

# From Surviving to Thriving: Healing Family Wounds with Dr. Romani

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## SUMMARY

*Dr. Romani, a leading expert on narcissism and author of "It's Not You," shares her insights on navigating cultural expectations, motherhood, and the complexities of relationships shaped by patriarchy. In her conversation with Dr. Shafali, she reflects on her upbringing in an immigrant family, the pressures of being a daughter in a patriarchal society, and the challenges of balancing personal and professional life while raising her daughters.*

- Dr. Romani discusses the mixed messages she received growing up in an Indian immigrant family, including the pressure to succeed and the disappointment associated with being a daughter.*
- She emphasizes the importance of recognizing the complexities of forgiveness, particularly in relationships with narcissistic individuals, and advocates for understanding one's own emotional safety.*
- The conversation highlights the cultural expectations placed on women, particularly regarding marriage and motherhood, and the resulting feelings of shame and obligation.*
- Dr. Romani reflects on her parenting journey, acknowledging her struggles with perfectionism and the desire to fix her children's problems rather than simply being present with them.*
- She discusses the liberation of the empty nest phase, allowing her to focus on her career and personal growth without the daily responsibilities of child-rearing.*
- The importance of self-care and breaking generational patterns is emphasized, as Dr. Romani admits to not prioritizing her own needs due to cultural conditioning.*
- The conversation underscores the significance of creating spaces for women to share their stories and heal from toxic relationships, highlighting the role of community and support.*
- Dr. Romani's work aims to empower individuals to recognize their worth and navigate unhealthy relationships, fostering a sense of agency and self-advocacy.*

Oh my goodness, everyone. You are in for a treat. This is such a special episode with one of my mentors, someone who I respect so much on this episode of Parenting and You with me, Dr. Shafali. I'm so excited to have Dr. Romani, the most amazing author of the book *It's Not You*, the pioneer of all this amazing work on narcissism. You all know her already. She is a clinical psychologist, New York Times best-selling author and a mother of two daughters. She's going to talk about her own mothering journey and her journey as a woman from the Indian culture and all the pathways she has gone through to reach where she has today. So, this is going to be an amazing conversation.

I am thrilled, honored, so excited that I'm being joined by the most influential clinical psychologist out there right now, Dr. Romani. Dr. Romani is a mother of two daughters. We're going to talk about her mothering journey. She's also, I'm sure all of you already know, the New York Times best-selling author of the phenomenal

book called *It's Not You*, which helps us identify and heal from narcissistic people. Dr. Romani, it's an honor to have you on my podcast. Thank you so much for joining me. Thank you so much, Dr. Shafali. It's so nice to see you again. Thank you. So, both of us are raised in an Indian culture. So, let's start there. Mhm. What were some of the messages you received as a young girl that were both empowering and stood in your way? I think that, you know, it's interesting. I had the experience of being not just raised in Indian culture, but in the United States, right? We weren't living in India. My parents had immigrated recently before my father before my mother and then my mother and then they were married. I was born. Um they were married before she immigrated. And so I was also dealing with that kind of growing up and you know it was a it was the 1960s. So in fact the year I was born was when the immigration and naturalization act was passed in the United States. So actually we could you could people from India could actually stay longer than a student visa or something like that and I was born in the states and so I had a American citizenship. So what was it like? I mean what were the messages?

They were complicated. They were very complicated messages. It's a very patriarchal culture and I was a daughter and in Indian families the thing they want more than anything at the time I was growing up was their first child to be a son and a child being a daughter was a massive disappointment and not for my mother but I think in the family system at as a at large and uh my mother actually only now now that I'm like almost 60 years old she wouldn't have never told me this as a child but now that I'm fully grown she has told me that you know when she she was so young at the time too and shows up with this daughter who she adored and was really criticized, made fun of, mocked, you know, made to cry for having a daughter.

So, I'm enough of a psychologist to know that somehow gets internalized that you the message early on was you are somehow lacking because you didn't deliver, especially as the eldest child on this whole gender thing. That was number one. And there were also very discordant gender roles. And again, what gets tricky, Dr. Shafali, is you had two things going on. It was a different time historically in the United States. the opportunities women have now were very very different than the opportunities women would have had then. And on top of that, you know, the way in terms of issues like race and language and all of that would have featured, that was all going to be an issue. But there was definitely this sense and the cultural things I was raised with is that in a marriage it was that the the husband is almost supposed to be worshiped as something next to a holy person, you know, like a deity. And so I saw the sort of worshipful nonsense which has actually turned me off to marriage my whole life even though I've been married I've been divorced. So you know if it was an arranged marriage all of that. So all the things we learn about in the United States about love and I would see kids parents like kissing each other. I'm like what the heck is that? So there was that piece of it. I do know I was loved though. You know I can say I'm an inc I'm a very very very securely attached to my mother. So you know thank heaven for that. She was a very young mother.

Absolutely magnificent mother. loving mother. I can't imagine what it would have been like to be as young as her, have a new baby, try to figure out this country where you don't have a car, but also still have to please a kind of unpleasable husband. So, I'm sure again from a what we understand about how kids internalize what's happening, I'm sure I experienced some of that struggle and sadness she had, but she was a very, very loving mother. And I think what I learned and I have to say this is probably one of the hardest things that I learned was that I felt a tremendous obligation from as far back as I have intellectual memory of any kind. I have felt a

tremendously strong obligation that you've been given every opportunity that not one ancestor woman in your life has been given. So you don't get to slack. You don't skip higher education.

