

53. Navigating the Evolution of Relationships
with Dr. Maneesha Ahluwalia



FULL EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

53. Navigating the Evolution of Relationships with Dr. Maneesha Ahluwalia

Arpita: Welcome everybody to another episode of Doctors Living Deliberately. We are excited to have you here today. Hi, Michael. How are you doing?

Michael: Good. Still recovering from all of these illnesses that are kind of traveling around our house. So hopefully everybody's starting to feel better with all these winter kind of sicknesses that are going around. So my voice is a little raspy. I'm sorry, but it's better than it was earlier in the week when you and I tried to record and were unsuccessful. So making some progress.

Arpita: Yeah. That's your sexy voice. Just, just leave it at that. I'm going to try my sexy voice on today.

Michael: All right, done.

Arpita: Well, I'm excited today to have Dr. Maneesha Ahluwalia here with us. And I really was excited to bring her on because as we're coming up to, that some people dread holiday, Valentine's day, talking about relationships with significant others. I actually thought it would be a great idea to have her come on because she does some amazing work that I'm excited to tell you about. But to give you a little bit more information about Dr. Maneesha she is an independent infectious disease physician who is service minded and is a loving old soul who is now in her second career as a life coach for Indians. She has used coaching to strengthen her bond with her parents and has used coaching to embrace transitions in her own life and career from her personal experience with divorce and infertility, including embryo adoption, navigating her post divorce, interracial and interfaith relationship, cultivating a real and loving relationship with her culturally traditional Indian parents. She has demonstrated what the meaning of authentic relationships with our loved ones looks like.

And so I think a lot of what resonates with me when I talk and listen to Maneesha and see her on social media is just knowing and recognizing that we all have parents and they all have their nuances. And we want to really have the ability to have these open and authentic conversations with them, but we're kind of held back for various reasons. And so Maneesha does an amazing job of helping people kind of overcome those hurdles. So Maneesha I hope I didn't butcher it too much with the details. I love to talk more free, but tell us all about you and whatever I missed. Welcome on board today.

Maneesha: Thank you. Thanks. I know scripted conversation is always a challenge. So I definitely like to speak from the heart. You know, you got it. All right. I am Yeah, I'm Maneesha Ahluwalia, thank you so much for having me today. I live in Baltimore I'm born and raised in Houston and lucky for me the Indian population in Houston was huge, And we were a big part of it and my parents just really embraced the culture and wanted my brother and I to really have a good experience growing up as an Indian American second generation in Houston. And it was just a lovely experience. I had a huge family growing up all around me, all my dad's brothers and sisters, all their children, my grandparents, my great grandmother. So, you know, it was like one huge, loud Punjabi family living in Houston kind of well known, I would say, because they've been there 50 years now as of last year. So it's a big deal. And that was really my upbringing and growing up there, growing up Indian. You know, what are you going to do with your life? You know, for me, it was, I'm going to be a doctor for my dad was like, you don't work hard enough to be a doctor. So I was like, I'll take you up on that challenge as daughters do. Yeah, and I took off from there and, and I'm sure there's lots of other questions I can answer, but that was the beginning.

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Arpita: Amazing. Well, I, I guess I'll just jump in and start off and you know, I, I reflect back even to some of the challenges that I, you know embraced when I had them come up for me, primarily, you know, having the interfaith, the interracial relationship and marriage it comes with a lot of hurdles, I would say that you may not be aware of, especially in the beginning when you're just so in love and you want everything just to be rosy and swell. You don't think about all the things. But I do remember the interactions that I had with my parents prior to, you know, them really becoming aware of it and even after they've become aware of it. And, you know, I think having some additional tools to help me have open conversations at that time would've probably benefited me. So I guess let's maybe start off with talking about some of the biggest hurdles that you have seen. And it's not necessarily just Indian parents, this is for any culture that typically when you have an outside culture come in and have first generation born in the US there are going to be differences with your parents like beliefs and ideals that we have and values that may not be in line. Yeah. So when you see this with your clients, what are some of the most common hurdles that, or challenges that you see that they're facing, that you help them with?

