



## Transcript Episode 6: Victims and Villains

### **Clare**

Hello and welcome to the Sex and Relationships Podcast. I'm so pleased you can join us. I'm Clare Prendergast and I'm here with my colleague Janet Eccles. Hi Janet.

### **Janet**

Hi, Claire.

### **Clare**

This is the podcast where we draw on all our years of experience as therapists to give you some insight, advice and top tips to guide you on your way through sex and relationships. Today we're talking about victims and villains. In other words, we're talking about conflict. We're talking about fighting.

### **Janet**

I suppose I had a bit of fun with this, really, because there are so many ways of showing our displeasure or anger or hurt. We have the shout and the sulk. You know that sometimes we feel so overcome with frustration or anger that that bursts out of us and we shout, which is obviously a deeply unpleasant behaviour to be around and often actually brings you the absolute opposite of what you want to achieve, which is to be heard and understood. And, you know, for somebody to have some empathy with you. And if you are aggressive and shout, yes, I know that probably comes from feelings of hurt and things not being fair, but all you're going to do is alienate the people that you want to persuade to understand you.

**Janet**

And then, of course, you have the many ways that we can withdraw. And that often happens because we don't like fighting, and we hide from it. And we think sometimes that if you avoid conflict, that's the best way to 'oh, you know, at least said soonest mended', which, you know, may work in the short term, but in the long term it's the road to hell. It's absolute disaster route. And the different ways, of course, that we can withdraw is uh, is sulking, physically removing ourselves, stonewalling, being very sort of passively rebelling or sort of slamming the kitchen doors or going down the 'what's the matter?' 'I'm fine' route.

**Clare**

I was struck when you were talking about the shouting and the shouting coming from a losing control kind of way in the in the heat of the moment, I was reminded of of folk who cry when they're really, really angry and they're wanting to be, you know, this is outrageous I can't believe you spoke to me like that, but find themselves crying and that being a huge source of frustration, it's just not showing up for the fight in a way that's serving you because you've just bursting into tears. And I think you referred to something about the idea that the conflict is bad, that if things are going well, if things are good, we won't fight. And I think that prejudice really we need to speak to as well, the idea that differences of opinion are the road to ruin, basically, rather than differences of opinion being a part of all relationships, you know, not just intimate relationships, professional relationships, social relationships, friendships, you know, we're never going to agree on everything. And how can we learn to have conversations and even kind of verbal battles when we see things differently in a way that allows all of our points of view to be valid and worthy and worth listening to.

**Clare**

And the other thing that I find really important around this sort of claiming sort of conflict as a, as a valuable part of relationship is, is its affinity with, you said we're having a break from sex, but is its affinity with sex, you know, on a on a biological level, so many similar things happen when we get into conflict, as do when we move into the arousal cycle with sex and the risk of being a couple who avoid conflict is it can also shut down the capacity to be sexually intimate. You find other things shut down that you didn't want to shut down by shutting down the willingness to to fight.

**Janet**

Yeah, and I suppose it's all about being available, isn't it? I mean, obviously when we become angry and upset and agitated, our bodies become aroused, not sexually aroused, but aroused in a different way and ready to deal with, with whatever's coming. So, I suppose by shutting that down, it's another way of being unavailable to your partner or friend or family.

**Janet**

But, you know, and you were talking about the necessity of learning to do conflict well, because well it's there every day, isn't it? We can't avoid it because we're all different people and because. Different people and we see the world and experience the world slightly differently we're, therefore, going to have conflict. And I used to ask my clients, you know, if I was working with a couple, and I still do every single time, how do you do conflict? And as an example, I used to sort of say, well, you in the supermarket, you know, and once marmalade and one wants strawberry jam, where do you go. And you know, and of course the easy answer is, well we buy both. Fair enough. Right. Okay. I need a better question. So now then I went okay, so one of you wants to go to Butlins and one of you wants to go to, you know, the Canaries. Where do you go? And it's understanding how they do the process of reaching a decision where they may want completely different things, but somehow a resolution or not actually is reached, you know, does somebody always lose or do they take it in turns or, or do they decide that they're going to go to France instead? And I suppose that's, that's a sort of a safe conflict to, to understand rather than going for something that's deeply personal and high risk. So, to start at the lower conflicts and understanding, okay, how do you do that then. And of course with anger can come other really unpleasant behaviours that that actually aren't okay, like belittling or blaming or insulting or, you know, stonewalling or all of which, you know, so straying into sort of emotional abuse territory, which obviously we work very hard with our clients to steer them into better ways of asking for needs to be met, asking to be heard and coming to resolution in a, in an easier and much better way because oh my God, it can be exhausting falling out, can't it?

