

23.02.06 My Pandemic Valentine Hour

SM Sarah McConnell

LA Lalin Anik

JG Julian Glover

SS Sushma Subramanian

KF Kristina Feeser

SM

This is an encore presentation of an episode that originally aired in 2021. If you ever felt petty for wanting special treatment from your partner, it turns out your pettiness is backed by science.

LA

I accept that I'm needy, Sarah. I think it's good to accept your vices. Recognize your virtues and accept and recognize your vices, and I am needy.

SM

We're all needy when it comes to people we love. For instance, it's nice to be taken out to a favorite restaurant. But if our partner takes just about everybody there, that's not cool with us,

LA

Many of us, no matter how cool we are, or how much high self-esteem we have, we do get this tingle of a desire for "Please treat me differently. Please treat me a little better so I know you love me more."

SM

From Virginia Humanities, this is With Good Reason. I'm Sarah McConnell. Today, the special treatment we require from our romantic partners. But first, monogamy is the cornerstone of how most people imagine adulthood. We date around, we have our fun, then we commit to just one person forever. Full on monogamy. Julian Kevon Glover is writing a book about non-monogamy. Julian is an Assistant Professor in the Gender, Sex and Sexuality department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

SM

Julian you're exploring in your book the embrace of non-monogamy. What do you mean by non-monogamy? Are you talking just about Tinder dates with strangers or something deeper?

JG

So yeah, it's a great question, and a great place to start. So for me non-monogamy is an ethical commitment to undoing all of the various lessons that lead us to believe, and to treat partners, whether romantic, platonic, intimate, or a combination of all those things, to

treat our partners as if they are property to be controlled, to be owned, and to be manipulated. I see this to be a freedom practice, that really allows for individuals to develop relationships with other people that are not built out of a fear, the fear of loneliness, or many other kinds of fears. My understanding of non... and practice of non-monogamy is based on the belief that there is no single partner for whom I can satisfy all wants, all needs, all desires. And there is no no single partner that can do all of those kinds of things for me.

SM

Why are you calling it specifically non-monogamy? Isn't it the same thing as what used to be called open relationship, or open marriage, or polyamorous?

JG

Yeah, so I specifically say non-monogamy precisely because for me, my practices are very much attempts to, or seek to undo monogamy as the bedrock of society. And when I say that, I mean, the familial structure, this idea that a family is not valid, unless there is exactly one mother, one father, two and a half kids, white picket fence, and maybe a dog.

SM

But what do you call traditional relationships influenced by capitalism? Why can't we just say they're influenced by our innate instincts toward jealousy and possessiveness, and a desire for not dealing with the unknown or not being kept off balance by the unknown, right?

JG

Yeah. So my work is really an effort to dismantle those things. And for me, this idea of capitalism is especially important because of its particular effect on Black bodies in particular. So I take that very, very seriously. And for me, the key to being free is very much comes from undoing all of the kinds of lessons that have been naturalized around it.

SM

What was the moment that led you, personally, to look more deeply into non-monogamy? Were you in a more traditional relationship at the time?

JG

So I love this question. This is probably one of my favorites. And it's because there was no single moment. It was really a culmination of moments for me. And what do I mean by that? Well, I've had a few partners. And it was always the case that I was always the partner who was cheating. I always just really believed that there was something inherently wrong with me. That I was wrong. I was made to feel so much guilt and so much shame. And I carried that weight for a long time. And it really affected the way that I create relationships. I realized

from a rather early age that I started carrying so many secrets. And it wasn't until several years of very intensive therapy, and a kind of rekindling of my spiritual self, that I realized that it was all of these kinds of secrets that were making me sick.

SM

Could you share with us, briefly, your childhood growing up in rural Illinois in a deeply religious Pentecostal family that preached just the opposite of everything you were coming to understand you are?

JG

Yeah, so it was really hard. I was, I was assigned male at birth. I don't understand myself in that way anymore. But it was very clear to myself and other people that I was so feminine, so so so feminine in all of my mannerisms. And I remember vividly so many small bits of correction that people who loved and cared about me chided and corrected me. And then when I started coming out at that time as gay it really was a problem. I remember vividly being woken up from sleep in the middle of the night to what felt like, it was like water being poured on on my face. And I woke up, and it was my parents, our pastor, and his wife that were at, you know, at the side of my bed, literally trying to pray the gay away in the middle of the night.

