

UNCONDITIONALLY WORTHY

The Podcast

Unconditionally Worthy Podcast EP 62: How to Make It Through the Messy Middle in Relationships with Erica St. Bernard

Adia Gooden: (0:00:00) This episode is sponsored by [Crys & Tiana](#) taking the guesswork out of launching your podcast.

Welcome to the Unconditionally Worthy Podcast. In this podcast, I will guide you on your journey to connect with the true source of your self-worth. Each week we'll discuss barriers to unconditional self-worth, the connection between self-worth and relationships, self-worth practices you can apply to your life, and how to use self-worth as a foundation for living courageously. I'm your host, Dr. Adia Gooden, a licensed clinical psychologist, dance enthusiast, and a dark chocolate lover who believes deeply that you are worthy unconditionally.

Hello and thanks for joining me for another episode of the Unconditionally Worthy Podcast. I'm recording this during the first week of getting back to work full-time. Our nanny has started. Baby girl Amani Joy is with the nanny upstairs. And really grateful for childcare and for the support. And we've been having a little bit of trouble with sleep. So yesterday I was kind of a little delirious. I'm glad we weren't recording the podcast yesterday because my brain was not firing on all cylinders. But today I'm feeling good. I got more rest, and I am ready to get into it. On this episode, I have a really interesting and insightful and nuanced conversation with Erica St. Bernard, who's a licensed marriage and family therapist. She does a lot of couples therapy and we really talk about kind of what does it look like to be in a messy middle of relationship, but also to learn to show up to your relationships in healthy ways. And so I think that this episode is going to provide a lot of wisdom and insights. So for those of you who are in relationships, for those of you who want to be in relationships and maybe even understand the challenges that you've had in past your current relationships, this episode is going to be incredibly valuable and useful. So be sure to listen in and let us know what you think.

I'm very excited to introduce you to Erica St. Bernard and to have her on the podcast with me today. She is a licensed clinical marriage and family therapist and the Founder of Your Life's Well, LLC, a private practice in Bowie, Maryland. She sees millennial women, men and couples preparing them for life and love that prioritizes individual and relational wellness. She provides pre-engagement, premarital and

couples counseling to equip and empower couples for a legacy of love and wellness. Erica is the author of *We Over Me: Principles of Marital Partnership*. As an ordained minister, she integrates faith and spirituality at the request of clients. Erica seeks to normalize conversations about mental and emotional wellness and the intersection of faith for and with people of color. So Erica, thank you so much for being here. Welcome to the podcast.

Erica St. Bernard: Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited to be here with you.

Adia Gooden: Awesome. Well, I'd love to start with the question I always start with, with guests, which is by asking you to share a bit about your own self-worth journey.

Erica St. Bernard: Sure. I think one of the easiest and quickest things for me to say about it is that it's an ongoing journey. I think as life happens to us and as we live and as we experience things, we have revelation, so to speak, or, you know, epiphanies or aha moments or highlights that kind of serve as mile markers for how we've grown. And so I think of my journey to self-worth or journey of self-worth that is continuing to be rooted in my faith in Christ, but also to be very supported and influenced by the people I intend to surround myself with. So I'm very intentional about who's in the room with me when I have control, right. Where am I going? Where am I spending my time? What am I listening to? What am I reading? You know, where, what am I opening myself up to? So that, that those messages from those people or those resources are speaking to where I am are encouraging me for where I am, but also for where I'm looking ahead to.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. I love that you're sort of talking about being intentional about sort of what you consume as well as who you're, how you're surrounded by. And I think that's so important, because a lot of us, most of us when we were kids, we didn't have much sort of control or agency over who we spent time with, whose messages we were receiving, right. And depending on the adults that we were surrounded by, and maybe even the other kids, we may have received affirming and positive and encouraging messages. We may have received discouraging and critical messages. And I think that one of the things that as we get older, thinking about how do we get intentional? And I think that's sort of the movement around boundaries is part of that. Like how do you set boundaries with people? (0:05:00) And I think one of the things that I often focus on is like, also how do you get intentional internally? And I'm sure you do this work with your clients as well, which, because we carry those voices that we heard when we were kids with us.

So even though we might have been desperate to get out our parents' house, desperate to get away from that family member who just got on our nerves and made us feel bad and all of that stuff, we then have this tendency, our minds have this tendency to then sort of repeat the messages and the narratives, right. With, you know, even far beyond us being in the situation and the space with that person. And so I think there's the internal work of sort of like dismantling and freeing ourselves from those narratives. And those external things like what you listen to and who you surround yourself with can be so corrective and helpful in sort of creating new internal narratives and affirming your worthiness as you go along.

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah. Align with what you've said about from childhood, not having total control because what child has total control, but thinking about the messages we've heard that we want to preserve and hold onto and holding onto those. But then also identifying as we're thinking about our self-talk and what's happening in our head? What's happening between our own ears before we say a word to anybody else? What is the messaging I'm listening to about my worthiness, about my value, about my virtue, aside from a role or an assignment or a title or a life responsibility at the core of me? At the end of the day when I take off the minister title, when I take off the title of wife, of mother, of sister, even a friend, and I'm just Erica and I'm bare bones, what do I see as my essence? And I think for me, one of the

greatest words when people say it in their mention of me or in their interactions with me, the notion of being authentic is something I've worked really hard to do just to find my own authenticity. And so we talk about like that lifelong journey of self-worth because we all, especially as black women, have been in circles or spaces where there is an expectation of what we're supposed to look like or sound like, or be like. And so I remember in early counseling training, thinking about the fact that most of my peers there were white, and I didn't sound like them, and I didn't look like them. And usually my hair is big and curly and out and doing what it does. And so I was trying to tame that and shrink back, and it felt unreal. It felt like very disingenuous. And I wondered how could I truly connect with clients and help them to see their worth and value if I hadn't yet figured out how to do that for myself. And so when you talk about the self-talk and what we're saying to ourselves and how we are rewriting old messaging, and as you suggested the correction, the corrective power of what we're intentional to listen to, whether it's meditations in our own voice, I encourage my clients to find meditative mantras and record them in their own voices. They're usually freaked out initially. But once you record it in your own voice and then you play it back and you hear yourself saying those things, it rewrites the messaging that you've been believing. It can begin to rewrite the core of who you're. And then those words are no longer words on a paper that you recited, but those are words of your heart. They become your heart song, they become how you show up in the world. And that's what this ongoing process is. You get to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite and never has to be finalized.