Maneesha: It's simply that parents want what they want, and we want what we want, right? Like, I mean, if you really had to break it down for anyone listening, for anyone who's second generation versus, you know, from that country, from somebody who's, that's it, they want what they want, and we want what we want. Lucky if it all matches up. And sometimes it matches up at the very beginning and then like now we're, you know, in our 30s, 40s, 50s, whoever's listening. And now we have different ideas all of a sudden, you know, because we're into thinking about what we truly want all of a sudden, because we haven't done that in 20, 30, 40 years. And we have an opportunity, we have the means to change things, to shift things. And those conversations can come up at any of those stages, right? It could come up at the very beginning when you're choosing your life and career, but it could also come up at the next transition. And the challenges are, our ideas are different from theirs, and our ideas are different from our partners, and our parents, and our kids, and, you know, all of that is the easiest way to say, when we have differences, how are we going to navigate those? But the differences are always present.

So, I think the challenge is to find out how to stay true to what you want, and how to say, hey, mom and dad, I know that this is what you want for me, I know that this is what I want for me and I know that when I say this, you may not like it. And the next part I think that's super crucial is recognizing that they're not going to like it. And you can almost expect them maybe not to like it or not approve or be disappointed, but that doesn't mean you have to do anything differently. And it can just mean that I'm okay with you being disappointed because I know what I'm doing. I have faith in what I'm doing and I know this is good for me. And I'm willing to make some mistakes and really like that's the thing that could apply in so many different people's lives and those are the challenges, but those are also the solutions.

Michael: Yeah, it's interesting because physicians are such innate people pleasers, and I think so many of us gravitate towards this career because we saw so much of the reward that came with the, you know, academic excellence along the way. And so when we have these expectations that come up from our parents, from our loved ones, it's so easy to fall into the expectations that have been laid out in front of us. And when you speak to kind of figuring out what is truly authentic for you versus what your parents want in terms of their expectations and then figuring out how to reconcile those two things and really sitting in your power, that seems so far from where most of us you know, start out on this journey. So how do you get people to a point where they go from the innate people pleaser, I'm going to medical school because everybody loves how I'm

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always excelling to, you know, actually this is what I want in my life and I'm going to do this because this is what I want. How do you get people there?

Maneesha: I think we all know what we don't want because what we're experiencing in our current life, whether it's relationship or career, there's some part about it that's challenging us. There's some part about it that's playing out over and over as something that's not working. This is not working. There's got to be something more. And I think we all have that intuitive sense. Are we aware of it? That's where I think some of the mindfulness, the quieting down, the slowing down, the intentionality. Those are the tools that help us raise our awareness to what it is that we don't want and also what we do want, right? So we have to get quiet. We have to find the time, we have to find a moment where we're going to be in tune with what we actually think and want and then decide that we're smart enough to know that that's probably what's going to work best for us, right?

So how do we stop people pleasing? We can't unless we decide that now's the time to know what I want. So when we start to figure out what we want by quieting things down, by spending time with ourselves, by just tuning into what our thoughts are all the time, we're going to hear what we want and once we hear what we want leaning into that as our intuitive nature as, as our knowing and going with it, you can't go wrong with that, right? Like, that's why we went into medicine. We knew we had a calling and we knew we didn't want to be an engineer and we knew we didn't want to be a lawyer. And so we went to medicine and we did that, we did that and now we're people pleasers, but then we forgot to listen to what we want, and I think it's always there. It just gets buried under 20 years of doing, doing, doing, and following the rules.

Arpita: Totally. It reminds me of Glennon Doyle's book, Untamed. She's a whole chapter where she talks about her inner knowing where she goes into the closet and just like, kind of really just separates herself and just is allowing herself to be present with herself. And I found that chapter so extremely powerful because we don't do that. You know, we all have the answers within us, you just have to give it some airtime and really be intentional of sitting and just being with yourself. And it sounds like so woody and out there and crazy, but it's so very true. When you just sit there and say, what feels right for me? What is an alignment with what I want? It just comes naturally from that standpoint, when you allow yourself to sit there. And I think that's also important because a lot of people are too scared to even allow themselves to do that, right? And that's what holds them back.

