



# God Hears Her Podcast

## Episode 130 – Defining Toxic Behaviors with Dr. Alison Cook

### Elisa Morgan & Eryn Eddy-Adkins with Dr. Alison Cook

[Music]

**Alison:** I do think, culturally, there is a lot of self-centeredness. There is a lot of (quote-unquote) “narcissistic behavior patterns.” We see it in the Church a lot. We see it, you know... It’s hurting people, so I don’t... I think there’s a reason why we’re throwing that word around a lot. And I always go back to, with any of these words, it’s someone who’s not doing their own work.

[Theme music]

**Intro:** You’re listening to *God Hears Her*, a podcast for women where we explore the stunning truth that God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His. Find out how these realities free you today on *God Hears Her*.

**Elisa:** Welcome to *God Hears Her*. I’m Elisa Morgan.

**Eryn:** And I’m Eryn Eddy-Adkins. How often do you hear the terms “narcissism,” “blame shifting,” and “gaslighting?” Are you familiar with them? Have you experienced them?

**Elisa:** Today we’re talking with expert, Dr. Alison Cook, about all of these behaviors and how we can identify them in ourselves and in our relationships. She also will share with us the importance of developing our selfhood and what that looks like. There’s so much to take away from this conversation.

**Eryn:** We are so honored to speak with Dr. Alison. I have personally been changed by her work, and I’m so excited for you to join this conversation with us on *God Hears Her*. Let’s start with learning about how Dr. Alison got into the field of psychology.

**Alison:** Well, you know, it’s interesting because our greatest strengths also become our biggest blind spots in a way. Right? And I was good at it.

**Elisa:** Mmm.



**Alison:** I'm high in empathy. I think empathy is my top strength on StrengthsFinders. There was some safety in me that just naturally God gave me. But it was also kind of honed — heh, heh — in the sense of I needed maybe some help learning. And that's what a lot of times I teach women is we have to have boundaries with our empathy too. Some of it came naturally. I was very interested about people, and at the time, again, I'm not that old; you know, but still, this was like the mid-nineties. Psychology and Christianity were still very much divided. I had a lot of people telling me, "You can't go do that. You can't go study Psychology as a Christian." At that time, it was not very common. And ...um... here I'd come out of this secular undergrad... eh... it was very confusing. I was cobbling together a lot. There was some fortitude inside of me for sure. It just... kind of a quiet strength maybe of like, "No, I'm going to do this." You know so there was this program in counseling, this Christian counseling program at Denver Seminary that I went through, but even then, I was still hungry; because it was really more learning about the Bible and how that applies. I mean we learned some counseling skills for sure. It was a great program, but I had more of a hunger. And, again, at the time, it came out of the academic part of me. I hadn't yet connected it to my own, you know, that...that cliché of the therapist who doesn't know herself. You know?

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...I hadn't quite made that connection. Right? But it really was in my questions, which was like I'd read these, like Augustine and Calvin. And they talk about, you know, *How can I know God if I'm far from my own self?* I was drawn to that idea. So it was also in the ideal realm. We have to know ourselves. Why do we have this problem with psychology? Psychology is about self-knowledge. That goes hand in hand with God knowledge...

**Elisa:** Sure.

**Alison:** ...That was... I knew that.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** I understood that. But, again, it was still very academic, and it wasn't until halfway through my academic program that I was like *Oh! Oh, this isn't just head knowledge. I actually have to learn this.*

**Eryn:** Yeah.



**Alison:** ... [laughing]... *You know, I have to... I have to:* I understood that. But, again, it was still very academic, and it wasn't until halfway through my academic program that I was like *Oh! Oh, this isn't just head knowledge. I actually have to learn this.*

