

[music]

0:00:02.5 Nicole Antoinette: Welcome to the Pop-Up Pod. A podcast that's similar to a pop-up shop or a pop-up restaurant, in that it's sporadic, sometimes it's here and sometimes it's not. Each 12-episode season dives deep into a single question, and our question for season one is this, Should I get married? Twelve episodes, 12 different people, honest conversations about the joys and struggles of long-term romantic relationships. These intimate conversations are 100% listener-funded, paid for by my sliding scale Patreon community. Thanks y'all. That means that you won't hear any ads or sponsors on this show, it's just me, backed by the support of 400 plus people who have come together to ensure that everyone involved in making this podcast gets paid. That includes me as the host and creator, my sound engineer and musician, Adam Day, as well as every single one of our guests. Our Patreon community also funds the creation of a full transcript for each episode, which you can find in the show notes to help make these conversations more accessible. Those are our production ethics here at the Pop-Up Pod, and if that aligns with your own values, I would love to invite you to come check out our community at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette.

0:01:18.3 NA: It's a fun, easy and welcoming space. And remember, it's run on a sliding scale. So you can pay whatever amount makes most sense for you, either as a monthly payment or an annual payment, and you'll get access to a wealth of bonus content, the chance to help shape the topics and conversations of future seasons and more, and you can cancel at any time. So that's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette, and hopefully I will see you there. In the meantime, I'm excited to introduce you to today's guest, Natalie Lue. Natalie, whose pronouns are she/her, is a long-time thought leader on relationships and human behavior. And in this episode, she joins us to share stories about some of the obstacles to intimacy that she's had to navigate, such as people-pleasing and poor boundaries. In the realm of boundaries, she also shares about her experience of needing to create healthier boundaries with extended family, especially when they over-step with your partner. Oh, so real. I love it. Okay, here we go.

[music]

0:02:28.3 NA: Okay, here we go. Nat, welcome to show.

0:02:30.7 Natalie Lue: [chuckle] Thank you for having me, Nicole, always a pleasure.

0:02:35.4 NA: So I know that this is audio only, but I love having video on and getting to like peek into other people's homes and lives and like look at your cute fireplace, look at what's going on behind you. So I like that I'm getting an inside peek into what I assume is your living room.

0:02:48.7 NL: That's right, yeah. I actually don't hang out in here that much. My husband and my youngest daughter really love hogging up this room, and the dog, and I'm also an early nights person. So I have taken to being in here a little bit more recently, but I like my bed about 8:00 PM, it's perfect.

0:03:08.7 NA: Yeah, for me, it's like 8:45-ish usually. So do you go to bed at a really different time

than your husband?

0:03:13.5 NL: Generally, yes. It doesn't necessarily mean I'm going to sleep straight away, but he's like, "Oh, I don't wanna go upstairs at that time because I'll fall asleep really quickly and then... " 'Cause he can't stay awake for anything, and so he'll like, "I'll be like awake really early." What does he do? He comes down here, he lays out and he ends up fast asleep on the sofa, far earlier than I am asleep upstairs [laughter] in the bed. But there was a time... I absolutely love early nights, but there was a time when I was a bit like, "Oh, should I be having early nights?" You know how we can be, it's like, "Oh, you gotta hang out." And actually, since I've owned it, I absolutely love it because I think some people are like, "Oh, you can't have an early night when you're in a relationship." Yes you flipping can.

0:04:05.6 NA: Yeah, so it sounds like there is plenty of times where he's coming up to bed later than you are. Maybe you're already asleep, maybe you're not already asleep. Do you guys share a bedroom?

0:04:15.5 NL: Yeah.

0:04:15.6 NA: Is that ever disturbing for you?

0:04:18.5 NL: So we have a bit of a banter thing where I might be just drifting off, and the next thing I can hear is like a herd of elephants [laughter] coming into the room. I'm like, "Were you even attempting to come in here quietly?" And he's like, "Oh," He was like, "I was. I was." But one of the times I think last week, he said to me, "Well, why would you be asleep at this time?" I'm like, "Oh my God, why wouldn't I be asleep at this time?" So yeah. But you know, I tend to settle relatively quickly, or we end up chatting and having a bit of a giggle.

0:04:50.2 NA: Yeah, so it works for you. I feel like I will take any opportunity to praise the having separate bedrooms, it works for me so well.

0:04:58.0 NL: I saw that you guys have got that.

0:04:58.9 NA: Oh my God, it's the best. It is the hill I will die on. I know that it's not for everyone, and obviously, you have to have enough space where you live to make that possible. But honestly, it's been incredible.

0:05:10.9 NL: Wow. We did separate rooms when my husband had COVID. So he got it on New Year's Eve, and I was like, straight into the spare room. And don't get me wrong, felt bad for him, but I was having the time of my life in the spare room. 'Cause the thing that we do not agree on is heat, so he likes the house being like super warm, and this has been really over the last year since we changed our boiler. And the guy was like, "Oh, just run it off the thermostat." Whereas before, we had it on a timer, and I am cussing him. I am 44, I've had to accept the fact that I am perimenopausal, and sometimes it feels like I'm in a flipping inferno. And he's like, "What's wrong with you? There's no way you can possibly be hot." I'm like, "I am definitely hot." So that's the

thing that we will sort of battle on. It's never in any serious way, but it's like, he's ended up with all the duvet, and I have a light blanket on me. But the thing is...

0:06:15.6 NA: [chuckle] You're like, "I have a light blanket and a lot of hormones, leave me alone."

0:06:17.8 NL: [laughter] Yeah. So the funny thing is, I enjoyed being in the spare room. But then, at the same time, after a while, I sort of miss being in the same bed kicking into his space, 'cause I'm a bit of a spreader. [chuckle]

0:06:32.8 NA: Oh my God, yeah, I love hearing people's different sleeping arrangements. It's funny that we just got right into this, and I didn't start with asking you to introduce yourself. The way we've been kicking these off is with what I'm calling a relationship bio. So think of less, what do you do, work wise, and more of who and how do you love? So how do you wanna situate yourself for this conversation?

0:06:57.0 NL: Oh, wow. I am 44. I am married, coming up to 10 years with my partner or my husband, now husband for about coming up to 16 years actually next week. And we have two daughters, and this is the healthiest relationship I have been in. Admittedly, it's actually the only healthy relationship I've been in. I always say to people, in the end, it just takes one relationship. I don't need to obsess about the fact that none of my previous relationships were particularly healthy, so yeah. We've been rocking and rolling for 16 years, and I met him at a point in my life when I, at that point, was really sort of in a space where I was finally sort of owning myself. I was sort of really the most me I'd been at that point. I was in a happy space, I was in a much healthier space. And so I really knew what I wanted out of myself and out of a relationship when we met. So it was good timing.

0:08:01.3 NA: Yeah, yeah. So drop us into your real romantic life a little bit. What's working well for you two, and maybe what's not working so well at this moment in time?

0:08:11.7 NL: We are... It's funny, when the pandemic kicked off like a couple of years ago, sort of several months down the road, it was interesting having conversations with friends, and even then sometimes as a result of my work, where people are like, Oh my gosh... One friend was like, "For the first time, I would say, I don't know if we're gonna make it. I don't know if I wanna be around him." Some people really, really clashed. We didn't have any disagreements at all with regards to, as a result of us being in that same space around us so intensely. I feel like we are the... We have this, I guess, this very deeply spiritual relationship in the sense of that it feels like we're absolutely supposed to be together. We accept each other for exactly who we are, and we have this freedom to be ourselves, and we also encourage the other to grow. We have a great sense of humor. We don't really take anything massively seriously. We were never a relationship that had... I'm not in any way trying to sound like Will Smith and Jada Pinkett here, but we're not a relationship that has these hard and fast rules, and what I mean by that is nothing whatsoever that's even what they were talking about, more so in the sense of...

0:09:34.2 NL: We know so many people who it's like, "Oh, I'm not allowed to do this, and I don't

like it when they do that." We don't have any of that in our relationship. There's never been, "You can't be friends with this person or you can't talk to this person." So there's this real freedom and acceptance in our relationship, and for us, we know things are going... We know that we are getting to connect with each other if we have a good belly laugh each day. We know if we're having a good chuckle, a bit of banter, we know we're in... Not that would mean that we're in a bad place, but we know that we're connecting, actually seeing each other. 'Cause we can get so immersed at work, kids, the dog, the house. It could just sort of take over. And I don't know, that's an interesting question. Is there anything in particular that's not working? No. I never really kinda see things in that way. I think we go through periods where it feels like he's really intense with work. Maybe I am really intense with work, so you can kind of feel a bit like, oh, that's sort of taking over a bit, but I find that things sort of recalibrate themselves. There's no massive tensions about things, but where...

