



# The Millennial Life

podcast

with Liz Higgins

## **Episode 2: To The Millennial Commitment-Phobe A Talk with Avrum Nadigel, Author of [Learning to Commit](#)**

Liz Higgins (00:02):

Hey, y'all! Liz Higgins here, and welcome to the Millennial Life Podcast, where my main goal is to share conversations that will inspire you and drive you toward the life and relationship you desire. I'm here to share what I've learned as a licensed therapist and relationship coach specializing in millennial relationships and wellness, as well as transformative conversations with other professionals. Thanks for listening and enjoy today's episode!

Liz Higgins (00:35):

Hey, y'all! Thanks for tuning in today. I want to start by asking you a question - Why is commitment so hard? Are you a commitment-phobe? No, seriously, I'm really asking because, if so, this episode may be helpful for you. Or perhaps you've been on the receiving end of a relationship with somebody that's kind of a commitment-phobe or exited the relationship dramatically, and you don't know why... there wasn't anything really wrong going on in the relationship. It just ended. As our generation continues to grow, as relationships continue to evolve and expand, I think that commitment and the idea of it is becoming scarier for many people. Like, how do you even make relationships last? How can you know when you're with "The One", Capital O? I mean, these are questions I've heard on repeat from clients over my years as a therapist and coach, and these questions certainly make sense, but as I've learned more about relationships and marriage, I've started to wonder if we're asking the wrong questions and looking at commitment in the wrong way.

Liz Higgins (02:00):

Like what it is today is very different than what it was just a few generations ago. Not even religion, not even having children, not even having all the healthy relationship skills can be the thing that keeps the relationship intact longterm. As hugely valuable as those things are, they may not be enough. My guest today talks about his own journey with commitment phobia and how he would get to the same timeframe in relationship after relationship, where he would exit stage left. I wonder if some of you can relate or like I said earlier, if maybe you've been on the receiving end of this type of breakup. So he's going to share exactly what got him out of that repetitive relationship cycle and into a marriage of over a decade now, which is awesome. In the therapy world, a lot of times you'll hear therapists, clinicians talk about attachment styles.

Liz Higgins (03:02):

So a behavior like this of commitment phobia might be expressed or understood as like, anxious avoidant or an avoidant attachment style. And there's ways to work with that around this lens and within that framework. But something that really sucks honestly, is that in a lot of dating and relationship books I've read, I've seen writers encourage people to stay away from people like this. And I think it's kind of sad. It's unfortunate. Because we really have the greatest opportunity to grow and to change - yes, change - in relationship. We're going to talk about this today

wrapped within the themes of family systems theory, which was one of my first introductions to working with clients, relationally and systemically. It honestly changed my life and started me personally on a path of real relationship exploration, understanding... And it's now gotten me to a place of serious security in myself and my relationship.

Liz Higgins (04:08):

There's many paths to a healthy relationship, right? And I want, I want to acknowledge that. It's very important that you know I'm an advocate for lots of different approaches and that one size does not fit all. But if there's, if there's anything you take from today's conversation, I hope it's that the patterns in our life tell us where there's something to learn. They show us where we have room to grow. All right, let's dive in! I'm bringing to you today a conversation with Avrum Nadigel, who is a Masters of Social Work, and also comes from a degree and a Masters of Commerce. So an interesting blend of like business and social work, and also has postgraduate training in Family Systems Theory, which is the core of some of the themes we're going to talk about today, whether you realize it or not. He's so knowledgeable with this method and framework of looking at life and relationships. And something that really sparked me on my own journey towards relational growth and an understanding of myself honestly, was when I first was exposed to Family Systems Theory in grad school. So we share a common bond, a common interest here, and I'm so excited to be having this conversation today. Hi, Avrum, thanks for being here!

Avrum Nadigel (05:35):

Thanks Liz. It's good to be here.

Liz Higgins (05:37):

And where are we? Where am I talking to you from? Where are you? Cause I know we're not close to each other.

Avrum Nadigel (05:44):

Well, our countries are close - I'm in Canada. Um, and, uh, I'm in Toronto, Ontario.

Liz Higgins (05:51):

Yes! Far, but close in mind and thoughts and hearts. So, I... Okay. I don't, I don't even know where to start because there's so much great stuff that I know will come from this conversation. And maybe, maybe my intro here is that when we met, I had the pleasure of reading your book. It's called "Learning to Commit", and our little tagline is "The best time to work on your marriage is when you're single." And boy did that resonate for me on a personal level, just knowing the work and the journey that I had been on, but also with the clients that I work with. And certainly also with millennials. We have our issues with commitment and it's something that comes up a lot when I sit with clients, um, it's something that has drawn clients to our practice here because we focus in on those, those pieces of the story where it's like, people feel like they just can't get it right. And they're not, they're ultimately not comfortable with commitment. And so you were the first I had ever read where you were blending this information that we know from a theory framework, but to like the real life experience of having gone through this yourself. So you were petrified of commitment and you didn't marry until your late thirties - sounds very millennial. What do you think you were so afraid of? Tell me about this.

Avrum Nadigel (07:17):

Well, at the time, I didn't know. At the time, I was intellectualizing the whole process. And so I assumed that marriage was an outdated social, uh, contract, uh, that served my grandparents well. Um, and, but by my parents' generation, I noticed there was a lot of divorce and I just thought that it was, you know, it was time to rework, you know, one's thinking about relationship and by the time I hit 30, I didn't think I'd ever marry. But the only reason why I never went far enough to commit actually to my, you know, fear of commitment, uh, is because I wanted to be a dad. And, you know, it takes a while for institutions to change. And so single dads aren't exactly, uh, it's not an easy racket. And so I used to assume that "I need to bite the bullet and somehow figure out a way to get married if I want to be a dad."

Avrum Nadigel (08:21):

And so it was a endless pursuit of reading books about commitment phobia, which is what I struggled with. And it was, it was very depressing because the literature out there is primarily written for women, especially self-help relationship books. My first publisher actually told me for all of our marketing, (that I sort of enjoyed) they were like, you know, this is, you know, this has to be geared towards, towards women. They're the main purchasers of self help books. Don't shoot the messenger here. I'm just telling you what my, what my publisher told me. And so all these books about commitment phobia were written, (at least in the nineties when I was reading them) were written for women. And the message was always the same - "Run for the hills! Commitment-phobes, um, are broken almost like they have a neurological glitch and they can't be fixed.