So there was another point where my parents asked me to leave, leave our home because I wasn't going to... I was choosing in their mind not to be repentant. So I got a one way ticket to Chicago, and was kind of just meandering, I had no idea was gonna do but I was intercepted by three trans women, two Black trans woman and Latinx trans woman. They were the folks who introduced me to a world of Black and Latinx, queer, trans, non-binary people, lesbian, gay people as well. And that's called a ballroom scene. And being mutually recognized by other Black, queer, trans and non-binary folks in that space really did save my life.

SM

And what did you learn? What did you learn from them about love?

JG

I really learned what unconditional love might look like. Loving somebody with full knowledge of, not despite, okay with full knowledge of our own kinds of contradictions. And that, for me, has been so freeing for me to be able to explore many different sides of myself as I continue to explore them with all kinds of different people. That's one one major thing that they taught me about love. And the other thing was, without a serious practice of self-reflection and self-reflexivity, it is really, really, really challenging, if not impossible, to fully love somebody else. I don't really agree with RuPaul on very much anymore. But one thing that I agree vividly about is very much when they say, "If you can't love yourself, how are you gonna love somebody else?"

SM

True for both monogamous and non-monogamous relationships, wouldn't you say? For all love.

JG

Yeah. And what I find, though, is with monogamous relationships, there's this idea that the person should complete you, or that you should complete the other person. And that is a challenging one for me, one that I don't really agree with. Because I found that the best relationships are the ones that I come to already whole, not seeking a partner to complete me, but seeking, you know, a partner who can enhance and show me many new things, new ways of life, have new experiences with them, right? And not expect them to make me whole, right? So it's to say that my sense of self is even while I'm in a relationship with somebody, I'm maintaining an autonomous sense of self.

SM

It's interesting you say that, I remember years ago somebody telling me about having studied Nietzsche, the philosopher, the German philosopher, and talking about this concept of love never works when you come into it half empty, looking to complete yourself. But rather you have to come into it whole, and together through the love making something new.

JG

Absolutely.

SM

But I said good luck with that.

JG

Yeah, yeah.

SM

If only.

JG

Right. And you know, it's it is challenging. But I have, I mean, you know, I'm, I'm currently seeing somebody who is blowing my mind through watching them, and moments of struggle, and also moments of triumph. I'll tell you one more thing. We were having all kinds of problems around Thanksgiving, and they told me, "Julian, you had the tendency of making decisions for other people." And I said, "Oh, how dare you." And then I, and then I thought about it overnight, and then I came back I can said, "You know what? Maybe you're absolutely right."

And that wasn't the end, right? I also had to come clean about why I

might do that. It was a fear. I feared that if I didn't already make a decision for somebody, that it would mean that I would have to be honest with them about a kind of capacious desire, right? And I thought that this was going to be something that had the potential to break us up. So I had to be honest about that fear, and figure out what kind of question I could ask. And the question that I asked him was to say, "Babe, how can I show you how much I love and care about you when I want to play, but I don't want to play with you?"

SM

That's a huge question.

JG

It's a huge question. And you know, he sat there for a good five minutes, and we were in the car. He sat in silence, really thinking about my question. And about five minutes later, he articulated precisely what it is that he needed. And then told me, that was the first time that he had ever truly asked for what he needed in a relationship. So being honest in this way, and being vulnerable in these ways, are really the kinds of things that allowed our relationship to blossom. So I offer that story, as just one example, to demonstrate what can manifest from that kind of vulnerability, that kind of honesty, in a non monogamous kind of space.

SM

You've described one of the joys of non-monogamy as being something rooted in a psychological concept called 'compersion.' What is compersion? I've never heard of it.

JG

Yeah. So compersion is a concept that comes from the field of psychology, that is all about an experience of joy. When we see people who we love receiving love or being loved on, the person is not being loved on because of directly something that we've done. But it's more to point out that we have created a kind of space for a partner to get what it is that they need or desire from whoever. And we can experience joy, and not jealousy when, when a partner experiences this, right?

SM

That takes a big heart, a lot of generosity, and a good deal of self control, right?

JG

Yes. And those are the tenants upon which I understand non-monogamy right? For me, it is about creating space. And like what the act of love, the act of generosity, for me is the creation of space for partners to get what it is that they need, from whoever it is that they need it from, while also for me working on myself so that I'm able to also do the same, and to not be overwhelmed by feelings of

jealousy, right? Rather than feeling like something has been betrayed. compersion really kind of asks what are the kinds of things that have been fulfilled, that maybe I could not fulfill for my partner whom I love.

SM

Julian Kevon Glover is Assistant Professor in the Gender, Sex and Sexuality department at Virginia Commonwealth University.