**Elisa:** *I have to be transformed.* Yeah. Yeah.

**Alison:** Yeah. It didn't...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...It took me... I ... I had a lot of that buried, you know. I had very strong protectors, as I... I call them. I intellectualized and kind of asked all these questions in the abstract, and it was like one day I had a panic attack. You know it was like I am literally by myself in an apartment. All my friends have married and moved away. And I haven't once thought, *Oh that's sad.* I haven't given myself the permission to feel those emotions, to feel that loneliness, to feel that ... And it just all came rushing out, literally, on one day in the form of a panic attack. *I'm alone. I'm by myself. I don't have anything that I want. I'm working all the time. And this is not working.*

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** And so it was... it was a moment of like it wasn't a pleasant, you know...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ... It was a... all those parts of me all of a sudden were like *No, no. This isn't working. We have to change.*

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** When you said you weren't allowing yourself to feel what you were currently experiencing...

**Alison:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** ... You feel so alone in that moment, and yet it's such a common thing to experience. What have you learned along the way of why we do that. Like why do we not allow ourselves to feel our circumstances?



**Alison:** Basically, what I see over and over and over again, in my office and what I experienced in my own life, are three reasons. One: We've got these childhood wounds, and we weren't attended to. We weren't attuned to in childhood, even by the best of parents, so there wasn't that safe place where we learned how to have an emotion, feel sad, feel hurt, feel lonely, with someone else, which teaches us how to feel that with ourselves. Right?

**Elisa:** Right.

**Alison:** So that's where childhood wounding comes in, just, you know, the super cooked in, sort of, you know, is... is just not conducive to coming home and saying *Man, I... I feel sad. You know, my friend left. I feel sad.* That happens. I see that a lot. Or, you know, just... that just isn't taught. And it's a skill you have to learn.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...how to honor emotions. I think it's taught much more frequently now...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...that it was in the 80s when I grew up. So number two: I think some Church messages underscore that message, so I got that piece. But then I also got the "pray your emotions away" messages. "Emotions are bad."

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** *You shouldn't feel those things because you have Jesus...*

**Elisa:** Right.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...And I internalized that. Man, I was a good little Christian. *I have Jesus. I am not lonely!*

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.



**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** You know, and that also added an overlay of why I didn't know how to. And then I also think there's sort of this cultural overlay. You know I think especially maybe for women, you know, that... And that... I just came by that naturally. There's no one to blame for that. I just... I never wanted to be a bother. I never wanted to bug anybody. I never wanted to add to anybody else's burden. I didn't...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...Other people's problems were worse than mine. There's sort of a whole cocktail, I call it, of reasons, I think, that we can learn. And to bypass our own emotions, our own experience of pain. And then sometimes it's just painful... You know, and then, we haven't *learned* how to do it, and we might even hear, "Well, I *should* do this," but then it's like if I've got a big backlog...

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...that's scary!

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** Like in my case, that... it was a little... It took me a while to...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ... you know if you've been doing it a little bit all along, those emotions, you build trust with yourself...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...But if you haven't, it is scary...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...to look at those emotions.



**Elisa:** You're giving so much freedom, Dr. Alison, to everybody, including Eryn and me, who's listening; because, you know, you're the (quote) "expert." And you're taking us in your own process, you know, just a very normal human being growing up, sorting through these three foundations that you're talking about. Talking about having your own panic attack because you hadn't been able to integrate what's going on and stuff. And it's so normalizing. And I think that's one of the places we really want to keep this conversation, you know. Our struggles with who we are and what we think and feel are *normal*. You know we've been raised in a ... in a context that has taught them to us...

**Alison:** Yes.

**Elisa:** ...You know I would love to spend a few minutes unpacking some of the issues that we as women specifically have in relationships that... that you treat all the time. And they're terms that may be familiar to our listeners and may not be familiar, but I have a feeling the experience of these issues is very familiar. And sometimes just putting a name on them, a label on them, will help us go *Oh, this is wacky! I can't have this in my life!* And let's just kinda go down a list. Can you help us understand this one? What is narcissism?