Adia Gooden: I love that intervention of having people sort of record their own voice, affirming things to themselves, and then listening to that to challenge, rewrite the negative thoughts, negative narratives. And I also really appreciate what you said about sort of, you know, connecting to your authentic self, especially in the context of being a therapist, being trained as a therapist. Because, you know, when we're trained as a therapist, you know, the predominant culture of therapy in the United States is very white male, upper class, right. Cisgender. White male, straight, cisgender, upper class, right? And there's also a dynamic in the mental health field as in many other fields, which is, that's neutral, right? So the neutral way of being is centered around white male upper class culture, right? And so then as, you know, women of color in that space, you know, you're kind of like, well, you know, and you're sort of trained like this is the right way to do it, you know, more blank slate. Like watch the self-disclosure, watch the connection, watch the, you know, like you're sort of trained to watch all of these things. And, you know, I think one of the things that I experienced when I was operating under my own license was sort of this freedom to say, you know, I can make an intentional decision around how I show up in the room with my clients and feeling comfortable being my authentic self and connecting in ways that a supervisor may or may not understand (0:10:00), but I know that this is the appropriate way to connect and I'm very thoughtful and intentional, right. I think about one of my clients and he was sobbing and, you know, I made the decision that moment to say, do you want to hug, right? And normally that is not something I would offer, and if I was being supervised and videotaped, right? Because you go through training, have to be videotaped, which can be very useful. I wouldn't have done that. But this is a young gay, black male client, and he's sobbing and it felt very clear to me in that moment that the best thing I could offer was physical comfort that was appropriate. And I asked him, right, and there was like permission seeking and all of that. But that was the best way I could show up authentically and offer that comfort and care, even though some people might consider that a boundary violation. So, you know, I think, anyway, that's sort of a tangent, but it's sort of this process of trusting yourself. I think a big part of authenticity is trusting yourself over the external messages over what somebody else said you should be, you should do. And tuning in, listening to yourself and saying, well, what feels right and how can I intentionally move forward into the world in that way.

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah. And I think it's moments like that where we give ourselves permission. I'm always talking to my clients about giving yourself permission to do something that is different than what you're used to. Different than what they said. Different than what, even what you said, right, because we grow and we mature. And I used to think a certainly, and now I don't think that way all the time anymore.

And so giving yourself permission to shift a bit to pivot from what your usual line of thought would be and to reach out, I've done the same as you said, practicing independently. But yeah, I've had clients who I could tell, you know, based on our conversations and our journey together through whatever we were there to address and work through, two in particular, two young women struggling with similar and different things. And there came a point in a time where for one of them in particular, every single session ended in an embrace. And it wasn't like a, you know, it wasn't like a auntie kind of thing, although I'm older than her, but it was this very, in this space, one of the only spaces I feel seen. And so what it is to see and be seen in a space.

And I think that goes back to self-worth me being able to acknowledge my own, me being able to connect with my authentic self and then to empower this person to do the same. And to trust in the moment that these embraces are indeed therapeutic. That is not about me, but it is very much about her. And as you suggested, always consent seeking, hey, do we want to end? And how are we ending today's session? And there'd just be this moment in time that was really sacred, really special, really brief, but it would be the thing that would kind of, as she would say, it carries me until the next session. And so it was one of those, again, that, that space that seems a bit tricky for others to navigate. And we might get side eyed and there'd be some questions, but when, you know, you know, and I think that's the beauty of being a woman of color and showing up in the fullness of who we are. Because people connect with that, right? People come to your website and they're like, oh my gosh, your lip color, oh my gosh, your head wrap. Wow. Your curls, oh my gosh, your frames. These are the things that from the outset before they get to hear our voice, before they get to truly engage with us, they're connecting site on site. And that's the beauty of being fully present. That's the beauty of acknowledging and affirming your own self-worth and doing the work that is continuous to make sure you're continuing to do that as you support people's journey to theirs.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. Yeah. I was having another conversation or a different episode of the podcast and we were sort of talking about how when we are our authentic selves, we give other people permission to be their authentic selves, which is so different than sort of how things tend to operate, like in social media and things, which is be like me or I should be like them, right, versus, wow, they are so themselves. Maybe I could be fully myself. And that's really the goal, not to have a bunch of people trying to act like everybody else, but to have people say it's okay. And it's beautiful and it's wonderful to be fully me. And that me seeing that person be fully them with their hair, with their style, with whatever, with their voice, you know, their way of moving in the world gives me permission to be fully me.