0:10:41.4 NL: I think sometimes where tension has resulted in its own way, I think has tended to come from, he's very stressed, for instance, with work, and maybe has got a lot on his mind with that, but is just kind of stumbling along and not saying anything, and then maybe I'm stressed about something, and I'm kind of in my own little bubble about that, and it's funny. As soon as we sit down, and we have a conversation about that, that just fades off. And it's funny, for me, I found that, I don't think brood is quite the right thing, but I don't know if you have this, but working for yourself, I think it's very easy to get in your own head. It's not like you... My husband has colleagues, he has a boss, he has employees, so it's not that he doesn't have worries, concerns, things that might be rumbling through his head, but there's a whole ecosystem of what's balanced enough. When you're working for yourself, you can be thinking about so many different things, and it can be quite consuming, and in a way because you're in this constant conversation with yourself about the stuff, you almost feel like you have been talking about it, but you really have not, and things can build up because it doesn't feel like...

0:12:00.6 NL: Sometimes it doesn't feel like a personal thing. It just feels like, Oh, this is just something else to obsess about with work." And as soon as I open my mouth about this stuff, often after it's kind of brooded along for too long, he'll turn around and say something in about 30 seconds to a minute, and I go, oh jeez, why didn't I just talk about this sooner?

0:12:16.6 NA: Interesting. Yeah. Yeah, I find the solo self-employment is... That's definitely relatable, that how much of it just happens in your own mind. And my partner and I do such different work that it's not like, we can't listen to each other or share things with each other, and we definitely do, but he's not the person that I'm gonna go to if I wanna talk about work stuff in detail, just because his frame of reference is so different, so that comes up for us for sure.

0:12:45.9 NL: Yeah, absolutely, and I think that a big learning curve for each of us, and it's funny because he would say that I'm not great at asking for help and saying, I need... And of course, I'm a recovering people pleaser and perfectionist, and I was an over-responsible kid, so hey-oh. But the funny thing is, is that last year was part of... Our youngest daughter struggled with anxiety that was sort of triggered by the pandemic, and so as part of her package of support that we got, we were able to do a few sessions of family therapies so that we could all help to support her, but also so that as a family, we were also getting support, 'cause it was very difficult to go through that as well in

the context of a pandemic. What was interesting is about us both realizing that we were both over-responsible eldest children, and it was something that we were aware of, it's not like this was unknown to us, but realizing how we actually both don't like to be a burden and we both won't necessarily be rushing around to ask for help, but it plays out in different ways, 'cause he's far less of a people pleaser than I am. And so it was really interesting to not just talk about that, but to see how each of our upbringings, each of our experiences influences how we are in our relationship.

0:14:07.8 NA: Yeah, and to still be uncovering layers of that 10, 16 years later, it's just interesting how there's always more to learn about each other, and about ourselves.

0:14:16.8 NL: Absolutely, something that I find myself saying a lot to people is I find that what a lot of people do with romantic relationships really is that there is almost like they are trying to get to 100% knowledge in a really short... What is a relatively short period of time. It's like I wanna find out all there is to know, so that I can decide if I want to be with this person and whether I can stay with them forever, and I'm like, mate, the getting to know is ongoing. It never stops. Obviously, when you're at the beginning of the relationship in those early months in the first year or so, that's a far more intense period of getting to know, but if you think you can go into a relationship and that you can just take a snapshot and be like, I've decided who that person is, ain't going to happen.

0:15:07.1 NL: That person is going to evolve, you're gonna weather things together, joys, lows. And also because you need to be curious, like you need to not be complacent because it is so easy in a relationship to be caught up in your own stuff that you don't even notice what is going on with the other person. It doesn't mean that you're coming from this dodgy place, but I think that what happens to a lot of people in relationships is they become complacent. Whereas, I'm always like, actually, we're always going to be getting to know stuff like my husband didn't know... We were talking about this on Instagram. He didn't know until I think it was two years ago that I hadn't watched The Matrix before. It's not that I... I'd attempted to watch it, I even owned the DVD. So this is how far back. And matrix is, what, 20 plus years old?

0:15:56.3 NA: Something like that.

0:15:57.9 NL: And he's like heavy-hitting sci-fi, so my mom is a massive fan of The Matrix, my brothers, he's a massive fan. Somehow it had taken a good 13, 14 years into our relationship before he discovered it. And honestly, he actually went into shock.

[laughter]

0:16:15.3 NL: He like was like, I don't know what I would have thought if I had known this about you at the beginning. I was like, "Stop being ridiculous." So I say... He's like, "We're putting The Matrix on right now." 'Cause what it was is I had attempted to watch it, I couldn't stay awake for the whole thing. We both fell asleep watching The Matrix. Finally, I watched the whole thing. Must have been like around Christmas time. Our oldest daughter absolutely loved it. I got to the end, and I went, I don't really know what the whole fuss was about. He's just looking at me like, "What is up with you?"

0:16:45.1 NA: He's like, you're lucky I already love you.

0:16:46.5 NL: Yeah, but it's all this... Like we still find out... We still find new stories to tell, new insights to share, and that's part of the joy, the curiosity, the exploration of the relationship.

0:17:00.4 NA: What made you decide to get married?

0:17:01.8 NL: That's a good question actually, 'cause we only had two kids by the time we got married.

0:17:08.0 NA: Okay, interesting. Yes, love it.

0:17:10.4 NL: Kids came first. We had always known that we would end to get married someday, but we were not the type of people like, "We have to be married." And believe me, when I get pregnant, it was like, "So when are you getting married? When are you getting married? When are you getting married?" And I... And thankfully, him, we don't believe in getting married because she got pregnant, or getting married because everybody else feels uncomfortable about the fact that you two are not married; that's not a reason to get married. So it was something that we knew that we would do. It was... I don't see marriage as, marriage is a way of showing how much you love each other, or some people are like, Oh, we'll get married, and then that he'll commit or she'll commit, then. Mate, you have to be already committed before you get married because marriage is really, it's piece of paper, it's established in some pretty dodgy stuff from going back centuries.

0:18:13.4 NL: First of all, you have to define what marriage really is for each of you. We have two children. We both felt like actually, it was a celebration of our relation. It was a big, massive party, basically, an expensive one at that, but it was a celebration of our relationship. It was really just an affirmation of what we already know and appreciate and are committed to about each other. Nothing changed about our relationship, and we were in a bit of a high, like literally the first few days after, It's 'cause we just had this massive party, and it was epic. We still have people say almost 10 years on that it was still the best wedding that they had ever been to, so we know how to party.

0:18:58.0 NL: It was also as well from... Not that we gave it a massive manifold, but it also... It certainly... I don't... It varies from country to country, but it certainly gave our children... Heaven forbid that something should happen to either one of us, it also gives our children a level of protection as well because of... In this country, if you ain't married and then...

0:19:17.2 NL: So that... It can go into all sorts of weird territory about where the kids could end up, if both of you... Heaven forbid something happened to you, it can end up in a weird place, so at least we're covered sort of that, but that was a very minor concern in it. So, admittedly, we didn't really kind of... Which is probably reflective of how we are. We didn't really give it like a major amount of... It was just an extension on what we were already doing and what we were about.

0:19:47.1 NA: Yeah, I'm particularly interested in that because I do think that there's sort of a

normative script of first this then this very much the relationship escalator, right, and then you get married and then this... Yeah, the eye roll you're doing, I also agree with, but your situation is interesting because like you said, you already had that depth of commitment, you were already co-parenting, right, you had two kids together, so either what changed or do you remember there being a particular conversation where you were like, And now we think we're gonna get married?

0:20:17.6 NL: So I think that there wasn't really anything necessarily at the time. What happened was we did a lot of other things first, 'cause obviously, we could have gone down the route of going to a registry office, being all low-key, go and fly off to somewhere, and to be fair, when our families we're really getting on our nerves, we did think Jesus, why didn't we just flipping go to Vegas or go to the Caribbean or whatever? But actually what happened is, first, we were busy with having one child, then we got busy with having two.

0:20:51.4 NL: We had bought a property together, literally, we closed on that the day that I had to go off and get induced with our first daughter. Then I was pregnant again the following year, and then we sort of surfaced out of the early years of the two of them, and we were like, Okay, so we were gonna move. No, actually that's not true. We decided that instead of moving, we were gonna get... We were like, my husband, it wasn't... We didn't necessarily sit down, but my husband was kind of like, Okay, well, We're sort of in that place now where the kids are at this age, we've done these other bits and pieces, right, we can do that. And literally...

