



The Millennial Life

podcast

with Liz Higgins

Episode 19: How Were You Conditioned To Love?

Liz Higgins (00:00:02): 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 (00:00:35): Hello, hello! How are y'all doing today? I hope everybody's doin' well, and that you were able to catch my last episode where I wholeheartedly admitted that I had pod-faded into the abyss. But I am back! Um, today I'm excited because I want to talk about this question - how were you conditioned to love? I want to talk about that. And I think today's might be a short one, so we'll just go with it and see.

Liz Higgins (00:01:05): But, what I think is really interesting is that, for some of you listening, this might be like "Okay, yeah. I've thought about this stuff before. I've been in therapy, I've asked questions about my upbringing," things like that. So, this may not feel entirely new. For others, this may be, like, "Woah. I never thought about it like that. I never connected dots in this kind of way." So my hope is if it impacts anybody in that kind of way, then I've done my job for this episode.

Liz Higgins: (00:01:36): So, what we experienced growing up, what we saw modeled around us, what was done to us (like how we were treated), and also what we did and how that was responded to - are the ways we learned to love. And I mean love as an action. Like I'm referring to it as a verb. I know that we associate love with that emotion, that feeling, that embodiment of passion, intimacy that we call 'love' pretty universally... but I want to look at it more as one of the functions of close relationships. Like actively giving loving. Actively receiving love. And we have to go back to the very beginning where all of it starts for us - which is birth!

Liz Higgins: (00:02:28): I'm not gonna go back that far. Think about your upbringing, think about your childhood. Think about those first caretakers in your world; those could be your parents, grandparents, nannies, teachers... I mean, we all have those individuals that were the ones who were entrusted with our care. As those innocent, unable to protect ourselves and function for ourselves kiddos. So some of us came from toxic, highly dysfunctional environments where there was no open, free-flowing love - you had to earn it, or it came with conditions. Or, you were indebted with the job of providing someone else's sense of happiness or worth. (I hear that one a lot.)

Liz Higgins (00:03:20): This is significant because what was missing there, was the baseline understanding that you were worthy of love and belonging simply because you're human. Because we all are. Um, in some therapies we talk about unconditional positive regard for our clients. Like, showing them their inherent worth and value for whatever it is they believe or think, just because they are. That's really important! And not receiving that, even at very young ages (I'm talk 3, 4, 5, 8), young ages where we start to grow in our connection to shame (which is inherently feeling unworthy of love and belonging.) So, it's important to think about that.

Liz Higgins (00:04:11): Think about your story. What did you learn? What did you experience? How would you describe the environment you were in growing up? If you don't hear that, if you don't feel that, if you don't experience that, then chances are that part of you did not grow and develop securely in yourself. Because as kiddos, we need that. We have to have that. There is a dependence on caretakers to let us know and have this awareness about ourselves (until we can manifest it enough and be strong internally) - we need them to let us know that we're okay and we're loved.

Liz Higgins (00:04:53): So we don't have it - it can hinder us. And, when love, our worth, and the regard we have for ourself, is maybe dependent on pleasing others, or staying out of the conflict of a crazy environment, or escaping to be safe, or being kicked OUT to be safe... we begin to build walls and we learn other ways of getting that need to be loved met. And I think that's what is so significant, too, that NEED. That need for connection and for worth and intimacy, love. It never really leaves us. We all have it, we all have it. But we learn other ways of getting that need met.

Liz Higgins (00:05:40): Oftentimes unhealthy ones, right? For those of us who grew up caretaking a parent - maybe they were ill, because they had mental issues, because they were an addict or alcoholic, because they were emotionally distraught - most likely, you learned to turn your own needs off. Or to really dial back that notch down a lot. So your love template as an adult may be that real vulnerability and intimacy is completely scary and not something you're up for. Maybe you avoid close connection, you break up with people when things get too serious. OR, the flip of that! You pursue what you know - finding someone you can take care of. There's not "one way" this looks for everybody. And it's your role to figure yourself out.

Liz Higgins (00:06:36): I will say, that's why people like me do what we do. Um, for me personally, I've just grown and grown in my fascination with this part in humanity and how we will fight so hard to get love. Sometimes, in all the wrong ways, because of what we learned. Because of how we were conditioned to be in relationship! And the incredible thing is that you can change this. There's ways to grow, there's ways to start a new narrative, and new ways to be. You just have to learn it or be willing to learn it (and find somebody that can help you.)

Liz Higgins (00:07:11): For millennials - let me call us out for a second - many had "helicopter parents". The term was kinda coined, or at least was largely utilized in reference to our generation and the types of parents that a lot of us had. I want to define what that is. Basically, helicopter parents smother their children - that can happen in a range of ways: Being overly intrusive in their life, telling them what they need to be when they grow up and where they should go to college or that they SHOULD go to college. Um, like, having a strong connection to the outcome of their child's life. I hear from clients - millennial clients - a lot, when they think back on their parental relationships and go there, about how responsible they felt for their parents happiness. And, like, the whole "parents living vicariously through me" kind of thing.

