, and guilt tripping, when I feel hurt, I can invite the care that I need and want.

And that's an advanced relationship move. The only issue with that is, like you said, a lot of people don't expect care to begin with. We don't even know we don't expect it. Yeah. Exactly. It's not on the map. And the question is how to begin working towards. The relational map that has that built-in where I trust in the security of my relationship enough to know that person will be there for me.

I just might have to jump over a few hurdles, which is okay. I can do that. If I know it's there, once I expect care a more likely to invite it, but that is something that people have to work through, depending on their history.

Oh, totally. And I love what you're saying about staying in rather than, so you reach out initially and, it's almost like a choice or a road, two roads. It can either be, see confirmation of the, whatever that injury is. But what you're describing is in that moment, rather than going in that direction, which is I don't know, I want to call it the lazy, but it's the automatic, it would normally be the automatic path that you're saying that we can do this. And they were like, your language of we can do better. We can do better. And so then it would be overriding that impulse and moving back towards another bit like you said, doubling down on vulnerability and that's hard, especially that I think of it as the third move.

We reach out the thing happens and I guess, yeah, the thing happens. And then what do we do with that? And what you're saying, and I love is do it again, double up, make it louder, make it more clear because, and that rests on this assumption that you're going to get it, but also the way that you get it is by doing it.

Because, and also because it's the only strategy that works. Everything else we might do is detrimental to the relationship. We can get palliative, we can blame our partner. We can get critical, we can go away and solve that. None of that helps our connection now or in the future. Even if you let time, ease the wound, it's still there in the background, th this experience of your partner not being there for you.

So really the only move that is going to do anything productive is to double down on the approach of care and vulnerability, even when it's not initially there. And it's an extremely vulnerable moment, but that's why, we affirm the relationship. We believe in the relationship. That's why people make commitments to each other and speak vows to each other is because we know that has to be there.

Otherwise, why are we doing this? And the thing I would add to that is none of us do this naturally. Like you said that the default tendency is to do something defensive or protective because we're wired to, to protect ourselves more than we're wired for love. So we have to train ourselves a little bit to make these connecting moves.

It takes practice. And I would say intentional practice. For me, it was years of trying things that felt extremely awkward and unfamiliar because my family didn't make moves like that. So it took me doing things that didn't feel normal. They didn't feel natural to me, but I knew they were the right move and much better than what I would have done.

And so one of the sections in the book is the importance of practice that once you start practicing these healthy relationship moves, you have to keep practicing them because it's not like they become your skill because you thought about it once. A lot of this stuff is procedural memory. It's muscle memory.

It's wired deeply into the brain. It's default emotional habits. And the only way we become more secure is to practice practice with people that we care about and in our lives.

I love that. I think you're really speaking to the exact piece, the exact pieces that if we can pull that out of the dense academic world and offer that. So these are very simple things that you're describing, even that you could play with or experiment with.

Just try it, try to touch someone as you walk by. I think of course, the John Gottman work around bids for connection. I re I really like that. Is there any, and it's fun to practice.

This is the other thing is for whatever reason, we're living this massive social failure to not educate and train ourselves around relationship health. I understood this when I was a kid in school because I lacked so much connection. I would go to school, really suffering and feeling really alone.

And it boggled my mind, even back then that we would spend weeks and weeks memorizing equations. Everyone was going to forget, and we didn't spend a single half hour talking about relationship health. So if we understood these concepts a little bit more relationships would be easier. Think about all the things we practice in our lives.

If we want to be a brilliant piano player, we practice. If we want to be a great athlete, we practice. If we want to speak a language we practice. Why? Because all of these activities involve procedural memory. You have to be able to do them quickly and automatically you can't stop to think. Relationships are much like that. The expressions on our face, our tone of voice, our body language, our eye contact, all of these things are so fast and so automatic that if you don't retrain them, they will simply be whatever default they were up. Which typically isn't good or promotes connection.

So what's fun about this practice concept is that it's bonding to practice. It's to give you an example, let's say my partner and I have a poor interaction I ask for care. She doesn't offer it. I ask again in a sweet, vulnerable way. She makes fun of me or blows me off or gets, distracted by something else.

And now I'm feeling wounded and hurt, and it'd be easy to write my partner off and say this person is useless. I guess I'll go find somebody else that knows how to comfort me. But what really needs to happen is we need to practice together as a team because we already know that we want to be fully connected.

It's just whenever. And that interaction was an example of that. So what I can do is go back to my partner and say, I don't think we handled that interaction very well because I was left feeling alone and unsupported, but I think we can do better. And I think if we practice how we might do that differently, it'll really help us in moments like that when we're tired and stressed.

So let's just role, play it a little. And if my partner is willing, then not only is it fun and playful, but it gives us additional skill that we'll have the next time, because now it's built into muscle memory. We've said the words, we've practiced it. This is something most people don't do, but it's crazy to me because relationships are so difficult.