**Alison:** Yeah, it's not a word I would've ever understood until the last few years. And now, again, that's the irony is now we're in a time where *all* of this language is everywhere. And it is being normalized, and I think that is healthy, and we also now have to be careful not to overuse...

**Elisa:** Yeah...

**Alison:** ...some of these words, you know...

[speaking simultaneously]

**Elisa:** ...cause everybody's a narcissist...

**Alison:** ...almost sometimes the pendulum...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** Yeah. Sometimes the pendulum can swing so far the other way, and everybody's validating everybody's feelings...



**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...And it's like, *well, okay, but let's do that in healthy balance...*

[Laughter]

**Eryn:** [laughing] Yeah.

**Alison:** The naming is super helpful, as long as we're not using these things as weapons. Narcissism I look at as a pattern of behaviors. It's... it's way overused. It's not a selfish person. It's not even a self-centered person. There's a spectrum, but if you really want to get clinical about it. You know the clinical, if we're really using the term, the clinical term "narcissism," it's someone with such a pervasive pattern of not being able to empathize with another human, with not being able to even really enter into the experience of another human on any level, to the point where the mirror always has to be... It's like when you're with this person, it's like you have to be a mirror always for this other person. They're never going to see you. They're never going to be able to understand you. Their own sense of self is so fragile that they always have to have everything being validated toward them. And it...and it can get really toxic because, you know, if you do start to say, *Hey, I'm not sure...* they can't tolerate that. There's no ability to tolerate any sort of criticism or healthy feedback or constructive feedback or owning one's own... And this all gets back to shame.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...because there's just so much shame there. Right? But essentially that person has never learned, at the extreme, how to honor their own human fragilities, their own human missing the mark-ness, their own human, you know, their own humanity. And so they need everybody around them to constantly be propping them up. Now you can see how we could throw this around by anybody who's selfish, but there's lots of different levels of it. And I think — why is that word being thrown around so much? I do think, culturally, there is a lot of self-centeredness. There is a lot of (quote-unquote) "narcissistic behavior patterns." We see it in the Church a lot. We see it, you know... It's hurting people, so I don't... I think there's a reason why we're throwing that word around a lot. And I always go back to, with any of these words, it's someone who's not doing their own work. It's not doing their own work of looking inside, looking at the hard stuff, facing themselves, taking responsibility for themselves...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...which is the path to healthy relationships with other people.

*godhearsheer.org*



**Eryn:** I've never heard narcissism broken down like that...

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** ...before. That was really helpful...

**Elisa:** Super helpful. Yeah.

**Eryn:** There's another word that I would love for you to speak on, and it's "blame-shifting."

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** You actually introduced me to that term, and I was like *Whoa! What is blame shifting?* And now I'm able to identify it and understand it more. Would you unpack it? What is blame shifting?

**Alison:** Yeah, it's a strategy, and it's often used by folks with narcissistic tendencies or anyone who's not capable of doing their own work. And when we blame shift, we just always have to put the blame somewhere else outside of us.

**Eryn:** Mm.

**Elisa:** Ah.

**Alison:** And so whatever happens, and it can be real subtle and real overt, you know. In a subtle thing, you know, you might see your kid do it. You know *Hey, did you put your hand in the candy jar? Well, he made me do it.* And what we do is we try to teach our kid to say, "Well, you made that decision. They might have encouraged you to do that." You know, that's a sort of an overt example, but it's — in its more insidious or subtle ways — like let's say you're in a marriage, and someone is kind of blaming you for their depression, or blaming you for their addiction, or blaming you for the way they drink. And there's little bits of truth in it. Right? *If you weren't so emotional, if you weren't so this, I wouldn't do this. Or If the kids weren't so hard to manage...* It's just this very subtle thing where there might be a grain of truth in the fact that, yes, this is a hard set of circumstances. But at the end of the day, that person isn't saying *I am fundamentally responsible for this choice I am making. And here are some reasons why this has been a hard season for me and why I'm making some bad choices; but, fundamentally, I am making bad choices.*





**Elisa:** Mm. So it kind of bubbles up out of a shame over my humanness, and I want to cover it up. You know it's like, in the garden, you know, *She made me eat it...*

**Alison:** Exactly.

**Elisa:** ...you know, so that's blame shifting...

**Alison:** That's exactly right.

**Elisa:** Okay. Now how about another one that I've heard a lot of people using, and I still get confused about it, is gaslighting.