Avrum Nadigel (09:07):

And if you're in a relationship with one, you will forever be disappointed." And that was really depressing for me because it really did feel like there was something wrong with my brain, you know? Um, and that, uh, it was either a lack or too much dopamine or something, I don't know, but I was pretty convinced that it was, it was a neurochemical. And, uh, that it stayed that way until I attended a random talk on a random night when I was living in Vancouver, British Columbia, and that talk changed quite literally, everything for me.

Liz Higgins (09:40):

Well, you have to tell us, so what was that talk?

Avrum Nadigel (09:45):

Well, it just so happens that that talk was delivered by my late coauthor, (a book I just released last week, uh, for therapist) and my coauthor, my late coauthor who died in 2010 was a professor of social work at the University of British Columbia.

Avrum Nadigel (10:02):

He ran his own marriage and family training institute in Vancouver, sort of a, he's a very well known marriage and family therapist and speaker in Vancouver. And so they're, in the Jewish community, they would bring in these different psychiatrists and therapists to speak about relationships and, you know, and I would go, I would go down. I wouldn't go to learn anything. As a practicing therapist at the time, I figured I knew everything. I went because I hoped to meet a single woman. That's why I would go - because I'd hope there would be someone that's single there and that never happens. But yeah, it's true. And that's why I went and that's why most of the people went there and, you know, the crowd was a lovely crew of like 30, 40 year olds and 50 year olds, uh, some 20 year olds, all single. Pathetically single.

Avrum Nadigel (10:45):

And, um, we couldn't, we just couldn't figure this thing out. And every speaker came in, they talked about the same thing, "Communication and Compromise. Communication and compromise, blah, blah, blah." And that was almost every single talk. And it just, it rang hollow for me. It's not that it wasn't true. It just, I knew that. I knew that and that didn't seem to be working for me. And then I go one night, um, it was after the end of yet another relationship and I was pretty despondent and I just, I, I started going to these talks. I stopped for a while cause I was in a relationship and I started going back again, hoping to meet someone. And this guy was there. Um, this Dr. David Friedman, and he starts his talk by saying that we marry people. We pick our partners to either do something differently from the families we grew up in, or we pick our partners to repeat something.

Avrum Nadigel (11:34):

And there was something about that idea that we pick our partners unconsciously to either repeat something from our past, or to get something different, to have a redo in a way, um, from our past. And something about that rang true because there was a pattern to the women that I was dating and it wasn't working with. And I started thinking, you know, I always thought when the relationships ended, it was because I was dating the wrong women. But when that talk ended, I started thinking "One sec, this actually might have something to do with me that I'm sort of, you know, working away at a knot here and that maybe, maybe I shouldn't be running away from these relationships as quickly." Anyways, I was very interested in the talk. And during the Q&A, I just happened to be reading a book by Harriet Lerner called "The Dance of Intimacy".

Avrum Nadigel (12:26):

It's a wonderful book. And I raised my hand and I said, "Dr. Friedman, your talk sounds remarkably similar to a book I'm reading." And a woman in the crowd stands up and said, "If you like Harriet Lerner, and what Dr Friedman is talking about, you should read a book by David Schnarch called "Passionate Marriage". And then David Friedman, the speaker, said, "Oh boy, Dr. Schnarch is doing some of the most interesting work in sex and marriage therapy." So that morning, the next morning I ran out to a bookstore in Vancouver and it was sold out. I couldn't find it in a few stores. I finally found the book. I sat down Liz, I was in a coffee shop and no joke - this has never really, this never happened to me before - within one hour of reading this book, (which we can get into some of the, you know, the terms).

Avrum Nadigel (13:16):

But within one hour of reading this book, my entire world view of marriage and relationships shifted. Um, the only way to describe it is as a paradigm shift and I left the coffee shop excited about dating for the first time in my life at the age of 32. I met my wife, then girlfriend, within a year of reading David Schnarch's book and we were married two years later. And so I, you know, I will forever credit David Friedman's talk. Um, and I have to say just one quick thing. You know, I did not know Liz, at the time, that Harriet Lerner trained with a man that we both know - Dr. Murray Bowen, the late Dr. Murray Bowen. I also did not know that Dr. Friedman, when he was speaking in Vancouver, also trained with Murray Bowen. And once again, I had no idea when Schnarch was recommended to me, that he bases his whole theory and "Passionate Marriage" on Dr. Bowen's works. So when all of that came together in that coffee shop, when Bowen was mentioned, and then I remembered Harriet Lerner saying Bowen.... Everything sort of came together, not only personally, uh, did I, um, start to date differently and think differently about marriage, but professionally I changed the entire way I work. And my life really has been

very different. And that all happened within 24 hours, which is sort of, sort of odd, but that was my story.

Liz Higgins (14:39):

That is so amazing. It's like shattering almost to hear the story and just how all those pieces came together. And I totally hear you. It's like, you start to learn these things or you read a book by an author and then you find out, oh - they've worked together with this other person. You love their work and this and that, but those are things that for me, kind of happened over these longer stretches of time and for you, it was like, bam, bam, bam. This is all came together so instantaneously. And the perspective, the paradigm shift as you call it, that happened really set you on this completely new path.

Liz Higgins (15:23):

There's so much that I want to ask you about with this, but part of me wanted to go back and, and maybe even just for the people listening, could you describe like, before all this happened and you were going to that group and you were searching for something, you didn't know what that was... But you talked about like these patterns or maybe similarities even, in relationships you had when that commitment phobia experience was happening. Like, can you describe that more? Like, what did that feel like for you to be in relationships throughout your life that were this way.