SM

It's human nature to want to be treated special. We feel a rush when we recognize that someone's gone out of their way to please or accommodate us. But say that someone has gifted everyone a bouquet of roses for Valentine's Day. Then we feel less special about our bouquet. Lalin Anik is a Professor of Marketing at VU Amsterdam. She says our desire for special treatment is essential for satisfying relationships.

SM

Lalin, you say that we're all drawn to people who are kind to others. But once we're in a relationship with them, it's disconcerting to us when they're generous to lots of people, when what we really want is special treatment. Not, not the same treatment they're giving to others. Does it happen a lot?

LA

What we find in our research is that yes, it happens a lot. Actually, this I must admit, this project was born out of my own interests and observing my own behavior, that I've realized over and over again, that I have this expectation, or I've had this expectation from my own romantic partners, that they are nice people. I expect them to be generous with their time and resources with others. But I realized I expect them to be a bit nicer to me or treat me a little differently. So I started wondering, "Is that the case with everybody else?" And I look around and I realized, yes, many people many of my friends expect similarly from their romantic partners.

So we studied it. And I can give you one clear example. So, imagine that it's your birthday, and your romantic partner sends you a celebratory text. Now picture one of the two following scenarios, okay? In Scenario A, your partner sends you a long, thoughtful, affectionate message that clearly took a significantly long time to compose. However, you know that this is something that they do to many of their friends and family members, right? They always send this type of long thoughtful birthday messages. This is Scenario A. In Scenario B, imagine that your partner sends you a message that says "Happy Birthday" with a smiley face. Very short, quick message. That said, this is the only birthday message that they're going to send in the whole year. Which one would you prefer? Would you prefer scenario A, long, thoughtful message that's sent to everybody and you? Or would

you prefer something that's very short, but that's the only message that they sent. So what we find is that between Scenario A and B, when given the choice, most people prefer scenario B, where they get a message that's short, but unique.

SM

So Scenario A, did it actually happened to you? Was there a moment where you received a gift, or a blandishment, or some sort of affection, that was irritating to you, because you thought, "Hey, you're doing this with everybody."

LA

It happened many times. I found myself, this is almost like a little bit of a therapy and admitting what I thought was my downfall, and now I realize it's just a desire, I don't want to minimize it. But yes, I mean, this happened many, many different times, where imagine like, I'm about to have a lunch date on a Saturday with my partner, and they say, "I need to cancel because our friend needs to move her couch, I'm going to go and help her." Right? And I say, "Well, this was going to be our date, and you're giving up on me and doing something else." Or that it has happened before where, let's say that my partner takes me out on a date to a restaurant, I'm Turkish, let's say in town, we go to a Turkish restaurant. And then next day, I hear that they also took another friend out to the same restaurant.

So the timing doesn't really matter whether, you know, they treat me the same way before or after they treat somebody else. But that the expectation is, I found myself expecting that they treat me differently. I want to go somewhere else. I want... take me to a different restaurant. Or, take your friend to a different restaurant, don't let it be the same thing. It shouldn't actually matter when you think about it. It shouldn't take away from my experience, or from my expectation of you know, my partners, but it ends up being sort of a little bit hurtful. People don't enjoy that they say "Treat me uniquely, just differently."

SM

Can you still remember the one time you actually brought it up with your partner? When you actually said, "Can I, can I say something I feel silly about but I want to mention to you?"

LA

Yes, it actually happened at a store. So we were at a Filipino store, my partner's half Filipina, and we were getting some food. And as we're waiting in line, we're just ordered, my partner sort of pushed me aside to give way to a stranger. So it is not the exact scenario in B, but I realized I said, "Listen, I should be your person, you know, I should be able to stand here," but they were trying to make space for somebody else. And I took that almost personally and thought, "Hey, what is going on?" And they said, "Hey, you know, we need to be

respectful of other people." But beyond that, my partner would even like to give a better treatments to somebody else.

Sometimes I'd say, you know, I'll push you aside, because we can deal with it at home, you know, you are my person, it's, I don't have to be as careful with you. So in these scenarios, I would bring it up and we would talk about it. But there would be this tension, initially, that I would feel my chest tightening, as I asked for it. And I would feel my partner getting a little bit of tense, because for my partner, it is okay to provide me a bit of a less treatment or bit of a sort of same treatment, or provides a stranger some better treatment, because again, we can resolve it later on. And we have to go out of our way for strangers, so to say. And I think of that very differently.

SM

I'm curious, do you think before this relationship, you were ever the one in the relationship who was doling out kindness and thoughtfulness to many while treating your then partner somewhat equally?

