



## Episode 501: Terry Real on Breaking Through Shame, Anger and Trauma & Healing Relationships

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Katie: Hello and welcome to the "Wellness Mama" podcast. I'm Katie from [wellnessmama.com](https://wellnessmama.com) and [wellnesse.com](https://wellnesse.com). That's wellnesse with an E on the end. And I'm here today with Terry Real, who is a nationally recognized family therapist, author, and teacher. And he's particularly known for his work on men and male psychology, as well as his work with relationships and couples. He's been in practice for 30 years and has appeared on pretty much every major show and broadcast ever, talking about this. He's got books including, "I Don't Wanna Talk About It," which was on the topic of male depression, and then, one on, "How Can I Get Through to You?" which is about relationships. And then, most recently, "The New Rules of Marriage."

And, in this episode, we go into everything from his own story of trauma and why that turned him becoming a therapist, and how depression expresses differently in men and women, how he works with couples to

improve intimacy, his relational life therapy program, how our adaptations to childhood wounds are actually more important than the wounds themselves when it comes to healing, and how we can use his expertise and knowledge in this field to help raise relationally aware children who don't have to repeat these patterns. We get into a lot. It's a little in and out, he's checking on his wife who just had shoulder surgery, so there's a couple of pauses, but really interesting episode, and let's jump in.

Katie: Terry, welcome. Thank you so much for being here.

Terry: Oh, thank you. It's a joy to be here with you.

Katie: Well, I'm so excited for everything we're gonna talk about today. I mentioned offline, I shared my story of sexual trauma and my journey with that about a year ago, and heard from literally thousands of women who experienced something similar. And I know we're by no means isolated cases of this. And I know that you have so much expertise here, as well as personal experience with trauma yourself. So if you don't mind, I'd love to start there just to give people a personal connection, if you don't mind sharing some of your own story.

Terry: Well, you know, they say that therapists are people who need to be in therapy 40 hours a week. And so I became a therapist to...I wrote in my first book, "I Don't Want to Talk About It," I became a therapist to gather the skills I needed to have a real conversation with my father. And I needed to understand my father so that I would not become him.

My father was a loving, very smart, very warm, violent, depressed, miserable human being. And his father was a depressed, violent man. And one of the things I say is that my children don't say that, and I think that's my life work. "I Don't Want to Talk About It," it's about a third autobiographical, it's about my depression and the violence that was dealt in my way as a kid.

And I end the book, the epilogue, the last lines of the book on something like "I end this book as I began up in my third-floor study looking down at my children at play." And I describe them. And then I say, "When they're old enough, their mother and I will share with them the outlines, some of the details of what happened to us as children. But they will have no lived experience, they will have no experiential visceral way of understanding as we do, what that violence feels like." And then the last line of the book is, "We intend to keep it that way."

Katie: I love that. I think that's such an important point for all the parents listening, especially any of us who have been through things like that, and of course, wanting to break the cycle for our children. I know that you work a lot with men, and I'd love to touch on this a little bit, even though a lot of the listeners are women,

many of them are married to men. And it seems like there are some specifics of this that make it even more difficult for men.

I feel like the mental health conversation has gotten easier in a lot of ways for women, or at least it's starting to be talked about. And I think men might in some ways struggle in different ways or have a harder time talking about it. It seems like this was some of the reason behind your book as well. Can you talk about your experience with that?

Terry: Yes. Well, patriarchy which is the masculine code writ large, that's all patriarchy is. Patriarchy is the water that we all swim in, we're the fish and it's the water. And under the rubric of traditional masculinity, the essence of what it means to be a man traditionally is to be invulnerable. The more invulnerable you are, the more manly you are. And the more vulnerable you are, the more girly you are.

And so, the problem in heterosexual relationships is that women across the West because of feminism, because of economic changes, because of their empowerment, are asking more of their marriages than historically ever before. And women across the West are asking men, insisting that men be more emotionally open and connected than we raise boys and men to be in our culture. And that's not changing.

When you ask a girl what it means to be a good woman, she'll president of the United States, astronaut, you know, first chair in the symphony orchestra of the world, the sky is the limit. Fifty years of feminism has changed that. When you ask a boy what it means to be a good man, you get the same stereotypical answers that you would have gotten 50 years ago, and I'm talking about recent surveys.