Avrum Nadigel (15:55)

Yeah, I mean, it was always the same. It was always the same thing. There, there would be the chase. And so I would, I would either meet a woman online or, you know, a blind date. And, uh, I would start conjuring up a fantasy of what my life will be like with this woman. And I would get, um, sort of, uh, enraptured by this fantasy of what my life will be like. And it was intoxicating, right? So for weeks I would chase this woman and, and, and, and every morning the sun shone bright. And, and I was, you know, the day was, even though I, you know, I might've hated my job and everything was just beautiful and fantastic and, and, and luscious. And, and finally, you know, every now and then I would be successful and I would date the woman. And, um, and then every single time Liz, at about the six week mark, eight week mark, the honeymoon phase would end for me.

Avrum Nadigel (16:45):

And the reality of the relationship would kick in and a sort of boredom and malaise would kick in. And I always, always, always interpreted that that something is wrong. Why? Because I was taught, I was taught from a very young age, if it doesn't feel right it's wrong. That was drilled into my head ever since I was, um, I would say 11, 12. It was told to me by friends, definitely by family... By the way, in a loving way. Not in a, in a mean spirited way. It was always told to me that if you're, if you're dating someone and it feels wrong, it's wrong. Um, and then there was another message that was told to me that scared the living hell out of me - my parents divorced so that, it really hit home. And that's, uh, you know when you're with the wrong partner. This idea of be very, very careful because, you know, "Don't pick the wrong partner.

Avrum Nadigel (17:34):

If you pick the wrong partner, Oh, your, your life and your marriage is going to be a living hell." And then along comes David Schnarch in "Passionate Marriage". And he has a couple of

doozers that was like a 2x4 across my head. Schnarch's research suggests that actually that is completely false. Now he's basing this on Bowen's idea. And he said something that was just, it just blew me away. And what he said was, this is one quote that always stuck with me. "Everybody marries for the wrong reasons. It takes being married to figure out what the right reasons are." And that was completely the opposite of what was told to me.

Liz Higgins (18:14):

We just need to like pause and like soak that one in, because I hear that. Obviously similar to you as a relationship therapist now, as a professional that studies these things, but like that hits home in such a deeply true way because we on a societal level - and I think very general level - don't look at relationships that way. We don't look at commitment for that deeply vulnerable opportunity that it is. We're not, we're not chasing that part at the beginning.

Avrum Nadigel (18:48):

Well, and also because, um, people are, uh, we are a very feeling-centric society. So if it feels wrong, it's wrong. And if it feels right, it's right. Uh, and I completely, by the way, I understand that. When clients are in my office and they're engaged, and I know that their history is one with fear of commitment and they start getting cold feet before their wedding, and they interpret their cold feet as "I'm with the wrong partner". I get that! I completely get that. And, you know, Liz you read my book, I mean... My wife and I, we broke up during our engagement. And then we got back together right before the wedding. So I intimately understand cold feet and I intimately understand the profound fear of anxiety and the very loud message in one's ears that you're marrying the wrong person. I get that.

Avrum Nadigel (19:34):

But one of the things that grounded me, um, was this theory that you and I are, are aware of and understand - a Family Systems Theory, um, and this general idea that people don't pick partners for the wrong reason. Now I'll tell you something, Liz, when you tell someone that message, (especially if they were divorced) people get very reactive to that message. They get very angry when they hear that idea. You know, "That can't be right. Of course, people marry wrong." Well, according to the theory, and at least the research in the Family Systems world, we don't marry wrong. There are very, very powerful, evolutionary reasons why we pick our partners the way we do. And, you know, the way I describe it is: you know, Liz, when you see two dogs in the park and they're sniffing each other's butt, you know what I'm talking about?

Avrum Nadigel (20:17):

When dogs do that thing, they basically, they do this thing. I don't know what they're sniffing, but they're sniffing something. And they seem to know it's like, you know, that's the butt that I want! I don't know how they know, but they know. Well, human beings do the same thing. When we're dating, we've evolved. We've evolved to have a 10 eye in terms of allowing people in that is emotionally compatible, I would say, um, with us. And by the time most people hit six to eight months, (this is what I tell the singles in my office) when you hit about six to eight months, you already have more or less done your butt sniffing, I guess, is one way of putting it. And that, and that really, Schnarch talks about this. He also puts it about eight months, nine months. But it doesn't take five years. And that's why, um, uh, I took a lot of solace in that theory. So when I was dating Elisa, (Elisa is my wife) and I had a really tough time during our courtship and our engagement, many times doubts, many times wanting to run for the hills. It was the theory that grounded me saying, "Oh, no, no, no. This is just, you know, your anxiety has nothing to do with the partner you pick. Your anxiety is your unbelievable fear of commitment."

Liz Higgins (21:31):

What was that like for you, like bridging that gap when you were with her and you had started, or maybe even, you know, you were a little further beyond just having started, learning these things. I mean, it happened all in that same year, I guess you mentioned. But like, how did you bridge that gap between those fears and those old messages and the scripts that you were believing your whole life and then what you knew to be true based on what you were learning? How did, what, what was that process like in between that? How'd you actually do that?

Avrum Nadigel (22:02):

Yes. So there's a couple of things and you know, nothing is simple. You know, there is no smoking gun. There is no silver bullet to any of this, but for me, it was a few things. Number one, there was the idea from David Freeman because I was reading David Friedman's book along with David Schnarch's book at the time in 2000, what year was it actually? So... Elisa and I probably were dating around 2003... Around there. And so the idea was that people who are afraid of commitment are afraid of one primary thing. There's a few things, but there's, there's one thing. And anybody, any of your clients or anyone who's listening to this will understand this. When you have a very weak sense of self... And what I mean by that, is when you're not clear on your principles, when your values are vague, when you are oriented to other people's feelings... When you get into a relationship, you tend to lose yourself in the relationship.

Avrum Nadigel (22:51):

And what I mean by that is you tend to, you know, when I'm on my own, when I was in my twenties and I was having a coffee downtown by myself, I felt very secure in who I was. But as soon as I got into a relationship and in the relationship, my partner would push and pull me to do things or to want to do something. I would lose who I was and get very anxious. And I almost felt like I was disappearing. It was really weird. It was this feeling of disappearing into the fusion of the relationship. And so I had to break up to breathe again. Because I felt that I was losing myself. Along comes David Schnarch and Friedman, and they say, "Oh no, Avrum, you misunderstand something. If you could learn to stay, you will find yourself. Because if the only way you can be your true self is by being alone and having Americanos in a coffee shop, you'll die that way.