I want to talk about one of my favorite one liners from you because, oh, some people who may not know this. So Maneesha, I joined Sunny Smith's program, EWP back in 2021. That's how I got into the coaching world. And Maneesha was my coach for multiple sessions there. She was amazing. I love her to death. And one of the little tools that she gave me that I still use daily, almost daily with my tool belt is choose your discomfort, right? So that it's one of my favorite things. And it's basically you get to decide like shit's going to happen one way or the other, and you get to pick which discomfort you want to go with, knowing that it's not going to be rosy either way. But once you've picked that discomfort, just be in peace to go with everything that goes along with it.

And I think this is really important with our parents because when we are talking to, about having conversations with them, we can choose the discomfort of just ignoring it and living in a kind of bubble of disregard or just, you know, putting our head in the sand. Or we can have the discomfort of having the

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conversation with them and then seeing what comes and unfolds after that. And we have to be really, really, you know, present with making that decision and moving forward with it. So how do you work with people when they are really stuck with moving forward with choosing, you know, that they want to, they really want to have that conversation, the authentic conversation, but they're so scared of the repercussions. And, you know, it just depends on how devout I would say, culturally devout certain families are with regards to what the repercussions are. But what's your 1st steps with handling this with families

Maneesha: For anyone listening, I think it's, you can definitely apply the same formula across the board, whether it's bosses, partners, romantic relationships, children, parents, and whoever else you might come in contact with and, you know, building on what you said, choose your hard, choose your discomfort. Definitely wrote that down as notes for today as a talking point, but I have developed another way of saying that so that it becomes crystal clear how to choose one or the other. How to navigate that in between when you're like, if I say this they'll be upset. If I don't say it, I'll be sitting in my discomfort. Okay. So let's say you've decided mom and dad, I've decided I'm not going to have kids. You haven't said it yet, but you've decided in your mind. And you're playing this out in your mind over and over and you're rehearsing this conversation with them in your mind and you're already playing out like what they're going to say, what their look is going to be, you know, what expression they're going to have on their face, what your body's going to do, you're going to get all tense, you're going to be like, maybe I shouldn't say it. Like you've played all of this out a million times in your head. We all know this conversation, right? There's some version of this conversation in our mind right now as I'm talking. And so you rehearse this whole thing. And, you know, before you say things out loud, here's the formula; if I say it out loud, the discomfort is, or the negative emotion is this, you know, fear of disappointment, fear of disappointing my parents. And the positive is, I'm going to have, to be able to say what I need to say. The negative, I'm not saying it, I'm going to keep things bottled up, I'm going to not be in alignment, I'm going to be holding this inside of me, I'm going to build resentment over and over, right? And the positive of not saying it is, oh, my parents will be pleased. Right? Because they'll never know the better. So we discard the positives, because they're not the challenge. Every time we lean into the positive, that negative keeps nagging us. And when we lean into the positive on the other side, the other negative keeps nagging us. The positives are not the problem. It's the negatives. So if we compare one negative to the other, the question is, the crucial question, that helps us decide and be clear is, which negative is intolerable, therefore the other one I'm willing to choose on purpose? That becomes the question. Which negative am I no longer willing to tolerate? And therefore the alternative negative is the one I'm going to choose on purpose. I'm going to choose on purpose, having this fear of disappointment during this conversation and any moment it comes up after this conversation, I am going to choose on purpose, the fear of disappointment. Right? That's going to come up during this conversation and anytime after this conversation.

I'll give you a totally other example very quickly because it's much more impactful. And that is, the decision to go child free. I was in a marriage with a, with an Indian guy, and at the beginning we said no children, we were happy with that, we were gonna go volunteer in the world. Throughout the marriage, he decided he wanted children, he changed his mind. And I stayed with, I don't want children. We went through fertility treatments after I decided, okay, I will. And then finally, lo and behold, four years later, I did everything I was going to do, I reached my limit, and I thought to myself, I'm not gonna wanna have kids, I'm not having kids, I'm deciding to not have kids. And I knew, saying this could potentially end my marriage, but I knew not saying it, I could live with a life full of much bigger regret, right? So I decided I'm going to choose the regret of not having children. I'm going to choose that over and over when it comes up in the rest of my life. That I'm willing to be

