

Episode 6: Divorce Him: Emily Nagoski

Vanessa: Hi Julia.

Julia: Hi Vanessa.

Vanessa: How are you?

Julia: I'm good.

Vanessa: You're looking especially clean today.

Julia: I just showered. My hair is still drying.

Vanessa: Oh, that's what it is. It's a big difference.

Julia: Thank you. It'd been a long time.

Vanessa: So welcome everybody to Hot and Bothered and this segment that we lovingly call...

Julia: Divorce him.

Vanessa: Divorce him.

Vanessa: Okay, so let's solve this person's love life. My fiance, 28 year old male, thinks PTSD is affecting his attraction to me. 28 year old female. I seem to have a very unique problem with my relationship. I find it very hard to find advice about it. I've been trying to deal with it on my own for years, but I have fallen into a very deep depression and feel at the end of my rope. I've been with my fiance for five years. We have two kids and one of them is only three. I wouldn't be trying so hard to make this work if it weren't for them, but he's a great dad and I would endure nearly anything to keep our family together.

Julia: That said, I have been enduring so very much. For years now, my fiance has been telling me he isn't attracted to me. That may sound cut and dry, but let me explain how it is not. Not at all. I love the tone of this writing.

Vanessa: Mmhmm.

Julia: For months at a time, things will be very good, nearly perfect even. We are all very happy and loving and we have so much fun together, our whole family. But then all of a sudden there is a fight or a bad couple of days. He says, he just isn't attracted to me like he should be, that he doesn't love me like he should. This crushes me of course, and I mentally prepare to separate. However, when I start to become distant, he tells me it can all be fixed and he starts plying me

with affection and sweet words, but never tells me he didn't mean it. Just that he thinks it can be fixed.

Vanessa: Okay, so here's the important part about all of that. I am at my very most attractive. I work out all the time. I'm in excellent shape. I take great care of myself and dress up every day. I don't want to toot my own horn, but for the sake of understanding, I will say that I know I am considered very attractive objectively and he gets told he's a lucky man very often. That is why he keeps insisting it is some chemical imbalance that I have and can be cured. He thinks it is from my having suffered years of abuse before I met him. He read that PTSD can throw off your chemical balance and even send a chemical signal of sorts that is repellent. So for years I've been trying my very best to fix this thing that I have no idea how to fix and whenever I feel like everything is okay and that I am getting better, he will reiterate these things and I'll feel very stressed again for months at a time.

Julia: At this point. I will also mention that during those months when things are good between us, we have sex about twice a week regularly. When I bring this up, he insists that he isn't attracted but says it's just quote unquote "superficial". I take that to assume there's a missing connection on his part, but it's so hard to understand because he also swears he loves me very much and this is just chemical.

Vanessa: I don't know what to do anymore. I'm finding it very hard to function and have withdrawn from everything. I find that I'm really starting to hate and resent myself. I'm very depressed. I know it'd be so hard on everyone if I tried to split and move on, but I also know that I cannot take much more of this heart wrenching rejection and mystical problem that I can't seem to fix. Is it worth it to continue trying? Has anyone ever heard of such an obscure problem before? Solved it. Divorce him.

[AD BREAK]

Julia: This makes me want to scream.

Vanessa: Yeah. The first thing I want to do is like honor-- she says very explicitly that her motivation is entirely for her children. Right? Like I think once you become a mom, like that is your top priority. Right? Once you become a parent, there's nothing more important than having a stable life for your family. And so I want to honor, like she's not in a simple situation. That being said, this man is a monster and I think that we have come to overuse the term gaslighting as a society, but I think that he's gaslighting her and is a monster, and needs to be sent to like somewhere far, far away. Like an island for bad men.

Julia: Just like a rock in the middle of the ocean.

Vanessa: Yeah. But I want all of the bad men to be there together and hate each other on that bad island.

Julia: Like a evil men penguin colony.