0:21:28.7 NL: So then, yeah, he just said... I think he felt like it was time. It didn't feel like it was something like the ball was in his court I had this trust that at some point it would happen, 'cause some people would be like, Oh my God has he not proposed yet? I always felt like when the timing was right. Bearing in mind, if you know you're gonna be shelling out for a wedding, not to be making it all about money, but of course, you wanna be making sure the timing is right, because I wasn't gonna be engaged for five years. Otherwise, I could have just done that from the onset.

0:21:58.4 NA: Do you think that you would be as fulfilled if you would have never gotten married?

0:22:00.3 NL: Yeah, because for me, I didn't feel like I needed to be married to ultimately define our relationship, but also because I guess with the benefit of hindsight, nothing actually changed in our relationship as a result of us being married, I didn't feel like anything was missing. So it was just an added bonus, I guess, for one of a better term on that, but I didn't feel like anything was missing, and I think going back to what you said about how we internalize a lot of messages about everything, But marriage for instance, we have internalized messages about that, and so we can almost be pre-programmed to think that this is something that not only do we want, but that we have to want. A bit like, even though I was actually very happy having two children, once I got to 35 plus, almost as if somebody had flicked a switch, I started going through this internal debate with myself about whether or not to have another child, and it wasn't actually because I wanted to. It's because society has actually conditioned us that if you're a woman over the age of 16, then you're on the downer, and that once you get into your 30s and particularly once you get to mid-30s, oh your fertility is on the way out.

0:23:22.6 NL: And you should be thinking about whether you want to turn around and have another child, and I really had to step back from that and go, Is this about what I want or is this about What I'm programmed to think I'm supposed to want. And marriage is an interesting one, and I think that that's why I said that honestly, I genuinely believe that we would have been fine without getting married because it was not, I need this marriage to confirm that you are committed to me, to confirm that you love me because I already knew those things, but it is also interesting at the same time that it's something that we probably think about as an option quite simply because that's what we've been taught and that's what we have been programmed as such.

0:24:02.2 NA: Yeah, do you feel like in getting married, in whatever it was that you said in your vows or what the commitments were that you made, does... How does longevity play into it? Do you feel like this is a life-long commitment, and that is what success looks like with this.

0:24:18.6 NL: I'm very much of... That's the phrase I was looking for. A phrase that popped into my mind over the years of me being in this relationship where I feel like we're in this... He's a soul partner, it's a soul partnership, and that's actually... We probably were into that before we were actually in a marriage, that there was this real sort of, we have come together for however long it is supposed to be in life, and we're both enriched as a result of being in this relationship together, we've got amazing girls. I never think about like... And it's not because I'm trying to dodge it like where I'm sort of going and thinking, Oh yeah, well, maybe the grass is gonna be greener, I've gone into this expecting, hopeful that we are going to remain together and that we will continue to grow together, because obviously some people go into this and they grow together for a while, and then they grow apart.

0:25:16.1 NL: And so, yeah, you like to think, Well, this is it. And so, but I never think, Oh, this is it forever and ever and evermore, amen type thing. It's more of like, I'm not looking around at other options. Once I was in, I was in. There are some people who, when they go into a relationship, they're sort of thinking about what if I get to whatever age and maybe they're old and flabby and maybe they're not in that job anymore, well, things aren't as fun like... Would I really kind of wanted to be looking somewhere else? And for me, it's loving each other through all seasons and conditions. What can you weather together. It's easy to say, your relationship is great when the going is good. The real measure of it is when one or both of you are going through tough times and things are not easy in your relationship, that's actually really where the rubber hits the road with your relationship.

0:26:13.0 NA: Yeah, will you give me an example of one of those times for you two?

0:26:16.4 NL: Yeah, I think there was a period, I think, seven, eight years ago, where... Funny enough, when another pandemic... Was it a pandemic or was it an epidemic, I think is... My husband is from Sierra Leone. Well, he's born here in England, but he's originally from Sierra Leone, and that's where my mother-in-law lives, and when the Ebola outbreak happened there, she came to live with us, and at first, it was great, the first few months, we got on really, really well, and then we really did not get on very well, and it was a difficult situation, she was living with us, he's obviously feeling... I don't wanna say caught between us, but it was hella awkward, and we were

fine in the sense of we were never in any danger whatsoever of like, "Hey, this is leading to a divorce. We are gonna break up. I don't know if I... Blah blah blah. But it was tense for a while.

0:27:13.2 NL: And I think that that came from when you're in a relationship, sometimes you have a fear of being so honest that it would hurt the other person's feelings, and so what you try to do is you try to say anything else, but that thing that needs to be explicitly said, because it's like that feels really harsh, and you know that they were doing their best, and that's what happened, is where truthfully, I felt disappointed in how he handled the situation initially, and instead of saying, "You really let me down, or you disappointed me," or whatever, I danced around that because I didn't want to explicitly say that because I knew it would devastate him to know that. And so instead, I kind of like, well, I didn't like blah blah blah, and it went on and on. And what would happen is I'd feel alright. And then maybe he would say something and reference his mom, and I'd be like, "What the... Feels like he just doesn't get why that situation just wasn't okay, and so we kept looping back around every once in a while over the period of about a year. And on top of that, I went for a period of feeling... I went for a period actually feeling a bit low.

0:28:35.0 NL: I felt trapped, and for me, being somebody who was a kid who has some pretty difficult things to deal with, when I feel like I'm trapped, that kind of brings back that because you don't have a total say over your circumstances, you have an authority, a bigger grown up than you in that presence, that brings up a lot of stuff, and so I found that I was feeling quite wounded because the people pleaser in me was a bit like, I've been... I've been a good wife. I haven't done anything wrong, and I felt like... I felt attacked about my goodness as such, and that was a period I think that really opened my eyes up to my people-pleasing, and it brought up a lot of mother issues for me because if you don't get on amazingly well with your own mother, and then you think you'll get on really, really well, with your mother-in-law only for that to kinda blow up, man, you're in a funny spot. And so I think it wasn't that it was just difficult for me. It was difficult for him, and if funny thing is, is it didn't mean that we were not getting on all the time, but for a while, I really just could not seem to fully move past what had happened.

0:29:48.2 NL: And do you know what happened? Eventually, I blew up one day, and I finally... I remember waking up the following morning, and it was like... It was almost like it was sitting on me going, you have no choice but to say this, and I remember having to take a few deep breaths, and then I said it. And that look on his face said, yeah it did happen. And immediately there was a lightness. He was like, "Okay, I get it." And he literally meant that, and it was done, and I realized just what it wasn't necessarily about him having to do anything. I think I needed that level of honesty to be there, 'cause we hadn't had a thing where I wasn't at that level of honesty before and of course, that damages the intimacy of your relationship because you're pussy-footing, dancing around this thing, and that's what I say to people, you make this decision not to say something because it's like, Oh well, I wanna keep the peace, or blah blah blah. I don't wanna hurt feelings. But the moment that you do that and it continues on and it manifests in different ways, you're encroaching on the intimacy of your relationship. As soon as I said I, t everything stepped back.

0:30:56.9 NA: Yeah. Yeah, I remember when we were emailing leading up to having this conversation, one of the things that you said that you wanted to talk about was creating healthy

boundaries with extended family, especially when they over-step with your partner or something like that. And I really flagged, I put stars next to that for myself because it's one thing to navigate conflict or differences when it's within just you and your partner, like that obviously is its own thing, but then when you start to bring in not just other people or other relationships but these family of origin relationships where we usually have so much other stuff, and it's been at the time of this recording, on and off, almost 14 months that my partner and I have been living with his dad, and so any form of intergenerational living or navigating that or what is my role here when this isn't really my family, but it's sort of is, right. And I don't know, so that... What you mentioned about how to create healthy boundaries with extended family, I don't even know what my question is, but I'm just like, Oh my God, tell me everything.

0:32:00.9 NL: Well, I think that when we get involved with somebody, so we begin a relationship with somebody, as you recognize, it's not just that... Unless of course, neither one of you have anybody else, but it's not just the two of you, and so you guys get together as your relationship evolves, you are seeing that person or each of you are seeing the other in the context of, for instance, family. Something I recognized early on was that my boundaries with my family were important, because if I didn't have healthy boundaries with my family that has a knock-on effect on how I am in my relationship, and then once we were now parents, I realized I can't be sucked into flipping shit with my family, where I'm basically expected to almost parent my own parents, for instance, so get involved in dramas that effectively make me sort of in charge of something, because that's taking away from myself, I'm taking away from my family, but I also realize that even if it's not that, it's that when we are interacting with each other's families, and sometimes our family doesn't have the healthiest of boundaries, we have to know when we need to speak up.