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with, right? But the discomfort of being in a marriage in which I would have resentment coming towards me from my ex husband. That was no longer tolerable. Love of my life. Still love him. Very hard to get over that relationship. But I had to choose, temporary regret if and when it comes up throughout the rest of my life. My brother has three kids. Everyone around me has kids. So I see that moment all the time. What if that was me? But I'm able to reach back into my past and say, but I support myself in the decision I made back then. And that's how I know I can make be okay and choose regret for my future rather than the long term continuous fear of having resentment come upon me by a husband, ex husband that's disappointed. Yeah. So I think that's like really the formula, which discomfort am I willing to choose on purpose because the alternative is so intolerable?

Michael: I'm so grateful for this part of the conversation because when we first started talking, it was about, you know, living in authenticity and just making the choice, right? But that choice comes with the discomfort that we're talking about right now. And the language that we use around this is so important. Even when you were just speaking, you were talking about, I could say this thing and it could end my marriage. But if we really examine this situation, not saying the thing could also end the marriage emotionally, right? It may not be the thing that causes the rift in the relationship, but if you are feeling the resentment towards your husband with these words that are going unsaid, the relationship is not living in the way that you want it to live anyway.

So choosing the discomfort like you were so eloquently pointing out, it's not easy. And I don't think any of us is here to say that living in the discomfort of living authentically is easy. However, it gets you a lot more of the life that you want to be living. And it gets you more genuine relationships. And so you can sit here and say this relationship, you know, here's the love of my life, the relationship completed itself. And now we get to kind of live in more authentically as the people that we, we genuinely want to be. And I don't think it makes it any less painful.

Maneesha: I guess I'm two years post divorce so it's really kind of hard to grasp that concept because the memory of what was continues. And, and similarly, like you're talking about relationship with your parents. You know, if you decide to say something and they get disappointed, that relationship has changed. They're going to be, it's going to be a different relationship. So whether it's completed or it's changed, it lives differently in our minds from then on, but from a place of choice and from a place of intention, because we chose the change. And whether that's a completed relationship or just a change relationship, it's something we chose. Which makes it so much more empowering, so much of a better place to live from, something that we forget in the last 25, 30, 40 years, because we just tick the boxes and go on with our lives as we planned them a long time ago. And now we have this grand opportunity to make things juicy and sexy again by like, really like empowering our everyday decisions from a new place of like, Oh wait, I just re decided that this is what's right for me.

Arpita: Yeah, it's something just popped in my head while you were saying that, you know, we're talking about, you know, we're afraid of disappointing our parents, primarily when we do things that are not in alignment with what they feel is appropriate. And, you know, I think, and I think we touched on this on the parent pleasing episode that we had, we'll link that in the show notes too, but, you know, we are under this impression that if we get our parents approval that that is equated to love from them, and I would like to even just challenge that we don't know for sure that that's the case. And even if we don't have their approval, is it possible that they still will have love for us? And I get it. There are some families and some cultural norms that

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it might be a hard no. And then that's, again, living with intention, which life do you want to live? Do you want to live an authentic life or do you want to live one where you're kind of just doing things to please other people and truly, seriously, just unhappy yourself, or do you want to challenge it and put out there what is authentically in line with what you want for yourself and see what happens. And I, I might be a little bit just gifted and lucky in this area, but I feel like even for myself, you know, leaving cultural norms, marrying outside, marrying an Italian American man, leaving medicine to, you know, help facilitate running a medical practice and then going on to create a coaching business, these are not traditional, the path that everybody should take with our parents. And I think what we have to give our parents some credit towards as well is the fact that a lot of them, they truly just want us to be happy as well, you know. And if we do what we want to do for ourselves and we can exemplify how we are happy and how we're creating the life of our dreams, I think a lot of them will probably come around at some point, even if they have initial disappointment. So I think it's important just to remember to do what you feel is best for you. While also recognizing it might be uncomfortable at times.