Like, “I’ve got to show up because they gave so much of their life to managing me, to providing for me, to putting me in all of the sports and organizations and activities and extracurriculars”... It’s translated into this huge form of pressure to become something for them. And that’s not necessarily healthy.

Liz Higgins (00:08:36): For some, this inadvertently creates a dependence on others and an inability to determine needs that we have and self-definition, which is really important for an adult loving relationship. And there’s other parental terms, too. Lawnmower parents - when parents remove obstacles for their kids in hopes of setting them up to be successful - so they’re always removing consequences or paving the way for you to seamlessly get what you need. But then, you don’t learn that getting to anything important (including healthy relationships and healthy love) takes a journey. Oftentimes, a Frodo and Sam type journey where you really have to find yourself along the way. If the obstacles all get removed by our parents, and life was just peachy and easy, this affects the way we learn to love. The way that we DO love. Love is a verb.

Liz Higgins (00:09:37): And I’m not just talking, too, about love with others, loving others, being in a relationship. It can also be that love connection to yourself, you know. We have that internal relationship to our own self that has developed as we grow. I want to read off something I read from Esther Perel (ya’ll know I love her.) This was on a Goop article; I’ll link to it in the Show Notes. But, she asks these really amazing questions about, like, how you were conditioned to love and where you learned it.

Liz Higgins (00:10:19): She says, “How did you learn to love, and with whom? Were you allowed to want? Were you allowed to have needs growing up, or were you told “What do you need that for?” Were you allowed to thrive? Were you allowed to experience pleasure - or was pleasure just a break between work sessions, a reward after a lot of effort? Were you allowed to cry - and were you allowed to cry out loud, or did you have to hide it? Were you allowed to laugh - out loud? Did you feel protected as a child by those who needed to protect you - or did you flee for protection? Did the people who were supposed to take care of you do so - or did you have to take care of your caregivers, becoming the parent-ified child?”

Liz Higgins (00:10:08): Okay. SO MUCH IN THERE. So much to think about. I want you to think about those things; those pieces of your history. When I work with clients, I used to stay mostly focused on the present issues; feels kind of bad to say that. Um, you know - what’s not going well in their relationship, what they want to see happen differently... What better would look like? But, I came to realize that’s only HALF the conversation. The rest of it is painted by the decades before they even met their partner. The template they learned at a very young age of what love is, what it looks like, and how they got to experience it - that’s what’s critical to have an awareness of. To have an explanation of. From exploring that more deeply with clients, they not only get the results they want in their adult relationship, but they get results that LAST because they do the hard work of going inward and identifying that relational blueprint - how they were conditioned to love.

Liz Higgins (00:12:17): I also want to invite to this conversation some facts around patriarchy and modern relationships. And I'm so passionate about this topic that I really want to save this for a whole other episode, which I will probably do. But briefly, I want to share with you how incredibly important it is that we all understand how differently men and women are conditioned, relationally. Whatever your orientation is, however you identify your gender, you still most likely felt conditioned by the masculine and feminine narratives of functioning. That masculine equals strong, logical, rational, non-vulnerable, achievement-seeking, purposeful creatures. And feminine is nurturing, soft, emotional - maybe HIGHLY emotional - needy beings.

Liz Higgins (00:13:12): But we blend that in with what you saw and experienced growing up... now we're talking blueprints. Now we're talking your unique landscape. And I just think, like I'm thinking about somebody I worked with a while back who described their father as, like, the raging, angry, alcoholic father who only began to shed tears in his later years of life. And, like, they'd authentically describe him as strong, a mentor, a best friend. And I believe that's true! But there was still so much that his father's non-emotional stance and hiding behind walls of addiction or self-righteousness or anger, robbed this client from having a full sense of himself. And you know what? Robbed that father of having a full sense of himself through life, and being able to model that. This is why I really like Terry Real's stuff. Because he calls this out and talks about how we have to dismantle this patriarchy and those "rules" that really strip us of being able to be, um, just like fully relational. And truly intimate.

Liz Higgins (00:14:31): For a while there, I really thought I was headed toward a life of fighting for straight-up egalitarianism - a "same as" relationship with my husband. One where we are, like, 100% equals across the board. I thought it was true, I thought it was attainable, I thought it was the life I wanted... I thought that was modern partnership, honestly. But I've come to realize some other things about it. It's never been about "let's get you more feminine, and let's get me more masculine." I mean, sure, there's some of that that can help you grow and develop. But we were never meant to be the "same as"...but to share in this joint journey of developing ourselves - becoming our best selves, and creating an intimacy unique to our relationship and who we are; and what we need. One size does not fit all.

Liz Higgins (00:15:28): And it's not just about moving relationships to equal footing. I think it's being able to look at our unique histories - the way we were conditioned to love, the way our adaptive child learned to protect us in relationships, and being so open to growth.

Liz Higgins (00:15:47): Alright my friends, I'm keeping this one short today - but let me know your thoughts soon and let's keep the conversation going. Listen in next time - hopefully we'll have another episode out next week, where I'll talk about self-esteem and where your sense of self comes from, and why it's so important for your adult relationships. I think there's some really juicy stuff to, um, put into that conversation. So, stay tuned and I will talk to ya soon!

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.

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