**Alison:** Yeah, so this one I... I break it down. It's a form of manipulation. It's a pretty toxic form of manipulation, and I break it down as ... There's two components to it. It's a lie, but it's a lie that then, part two, is with kind of going on the offense to blame someone else. So it's got a component of blame shifting in it...

**Elisa:** Okay.

**Alison:** ...but the lie is essentially — and this is a really... you know I'm really giving you a technical, you know, it kind of shows up in much more nuanced ways. But the lie is, you know, *I'm not... I'm not drinking again. You have trust issues.*

**Elisa:** Oh!

**Alison:** And you are drinking again.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** So something is happening. Someone else calls you out on it. You first of all deny it, so there's that lie component, so that's more than just blame shifting. And then you say something to get the other person to feel bad. It's trying to make them feel crazy. It's trying to throw them off the course. It's really toxic. And it came out of this play called *Gas Light*. That's where the word came from. There was a play. I... I think it maybe came out in the 30's, and the husband ... he was turning down the lights in the house systematically every day. And then his wife would say, *Gosh, it's getting darker in here!* You know, *What's going on? It's not getting darker in here. You're crazy!*



**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** Wow!

**Alison:** That's... that was the play. This guy was trying to make his wife go crazy. That's where the word came from.

**Elisa:** See, that's so helpful.

**Eryn:** I had no idea that that's where the word came from!

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** And so the cue is you start to feel crazy. It happens a lot if anybody's stuck in a... a really kind of sick pattern of behaviors that they're not taking responsibility of, they're not owning. They might blame shift, you know, they might try to blame... they might even just deny outright that something is happening and kind of dig at *you* to make you feel bad, that you're kind of wondering *Is this thing happening?* It's really toxic.

**Elisa:** Mm-hmm.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** Spiritual gaslighting, I'll give you an example where we use spiritual language. Whew wee! Does that get toxic! Because, you know, it... we can couch it in something like *You're not trusting me. You're not submitting to me. You're not submitting to God. You're questioning my...* Like a pastor might say, you know, if someone's saying, "Something does feel right, like I feel like maybe the ... the leadership... there's stuff going on." Maybe people aren't being treated right. Maybe the finances aren't be dealt right, and they start to raise those red flags. And the church leader or somebody says, "No, we are handling them right." And they're not, so it's a lie. "And *you* are not honoring our spiritual authority, so you're bad. You're sinning."

**Eryn:** Mmm.

**Alison:** So that... that gets really ugly, cause then that person is like *Dang!* And then what happens is the truth always comes out...



**Eryn:** Right.

**Alison:** ...you know. But sometimes it doesn't for a long period of time...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...And that person's just left to go *I don't know. Do I trust myself? Are my instincts off? Am I seeing this wrongly? Am I...* It's really corrosive to the person on the receiving end.

**Eryn:** That example... I think that we can even think through the lens of... even if it's with, you know, maybe it could be a spouse or a sibling or a friend that has done something similar in that way. Like I can already think of ...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** ...examples that I've had... endured that in my life. And there's something I want to touch on, and it's that it's so... eh... My heart hurts for the one that is the absorber of blame shifting, narcissism, gaslighting; because there's this like vulnerability, this naivete that's happening for them to be willing to endure it. Like they're ... they're willing to ask the question: *Is this me? Like am I wrong? Like I feel crazy, but they're so confident and self-assured that it is me.* And then they have this (quote-unquote) "proof" that it is. And so what would you speak to that person that feels like they're in like a... like a little bit of like a riptide maybe? Or just like there's a lot of confusion as to identifying it and then owning whatever you need to own, but then also like not owning stuff that you need to own. And how do you respond to that?