You will work every day of your damn life. And so that was the message that I have been given a voice that nobody else that came before me, certainly not my mother, her mother, her mother, and so on and so forth on either side of the family was ever given. And I think to this day, it's an obligation I carry heavily. It's almost in a hurtful way because I don't give myself a moment down. And so I felt a tremendous responsibility to do that, to honor all the sacrifice. She had gotten into medical school. She wasn't allowed to get into medical school because she had to get married. So I learned that marriage meant you had to give yourself up. These patriarchal structures meant you had to give everything up. So it was a call to action. So putting my head down, being a good girl, being a really good student, being ambitious. Again, I'm pushing 60 years old. And I still retain that. And I feel like if I were to step down from this, I still feel it would be irresponsible. So that was also a burden, you know, to really really carry. In essence, it wasn't that I was told I was great. I as a very young age realized like I've been given something that nobody else was given in my family.

So don't you dare take this for granted. And as a daughter, like I said, I wasn't told I was great. I was watching my male cousins be told they were fantastic and couldn't do anything wrong. And I was kind of like, you know, back shelved and sort of nobody's going to care about a daughter. The other message I got was a really interesting one was that, well, daughters are no good because they don't take care of their parents. The understanding would be that they would take care of their in-laws. Well, that's not the culture we came in. actually I ended up marrying a a white American person. I didn't even marry an Indian person. Didn't work out. But now I'm incredibly focused. I I'm one of my biggest roles in my life is to care for my parents. So it's like every single stereotype, every single belief got exploded. But it was a very complicated way to grow up. And so the messages were very mixed. And as part of an immigrant family, I think immigrants carried two burdens. One of maybe some cultural pride, but at the same time cultural silencing. And so I would get this mixed message of India's great, no, India is terrible. No, India is great. No, India is terrible. So I'm Indian. And so was I great, was I terrible. So it really created almost this very fragmented internal sense. So all those messages kind of came and and in our family, men and women socialized separately. So I would remember that kind of like when women would socialize, there was a lot of laughter and joy and when men it was dull and gray and so but the women their personas came out when the men weren't present. So, it really gave me some really messed up models of gender roles.

I'm going to own that. But, you know, and it's recently, we recently had a family party and somebody was visiting and said, I it's so fascinating like the women were just they were having a time, but there were really no men brought into that space. So, all of these things carried me. Obviously, I grew up a a very acculturated life here in the States, but those messages definitely have been etched in me. It's bas basically the one you don't get to fail because too many people gave up too much stuff for you to be right now sitting with you on a podcast. Right. But you and like you said it it's a double-edged sword. So on many levels you have embodied that. You have turned it into service. Look what you've done for people. You've helped so many of us women especially through your hard drive, hard push, hard accomplishments.

But talk to us about as a woman and a mother and now this fantastic career. How do you give yourself the permission now? Because I do see you working round the clock. I don't know whether you've ever given yourself slack, but I saw you through your promotion of your book. You've been tireless. You don't stop. I mean, I see you everywhere. It's so interesting you bring up this question, Dr. Shafali because in a way it almost veers away from it kind of it's never going to fully veer away from my Indianness and my culture but you know life life took the turns it took and they weren't always easy and like I said I did get divorced which brought a lot of shame into my family it was horrific shame for my mother for the whole family people looking at me sideways it was a real kind of ick kind of attributed to me in the long run my ex-husband remains a friend we co-parent really I think very well we didn't always get it right but I don't know that any parent ever gets it right I respect who he is as a person I got married because also I mean I was in a relationship loved and cared about the person but I also because the message I got growing up as a woman is Indian daughters get married it's a very big generational shift though Dr. Folly, I have so many cousins, women cousins who are not getting married. I almost got married in a way in some ways to just sort of like, okay, let's just chill this out. Again, I grew up with really skewed models and all of that. I'm so grateful I did. It was an important part of my journey. I our kids are wonderful, all the things, right?

So, everything happens in life for a reason. But to your point, you know, I think this is the immigrant's burden, right? You can never do enough. You can never work hard enough. You have to earn your place at the table times 10. And I definitely definitely felt that like I I don't belong in this table. I don't belong in this room. I don't belong in this podcast. I don't get to write a book. Like everything is an experiment in impostor syndrome. And so we get into an interesting space where again culture overlaps with even what we understand about trauma which is how much are some of what seem like our adaptive behaviors actually really trauma responses. And I think overwork is a place of dissociation. It's numbing. It's all this other stuff that is virtuous. Oh, look at Dr. Romney. He works so hard, right? But honestly, if somebody and you know gave me I don't know the amount of resource I need to make sure I could care for my parents.

It all comes back to that. Can I care for my parents? Can I care for my children? Can I be the good Indian daughter who cares for everyone if I had enough resource to do that? Honey, I'd put my feet up for six months. I'd watch movies and I'd actually start exercising and I would do all like I know what I want my life to look like. It's I love a lot about my life, but I don't care for myself. And I think because some of my success came so late, I was over 50. Um I was struggling till I was about 52, 53 and then only then did this conversation about narcissism get any traction. It came so late. So in a way I feel as though I'm I'm I got to the party late.