0:33:24.4 NL: So I hear these horror stories where people say, My in-laws make racist comments about our mixed-race children. Mate, your partner needs to bear in mind that that's his parents or her parents, that this is a reflection of their boundaries there, and if they're letting that pass, and if they're not turning around and saying anything, you end up feeling unprotected, unsupported in that situation.

0:33:52.0 NL: If your extended family can come along and cuss your partner out, cuss you out, over step with your children, those things, this all gradually takes a toll. And you hear these stories, and I think sometimes what happens is we were all children before, and even though we know we're a grown up now, I know that I'm 44, somehow you get around your parents and you can start to slip back into a child where suddenly there's this authority, I get it. However, one of the big sources of tension, and friction, and resentments in our relationships is when one or both people don't have healthy boundaries with their respective families, and as a result... So they're still behaving like a kid in some way, so if you... Let's say your partner was like, I don't know, allowing his mom to sort of come in, take over, you know, I know wash and iron his clothes, tell him how to be... First of all, that's letting him play the role of being like this little kid's son, but it's also encroaching on the dynamic between him and the mother. She's kind of peeing on her territory as such there, and we have to each take, yes, responsibility for our boundaries, but also we have to look at how does the way that I interact with my family impact me, or my partner, on our relationship.

0:35:24.5 NL: We can't just be like, well, it's not my fault, my mom says racist comments or calls you names, or ignores you or whatever. It's like actually part of having a healthier relationship all round, even though it might be uncomfortable, is that you need to speak up and address that and make clear what is and isn't okay. Otherwise, your partner's still gonna be this kid, and this dynamic will still continue, where the parents have this hold over them, and that's going to affect the relationship undoubtedly.

0:36:00.0 NA: Yeah, this is like such a deep topic, right? This could go in so many different directions. Do you feel like there was a noticeable point or a time that you remember, maybe it was when you had kids... 'Cause it sort of... What you're describing to me is that there is a point where you... Not transition, your allegiance, maybe that doesn't sound right, but you were building another family, or... And it's... Or that is its own unit that needs to be protected, and that has its own care and tending needs, and that may be the values and the boundaries that you have in your partnership. And then if there are children involved, maybe you're trying to create a different family from the family that either of you came from, at least in some ways, and that can feel really challenging, and I guess I'm interested... Do you feel like there was a time where you were like, Oh, okay, we need to do things differently, or I need to be protective of this unit at the... Potentially at the expense of this other relationship? Does that make sense?

0:37:05.7 NL: Yeah, totally. The funny thing is, is that I only started really healthfully engaging with this idea of boundaries about eight months before I met him, and that was because of the difficulties I was going through in my life, then. I had an immune system disease, and I realized it's all very well going off and eating healthy foods and doing these things to try to bring your health back up. There's not really any point in doing those things, if you're still gonna have the same shitty boundaries, if you're not gonna turn around and say no when you need, want to, or should. And what was interesting is that fear around it, that fear of, Oh, God what drama is this gonna bring, what conflict is this gonna bring? But I realized that the more that I said no when I needed, wanted to, or should, the more that I expressed who I was, that yes, there were family members who were uncomfortable, yes, it did change things, and I was also happier, and I was no longer in drama. So what I found was that there were series of incidents. It wasn't really any one particular thing, and it's not even like once I was aware of it and really sort of clamped down on it that that stopped it completely, but...

0:38:19.0 NL: My mom at times... I think my mom really struggled with me having healthier boundaries and having a separate identity to her, and they became... And I think that this might sometimes be a cultural thing, where it was almost like, Oh, you think you're really big and special now because you've got a husband or you got kids, or people might say it's because of your job or whatever, but... Or you think you're so big and special that you don't have to be respectful towards me.

0:38:51.0 NL: And it's not that you're actually doing something disrespectful, is that you're not compliant anymore, and when you're shifting out of that child role, you mentioned the word challenging, absolutely, but I also think that family can find it very threatening because you're not doing the expected, you're not under the control. And obviously, depending on the length and

breadth for the relationship and how healthy or unhealthy it was, there can be really the sense of... Some family members will actually try to create lots of negative consequences to pull you back into line. And so I think for me, I would say... And I imagine if you were asking my husband the same thing, I imagine that he might say it was the same thing, but it was after we'd had our second daughter, and I think she was about three months old, and my mom on and off over the years, when we're just been unhappy about something, even if it really has nothing whatsoever to do with me, I sometimes got cussed out, cut off, that type of thing.

0:40:01.7 NL: And sometimes you don't necessarily know exactly what it is that she isn't happy about, but certainly, it's coming up. But on this occasion, he was at work one day and he received a call from her, and so she's like, "Can I have a word?" And he was like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." So he went into a meeting room to take the call, and she absolutely annihilated him on the phone, like really ripped him a new one on the phone about something that really was... He was going, "What?" like he was like, "What are you talking about?" So of course, we're raised like, you can't speak to adults in a particular way, so he just sort of went, "Right, okay." And so let the call, and he came back. Or he called me and he was like, "I have never been spoken to like that before, and she can never speak to me like that again." And they became this sort of a fought right, she's expecting that I'm gonna get on phone now and be like, why have you called up my man and blah blah blah.

0:41:05.9 NL: And I was like, I'm not gonna play this game. And so I left it, and of course she called me and she had to reveal in the end that she had made the call, and she was a bit wrong-footed by the whole thing, and lashed out and everything else. But in that call, I said to her, you can't do that. It's not even about me having ideas above my station, you're being disrespectful. You don't call up my partner and cuss him out on the phone. That's completely inappropriate. And I said, and you know you're probably gonna be all offended by that, but you know what, if I thought for one second that he had said or done something that overstepped, believe me, I would turn around and say something about that, but you don't get to call up my man, and lash out like that, it's just not on.

0:42:00.7 NL: It's not okay, and I realize that this dynamic of these sort of blow-ups and fallouts and distance, and I guess he realized it too, it was like there were certain times when he would turn around to me and he'd be like, "No, you can't do that with her." And it wasn't because he was trying to control me. He was just like, No, like, that's not cool. We can't do that. And he's never... If anything, ironically, even with him saying that he's always encouraged like... Wanting me to have a relationship with her, he just doesn't want me to have a dysfunctional, unhealthy one.

0:42:38.9 NA: Oh, yeah. I appreciate you sharing that. Something that's going on in my life right now. Shoutout to my therapist. Something that I'm really working on in therapy, you mentioned, I don't remember the words you used before, but being an over-responsible child, something like that. Like I am... At around the age of 13-ish was really thrust into the role of being a parent to my parents, which I sort of knew, right? And as the decades went on, it was something I was aware of, but I hadn't really, really stopped to think and unpack how damaging that had been and really what those 23 years or whatever it was had been like. And it wasn't until I started noticing that I would slip into that role with my partner, and that that was a problem that I kind of stepped back and was

like, "What's happening here? Why do I keep finding myself in the parent role?" Maybe that sounds too passive, "Why do I keep putting myself in the parent role?"

0:43:41.6 NA: And it's been, first of all, very interesting to dig into this in therapy, to talk about it with my partner, but then also over the holidays this past year, wound up having a series of really uncomfortable conversations with my family, to essentially set boundaries that I couldn't have set at 13 because you're too young, you don't know, right? There's a reason you get thrust into that role, it's not your fault when it happens. And I feel like I'm shaking up the dynamic of my entire family, and it feels gross and awful and exactly right at the same time. And I feel like I'm really trying to reclaim a different way of being for myself, where I am not falling into that role and where I'm not letting the roles that I've played in my family of origin to negatively impact this other family and partnership that I'm trying to build, and it has been some work, I will tell you.

0:44:35.9 NL: Oh, listen, right there with you. I have gone through my own unpicking and I know that it will be ongoing. I don't ever remember not being over-responsible, and I felt protective of my younger brother and then I had younger ones that came along, but I also... I felt like I was old before my time, that I had to be the good girl, the strong girl, the clever one, who didn't ask for too much. It almost became like, Oh, everybody else needs more than me, so my job here is to not ask for too much, is to not show too much emotion, is to not be difficult in some way, and I think because of the way that my relationship was with my mom and because of things that she was going through herself, I felt like an armchair therapist, a substitute spouse, a substitute sibling. I also felt at times that I was having to be the grown-up, so I was expected to impart advice, to be sensible. At the same time, I also think as well that sometimes when I was seeing stuff that I knew was not right, that was inappropriate, and it's very easy to consciously and subconscious, sort of go "Oh, my God, when I grow up, I'm just totally not gonna do that type of stuff, and so I almost made it a point of pride to make sure I was not behaving in ways that I found to be unsettling, to be [0:46:03.7] wrong there. And that became a rod for my back, one, because, yeah, I was taking on adult responsibilities. Some of those, yes, I did assume.