**Clare**

It can, it can. And I'm thinking about something that I've seen again and again and again is a couple who get into the room and complete exasperation and confusion because in

their world view of their relationship, they did, however many years with no conflict. 'We just, we never we never used to fight. We just were this, like, perfect fit. And we just got on and we always agreed and everything was just wonderful. And over the last sort of 12 months, 18 months, two years, whatever, we're just fighting all the time.' And what becomes apparent is they're not actually fighting about the problem. So, they're fighting about, you know, maybe it's the, you know, putting the bins out or the washing up or the who's cooking tonight or, you know, 'you looked at me funny' or 'why did you leave your shoes there?' And these, these are the fights that are happening, but they're not the heart of the difficulty, that is, that is in the mix that the couple are needing to address.

### **Janet**

That's really common, isn't it? That the battleground is rarely what the real issue is. And I think that it's very useful, actually, to try and dissect the anatomy of a conflict with clients so that they understand what are you really fighting about, what is this conflict really about? And so, you have the battleground, which is the dishwasher. And then behind the dishwasher you have the anxiety. So, what does it mean if you lose this conflict? What are you really fighting for? And it may be about fairness. It may be about feeling taken for granted or being invisible or just not appreciated. That messages are being read into, 'oh, you've left it for me again to load the dishwasher' or whatever. So, what do I understand from that? Well, I understand that you don't want to pull your weight, and if you leave it, you think I'll do it and therefore you don't really value. You see me as the housekeeper or the maid and, um. And you just think that I'm, I'm here to wait on you and serve you, which is very different to 'Oh, God, they've not done the dishwasher again'.

### **Janet:**

But, you know, suddenly we're into this very personal territory of 'I don't think you love me enough', 'I don't think you value me enough'. And that makes me quite afraid. Or 'it makes me very angry because clearly I'm doing more for you than you're doing for me. What does that say about our relationship?' And then the third layer behind the anxiety is the deep stuff, the really deep hidden fear, which is generally about personal feelings about self. And if you do feel, say, insecure in a relationship and there are echoes of things that went on, say, when you were a child with your parents, with your family around rejection or not being valued in the family, then often what it will be delving into is that fear of 'am I lovable or actually, is no one ever going to value me because it feels

like this is happening again?' So suddenly we look at a pile of dishes on a draining board and, you know, at supersonic speed, we're that frightened, vulnerable child again, who is feeling very unloved. And often *those* are the feelings that come out in the conflict.

### **Clare**

And it's a sort of parallel process, isn't it? It's sort of working with the clients and, and, and even, you know, if you're not in therapy, if you're just listening to this and just thinking about how you show up in a conflict, it's getting to know what our programming is, what software we've had uploaded in our internal systems that are unconsciously playing out when we're in a conflict situation and seeing if we can make that conscious, if we can recognise that, 'oh gosh, I'm now, I'm five now and I'm not five. I'm 55, but I'm feeling five, so I need to attend to that'. But we put it on our partners and we see it as their job to attend to it, their job to see that we're scared or we're hurting or we just need a cuddle or, you know, rather than taking that responsibility ourselves and seeing, ohh, I've gone into this, this terrain and what do I need to do to be able to be fit for purpose again, to continue this conversation about the loading of the dishwasher? Because the irony is, it is both and dishwashers do need to get loaded. And how are we going to do this in our household so it's a peaceful part of our day.

### **Clare**

The other thing is we get into a habit of having the dishwasher as our battleground. We'll have our daily fight. One of us comes out on top, but there's a consequence which can be hidden, which is the impact of it on the other people in the household. Because whilst one person might be just, you know, it's fine. Yeah. I just let off steam and I blow my stack and then I can have a nice evening. Whoever else is in the environment might be, you know, that's their evening ruined. Because actually being around that behaviour is deeply, deeply disturbing.