So I'm trying to, you know, kind of make up time. But I also feel this tremendous sense of responsibility to everyone I care for. So no, I don't care for myself. And to another point, culturally, I did not have great models of what looked like female self-care, women's self-care when I was growing up. Again, in the immigrant wave, my parents came in to the United States, they really came with not much. Even though there was resource in India, it didn't transfer well. And so, we lived in, you know, we lived in a very small two- room apartment when I was born. And there wasn't resource. So, there was not like this idea of leisure time. The United States was a different country then too.

Even the way people take vacations now, there was no equivalent to that in the 1970s. Like people I look at with vacations, I'm like, my god. Like the richest family in town wouldn't have taken the vacation that the most ordinary people take now. So it's a very different world. But so I didn't have a mother who got her nails done or her hair done. She sewed my clothes. You know what I'm saying? So I did not ever see that woman put her feet up once.

from when I got up in the morning till when I went to sleep as a child that woman was cleaning, organizing, cooking, I mean all of it. So I don't have a model for I and to me when I do that I feel guilty like well she didn't do it so I shouldn't be doing this and so I there's no model and I don't remember I mean maybe with my grandmother it would have been she was sitting and talking with friends but it was and there's more help in India like there's someone to clean and cook and wash the dishes and all that other stuff. I don't have a model for it. And I actually think a terrible thing and I think it's a terrible thing I've done to my own daughters is when we don't give our children models of self-care. Like my kids don't really I mean they're they're shocked if they were to come in the house and see me sitting and reading a book that's not for work. They'd be like, "What are you doing? Wait, you're going to watch TV?" It's that. So it's a very complicated multi-branched tree for me. But no, I don't I don't care for myself. And I mean it may come back to bite me, but we'll see what happens. Do you think that at some point you could give yourself the gift of breaking that pattern? No. No, Dr. Shabbali. I mean, it's an interesting question, right?

There's probably some corners of that conversation I can't fully get into in a public forum. I hope so. I hope so. Um, my life is cut up into a lot of pieces, too. The people I care for are kind of all over the country and so I'm always on an airplane and that kind of thing. I do it in tiny pockets, you know, because I travel so much to work and lecture is that I don't know. Oh, I might check out the hotel's pool for half an hour or if it's in a nice place, I might, you know, I added I tacked on a date to a business trip that I have in May so I can, you know, and took the day off so I can sit by the swimming pool. It might look like that. Will there be a time? There will be a time probably as the kids get older, you know, as my role shift where my parents are and sadly when my parents pass, you know, there will time will feel like something different, you know, as I get older, as I feel more financially secure in a way. I mean, I think those are the things that but I need to feel safe before I'll put my feet up. That I know. Yeah. Yeah. I I just want to reflect to you that, you know, there's some people who give, but then there's some people like you. I'm just saying you give at a thousand and I don't know, you obviously don't realize it because you're just being you, but I see you just consistently just giving a thousand, a thousand, a thousand. And I just see so much reflection of our Indianness in that that girl who just feels like she has to prove it and show up and is such a loving heart that it's such a deadly combo, right? That loving heart with the good girl. It's like you have no escape from your own self and you're so competent and you're so brilliant. It seems to come so naturally but the level of output is so vastly different. So I just know that you are, you know, burning it at every end and hopefully you will one day realize that you are so enough. You know, the most powerful thing I heard you say besides all your work, which is incredible. I loved what he said, I think it was on Louiswis's podcast and his mouth fell open. You said something about, "Nope, I don't believe we need to forgive everyone." Do you remember that? Yeah.

Nope. Talk about that because that's radical. It is radical and I think that it's it's a very uncomfortable again culture that we're from if you want to even bring it back to that that's unheard of in Indian culture some real

horrifying things have happened in Indian families and the sense is there they're your elders you forgive you know we are family you forgive there's a lot of closing ranks I think that the issue becomes because of my focus which is on antagonistic narcissistic manipulative harmful emotionally abusive relationships sadly people who can engage in If you forgive them, they receive that as in essence permission signing off and emboldening their behavior. Oh, great. Well, that's good to know. And they'll keep doing it and they'll keep using the forgiveness as a weapon. And what I tell people is that forgiveness is an internal process. This isn't something you have to broadcast to the world. The biggest mistake anyone could make is to walk around saying, "I don't forgive them." Right? Because then that honestly puts a terrible light on the person who's not forgiving and who may have very valid reasons to forgive.

And in fact, Dr. Shafali, there's a whole body of research that shows that if people repeatedly forgive people who are repeat transgressors who have harmed and hurt and betrayed them multiple times, it's actually bad for the forgiver. Although there's a lot of research talking about how great forgiveness is. There's also research showing that it's not. And I think that the reluctance of the field of mental health, psychology, psychiatry to step up and say this isn't always good for people speaks to the patriarchy in the field, which is a conversation for another day. But I don't believe it's always good for people. And in my work, a lot of people said they set they felt set free when they realized that not forgiving doesn't make you a bad person.

