


# Ep\_83\_Part\_1\_Relational\_Safety\_with\_\_Raabsmith\_interview

Fri, Feb 28, 2025 06:58:21 ⌚ 33:28

## SPEAKERS

Speaker 6, Speaker 5, Speaker 1, Speaker 3, Speaker 8, Speaker 4, Speaker 7, Speaker 2


---

 Speaker 1 06:58:21

Music. Hi. I'm Pam Blizzard from recovered peace, and I'm Michelle Burkett with hope redefine, and

 Speaker 2 06:58:29

I'm Bonnie burns of strong wives. We're so glad you're joining us. Welcome back to another episode of hope for wives. Today. We are talking with Joanna and Matthew rabsmith, co authors of the wonderful book, building true intimacy. Their their schematic, the intimacy pyramid, which explains everything, everything you need to know in life, is in that intimacy pyramid. No, I just think it's awesome. And so today, Joanna and Matthew are going to help us unpack relational safety. Now the three of us, Pam, Michelle and I have talked about relational safety in a prior episode, but this is really one of Matthew and Joanna's niche so we want to hear more about relational safety from them, because we know that most of our listeners can't move into grief until they have some form of safety. And grief is so important for our for healing. So welcome Matthew and Joanna. Thank you for being here. Great to

 06:59:37

be here. Super excited.

 Speaker 3 06:59:38


Yeah, thanks for having us. Finally, I feel like we've been we've been friends for a long time, and we this our first time on the pod. So we're really happy to be here.

 Speaker 2 06:59:48

That's awesome. It may be the first of many, if that's okay with you,

 06:59:52

first of many or only one, we'll

 06:59:56

see how much you like us. Okay,

 06:59:59

then our best behavior, ladies, yes, that's going to be going to be

**S** Speaker 2 07:00:07  
hard. So we, I mean, just to dive in, Matthew and Joanna, we'd love to hear your definition around relational safety.

**S** Speaker 3 07:00:16  
I think you know we talked about in the book, relational safety is really built on this idea of constructive behaviors right, and actions that are that are coming from both sides, and a relationship is safe when we are both working together to try to build the relationship right. And the in the really kind of foundation, and it's a really active process. It's demonstrated through behaviors. And we'll talk about, you know, kind of consistently. We talk a lot about reliability and consistency and safety relationships. Stop being safe when they're chaotic or they're they're kind of very much kind of out of balance. And so yeah, and if

**S** Speaker 4 07:01:02  
you're familiar with the end of the sea pyramid, you can't have safety if you don't have honesty, right? So one of the key foundations of being able to build safety is an open, honest, transparent relationship. So you could say that that's the starting place, and we can't really build much until that's in place. And so we always start with that foundation of honesty, which we really we talk about. You know, it's not just the absence of lies or deceit. It's also this, again, kind of this idea of a constructive behavior. Honesty is something I bring to the relationship. I'm actively putting into the relationship. If someone has to drag information out of me, I'm not being honest, even if I didn't tell a lie. And those that also includes things like self awareness. If I'm not aware of what I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, the actions, the choices I'm making, the impact on others, I can't live fully open and fully honest without that self awareness so, so that's always this starting place before we really dive into the nitty gritty of safety. Yeah,

**S** Speaker 5 07:02:10  
I think what I'm hearing is that honesty and safety is a verb. It's just not a state of being. It's a constant action and behavior and doing and creating,

**S** Speaker 6 07:02:24  
yeah, 100% and a lot of our Oh, I'm sorry, go ahead. No, I

**S** Speaker 3 07:02:30  
think you're right, and I think it is true what we found, even as the relationship grows, these things still stay versed. You get more honest, you become more safe, you get more focused on these things. You know what we talk about as we move up the pyramid, things like trust and vulnerability and intimacy? Well, to have greater vulnerability, you have to have greater safety. And so we keep coming back these. Like you said, these aren't static concepts. They're not okay. We've achieved safety, and now we're done. We get to move on. It's more like we've achieved safety, and this is what it allow us to do and to gain more in our relationship, we've actually got to gain more safety and more honestly, one of the

**S** Speaker 4 07:03:10  
ways I help couples that I work with kind of understand this better is I'll have them for an entire week track almost every interaction they have, because I have. Interaction either build safety or tears down safety. And I tell them, if it's neutral, it's tearing down. So there's no neutral interactions that you have relationally, right? And so really start thinking about like, sit down at the end of the day together and think through, were we building safety today in our interactions, or we're we tearing it down, even if they feel small, even if we're just talking about what we're going to have for dinner, right? There's relationally always something going on.