Vanessa: Yes. That is what I want for this man. The first thing that I want to deconstruct is the idea of objective attractiveness. The fact that he is making this a hundred percent her problem and that he quote unquote “read something once about PTSD” and it's a mystery. Like if you really want to save your relationship, go to couples therapy and have a professional say that there is not a mysterious chemical.

Julia: I don't have the science down of the biological mechanisms behind attraction, but that sounds fake.

Vanessa: I mean it sounds exactly like this like witchy mystery. Women, like, women have scents and women have chemicals and like can we like stop pretending that any of that is real? I can smell the trauma on you.

Julia: It's such a, also offensive concept. Like as though it's her fault that she was abused as a child and now like that's the reason she's undesirable is like a physical change to herself because of that abuse.

Vanessa: Also, that we know of, approximately one fourth of women have been sexually assaulted, so are a quarter of women just like skunk spraying men their like trauma scent? It must be so hard for men to have to sleep with women who have been, you know, sullied by abuse. Shame on us.

Julia: That's the man's perspective is that shame on this woman for being sullied and now she's undesirable.

Vanessa: She should really take a page out of your book and shower.

Julia: Maybe that would fix it.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Julia: When I read it, I see a pretty clear cycle of abuse that this is just a line in that he keeps bringing up and I'm not even sure that he believes it. I just think he knows it's effective in terms of controlling her and that it works really well into enforcing his control upon her and making her feel tied and bound to this relationship because it is her fault. And so I think he's using this fake science as a mechanism to keep her engaged to him.

Vanessa: Yeah. And that whether or not she explicitly knows that, it's not actually what's keeping her in the relationship. What's keeping her in the relationship is their children. The other thing I'll say is like all relationships go through like attraction phases and like lots of sex and not

a lot of sex phases. Right? You hear this especially a lot around people having young children, right? Like just too tired to have sex. Like my body is totally different. So all sorts of things. And so I again feel like he is playing on these things that could otherwise just be like normal phases in relationships.

Julia: Yeah. He's definitely capitalizing on people's right to sometimes not feel attracted to their partner. He knows that that happens, it seems like, and he's using that to control her. I mean, even if it did start as him actually not feeling attracted to her, maybe when they had young kids and it wasn't working for them sexually, I think it's now turned into something where that's a card he's pulling in a similar way where you could say, I just don't like men who are shorter than me. I'm just not attracted to them. That's just my biological, that's my physiology. As opposed to interrogating that as something that is from the outside world and not from you internally.

Vanessa: But here's the thing, right? Like there can be things that we're not attracted to.

Julia: I mean, I think even it's hard to parse when you feel attracted to someone, why that's the case. Part of the reason I'm attracted to anyone is because I'm a human in this world and consume media and I'm part of society and society tells you in part who to be attracted to, and I'm not living in a bubble and I am part of that. But also I'd like to think part of it is because I've developed, like my own loves and my own tastes and I want a partner who reflects that. I'd like to think the internal impetus for me to be attracted to someone is more valid and more interesting than what I hear from the outside is subjectively attractive. And to that point, the-- when the woman says I'm an objectively attractive person, that doesn't mean her husband has to be attracted to her and have to have sex with her all the time. I think this woman is not to blame here at all, but I think saying I'm objective attractive, you should want to have sex with me, doesn't necessarily play out at all times and in all circumstances,

Vanessa: Right. Like quote unquote "objectively hot people" aren't just like entitled to sex all the time.

Julia: That's why the bachelor exists. It's objectively attractive people who like still need to try to find people have sex with.

Vanessa: [Laughs] That's why the bachelor exists? It's a charity project for hot people that need to get laid. And we're all here cheering them on. So hard for you. You can do it.

Julia: That's really what it is.

Vanessa: Here's the thing, we have a lot of like strong instincts on this. And I of course think we're right, but I think that we should speak to someone who actually knows things.

Julia: A woman in STEM.

Vanessa: Yes.