So, it's changing, but it's far from change. And even though you in your family may be bending over backwards to cultivate your son's sensitivity, by the time he's three, four, or five years old, he knows the score on the playground. Judy Chu did research that boys learn to not express emotion by the time they're three, four, or five years old. They still have it, but they read the politics of the situation and they keep their mouth shut. That's when the boom drops on boys, three, four, or five, it's almost pre-verbal. And so, you know, there's a role disjuncture, women are asking their men to do things and be things that in the traditional setup are not manly to do.

I can't tell you, I mean, I'm waiting for Clint Eastwood to be dragged into my office by his partner. But those old mores don't work anymore. My clinical practice these days are couples on the break. Before COVID, people would fly in to see me and we spend two days together the three of us, and at the end of those two days, we'd agree we're either on track or getting a divorce. This is the last stop.

And over and over again, women would bring in men because they...and they will say better communication or better this. But what they really wanted and needed was an open-hearted connection, men who could articulate feelings and share them, and who could listen to their partner's feelings and not rush to solve the problem or shut things down.

And I have great compassion. I do good work with tough guys. But I have great compassion for them because we're not just asking them to undo their childhoods the way we do for many people in therapy. We're asking them to move...one of the things I say is that moving men and women into real intimacy is synonymous with moving them beyond patriarchy and beyond individualism. Because the way that we were raised was not built for intimacy. Patriarchy isn't built for intimacy. It's built for production and consumption. And this demand for a truly intimate long-term relationship is historically brand new, and it's wonderful.

You know, a lot of the reaction to women's insistence on more connection from their men has been a reactionary reaction. If women would just shut up and go back to the '50s, all would be well. I don't want women to stand down, I want men to stand up and meet these new demands. I'm not neutral that's...in therapy that I've created relational life therapy. One of the differences is that we're not neutral, we take sides. And we will side with the one who is dissatisfied and wanting more intimacy, and sometimes that's the man but most often that's the woman.

Her delivery may suck, she may need some real coaching on how to speak up with love. But what she's asking for is legit. I'm not neutral about intimacy. Intimacy is what we're born for. Intimacy is where we function best physically, as well as emotionally. It's what we're designed to be. And traditional masculinity cuts men out of intimacy.

I gave a talk for a sex addiction workshop, I called it The Cure for Sexual Addiction is Intimacy. And I think the cure for everything is intimacy. I literally believe that along with biology, all of our trauma, all of our neurotic issues, all of our relational issues, all of our addictions, are rooted in disconnection. Disconnection from ourselves, loving ourselves, knowing ourselves, asserting ourselves, and disconnection from other people and from the planet and from spirit.

I just handed in a new book. I hope you have me back in March when the book comes out, it's called "Us: Getting Past You and Me to Build a More Loving Relationship." And it's really about moving beyond the triggered trauma-based adversarial point of view that we get into when we don't feel safe. And moving into cultivating the art of shifting out of that triggered fight or flight, you and me, into what I call the wise adult part of us, prefrontal cortex, the part of us that can stop and think and remember love. Remember the whole, remember that the person you're speaking to is not the enemy but someone you care about. And it's in your interest to help that person feel good, you know.

I'll shut up in a minute and let you talk. But my final thing in this little riff is, our relationships are like our biosphere. In the new book "Us," I say that the essential mistake of the culture of individualism, which I argue against is that we're not in nature, we're apart from nature, we're individuals. And that fuses with the essential mistake of patriarchy which is not only that we're apart from nature, but we're above it, we dominate it. And both of those things are delusions, and both of those things are fatal. We're not above our own marriages, we're not above our own families. Our relationships are our biosphere. You can choose to pollute your biosphere with temper over here on the right side, but you'll breathe that pollution in and your partner's resentment or withdraw on the left side. You're connected, you can't escape, you're in it.

So once you start to think ecologically, once you have the humility of understanding that you're in it, not above it, then it becomes in your interest to please your partner because you live with them. And this is a wisdom that's been lost and is the essential message of my work, you're in it together, you're a team. You have to assert yourself because that's part of being the team. And you have to listen and respond, that's the other part of being in a team. And we don't teach our sons and daughters to do either of those very well.