It doesn't mean you're holding a grudge. It doesn't mean you can't let go of stuff. It means that you actually realistically maybe appraising what this situation is. or if this was a significantly impactful relationship, a parental relationship that affected you developmentally, a long-term intimate relationship that might have also by extension affected the children you have with this person. In those kinds of relationships, depending on the betrayals and whatever, it may feel unforgivable. People may say, "The course of my life was changed by this. I suffered tremendous distress. People might have complex trauma. Their trust might have been betrayed in fundamental ways. They may have not been protected."

And and when I work with clients on that, I'm like, how do you forgive that? And they're like, I don't know. I'm not doing a good job. I'm like, you're doing a damn good job. Right? But forgiveness is also not lip service. Like, I forgive. There really truly has to be an internal accompaniment of a letting go of resentment. And it's okay if you don't let go of resentment because as far as I'm concerned, that psychological safety, this person's still harmful.

Like, I can't I I am going to resent them because I'm still unsafe with them. How do you forgive that? And so I think that forgiveness is often used as a way to silence dissent. And I have a real problem with that because that dissent is where a person is able to create a coherent narrative about the harm they experienced. People after they develop that coherent narrative can say, you know what, my mother's a dangerous person or my cousin's a dangerous person or my ex is a dangerous person. They're not good to me. I didn't deserve this.

It was an unhealthy relationship. their behavior is unacceptable. Sometimes people say, "You know what? I'm never going to have anything to do with them again or I forgive them or I kind of forgive them now that I know what their backstory is." But you can't get there until you do your healing and get coherence. And you know

what? Some people never get there and they heal just fine. And so I think that there's such pressure to forgive. But like I said, it's a silencing of dissent and it is shutting down the process of processing the emotions that a person just forgive them. Just forgive them.

And I think people take that as license to say, "Well, then I shouldn't be angry and then I shouldn't be hurt." No. And so it's complicated. It's very complicated. But more often than not, at least in the world I'm in, people get pressured to forgive and they're not ready. And maybe they'll never be ready. Yeah. That was so liberating for me because I think there's so much pressure really in in our culture, in the world, to bubble wrap, to put a bow on top of every process. Like every goal of every relationship has to be a good ending, a peaceful ending because people are afraid by the brutality of the isness of disharmony. It's okay sometimes to stay in disharmony. It's never okay to harm someone. It's never okay. You're not talking about harming anyone or being violent, but it's okay to have friction and be and sit in that. And I think the western world especially and and India apes that in some ways is to bubble wrap everything and put a bow on it. But then you you bypass the discernment of the brutality of relationships sometimes.

Sometimes people's consciousness requires a brutal reckoning and we need to be able to say no this is not okay. It'll never be okay. I need to just be in this for this moment in time. And that's hard. That's a tough cell, especially culturally, you know. I mean, I think that there are some cultures that not only are patriarchal, but also via, you know, collectivistic or even appearanceoriented cultures, right? The way this family looks to the world is more important than how this family functions. Yeah. And that narrative structure for a family is where you'll see a lot of that forgiveness pressure, you know, and again, like you said, the bubble wrap, the gift wrap, the the the bow on top, look how wonderful we look.

It misses that point of acknowledging that this is not okay and just that simple recognition. Sometimes it can't be fixed. There can't be the divorce. There can't be the no longer speaking to the family member. Again, culturally that's very pronounced. But the sense that that was not okay. The way they behaved was not okay. Giving someone that validation that they can use that languaging actually sometimes is how they're able to keep interacting with the person even if it's superficially at a family function or something versus having to do that performance. The performance is what leads to the death of a soul. Yes. Even Buddhism and spirituality sometimes gets confused as we should give everyone a pass and understand everybody's childhood.

psychologists especially, we should just understand and forgive and and while that is benevolent and and beautiful in many ways, like you said, it's very empowering to say, "Yes, I understand and it's not okay." Correct. That's right. And that took me a long time with all the narcissistic relationships in my life because I kept understanding people's childhoods that I would allow bad behavior and it took a long time for me to disentangle. Oh, I can really be understanding and compassionate, but I can also say this is intolerable. It's inappropriate, not allowed. And the behavior can be separate from the childhood experience, you know, and all of that is obviously breaking through the trauma dialectic, right? The trauma, you know, kind of dichotomizes us. It splits us. It fragments us. And it makes a lot of black and white. And that middle path, that gray that where the word use of the word and instead of the word but. Yes. and that recognizing that there can be compassion for the history but no tolerance for the ongoing behavior. It is a tough cell. I don't care what culture you're in.

People want tidier answers. I think that especially when it comes to things like love and relationships, we still approach them from a very childlike place, right? We want to be loved. We want to attach.

We want to be cared for, cherished, protected. And a lot of that didn't happen for a lot of people in childhood. So this idea of like I want them to be good. And I said, well, you know, listen, you're trying to attach to a very jagged object, you know, and that there's elements of this person you have empathy for. There's even elements of this person you enjoy, but there's also a lot of this person you don't feel safe with. And I think internalizing it in the person saying you just don't feel safe with them. This doesn't have to be even an indictment of their behavior.