LA

I think there were moments of that. It could be something to do with strangers or for work, let's say with my students, I'm going out of my way to be there for them, possible. But here's the thing. The difference is that I grew up in a household where it was very clear, people who are in our inner circles, they are the most important to us. And then we... sort of we would really take care of our home, of our core, of our nuclear family. And everybody else, we're nice to them, but there was a distinction when it came to making a choice, that we would always prioritize. And I think about it as if you had a cape, somebody you can wrap around in there are the closest, your parents, your child, your sibling. That's the first circle.

SM

Did you find it was the same for all genders and all relationships, that no matter who you were, one of the partners did wish to be singled out and to feel unique?

LA

That's an interesting question. So in one study, we wanted to understand being treated uniquely and in a special manner, whether that affects the way we pick relationship partners initially, whether we court with them. And what we find is that that desire is so strong, that sometimes we give up attractiveness, that we're willing to date somebody a little less attractive in order to receive unique treatments. And then we looked at preference of this desire in women and men. So what we find in the study is that there are no gender differences, in that we expect similarly, from men and women, that they provide to us a unique treatment. So we basically don't find that big of a gender gap. I thought initially, that there will be a gender gap. If we think about it from an evolutionary angle, right, men are

sort of expected to be breadwinners. So if we might expect them to give us that unique treatment, which would signal that they will take care of us and our family, our newborns. But that's not what we find.

SM

Sure, because men would covet those traits in women just, as women would covet them and men. Possibly they'd express them differently.

LA

And that's what we find, that we don't see big gender differences. There might be context in which this is different. But I can't say much. The initial data shows that gender differences are quite small.

SM

So I guess one lesson is that everything's relative, even love and displays of affection, right?

LA

That is beautiful said. I think that's right. How we think of the love we receive, it's not in a vacuum, but it's not isolated.

SM

And do you think even if you're the kind of person who's pretty cool and low maintenance, it still matters for you? So even if you're not always, you're not needy, and you like to think you're above all this petty stuff, right? But it still makes us crazy when the special attention however slight, stops.

LA

I accept that I'm needs, Sarah. (LAUGHTER)

SM

I thought you were cool.

LA

Clearly, after running all these studies and publishing this paper, I realize, and I accept. I think it's good to accept your vices, recognize your virtues and accept and recognize your vices, I am needy. That is to say, okay, so one of the studies that didn't make it to the paper, but we do find some initial evidence that lower self esteem and higher levels of insecurity does lead to a higher desire for unique treatment. That said, many people experienced this, it might not be just at the same level or in the same context. But many of us, no matter how cool we are, or how much high self-esteem we have, we do get this tingle of a desire for "Please treat me differently, please treat me a little better so I know you love me. Or you love me more."

SM

Yeah. What about online relationships, and when people are dating

online sites, or social media flirting?

LA

we have some studies to speak to this. We ran some studies on Facebook, as well as on Snapchat. And what we find is actually in those domains, it's more visible. Because, okay, let's imagine this scenario, Snapchat, okay? If you're a Snapchat user, you can send a direct message to your contact, or you can post a message on your story, which is visible to everybody and to your partner, as well. And what we find in our studies is that if your partner posts a message publicly, and then they send it privately to you, people respond to it much less or much less frequently than if that message was not posted originally in the story, but it was only sent directly. Right? So people say, if you're, if this is something that you share with everybody else, I'm not going to respond to, to it, even if you send it to me directly. I want it to be special to me, that it's between you and I. Which to me, says on social media, we can see how our partners are treating others, which makes it more sensitive, I think.

SM

I thought it was really interesting also, that you found that there's some relationships where people don't want preferential treatment, like at work. Why would that be?

LA

So, I wouldn't say it exactly that way. But I would say that the preference for unique treatment from a partner is stronger than preference for a unique treatment from a close friend, and which is stronger than desire for sort of a treatment for from an acquaintance. I would be interested in exploring this more in work scenarios. Because let's, let's imagine a scenario where you have a colleague who never schedules meetings in the mornings, because they're not a morning person, right? But when you ask for it and you say, "Can we meet tomorrow, this is really urgent." And they say, "You know what, I can meet with you at 9am." That will make you feel good, because you know your, your colleague is not somebody who usually does this, but they're almost going out of their way to meet with you in the morning.