**S** Speaker 2 07:03:51

You know, story is really powerful. So I'm wondering if you have any scenarios that you could describe that help us have a better understanding of relational safety we

**S** Speaker 3 07:04:07

usually tell on ourselves, Oh, yeah. And I can think of one actually, just recently or we were in a food hall. I don't know. Does anybody know what a food hall is? It's like, it's like a it's like that. They took the food court in the mall and they made it cool, and so they have all these different restaurants and all these different things. I'm one of those people that the more choices you give me, the worse I feel. And so I love all

**S** Speaker 4 07:04:33

the options, because I don't have to decide. I can just eat everything I want. Yeah,

**S** Speaker 3 07:04:37

like, you know, if I go to the Cheesecake Factory, they've got like that 25 page menu, right? I'm I'm a mess, right? I've gotta decide. So I we were at this food hall with our with our kids while we were on vacation, and I was starting a

**S** Speaker 4 07:04:51

long week that included multiple days at Disney. So we're all fried, all

**S** Speaker 3 07:04:56

fried, and I started to get really anxious. So when I start to feel uncomfortable, I start to get anxious, and I shut down and and so Joanna is asking me what I want, and I'm giving her a lot of I don't know, probably not. And what's happening is, is that I'm really going internal, and I'm not communicating to her what's going on, so I'm not being honest one because I wasn't really aware at the time in the food hall. I didn't, I didn't know what it was. I just knew that I wasn't feeling good, but I wasn't communicating it to her. So I wasn't, I wasn't being honest, and I wasn't doing anything about it. I was really just kind of shutting down and closing off, and Joanna was reaching out for information and connection and kind of trying to work together, because we have three hungry children, two hungry adults, we needed to be a good team. But because I was shutting down, I wasn't being constructive to our relationship. I wasn't helping our family in that food hall, and so everything got harder.

**S** Speaker 4 07:06:07

And so I started feeling unsafe or insecure. I could tell something was up, but I didn't know what it was, and that's not a good feeling. And if you know right, betrayed spouses certainly don't like that feeling, and so I like to control and fix it. And so I'm asking him more and more questions. I'm trying to dig around to figure out, if I can figure out what's going on, I can fix it for him, and we can all be happy and move on, right? And so when we talk about safety, one of the things we talk about is responsibility and being responsible for yourself, yeah, which means that moment, Matthew wasn't being responsible for himself and I was being overly responsible for him, right? So, and not just means like being responsible for yourself, it means be responsible for yourself and only yourself, but don't take on things that are other people's responsibility. And so that's where I tend to kind of overstep boundaries and want to overly care, take for people or fix things, and so, yeah, so that's a way it that's where it was getting off, kind of for both of us, yeah. And

**S** Speaker 3 07:07:11

it wasn't until later that night that we sat down, the kids were in bed, and we actually processed through the whole event, and we were able to walk through it. And in some ways, I would really say that that was a that was creating safety for our relationship. So we process through I recognize why I was getting worked up, what it was about in the

safety for our relationship. So we process through I recognize why I was getting worked up, what it was about in the food halls, why it was, why it was a problem for me, but also what I could have done about it, some things that I could have done to communicate to Joanna what was happening, where I was, and to be in a different place relationally, so I can support our relationship and our family, and so that's, I think, a great example, because a lot of times we forget. We're gonna have moments where things break down. That's unsafe, right? That does create unsafety, but one of the best ways to build safety in a relationship is to go back and to work on it, and to take responsibility and to say, Hey, I screwed up there. That wasn't good for us, it wasn't good for me, it wasn't good for you, and I'll own that. And can we work? Can I can I do something different next time? Can I even do something right now and then? Can we work on solutions? So we actually talked about, okay, what happens when we're in a food hall next time? What. Would actually work better for our family now that they're becoming popular, I've gotta be ready for a world with food holes, right?