Avrum Nadigel (23:37):

You will live the rest of your life, and the only way you can be secure in who you are is to be single." And again, because I want to have a child and wanted to be a dad, it wasn't an option. So by the way, just to be clear, any of your listeners who want to remain single - you know, my books and my work isn't for them. I'm... My message is for the people who are petrified of commitment. They want to commit, but they're so afraid that they're gonna get lost in the commitment. And so that idea really was grounding for me when, when those fears, um, when those fears kicked in. And the other thing that I had going for me was just a wonderful therapist, a very kind wise, man, um, an analyst, not a Family Systems Therapist. And I'll never forget, uh, after my first date with, uh, with my wife, uh, I came into his office and I was really bummed out because, um, my then wife and I were talking on the phone for months before our first date,

Avrum Nadigel (24:29):

And we had, so, you know, the conversation was great and of course, nothing is going to ever live up to such, you know, intense, long distance conversations. And then we went on a date and it was ehh, it wasn't, it wasn't so great. So I go, I go into his office and I'm pretty bummed out. And he looks at me and he says to me, "Well, what changed in her on your date?" And I said, "I don't understand what you're asking me." And he goes, "Well, what changed? For months you're talking to this woman. She's funny, she's intelligent. You share the same principles. Everything is going great. What changed?" And I really couldn't pinpoint to anything except for the fact that there was a bit of an emotional letdown. And what he said to me was "Try to cultivate the friendship a bit and see where it goes."

Avrum Nadigel (25:07):

Don't make any drastic changes. Don't let your strong feelings right now of disappointment end this relationship." It was the wisest piece of advice, um, that I ever got. And so that's what I did. I went home. I was still bummed out, but you know, my wife was in medical school at the time and we were in a long distance relationship. And so, you know, we kind of spoke on the phone a little bit and, and because of the long distance, it actually worked for me because it allowed me to throw kindling on the friendship. And as the friendship grew, and we would come in to see each other, every, like, let's say three months, the romantic relationship sort of blossomed over a longer period of time. And I just woke up one day and realized "My gosh, it's eight months later. And, um, I'm in a real relationship." Um, so they're the three, you know, the three things were a little bit theory, a good therapist, and for me, a long distance relationship really worked.

Liz Higgins (25:58):

Well. Even that piece is really interesting to hear because, you know, I mean that obviously is not the norm in our world today. We can find a relationship so quickly, I mean, it's in the palm of our hand. And I think people get very obsessed with this idea that they can simply scroll and swipe and swipe, and then they're going to find this person that checks all the boxes, but, and then they, you know, plunge into this honeymoon phase of a thing and then it just dies or whatever. But I've actually, I've talked to some clients that feel very nervous and cautious about doing something longterm. But I almost think in the back of my head, like, man, I wish this were the way that we could do relationships because it, it carves out that space for you to navigate that balance of being in a relationship and being aware of yourself in that. So I don't know. I mean, can you maybe just say a couple more things, I'm just curious to know more about how that long distance piece truly helped you.

Avrum Nadigel (26:58):

Yeah. And by the way, I should just say that Elisa and I met online. So even though, um, your, you know, your listeners might be thinking, well, you know, this was, this was, you know, that was, then this is now. Now we have so many more options. It's not true. It was the exact same thing for me. I was dating. I mean, I was in Vancouver. I dated, I'm embarrassed to say I dated a lot of women in Vancouver. And then I went to, then I went to Seattle and I dated women in Seattle and Portland. And so I was using, I was using online dating sites, just like people are now. And the plethora of options was great for a commitment-phobe like me, because at the first sign of anxiety I would bolt. Uh, and so really it was, it was because I was in a pretty dark place and pretty despondent about the fact that commitment-phobes, you know, um, are sort of doomed to be that way.

Avrum Nadigel (27:48):



And I've just went in pretty, you know, blah, blah, place. It actually worked for me when, um, I was dating and when Elisa and I were dating because I had to, I had to get to a place of almost a lack of hope. So I wasn't running back to the online sites. And so what I tell people sometimes is that, you know what, maybe you still gotta play the field and they look at me like, I'm crazy. No, no, no, no. I want to get married. I'm like, you don't sound like you do. It's like sometimes, sometimes we have to gorge on ice cream and get good and nauseous before we go, "You know what? The pain of change now has outgrown the pain of staying the same." So I really had to feel like I was sick and tired of being sick and tired of being single and just playing the field.

Avrum Nadigel (28:31):

And so that actually sort of worked for me in terms of the long distance thing. What worked for me, what worked for me was that it was short, intense bursts of physical contact in sort of a very artificial way. And that worked for me because just that maybe at a moment when, uh, Elisa and I were, where my sense of the honeymoon phase would end, I'd have to say goodbye to her. And so there was something, there was sort of like a prolonged intensity that happened because of this. Cause it's, you know, you go to the airport and it's sad and you're thinking about it, but then I get my freedom, Liz, I get my freedom back, but I have a relationship. So I have my freedom, but I also have my commitment. And that duality really, really worked for me. And I'm not suggesting that people should adopt this, because it might not work for them.

Avrum Nadigel (29:15):

But long distance really worked for me. I should say one other thing, because I think this is important to say. My wife and I, uh, at the time and still to this day to a certain degree, are both, um, practicing Jews. And so we also adopted certain laws of modesty. So it wasn't like, you know, we were having sex on the first date or any of that kind of stuff. And that's something else I would say to people, especially people who are afraid of commitment. And this is an old line from Dr. Roberta Gilbert, uh, an author and psychiatrist in the States, a Family Systems thinker. She has a quote and I'm going to butcher it, but it's in my first book, something about, you know, if young people could just cultivate a friendship and put pause on the physical sexual relationship over time, you just might wake up and realize that you have found a good life partner.

Avrum Nadigel (29:59):

I think it's very hard to make those judgment calls when you are having sex too early into a relationship before you understand the character of the person that you're with. And it is shocking to me today, the clients in my office, where, you know, first date sex, second date sex. And, um, you know, uh, it's really sort of, uh, interesting how there isn't even an intellectual understanding that this might not be the best way forward for an emotional, uh, longterm commitment. That you, you actually might be mucking up the process by hopping into bed too early. And I know this sounds very, you know, old school and, you know, a little starchy, but I really do think it's true.