### **Janet**

Yeah. Exactly. And then that's another difference where it's easy to criticise. 'What's wrong with you?' 'oh, it was something and nothing'. Minimise it. Because the family that they grew up in that was the norm. You blow up, you let off a bit of steam, you have a bit of a shout and a yell. Everyone knows that this is how we do it. There's no, you know, there's nothing serious going on here. And that's it. It's all done and dusted, and

other people like you say, will be bruised and hurt for days by that because their family didn't do conflict like that. And then they're getting criticised for being bruised and hurt. And of course, that then can scar another round of conflict.

MUSIC

**Clare**

So, do you think we're ready to talk about what to do about it?

**Janet**

Yeah. Clare, what do we do about it?

**Clare**

I find so much value both in how I manage my own emotional landscaping conflict, but also when I'm facilitating couples to put in a pause. For one of you to notice this is getting out of hand. This is turning into something we don't want it to turn into. And to agree a way of declaring we're taking a pause. So sometimes folk use the expression 'time out', 'time in'. They'll put a pause in that way. But some of my clients will just come up with a word. You know, I've had them, you know, aubergine, broccoli, cauliflower. You know, just one of them will say the word and it's and it's like, oh, we're stopping now to do that, self-reflection to do that. What am I doing here? Am I do I want to be having this conversation? 'Do I want to be having this fight?' 'Is this really what I want to be saying?' 'Is this really what is important right now?' 'Is it actually that you came in an hour late from work and that's what I'm worried about, that neither of us commented on the fact that you came in an hour late, and that isn't usual, and I'm worried something's amiss, but I'm fighting about the dishwasher'.

**Janet**

So, I think that would be useful if both of those people were in their grown-up states, like they're in their adult cells. But I can also see that a code word might be a really good way of getting out of something, you know? 'Oh, you're now late from work again. You're having an affair'. 'Aubergine'. You know.

**Clare**

Ah no, you're missing, what I'm what I'm saying is, is that in the pause is when you come back to the adult. The pauses just so that I can recover some equilibrium, and I can have the fight I want to have, rather than the fight that we just got into because of old patterns.

### **Janet**

So of course, what we're talking about and dancing around is something a technique that we, that thousands and thousands of counsellors use with clients when talking about conflict, is what's commonly known as the Drama Triangle. And I'll quickly just run through the three points of the triangle, because at one point we have the victim, at the second point we have the persecutor or villain, as we've called it. And the third point, which we haven't really talked about today, is the rescuer. And this form of conflict is, oh my God, it's so common, isn't it, Clare? Like, we will see it everywhere. We'll see it in our families, in our friendship groups, in our relationships, in the playground, in work. Generally this dynamic is everywhere.

### **Janet**

And if there is a conflict, just to quickly sort of give an idea of how the Drama Triangle works and how this dynamic works. If there's a conflict, then suddenly one or both partners may feel victimised, like 'that wasn't fair'. 'That's unjustified'. And they will place themselves in the victim's position. And therefore, by definition, if they're feeling victimised and the person that they perceive as having done this to them is the villain, the persecutor. And generally, what we want them to do is to say sorry, apologise and make it all better and see things from our position. And sometimes if the other person is conflict avoidant and generally acquiesces, then that may happen. But often the other person will be thinking, 'nah, that's not very fair. I'm the injured party here. You're the one who's done to me. And I want you to rescue me. I want you to say sorry to me. So, I'm going to sulk. Until you do that'. We will out victim each other until somebody wins, when actually, all we want is to be understood. And for somebody to sort of come to us and say, 'you know, come on, we're all right, let's sort this out'. And often, if that rescuing from the person we're arguing with doesn't come, what we'll do then is go and look for it somewhere else. So, we may get on the phone to a friend or a family or at work we'll go to the water cooler and have a good moan about Doris from accounts, and look to be rescued in other ways to justify our position. But if you find yourself dancing around the drama triangle in these positions, the way out of it is to step into your adult

self, you grown up self. And instead of being a victim, it's okay to be vulnerable. Instead of being cast as a persecutor or the villain. It's all right to be assertive. It's okay to state your point and say, I don't think that's okay. And instead of being a rescuer, it's okay to be a helper, which is, 'gosh, that sounds quite difficult, is there anything I can do to help?' I mean, I assume, Clare, that this is something that you talk through with your client?