How can you possibly be good without the practice? So when people notice something, they don't do very well. I highly recommend that they practice by role-playing those scenarios at times when they're not so upset. And that gets the new habit woven into muscle memory and makes it so much more available later.

what's like having a do-over in a sense. And what I like about what you're saying, just the notion of practice means that you're not supposed to already know how to do it, right? Like that. We all the masters, everybody. It's a process that is an ongoing process. So I like just even that term, because it's so forgiving, and then also there's face saving in this, which I think is really important and saving face saving for ourselves face saving for our partner. So that rather than going back to her upset or what have you, you're again, you have to be regulated enough to do that, but leading the two of you in this direction, and I could see, let's say she feels bad about it, or she really was distracted and it was like, oh no, you he's coming at me again.

But there's the grace of it. There's grace in it. Let's together do this. I think it's so important because as there's a lot of shame in relationship behaviors. We look across at someone, we take a sharp tone of voice with them. We ignore them we do something silly and then we feel awful.

We feel awful about ourselves, why did I react that way? How come my behaviors, aren't more connecting w when I'm stressed. That's all of us.

And when we make errors, we're going to support each other to get better. So there's a lot less shame and finger pointing. There's a lot less blame and criticism, why did you do this to me? Why are you bad at that? This is the stuff that really kills connection because we don't feel emotional as secure in those environments.

But if somebody says, I don't think we did that very well. Would you practice with me so that we can get better at that so we can love each other more? That's just a nice, happy invitation. Who wouldn't want to step into this and then I want that honeypot, but it's also, but what's so great about it is it's also a balance.

So you are taking care of yourself by working by requesting the practice. So it's that wonderful. It's the wonderful both end. Exactly. Yeah. And people, as misunderstand this about secure attachment they think it's codependency because it wipes out the individual.

When the opposite is true, a securely attached relationship promotes and celebrates the individual a dysfunctional relationship is the one that wears on the individual more and tries to take away those unique qualities that make people themselves. Yeah, practice is a way to be yourself and say, I'm not going to be different.

We just need to find a way to have middle ground in these scenarios and manage our differences as well. And it'll, it allows you to find how to do that. Without this pressure on each person to try to be different .

I love it. So just, are there any other kind of techniques or hints that you want to share just directly? And again, I'm going to recommend highly recommend your book. All of this is captured there and you've been so generous in sharing some of these ideas so that we can get them out far and wide. But is there anything else on top of mind that you would want to share as an example? One thing I want people to understand is that, that the book is written to be inclusive of all couples.

And this is just a pet peeve of mine. A lot of relationship self-help books out there only talk about relationship between a man and a woman. They only give examples of married couples. They only, stress monogamy as a commitment type. These books, in my opinion, are outdated in some ways relative to how people are conducting their relationship lives.

And so it was incredibly important as I was writing this to, to put out a resource where people can see themselves in it, no matter what type of relationship they're having, no matter their sexual orientation, their relationship orientation, their commitment structure married, not married. That they have a way to practice deepening love and connection that doesn't put them in a cultural box or asks them to adhere to a religious.

This is important for people, that, that haven't seen themselves in other relationship self-help books. Hopefully this book will speak to them and it weaves together some of what we've talked about, the intersection of attachment theory and neuroscience, but it makes it practical in a way people can implement.

So for example, there's a section on how to be more present, despite the fact that we're living really busy, modern lives, that there's distractions constantly all around us, and so how do you challenge yourself to be present in that. For intimacy to occur, because what we know is that our nervous system has been honed over hundreds of thousands of years to measure connection in certain ways.

And we've only been communicating through technology for the last 50 years or so. So people sometimes don't slow down enough to communicate these cues in an obvious way to each other's nervous systems. And then they wonder why they don't feel connected. The nervous system needs time to sink into its evaluation of these cues.

Once you get close to me, I have to determine, do I feel physically relaxed and comfortable with you and close, once my brain makes that adjustment, I can benefit from the closeness, but it takes a little bit of time. You can't just move in and out. It's the same with touch. It's the same with tone.

It has to be consistently kind and caring for the nervous system to pick up the message and trust the consistency. So in a way it's a manifesto for the modern life and the modern world that we find ourselves in. How do we create emotional intimacy and connection, even though most of us are pretty busy and I've woven that into the book as well.

That's really great. I love it. I love it. And you're doing other interviews are there other ways like YouTube videos or articles where that people could get more?

So if people go to get more than words.com, not only can they order the book there, from Amazon Barnes and noble bookshop.org, wherever people want to buy it, but what they will get is a bonus chapter on attachment, which I wrote for the book, but it didn't make it into the book because we had so many juicy, meaty chapters that the publisher was finally like, look, we can't stuff more in here.