Liz Higgins (30:44):

It could sound old school to people that are listening. And, but I think that we just already know there, there's research that indicates that these kinds of things you're talking about can be true. And it's like research that has come out saying, you know, couples co-habiting, living together. It doesn't necessarily predict the success or compatibility of the partners with each other. And I hear that a lot. There's kind of that thinking of, "Well, we're going to move in first and see how

that feels and kind of start this life together and blah, blah, blah.” And I, I, I, I think sometimes it can be people following that feeling more than following what they know will be the true way to get them what they want. Which takes a lot more work, as you are sharing with us. It's like a lot more going into yourself and knowing what you value and what you need and want out of a relationship and a life. It's not just “Does this feel right?”. And it's great to feel good, but if we're solely chasing that thing, then yeah, I think it does. It can lead to problems sometimes. So that definitely makes sense.

Avrum Nadigel (31:47):

And, and, you know, I'll tell you right now, um, in my practice, I can think of a number of couples who have been married - not a long time, by the way. I'm talking about five, six years - and they're encountering their first major challenge. Usually it's the birth of a child, uh, and they're exhausted and they're stressed and they're not having sex anymore. And what's freaking them out is that they don't understand because they base their whole relationship on that first month when they were having sex on the washing machine and having sex in the street. And they're having sex on subways.

Avrum Nadigel (32:21):

And, you know, they, they erroneously thought that this will be forever and ever, and that this is, this is why we were so compatible. There was no way, first of all, there's no cultural institution to tell them that, Oh, by the way, this is going to change. This will not continue like this forever and ever. Um, unfortunately, uh, you know, there are some people who read Esther Perel's work. I wish more would! Her book “Mating in Captivity” speaks to... Yeah, it's a great, and at her, by the way, all of her work is based on she, she credits David Schnarch and Murray Bowen in that book. And so, you know, I mean, uh, young couples don't understand that what you have today is going to... Not only is it going to change, it has to change because we are human beings and we are designed to evolve over time. So natural problems in your marriage is natural. It is supposed to be that way. Sex is supposed to change. Your communication style will change. And what freaks people out is that when the change kicks in, no one, not in their premarital courses, not in the books that they've read, no one has prepared them for that change. And it just freaks people out.

Liz Higgins (33:30):

Yes.

Liz Higgins (33:42):

I want to go back to a really significant piece of your story that you just kinda mentioned in there, but the whole breaking the engagement. I mean, tell me more about that. Because A) I know, from being a therapist and sitting with people that have gone through this, it's happening to more people than we realize and B) you know, how, how did that play out? How did you actually overcome that part?

Avrum Nadigel (34:05):

Yeah, that was, um, whenever I give talks and that comes up, sometimes I'll mention it. Um, I, I still can get emotional thinking about that, uh, not right now, but it definitely has happened in some live talks. It takes me by surprise. It was one of the most painful periods of my life. Um, you know, I, I finally felt I™d overcome something, I, I, you know, everyone in my family and all my friends knew, and everybody was like, “I can't believe it! Avrum Nadigel is going to get married!” And, you know, the ‘forever commitment-phobe’. And here we were, it was right before

the Jewish holidays in the Fall. And I was just feeling incredible pressure in terms of all of just, you know, um, my, although I say that people needed a similar level of emotional maturity, I think my wife in many areas is more mature than I am.

Avrum Nadigel (34:51):

And, um, so she was just more comfortable with relationships. She was more comfortable with, uh, holidays and being with family. I was always very anxious and allergic to too much togetherness, too much, um, community, too much relationship. And so it was a, it was a clustering of planning for the wedding, the Jewish holidays and, and just something in me said, "I can't do this. I'm too upset. I'm just too upset. I understand what the theory says. I'm too upset and I'm going to make your life miserable." And just as a side note, this is months of unfortunately putting my wife through hell, you know, like every third day calling up saying that, I don't know if I could do this. Like every, and by the way, we were engaged. And so she was going to the hospital, she was working and her colleagues would say to her, "Oh God, another hard night with Avrum?"

Avrum Nadigel (35:36):

Like it wasn't, it wasn't great. And so I just, I actually, I, I, I, um, she said to me, one night she looked at me and she said to me, "You know, if, if you don't love me and you don't... I cannot be with someone who doesn't want to be with me." And, you know, she did it in a very calm way with, with, you know, there was no screaming, there was no big, um, thing. And that's what that's, why was even worse because it was just a very calm way. She said to me, "I will be okay." And that killed me because I knew she would be, you see if she was screaming, "How could you do this to me?" and all this, I would know she was still attached to me. But the way she said that she will be okay, broke my heart because I had a sense with her that if I let this go now, if I let this go, I'm going to bump into her in 20 years and kick myself in the head.

Avrum Nadigel (36:24):

Cause there's something good here. But that didn't make a difference. The ring was given back. I went home that night. I didn't sleep all night. And I called her the next day. And I said, "Can we talk?" And she said yes. And I came over and we both had maybe a half an hour of sleep. Lots of crying, lots of, um, and I just said to her, I, I don't even know what I said to her. I think we just, I just said to her, um, as miserable as I am. This is about me, not you. And I think I'll regret this rest of my life. And, um, she said, you know, well, let's give this other shot. And we now have been married, uh, we got married in 2007. We have three kids. So I just, I, I, the reason why I tell my story is because, you know, people think that if you have a rocky engagement or break up in the engagement, well, clearly those are signs that there's something wrong with the relationship. But I just use my story as a testament that that's, first of all, that's not, that's not, it's possibly not true. Um, I lived through it and, um, I think Elisa and I have a wonderful marriage. I'm a marriage therapist, myself. She's a psychiatrist. I think our kids are relatively well adjusted. And, uh, yeah. So, that's my story.

Liz Higgins (37:35):

That's amazing. And I mean, can you describe, and I know she's not here in this conversation, but like that, that statement that, that she, you know, gave to you in that conversation of like, "I'll be okay." Now, granted, I'm sure that didn't mean, like, "I won't be hurt. I won't be sad." Like, I'm sure she would have been heartbroken to an extent, right? But like, that she knew she'd be okay. Like, what is that for a person that can be in that space?