**Clare**

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And I think we all inhabit every corner of the triangle. We can get stuck in sort of thinking, you know, you're the perpetrator, I'm the victim. That's always the dance. But actually, we jump between and particularly rescuer and perpetrator. It's kind of, 'oh, let me help. How can I help? I can.....' 'Oh, you're always doing that. Oh, you drive me mad'. 'Oh, let me help. How can I help?' 'Oh, you're.....' you know, we can slide around the triangle.

**Clare**

I mean, it showed up for me, particularly around parenting. You know, I noticed there was a time in parenting when it was, the sort of early years of getting out the door to school, and there needed to be, you know, shoes on, packed lunch, school bag, reading book. So, there's a child who's not quite able to get themselves ready for school. They need help. But also you're trying to help them learn how to do things for themselves. And I just found my inner perpetrator, she just came out such a lot with 'put your shoes on!' 'Where's your reading book?' 'Where's your bag?' You know, and I raised a particularly sensitive child who just would kind of look at me with this where has that come from? Do you know? It was not helpful. It was not a helpful way of being.

**Janet**

And so that was your, I suppose, what, what you're talking about very honestly, there very candidly is this is about your anxiety about being late somewhere.

**Clare**

Yes. Yes.

**Janet**



Whilst understanding that somebody with, with a whole lot less power than you in, in that dynamic needed to learn. And if you could rewind and have a day back where your gorgeous son was, you know, knee high again, how would you like to have done it instead?

**Clare**

Well, I think I mean, I think you're I mean, hats off to you. My anxiety about punctuality is yes, goes back to my early days and is underneath those kind of interactions for sure. I like to be on time for sure. But also, I suppose wanting more assertiveness, more caring, and a little more willing to be late.

**Janet**

And that's really, you know, that's really big and brave of you to admit that Clare and of course, none of us were perfect parents and we weren't parented perfectly either. But I guess the important thing, if there is an understanding of, you know, 'sometimes I don't always get it right, but I love you and you're important and I'm sorry sometimes that it happened like that instead of like this'. You know, and that's, that's not just in parenting, but that's in our relationships, you know, that being adult enough in our self to say, 'do you know what I didn't always get it right, and I don't always get it right. And I'm sorry about that, but I, I don't mean any deep harm here'.

**Clare**

And the thing is that apology that you're modelling there, which in this example is, is where the power imbalance is real, you know, the adult and the child. But in an intimate partnership where the power of balance, the power balance is ideally more equal, there is room to go in with. 'I was out of order. I wish I hadn't said what I said. I'm really sorry'.

**MUSIC**

**Clare**

You know, in terms of, you know, we're full of these sort of psychobabble expressions, aren't we, Janet, in our field.

**Janet:**

Speak for yourself!

**Clare**

But I do, I do love the words rupture and repair. And the thing about conflict is you do need to be willing to risk rupture. You do need to be willing to risk that one of you might feel a bit bruised afterwards. Their feelings might be hurt when you risk sharing how it is for you. But rupture doesn't equal catastrophe, the end of the world, the relationship's over, we're dead in the water. No, because after rupture can come repair. And the repair process can be so, I mean, so therapeutic, so healing, so deepening of the partnership. Because I think that's the other thing. It's not okay just to have the same fight again and again and again. It's really important we learn from them, and we learn new ways of being with these squeeze points, these stress points when they might happen.

**Janet**

But, you know, really when I'm working with a couple who have a lot of problems with conflict, often the first place that I'll go to is understand levels of self-care. How well do you look after yourselves? And don't you think? It's really amazing how often people see that as a luxury and an indulgence, as opposed to an absolutely essential activity that actually clearing some capacity in yourself is a way of being selfish for the team. Like a much, much needed activity that makes you life fit, match fit, life fit, game fit. You know that having that bath, even if it's just once a week, reading your book, going for that run, doing that crafting, doing a bit of DIY, whatever it is that you just really enjoy doing, just to make sure, really make sure that you take that time. And once, once there is a level of self-care, then you're much more able then to to deal with family and relationship difficulties. Before then we look at okay, now we'll look at, you know, the couple doing things together and improving their relationship. And I don't know if that's just me or whether you do something....