Katie: So, it sounds like you've worked with couples at like, the toughest point. And it makes me curious, I think the past couple of years have been a pressure cooker for a lot of relationships. And it seems like a lot of couples are struggling with these things even more than they have in the past. And it makes me wonder what does that repair process look like? How do you break that cycle of relationship disharmony or break that trauma cycle? Because I know from my own experience like we all bring our traumas into a relationship and that becomes a part of our interactions and how we relate to each other. So, what are the steps to starting to break through that cycle?

Terry: Well, we all marry our unfinished business. I call this the mysticism of marriage. And if you're lucky, you marry your next step in development because you pick somebody who's gonna hold your feet to the fire and foment the crisis that has the possibility of transforming you. But you have to know how to get through it alive. And that's where skill comes in. It helps to do some trauma work, it helps to understand what the early wounds are. But more important than the wounds are the adaptations to the wounds.

Gabor Maté makes that point too. You rarely see the wound itself, you see the scar tissue over the wound. And I talk about the adaptive child part of us. There's the wounded child part of us, very young, totally reactive. When I do work with somebody, it's usually the first minutes of life to about four or five. There's the wise adult, prefrontal cortex, the most mature part of our brains that can stop and think and be deliberate that's present, that's here and now.

And, then between these two is the part I call the adaptive child part of us. And that's the you that you created in the absence of healthy parenting to cope. It's how you got by. And the problem is most of us are still getting by using those same defensive mechanisms that we learned as children. And they worked great when we were kids, but we're not kids anymore, and it doesn't fit.

I teach my students to always be respectful of the exquisite intelligence of the adaptive child. You did exactly what you needed to do back then to be as whole and intact as you can be. And those things that you did back then are rewarded by the culture at large and probably make you a great success in the world. They'll make a hash of your personal life. So, I have a saying, "Adaptive then, maladaptive now." Can I tell you a story to illustrate?

Katie: Absolutely.

Terry: This is a story I always use. I always use the same story, forgive me if you've heard it before. But it's so perfect. So a guy is brought to me on the brink of divorce, his wife is about to leave him if this session doesn't do it. We have a contract for about four sessions and if there isn't a dramatic change, they're done. This is the last stop. The problem is that he's a liar. He's a chronic liar. He lies about everything. So, I take him back to his childhood.

I have a saying, "Show me the thumbprint and I'll tell you about the thumb." This guy was a champion evader. He lied, he omitted. He was the kind of guy I would say to him, "So, did you drive okay here in the rain?" And he would say, "Well, there was precipitation." That's, like, the important distinction between rain and precipitation. He was one of these guys. He was an evader.

So sitting with him I feel that, I see that the presenting problem is he's a liar. I have a saying, "Show me the thumbprint and I'll tell you about the thumb." If he learned to evade, he was evading someone. And so, I take a guess and I say, "Who tried to control you growing up?" Sure enough, it was dad. He was a military man, he was intrusive, he was all over him, how he sat, how we ate, how much he ate, you know, who his friends would be, how he dressed. He was all over this guy. And he was a rager, the father. You didn't cross him.

So I said, "Okay, crossing him would be terrible. Giving in to him would be horrible. What did you do?" And he looked at me and smiled and said, "I lied." I said to him, "Brilliant. That's a brilliant solution. You did exactly what you needed to do back then to preserve yourself. Congratulations. What's it gonna take for you to start to realize that your wife is not your father, and you're no longer that little boy?"

Long story short, that couple comes in a few weeks later and they're all smiles. And they say, "We're done, we're ready to end therapy. We figured it out." I say, "Okay, there's a story here, tell me the story." He says, his wife sent him to the store with a list of stuff, and true to form, he came home with almost all of it, but he'd forgotten say a certain kind of bread. Wife says "Where's the pumpernickel?" And he said, "Every muscle and nerve in my body was screaming to say to her, they were out of it. And instead, in that moment, I took a breath, and I settled myself down, and I looked at my wife, and I said, 'I forgot it.'" And she burst into tears. And she said, "I've been waiting for this moment for 25 years." That's recovery. That's what healing looks like.

Katie: Wow, that's a powerful story. And it illustrates so well I think that...like, I love your point that you make so well in your books and just now as well of like, we develop these things to protect ourselves. They're not a bad thing. They served a very important purpose. And that was a part I had to dismantle and learn as well, these aren't things that I could fight my trauma responses. I had to understand them, and in my process, even thank them for keeping me safe for so long. And then recognize in my adult brain that I didn't need them to keep me safe in that way anymore. And make them...to let them go. Is that a common part of the process for most people?