Erica St. Bernard: Absolutely. And that's, like you said, that's the beauty when we get to this space where I'm not threatened by you showing up as your full self and you're not threatened by me showing up as my full self, but we are empowered. I love being in a room with black women and just kind of feeling the energy of all that black girl magic before we say a word, like literally just walking into the room and kind of, I literally walk in and like I take a deep breath to like breathe in the essence of what it is to be a black woman in a room with other black women before I say a word, before I take in anything else, just to kind of breathe that in because there's so much energy in there (0:15:00) that we can pick up on, that we can use again along the journey towards self-worth and the journey of all the other things we're journeying towards.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. Yeah. I agree. I think there's also a special way that black women see each other and, you know, see each other just so fully. And I think that it's like, in those spaces, there's like a few things going on. There's one sort of relief of like, okay, right, like, I don't have to be on in the same way that I have to be on in other spaces where I walk into a space and I'm like, I'm the only one, so I better zip it up, tighten it up, you know, like, you know, pro like, it's just, there's a tension. So it's like, oh, it's just us. And then there's just like this richness and this color and this, you know, like, there's so much, and then you know, you're going to be seen, right? Like, people are going to comment on your outfit and your hair and

you're like, okay, like, I see you, right. Literally you say, I see you, right. That's this way of affirming, like, I see what you did there with your outfit and how you got yourself ready. And it just feels very connecting and uplifting to be in those spaces. I completely agree. I completely agree. Well, a lot of the work that you do is helping people with relationships. And I'd love to hear your insight on just some of the challenges that you see people having in romantic relationships. I think that, you know, again, with social media you often get the sort of snippet of things and usually things are more nuanced and more complicated. It's just like how people are, like, communication is key. Communication is key. You need to communicate. But it's like, well, we actually need to talk about what communication is, what, we're always communicating what's helpful, what's not helpful. So I'd love your sort of nuanced experience, take on, what are the challenges that you're seeing millennials have in their relationships with each other, with themselves? What's your, what's your take on that?

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah. I think one of the greatest challenges as we mentioned moment, you know, moments ago is that internal narrative from childhood or the expectation based on childhood, right. Most of us, I joke, but I'm sincere when I say it. Most people don't walk down the aisle if they're getting married or whatever. Their ceremony's going to be thinking, I can't wait to mess up this person's life. Like, I just don't think most people are doing that, right. Any more than most moms look at their babies and say, I can't wait to mess up your life. Like, I don't generally think that's the line of thought going into these relationships, I think all of us, and I do mean all generally speaking, have a desire to be connected in a loving and nurturing relationship. The question sometimes is, do I have not so much what it takes, like am because it's not a question of am I worthy of it? Yes. Flat line, you're worthy, No questions there. But do I have the skills? Do I have the ability to intuit somebody's thoughts and feelings in addition to my own not above and beyond? Notice I didn't say above and beyond, but in addition to my own. And sometimes that is the greatest challenge is that I think, and I feel this way hard stop. So it's like, yeah, but you don't leave room for this person that you say you want to love and build a life with or dream with or whatever it is.

And so it's really about how do I acknowledge that I have wants and needs, this person also has wants and needs, how do we effectively communicate them and effective communication course is different than some other forms of communication, you know, like we're ridges, well this is who I am, okay, and you just don't leave it like that. We're not going to try to do anything different. We're just going to settle for this is how I am. So this opportunity we have in session and in reading, certainly there are tons of resources. The question of who am I and how am I showing up in the relationship is one that people don't often ask. We're quick to say, well, if you would do these things, then our relationship would be better. So if you would stop this, if you would just this. And the question is, how about you? If you would just, if you would stop, right? And so it is that reflective pause, that quiet moment of reflection where we say, how am I showing up in this relationship? And sometimes when I'm working with people who are not yet partnered or who are seeking partnership, how am I showing up now? And is that the way I want to show up in romantic spaces, right. And it doesn't have to mean that I'm turning myself inside out and becoming a whole new person, but there may be some tendencies that I'm shutting down or I'm closing people out, or I'm not willing to engage. That could be problematic. And so really thinking about what that looks like.

So I think it's really about the awareness of the personal story and how it impacts them, how they're showing up in the relationship. But then also, what skills do I need? Because many of us, certainly millennials, we're educated and we've (0:20:00) got the world at our hands. We can Google anything in real time. We can listen to a podcast or an infomercial about everything. The question is how much am I applying what I've listened to, right? Because you can quote the podcast and you can tell me what episode and you can tell me who was on it. And you can give the tea and you could do all of those things. The question is the application piece. And I know, because I struggle too with application all the time. It's like, it was good, that was good, and then it stays there. It was just good. So it's like, okay, that was good. And how do I put that into practice on a day to day basis, since I think it is that acknowledgement of past

history and needing to think through some of it, not necessarily rehash all of it, but just acknowledge that a lot of how we think about relationships is not our own thought about relationships. And many of us don't realize that. You know, we want to correct and undo what we saw, but we are not really being honest about what we saw.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. Well, I think that's one of the powers of therapy, right? Is that you sort of asked to bring it out into the open. You're asked, what was your parents' relationship dynamic like? And you might square arm and it was fine, right. I always thought it was interesting, especially when I worked with young adults and I'd ask, well, you know, what's your relationship like with your parents? It's good, it's fine, it's perfect. I'm like okay, great. Then a couple months later, few sessions later, well, you know, and it's like, right. You know, we'll just give you give you space for that to unfold because usually it's not perfect.

And as you said, no matter, even if there's an intention right? There can be a challenge with actually sort of showing up in, you know, the best way we can, we may not know how best to show up depending on our family history, the experiences we've had in the past. I also really like that you highlight the importance of looking at ourselves because it's very easy in relationships to blame the other person. And, you know, certainly I know from my experience as a couple therapist as well, that people come in saying it's their fault. They're the reason our marriage, our relationship is not working. They just need to change, as you said, they just need to do it differently. And yes, there may be some things that you want your partner to do differently and that may be reasonable and takes two to tango, right. And there is also work that you probably need to do, right?

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah, absolutely.