This behavior is problematic, which is why you don't feel safe. But that bringing it back to that fundamental idea can sometimes, you know, be like, "Yeah, I don't feel safe. I don't feel myself. When you can't be yourself, you're not safe. Right. But in India especially, but other cultures too, we were taught that is not a good enough reason. No. To not be with someone. Oh, you don't feel safe. Right. That's not enough because everyone's not feeling safe with everyone. You have to be an axe murderer, be brutally attacked, be physically abused. He should be a drunk and an alcoholic. And then you have a legitimate reason to leave a marriage or relationship. So women especially have been given that narrative that you can't just leave. What is just feeling safe, find a way to survive and what a terrible model. It's a terrible model and it is done so much so much harm. I know can say that to me personally is that an intimate relationship is the subjugation of the self. That's really the message. Dr. Romani, thank you so much for your honesty, your vulnerability, your openness. Let's take a quick break and return very soon.

So talk about the shame because so many women who are struggling in their marriages don't leave or don't find other options because of the shame of this perception of failure because marriage has been so pedestalized, sanctified and sold as the ultimate goal for a woman to keep her family together. Then when that falls apart or crumbles, she's burdened by this tremendous, you know, sense of failure, unworthiness, and shame. You've been through a divorce. I've been through a divorce.

How did you go through it with any sense of empowerment? Where did you find that empowerment from? And what would you say to women going through it today? I think it's a tough call, you know, because I think that what we got to remember, and I always preface everything I say in this space, which is not everyone can leave. And for all the reasons, people can't leave, right? Financial, cultural, they really will be cast out in a permanent way from a family. They left the workplace. They don't have a steady source of their own income.

Safety concerns are very real. If the relationship is narcissistic or emotionally abusive or physically abusive enough, the likelihood of harm escalating goes up if a person leaves. So the, you know, it's not always the path. But when people do opt for that path, say I can do this and I feel like I I'm I'm able to do this. I don't know. No, I mean I think Dr. Shafali is that I growing up in the culture I did, I think I saw no marriages I admired. Not one. The only marriages I admire are of people I you know my peers I've had and but not not one. Maybe here and there. I mean I don't know that I admire it. I think the one person I think because the man was gentle and the image of a gentle man is not as much of that something I'd see in the culture and so the man the

man in that marriage was gentle and but the wife was very demanding and not very nice. So it's like there some it's almost like every relationship had to have someone who wasn't very nice and so I guess I for lack of a better word I didn't see the point and I guess because remember the way I had to grow up is I had to watch parents in a not healthy relationship to this day and it didn't do me any favors because I ended up blaming myself a lot. I exhausted myself as a child basically trying to be a peacekeeper and a diplomat and try to keep everyone like I was almost like a rodeo clown like I was constant how do I make sure everyone's okay and how do I monitor the energy and how do I make sure my parents don't fight you know how do I protect my sister and so I think it's like I thought I didn't want my kids to have that and I look back and I have a tremendous amount of regret I didn't do my kids any favors by getting divorced that was very hard for them splitting their time between multiple household between mine and is having to worry about us. It took a tremendous toll on them. It if somebody said to me at the end of my life, what will my regret be? My regret will be that I didn't spend enough time with my kids when it mattered and that I broke their world up. And that will be my regret.

Had I not gotten divorced, my regret would have been I didn't give them a great model of marriage. So, I was doomed. I was doomed. And I recognized that I was doomed. I know I wouldn't have taken the turns in my career I did, done the work I did. Probably not. If id stayed in that relational situation, life would have taken different turns. And so there was shame because ashamed is literally said that someone people have said to me in as many words, you should be ashamed. So it's not like it was internal shame. It was like you should be ashamed. Many people ended contact with me for some period of time and then it worked its way out and we got back in contact again. And so their big concern was you're screwing up your kids. My kids are great, you know, so they're not, you know, what I don't know. I mean, I think whatever path they took, all kids, if you want to make that argument, all kids struggle with something, right? and you're going to be, you know, dooming yourself to a life that's a mess. And it is I I don't know.

I feel like I feel pretty well in hand in my life. I work all the time, but I think that's probably my greatest sin, you know, is that I do work work too much. But I can't even say it was internal shame. So much external shame that I will tell you this though, Dr. Shafali, it's probably a bigger disclosure that I should make, but I feel a poignant yearning sense of envy when I look at people who got married, had their kids, and stayed married. and the kind of peace that those kids get to settle like people who have long long-term truly happy marriages like that they're friends with their partner and there's respect and there's joy and there's support like and they had kids together and there's their kids got to experience that close-knit loving family. What's interesting is my kids if I'm with my ex and we're together we're all laughing. We're all having a wonderful time. I enjoy that. So it's not it's not as though they're they're viewing this hostility between us. Not at all. And I love my um ex-husband's partner so much. And so there's a lot of great things we made work. And maybe they've learned that human relationships aren't just one way that had to be a win. And I've even said to them in his many words, if your father ever got sick, you don't have to worry. I will step in. Like this is he will never I mean, you know, even if he wasn't in a relationship, I would care for him. You know, that's my responsibility because he's your father and you're my children.