Maneesha: Yeah. And parents wanting what they want, you know, it comes from their experience. They may not have gotten what they wanted from their upbringing, from their parents. And now they want so desperately for someone else to at least give it to them. Right? So there's a gain in it for them, too. Like, my ex in laws wanted grandchildren because they didn't have any grandchildren from their older son. So they wanted it from their younger son, which was my ex husband. They wanted it badly. And there's a game that I, that I keep seeing advertised on my social media feed. It's called Parents Are Human. And I think it really is in line with what I'm talking about now, which is parents have their thoughts and feelings because of the same reasons we have our thoughts and feelings and they're operating from that and we're operating from what we've seen and grown up with and what we're lacking. And so if there is this beautiful opportunity to understand both sides

And I also want to speak to the audience members who are of the mindset, like you guys don't get it, my parents don't want what's best for me. They only think about themselves. They don't want to hear my opinions. They don't want to hear what my likes and dislikes are. They don't want to hear what my desires are, they only know that being a doctor and getting married and having children is the only way. And they're not ready to hear anything else and I would like to just speak to that for a second and say that yes, I think a lot of us have that experience where we have strict, traditional, strong minded family members who really do only view the world in one small lens. And I will still challenge anyone listening to let them be who they are, but take on the challenge of speaking what you want to say to them. And just expecting exactly who your parents are to be exactly who they're going to be when you say what you need to say to them. We don't need the parents to change. Nobody else needs to change in order for us to live the way we want to live. Your parents can be as strict, as close minded, as you might imagine them to be. As they may have proven themselves to be over and over in your life. And yet, if there's something nagging at you that you truly want a different partner, a different career, working for Doctors Without Borders and cutting your pay by 80%, case in point, you know, whatever it might be, going child free, saying, I don't want to have kids, saying, I want to get a divorce, saying, I want to go be an artist. I'm bringing that up because, you know, we're Doctors and, and for doctors to become artists or something completely different and unconventional people will not get it. And so anything you want to do, if it's calling to you and you don't want to have this life full of disappointment of yourself by your own self, you don't want to be disappointed in your own life anymore, you got to challenge yourself and you got to rise to that occasion of that discomfort of having that conversation and your parents are going to be who they're going

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to be. And if you're really lucky. They'll come around. It's not going to be the case every time, but I think they can. And it may not be the case that they ever will, but yet at least you would have tried.

And I want to give validation and normalcy to those people listening who are like, I get what everybody's saying right now, but I'm also okay with pleasing my parents for the rest of their years. And I don't want to challenge anything and I don't want to rock the boat. And if that's you, hey, at least you own it. At least you're doing it from a place of intentionality. So nobody needs to be listening to this saying, Oh, I need to make a change because I've had this idea that I really want to make true. If you're done challenging yourself and you just want your parents to be happy and you're willing to do what it takes to keep them pleased and you're okay with that and that's your choice by all means, you know, there's nobody here to say that's wrong. Your choice.

Michael: Yeah, I mean, 100%. This is all about intentionality. And I did want to highlight one of the things that you were just talking about with expectations. Here we are talking about the weight of expectations on the children because the parents have a certain idea of what their child's life should look like and how they want it to be a certain way. But there's two sides to this, right? When the adult child expects their parents to be different than who they truly are. So we started this episode, you were talking about this visualization where you can practice telling your parents the thing and you know how they're going to respond and what their facial expressions are going to look like and you can rehearse this. And wanting that conversation to go differently than you know it will is your expectations on your parents. So if you want your parents to let go of expectations, part of this begins with you releasing them of the expectations that they be different than who they are, right? So this all goes, this is a two way street and know that it's not just your parents that have these expectations and going into all of these decisions with intentionality, with knowing, okay, they're going to show up in this way and I get to still choose to be who I want to be. Do you have thoughts about that?

Maneesha: The fact that we have expectations of how we want our parents to be, well, A, we do. I think we all have expectations of how we want our parents to be or to change and be different. Because this is what I want, now I want you to want what I want. I mean, I think that's really the crux of it. Like, I've decided this is what I want now. So you should also be happy that that's what I want. No, that's a rule we're putting on them, which creates even more challenge. Because now they're worried about disappointing you, right? So then it becomes cyclical and, and super challenging. And if we come into a conversation knowing exactly how they're going to be because that's who they are, then we come into it expecting what happens and remaining completely detached from what they might say or do because we already know it's coming. And that releases the expectation. Hey, I'm just expecting them to be this way. And being detached from that outcome is the freedom to be able to say what you want to say. Yeah, for sure.