They're inconveniencing themselves, they're doing something special for you. This desire to be treated uniquely does split into different contexts. So my hunch says that in work scenarios, treating people differently might be a way to show that you like them without saying, "I like you, but I care for you." Sort of more professionally, giving them a little bit of a leeway or going out of your way to do a favor, to provide feedback, to arrive on time, whatever it is that you don't usually do. That might be an interesting way to network or build your work relationships. So if you're looking to find a new date for Valentine's Day, right, and if you're online, and you're sort of busting your head and thinking what can I do? Sort of communicating with a potential romantic date that you're treating them uniquely,

saying something like this in the message, "I typically don't write as long. But with you, I just got the inspiration."

I'm not saying play games. But if there's something that you usually do, and then you go out of your way to do it differently, communicate that with people. The other thing that we haven't yet talked about the effect of receiving unique treatments on relationship satisfaction over time, and we have some data from couples. And what we find is that desire for unique treatment, and actually receiving that, tends to correlate positively with relationship satisfaction. In other words, if you think that your partner often gives you a unique treatment and treats you differently and better, you tend to be more happy in your relationship. And you'll be more likely to respond to your partner and perhaps give them surprise gifts. So I would say as Valentine's Day is approaching, show a different side of you. If... this week, go and do the groceries to surprise them. Plan a different sort of date, get a cake, bake something. Whatever it is that you don't usually do. It's not only the surprise factor, but it's doing something a little differently that you then usually do, and giving them a unique treatment. That might really sort of make your day, or make their day, and lift up the relationship a little bit. And it will also help... and if you're single, it will also help in terms of finding a new partner.

SM

Lalin Anik was formerly an Assistant Professor of Business Administration at the University of Virginia's Darden Business School. She is now Associate Professor of Marketing at VU Amsterdam. This is With Good Reason. We'll be right back.

SM

Welcome back to With Good Reason from Virginia Humanities. Studies show, the more we look at screens the less we feel our body. Scary, right? In a virtual world, we're increasingly out of touch. Sushma Subramanian is a journalism professor at the University of Mary Washington. Just two days after getting engaged, she moved to Virginia to teach, leaving her fiance behind along with a lot of unspoken feelings, and unanswered questions. But she tells us about the app that got them talking and touching across the distance. Sushma, do you think that we've all fallen out of touch with touching, especially during the pandemic? With our desire and habits of touching one another, we were all on cellphones anyway, and now it just seems worse.

SS

I think that a lot of people are talking about how they really miss touch. They miss throwing their arms around their friends at brunch, they miss, you know, cheek kisses and that kind of thing. But there are many people who are introverts who aren't particularly touch-friendly, who they feel like this is a great time, right? They're not

pressured to, to engage in that way. But regardless, I think because touch is on our minds, and we, we're not having those usual experiences, it's time... it's a good time for us to reflect on what our relationship with touch is.

SM

Do you know people who are both very touchy and needful of touching, and people who, not so much?

SS

Yes, yeah. My friends and family run the gamut on that. And so I've heard from some people that this whole experience has made them extremely depressed and they can't wait to go out and just, you know, throw their arms around other people, just have bear hugs. Other people are just so happy that one day when things are normal, they won't be forced to do that anymore. They don't have to shake hands. When I started out writing my book, I think I was very much on the end of being very happy not to shake hands with people. When I was younger, my dad actually used to call me a touch-me-not, after... there's that plant that folds in on itself when it's touched with your finger, because I didn't like being touched in general. But I think that I've become a lot more touchy. So. So yeah, I, I'm extremely, you know, physically affectionate, especially with those who are closest with me. But I do still find it really hard to... you know to hug people I don't know. And I'm actually not a real really big fan of shaking hands.

SM

There was a period of time when you and your then-fiance, now husband, were long distance. You were teaching at college, he was elsewhere. And you had to rely on just screens for intimacy and closeness that had always been in person with each other. Tell me the story of how, ultimately, touching screens made a big difference in your lives.

SS

Yeah, so this was just when I started teaching at the University of Mary Washington. And until then, we had both been living together in New York. So like two days before I moved, we got engaged. So suddenly, we're separated from each other. And we have all of these mix of feelings going on, that we're not really talking about. So in the, in the midst of all of this, we... well I was already working on my book about the science of touch. And I had met these scientists at Northwestern University. And they were working in the field of haptics. And they were specifically working on this technology that was trying to reintroduce touch onto our screens and our devices.