Avrum Nadigel (38:03):

Well, you know, it's funny because I know Liz, you want to talk a little bit about a concept called Differentiation of Self, or another way of talking about this is emotional. And so I think what happened in the moment, although I couldn't tell you in the moment because I was too emotional, but I think what happened in the moment, um, Elisa steeled herself, and she got ahold of herself. And I think what was happening in the relationship, she was so scared if this ended that, you know, like, like we all do, right? If this relationship ends, I'll never meet anyone again, I'll never meet anyone like this person again. And so long as you believe that, you will hang on to something too long. And especially if your partner knows that you're not going anywhere, well, they can make your life a living hell.

Avrum Nadigel (38:42):

But the moment that you can steel yourself and settle yourself down, you know, and, and know that you will be okay - single or not - the moment, you know that, now you have options. And that vibe that you will give off will be very unsettling to the person that is making your life a living hell. And so when she looked at me and she said that, I think a couple of things happened. First of all, I believed her. Meaning that if I broke up with her, she's not crawling back to me. And that scared me. You see? Cause if she was like, "Get outta here, you piece of crap!" and she was throwing things, I sorta would know that I, I, you know, I can call her back in two weeks and she's, you know, she's still so emotionally and intellectually attached. But I knew that if I left and I waited too long, she really was going to be okay.

Avrum Nadigel (39:30):

And if she was going to be okay without me, then she just might have enough time to think, you know, this guy's been putting me through hell for like, you know, three months. I don't know if I want to, you know, there's probably a better catch out there. And so I would say that Elisa's, um, Elisa's work on herself (cause she was working, doing her own work), by presenting herself in a more solid way, as a more solid sense of herself, it calmed me down too. And this is the idea about, about systems, is that because we are interlocked in these systems, if one person can calm down, it calms down the group. If you can't find anyone to calm down, the group is going to get very anxious and, and reactive, as you can tell in certain parts of your country. And so...

Liz Higgins (40:12):

I was gonna say, we see this happen on so many systemic levels. It's incredible, yeah.

Avrum Nadigel (40:15):

Yeah. Once you learn, once you learn systems theory, you'll see it everywhere from marriages to churches, to society, to companies, to hospitals... It's everywhere. Um, and so I think that what happened was she, she was able to increase her level of, um, of differentiation just enough that it settled us both down, which allowed me then to tap into something very deep, uh, deeper than my feelings and my principles. And my principles were, I know I'm with a fantastic woman for me, we can make a great life together, even though I'm feeling right now that I should end this relationship. And so my principals overrode, my, my feelings, uh, and I was able to proceed. And we actually, by the way, the wedding was beautiful and it really calmed the waters. And she helped that. And then, you know, I matched her level of maturity.

Avrum Nadigel (41:08):

So I had to grow up a little bit. And all of these grueling experiences that we had, (and it didn't stop there. You know, I mean our first year of marriage was quite rocky.) Um, but, but all now I had some, some experience that told me that when things got rocky, and when things got anxious, it wasn't that I was with the wrong partner. It's that there was a potential to grow. And once I had that paradigm shift, once I understood that, all of a sudden, all of the hard times, (and they were still hard) but it changed my thinking and my approach. And I looked at it as a, it was sorta like, it's like turbulence on a plane. You want to go to Florida, you got to ride out that turbulence. And so, you know, if I want a better marriage than my parents had, I'm going to have to ride out this turbulence because it's part of my growth process. And that's what I've been doing now for the past, I don't know, 15 years, 12 years, whatever it's been.

Liz Higgins (41:58):

Yeah. And, and how would you describe your level of anxiety in life today, in relationships today as it compares to maybe those earlier years when you were first learning about systems theory and everything that really made the shifts in your life? Cause we all have anxiety. I mean, it's, it's always going to be there, but what are the noticeable differences for you?

Avrum Nadigel (42:19):

Oh, I mean the most obvious one is that, um, I haven't had a thought of "I'm with the wrong person, or maybe if I was in a different marriage, um, I'd be happier"... I haven't had one of those thoughts, uh, probably... I would say I was having some of them in maybe the first few months of our marriage, but it's been, uh, I don't know, 12 years, 13 years. Now you're talking about, I was a guy. I would have those thoughts, um, consecutively for, you know, decades. Uh, so I, you know, I don't believe in cures, Liz, in terms of what we do, you know, I believe in growth. I, you know, I, I, is it possible that I can have those thoughts down the road? Sure. If I have enough clustering of anxiety, you know, in my family... And, God forbid, I hope it never happens.

Avrum Nadigel (43:05):

I'm sure I'll fantasize. I'll, I'll kick into an old immature, uh, regressive fantasy that, you know, if something was different, if I was with a different partner, this wouldn't be happening. But that hasn't happened in a long time. And I thank God. I really do. I feel blessed that I found Family Systems Theory to help, um, sort of settle those waters and calm those fears. And I really do believe by the way. There's no question in my mind, no question that not only is my marriage more mature than my parents' marriage. Well, I mean, A) I'm married, they got divorced, so there's that! But whenever things get testy in my marriage, and when anxiety goes up, (and it does) every single time my orientation is towards self and not towards Elisa. What I mean by that is even if she's doing something that is objectively, you know, pissing me off, my first question starts with, "How did I contribute to this? What, what is my part, what is my role?" And that changes everything, Liz.

Liz Higgins (44:01):

Yeah. It's that whole process of letting the relationship, or allowing your partner to be, a mirror into yourself. And I mean, just hearing your story, it's like, I'm nodding my head over here because again, for me too, learning about this theory as it is, but really applying it to myself and diving into that work, it changed everything for me. And I'm not trying to just go along with what you're saying. I truly don't struggle with that question either. It's just not on the table for me, that I'm with the wrong person, because I've done all this work and explored all these things and invited him into this process too where we talk about it and explore it together to where, like, it's

just not a narrative in my anxiety experience. Of course I have anxiety. Of course I have days where I'm like, "Okay, I'm really tired of you in this moment" or whatever, but it doesn't hold me like that. So I think it's amazing that the transformative nature of these, these things that you learn, that you're talking about and just wow, how they really reshaped the story for you. That's amazing! What would you say are some of the popular ideas about love and relationships that you, you've seen to not be helpful for you or even for clients that you work with? Cause there's many out there.