[AD BREAK]

Emily: I am Emily Nagoski. I'm a sex educator. I teach women to live with confidence and joy inside their bodies.

Vanessa: Um, and your book *Come As You Are* is the only required book that I assign to couples when I'm about to marry them. And I've gotten 100% positive response rate from that assignment.

Emily: That's fantastic. Yay.

Vanessa: So I wanted to talk to you a little bit about attraction. In talking to people about romance in romance novels. I have like gotten more uncomfortable lately with people saying things that they are and aren't attracted to. Like saying, Oh, I'm just not attracted to women who are like bigger than a size, whatever or any number of things. So I was wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about attraction. Like, is it purely a biological thing? What part of attraction is chemical? What, what are your thoughts about attraction?

Emily: So everything is biological because-- if it happens inside a body, so this, this like nature-nurture distinction is one not made by anyone who does this kind of thing for a living because the answer is always neither nature nor nurture, but specifically the interaction of the two. There are some things that are probably absolutely universal and biological in terms of a person's attractiveness, baseline indicators of health. There's a reason why Quasimodo in *Hunchback of Notre Dame* looks the way he does, like that's an intense level of asymmetry intended to activate this sort of innate sense of this person's history of development over their lifespan has been marked by serious illness, which is a health cue related to reproduction. So there might be some innate and universal markers like that. Beyond that, a whole lot of what we prefer in a partner's physical appearance in particular has to do with what we've been exposed to in our life. We know from research over a couple of decades now that people tend to consider attractive, the kinds of people they're most exposed to, whether it's in-person or in the media. The more they are exposed to different types of bodies and faces, the more they find those different types attractive. So when people say something like, I'm only attracted to women's bodies that are a certain shape or size, that has nothing to do with any innate biological anything at all and everything to do with the shape and size of bodies they've been presented with, especially the bodies they've been presented with in an idealized setting on a pedestal of like this is what a woman looks like.

Vanessa: And to what extent do we expect to attraction and sex to fluctuate within a relationship? Like at what point, if there's love but no attraction, is that just a phase that every

relationship goes through? What do we say to people who are like, I haven't been attracted to my husband in two years?

Emily: Yeah. So, um, attraction is this, it's not a technical term so I'm trying to like translate it into where it would fit into the research, but basically the extent to which we find a person appealing to us as a sexual partner has only a little bit to do with the objective characteristics or features of the partner and way more to do with the context in which we perceive those characteristics. So when you look at your partner, what are you actually seeing? You're seeing sure, their physical body, you're also seeing your entire history with that person. Every moment your body has shared with that other body and if most of those moments were joyful and pleasurable and trusting, then your interpretation of what you see in that body is going to be really positive and light up and sorta doesn't matter what the body itself looks like, your associations with it are joyful, trusting, caring, loving. And that's attractive. If when you look at that body and what you see is your entire history with that person, if there's been a whole lot of "you're not there for me and disinterest and disengagement or even betrayal," then yeah, you're going to find your partner less attractive and even your own personal state of mind in that moment, when you look at your partner, changes your perception. If you are just in that moment exhausted, worn out, overwhelmed by everything you have to do and you see your partner, that-- you-- it's not going to activate a like, wow, what a beautiful body that is. I'm really interested in engaging sexually with that body. Nothing, no matter how beautiful your partner is, even no matter how much you love and trust and feel joyful with them, when your brain is in that exhausted state, it's still not going to activate a desire to move toward that body, especially in an erotic way.

Vanessa: So we found this question that I was wondering what your thoughts are. So this is, uh, a couple that's been together five years. They have two kids together and every couple of months he says that he is not attracted to her despite them having an active sex life most of the time, and he insists it's because she has PTSD that is affecting her hormones and is a chemical imbalance and that she can fix it through therapy. What do you do, even though this is obviously an extreme version of that? Like one of my best friends, his husband will say like, I'm not attracted to you when you weigh a little bit more. Do you have like advice for people who are going through those phases in their relationships? 'cause my advice is dump him. Like, leave him immediately, but that doesn't seem sustainable.