Terry: Yes. One of the things I say is that maturity comes when we deal with our inner children. And inner children is just a personification of traumatized ego's days. Your inner child is the age that you were when your development got arrested, and they live inside of us like the lying boy lived inside that man.

But what I say is, when one of your inner kids kick up either overwhelmed wounded kid, or an adaptive child who does the same thing over and over and over again, you wanna put them on your lap, put your arms around them, hear them, love them, and take their sticky hands off the steering wheel. They don't drive the bus, you do.

So, literally, if Belinda and I are fighting, my wife, I have a composite Terry, little Terry. He's about eight years old. And I take him out of my body and I put him behind me, he holds on to my shirt. And I have a deal with him every time Belinda and I fight, I do this. I have a deal with him, between the anger coming our way, and you is me, my big body, my strong self and like Superman, I'll take the blast and you are completely protected. That's my part of the deal. Here's your part of the deal young Terry. You let me deal with Belinda, don't you go and deal with her. I can do it a lot better than you can.

And yes, I teach the men and women and non-binary folks to work with their inner children all day long. Have these big burly guys who, you know, snap into anger, and rage, and indignation, and say, "Excuse me," and zip into a bedroom or a bathroom. And these big tough guys are putting their little boys on their laps and understanding that, listen, little one, I'm not in a rage, you are. I'm not in a rage, you are. I'm not afraid of my wife, and avoiding conflict, and not standing up to her, that's your fear. And I will deal with you and you let me go deal with them. And that's true for men or women.

Katie: Yeah, that's such an important point. And probably even just that visualization and awareness is such a big step into breaking that. And I know from reading your writing, you have talked a lot about that interplay of shame, anger, and depression, and also aggression, and kind of breaking that cycle. And I know this is a part of it but for people who are experiencing either in themselves or in a partner that cycle of shame, anger, and depression, what are the steps to begin to dismantle that and break the cycle?



Terry: Well, you have to get help, and you have to be humble, and you have to have courage. They say it's highly pretension to quote yourself, but I'm gonna quote from my first book, "I Don't Want to Talk About It." Here's the quote, "Family pathology rolls from generation to generation, taking down everything in its path like a fire in the woods until one person in one generation has the courage to turn and face the flames. That person brings peace to their ancestors and spares the children that follow." That's you, that's me, that can be anyone listening to this podcast right now.

Turn your face to flames, feel the feelings, allow the memories. And if you're feeling swamped or if you're feeling scared, get help, get a therapist. And get a good therapist who's really helpful. If you're sitting there wasting your time, trust your instincts and go find somebody else. Of course, I'm gonna recommend therapists to do my method relational life therapy. Anybody can come to my website, [terryreal.com](http://terryreal.com), and find therapists to work with. But do the work. Have the courage to change the legacy. And remember, this isn't just your work, it's the work...AA has a saying, "Pass it back or pass it on." You be the hero that turns and faces the flame and changes legacy for your children and theirs.

Katie: That's such an important point and I love that phrase. I think the majority of people listening almost everyone are parents, and that's something I think about often, and I know I hear from other parents, as well is we, of course, want to be the one to break that cycle. And also hearing how, you know, boys are not taught to understand and express emotions well, and how these problems then manifest in adulthood. How can we, as parents from an early age, give our children the foundation and the tools to be able to have this language and to understand this before they have to become the adult that then has to work backwards?

Terry: Well, you want to raise relational boys and girls. I have a CD that you can buy on my website called "Raising Relational Boys and Girls." You want them with good self-esteem, you want them with assertiveness, and you want them with responsiveness. Those are the keys in relationship, how to know what you want, put it out, speak it in a way that's constructive, and listen to it and respond to it in a way that's compassionate. That's what's missing. Very few people know how to do this.

So let me break it down. This is primarily for women what I'm about to say. And I could do a whole hour on this one point. Under patriarchy...this is for the women. Under patriarchy, you can be connected or you can be powerful, but you can't be both at the same time. Let me say that again. Under patriarchy, which we're all still living in, you can be connected, "feminine, affiliative, accommodating," or you can be powerful, "masculine, competent, can do, get the job done." But you can't be both at the same time because power is power over, not power with. It breaks the connection.