0:46:15.2 NL: But plenty were actually put on me as well, and this is something I think that historically parents just were not fully aware of just how inappropriate that stuff is and how it takes a toll because it affects how you work, it affects the way you show up in your romantic relationships, it might affect how you show up in... And within your friendships, everything, but also it affects what are you gonna take the blame for? What are you going to feel responsible? What are you gonna feel is there within your power to change? And my over-responsibility has gradually revealed and unraveled itself over the course of our relationship. I remember my mom calling me one day, a few years back, and she was having some issue with one of my brothers, and that's a whole thing, if she have an issue with one, you call up the other, and blah blah blah. So anyway, I'm on the sofa cuddling up, reading a story with my daughter, the phone rings, and I've had a habit of when I see the phone ring and going, "Oh, I wonder if something's up. So I pick up the phone, I immediately know by the tone, "Oh, God, something's going on, and it was basically wanting to pull me into some drama thing, and without... I didn't realize, it actually came out that audibly, but I sighed. And there was kind of a bit of a jolt, I think, on her end, where she went, oh, sorry, I'm obviously kind of disturbing, and I think I must have sounded fatigued. I was kind of a bit like,

what? You're the mother here.

0:47:49.8 NL: What is it that I am supposed to be doing? Why are you trying to pull me into this? So we ended up ending the call, and in a rare moment of clarity about these things, she called the following day and apologized for calling me up and trying to drag me into that, just like, what am I actually expecting you to do? But variations of this have happened throughout my life, and I've had this responsibility loaded onto me, and it felt so burdensome. If you're gonna be somebody's partner, it's difficult to be truly available to them if you're caught up in playing out these toxic roles in other relationships. It's like I say to people, you can't try to be in your relationship and also still play a little girl or little boy to your family. If you're acting like a substitute spouse, where, for instance, your parents, or a sibling, you are taking away from your own relationship, and I think sometimes actually, I've seen a lot of this where people don't allow themselves to be in too healthier relationship because they know that if they were in a healthy relationship, that the person would turn around and be like, "Ah, what are you doing?" Why are you doing that? And they're too afraid to upset the status quo, so they'd rather stick themselves in a shitty relationship that allows all of that search to carry on than to actually be in a healthy relationship that flags up actually how unhealthy the family dynamics are.

0:49:21.0 NA: Yeah, so you mentioned that maybe one of the side effects of the over-responsibility or being the good girl was kind of this behavior of people-pleasing, and I know that's a theme that comes up in your work and other conversations that we've had, makes me wanna ask if you can talk about your experiences at the intersection of people-pleasing and intimacy, like maybe how they might work against each other. And I feel like there's something there.

0:49:48.0 NL: So people-pleasing and intimacy do not go together because people-pleasing is like wearing a mask or a costume, you're playing at being whatever you think is pleasing, and so that is a block to intimacy because you're not being who you really are, you're doing what you think is expected, you're doing what you think is pleasing, you're trying to avoid something, you're trying to avoid conflict or criticism or rejection or whatever it is, or you think you're gonna get something if you're pleasing in this way. And where I found it to be really sort of showing itself is I mentioned earlier on about not asking for enough help or not admitting that I was struggling, where that can show itself is sometimes in annoying non-passive aggressive behavior, we're all guilty of being passive aggressive at times, so rather than come out straight and be like, "The house is like a mess, and I'm feeling really tired, I'm gonna be banging around the house with the vacuum cleaner so that everybody knows that I am vacuuming and that I am tired. My husband, would be like, "Why won't you just turn around, and say, Guys, can you blah blah blah?" And then what was interesting is, I can't remember whether it was... You know when Demi Moore had that autobiography?

0:51:13.0 NA: I mean, I haven't read it, but, yeah.

0:51:15.4 NL: It's actually really good. Demi Moore or is it Dimi? Well, whichever one it is anyways, quintessential people pleaser, she had a pretty tricky upbringing and was exploited quite a bit, very over-responsible as well. And I can't remember the exact line in the book, but here's the funny thing, I listened to the autobiography first. In fact, I know it was like Christmas 2019. I

listened to the autobiography first, we were on a flight, I think, to Brazil or something, and then I was talking about the book so much that my husband said, Well, I'll listen to it. And the funny thing is, is that out of the entire book, we both noticed exactly the same line in the book where I went, that feels a bit familiar and where he went, "Is Natalie doing that?" And It was... I can't remember the exact line, but in it, Demi is talking about her marriage to Bruce Willis, and she said that there was this moment in their marriage where she realized that she just let him do whatever the hell he wanted to do, not that he was necessarily doing anything dodgy, but that she just let him do whatever the hell he wanted to do, and she never really asked for much of him.

0:52:41.0 NL: She was really rather self-sufficient, able to take care of herself. They were having a great time together, but she never really voiced needs in the relationship. And so actually, I think Bruce expresses his concern that actually he wasn't really sure if she needed him, and also she wasn't sure whether she really was okay with him doing the stuff that he was doing, or whether it's just that she didn't want to be in a position of expressing a need, and I remember reading this going, "Whoa!" And I knew that that wasn't what I was doing, but what I did know that I was guilty of was that my default setting as a recovering people pleaser is that, and it happens, I would say probably in nano seconds, but it's like in any given situation where I sense somebody else's need, it's like somewhere in my brain crunches the data of that and already works out the possibilities of inconveniencing that person, of not wanting to make them uncomfortable, of not wanting to ask for too much. My husband is very different. In that situation, he's not even thinking about that, he'll just turn around and say whatever it is. And actually, I'll give a great example of this in working action.

0:53:58.2 NL: So my husband likes to be very chatty first thing in the morning. Let's be clear, I do not. This is something I've been saying to him since the very early days of our relationship. He is very chipper, he is very jokey, but also he sometimes just wants to start into big discussions about something or start talking about this or whatever, and I like Jesus, give me a moment like to get into the day. So about a year or so ago, he starts the day by going, "Oh yeah, so I've been thinking, right? So we need to have a chat with the mortgage advisor because we got the re-mortgage in a few months time, and I could feel myself going, it's fucking seven something in the morning, like what the hell is this guy yelling about." And he goes like, "I know you get stressy about these things." So immediately I'm a kind of be like... So we're having this conversation, and I... He's asking me this stuff, I'm answering. We're having this conversation, but I think he starts to think that I, bearing in mind I'm not like massively chatty first in in the morning, I think he starts to think that I'm irritated with him. So he's like, okay, right, let's just like leave that, we know what we're gonna do now.

0:55:06.4 NL: He goes off and no word of a lie, I go and have a shower in the shower, my brain starts cycling through, "Is he annoyed at me? Have I pissed him off? Does he think that like I'm in a mood? All of this start sort of cycling through my mind. I come out of the shower, I get dressed, I do my usual morning sun salutation, still this stuff, popping up, and suddenly it hits me like a thunderbolt, and I start laughing my head off, and I say to myself, I would lay bets that he is downstairs and he has not given this conversation a second thought, and I started laughing my head off. There I was, I've been for that whole shower thing, and I was like, I'm gonna have to go and test this out. So I went downstairs, and he was like in his office, and I went in and I was like, "Hey.' He was like, "Hey, hey." He was having a coffee or whatever, and I said, Look, I just clear up, you

know, about our conversation earlier. And he looked at me like, blank, like, "What? What conversation?" And I was like, you know when we were talking about the mortgage. He went, "Oh, yeah." And I said, Hey, I just want to be like I wasn't being awkward. So then he went, "Ah, okay."

0:56:17.8 NL: And hadn't given it another thought, and I told him then about how I had realized that that is exactly what he would be doing, and he started laughing, and I said, I've had this massive eye-opening moment where I've realized, in those situations, if you wanna say something, you say it, if you think something, you'd express it. You don't realize, me... Without me even realizing it, I have run the calculations, and I'm already thinking, have I inconvenienced him? Have I pissed him off? And I said... And he was like, 'Wow, that's fascinating to sort of get that insight into how your brain works in that situation.' And now I've noticed that sometimes he would be like, "What are you thinking now? Are you trying to kind of think about how to sort everybody else out, or you're actually thinking about what it is that you need?" So it's interesting this way that sort of that fear of thinking that not having needs is a way to please people, is a way that unconsciously shows up, 'cause believe me, I actually don't believe that. So I don't believe that I need to not have needs to please him, but it is my default setting from being a kid that did that all her life and right up into adulthood, and I've been unlearning that over the years. So I'm far better than I ever have been but it's still a work in progress.