**Alison:** Oh yeah. And this is why, to me... So I'll speak personally to the person, but I want to say, first of all, this is why I get into a lot of codependency because what happens is you get into these relationships where you outsource your self-esteem. You outsource your own instincts to this person...

**Eryn:** Wow!

**Alison:** It's really hard. How do... how do I trust myself? How do I differentiate? That's why we need healthy differentiation, even in the best of relationships. It's not wise, you know, to completely, blindly trust other people. We have to also learn how to trust ourselves. We also have to learn ... God's given us this inner alert system. Now it can get knocked out of whack, and so that's what's hard is that process of beginning to pay attention to your own body, to the cues your body is sending you — your body, your soul, your mind. And so what I would say to someone who's listening is pay attention, you know, to the anxiety you notice inside of you when you're with this person. What cues are your emotions sending you?



I'm saying it's a process of getting curious and paying attention. Don't just immediately go, *I'm wrong. They're right, I'm wrong. There must be something wrong with me.* We don't know. Go on an investigation. And...and so a couple things you can do: Just start to say, *Gosh, I just noticed that doesn't feel right. That doesn't land right. I feel kinda icky, or I feel kinda like, mmm, it's not adding up.* God's given you this whole system in your body, in your spirit, of discernment. So don't bypass that system God's given *you*...

**Elisa:** Mm.

**Eryn:** Mm.

**Alison:** ... Nobody else...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...It's given you. Right? And it's scary. And you don't immediately have to address it. I don't think it might be wise to address it...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...immediately. But if you notice that, if you're just like *Man, this isn't feeling right.* Then what I would say is get a third-party objective. And it's not to triangulate. It's not to talk poorly about this person, so you've got to get someone really safe — it might be a therapist — where you say to this person, "Listen, I don't want..." Especially if it's a spouse, it can be really hard, so you've got to have someone really safe to say, "Listen, I'm not looking for you to pile on. I am trying to grow in discernment. Something isn't sitting right. I'm noticing something here. And he... he or she is telling me I'm wrong, and it's not... I need some help. Can I run some things past you?" That's a healthy way to ask for support. That's not ... what I often see people do is they just go vent to someone...

**Elisa:** Right.

**Alison:** ...and then go right back into the same toxicity. And... and nothing is solved...

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...And that doesn't help. But when we go really wisely and say to someone that we think is safe, we say, "Would you be a second set of eyes and ears for me? Would you help me discern? Here's what



I'm seeing. Here's what's not adding up. I'm feeling confused. I'm feeling unclear. I'm not sure." Ask God for help. Ask another safe person. And then really give yourself an opportunity — and it's hard. And the next time you might even be in that situation where you ask a question. You know, it's like we have to become sort of shrewd, as Jesus said, you know, to ask a question. And then kind of notice inside ourselves, *Does that jive with the facts?* And we start to get discerning, and then maybe you start to realize, *I think this person's lying to me. Or I think something is off here.* Then you gotta get another... you know, again, don't do it alone. Get another wise person, get a therapist, get somebody to help you figure out how to get your way out of there.

**Eryn:** When you're exercising that muscle maybe that you've not worked on...

**Alison:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** ...basically it's like...

**Alison:** Yes.

**Eryn:** ...you feel weak in the moment, and it's really building that strength to be able to continue to do it and trust on your discernment versus... I love what you said, like giving the other person... What did you... what term did you say? You were like ...

**Alison:** Outsourcing...

**Eryn:** Outsourcing!

**Alison:** ...your self-esteem. Outsourcing your wisdom.

**Eryn:** That's so good!

**Elisa:** Can you give an example of that?

**Alison:** It could just be as simple as, "Well, that's my pastor. He must be right." "That's my husband. He must be right..."