And so, what I teach women, in particular, is what I call standing up with love, soft power. When you...a lot of women move from the traditional disempowered voiceless half of the seesaw over to the masculine, Katie, bar the door, I am woman, hear me roar, you know, I'm gonna say what's on my mind, and screw you if you don't wanna hear it. We can do better than that.

And so, what I teach both partners, but women, in particular, is how to cherish your partner, and cherish the relationship, and stand up for yourself all in the same breath. Because a lot of women when they finally do speak, they vacillate between not speaking up because it doesn't go well and speaking up in ways that, frankly, are just not skilled. And standing up for yourself with love is skilled.

It's the difference between saying, Katie, don't talk to me like that. I'm not being disrespectful, you don't be disrespectful to me, which is a C plus, maybe. And this one, Katie, I wanna hear what you're trying to say could you tone it down so I could listen to it, honey? Which of those two things do you think is gonna go down better? So, you can learn this, you can learn to be cherishing and assertive both at the same time. It takes a little practice, but you can do it.

And for men...but this is true for anybody, I'm just saying this. For the person on the receiving end of a partner who's unhappy...I want everybody listening to pay attention. When your partner is unhappy, if you're like most people, you have two points of reference. The first place you go is objective reality is that you're listening to your partner. Well, that's true, that's not true. Well, whether you're saying it out of your mouth or in your head, you're not listening, you're rebutting. Well, yeah, yeah, but.

And then the second point of reference is yourself. I can't believe I have to listen to this again. Here we are again. I can't get through this son of a gun. If I push him, he's just gonna walk away. I want you to lose both of those orientations and trade them in for this one. Ready? If you got a pencil, write it down. Compassionate curiosity about your partner's subjective experience. Compassionate curiosity about your partner's subjective experience.

Honey, I'm sorry you feel bad. How about starting with that? I'm sorry you feel bad. I love you, I don't want you to feel bad. What's going on? Tell me what's going on? And then a golden question for the most part. There are always exceptions but for the most part, "What could I say or do right now that would help you feel better?" That's repair.

What could I say or do right now that would help you feel better? Well, you could apologize for blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Okay, all right I'm sorry. All right, good. What do you need honey? Well, you could be accountable about blah, blah. Okay, I am. Great. Want some tea? We're done.

Harmony, disharmony, and repair is the rhythm of all relationships, closest disruption return to closeness. But when you're in that disruption phase, you lose your wise adult, you go into fight or flight defensive, it's about me versus you, and you lose your way. And what I want people to do is cultivate the practice, when you're triggered, when you forget the us, when it's you and me, and you versus me, take a breath, take a walk, splash some water on your face, talk to your inner boy or girl.

Actually, would you mind if I just went downstairs and attend to my wife? She just had surgery, and I wanna plug her into some ice. Okay?

Katie: Oh, absolutely. Go for it.

This episode is sponsored by Olipop. At least six times a day I get the question, "Mom, can I have an Olipop?" Usually once from each of my kids. And I'm happy to say yes. While I sometimes drink regular soda as a kid and usually felt pretty awful after, I love that my kids get to sip on something that taste like the sodas I grew up with. But unlike other sodas that are full of sugar, corn syrup, and artificial ingredients like aspartame, Olipop is made with natural ingredients that are actually good for you. They use functional ingredients that combine the benefits of prebiotics, plant fiber, and botanicals to support your microbiome and to benefit digestive health. We've all heard that many people consume much more than the recommended amount of sugar. And Olipop is much, much lower in sugar than conventional sodas, with only 2 to 5 grams of sugar from natural sources and no added sugar. Their vintage cola, for instance, has just 2 grams of sugar as compared to a regular Coca-Cola that has 39 grams of sugar. I've worked out a special deal for my listeners to receive 15% off of your purchase. I recommend trying their variety pack if you're not familiar with them, so you get to sample all of their flavors. Go to [drinkolipop.com/wellnessmama](https://drinkolipop.com/wellnessmama) and use the code "wellness mama" at checkout to claim this deal.