So like, if you touched your, your smartphone, you could actually feel something on the screen. Kind of, it would feel like a projection even though it was just created by vibrations. So anyway, they gave us these experimental phones. So I gave one to my husband, and I kept one

with me in Fredericksburg. And we thought, well, it'll just kind of be interesting to see if being able to touch remotely will change our relationship in some way, or maybe bridge some of the distance between us. So we, we were using an app that I created along with a colleague of mine. And basically Kartik, when he put his finger on his screen, I could feel it on mine as a, it almost felt like a tiny projection. And so we were testing this out for the first time, and I put my finger down, and he could feel it. And, and then, because I thought that was really funny, I moved my finger and he kind of chased me. And I didn't let him catch me, and then I moved it again.

And he went after me. And it was like we were flirting haptically. And it was so interesting, because we were using this sense that we don't usually associate with our technology. It kind of unlocked something in our brains that we had only really used at the beginning of our relationship. And suddenly we were flirting again. And it was a real turning point. It allowed for this playfulness, and this moment of connection. And after that I feel like we kind of settled down and into the engagement. And I'm happy to say we're happily married now.

SM

Yeah, what what is the feeling? So you're touching each other by each putting your hand on the screen, you can see where the other person's point of touch is. And you feel a certain vibration.

SS

Yeah, it's a certain vibrational pattern that creates this feeling like it's a bump on the screen, as if the finger is reaching out of the screen toward you. Of course, it's very, very subtle, but it was definitely present.

SM

It's interesting, you've written about this, and said, at first, as fun as it was, it also kind of creeped you out a little bit and it felt like you were touching a stranger's finger. And in a way I wonder if that added to the excitement, the sense of touching and, you know, electricity.

SS

Yeah. So the reason that I wrote that was when I first tried out the app, I had used it with my colleague's son who had worked on the app with us. So I tested it out with him before I tested it out with Kartik. And so like, I think my kind of disgust that I was experiencing was because I was like touching a stranger virtually, you know? And it was almost as weird as it would be dealing with a, an actual stranger in person, right? Like if you're sort of, yeah expected to rub a stranger's fingertip, right? That would be extremely awkward. And like, a lot of those same feelings did exist when we were doing it virtually on an app.

SM

As somebody who, as your father said was like the fern that curled away from the touch, how did you of all people decide to delve into the whole history of human touch?

SS

I remember there was this time when I was working at home one day, and I was kind of just zoning out. And I felt like the top of the desk felt a little bit loose. So I sort of stood up and was trying to lift it off its base to see what was wrong. And as I was touching it, I started to think about, well, what exactly is touch, right? And like, I could feel my, my fingers around the corner, and I was taking the, you know, all this information. And I was wondering, does it have to do with what's in my muscles? Does it have to do just with what's in my skin? And after that, I started to just sort of think about how strange it is that I didn't even really know what my sense of touch is.

SM

Where do you think we are as a society, even before the pandemic, where do you think we were headed in terms of the long arc of our cultural evolution when it comes to touch?

SS

Well, I think that we have long been a vision-centered culture. And this goes back to the ancient Greeks, because they would rank the senses from highest to lowest. And touch was considered a baser sense than the others, because it's associated with the body. It was, you know, kind of concerned with immediate needs and like, survival, and also sex. Whereas vision was the highest sense because it was associated with beauty and intelligence. This is a belief that has existed in Western societies for a long time, and we don't think about it consciously. But I do think that those beliefs have sort of fallen into the background of our consciousness and helped shape the society we live in today. And I don't think it's an accident now that we're suddenly, or not suddenly, but constantly surrounded by screens.

SM

You think our increased screen time during this period will change our sense of touch when we emerge, and we're all back in the world together again?

SS

Well, I think the more time that we spend on screens, the less in touch we are with our bodies. So there was this really interesting experiment that I did with virtual reality. I went to a lab where they were trying to treat chronic pain by having people play virtual reality games. And what happened for these patients is that if they suddenly spend their time in a lot of... in virtual reality, they disconnect from the feelings of their body, and they begin to identify

with this avatar that has a healthy body on the screen. Right?

The more time we spend on screens, the less in touch we are with our bodies. We blink less, we might swallow less, right? So all of these bodily signals kind of get blanked out. So that does happen as we spend time on our screens. But I would say, once we emerge from this pandemic, we do have an opportunity to really experience what, you know, life with a fuller sense of touch would mean right? So to, I don't know, to... if you've been doing groceries online, to actually go to the grocery store and touch your vegetables and fruits. All of those things, we can really engage with that. And think about what does it mean that as a society for a long time, we have not valued touch as much?

SM

How much of a loss of the sense of touch do you think there is right now for people dating during the pandemic?