**Eryn:** Yeah.



**Alison:** ...I have no choice to believe him.” “That’s my... well, she’s my best friend. She’s been my best friend for twenty years, so she must right.”

**Elisa:** Okay. And that helps, and I... I’m thinking about the woman who is lonely and has very little self-esteem because her husband is in a very valued place and works and gives her very few compliments. And she doesn’t know how to find her own value outside of him. Is that an example of what you might be talking about?

**Alison:** Yeah. She might not even realize that she’s never really given consideration to some very basic questions, such as: What do I think...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...in this situation? What is my preference?

**Elisa:** What do I want? Yes.

**Alison:** What do I need...

**Elisa:** Yeah, that’s good.

**Alison:** ...in this situation? And, listen, I... with my clients all the time, asking that question: What do I want? Isn’t that selfish? It’s actually not. I’m not saying that you should *only* get what you want, but if you don’t understand how to answer that question, even in small ways. Here’s an example: You know *Where do we go for dinner tonight?* “Whatever you want.” That’s outsource... you know. And it’s like *What do I actually want?* Well, maybe you end up sacrificing what you want most of the time because you don’t care that much, but at least you know.

[Laughter]

**Elisa:** Yes, yes.

**Eryn:** Yeah, exactly.

**Alison:** At least you’re like *You know, I don’t actually prefer to go to Italian...* whatever, you know, I don’t know, whatever the thing is. *But, listen, it’s so important to my... that I do it.*



**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** Yes.

**Alison:** You know, I mean, I'm not saying that we... we know what we want so that we can be like *I'm never doing that. I am only doing it my way!* But if we don't *know* what we want, what we need, what we prefer, what we believe — even if in a situation we may say, “I'm not going to bring what I believe into this conversation, cause it's not going to serve the conversation, but I know what I believe, and I know where I did not agree with what they were saying. And I've got to figure out *how* to insert that.”

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** That is selfhood, what I call selfhood.

**Eryn:** Oooh! Okay, so tell us more about selfhood versus selfish and selfless — all of the... all the selfs, yeah.

**Alison:** Selfhood is a strong sense of self. *I know what I need. I know what I want. I know what I like. I know what I believe. I know where my convictions are. I know where I can't push beyond.* And it's a ... I believe it's a process every single one of us is called to.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** And selfishness would just say: *I only do what I want. I only do what I think. I don't care what anybody else thinks. I never consider another person.* That's not what we're after here. Selflessness, which is often what we're taught as women, is: *I never consider my wants or needs. It's always about other people. I always put other people first. I never think about myself.* That is also not healthy.

**Eryn:** Yeah.

**Alison:** Selfhood is: *I know what I need, and I know what you need; so together we're going to have to negotiate a way forward.* [Laughter] You know it really leads us into the heart of what a healthy relationship is, which is two whole people figuring out together how to navigate life.

**Eryn:** Mm.



**Alison:** But it's not me saying, *What I need doesn't matter*. It's me saying, *This is what I need. This is what you need. Let's figure it out together*. That's selfhood.

**Elisa:** It sounds like a healthy relationship kind of starts with a healthy me, you know, with me knowing who I am...

**Alison:** Yes.

**Elisa:** And that, you know, that sounds so *I'm-okay-you're-okay* back in the day, but you know, you've called us to it. God made us in His image, and He created us, and He has given us ... placed within us a divine potential that we're responsible to steward. So, you know, the beginning of that calling of living out that potential is to know who we are and what...