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Terry: So, I guess that's what we call walking the talk, right? This is important, but my wife's shoulder is equally important. She couldn't wait. Anyway. So what was I talking about? Oh, yeah, cultivating the practice of when you're triggered, when you're reactive, taking a break, teaching each other beforehand what you're doing so you understand what you're doing. And it's a break, it's not a rapture, you have to say when you're coming back, 20, 30 minutes.

And when you're gone, you get back into center, you reregulate, you get back into the wise adult, you remember love, you remember what you're about. Somebody said wait, W-A-I-T, why am I talking? And if you're talking to make things better, okay. But if you're talking because you wanna be right, or control your partner, or ventilate, or retaliate, forget it.

So the first order of business is getting honest with yourself about what state you're in right now. The most important question as a couples' therapist I ask is, which part of you am I speaking to? The grown-up part or triggered part? And there's nothing wrong with being triggered, but you don't wanna act it out.

Katie: And if anything, I learned over time is like...I had a therapist use the phrase "Never waste a trigger." Like, eventually, I felt like I could actually move to a place of gratitude of like, well when I'm triggered, is that showing me where I'm metaphorically loaded. And so, why? Why am I loaded? Why is that causing this emotion? And what can I learn from it? It changes your perspective over like, I'm just going to react to this emotion because I'm having it.

But that said, I think as a mom, I have six kids myself, like with kids, they don't always maybe have that fully developed wise adult prefrontal cortex brain yet, but they still also experience anger, or they experience these emotions. So, like, it's helpful with you know, an adult partner, we can have those conversations, take a break and come back. Are there any different or specific tips for children when they're in one of those emotional states to help us keep our calm, also to help give them the language to be able to work through those emotions, those triggers themselves?

Terry: Children are borrowing your prefrontal cortex. This is my new book, "There Is No Such Thing As An Individual." You know, a little boy or girl falls off their tricycle and looks at their mother's face to see how hurt they are. We co-regulate each other. And you know as a parent, that you help modulate and regulate your kid's emotional experience all day long, you're giving them energy, you're setting limits, you're reassuring, you're keeping them company. But don't try and exile a kid's feelings, they have the right to feel it. They don't have the right to act on it and behave in destructive ways, but they always have the right to feel what they feel. And you can feel it with them.

A guy I work with Thomas Hübl, a wonderful German mystic once said, "A kid comes up and says, 'Daddy, I'm scared. Mommy, I'm scared.'" It's perfectly fine, and there's a place to say, honey, there's nothing for you to be afraid of, this and this and that and that. That's helping them modulate that.

But how much better is it to sit down with them and put your arm around them and say, "I'm scared, too. Let's both be afraid together for a little bit." So, it's entering into your kid's experience rather than trying to manage it. First, be empathic. Oh, yeah, Billy, going to the moon and raising the family there, that's a great idea, that would be so cool. Here's why we're not gonna do it, by the way. But what a cool...you empathize with the

feelings and the wishes and you set limits on the behavior when you have to. The other thing I want to say to parents is reward wherever you can, and set limits wherever you must. And then, the last thing I want to say in terms of boys is keep the bar high. Keep the bar high.

I tell the story in that little CD I was talking about, a true story. When my son was about five, I was taking him to hockey practice and I was getting the "How's school?" "Fine." "What did you do today?" "Nothing." "How are you feeling?" "Great." And I pulled over on the side of the road and I said to him "Now, listen, sweetheart, I'm doing you a favor right now driving you to hockey practice. So, I'm in the middle of doing you a favor, you can hardly say a word to me. You can do better than that. Now, if you want me to continue on our way to hockey practice, which I'm happy to do, what I want from you is one thing you learned, one thing you saw, one thing you felt. Go."

And he said, "Well, let me talk about hockey practice." Okay. He said, "There's a difference between the kids who go to private school and the kids who go to public school." And I said, "Wow, that's a really interesting observation. How would you describe that difference?" He said, "I don't know I can't say but it's a lot like the difference between some of the White kids and Black kids." My little five-year-old was talking to me about race and class in America. But he would never have done that if I hadn't insisted on it.

So hold on to your boys. Mothers, this idea that boys need to separate from you in order to grow up is bullshit. This idea that they're supposed to be monosyllabic with you and that's good for them is bullshit. Raise relational boys and girls, and be relational yourself, that's the other thing. The best gift you can give your children is your own recovery.