SS

So we were already having these societal conversations about consent and what that means. You know, asking somebody first, whether you can touch them, whether you can kiss them, and, you know, engage in other forms of intimacy. But that has been heightened when the idea of touching can be so dangerous, right? It's a way of catching a virus. So my students have reported that they just have a lot of conversations now before even meeting with someone in person. You know, if they want to kiss them, if they want to hold their hand, they really talk about what that means. And also if they're going to be exclusive, all of those conversations seem to happen right away. And with some of my students who are in more serious relationships, because they, a lot of them are living at home right now, they're also kind of moving their relationships along faster than would be normal because suddenly they're spending a lot of time with their loved one's family. And so yeah, in some ways it's deepened people's relationships.

SM

And you don't want to branch out as much because it brings danger.

SS

Exactly. And, and they all have to have... when they're deciding on whether to see the person they're dating, their entire family is sometimes involved in that conversation.

SM

We loved it. Are Americans a particularly touchy group, would you say? I noticed we do hugs, for instance, hugs and handshakes, not kisses on the cheek. I don't know, which is touchier.

SS

Americans are a mixed bag when it comes to touch. The United States is such a multicultural society. We have people who come from really touchy countries, really non-touchy countries. And, and so that's what sometimes makes it so awkward for us to touch each other. Right? Because we have such a range of behaviors.

SM

Are there different theories that help explain why a certain culture is high touch or low touch? And are there certain cultures that are particularly high or low?

SS

Yeah, so temperature is one of the theories behind why certain cultures are high touch or low, low touch. So cold countries are said to touch less and warmer countries touch more. And the reason is just like the amount of skin exposure that people have. But also maybe that temperature affects people's general temperament. So warm countries just might be more warm. Another has to do with like, sort of social norms that a country has. So if it's a particularly individualistic culture, then people might value personal space a lot more. And in a more collectivistic society, there might be more just general rules about how we touch. Things like bowing respectfully to certain people and hugging only certain people. All of those factors play into this. I actually, my background is Indian culture. And I, when I was younger, really noticed this playing out in my own life. For example, like I've never seen my parents hug each other. And when I would go when I was younger, to friends houses, I would see their parents kissing and hugging in front of them. And I thought "This is so scandalous."

SM

You didn't love it, you were a little put off by it?

SS

Well, I just I just think it was taking in the differences. And noticing noticing how my own family is, you know, has totally different behaviors. And I actually don't want to paint them as non-touchy. There were some ways in which my family was much more touchy. Up until something like fifth grade, my mom would massage my head every weekend with oil, like it's kind of Ayurvedic massage. And I know some like some family members who their parents do that for them up into their 20s. And while in a lot of other American families I observed, everyone was in a different room when they slept. With... I slept in the same room as my parents until I was in middle school. And that was totally normal for us.

SM

Oh yeah, we had a big king sized bed with all kids and parents together, often.

SS

That's unusual. I don't usually hear about... hear of other people who've had that experience.

SM

We loved it. Sushma Subramanian, thank you for sharing your insights with me on With Good Reason.

SS

Thanks so much. It's been great talking to you.

SM

Sushma Subramanian is a Professor of Journalism at the University of Mary Washington. Her new book is "How to Feel: the Science and Meaning of Touch." Coming up next three rules for successful relationships.

SM

My next guest is Kristina Feeser. She is a veteran therapist who shares her bittersweet realities of love. Kristina is a psychology professor at the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

SM

Kristina, just about everybody's hit a wall at some point with their partner during this crazy year. You and your longtime partner came up with rules to live by. Pretty simple rules, three rules of getting along.

KF

Well, this started as a way of... both David and I, we're teachers, and he'd been teaching and been a therapist for a lot longer than I had. And it was like, you know, the students can really only recall three things at a time. So if we had to distill it down into three things, what would they be? The first one is you can't change someone else. And that seems, on the surface to be, oh, well, of course you can't change someone else. But that's exactly what we try to do. The minute we get into a relationship with someone it's like, "Oh, I love you but..." so I always ask the students at this point it's like, "Well, if you want to change someone's behavior, and you can't change someone else, whose behavior can you change?" And they mostly get it, and they'll say, "Well, my own."

SM

So rule one is you can't change the other person. What's rule two?

KF

People don't want to change. And this really comes down to the idea that change is hard for people.

SM

So we can't change our partners. They don't want to change, we don't

want to change. And number three, the third rule?

KF

If it's real for you, it's real. So this has to do with perception. We all believe that what we experience in our lives to be factual, and it is our truth. Let me use the most common one. "What you said to me was really mean." "Well, no, it wasn't I didn't mean it to be mean." "Well, it felt mean to me." Was it mean, or was it not mean? It was mean to me on the receiving end of it. And so our perception of reality is our reality.