**S** Speaker 5 07:08:28

You are ex. You are describing something that was a that my husband and I experienced, that was a game changer for us, that particular process. Now we have a label for it, and hopefully you have a nicer, kinder label coming from the corporate world. We call that the post mortem. We would we when we started to later on, go, Okay, what? What just happened? Oh, and really start to say, well, here's what I was feeling in my body, and this is where I started seeing red. Do you guys have a better label than we do?

**S** Speaker 3 07:09:04

We were just in Hollywood, and they talked about, we'll fix it in post, so maybe we could call it something like that, right? We're gonna fix it in post, right? We're gonna we're gonna come back, we're going to do it. I like the post mortem too. I think it's good. I think and, and because I don't think there's any, I think we actually become unsafe when we don't talk about the things that broke down safety. I think that's what really makes things unsafe. And so many couples feel like there's not a space to process things that didn't go well, and so they're constantly just burying it and setting it aside and saying, fine, maybe we'll get the next one. Maybe the next one will be better. And it's not the next one actually is charged both with the energy of the moment

**S** Speaker 4 07:09:51

that you don't bury the lack of safety that it built, right? So I tell a couple like, Okay, you're just a little bit further apart now and then the next time something comes along, it's going to feel bigger because you have less safety there, right? And that's going to pull you even further apart, right? And have partners who are like, I feel like if I had a safe, secure relationship, this thing that triggered me so much wouldn't have even been a thing. Like, yeah, totally. Because the more and more less and less safety you have, the more hyper alert and hyper aware you are of any signs that it might not be safe.

**S** Speaker 7 07:10:25

We we have a phrase. We call it next time. So let's talk about next time because, and that's just a way, like you said, apparently you will be overrun by food halls. Or is that what they're called now? And the latest, it's the latest trends, but we will, we call them next time. So next time? Yeah, what do we do next?

**S** Speaker 5 07:10:47

And I think it's, it's so good to just accept that we're all individuals and conflict is going to happen. Recovery isn't sunshine and lollipops and rainbows that that those differences or those breakdowns happen, and that's okay, that doesn't define the relationship, but how you approach it later, with the post production or the post mortem or the next time can really be those are opportunities. I just speak personally, but when you do that, we walk out of that even more safe. We're building more safety and more connection and more knowing of each other each time we make that effort.

**S** Speaker 3 07:11:34

Yeah, absolutely. I think to do that knowing your history really matters. I recognize that when I don't, when I under communicate, that that is attached to part of our history where I withheld information from Joanna that was affecting us, my addiction, my acting out. And so I recognize that there is a unique sensitivity and reality in our relationship that my under reporting, my my withholding information, even if I'm struggling emotionally and that's causing me to want to shut down, I still recognize that in our relationship, that pattern has a history, and it's a really important history to name and to be aware of and to be uniquely sensitive to. And I think that part of building safety is knowing your history, is knowing your personal history, knowing what are the things that tend to light me up inside, right drive those emotions, drive me into those places I don't want to go, but also what's happened with my partner, what's happened in their life, maybe before us, things that took place in their life that affected them, and then as well, what has affected us together. Because I think we it's really easy to want to feel like everything's this clean slate when it's not. That's not how the brain works. The brain doesn't work as a clean slate. It's constantly mapping things based on our past. And so that's why knowing our past is, I think one of the keys to really understanding safety is I know where my brain's going to go. Most of our family explosions that were that were really terrifying to me as a kid all happened on vacations. So I know getting ready for being on and returning from. Vacation, it's just emotionally sensitive time for me. I'm way more charged in those spaces than I am others because of that history. I mean, just packing the car, I can remember the kind of fights and screaming matches that would go on, and so I'm loading luggage, and I'm like, I'm feeling a little feel a little weird, right? And there's nobody out here with me, but I know, oh, that's a part of my history. It's a part of knowing what went on before that helps me to know what I need to do for myself. Maybe that means I'm going to take it a little slow. I'm going to do some extra breathing today. I'm going to be maybe kind to myself a little bit more patient. And I think that's that knowing of the history is really, really key,