Katie: Yeah, exactly, that idea that they listen to some of what we say, but they notice all of what we do. And being the example is probably so much more powerful than our words ever can be. You also talk about the idea of self-esteem and false self-esteem, ways that self-esteem can exhibit falsely. And I feel like this is also an important piece in relationships, spousal relationships, and also with kids. So can you break that down a little bit, what you mean by self-esteem and false self-esteem?

Terry: Yeah, well, I talk about false empowerment. And it's not really self-esteem, its grandiosity, its superiority, it's being above the rules. And therapy is focused for 50 years on helping people come up from the one down of inferiority. But in order for us to have good relationships, you also have to come down from the one up of superiority. Judgment, contempt, looking down your nose at somebody, attacking somebody, trying to control them, being above it all, being above the rules, walking out, you know, saying something like this conversation is over, and walking out of the room. That's not inferiority, that's superiority.

And superiority damages as much relationships as inferiority does, if not more. And also men tend to lead from the one-up superior position and have hidden shame, where women tend to lead from the one-down

shame position and have hidden superiority, we can talk about that. But at any rate, helping people come down from the one up is really critical. And as a field, we haven't been focusing on it.

But it's really important to understand when you shifted out of uncomfortable feelings to a more comfortable attack. The thing about moving from shaming into grandiosity, from one down to one up, and from implosion to explosion, is it feels good. That's the devil in the details. It feels good, in the moment. It'll ruin your life, but it feels good. And so, you have to learn what the superiority is doing and how toxic it is. And then you have to work to bring yourself down from it for your sake.

But in terms of our kids, I like to tell the story. This is my favorite story about false empowerment. So my son, Justin, ADHD nightmare, is four or five, and he has this first kid over for a playdate. And being in Boston, the playdate sounds something like this. "You wanna play hockey? You wanna play hockey? How about hockey" says Justin to this kid. "You wanna play? Here, here's the stick. Wanna go out, wanna play throw a puck around? Wanna go outside? Wanna play hockey?" This goes on for about an hour and the kid leaves.

And Justin comes bouncing up to me and goes "Do you think he had a good time?" And I go, "No." And he's stunned. And I looked at him and I said, "Listen, sweetheart, let me teach you something. If you wanna do exactly what you want to do, be alone. The minute you let somebody into your world, you have to pay some attention to what they wanna do." And my darling boy looks up and he goes "Too much hockey?"

Okay. Now, fast forward, I'm dealing with Chris. Chris is on the brink of divorce. Chris brings his wife to the Bahamas for four days of R&R. You know what they sound like? You wanna have sex? How about sex? Wanna get close? Wanna be physical? Wanna be intimate? This goes on for four days. I asked her if she had a good time and she says no. And Chris is stunned. He's stunned.

What do I do with Chris as a therapist? What do I do? I tell him the Justin story, that's what I do. And I say to him...this is all true. I say to him, there's a word for what I was doing with my son when he was five, it's called parenting. It's what you deserve and did not get. So, now, there's a sensitivity chip in you that should have been installed that wasn't installed. And you have to fly to Boston and pay me an armload of money and we'll install it. But you poor guy. I call this oh, you poor perpetrator, you poor guy, you were set up to be the insensitive selfish creep that you've grown into. Let's unwind that and make you a more connected, nicer relational person.

See, I do believe that the person down deep is a good person. In 40 years of practice, I have not met a bad person. I've met a lot of twisted people doing very bad things. But down deep, there's a decent person who is in the middle of all of this scaffolding. And if you can get to them, you can free them. I do that as a therapist,

and I think in my books and writing, and the courses that I teach online, you can learn to do it yourself and with your partner.

Katie: And I will make sure your courses are linked in the show notes at [wellnessmama.fm](http://wellnessmama.fm). I know you've mentioned them for anybody looking, those will be in the show notes. What about in relationship dynamics where only one of the partners is willing or able to do the work and is kind of pushing for that, or wants more connection or wants...and the other partner is resistant? Is there any hope in that situation when one person is willing to work with you, but the other isn't?

Terry: Well, whether it's working with me or reading books and listening to tapes, it's taking relationship seriously and learning a few relationship skills. And if one person wants to do it, the other one doesn't that's a subset of the broader thing you said one person wants to be close and the other one doesn't. You have to make a fuss.