Emily: Yeah. So some learning has to happen definitely on the side of a partner who says, "the reason I'm not attracted to my partner is because of something that is wrong with them and if they fix it then I will be attracted to you". That is literally conditional love and uh, that's not what, uh, successful long-term relationships look like. You are, I think correct that that is not sustainable. I think it is fixable, but it does require probably professional intervention, therapy. Not with the partner who is perceived to have something wrong, what we call the diagnosed patient in the relationship, but, uh, couple's therapy where the two of them talk together about what it feels like to be on the receiving end of messages about your attractiveness and lovability ultimately being contingent on anything at all. When in healthy long-term relationships, the deal

is you feel loved and supported and liked and appreciated by your partner, literally no matter what. And when things go wrong, your partner feels some degree of desire and responsibility for helping you make stuff better. They're more attracted to you in terms of like working together, collaborating in a relationship, in order to fix whatever it is that's making the person unhappy. Uh, and the examples you're describing are body related. Like whether or not the person's body changes and everyone's body changes over the course of our lifespan. If we are lucky enough to grow old, our body by the time we die will be really different from the body we had when we met our partner, if we're fortunate enough to have a partner that we're with for decades. And if love were contingent on the shape and size of a person's body, love would never last over decades and it demonstrably does. So it is not the case that there are physical conditions to healthy love. But it is, it requires work. Like I don't have zero hope for people who bring that point of view to a relationship. This point of view of, "if your body doesn't meet X-Y-Z criteria, if it changes, then I no longer am interested in you. Um, because I know that, I know people who have had that experience and their partner has like released themselves from that frame of mind so that they could continue to recognize how beautiful and spectacular and lovable and loving and fantastic their partner is without reference to where they compare against some fictional aspirational beauty ideal.

Vanessa: Do you think romance novels can be part of like self healing in those ways?

Emily: God, yes. So, uh, I experienced an abusive relationship when I was in college and it was actually one of the reasons I stopped reading romance, is that I couldn't find a story that felt like how I felt in the aftermath of that experience. I would find stories of heroines who were like rebuilding their lives, but they were always just like moving to a new town and starting over and they would have some trust issues. But it was never the sort of like crazy gas-lit feeling that I had of not knowing whether or not my own body made any sense in its internal experience. Like I don't even know what connection feels like. I don't know if this is a real emotion or if this is something I'm just putting on as a mask for tolerating something else. So I stopped reading romance 'cause I couldn't find that experience. So I went through my own healing process and when I came back to romance, it had changed a whole bunch. Uh, and there was more of that stuff. One of my favorite examples is Maya Rodale's "What A Wallflower Wants". It's one of the best, truest experiences of a survivor of sexual violence. Rebuilding a sense of sexual connection, not just with another person, but with her own body in this very beautiful, gentle way. It's really optimistic and warm and it gives a lot of credit to the hero. If I were in college and found that, it would have registered in this very profound way for me.

Vanessa: No, I think fiction is incredibly healing and I'm always afraid that, that I'll be told that it's healing in like unproductive ways, that it's self-soothing and not actually healing.

Emily: Why can't it be both? And there's something important about self-soothing.

Vanessa: And I feel like if a character has also felt that way, then that means that the author can understand that feeling, which means I'm not alone in the feeling. Right? And it's a place

that you can bring more vulnerability than you can into many conversations because there's no risk in being vulnerable in front of a book.

Emily: Yeah. And then you read it in a book and you can talk about what you read in a book to someone and be talking a little bit about your own life without the risk of talking about your own life. So it begins to open up a door that might be too dangerous to open up without that sort of intermediary of the story.

Vanessa: So here's I think, I think my last question, which is why is there so much shame around romance novels? Why do people read them in secret?