**S** Speaker 4 07:14:01

and it's really important to know the relational history if you're going to repair well. And I think a lot of couples who come through recovery, and maybe are on kind of the the further side, are really tempted to want it to to be equal again. And we talk about a safe relationship is always balanced. Balance does not mean equal, right? We both take responsibility for our own emotions, for our actions and our behaviors, but the way we do that will look different because of the reality we've lived through in our relationship, right? And so one, one kind of silly example, but it was really important to notice, is kind of again later on in the recovery we done, built a lot of safety, there was a lot of balance. And I noticed that whenever we were having conversations that involved numbers of some sort, like, how long does it take to drive to Knoxville from here for the state meet? Right? Matthew's memory of numbers not super accurate. So he would throw out a number, it would not be correct. And this happened kind of consistently. This inconsistency happened. Consistent started happening consistently. And I could tell every time he'd set a number. I felt internally this like on guard, feeling of like, I can't trust him, right? I was like, Whoa, that's a very strong response. I'm having him to be like, for doing 90 minutes off on a drive time like that seems weird, right? But I was like, Oh, I think it's more related to the history of our relationship, not the the kind of just certain reality right now that we're experiencing, right? So we had to talk through that and talk about, okay, when you're throwing out numbers that are accurate, it triggers that part of me that has experienced deception to see lack of honesty and transparency in our relationship, and that starts to feel really unsafe for me if we flip the script, that probably would not be the same thing for him. If I was throwing out numbers that weren't exactly accurate, he'd be probably be like, it's a little annoying you could check before you answered, but Right? But he's not feeling wildly unsafe because of that. And so we had to talk about that reality in the context of what we've both been through in our relationship. And to stay balanced is not equal, right? And so helping couples understand what that means is super important in recovery, because it's really easy for them to think, oh, we'll finally be healed and great when everything's equal again. That may never happen, but balance does need to happen pretty, pretty early on, pretty quickly, and so understanding the difference there can be really important to safety. Matthew,

**S** Speaker 5 07:16:39

I love the story you shared, including it included putting baggage into the car because it was literal and metaphoric, and that we are in this whole stay in your own lane thing. When I always said, but we're in the same car, I can't stay in my own lane if we're in the same car. And that relationships are this journey that we're always packing baggage into the car and unpacking it.

**S** Speaker 2 07:17:07

What I've noticed, as you guys have been sharing, is that you, when it comes to self awareness, you guys are on level gazillion and so. So I know for many of our listeners, they're not at that level. And I'm wondering, what kind of

practical tool or tip can you give to both the betrayed wife and to the betrayer husband? Typically? Um, what? What practical suggestions can you give to them in in order to grow their self awareness?

**S** Speaker 3 07:17:40

I give one actually learned from a client who had had a had a skill that I really loved, and he talked about lamp posts. And what, what I think helps is, even if you're not, if you don't have a lot of awareness, you can gain awareness by going back and reflecting so kind of what we were talking about, what a lamp post means is that when I have a situation that doesn't go the way I want, maybe I find myself really emotional, or I find that it was really, really difficult, or something took place, what I'll do is I'll go back and I'll try to isolate and kind of figure out what was the situation. And so for example, example for me, is track. Right family vacations, I started noticing we would have more arguments right before, you know, right before we would leave, I felt really tight in my body, so I I would look for signs that things weren't okay, and then I would look and ask about what was the situation. And what I started to notice was it would typically happen right before we traveled. And so even before I kind of put the two and two together that, ooh, traveling my family as a young child was really, really chaotic, I just saw the pattern that that happened a lot while I traveled. So I would just remember that. I would just remember, if we're going to take a trip, I'm probably my anxiety is probably going to go up, our disconnection may increase because of that, my anxiety tends to want to pull me away from people rather than to go to people. And so that's a way I think you can use awareness, is just look at situations, right? I food halls are now gotta they have a lamp post for me. I know if I have, if I'm going to a place where I have more food options than I can count. That's it's anxiety inducing for my brain, and I know that. I don't totally know why yet. I'm going to probably do some work in the next couple of weeks to figure out what is it about that, but I at least know that that's a place that I should be aware of going forward. And I think that's one of the easiest ways that people can start is just marking those spaces and going, I'm gonna, I'm gonna, kind of bookmark this. I'm gonna, I'm gonna lamp post this, so when I get here again, I at least know that this is kind of danger for me. And I think as