**Alison:** Yes.

**Elisa:** ...we've been given.

**Alison:** The easiest place to look for it in Scripture is in Jesus's command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We skip over that really quickly, but there's an assumption there that there's... it's actually very deep. It's not just "Love your neighbor as yourself," meaning you also have to love yourself. It's "you *will* love your neighbor as..." It... it's actually descriptive. The way you treat someone else will correlate with the way that you have learned to be with yourself. And so if we are bypassing ourselves, if we are disregarding ourselves, if we are minimizing ourselves, you know, if we are letting shame fester inside our souls, inevitably that spills out into our relationships. So you could argue that the best gift we have to give other people is the best version of our self.

**Elisa:** I love that. I... I had a quote a million years ago that really shaped me, by Earl Creps. And he said, "Your best practice is yourself."

**Alison:** Yeah.

**Elisa:** And I love that when you think about it. It sounds, again, narcissistic and very egocentric, but the reality is, is that I am aware of who I am, strengths and horrible weaknesses...

**Alison:** Exactly.





**Elisa:** ...you know? And I bring all of those to Jesus and allow His refinement and redemption. And that's what I bring into the world. You know if... if you wanted to encourage those listening right now, how they can develop this kind of confidence that you're clearly emoting, Dr. Alison, or how they could live into their full potential that God's given them to be, you know. And it's not like a one-two-three, because it's a lifetime, but what would you say?

**Alison:** I mean start small. I want to just quickly pause and say actually the irony of narcissism is that it's a lack of self. There is no self there, so therefore everything has to be about supporting the ego. Selfhood is the opposite of narcissism...

**Elisa:** Okay.

**Alison:** Because, as you said, you make peace with yourself, and then you're good. You can listen to other people. You can honor other people...

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Alison:** ...You can genuinely engage other people and understand where they're coming from, because it's no threat to you...

**Elisa:** You don't have to devour them...

**Alison:** ...because you know who you are.

**Elisa:** Yeah.

**Eryn:** Exactly.

**Alison:** Yeah!

**Elisa:** That's good. That's good. Thank you.

**Alison:** That... And so it's the opposite. It allows us to show up in a really authentic, curious way, cause *you're no threat to me. I know who I am.*

**Eryn:** Yeah.



**Alison:** ...*I'm free! And so I get to be with you and...and honor your...* So, anyway, because I figured it's so new for so many women, you know. Very small, you know, you might even start with getting curious about where you don't, where you inhibit, you know? So what would it be like to just simply, you know, *I'd prefer to go here tonight.* You know just small statements of self. It doesn't have to start big, and you might even make a list of ten things you want. And don't... don't criticize yourself. And I'm not saying go get them. I'm just saying notice, begin to notice...

**Elisa:** Notice. Mm-hmm.

**Alison:** ...*What do I actually want in this situation? What do I feel like I need?* You know start in your journal if you want.

**Eryn:** What is one thing that you would tell somebody listening right now that feels alone, and feels like maybe God isn't present in a circumstance, whether it's maybe a relationship that's unhealthy like we've been discussing? Or maybe it's they feel alone in unpacking some of the stuff that they are now starting to get a glimmer of?

**Alison:** I think I would say I get that. I see that. I don't want to give you an easy answer. You're not alone because you feel that, and I felt that for many years. I think what I would say is: The road... I think the... the first path is to get curious. And the reason I focus so much on that idea of getting curious is I think so often when you're feeling lonely, when you're feeling beaten down, when you're feeling like *I don't know where to start*, there's a lot of shame there. And we start to shame ourselves. *What's wrong with me? Why can't I figure this out? Why can't I do it? Why do other people seem to have it all together?* And so my word of encouragement would be to notice, first of all, that voice of shame if it's there. We have to notice it in order to move away from it and move toward this question of curiosity. *That's so interesting that I've found myself in a lonely season.* That's hard, right? That's hard. There's compassion there. I want to get curious about that. *I wonder what it is that has led to this. And I wonder what a next step might be. What would feel the safest next step? Could I name that to somebody? Is there anybody I could just name to: I'm feeling lonely and a little overwhelmed, and I don't know how to get started.* Is there a safe person you could just give voice to that to? Because we don't heal in isolation very well, but we don't have to get it all fixed up. And we don't have to... you know we can just begin that very slow process of honoring, right where we are, you know, to God and to a safe person. And maybe it starts with God, you know, maybe it starts with getting really honest with God. *God, I'm ... I'm really lonely. I'm not seeing the fruit of my relationships, and I don't think I want to keep going. I want something different.* So just starting with the naming without shame is, I think, a good place to start.