So we've had those conversations. And so, but I do envy that. I envy people who have that like that kind of that tight family zone and you know I mean everyone's got a different story. That's so honest and vulnerable of you to say that that longing probably your little girl self also and you know there's this fantasy that we all want to

give our children the utopic ideal and what a shattering thing it is especially for us mothers when we feel we haven't given that. Yeah. And we have to find a way to alchemize that. The way I've done it in my life is because of the work we do and having privy to so many family situations. I see truly and I'm not saying this as a sour grapes kind of reframe that every family has its own burdens, you know. Oh, that's true. It's true. It's true. And I'm not saying this because, you know, that makes me feel better. It's really the truth you know and so we take whatever the best we have in this life in this one life but you know marriage and that family system has been so sold and marketed as the ideal now of course families that do manage to be healthy and happy are always going to have a little bit of a trump card but I think that there's so many paths to getting there and you know that as well and you work with really difficult clients. Let's move a little bit to your kids and how do you feel your culture, you know, your your generational patterns kind of showed up in your parenting and what was some things that you couldn't help it just got passed on and maybe one or two patterns you consciously broke or tried to break if you could just illuminate that. I think the hardest thing is that and I think this is pretty universal in immigrant cultures. I think it's really magnified in Indian immigrant cultures is we're sort of obsessed with education and I get the obsession because it's the path it's the only path right you know maybe that's shifting a little bit we're seeing more entrepreneurship and although we're seeing more intergenerational transmission of wealth but it's education is the path forward particularly for women it was for me and so I pushed that you know I wanted my kids and they're bright girls and all of that but I have to say that you kind of got caught in the whole like no really it wasn't even like I cared that they went to some, you know, Ivy League, this that and the other. It was more of a you got to hang in there in school. Part of that, I think, was very much culture unconsciously coming through me. Part of it was the safety behavior, you know, like the the sense of I just want them to always have something in their back pocket that would make them employable and all of that. You know, it's that there's that fear. There's that fear when you again, especially when you come from the instability that comes from being from an immigrant family and the money around that. I myself was financially unstable for a long time in my adulthood life. So I think there's that protection piece and I also think that another cultural piece that I carried with me and maybe it's not just cultural I think part of it is who I am is I would try to fix instead of be that again another regret I'm going to take to my grave is that too many times with my children I wanted to fix things. How can we fix this? How can we make this better? What can I do? rather than doing the much heavier lift and the uncomfortable lift of sitting with their pain. Sitting with the tears, recognizing it can't be fixed, it's okay. My kids have even said to me, they said, you know, probably the worst thing you ever did to us was tell us like we're smart and we can succeed and look how great you are. They're like, in a way, you had so much belief in us that it kind of set us up that when stuff got harder for us to do, we really doubted ourselves. and they nailed what we know is that when we do kind of you extol their you're so smart, you're so great, look at this thing you did, we actually start planting the potential seed of a tree of the impostor syndrome because every at some point we're all going to stumble. The irony is I got to the impostor syndrome through apparently there's like 27 highways that drive into this place called the impostor syndrome, right? So I think that for them then it's like well why is this so hard and that should be easier for me.

So, I think that there was some of that, but I do think that those are some of the cultural patterns of like you got to do the thing and we got to fix the thing. To this day, I I had a conversation with my mother yesterday and she's like, "Well, just don't feel that." I'm like, "Mom, that's not how it works. We don't just not feel things." It's like telling me just don't be hungry. Like, this is a natural thing coming through me. She still doesn't get it. She's like, "I'm never going to get this. So, let it go." And she's an angel and I'm I'm like, "Okay, fine. I'm not having

this conversation." My sister rolling her eyes on the FaceTime and that's the end of it. But I do sometimes get sad. I'm like, "Oo, this is how she was when I was a kid, too." So there's no wonder that, you know, the fixer solver. That's the role I had in my family. That's what Indian families do.

How can we fix this? Do you want something to eat? They're crying and they're depressed and you're offering them food. I'm not not sure. But it's always like, "What is wrong? Why is she crying? We need to give her some food." I'm like, "No, they should eat food is the last thing she needs right now." But that's the fix. Like, "Can I make you something to eat?" I've done that. Even my daughters are smart enough to like, did I say I wanted something? Did I ask for food? Let's listen to us. And so that not listening part of me is a great regret. I've gotten better, but still sometimes I failed. I've actually 20 minutes before our podcast, I failed with my daughter and she just called me and about something else unrelated and I literally vomited on her my entire schedule for the next few days. and she's like, you know, actually, Mom, I just called to see if you wanted to spend a little time together, but I'm guessing no. And that was such a fail.

Like, she didn't need to hear my schedule for the next two days. So, that kind of coming out of me. I was not being mindful. I was trying to get things done. And my kids say that to me all the time. You're so focused on getting things done that you don't actually catch what we actually need. Those are all my Indian things coming through. I know. said, you know, there are very few parents who would be so open and so honest. And I can tell you that as much as you're making mistakes, the fact that you're so transparent and you really are, you're so easy to talk to, you have this way about you that I don't care how distracted you think you are, you also have a very open, direct, honest, like you're not here to impress anyone. No, that ship has sailed.