**S** Speaker 4 07:19:52

a couple, it's important that self awareness, but the other awareness as well. So as a partner who understands now my spouse and things that trigger his anxiety, I could be more sensitive to, okay, lots of decisions overwhelm him easily, great. So when I'm picking out a trim color for our house and I have 500 color swatches, maybe I narrow it down to three before I show him, I don't go, Hey, what do you think about these 500 swatches, right? And so you learn about your partner, and you learn relationally, what can give you more success as you know yourself better and as you know your partner better. And I think for us, the big game changer in our growth of self awareness has been insight and practice. And we use a modality called restoration therapy that we learned before we even started recovery, that was life changing for for us, individually, for our relationship. And so in that modality, you learn to understand what's that primary emotion I'm feeling, and then what's my coping behavior, or coping response, that fight or flight response that comes when I get triggered, when I I'm sensing that threat, and we learned that most people have about three to four core feelings that they go to and three to four main coping behaviors that they go to. So that insight right there about yourself is huge, and it helps you better understand all those future moments that you have when you get dysregulated, you're not lost, swirling around in your emotions going like, what's going on right now? Right? So I'll have my clients memorize so let's figure out what those are. Let's memorize it, and then you have that tool in those moments to practice and so, and that's a part of the insight, right? We're tracking back, when did those pains first start? What are the experiences memories connected to? We call it the pain cycle, when you get dysregulated, right? So you carry that insight into that practical moment where you need to practice the awareness and then the regulation, right. And so you use that understanding, you use that insight then in those moments. And so we would individually, as a couple, sit down and go, I can tell I'm dysregulated. Here's what I'm feeling, here's how I'm coping, here's what that does to me or to us, and here's now how I can step into that safety practice of self regulating, right? And so one of the things that I have a responsibility over to be safe in relationship is to be able to self regulate myself, right? And so using that insight to regularly stop, slow down when I feel myself dysregulated and regulate is so important, and it's really only through that practice, using that insight on a regular basis, that it is helpful in any way, right? So just knowing, just the awareness, isn't safe. That's why the awareness and honesty is below safety. I must be totally aware that I'm dysregulated, but if I'm bunching holes in the wall, it's not building any safety, right? And so that's one of the things. And we practice this religiously for I mean, we've been doing it well over a decade at this point, but, but that, I think, is the practice that helped us grow that self awareness so much.

**S** Speaker 3 07:23:13

Yeah, and then the example we used about the food hall. I didn't know we're going to talk about food halls this month

learn, and then the example we used about the food hall. I didn't know we're going to talk about food halls this morning when we were. When we were in post mortem, to use, you know, to use Pam's term, I was able to share with Joanna. And what I love about this is it also helps me to take responsibility for my action. So I was able to process with Joanna. I was to say, Okay, I know what was happening. Now, this was afterwards, but I said I was feeling overwhelmed, and I could tell that what I was doing is I was getting anxious, and I was pulling away, I was withdrawing, and I recognize that that communicates to you that you're all alone in this process, that the decision making for our family and caring for the kids is all on you, and that's not okay, right?

**S** Speaker 4 07:23:55

And then you can see how it plays out. It's a cycle, right? I was like, yeah, and then I started feeling alone and unsafe, and I wanted to control and fix it, and I did that by asking you more questions, which, guess what, made him feel even more overwhelmed and made him shut down even more, which left me feeling more alone. Yeah,

**S** Speaker 3 07:24:15

and what we've learned is I'll get nowhere blaming her, right? Because it could have been really easy for me to walk in and go, it's the food Hall's fault, and then second, it was your fault for asking me all those questions. But that really is not even if I could prove that. It doesn't help me at all. What's helped me to say is, ooh, I was feeling overwhelmed, and I was pulling away into my anxiety, and that doesn't help me. And the ability to speak into that for myself and to say but you know what the truth is? I handle a lot of big things. I handle couples who are working through betrayal. I handle three amazing kids and raising them. I've handled recovery from addiction. I know that I can get through it. That's the truth. And knowing that truth is what allows me to connect and to partner. And what I could have done in that food hall with you is to say I'm having a hard time making a decision about what my body really needs for food. If you have a sense of what you want. I'm I'm game to go along with it, because that not making a decision would probably be the best way I can help our family right now, but I can entertain the kids while you make that decision. How does that sound? Right? So that's that process of using that ability to regulate our emotions, to come back and to say, let me make this right. And what we've learned, as nice as it is to get all the moments like perfectly, we just don't live that way. We make mistakes, but it's nice to have something to come back to and go, ah, that actually feels really good. And what's really funny, we found it feels good, even if it's a couple hours later, right? For each of us to hear that and experience it doesn't matter a lot that it was in the moment. I think people have this idea that recovery is all about these good moments, yes and no, it's more about going that moment sucked, but we can make that moment suck less if we can have this moment together, right? And so that's, that's what we love to do, is to keep coming back.