**Clare**

No, I mean....

**Janet:**

I always start with self-care.

**Clare**

And I think as well that what I just want to draw attention to is those, those times in a lifespan, those kind of squeeze moments. So, take the time when a couple start a family and maybe they've got, you know, several children under five, for example. And it becomes so easy for the children to become the focus of the relationship. You know, making sure the children's needs are met, the children are getting where they need to be, and then the couple are falling out. And then you introduce this notion of self-care and it's like, 'you've got to be kidding me'. Do you know, 'just getting food on the table out of the door to work and the kids.....' just, you know, there's what it seems almost like, 'gosh, Clare's just on some other planet that she's putting this into our mix'. But it can be the place where the couple come together. The team of the couple can unite if they can be enrolled into this is key. How are we going to make sure we both get this? And then they sort of support each other indirectly through okay, you get to the gym on Thursday, I'll do bedtime. It's like, okay, you get to you get to yoga Monday, I'll do, you know, and then together they're actually getting their own needs met, but they're helping each other do it.

## MUSIC

### **Janet**

So, I think what we are coming to, what we're saying is it's impossible to avoid conflict. Conflict needs to happen in any relationship because we are different people. And so, by far the best way is to find a way where you do conflict well, where those differences are understood, are appreciated. And, you know, whoever it is that you want to do conflict better with, whether it's your friend, whether it's your partner, whether it's your mother, that you find a better way than the old bad habits that you both sort of fall into those traps. And it ends up being a lose lose instead of a win win.

### **Janet**

So, I'm going to, if I may, talk you through an exercise that I always set my clients who are in a couple relationship. So, I call it the ten minute exercise and it will take about half an hour. And, uh, what happens is that they need to be in a space where the tech is off, where they're not going to be interrupted, and that could be going for a walk in the park or just sitting at home. And it doesn't matter who talks first. But what's going to happen is that each of you is going to take it in turns to talk for ten minutes. And the reason that

it doesn't matter who goes first is because the second person to speak their ten minutes is not a response to the first. And that's what's so key about this exercise.

### **Janet**

So, the first person begins their ten minutes and what they're talking about is how they experience this relationship. And I always encourage them to not just talk about the bad things and the things that they are really upset about or struggle with. But actually, it's a good space to remember the things that they appreciate as well. So, if it is something about, well, let's go back to the dishwasher, then talk about why the fact that the dishwasher upsets you and what it means to you in terms of 'it's unfair'. 'I feel that you take me for granted. I feel that, you know, when this happens, this is what I read into it'. And that's very different from, you know, sort of the accusatory language, the blaming language that we see a lot, which is 'you always do this, you never do that. You take me for granted'. You know, we are telling our partner what a bad person they are, when actually what we want to say in order to be heard is, you know, 'when you leave it. for me, I fear that you don't really notice me or value me or love me, or it's another sign that you're not really engaged in this relationship, that you don't feel that you should pull your part in this relationship that frightens me. What does that mean?' You know, so you'd be much more vulnerable and less attacking.

### **Janet**

And it's also because you've got a full ten minutes. I mean, that's quite a long time to talk without being interrupted, because in those ten minutes, the other person has to show active and respectful listening, which means lots of eye contact, no rolling of the eyes, no passive aggressive behaviours, no staring at your watch, no yawning, no looking at your phone. It's that very polite, active 'I'm listening to you and nodding my head'. And you may be having things that you really don't want to hear and you violently disagree with, but tough. You got to sit and listen. And if you need to stick your fist in your mouth to stop yourself from interrupting, and that's what you do. But you sit and you listen.

### **Janet**

And when those ten minutes are up, then you stop talking. And that's really important. Have a half time break, and then it is the other person's ten minutes to talk. But like I said before, this is not a response. So, what you're not doing is picking up the other

person and 'Well, I didn't agree with what you said there. And that's not very fair because this is actually what... what you're talking about is.' Okay, well, this is how I experience this relationship'. And you might say that 'you know, I didn't realise the dishwasher was such a big deal. I didn't really understand why you were getting so upset about it'. And then you just talk about what it is that's going on for you. Or it might be that you didn't even notice the dishwasher, because there's this big thing going on for you in another part of your life that has made you sort of check out of the relationship a little bit, or, you know, 'I've not got the capacity'. And without that ten minutes to sit and think about, okay, what is going on for me here? You know, suddenly you got the time to, to just go to that next level, this anxiety or this, this deeper hidden fear. Well, what is this? What am I fighting about?