Adia Gooden: And so that's the piece. And I think that's, you know, what you're describing is like the application that's the messy middle piece, right. That's the piece that's like uncomfortable, right. But like, ooh, I guess I, ooh, I tend to always shut down. Ooh, I kind of lash out when I'm upset and I'm scared. And that's hurtful, right. And I also think that's where, you know, the work that I help people do this, this self-worth work is so important because if you aren't grounded in your worthiness, the likelihood that you're going to respond to a critique or a, hey, could you do this better? Or feedback with this must mean I'm the worst person in the world. They're going to reject me. I'll never end up with someone, right. Like that you would go there is higher than if you are grounded in a sense of like, you know what, I'm worthy of love and care, right. I'm worthy of taking up space and I have growth in work to do. And so there's sort of like a cushion, right? Like the criticism or the feedback lands in a cushioned way.

And it may feel hard, but you can show up for yourself and with yourself, you know, like offer yourself compassion and then be able to take it in and say, you know what? I really do tend to shut down. And that isn't how I want to show up in this relationship with someone I love so much. And so I'm going to breathe the next time I feel really vulnerable. I'm going to offer myself some encouragement and compassion, and I'm going to show up and I'm going to move in instead of walking away or pulling away. That's the like, the messy like, okay, like breathe through it and what are the strategies that I think people really need support with, right? And that's what, where therapy comes in or group coaching, like what I do comes in because it is, it's messy and it's hard. And you're often working through like your little inner child being like, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, like it's not safe.

Erica St. Bernard: This is dangerous, don't do it, don't it.

Adia Gooden: Exactly. And you got to coach yourself and your younger self. And it's the messy middle, but that's like, you know, it's just like flowers grow out of the dirt in the mud. Like, you got to get in there if you want to bloom.

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah. It's the beauty of, like you said, I appreciate the moniker, you know, the messy middle because it is that, and I think so often in the course of couples therapy specifically, people get stuck there (0:25:00). They get stuck, you know, between the narrative of, this is how we got here, right. That's usually one of your first questions in therapy. Tell me what brings you in, what are you wanting to work through, what are we addressing? And after everybody's had a chance to point their fingers at each other and we talk about what we want to change or what we want to improve, then we're in that messy middle and we're doing the work. And if people aren't resourced enough individually, as you're talking about with regard to self-worth, or they're not in their own individual therapy, and as stuff comes up from their past, it activates them or causes them to feel bigger feelings than they've ever felt before so to speak. Because that little girl or little boy part woke up and was like, hey, somebody stole my truck. Like, it's like, oh, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. And so we're adults, but we're responding like a five year old and somebody has stolen our truck, and so we're having a tantrum and our partner's trying to figure out who is this person? Or we are trying to figure out who am I? Like who am I responding like this? I don't usually behave this way. I've never done this before.

And so again, the beauty of the messy middle, when we are supported and when we can submit ourselves to the therapeutic process, knowing that, as you suggested, you know, many beautiful plants grow after a season of like manure and mess. They've got to be fertilized and the roots have to be dug up a little bit and we got to shake off some of the old dirt and put new dirt in so that things can blossom and bloom in ways we haven't seen. Another one of the challenges that we can about briefly, just as a mention is we want things to be the way they used to be so often that is a theme for couples. Well, it didn't used to be like this.

And it's like, yeah, but you're talking before the pandemic. Whoa, that's loaded. You're talking before we had kids. Whoa, that's a different life. You're talking before we moved, before you lost your job, before the loss of big mama, before the loss of your dad, before the loss of whatever, right. The loss of pregnancy, before the loss of all the other things. And so really helping couples to contextualize that, yeah, it makes sense that you're in this really challenging space. And so giving them permission even to settle with that. Because I think, again, watching the Gram, if we're looking at social media, it seems like all hashtag black love, it's amazing. Is beautiful. It's got beautiful soundtracks. And it's got beautiful reels and it's amazing. And so if ours isn't that, then we should go to divorce court. It's like, wait, no, no, no, no. Remember those are snippets. Snippets reels don't give you but 30 to 60 seconds. Like she's not on there for a day in a life of this couple, right.

And so this opportunity to think about the parts of us that need to be tended to, the parts of our relationship that need to be tended to, and then making sure, again, I think it's about the ongoing process of both. So often we want to focus only on the couple relationship and what you find is that it's sometimes the individual who needs some additional support, and other times it is the individual who's in therapy and they want their partner to join. And so it's really about empowering them from a systemic perspective. How do I support you as this partner, as this mom, as this entrepreneur, so that you can show up as your better self in relationships? And what does that look like in a self-worth kind of best way.

(0:28:20)

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It's so important to normalize couples going through challenges so that they're not like, this means we shouldn't (0:30:00) work, right? Because I think often you're sort of in, I mean, depending on how long people are together before they get married, but at least see sort of the beginning of the relationship is often a little bit of a fantasy land, a little bit of a like rolls color glasses, right? It's just light and fun. And I think some of the challenges couples experience are like what you were saying, which is life events, transitions, things happening in the world. And some of it is just like you started to get to know each other on a deeper level, right? And like life is different when you're just going on dates and like lighthearted stuff versus when you move in together and you have to share life together and you're navigating a shared bank account and you're planning a budget and you're planning for a family, right? Like those things sort of deepen the connection. And it also unearths differences, challenges, right? You think it should be done that way. I think it should be done this way, right? Like, all of these things that you have to kind of navigate.