**S** Speaker 7 07:26:28

I do appreciate the amount of times that the food hall has been mentioned. During this

**P** 07:26:35

time. People are going to be going food halls,

**P** 07:26:40

stressful and chaotic,

**P** 07:26:43

apparently, stock in food halls just went way down.

**S** Speaker 7 07:26:49

So what? What does it look like when you've got one person in the relationship who's willing to go to that place of self

awareness, ownership, but consistently met with someone who that just seems like a ton of work. I guess I'm I'm probably saying it seems like a ton of work, but what you really see as the partner is resistance or refusal. What is What do you do in that situation? Because I think that's pretty common in our especially with individuals who are early in recovery, but I think what comes up is shame and the inability to be introspective. But so I guess my question would be, what do you do with that type of dynamic that's super

S

Speaker 4 07:27:32

hard, right? And part of so much of what we've been talking about in safety is you have to have for a safe relationship, you have to have two people doing this work. Alright? So right off the bat, we know that it's not a safe relationship. It's not balanced. It doesn't mean that it's not healthy. It's not good for that person who is willing to step in and regulate and take responsibility, right? Like that is still the healthiest path forward for that individual. And I work with a lot of partners, who they're ready, they're doing their work. They're learning to self regulate all of that, right? And what I help them understand is that that's super empowering, and when they're doing that consistently, they start feeling that it feels really good to be able to regulate yourself. And the power of your ability to regulate isn't external. Anymore, especially it's not external. With someone who's very unsafe and unreliable, that's the last thing you want your internal safety to be dependent on this person who has made a lot of really destructive, bad decisions. And so I kind of frame it that way in the beginning, this is about taking your power back, you getting healthy and stable, no matter what anyone else around you is choosing. And so starting from that place and and from that place, I talk a lot about trusting your gut with my with my partners when we're working right. And so what I want is I want them to be able to make decisions from a place of regulation, when I'm making a reactive decision when I'm feeling unsafe to a perceived threat, I never feel great about that decision, whatever it is, right? So for some partners, it's, do I stay or do I go? Depending on how long I've been here, and we've been working on this, right? And they're really struggling. And I say usually, if there's a big struggle, it's probably because it's coming from a place of dysregulation, of feeling I'm safe and powerless, rather than feeling really secure, confident and empowered, I want to make a wise decision about what I want to do with the reality I'm living in. I once, I can regulate and get to that place, I can make decisions and feel good about them, regardless of what anyone else thinks. And it's amazing how many people have a lots of opinions about the state of your relationship. And so I have partners who are ashamed for staying, shamed for going right, all sorts of things right. And so going like, okay, let's detach the locus of that decision, and let's put it internal. And when that happens, you're going to feel really good about it. And so I've had some partners soon been able to do that, and they're like, I'm out here. I'm going, this is unsafe. It hasn't changed, and I need to care for myself and my kids now, right? And I've had some partners who go, You know what? It's not pretty, but I feel like I want to keep. I want to stay. I feel called to stay. At this point. I don't know how long that's going to last, but right now, I'm choosing that, and I feel good about that choice, right? To stay, even though it's unsafe, right? And I can persist, and I've had partners who have done that, and, and even though everyone on the outside is like, You're crazy, what the heck? Why are you doing that? Right? And, and sometimes it goes on, and they're like, yep, that that was it. I gave all I could, and now I need to step away. But we've had other couples who a miracle has happened, and that that spouse's heart has changed, and they're they have an amazing, thriving relationship, and but that ability to stay and stay in a peaceful way was only because they were able to get to that place of regulation and stuff.

S

Speaker 8 07:31:08

Okay, so we're gonna push pause here for just a bit, and you can tune in to next week's episode to Hear the rest of this conversation. Thanks for listening. You.