Arpita: One thing that comes up still, even with me, when you were just saying that, like, when we, you know, if you've decided that I'm just going to please my parents, just because that's the intentional choice that I'm making and you're comfortable with that, that's fine, do that. For me, when I, when I think about my own scenarios and just my life and what I realize is that I still have no guarantee that when I am doing what I think will please them, you will truly please them. It actually is more reason for me and what gives me more freedom to do what I want, because there is no guarantee, right? We can think that we're doing what they want for us. It's like this game of who's meeting what expectation back and forth, back and forth. But ultimately, we don't really know if what I do is going to get them to whatever level of happiness or pinnacle of joy or

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contentment. We don't know. It might just make them move on to the next level of, okay, now you need to do this.

So for me, that is part of the fuel of, I am going to trust and believe that my parents have a conditional, unconditional love conditional because I am their daughter. So that's the condition of why I get their love, but it's an unconditional love because I am their daughter, right? They may not do that same thing for somebody else, but because that relation is there that provides the conditional, unconditional love that I'm going to get. And I'm choosing to believe that so that I can do what I want. And I think that's served me pretty well. But maybe that's just me living in my bubble, but I love my bubble.

Michael: Yeah. Well, this has been a fantastic conversation. We've really enjoyed this. If you have some key takeaways, any, like, give us maybe three suggestions for our audience members who are looking to maybe optimize their relationships, what would you suggest?

Maneesha: Nobody else knows what you want except for you. How do you know what you want? It's there. And anyone who's transitioned in life knows that that feeling, that calling, that knowing was in them for a very long time before they took the step forward. And trusting that you do know what you want and trusting that it's worth taking the risk and finding out if it can be true. That's the work and it doesn't require anybody else to change. It doesn't require an outside source. As we've been talking, we just know. And, just like when there's a patient in front of you, and you're not sure what to do, but something calls to you and says, do this, that's that knowing. And, if you're trying to make a big decision in your life, just like when you made that decision to go to medicine, and you sat in the first, you know, the day one of medical school, and you thought, I'll be an attending physician one day. Well, there's no guarantee of that, but you just kind of knew. So similarly, as you're transitioning now, career, relationship, love, whatever it might be, I think we all need to start hearing this idea that we just, we just know. We don't have to look outside of it. There is a knowing, you already know and trusting that.

Arpita: Awesome. Yeah. Well, thank you, Maneesha. It's been a true joy again, just connecting with you. It's always just so peaceful and real and serene, I don't know when we talk, but I appreciate it. So tell our audience where they can connect with you, where they can find you if they want to learn more, any offers or programs you have coming up, feel free. Share your stuff.

Maneesha: Yeah. So I'm a life coach for Indians. I am available by direct message. So if you find me on Instagram, it's life coaching for Indians. Send me a direct message. I find that's the easiest way takes all the pressure off of you and you can simply go to your direct message, send me a little message, hey, I'm interested in working with you. And the next thing that happens is I will work with you to find a time slot and we could chat over zoom and figure out for a good fit and decide if we want to work together. And I'll tell you all the next steps and we'll make it super easy for you. But yeah, Instagram life coaching for Indians send me a direct message, watch my videos there's tons of videos on there. Some of them of me doing Bhangra and Gita dancing and some of them talking about tips and hints on how to navigate some of these difficult conversations and stuff about my parents who are awesome and 50 years married, 50 years in the U S and I'm just so happy about the relationship I have with them. So if you want to see examples of what's possible, and if you want to send me a message, Instagram or Facebook

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Arpita: thank you, Maneesha.

Maneesha: Thank you both for having me on so much. Absolutely. Happy Valentine's.

Michael: And thank you all for listening in and we will see you next time on Doctors Living Deliberately. Take care.

Arpita: Bye.