Avrum Nadigel (45:18):

Yeah, the most common one is probably, um, this happens in my office every single day - "Hi, Avrum, uh, my wife and I, uh, my husband and I, we'd like to come see you because we have communication problems." So this is one of the most popular misconceptions about what's happening in a marriage that if somehow I can just get them to, and I'm sorry to all the fans of, um, who's the empathy woman? Who's the big empathy woman? What's her name?

Liz Higgins (45:44):

Brene! Brene Brown.

Avrum Nadigel (45:46):

Brene Brown. Yeah. So, you know, um, a lot of people, I think mistakenly assume that if we just had more empathy and better communication, that marriage would improve. And I think that's, um, uh, as they say, as the Sex Pistols said, "Bollocks! Bollocks!". Um, uh, I think that, um, the couples in my office that are struggling, um, what it looks like, is a communication problem. So let's say they're not talking, right? So they assume that if I can just get them talking, you know, they will be doing well. What they don't understand is they're not talking, not because of distance. The distance is the after effect of too much fusion, too much togetherness. And it's too much anxiety is what, you know, David Schnarch calls it an anxiety problem. Esther Perel talks about sex problems as an anxiety problem. So what I often will tell couples is the good news is you communicate just fine.

Avrum Nadigel (46:34):

That's a line from David Schnarch. And what I mean by that is, you know, he doesn't want to hear a word you say, and you're sick to death of everything he says. So you're communicating just fine! You know, you're sending, you're sending off the perfect message. It's not about communication. It is about, um, that somehow along your journey in this relationship, you have both lost both yourselves in this relationship along the way. And the question is, how did that happen? And how can you come back together in a different way. Not the way you first met - those things are finished - but how can you now grow into the marriage and the relationship that you have? And that is not a communication problem. It's an anxiety problem. So that's one, the other one is compromise. Um, you know, um...

Liz Higgins (47:16):

I still hear that one so much. You know, I think we, even as a culture, maybe don't really know what that word means because the, the anxiety that surrounds that one for so many people, it's like compromise represents loss of myself, like giving up something that I value or part of me. Um, yeah. Talk more about that one.

Avrum Nadigel (47:38):

Yeah. Well, I mean, it's, you know, it's the whole idea of "if you love me, you would" right? So the complaint in my office is "If, if he loved me, he would. If she loved me, she would." Okay. So first of all, it's nonsense. Okay. Because if I love you, then let's, let's turn to the old Sting lyric. You know, if you love someone, you set them free, you don't hold onto them, tell them to put one hand behind their back and torture them into giving you something. If I love you, I'm going to give you the freedom to become the person you need to be. And that, and usually that happens with space, not with more togetherness. Not with more, um, you know, uh, fusion and all that kind of stuff. Now, I am not against hugs and kisses and long talks into the night.

Avrum Nadigel (48:20):

It's not about that. I think you need, you need both. But our culture is so weighed towards togetherness and attachment and all that kind of stuff. And it suffocates couples. And, but they have no lingo. They have no way of understanding that they are sucking the air out of the relationship by forcing their partners to do things out of love, you know? And that's where you have all this resentment, right? So when a couple comes to our office, Liz, right? And they resent their mother or they resent their partner, the resentment is years and years and years of compromising one's principles to calm you down. And you don't, you do that for the first year of a marriage. It feels great. You do it for 10 years. If I have to sacrifice myself, and the best of myself, to keep you calm, I'm going to hate you.

Avrum Nadigel (49:08):

It's it's, it's a guarantee that 10 years later, I am going to hate you. I'm sorry. Yeah, that might sound jarring to people. But when the couples come to my office, after 20 years of marriage, it's hate. It isn't just, you know, it isn't, it isn't just a, a, a minor inconvenience. It's hate. And that's because they were sold a false bill of goods. And they believe that if you love someone, you sacrifice for your partner. And, you know, you spend two decades sacrificing for your partner, you just completely lose yourself. And, and life is short. And it's way too short to lose yourself.

Liz Higgins (49:40):

Well, and I don't think millennials have it... We don't have it in us to wait it out that long anymore, either because there's too much of that narrative going on of, you know, I, I want this to be good now, even though we don't know what that may be entails. It's like the seven year itch is now the three year itch. That's what I tell... And you see it happening a little more too, like, young people, they don't, they're getting divorced sooner. Those that are. And well, we know the statistics too on divorce. It's like, there's higher percentages. Um, the second time around, the third time around like, you know. You really have to learn what it's going to take. You can't just get out of it and start something new without going in and doing the work to figure out what's going on and what went awry.

Avrum Nadigel (50:28):

Yeah. Look, I mean, Liz, I don't, whenever I give a talk, my message isn't a pro-marriage message. I personally could give a rat's bleep whether people get married or not. Really, I don't lose any sleep over the fact that millennials aren't getting married or, you know, the new research - they're not even having sex. I could care less. The only people I care about, really, is myself, my family, you know. I mean, I really could care less in terms of what's happening culturally. But I will tell you this, like all cultural phenomena, what happens is the pendulum will switch back. And what I mean by that is either we were evolved to couple up and have children, or we weren't. I believe we were. Um, strip theology away from this. I'm just talking about from an evolutionary perspective. So maybe it'll take a generation or two to experiment, you know.

Young people come into my office and they talk about, you know, um, uh, polyamorous relationships.

Avrum Nadigel (51:17):

And, you know, I know how I'm going to spice up my relationship. I'm going to invite in a third. And I look at them and I'm like, "Well, good luck with that. If it works, let me know." Um, and so, uh, I, you know, I tend to, I tend to think that there is tremendous, tremendous advantages for society, for monogamous relationship dyads, two people. And I think that maybe, uh, it'll take a generation, maybe two, to feel the pain and the consequences of a culture that is so, (and I know you're going to get, you might get hate mail for this) but so immature and anxious. Um, that, uh, it'll force people to grow up a little bit later. Now. It's not all horrible. I mean, I don't know about you and your community. I just know about, you know, what I see in my office and my community. Uh, the young people that I work with, you know, they still want to meet someone.