And so part of it is like, yeah, how do we help people have the tools that sort of the expectation that's more reasonable than, I'm just so head over heels in love and it's perfect. So it's always going to be this way versus like, I'm so enjoying this phase of our relationship where we're not dealing with heavy stuff and we're really connecting and it's just light and fun. Also knowing this is going to evolve and that's okay. Because it evolves both some challenges, but also the connection deepens, the intimacy deepens. And so sort of normalizing those things. And I love that you say you do pre-engagement counseling as well, because I think a lot of people, more people are doing premarital counseling, which is good, right. It's always hard when a couple comes in and they're like, yeah, we've been having this problem for 10 years, can you help us? And you're like, ooh, okay. Like let's see what we can do, right. But if you can come early, then you're not under the pressure of, well, we just got engaged and we just posted the pictures and we have a date and it better get together by this certain date, right. And then you focus more on tools to help people.

And so I'd love your thoughts on that. And I'd also love if you would share kind of, hopefully this ties in a bit about your book, right? Because I imagine some of what you talk about in your book, *We Over Me*, really gets into the tools that you offer, the frameworks, mindset shifts that you offer to, to couples so that they can have healthy relationships.

Erica St. Bernard: Absolutely. Yeah. What I realized is in the work that I was doing to prepare couples for marriage both in church, I certainly, you know, supported a church ministry that prepared couples for marriage. And that was fun and enjoyable and loved it. And then I realized that I was seeing the same things in this group setting as I was in the individual setting with couples in the office, which is this desire to be married, but this seeming, you know, chasm between where we are and how we get there, right. We see couples who are married 50, 60, 70 years. Our church does a thing every month. The first of the month we kind of acknowledge birthdays. And so people with birthdays just kind of staying if you're born in the month of whatever. And then if you, if you're married in the month of this, you stand. And occasionally they would ask, how long have you been married? And so you'd hear couples shouting out these wow numbers. Like there's one couple, I think they've been married like 65 years. And so you're like to be alive for 65 years. It's like a big deal, but you've been with the same person like living and doing

life for 65 years. Wow. We want that. And so we're like, I want to get married and I want to be married for 65 years. And it's like, yeah. But there's one 65 years between now and then, but also a lot of life and living and learning and growing and all of the things. And so what does it look like to prepare for that? So I'd have these premarital couples who would come, they'd be showing their ring and telling me about the save the dates and the venues they'd already booked and how much money they'd already paid. And so by then they were locked in. And so very much committed to just making this thing work. And my recommendation was always, okay, so let's acknowledge that these are some of the challenges and we probably will not resolve them before your beautiful wedding day.

And so that will mean that you will either one resolve that these issues will just remain in perpetuity or perpetuity, or we will be doing some ongoing work that you will be consistent to stay committed to the work of growing and learning what you need to learn so that you can have the kind of union you want to have. And so what I realized is that again, couples were coming and they'd already paid all this money in their venues. And so they were committed to the venue, committed to the date, committed to the experience. And I think in part because social media sells us these beautiful hashtags of, you know, the (inaudible) and whoever else, and all the people (0:35:00), and it's beautiful. I'm not suggested there's anything wrong with it. But when we're following all those pages and we're bombarded with all those hashtags, it's just like, ooh, I can't wait for my big day. And so then we plan it, except our partnership is a little janky. It's a little problematic, we don't really get along well. We have a really hard time coming together around the guest list. We have a hard time coming together around colors and how many people really need to be in the vital party, how many people need to be at the wedding, and how many plus ones can a person have I mean? The first wife and the third wife. I mean what? Like, it's just all the things that come up. And so really wanting to think about how we address some of those things outside of that tenuous space where you're already, you know, your nerves are, your adrenaline's running, you're ready, you're excited, you're ready to go.

So pre-engagement became a thing because I had a few couples come to me and it was literally just a few who were like, yeah, we've been together for a while and we're thinking about proposing, we haven't started ring shopping yet, but we're thinking that might be the next step and we just want to make sure we're in a good space. And I was like, this is amazing. This is beautiful. And so it took the pressure off, well, we've posted these pictures, we shared with our parents, we've, you know, done all these things. And so then we could slow walk the process of really thinking about who am I? How am I showing up? What do I want? What do I need? Do you, do I have the resources I need to show up in the relationship I say I want? Because sometimes that's the other piece. It's, I want something from you that I can't even access. And so then we're in this space where you keep coming up short, but I also don't have it. It's like me expecting my man to have a six pack, sis I don't have a six pack. And I'm not suggesting that it would be incompatible for us to be together without one. But I probably really shouldn't be holding him to this six pack standard if I'm not, you know, and of course that's the silly again, but it's aligned and just kind of yeah, right. But this idea of pre-engagement. And so I noticed in addition to doing the couples, you know, ministry things at church to prepare couples for marriage and my also individual work as a clinician, I noticed that the same themes kept coming up and we talk about mindset shifts. I realized that We Over Me was something that a lot of people, particularly millennials just didn't have a grasp on. And it was this idea that marriage is not, and let me make sure I'm clear about this. I don't mean We Over Me in the sense that I lose value, I lose purpose, I lose, you know...

Adia Gooden: All of my identity or?

Erica St. Bernard: All of my identity. Exactly. But I mean, if I'm going to think about marriage as a long term commitment with this other person, I sometimes have to think about us over myself because if it's just me that I'm always going to want my way. I'm always going to want things to go the only way I've ever wanted them to go, which is my way. And so then that never gives my partner the opportunity to

have it go his way. And that's probably not going to work for us as a we. And so we have to figure out as a unit, what are the things that are most important to us and how do we together work to support that? And so one of the concepts I talk about in the book is a notion of interdependence. This notion that together we do these things. I'm strong by myself, you're strong by yourself, we're capable, we're qualified, and all of those amazing things. But I really believe in this is likely my faith in Christ that influences, but I really believe marriage is about purpose that these are two people coming together to fulfill a purpose that is bigger than both of them by themselves. I tell you the truth, there are some things that have happened in my life in the 17 years of being married that I don't think would've happened if it weren't connected to my husband. And not that he did them or he made them happen, but because we supported each other along that journey. And the same is true for his journey.