SM

So what if one of the partners is just constantly irked or disappointed, but decides to bite his tongue because he just doesn't want another fight?

KF

Well, then you get what you paid for.

SM

meaning?

KF

Well, if you take the easy way out, then nothing changes. And you continue to feel the way you feel, and things don't get any better. Left to its own devices, things will pretty much fall down into chaos. You know, because relationships are like gardens. You can't just throw the seeds out there, and then let it go and hope for the best. It requires weeding, and it requires watering, and it requires fertilizer.

SM

How do we teach people how to treat us? And how do we listen and look for clues how to treat someone who's not us?

KF

We need to be authentic as much as we can. You know, that we're not doing things that we don't want to do just to make other people happy. Because the minute you're a doormat, that's all you get. That's the only way that you get treated. And so in a authentic self, you know, what you like, you know what you don't like, you've, you've explored all those things in yourself. You know, what kind of things set me off, what kinds of situations am I likely to have these reactions in. And a little bit of introspection, you know, will give you that information. "That hurt. Oh, I don't like that." And if you shut that down right away, now, what you're doing is you're violating your authenticity. I don't know if people mispronounce your name, or call you by a name you don't want to be called.

But my first name is Kristina, and you can imagine the number of

people who want to call me Kris. I don't go by Kris. Do you let it go? "Well, I'll be a nice person, and I'll let it go." "Is Kris your name?" "No." "Is Kris your preferred name?" "No." "Then people shouldn't call you Kris, should they?" "No." "Let me stop you right there. I go by Kristina, and I really would appreciate it if you could call me that." And you just have to not be embarrassed to ask for the things that you want. Because you're not going to get them any other way. People are going to treat you however they want to if you don't ask for something else. And more often than not, the other person will say, "I didn't realize that that bothered you. I didn't realize that it affected you so badly." Because you didn't tell them.

SM

So, most of us haven't perfected these practices. How do you suggest we best mend our own mistakes and learn from them? What's paramount for us to try to really keep in mind?

KF

Don't lie to yourself. You can lie to everybody else if you want to. But I find that if you lie to yourself, and you deceive yourself, change, change is virtually impossible. If you justify your choices, your actions, and all those kinds of things, it makes it really difficult to learn from anything, because you just doubled down.

SM

What's a simple thing we might try to keep in mind to show our partners we don't take them for granted?

KF

I think it's it's just so easy to go through your life and go "Oh, that was nice." And you think it in your head, but you never say anything about it because you're on to the next thing. I think it's a lot like mindfulness. And that's one good thing that the pandemic has done. A lot of people, you know, who have been very, very busy. This has given them a lot of free time where they can really look at their behaviors, look at their choices, look at the things that they thought they wanted, and say "Are those the things that I want?" And it's the same way with, if I want this relationship to work, it can just limp along for years, because he's busy, I'm busy, everybody's busy.

We've got the kids, we can concentrate on them. But if you really want something to work, then it's like, be in the moment. Enjoy being with that person. You know, because one of the things that you do with couples when they're not getting along is, "Tell me the story of how you met and how you fell in love." Because sometimes we forget that. Now sometimes the thing that you love about the person changes over time because you change over time. And that's the one piece of advice to young people is, "You are not going to stay the way you are now." You know, and this often is a is a problem for people. "Oh, he just, he doesn't bring me flowers like he used to." Well, no, because you're

both different now.

SM

Yeah.

KF

Do you want flowers? Well, get flowers for yourself. If, if flowers are the deal, if you want to a demonstration of his caring for you, well then pick something else. But don't just say "Oh, things, things just aren't the way they used to be." Things are never going to be the way that we used to be, and your memory for what that thing is is not accurate.

SM

Well, Kristina Feeser, thank you so much for sharing all you understand about this with us.

KF

Absolutely. It was my pleasure.

SM

Kristina Feeser is a therapist and a Professor of Psychology at the University of Virginia's College at Wise.

SM

This was an encore presentation of an episode originally aired in 2021. With Good Reason is produced by Virginia Humanities, which acknowledges the Monacan nation, the original people of the land and waters of our home in Charlottesville, Virginia. Our production team is Allison Quantz, Matt Darroch Lauren Francis, and Jamal Milner. Cassandra Deering and Aviva Casto are our interns. Special thanks to Jennie Taylor for booking assistance. For the podcast, go to with good reason radio dot org. I'm Sarah McConnell. Thanks for listening.