The first phase of getting what you want I call daring to rock the boat. You have to make it clear to that person that it's in their interest to change. And a lot of women get into what I call, I hate how you're treating me. What can I make you for dinner? They don't like what's going on, but they accommodate. The first order of business is stop accommodating, be congruent with your feelings. If you feel miserable in your relationship, let them know, act like it.

I had a woman who her husband wouldn't come in. She came in to complain about him. I gave her this intervention. This is a true story. Every day that she met him when he came home from work, she was a housemaker. Every day she met him as he came home from work she opened the door and said, "Oh, I want you to know I hate how you're treating me. I hate this. This, this, and this. Next Thursday at 7 p.m., I have an appointment with this guy, Terry Real, for couples therapy. I expect you to get your butt in that chair. If you don't, I'm gonna be even more angry and even more miserable than I already am, which is plenty angry and miserable already. Oh, what can I make you for dinner hun?" That was it. Ninety seconds, once a day, for six days, on the seventh day, he was in my chair. So, it's about standing up for yourself with love. Don't turn into a shrew, but don't back off either.

Katie: And somewhat related to that, I've heard you talk about the idea of I think you call it witness abuse or like yelling at your partner in the presence of children. So, for couples who have kind of that fiery dynamic, talk about that and ways to navigate it without passing that on to the kids.

Terry: First of all, the kids are in your presence. You may think that they're asleep you know, two doors down or two floors down. But kids are sponges, they understand everything that's going on, and they feel everything that's going on.

Witness abuse is if you are screaming at your partner and your child is hearing it, which they will, it goes into them as if you were screaming at them, there are no boundaries. Children have no boundaries. And when I do trauma work with that person, I do the same trauma work with them if they witness it, as I do if they were the victim of it.

So what I say to couples who are screaming and yelling at each other, when their children are in the house is you are damaging your children right now as we speak. Every time you yell at him or yell at her you put your kid in front of them and imagine that you're yelling at them. You must get help. If this doesn't stop within 30 days, one of you has to move out. But you must get help and this must stop.

Katie: I've heard it said that, you know, our voice to our children becomes part of their inner voice like that's some of the language they learn to relate to themselves. And that was gonna be one of my next questions is, do you think most relationships are able to move to that place of intimacy, or are there cases where separation is actually the best course for couples?

Terry: Oh, of course, they play. I mean, look if somebody has got an addiction, or somebody is a sex addict, or somebody is a chronic womanizer or chronic liar, or chronically irresponsible or a rager. I speak to people...and I think I'm gonna have to end pretty soon. But I speak to people about becoming relationship champions.

And what that means is you get centered in your being that you deserve to be in an essentially cherishing relationship. And if you're not, if it's either attacking and abusive, or if it's distant and ungiving, it's not good for you, it's not good for the kids, it's not good for the uncherishing person. So, grab them by the collar and get some help. And get help that really helps, not just a therapist who sits there and says, "Uh-huh, uh-huh, tell me more." But somebody who really knows what they're doing.

Get some help and fix it because if you're in an unchanging relationship, you will pay with your physical as well as your mental health, and your children will pay. They deserve to be in a reasonably happy home. And if that means you're a single mom or dad to make that happen, so be it. But don't expose them to chronic misery, it does them no good at all.

Katie: And respecting your time, this will be the last question but a little bit unrelated. I'm curious if there is a book or a number of books that have had a profound impact on your life besides, of course, your own? And if so, what those books are and why?

Terry: I'm gonna just do one. Suzuki Roshi's "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" woke me up to a spiritual dimension that I'd felt but not had named. And that was a really turning point. That was a turning point in my life.



Katie: Wonderful, I will link that in the show notes as well as your website, and your courses, and your books. I know that you have a wife to get back to you who has had surgery, I don't wanna keep you from her any longer. But thank you so much for your time and for sharing today, it was an honor.

Terry: Thank you very much. It was great to be here. Appreciate it.

Katie: And thanks as always to you guys for listening, for sharing your most valuable resources, your time, energy, and attention with us today. We're both so grateful that you did, and I hope that you'll join me next time.

If you're enjoying these interviews, would you please take two minutes to leave a rating or review on iTunes for me? Doing this helps more people to find the podcast, which means even more moms and families could benefit from the information. I really appreciate your time, and thanks as always for listening.