0:57:38.0 NA: Yeah, and I can definitely see how that becomes a barrier to intimacy because [chuckle] you're siloed off in your own head doing all of those calculations and that mental gymnastics and you're not connecting.

0:57:53.2 NL: Absolutely, and there's that whole thing of, if you know that you are prone of people-pleasing, you do almost have to really sort of check yourself and pull yourself into the present and listen to what the person is saying, take in your surroundings, notice your own body, notice your feelings, notice your thoughts that are coming up and really pay attention because you don't even realize how much you're sort of going off into your own headspace and a lot of that stuff, it's completely irrelevant to the situation at hand. And you're absolutely right that it is this... People-pleasing and intimacy don't go together. It's just not possible. And I think that once people start to understand that pretending to be something that you're not, telling people whatever it is that you think that they want to hear, sort of de-prioritizing your own needs, desires, expectations, feelings and opinions, is not intimacy, because no boundaries, no intimacy, you can't people please and have boundaries at the same time. When we're willing to have boundaries, which really means that we're willing to be ourselves to be more of who we really are, that means that we're willing to say and do the things that risk the possibility of discomforts...

0:59:07.7 NL: That risk the possibility of conflict. It's not that we're going to risk the possibility of conflict for conflict sake, but we need to know that in being who we really are and allowing the other person to as well, that we're willing to truly reveal ourselves, that we're willing to run the possibility of, "Oh, what did you mean by that?" Or but... We have to be willing to take that risk. And it is not about us being perfect, not gonna happen, and we don't even have to 100%, whatever that means, be ourselves, but we need to be willing to notice in our relationship when we're not being as honest with ourselves and with our partner as we really need and could be.

0:59:54.7 NA: This might be a weird question, but what even is intimacy, do you think?

1:00:00.9 NL: So intimacy is about that honest, vulnerable connection between people, it's like literally standing with each other and allowing yourself to each be seen and heard, so it's like, I'm letting myself be known, you're letting yourself be known, I'm open to knowing you more, I'm open to seeing you more, I'm open to hearing you more, and this risk and vulnerability that comes with that, and we have... Intimacy is only really what happens when moment-to-moment, we are truly being ourselves and allowing, this is important bit as well, and allowing the other person to as well.

1:00:43.6 NL: A lot of people think intimacy is like sex, or they think like intimacy is being in close proximity to people, and so they might say, "Oh, we were on a date, and it just felt so intimate." That's different to having intimate relationships. Intimate relationships are genuinely close relationships that have healthy boundaries, because healthy boundaries says you're truly being honest, and authentic, and transparent, and the allowing bit that I emphasized is because a lot of the time, we're trying to control others, so we use people-pleasing to try to control the people around us, 'cause it's like Oh, well, I have done all of these things. Now you be who I want you to be. And you let people be exactly who they are, and you are also exactly who you are, boom, you have intimacy. But if you're pretending to be something that you're not... If you're hiding. If you are not feeling your feelings, how on Earth can you have intimacy?

1:01:43.9 NA: Yeah. What just gets funny... I'm like making notes as you're talking. One of the things that just came up for me, this idea of not just being exactly who you are, but letting the other person be exactly who they are. I feel like there's a surface level reaction where I'm like, obviously, yes, of course, this makes so much sense, that's what I want, and then there's also some other kernel of truth where I'm like... I feel like it's so natural to, in small ways, like wanna control people or maybe that's just like you said, like that leftover from people-pleasing, so it's like I wanna ask you to sort of bridge the gap for me between saying that you want someone to be exactly how they are, and then accepting when exactly how they are is something you [laughter] wish was not the case. Does that sound terrible?

1:02:38.7 NL: Yeah. Listen, this is something that we humans wrestle with 'cause humans are always trying to be in control of the uncontrollable, and so we imagine that if we run a perfect home, and we always look really good and are sexy, and we say all the right things that it's like, Oh, well, the other person is never gonna take issue with me and our relationship will like be super happy all the time. That's just trying to control something there, and we don't like to, really, because I think that we've sort of gotten to a place where as soon as we hear the word control, we imagine that we mean... Oh, do you remember that film? *Sleeping With the Enemy*, You remember that Julia Roberts film, where she had a really controlling husband, and he turned the tins, they were all like positions like facing at the right... All the labels lined up, the towels lined up, so we imagine, Oh, control. Oh, that makes me abusive. Humans like to control the uncontrollable.

1:03:35.6 NL: I have used people-pleasing, perfectionism, even over-thinking to try to control my environment because it's like, well, if I out-perform then that protects me from scrutiny, that

protects me from criticism, that protects me from rejection, or at least you think so until somebody turns around, and they'd be exactly who they are, and it's like, What the hell? I've done all the things. This is the problem that we have as people pleasers who are also perfectionists. And so what can happen in the acceptance? You already know from being with your partner for three years, I already know from being with my husband now for coming up to 16 years, sometimes they get on your freaking nerves. Sometimes they say the wrong thing. Right?

1:04:23.6 NL: Sometimes you're like, "Oh my gosh." And yet, you absolutely love this person and accept them, and I think that something where we kind of go to as a place as humans is we can imagine that we can love somebody and be really annoyed with them at the same time, and something I say to people is that conflict is an important part of intimacy. When people say to me, I've never in all the years that I've been with my partner, or my husband, whatever, we've never had a fight, that's not a badge of honor. One or both of you are lying, 'cause if you've managed to go all this way, and you've never had a disagreement, then you don't have intimacy because you need to have run the possibility of disagreeing. It's not that you're disagreeing for disagreement sake, it's not you having dragged down fights, but you need to have that. And so part of the challenge is, is noticing those times when you're like, I want them to think exactly the way that I do. If it were me, I would do this. It's noticing that because that's an example of where control is showing itself.

1:05:21.6 NL: You're only human, we all have these moments, and then it's pulling yourself into the present and seeing this person who you actually love, care for, trust and respect, and going, and also this person is annoying. This thing that they're saying or doing is annoying me, and I also love and respect them. What is this situation showing me? Sometimes my husband annoys me because he says things that sometimes feel like... Not too truthful, that's not the way to say it, but he has a way of like, I will have been... I'll have had something on my mind, and he'll say something that is so flipping right on that is actually really annoying, and he says it in within a minute or two of me saying the things you're like, Oh my God, I've been reading about this thing for what feels like an eternity, and in thirty second or a minute, he turns around and says this thing, but also he is willing to call me... When I say call me, it's not in they way that we talk about in these times where we're making hell for people and cancelling them, but he is willing to turn around and say, Why are you doing that or I don't think it's cool that you did that as I would be, but when he does, in that moment, I feel enraged.

1:06:38.0 NL: It's only temporarily, but in my mind, I'm like that mother... Who the hell does he think he's turning around and saying... That's my first thought. And then I can feel literally, after saying that, I see this person in front of me, who I absolutely love, and I can feel my ego coming back, 'cause it's the ego that wants to control. You, Nicole, do not want to control. You actually don't give two flips about that stuff, but your ego likes to be right. It likes to win. It likes to have the power, so it is noticing those moments when the ego shows up. And an example of that actually in relationships, is that when you get into disagreements that it might be... That it feels like you have to have the last word.

1:07:20.9 NL: That you just have to keep going on and on and on and on. Yeah, but blah blah blah... And it's actually knowing when you've said your piece and letting it go, 'cause there are

sometimes I see this with a lot of people where in their relationships, they feel like they have to clobber the person, they have to hammer it home, so they say their peace, and then it's like they want the person to go, "Okay, then I totally agree with you. You're totally right. It's like, "Can't you just say your piece and be done. It's not about who's right, it's about what's right for the relationship, and that's saying your piece and letting it settle, 'cause sometimes people are not gonna have their light bulb moment in that moment. It might be later that day, it might be later on that week, but we have to know when to move on.

1:08:07.3 NA: That's very well said. Yeah, what would you say, other than people-pleasing, which you already spoke to, has been one of the bigger barriers to intimacy for you over the years?