### **Janet**

So, when the second ten minutes is up, you start talking and you separate, and you spend an hour or two hours away from each other. And the reason for that is, is that this is then not going to spiral off into an argument. Like you're done, you both said what you needed to say, you both listened, and now you're going to go away and process it and think about it. And then if you've got more to say, you do it the following day or even the day after that. I mean, yeah, the first week it might be the blur, blur You know, but generally you can only rant for so long. And once that steam has been released and, and you get into the swing of doing this, generally people then will begin to talk about difference in a much more reasonable way and therefore have the capacity to listen to what their partner is saying. And I think the fact that it's not a rush to resolution, it's just about talking and listening works really, really well.

### **Clare**

Yeah, I have my version. It's not quite the same as yours, Janet, but the fundamental principle is the same in that there is a talker and there is a listener, and then there is a talker and there is a listener. And I'm showing that with my hands that it's turn taking, but it's turn taking with space. And what I love about that, that way that you do this is it allows room for the individuation process. You know, we forget that we are two individuals. We can get into relationships, especially relationships that have been really tickety boo for a chunk of time and, and this sort of thing of just, you know, we're no longer two, we're one. We're just this weird. Do you find your, you know, you have clients and they just 'we' 'we' 'we' 'we' 'we' and trying to get them to go, no, no, hang on

a minute. Can you speak from the 'I'? You are two different people. And maybe it's the arrival of children. Maybe it's a big financial stretch. Something's come into the system that has stopped them being this perfectly happy couple to becoming this conflicted couple. And it's that loss of, 'oh, you're not me. And I'm not you.' You are someone else. And, uh, you know, as you were describing the technique, I thought I was thinking, gosh, it takes quite a bit of time to do it. And I think this is where quite often we will, certainly I see it in my room, you know, there's this coming to terms with the fact that actually relationships take time. And I haven't been giving my relationship the time it needs, the time for us to get to know each other now because who I was last week ain't who I am this week. Because as humans, we are constantly evolving and growing and being affected by our lives and our life experiences. And if we want to stay in a long-term relationship, we need to stay interested in who is my partner now.

### **Janet**

Yeah, it's so true that it's not like once we've decided, you know, we're in it for the long haul, we go into stasis. It's a living, moving, developing, evolving, changing beast. And as we are, you know, as people, as individuals and, and to stay alive to the changes. Because if, if we stop, if we just say, okay. Yeah. Secure now that's it. Every day will be the same, you know, you will get a nasty surprise, I think, sooner or later.

### **Clare**

Yeah. So, there is so much more to say and so much more we could say. And I suspect this subject of conflict and villains and victims we will be revisiting in different ways. But I think the sort of takeaway for me from today that I really invite you to consider is that there is no right or wrong. There is no winner or loser in a conflict situation, that everybody can come out as losers if you're not careful. But there's a way that actually both perspectives can have value and be heard. If there's a willingness in the conflict to recognise that from the get go.

### **Janet**

I was just thinking about what my takeaway is, and I think I'm going to go back to that question about how old do you feel? Because I just think it is so useful just because we flip into something so automatically into our, you know, generally sort of pretty wounded child selves, and we can do it so easily and so unconsciously. And I know, possibly in me that there's a, there would be a tendency for the sulky teenager to go, 'No, I'm not

doing that!' But hopefully at some point my grown-up self might win out and say, you know, 'okay, come on, calm down. You're all right. You're all right'.

**Clare**

Well, I think we're coming to the end of this episode. Thank you so much for being with us today.

If you want to read more about what we've been talking about then please do visit our website: [thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com](http://thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com), yep that's [thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com](http://thesexandrelationshipspodcast.com)

And if you have any questions for us to explore in our chats you can leave us a message on the website. We're also on social media. We're really looking forward to hearing from you. We're only relevant if we're in partnership with you, so let us know what's on your mind.

Lovely chatting Janet, until next time bye, bye.

**Janet**

Bye, bye.