And so when I wrote the book *We Over Me* self-published work, I thought about like, what does it mean to be in relationship? What are some of the challenges and hurdles I've seen come up in therapy? How can I support couples in talking through those things? But then also really thinking about the books that are out there about relationships tend to be written by as we spoke about our white counterparts. So they are white men, sometimes white women, sometimes couples, but white men and women who are, you know, against, you know, heterosexual, they are pretty affluent or at least middle to upper class and their life story just doesn't look like ours, right. And I joke, but I generally, they start like, well, Bobby and I met in Bible College. First of all, I don't know many black people that went to Bible College. And two, they probably didn't meet their love and then get married there and then live happily ever after, right. We come to love in very different ways at different seasons of life. And so I wanted to write a book that while it was intended primarily for premarital couples, it could also be utilized for couples, the span of their relationship. And recently at the top of the year, I hosted a *We Over Me* virtual series where I walked with (0:40:00) four or six, six, I think it was six of us maybe whatever wrong with some couples through the book. And we talked through what it was like.

And I had the newest couple had gotten married within six months, and the oldest standing couple had been married for 20 years. And it was beautiful to see and hear how each couple represented in its span could talk about the value of the book and the principles and concepts that were presented. And so it's a really great way, again, I think to normalize the conversations around sex, around household responsibilities, around what it means to ask for the help you need not to assume your partner knows anything. I joke in one of the chapters we talk about. Yeah, right. We talk about expectations. And so often, and one of the illustrations I give in the book is, suppose I have this expectation that my husband is going to draw me a bath every Thursday, because that's one of my client nights. He's going to draw me a bath, but there's going to be roses and rose pedals from the basement up the stairs. When I get to the tub, there's going to be, you know, champagne and my favorite fruit basket with all the cheese and crackers my heart, you know, can enjoy. I'm going to have a choice between girl, take care of your man clothes or girl get your rest clothes. I can choose what kind of night it's going to be. And my favorite music is playing.

And all of this I have put together in my head and I'm ready. Because it's Thursday, right. And I'm back into that garage and there are no rose pedals. And I walk up those steps and still not a rose pedal in sight. I don't smell a candle burning. I don't see, I don't see any of the things I envision. And I'm upset with him because he didn't deliver on something I didn't communicate. Like, how does that make sense? But so often that's how we show up and love relationships. You're supposed to just know, but how, how? And so we talk in the book about how, what it means to communicate those things, what it means to think through. There's some journaling prompts, short questions for us to think about. I encourage couples to get the book in pairs so that they can write their own notes and their own books if they want to share notes in that way. But it's a beautiful work that took a while because I was in my head and wondering about self-worth, right? Like, am I, am I ready to write a book? Do I have enough years of experience? Am I researched enough, like all the things? And then my husband again who's amazing and very supportive. I

remember one day we were talking, he's like, how's the writing going? And I was, well, I'm just not sure it's good. And he said, well, if you don't write it, it's not. And I was like, well let me finish my voice, thank you. And then I have things to write.

Adia Gooden: Right. It to work. Yeah. Well, I love that example you used of the sort of unspoken expectations because I think another layer that people often add on it is, well, I shouldn't have to tell them that I want this bath because they should just know. And if they really loved me, they would both just know I want it and they would do it. And if I have to tell them, then that means they don't really love me and they don't really want to do it. And I'm like, whew. That's a, that's a tough one. And it makes me think about, especially since I have a newborn, it makes me think about babies, which is, you got to figure out what they need.

Erica St. Bernard: You should just know.

Adia Gooden: Right. And the part is like, as a, I'm learning, okay, this is hunger, this is fatigue, this is right. But there's sort of a sense of, you know, when, when a baby is a baby, when you have a newborn, they're just crying and you've got to figure it out. And sometimes we do that as an adult. I just got an attitude. What's wrong?

Erica St. Bernard: Nothing. Nothing.

Adia Gooden: Are you sure?

Erica St. Bernard: I'm fine.

Adia Gooden: Why don't you know?

Erica St. Bernard: I said I'm fine.

Adia Gooden: And it's like, how are they supposed to know, right? And when we make up that they both should know and that them not knowing means they don't love us who we're in trouble with our relationships.

Erica St. Bernard: Big, big trouble. Big trouble.

Adia Gooden: I think the other piece that happens is it protects us from vulnerability when we just expect them to know, because it is vulnerable to ask, it is vulnerable to say, you know, what would really, I would really feel taken care of if you could if ABC, XYZ. Because then you ask, and then you have to step back and let the person step up. And there's the discomfort and the vulnerability of, well, what if they don't do it? What if they say no? What if they don't do it the way I want to, right?

Erica St. Bernard: Yes. Sometimes Dr. Adia, the question is, do I even know what I want?

Adia Gooden: Yes.

Erica St. Bernard: Right. Because sometimes it's, I just, I want something, but I can't yet put my finger on it. And so it's harder for me to communicate to you that this is the thing that would make the difference.

Adia Gooden: Yes.

Erica St. Bernard: And so once I sit with myself quietly in whatever way I can to really check in with me and say, what is it that I really need? Like, do I really just need like a nap? Like, do I really need to just ask you to take over for the evening? Because (0:45:00) if I don't get some sleep, I'm a combust. Is it that I really need, you know, what is it that I need? Like really asking from a sensory level, what, what visual thing do I need to see? What thing do I need to hear? Is there a voice I need to hear? Is there a song? Is there some, what, what is it that I need? And being clear about that with ourselves, again, back to self-worth. Like what is it that's going to make me feel more worthy in this moment so that I don't make this meaning of your actions and you're blindsided, the poor guy or girl that's like, what, I don't even know what happened. They just came in with smoke coming out of their ears and I don't know what happened. I said hello, and then the night was shot. Like, what just happened? I don't know.