1:08:25.1 NL: I would say... I didn't realize this until my 30s, but I'm brought up in Dublin in Ireland. So Ireland is a very Catholic country. I am not Catholic, but I did go to... I was with a Catholic school for... I was a couple of years of primary, all of secondary school, only Black person, only Protestant there, so that was the interesting one at school, and it took really into my 30s to realize how I clearly internalized a level of Catholic guilt around stuff, and that actually... I'm 44, and I was a teenager in the years where you heard a lot of stuff about women can have it all, and you were seeing a lot of sexually-related stuff in, for instance, magazines. That was kind of the culture, so it was like, Oh, you're having problems with your man, oh, here's 50 ways to please them, put on some sexy lingerie, cook them a nice dinner, but it was still ultimately about, Well, yeah, you can have it all.

1:09:30.4 NL: So you can go to university and you can have the job, but the most important thing in the world is to get a man and let yourself be this sexual play thing. And so it really kind of took really into my 30s to realize that I, in going to conference school with nuns and all that, I think... I don't wanna say it repressed. I don't think that is quite the right word, but I would find that I could be reserved, I think, in vocalizing my needs even for physical intimacy, because it was like, Oh, that's not a thing that you do as a girl or as a woman, so it was interesting noticing that and trying to evolve that and allowing myself to be vulnerable in those ways.

1:10:14.9 NA: So when you were just describing growing up in this, you can have it all era, but asterisks, the most important thing is still that you find the man, was there... Either as a result of that or in general, was there ever a time in your life where when it came to romantic relationships, you wanted the outcome or the relationship status more than you wanted the actual thing like more than you actually want to be in a relationship?

1:10:39.2 NL: Always.

1:10:40.3 NA: Okay, tell me about that. Nice.

1:10:40.4 NL: Yeah, I mean as I said, I've only been in one healthy relationship, and before that, I was just chasing variations of my mom and my dad, basically through my romantic relationships. I think... It's funny, my mom would literally be like... She really emphasized the importance of education and success. And at the same time, it was like, "You need a man for security, what gifts is

he buying you?" So it's really contradicting messages there. And so I wasn't choosy about my relationships before, so I often just kind of strolled my way into relationships because they were there, they had pursued and pursued me, and eventually I kind of relented, they had treated me mean and kept me keen... The list goes on. If there was a sort of vibe of unavailability and uncertainty, I was drawn in and I saw myself as mis-monogamy, but I realized that I didn't really understand what relationships were about. I saw it as I existed to please this person so that they would stick around and love me, so that they wouldn't abandon me. That's not what a relationship is about, and when people have patterns of being in unhealthy relationships or being involved with emotionally unavailable people, on some level, they're involved in those types of relationships because they have a fear of being... That they're not worthy enough, and they also have a fear being abandoned, and they keep trying to control the uncontrollable and to write the wrongs of the past.

1:12:13.5 NL: So I found that when I look back at my previous relationships, I can see this sort of progression to a point of breaking me and forcing me sort of to confront myself. I went into those relationships because I had learned what I had learned growing up as a child. And no, I grew up on a diet of... Well, I watched lots of things, It was Dennis Dee, Dallas, Falcon Crest, Beverly... Yeah, Beverly Hills 90210, Melrose Place. Great shows, so much romantic drama, and so yeah, I definitely was that person who... I think I just wanted to be in any relationship so that box was ticked, because if I was in that relationship, that meant that I was good enough, that I was worthy enough, that I had been chosen. And in the end, it actually came down to choosing myself.

1:13:04.7 NA: Yeah, have you ever taken a long intentional break from dating or from sex? 'Cause I hear you setting up this pattern of relationships that weren't working for you and then sort of combined with... Or compared to what you've shared about your current relationship, but was there a time in between where you were like, "I think I'm done with this for a while?" And, I ask because I've been partnered pretty much my whole life, and that's a state that I obviously enjoy being in because I keep doing it, and I am finding myself so curious about people who either choose not to be partnered or choose not to be for an extended period of time.

1:13:43.5 NL: Yeah, definitely. I think of the year that I... The year before I met him, I was in a space of, I'm going easy on the dating, sex, really just wanna park that. And I think partly what helped actually, was that if you're not drinking, then you can't actually use that as an excuse for why you did something that you...

1:14:10.8 NA: Someone who's almost 11 years sober, can confirm that that is true, yes.

1:14:14.6 NL: So at the time, because of my illness, part of my thing was like... I wasn't to be drinking, so I didn't have alcohol. And it was amazing how I was like, "Oh well, I just don't have that excuse anymore," 'cause I realized actually it was an excuse that was... It gave me permission to do something crappy that I was gonna do anyway type of thing. What I found... I attempted to date occasionally, and I was just like, "You know what, I prefer myself." So I actually went through a phase of staying home, chilled out in my knickers, watching TV, dating myself basically, because I was like... I felt like every Friday or Saturday was about going out, looking for men. It was... Even if we didn't necessarily say or that, but it was... We were going out clubbing, but we were also

looking for guys, and I was just so tired of that. And I felt that in that year... And it was the first time I'd had a proper full-on apartment for myself, I just found that... I remember I'd been dating someone and he stayed, and I remember the following morning actually sort of looking at my watch on the sly, because I was thinking to myself, "I'm gonna get to the gym, and then I'm gonna basically walk down to Selfridges and get myself a nice lunch." I actually wanted there anymore, and I was like, "Oh, this is an..." I really was starting to like myself...

1:15:38.9 NA: When you say you were starting to like yourself, do you think... Was that a result of spending more time just on your own or putting your... Because what you said about Friday and Saturday nights, like we say, we're going out clubbing, we say we're doing this, but really we're going out looking for men, that's so... When I think about different times in my 20s, that's just so relatable, and it's a lot of energy expenditure that you're not putting toward what you actually want and towards yourself.

1:16:03.0 NL: Yeah absolutely. And I was somebody who, while I had been in relationships and I had had periods of being single, but I realized that I had also... Even when I was having these periods of being single, I tended to be courting a level of male attention. Or, as I said, going out to the clubs, hunting people out. But that year that I was in that apartment was the year that I was no contact from my ex, who I also had to work with. And that year, which was when I started Baggage Reclaim, it was when I got the prognosis for my illness, so many things happened that year, and that was the year that I really had to learn how to be okay with myself. And it was not always pretty. I remember when I... It was no contact from my ex, and he was texting me, and it was like the middle of the night, and just half... Literally just sitting there in the dark having a conversation with myself, going, "You just can't do this. You just can't do this." And feeling so overworked with what was going on, but going, "You have to choose yourself here."

1:17:09.5 NL: And I found it was interesting 'cause at the time I had a personal blog. And I remember writing at various different occasions, I kept being in situations where I had to choose myself. It's not that I hadn't ever been before, but I was really quite aware of it in that year, where it ends up going, "No, I chose me. No, actually, I don't like this. I'm gonna choose me." And funny enough, a few days before I met my husband, I had been dating a guy for a few weeks, and I finished it with him. He was overstepping boundaries. And I remember getting off the phone and saying to myself, "Do you know what? I am actually genuinely happy being on my own. I would rather be on my own than be in yet another relationship with another emotionally unavailable man." And if that means that I've gotta be single until my 30s, my 40s, whatever it might be, then so be it. I literally said that I think the Wednesday or the Thursday, and I met my husband on the Saturday.

1:18:09.8 NA: That's wild.

1:18:12.2 NL: So the last thing that I wanted to ask you about, something you mentioned, I don't know where, somewhere in the corner of your deep, deep body of work that that pinged for me was you said that you had intentionally increased your own emotional availability through self-care, and I would love to hear more details and examples of that.

1:18:31.7 NL: Well, I think that a lot of people associate self-care, with, Oh, I should take myself shopping, I should go like pampering, and its candles and it's massage and that type of things. Don't get me wrong, it's nice to do things for ourselves, but it's not really so much about the candle. It's not so much necessarily about the treat, it's about giving time over to ourselves. And what I discovered was that in attempting to take care of myself, and sometimes having no flipping clue what to do or feeling deeply uncomfortable with that, but also sitting alongside that feeling and recognizing, Wow, girl, it really is quite a foreign thing for you to take care of yourself, so really being present to those feelings. I found as well that it's very easy to be like, Yeah, I'm okay. Yeah, I'm fine.

1:19:32.3 NL: That's often is what we're programmed to do, and so what I found was asking myself like, How am I doing today? Checking in with me. Sometimes I was surprised by what I had because I think I was often going at such a pace, something that has obviously been affected by the last two years of the pandemic, but often we've been going at such a pace that we do not really pay attention to what is going on in our body, to what's running through our mind. And so I became more emotionally available as a result of my self-care because actually, I was so much more aware of where I was pissed off. I noticed where I was resentful, overwhelmed, feeling guilty, feeling shame, whatever it might be, I noticed how I was impatient. Sometimes I'm rushing along, it's like, Okay, I'm gonna do this yoga, but okay, but I could be doing this, blah blah blah. It was like, "No, what's that all about, Natalie? So being really curious about, why am I rushing, why am I kind of squeezing that in in that way? Why am I sort of dismissive of myself in that instance? Yet if somebody else, I don't know, wanted something of me in that context, I'll probably rush to do it.