But that is the most endearing thing. You know, you're not trying to be the superwoman, even though you are a superwoman. You really are, but your honesty is just so refreshing. You go, you have no defense in terms of a fake inauthentic ego about you. You're just, look at look at how much you've shared. I mean, I'm so grateful. And people listening to you will be like, "Oh, wow. If Dr. Romani can be so vulnerable and make mistakes, I'm not such a bad parent now." you know, you're giving permission for other people to embrace their jagged edges and that is very unique to you. I appreciate that. No, I I sometime if I could have gotten a parenting doover if at my age I could have parented my kids knowing all I know would it would have actually looked different and as I said like they're still young. I do try to get it right and again that is also the immigrant piece is when you think about it in Indian culture at a relatively young age and in the past too young age daughters would be married and often go very far away from their parents right so even though there can be these large beehives of family activity it often doesn't involve the daughters right the daughters would often be married and off and they'd have to go to wherever those in-laws were if they were close by sure but that wasn't always the case in my mother's family it was like that that she came to the United states. Then I moved to Los Angeles. Then my kids move different places. So there is something in there that there is a you know we we we move around and and again the whole piece is that my children owe me nothing. They owe me absolutely nothing.

They have no obligation to me. They just need to go out there and feel that they have always a safe mess to land in and to be themselves. And that's that that to me is the core of parenting. There is no obligation. there is, you know, and so when I do get time with them, I cherish it. They're very autonomous. They're very independent,

but they are there always going to be my children, right? And I will always put their needs with some level of primacy. Does that make sense? That to me is that parenting is that and that that's the balancing act that because you sometimes are like, "Oh, I haven't seen you in 3 months and yet you're choosing to you have normal reactions." I'm like, "But I raised them to be able to make choices that work for them. And if they do choose to come spend time with me, it's from a place of want and not because of a place of guilt and not because of a place of overplaced obligation. I don't ever want that for them. And so that's a big one. And again, I try to listen. I try not to solve. But like I said, 20 minutes ago, I got it very wrong. It is a work in progress. I mean, I so openly admit to my frailties and and you know, having written so many parenting books, I look back with regret, too. You know, I just try to not get stuck there. But if I could do the do I mean so many mistakes I go how could I have gotten this so wrong. I think that's just the natural outcome of being sensitive, being self-critical, being overly perfectionistic. I think that's who we are, you know. So we look back, but many people don't look back. So they're free of that that rumination. So we take so much responsibility on ourselves. Just the last question, you know, to the world, you know, you look like you have your together, right? I mean, how the hell do you do it all? I mean, you are literally everywhere. And we know you're an overworker. You that's your trauma response, but you really do find a way to be authentic. You appear so authentic, so warm, so giving. So for women out there, what's something you would tell them is your source? What wakes you up every morning and allows you to be this fire in the world? I'm going to tell you what the research says and I'm going to go into the rameny of it all. People have asked me this question over and over again. I don't know how old your children are, Dr.

Folly, but everyone's like, "Are you sad about the empty nest?" I'm like, "Folks, I'm having a party in the damn empty nest every night. I'd be loving me some empty nest." It is wonderful that I can eat cereal for dinner. It is wonderful that I can buy the dumbest groceries and not worry that I'm not getting this things and this thing. It's liberation. I love the emptiness. Do I miss my kids? Of course I miss my kids. But I also there's such a joy in knowing if they're having a good day, I'm having a good day wherever the heck their good days happening. So the emptiness is a good thing. And I tried to be as hands-on as I could as a parent. And that made a career hard. I didn't have help. I didn't have carers and I didn't have family near me. So this was this was a solo run. And so having the time like we would remember once upon a time someone's like can you come to such and such place to speak there are war battles that required less planning than I would to have to get to Washington DC for two days. It was like there's a drive and this there's a concert and there's a school blah blah I mean now it's like now the biggest problem is finding something to watch a cat. Yeah.

So I have to say that there was a liberation that came from because I had my kids pretty late. I had my kids at 34 and 37. So, I was a late parent and so I spent all those years in graduate school. Then I was an academic and then as I went into this space where there was different demands on my time, I'm not having to do that day-to-day care. I do go and care for my parents, but even then I'm not like they're not children, right? I just have to split my life between two coasts and then do the things I need to do while I'm in their home and that kind of thing. So, it's more of it's more logistics. But I there's research showing though that one of the things that can create real marital tension for people in their 50s is that many men who never had a career interruption because of children are settling into like that pre-retirement and for many women it's their first time they've actually been able to lean into their career in a significant way or take some leaps or jumps or try something new that they couldn't do before because they were handling so many child logistics. And that very much happened for me.

And then I was kind of in a stale academic career. So then when we started doing this work on me writing and me speaking about and teaching about and all the 20 years of research I'd done on this finally getting into the spaces it should have. My career had a renaissance quite late. You know in fact my career actually kind of began quite late. Like I was well over 50. My kids were grown. And so part of it is that it's the embracing that this is a new phase. And I mean when I when a person says I'm sad about the emptiness nest I'm like you are speaking a language I do not understand like this is great. So that's one piece of it. And so now Dr.