And so when we can slow ourselves down enough to say, I haven't even, my husband and I had a talk a couple weeks ago, I was in a funk and I was like, yeah, I don't know, something's off. I can't figure out what it is, but I wanted you to know that so that you didn't think it was you or something you did. And then I was quiet and I don't know that I ever circled back and gave clarification of what was going on, but I know that in the moment I shut some stuff down that would have otherwise built some walls and caused some tension and created havoc for us. Because I acknowledge that there was something internal going on for me that I needed some time and space to process and it had nothing to do with him. It was all about me. And so I could take responsibility for that and could hold that and could share that with him at least to that point with sometimes the intention of circling back to say, hey, I figured out what it was or just to say thank you for granting me space to be in my feelings. Because sometimes that's where we are.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. I mean, I think you're so right, right. And often black women are socialized to not have needs to ignore your needs, to put your needs last. And so you may have to reconnect to yourself in order to figure out your needs. And that's, you know, one of the things I help people do and like my group coaching program, because there is a process of, you know, first of all, letting go of the negative self-critical thoughts, right, which really drown out any needs, right. And then tuning it, right? Like using mindfulness, right? Like self-care, right? Like all of these things that are slowing down to really tune in and acknowledge that it's okay to have needs and honor your needs and then learn to voice them, right? And you're right, it does take tuning into your body, tuning into your spirit, like what is it that you need? And then you can ask for it. And I think that that's such an important process. And believing that you are worthy of having needs and you're worthy of having your needs be met is so important. And part of that is, can you also meet your own needs, right? So if you want this fabulous bath, have you ever drawn one for yourself?

Erica St. Bernard: For yourself? Put yourself the roll pedals, right? Yeah, I did guess.

Adia Gooden: Exactly. It doesn't mean you can't ask, it doesn't mean you can't say, hey, I love this from you. But if you've never even offered yourself that, and that's how so many of us go into relationships is there's all these needs we have kept for years that we haven't totally acknowledge that we don't think we're worthy of meeting. And then we expect our partner to come in and meet all of those unspoken needs perfectly because we've been waiting for so long to get our needs met. And then the partner is kind of like, and maybe they met them without you asking in the beginning because you were dating and you were going on dates and it was fun, right. And then, you know, life started to progress and those things didn't happen. And you thought, my needs aren't getting met.

Erica St. Bernard: They don't love me anymore.

Adia Gooden: Exactly. So it's, so, you know, you gave the example with your husband asking for space. Like there was a point when I was pregnant and I was just, I wasn't feeling as supported and taken care of as I knew I needed to be. And I think what was really helpful was that I could say to my husband, you

know, I need more support from you. Here are some of the ways it could happen, but I need more. I think I even said, I need more attention. I need more support and attention from you, right. So, you know, often we say they just want, they just want more attention, they just asking for. And it's like, yeah, I need more attention. I think the other thing is that we tend to express our needs as complaints. You're not, you're not doing this, you're not giving me this, you're not and so it's, it's an attack, right. Because that feels like a safe way to say, well, you haven't done it. But all that gets is the other person saying, well, I didn't know and you're not doing this for me. And then we end up in this back and forth, which is very different than I'm acknowledged this is what I need. It's not about you not meeting the needs or you're doing something wrong. It's like I need more attention or I need more of this right now. Can you do that for me? And then the partner can say, you know, I've been distracted or I've had this going on, or I didn't realize, yes, (0:50:00) I can offer that to you. I don't feel attacked because you're not telling me what I'm not doing. You're telling me what you need and I want to meet your needs because I want to take care of you.

Erica St. Bernard: And the other benefit I think sometimes we forget so often couples will tell me or a partner will say, yeah, well they did the thing I asked them to do and it was great. And I say, well, did you say thank you? Did you let them know what it meant to you? That they not only listened to you, but that they executed and tried to meet the need or did the best they could? Because again, if we go back to that bath analogy, if my husband runs the bath and has the shot A playing and has some of the candles lit and maybe one of the other things, but he doesn't have the whole list, does that mean it was in vain that he doesn't love me. No. It means he did the best he could with what he had. And so I can say thank you so much for honoring the request in these ways. And then I can make sure that we have some of the other things on hand next time maybe or I can say, hey, can you also add this, right. But this opportunity to kind of seal that moment and remind my partner that they reached, you know, I've reached for them and they've reciprocated and reached for me and now we're holding hands, we're connected in the way that feels really good because men want to, most men anyway, want to support their partners as best they can. They really, really, really do.

And so as much as we can give them not just opportunities to do so by being vocal and saying, hey, can you show up for me in this way? But it also goes a long way when we can close that gap and say, I really appreciate you filling in the blank with whatever. And I know back to your point about I shouldn't have to tell them this thing or that thing. My analogy is always at your job when there's performance review time, nobody should have to tell you that you're doing your job. And they shouldn't have to rate you on a scale of one to five where five is high and maybe you get a bonus, but hey, guess what? You look forward to performance review time because there may be some incentive that either keeps you at that job or helps you transition and do something different. And so in a similar way on a smaller scale, that feedback for our relationship is really, really good. Because again, who doesn't want to make their partner happy? Who doesn't want to see us rested? Who doesn't want to see us, you know, loving and enjoying each other's company in time so that our Instagram and TikTok posts are indeed beautiful. And not just for hashtags sake but really genuine.