But there's a chapter on attachment I think is really important. Attachment theory was one of the things that helped me recover, from my dysfunctional attachment style as being really avoidant early on in my life. And so I believe it's very important for people to learn about it.

And so if they go to get more than words.com, I will send them the free chapter by email. They also get some other goodies right away. There's a neuroscience-based guide to connection that they get right away. There's a myth-busting guide, busting all these crazy myths in our culture about what creates connection, so there's a lot of things people can get just by going to the website get more than words.com. And I think that's probably the best place for them to begin their learning. Oh, that's great. And the book, that's the book title, get more than words.

It's funny. I wanted to call it shut up and connect a lot. A lot of people don't know this I've told the publisher. I was like, let's call it, shut up and connect. Cause I really wanted to get people's attention. Look, you're talking way too much. And your nervous system doesn't necessarily respond to that, slow down, be present, look each other in the eyes, touch each other.

But I guess they thought the original title was offensive. So we ended up with more than words.

I like it by the way, shut up and connect. It reminds me one time I did a skydiving thing crazy. And you crawl out on the wing and there's this big sticker that says shut up and jump. It's just do the thing. I did the thing that was really fun terrify me. And it's funny that I associated that to that because there's. There's a reason people don't shut up and connect. Like it's the vulnerability, everything that we've talked about, but there's a good reason that we use our words and try to stay in our left brain and try to stay literal and logical. And what feels like rational, it's a safe place. And so you're going out on a wing and not knowing, there is a jump in it. There's a faith, there's a piece of faith that, which is what you started with. So I really that's part of why I really love your original title. It's a spiritual jump.

It's the same jump we have to make when we start training our mind in meditation for, for people that have experienced that, you know how hard it is at first your mind is so crazy, so busy, how do you quiet it? With practice, you can, but you have to believe, that's there.

And I think for both therapists and, any member of the public. You're right. It's hard to make that jump to, what we might call quiet love, for example, because it's awkward, it's embarrassing. We don't know what to do. We don't have examples or relationship skills. This is why therapists jump in to make something happen.

When you know, the partners are about to kiss each other and say they love each other. This is also why we jump in and start talking. When we get home from work. When really what our relationship needs is to hold each other for five minutes and cut the talking and just hold each other, touch each other, and communicate nervous system, the nervous system.

So I think if we're all a little more willing to talk less, Touch more hold each other and communicate care in these very obvious, simple ways the brain does get the message. And once the subconscious gets the message, it's a lot harder to argue because that sense of intrinsic Goodwill is there. Yeah.

And you're not doing it to be morally good or because you should, or whatever, like you, you get more love back by your regulating into this connection that, that we want that you need. And yes, and then we're also taking responsibility to, to bring that to our close others and all the various forms of that calm.

I see this too, by the way, for everyone listening that's a parent, this is also what kids need. They need less talk, less formal conversation, less, talk about chores and responsibilities. And more holding more emotional intimacy, more quiet moments where there's just space, to be, and to feel together.

So the programs we have at ReadySet love will help people practice those. If you want a little bit of support and you're not working with a therapist or doing this in therapy, then the videos we have can paste people through the practice.

So you also have You have an organization that you founded?

Yeah. We have a wellness center in Austin called presence, wellness, and it's very relationship focused. As a therapist and you know how hard this is, I'm always trying to coordinate with psychiatrists and other care providers and it gets difficult, especially Austin's become a big city.

So we wanted to create an integrative wellness center. People can come do their therapy, but they can also get their medication. And the coordination is there between the physician and the therapist. We have excellent couples therapists. So now we can offer that as well. We have even meditation classes.

My hope is that it's a one-stop shop for mental health, which, these days is needed more than ever. And, therapist sometimes neglect the physical component of mental health and physicians often neglect the psychological component of health. And they're really wired together, our mental and physical health and our relational health.

So that's the purpose of presence and yeah, people need that support. We're happy to help them. And just a side question. What about adolescent kids?

Yeah we do now, we started really focusing on adults initially, but there's been so much demand, for teens that need a little bit of support, they're having mental health issues, their parents are concerned about them.

So yes. Now we have a couple of clinicians that specialize in that and it's been going. That's awesome. And it occurs to me that I should say that I'm on the advisory committee for this organization. There's not any financial gain for me here to be clear, but yeah, that there was a relationship there and yeah, I can certainly stand behind.

We, we respect your work so much, Sue.

And that's why I reached out to you, very early on when we were building this, because we've always wanted to pattern our programs on what the latest science is, what the best practices are, how to do really great deep therapy. And there's very few people that, that know more than you about that.

And so I've always appreciated your guidance and your wisdom, and I'm so glad that you're still doing the podcast and people get to hear from you because it's such a great resource. And thank you for coming and being so generous and sharing so much. And I know people are going to love it.

Thank you so much, Sue. I appreciate it. Alrighty, thank you. All right.