**Eryn:** Dr. Alison, what would you say to somebody that is starting to ... the...the blame shifting, maybe projection, insecurity that's being placed on them by another person. When they start, whether they're being gaslit or whatever it is, all these things that we're talking about, what would you say to them if they are starting to mistake what that person is doing with how God sees them? Cause I think that's a very common thing that we can do, because that person is so self-assured and confident...

**Elisa:** Because we think it's true, we think *Well, God... God thinks the same way of me.*

**Alison:** Yeah, which breaks my heart, and I see that in my practice. And it's one of the things that I get the most kinda worked up about, is that's exact... that's spiritual abuse. I mean that's why these things cause spiritual wounds, not just psychological and emotional ones; because you start to see yourself through a broken mirror, not the way that God actually sees you. And so sometimes I think we have to repair that. When someone's infiltrated us so much to where we're not only questioning ourselves and questioning our own, but we're... we're wondering if God sees us that way. I think this is where we become, in some ways... through the process of healing we become Christ in the flesh for each other. I think we do need ... and this is me speaking as a clinician, because I've done so much of this. It's like we need another human standing in as Christ in the flesh for each other. We are the hands and feet of Christ for each other saying, "That is not how God sees you." And maybe reading a Scripture over us, or reminding us that Satan is the father of lies and that God is the Father of life. What is lifegiving? What are the fruit of Spirit? Is this leading to the fruit? Is this leading to truth? Is this lifegiving? Is this leading you to the abundance that Jesus talked about? It's not that it's not from God, and I do think we can do that to ourselves a little bit. You know we can read through those passages. What do we know to be true of God's character? "God is love." You know what do we know the fruit of the Holy Spirit looks like? Patience, peace, love, kindness, joy, gentleness, goodness, and self-control. If we're not seeing that fruit, that's probably not from God. I do think that when we are in these really toxic situations, we need another human to help us hear God's voice very clearly. I just... I think that's sort of how God designed the Body of Christ. I think as we get stronger and stronger, and we heal, and we build those muscles more and more and more, we know *No, no, that's not God's voice.* You know? But I think when we're in it and coming out of it, that's why I say, you know, pull in that safe person that you trust to remind you who God is. And the fruit of what truth ... truth sets you free. Truth sets us free. God is not the author of confusion. God is not the author of chaos. God is not the author of lies. So when that's the fruit — chaos, confusion, crazymaking — when that's the fruit of what we're seeing, that's not of God. But again it's easy for you to hear *my* voice say that. It can be very hard — and I hope someone has heard that today — it can be hard when you're *in it* to remind yourself of that. You might need to pull in someone to speak that over you.

[Theme music]



**Elisa:** There was so much to take away from this conversation, and I'm so grateful for Dr. Alison's expertise.

**Eryn:** She has helped us so much with developing healthy relationships. Be sure to check out her website and her books, including her new one, *The Best of You*. You can find that and a link to join our email list on our website at [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org). That's [godhearsher.org](http://godhearsher.org).

**Elisa:** Thanks for joining us, and don't forget: God hears you, He sees you, and He loves you because you are His.

[Music]

**Eryn:** Today's episode was engineered by Anne Stevens and produced by Mary Jo Clark and Jade Gustman. We also want to thank John and Will for all their help and support. Thanks everyone.

[ODB theme]

**Elisa:** *God Hears Her* is a production of Our Daily Bread Ministries.