Emily: I mean, it's the patriarchy. [Laughs] This is a genre written primarily by women, primarily for women, primarily about women's sexual and romantic satisfaction. Finding partners who give them great orgasms, who make them laugh and love them exactly as they are. And "eww women, how boring". That sort of by itself gets denigrated. And then if a person denies that, that-- if they're like, "no, I'm a feminist. I'm in favor of stories about women. But why does it have to be women about, like, women in love and relationships? Why can't it be about women achieving great things?" And uh, first, if a person has that critique, I think they have not read very much romance that was written in the last 10 years in particular. And also, there is nothing shameful or wrong about women finding delight and importance in relationship. In fact, it is patriarchal to insist that a woman define her success in life and her standards of what matters in her life based on what men consider important and their measures of success in life. But people aren't quite ready for the idea that being loved is an extraordinarily feminist thing to have happen in a woman's life.

Vanessa: If there's like one thing that you could say to 10,000 women, what do you want to say to them?

Emily: Pleasure is the measure of sexual wellbeing. It is not what you do, who you do it with, where you do it, how often or even how many orgasms you have. It is whether or not you like the sex you are having. Pleasure is the measure of sexual wellbeing. If you are having fun, you are doing it right.

Vanessa: Ugh, that is so lovely. Thank you Emily so much. Not just for taking the time, but for all of the work that you do. I, I am just so, so grateful to you and I know a lot of people are as well, so thank you.

Emily: Thank you. It's my favorite thing to talk about.

Vanessa: So what did you think of my wonderful conversation with Emily Nagoski where I had a cold?

Julia: She's so smart. I liked the idea that when you are looking at your partner, you're seeing all of your history with them. If you don't feel attracted to them in that moment, it's actually the man's fault in this circumstance because he is feeling all of his bad vibes and his bad energy, and when he looks at his partner, like that's why he's not attracted. It's 'cause he sucks.

Vanessa: That is very specific reading based on our new information.

Julia: I mean, I was relaying what she taught me into the context of this question and I feel doubly validated that it's not because she's unattractive and it's not because her PTSD smells. It's because he sucks.

Vanessa: I also just like the clarity with which she was like, that is literally conditional love. Saying I will love you 10 pounds lighter. I will love you if you get rid of this smell. I mean, to your point about how much this is his fault, is like that there are also times where you look at your partner and you're not attracted to them and it's because you're exhausted and it's because you're distracted. Right? And it's like they could be sex on wheels and you'd be like, nope. Like nothing in the world could compel me to want you right now. And the fact that he like every few months isn't thinking, "oh, I'm tired. I have two children under five and work and whatever," but instead thinks, "oh, her smell is back." I think we just all have a responsibility to be questioning ourselves in what we're attracted to and when we're attracted to it, rather than immediately be blaming other people for not being attractive to us.

Julia: Yeah. I think it, it's a good instinct in kind of like what we were talking about where it's good to try to think about why you're attracted to people. Is it because of how they look? Is it because of how you're feeling? Is it because they look like what you think someone hot should look like?

Vanessa: Is it because they look like everyone you grew up with? Like, is that what you want?

Julia: Yeah.

Vanessa: Okay Julia, what are you going to do now?

Julia: I'm going to lunch with my favorite professor--

Vanessa: So I'm not invited.

Julia: Yeah, the-- for this time you're not allowed to come.

Vanessa: That's okay. I guess...

This has been “Divorce Him” an episode of Hot and Bothered. Come support us on Patreon where you can get extended interviews from our amazing experts, and get romance book reviews from me. We really appreciate your support on Patreon, it’s how we can make this show work. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram @therompod and leave us a review on iTunes. We are a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media. We are Executive Produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan, and Ariana Nedelman. This week’s Reddit question was chosen by Julia Argy, who also co-hosted today’s episode, and we are edited by Chelsea Ursin. Special thanks this week to Emily Nagoski, whose new book, Burn Out: The Secret to Solving the Stress Cycle is available now and I highly recommend it. Our production team is Brigid Goggin, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, Alexander Mark, and Nora Murphy. We’ll talk to you next week.