Avrum Nadigel (52:07):

They want to meet someone. They want to have more or less a similar relationship that their grandparents had, that their great grandparents had. I don't have too many people, philosophically, who will look at me straight in the eye and say, "You know, I just want to be single, and tweet, and be on Instagram in my sixties. Like, that's just what I want to do. You know, I just want to improve my social media presence, you know, right into my sixties and seventies." I mean, I really, really don't believe that's true. And, uh, you know, there were - I forget the name - there were a couple of feminists, uh, very well-known feminists who I think, uh, in their younger years rallied against monogamy and marriage, who have come up with articles now about... Ah, if I... I'll email you her name. If I find her article where she says now, she's, (I think she's in her fifties)

Avrum Nadigel (52:54):

And she's like, "You know, I'm just, I'm really lonely. And I think I was wrong. Like I was, I was intellectually stimulated", but in terms of emotionally, um, she said that, you know, her, her, you know, her life now, she realizes, she wished she had children and that, um, and that she feels that she got caught up in a movement and she paid a huge price. Now I'm not saying this is for everybody, Liz. What I am saying, is that I don't think this is going to be a forever and ever thing. I think, I think millennials are, they look at the landscape of institutions generally are very, very skeptical about almost anything. And by the way, for good reason! For good reason. Um, and so what I hope to do with my writing and the work that I do is just to provide a counter narrative about, to quote David Schnarch,

Avrum Nadigel (53:42):

You know, that "the institution of marriage is a people growing machine". And that yes, you can go to therapy and do it. You can go see your analyst three times a week for years and years. Um, I think there's a cheaper way to do this. And a more fun way to do this. And I believe if you handle your marriage that way, if you understand marriage that way, it is an incredible institution to truly become, you know, uh, the person that you're trying to be as you're dealing with the push and pulls of intimacy. And a monogamous relationship.

Liz Higgins (54:11):

I love that. Yeah. That piece right there, it just speaks to me. That's my language. I truly believe in that. And I think you're right, we're millennials, you know, we're in an interesting place and there's a lot, uh, in front of us. And I experience many clients, and my own personal experience,



you know, I, I've gone through phases of feeling really jaded about things. But what I know is true - and there's enough research out there. We're not just saying this - it's that people need connection. We're made to relate to each other in intimate and deep ways. So it's figuring out that balance. Because we certainly have been raised to become a fiercely independent generation that values that independence, and almost wants to protect it against all odds, but it's something we have to face if we choose that path of being in a committed relationship. Because it won't, uh, won't take us as far as we may want to go, or as deep as we'd like to go.

Avrum Nadigel (55:12):

And, you know, it's interesting, you know, as independent as people pride themselves on in 2020, we are completely dependent on "Likes" on Facebook and you know, that sort of external validation of strangers really! You know, people we don't even know. Um, and so I would say it's a bit of a faux independence. I think people, I think, you know, generally Liz, what I find is people over/under appreciate their maturity. Um, at least that's what I have experienced in my office. My clients often have a distorted view of how well, or how bad, they're doing as parents, as lovers, et cetera, et cetera. And, um, I think that as human beings, we need connection and we need separateness, as you know. And, uh, I think that what I'm trying to speak to is the separateness. There's a lot of connection talk out there - Attachment Theory and Empathy... There's a lot of that stuff out there. Um, I think that what is so important for millennials to understand is that being your own person and staying connected, um, is what we have evolved to be. And, uh, that's what I hope I offer with my, you know, my work.

Liz Higgins (56:16):

Yes. Wow, Avrum, this has been such a fascinating conversation. I really thank you for just going so far with all this and sharing so much about yourself. And I, I want people that are listening to be able to find you and, and maybe just say a little bit about this most recent book. You said it's, it's catered to therapists, but what's the, what's the tone of the book and how can people find you and your materials?

Avrum Nadigel (56:42):

So the book is, um, the book is called, "Where Would You Like To Start?" um, and it is, it was written with my late supervisor in 2009. He died tragically before the book was finished. And then the book sat on my hard drive. Uh, his widow, uh, reached out to me in 2017 and said, "Please finish the book." Um, so I did. And, uh, the book is just, I would say the book is a beautiful, um, a beautiful experience of sitting with a Master Therapist with something like, I don't know, David had, I don't know, 50 years something. He trained with Murray Bowen. And listening to a therapist talk about how to do therapy with families and couples, but written in the style of letters to a young poet. So it's, it's question and answer. So it was Skype. It was a Skype dialogue that we did in 2009, recorded and transcribed. Um, with a case example, I think that anybody who's interested in learning more about family and marriage and sort of the rhythm of, uh, these things will get a lot out of this book. It's very, very low on technical theory, and very practical. So I've had people who are not therapists really, um, enjoy this book. So that book is on Amazon right now. And in terms of, uh, finding out about me, my website nadigel.com, is where you can find me.

Liz Higgins (57:59):

Yes. Yay! Thank you so much. And I just want to reiterate to the people listening: the books that Adam has written, they're so readable. Also, I love giving "Learning to Commit" to clients cause it's, it's short, it's so concise. It's so jam packed full of personable, readable, relatable

experiences, and just pulls everything together in a way that anybody can really understand and get these concepts and what you're talking about. So I really recommend your stuff and... Oh my gosh, keep doing what you're doing because I think this is really creating some, some big waves for those of us, still trying to explore this part of our story. Thank you!

Avrum Nadigel (58:40):

Liz. Thank you so much for having me on and good luck with the podcast.

Thanks again for listening to the podcast. If you like the show, leave us five stars or write a review. If you're interested in learning more, sign up for my free ebook "The One Barrier to Commitment All Millennials Face" at [millennialrelationships.com](http://millennialrelationships.com).

-----

Thanks again for listening! Follow us:



[@millennialrelationships](https://www.instagram.com/millennialrelationships)

[@millenniallifecounseling](https://www.instagram.com/millenniallifecounseling)



[@millenniallifecounseling](https://www.facebook.com/millenniallifecounseling)