1:20:43.3 NL: And so it has been... Journaling has been great for me because I'm often surprised about what comes out on the page, but it really has really getting into a more honest place with myself about what I feel. It's noticing what my body is doing, and the big game changer for me was having a realization, I think it was probably like two, three years ago, where I made this connection, where the people-pleasing, the perfectionism, the over-thinking, the over-giving, and it's all really people-pleasing, but I had this light-bulb moment where I realized that it was short-hand for every single time I people please, it is short-hand for I am or I was anxious about something. Once I made that connection, so once I realized, "Oh, here I am contemplating this thing, pleasing somebody in this way, or, oh wow, I realized, what the benefit of hindsight, that was that, I started asking myself, What am I, or what was I anxious about?"

1:21:49.5 NL: And maybe I'm anxious that I'm going to be rejected, maybe I'm anxious that people would talk about me, maybe I'm being judged, maybe I'm anxious I'm going to lose something, but what that also revealed to me was making the connection, realizing that my people-pleasing is me being hyper-vigilant. I'm hyper-vigilant about other people's feelings. I am hyper-vigilant about the possibility of displeasure, that I have been in a heightened for a long time, and I'm sure you can identify with this, given that you were suddenly a parent at 13 years old, even though you didn't actually have a child. We were hyper-vigilant, a fight, flight, freeze response has been busy for a long time, and... Start by taking care of myself, I was like, "Oh, this is super interesting, 'cause it turns out that a lot of the things that I think are normal... Like just me being somebody who has an attention to detail, who likes to work very hard, who wants to be there for others.

1:22:56.4 NL: Yeah, some of that stuff is actually my hypervigilance, it is people-pleasing, it is perfectionism, and now that I am so aware of that stuff, it's like... And it's funny because every year that's gone by since my life changed so much, all those years ago, each year, I'm like, yeah, you know, it's full so much and you feel so... But actually, it just keeps going and going, but suddenly I see so much of that around me, and now that I see it for what it is, I feel like I'm emotionally available in such a different way, especially when you're able to sit there and notice how you have these sort of triggered responses, and you can also sit there and realize danger is passing, it's not even there, and reassure yourself and be present to yourself without judgment.

1:23:51.7 NA: Oh, yeah, something I've been thinking about a lot in the last couple of months is wanting partnership without self-abandonment, and I hear that a lot in what you're describing, that it's... I think you recently said something about this on Instagram, this idea that if you tried to be what you thought someone wanted and it still didn't work out, that your pain is actually about self-abandonment and not about the disappointment or their seeming rejection of you, and that blew my mind with how true it was. That it's... The pain comes from when I have abandoned myself...

1:24:23.4 NL: Yeah.

1:24:24.7 NA: Not... It's not even about the rejection, it's about not being on my own team.

1:24:30.3 NL: Yeah, absolutely, and this is... When... I mentioned earlier on that my youngest daughter struggled with anxiety, and I went for a period of being anxious about her anxiety, so I became hypervigilant about, "Oh My God, is she gonna have a panic attack? Is she gonna... Well, it's understandable, you worry about your loved one. However, what I realized was that in the process of doing that, that I obviously started behaving in ways that caused me to abandon myself 'cause I wasn't quite taking care of myself enough, and then I really felt that in my body, and I felt that in how I was starting to show up, and it was stepping back and realizing, hold on a second, you can take care of somebody, without abandoning yourself.

1:25:14.3 NL: Like a lot of... So many women think that being a mother means that you have to abandon yourself. That's not true. So many of us also think because to be real... Let's be real. Patriarch has made sure that men are not going into relationships going, Oh yes, I've got to abandon myself, it's women who were socialized to do that, and I am not comfortable, for any length of time, doing that to myself, which is a great place to be in now, at this stage of my life, 'cause there was a time when abandoning myself was as natural to me as flipping breathing, but I can't do that to myself, and when I do... Because, "Hell, I'm only human. And so we can abandon ourselves in ways that we don't even... It could be at work, it could be part... Whatever it might be, when I catch myself in it, it allows us to take responsibility, not in a judgmental harsh way, but it's like, Okay, well, now I can take care of myself, now I can do what I need to do.

1:26:13.1 NA: Yeah, I love that so much. I think that's a good place to start to wrap up, unless there's anything that hasn't come up yet that you really wanted to mention or chat about?

1:26:22.2 NL: No. Oh my gosh, this was... I would say this is probably one of the deepest conversations I've ever had.

1:26:28.8 NA: Well, I love that. I will take that as a compliment. It's like...

1:26:32.5 NL: Yeah, I should just say I've ever had in a podcast, but yeah, it's like...

1:26:36.1 NA: Yeah.

1:26:36.6 NL: Yeah, I was like, Wow, this is... I totally did not expect to talk about a lot of the things that I spoke about today.

1:26:41.7 NA: Well, I appreciate all of the honesty. Last couple of things, I'd like to ask, if you could leave folks with an affirmation of sorts based on what we talked about, what would that be? What's your wish for everyone listening?

1:26:54.7 NL: Oh wow. My wish for everyone, and this is really at the heart of everything that I do, is that they embrace treating and regarding themselves as well as others, with love, care, trust and respect. I think that when we truly embrace that for others as well as ourselves, that we experience much richer relationships, that we truly are allowed to evolve into being more of who we really are.

1:27:23.9 NA: I love that you used the word respect because I feel like while that hasn't come up a lot throughout this conversation, I do think that's sort of the through line, right, that when we were talking about setting boundaries with family of origin, like there's, okay, you're respecting yourself, you're respecting your partner, you're respecting who you are as adults, the not abandoning yourself, like you're respecting yourself by not being willing to walk away from your own needs in order to just be hypervigilant out of fear of rejection or whatever, that there is this thread of respect that... It's a word that I don't even think about that much when it comes to my own self-tending or even relationships, but I think it's really powerful. I'm glad you said that.

1:28:00.9 NL: Yeah, that's why I always have those four together, the love, care, trust and respect, because when you have one, you have the other. So when people say to me, Oh yeah, yeah, we love you so much. And yet, if you don't wanna accept somebody for who they are, you don't respect them, the trust and the care cannot be there, and so the four together. And respect is so important. We can't turn around and be like, Oh my God, I have so much respect for that person, and we have so little respect for ourselves. That doesn't even add up.

1:28:26.8 NA: Yeah, what is the best place for people to find you and say hello? Do you have a favorite way to connect with new folks or invite them into your world?

1:28:34.7 NL: Instagram, so that is the best place to get ahold of me. I'm at natlue on there, N-A-T-L-U-E. And of course, I've got my website baggageclaim.com or co.uk, which has got a podcast and the blog and all the rest on there.

1:28:52.6 NA: Yeah, I will put links to those things. You have such a deep body of work that people who are interested in any one of the many things that we've talked about, there's podcast episodes, there's blog posts, you've been doing this in a deep way for a long time, so there's plenty of things that I recommend people check out.

1:29:03.9 NL: Oh Thank you so much it's always a pleasure to chat with you.

1:29:08.5 NA: Yeah, thank you, thank you.

[music]

1:29:20.4 NA: So thanks so much for listening to this very first season of the Pop-Up Pod. All of the intimate and honest conversations you'll hear on this show, are 100% listener-funded, paid for by my sliding scale patreon community, that means no ads and no sponsors, just a couple hundred people coming together to ensure that everyone involved in making this podcast gets paid. That includes me as the host and creator, my sound engineer and musician Adam Day, as well as every single one of our guests. The patreon community also funds the creation of a full transcript for each episode, which you can find in the show notes to help make these conversations more accessible for all. Those are our production ethics here at the Pop-Up Pod, and if that aligns with your own values, I would love to invite you to come check out our community at patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. It's a fun, easy, and welcoming space. You also get access to lots of bonuses, and remember, it's run on a sliding scale, so you can pay whatever amount that makes most sense for you each month, depending on your circumstances.

1:30:20.0 NA: That's patreon.com/nicoleantoinette. And hopefully, I'll see you there.

Thank you for choosing Scribie.com

Cross-check this transcript against the audio quickly and efficiently using our online Integrated Editor. Please visit the following link and click the Check & Download button to start.

<https://scribie.com/files/8005fe0716084939bfaeb2fed5507fff07e7d83>