Adia Gooden: Right. And it's another version of I see you, I see that you were making an effort to show up for me in this way and I appreciate it and I acknowledge it, right? I think the, I shouldn't have to, it just feels like this very old school. Like these kids are supposed to go to school and get good grades. And I'm not going to tell them that they, it's like, oh, you know, it's like, what if we said, I see that you're trying, I see that you're making an effort and I appreciate that. And some of us, I'm a words person, words of affirmation person. For some other people it may be, you know, I so appreciate you did that bath me. I want to make you your favorite meal this weekend, right. Like, you know, it may be a different way, but it's an acknowledgement and we all want to be seen for how we're showing up. And that reinforces the behavior. It has so many benefits, it reinforces behavior. And then also for those, the person who is acknowledging it and appreciating, we know that gratitude leads to happiness, right. You are going to be

more happy in your partnership if you acknowledge and express gratitude for what you appreciate, it is going to make you happier, is going to benefit everybody in this situation.

And again, it can feel vulnerable because it can feel like you're saying, you impact me, right? What you do impacts me. You're not the sole source of my happiness, because we know we don't really want that, but it influences me. I'm letting myself be vulnerable to be influenced by you. And I'm acknowledging that. And people can feel like, well that means I'm giving my power away. But I think again, sort of related to your theme, the title of your book, it's like that strengthens your relationship. Your we is stronger when you're connected and influencing each other and acknowledging each other versus when you have this hyper independence of like, well you can do what you want. I don't care. And I'm over here and it doesn't affect, you know what I mean? Versus like, yeah, how you, how you operate affects me. How I operate affects you. So we've got to join together in our we and prioritize that sort of strengthen in our togetherness and our interdependence in order to have a healthy lasting partnership.

Erica St. Bernard: Yeah. Yeah. And it's one that we both want and it's one that we both get to get, have the benefit of, right. I think about, again, just the gift that we get to give each other each time we are vulnerable, each time we do extend the ask, each time we do honor it. And then they'd say thank you for it even, you know, I think you thank strangers when they hold the door, I hope, right. You say thanks, you know. And then if people don't say thank you, you're like, you're welcome. Like wait a minute (0:55:00), you just walk little happy. It's like, okay, wait, come back, it's okay. They didn't say thank you. But that kind of reminder again to say thank you because you know, again, there's so many things going on. There's so many moments that get missed because life is so busy and full when we can be very intentional to see where our partner is, as you mentioned the notion of seeing and being seen and it is vulnerable, because that means they will see a part of me and they will know that they impact me. But the reality is we're being impacted whether we acknowledge it or not.

And so with the acknowledgement, then we can make some very intentional shifts to impact each other more positively to be more gentle with our words, to be more kind, more caring, more compassionate, and all those things are going to be beneficial to the fullness of our relationship, not just at home. But of course I talk in the book about healthy relationships being as we talk about at the top of the, of the episode, proof and permission for others to pursue something similar. We get to see that like black love is real. It's not just the hashtag, it's not just the TV show. It's not just superstars, it's not just names that we know, but it's your everyday run of the mill people who are doing the work behind the scenes to build lasting, loving relationships that leave a legacy that really let children and families know that, yeah, we can totally do this. And not out of obligation and not because we are financially responsible for and to each other, like some of the marriages from thousands of few years ago, even just 50 years ago, right. We're together, but we're really not together, we're just together. It's like, oh, okay. It doesn't have to be like that. You can do something different. And so again, we can inspire hope and empower people to do the work of maintaining the relationship with the understanding that love isn't always easy. But the rewards are always great and the joy is in the building, it's in the growing and the learning and the sharing, and the complimenting and the congratulating and the pausing and the moments of reflection where we sit and think about where we started and now where we are. Look how much life has changed. Look how much we've changed. And then, you know, kind of reflecting on all of that and seeing myself in the relationship, seeing yourself in the relationship and realizing the benefits and how great they've been over time.

Adia Gooden: Yeah. Well, you know, it feels like we could talk for a lot longer, but we're sort of coming up on our time and I really appreciate all of the wisdom and insight you shared. I think those people who are listening, who are in relationships, who are wanting to be in relationships, I think they'll draw a lot from this that's useful, right. That's, it is a, as we were saying, like it's a nuanced way of thinking about it, right. We're sort of getting more into the weeds and the messy middle and what it can look like, even

though it's hard to sort of show up in your relationship in a way that's really going to support its health and strength in an ongoing way. And so I really appreciate you sharing your insights. I'm imagining that there's a lot of people listening who were going to be curious about where they can buy your book and how they can connect to you further. So I'd love if you could share that.

Erica St. Bernard: Yes. So my website is www.yourlifewell.com. You can also follow me on Instagram [@yourlifewell](https://www.instagram.com/yourlifewell) is the handle. And you can purchase the book on the website and on the IG, there's a link for you to purchase the book there. And all the books are signed by me and I mail them out. And I usually say a short prayer over them to intend, send the intention that wherever this book travels, it meets the person who needs it, where they're and helps them to grow in their life, their love and their legacy.

Adia Gooden: That's wonderful. Well, we'll definitely link to your website and IG in the show notes. So check those and, you know, if you're like, yeah, I could use some of these tools and, you know, insights be sure to grab Erica's book, I think it's going to be a really helpful resource. And Erica, thank you again for sharing your time, your energy, your wisdom with us today.

Erica St. Bernard: Thanks again so much for having me. It was pleasure.

Adia Gooden: Awesome. Thanks for joining me this week on the Unconditionally Worthy Podcast. Make sure to visit my website, dradiagooden.com and subscribe to the show on iTunes so you'll never miss an episode. You can also follow me on social media [@dradiagooden](https://www.instagram.com/dradiagooden). If you love the show, please leave a review on iTunes so we can continue to bring you amazing episodes. Lastly, if you found this episode helpful and know someone who might benefit from hearing it, please share it. Thanks for listening and see you next episode.

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