Shafali because there's a real blessing in coming into this when you're older is that I'm enjoying the ride and I'm very carefully watching women whose careers I admire in their mid to late 70s. And it's interesting because they're saying you know and they're such wonderful mentors because they'll say take your body is still working. My hip's not great and I'm perimenopausal and my cataracts. I'm like a car. You probably should sell. But I can still get on a plane. I can and I think to myself, I didn't ever have this before. So when I'm in it, it's almost like this is a gift. This is this is really I'm I'm treasuring it because it's the first time. And some I was talking to a colleague I really admire. She's like 78 79. She's like because your body does give out and this this schedule's going to be tough at some point. So do this and enjoy it and when you need to slow it, slow it. So I think in some ways I'm like a kid in a candy store. And so for women, women's bodies are made to live longer, too. Embrace the stuff that comes as your kids get older. You actually can have a fascinating act two or act three when you're not in that heavy like what do I need to put in the lunchbox phase of life and really just say like ah I got my backpack like I I don't mind, you know, if I have to sleep in the airport part of the night, I don't care. So it's like I get to be the backpacker, you know, but now I'm like, you know, 60 years old. So it's it's got and so I got a little bit more money in my pocket, too. So it's good. I I think that there's a recognizing the blessing that this came when it did. So I'm able to appreciate it. Yeah. That's what's been a big driver. Yeah. Well, you're certainly a role model for all of us because you're living it. You speak with such integrity. When when I listen to you, I'm hearing the message way more than I'm hearing you. And and that's not that's really a compliment. What that means is that you're so passionate about the message and your ego doesn't show up. You're a true teacher. I appreciate that. But I will say this too. The other message for women because I came into this later and older. I do not sweat small stuff stuff that really brings women down. Folks, I try to put my face on and I I I think this blowd dry is from Wednesday. To be honest with you, I've gained weight. You know, I'm in this from here and here and yeah, no, I'm wearing double digit sizes and no no and you become invisible at a certain age. And ladies, the day you become invisible in the world is a freaking superpower because I think that's where it is all intellect for me now, which is really where I'm most comfortable. And so I stopped caring about that stuff.

Like I, you know, I throw on what I throw on. I'm joking not like I look ridiculous from the waist down. Those things matter to me a lot. Once upon a time, they don't matter. My house looks kind of like a moderately deranged person lives in it. And there's things where they shouldn't be. And so, a lot of that perfectionistic bent I had earlier in life to be the perfect daughter, to be the perfect this, that's all gone. Like the jig is up, folks.

Things are messy and weird things get eaten for dinner. And you know, I still wear a backpack. I'll never forget the day I was about 42 years old and I tried to carry a purse. I'm like, I don't get this. like this is on one shoulder and I remember I was at a dinner at a work dinner in Washington DC and one of my colleagues is like you know you look ridiculous like that's a student's backpack and I was like I don't care what you think this thing is comfortable on my back and I got a little holder for my water bottle like I don't care what people think about me

about my Jansport backpack about my Crocs and so I said but I have something to say and if this has happened to you you're going to want to listen to what I have to say but all that went way. And so there's a real kind of like yeah kind of whole crazy cat lady vibe that I'm channeling through the world and it's so much easier because it's actually who I am.

Well, let me tell you, as a woman watching you, I'm just in awe. So, whatever you're doing is so true. So, I want to be that. I want to give myself the permission to really just speak my truth without caring too much. But you do look like you're pretty put together. I'm just telling you. I mean, I don't know how you do it, but you do it. Let me ask you one curious question that I have. I'm curious about this. My turning point was when Oprah picked up my book and I got to go on her Super Soul. What was your turning point? Because it seems like even though you did decades of work, you blew up at the right time when the world was ready to hear it. What was that first moment where you went, "Oh my god, this is getting recognition like it's never gotten before." I think the moment was when we had started a YouTube channel and I just said well there's a lot to say here so let's just keep doing we didn't know what the hell we were doing I you know I work with still work with members of the team who I'm like okay let's try and then during the pandemic obviously people were flocking to spaces I mean the the pandemic start for us ended up being a bit fortuitous but it was there was no person there was no moment like a single human being recognized it but I was looking at the numbers and I was like some people are watching this. This wasn't just, you know, this was actually this is making a difference. And then what was happening was I was seeing a slow shift in the cultural conversation. I can't say I can take responsibility for that, but something happened. And I think that there was some level of like, wait, this this narcissism stuff is percolating into the world. And I think that was the moment when I started looking those numbers on YouTube. And I don't really look at them that closely. they just keep turnurning content into there because my singular mission and vision is I want to make sure that there's a free way for people can get this information. Most people are never going to end up in a therapist's office. Some people don't even have the money for a book or a membership but everybody can go to YouTube other than a few regions of the world. And so I thought we keep pushing it here. And I remember one woman saying we would go we go to in India actually the president in India said we didn't have strong internet in the house but there are these cafes we could go to and we would go and we'd put our money together into the internet cafe to watch your YouTube videos. And that conversation I had with some women and I thought that's it. We we hit our goal that this is now getting into the hands of the people out there who ordinarily wouldn't see this. Then that's when I knew that that we had done what we like set ourselves out to do is that people I didn't think ever could be reached. We're now being reached and I was like, "Okay, we got it." I know this sounds like I'm just like another person fangirling on you, but I just want to say sincerely, I have watched you on Med Circle. I've taken notes. You're like this professor out there giving free classes. You know, you've been giving classes to us women. And you have helped so many women, me included, to identify the unhealthy relationships, the techniques, but you've given it so freely and volumes of information. I mean, you have video upon video upon video. And I just want to say thank you from all our behalf for forging this path, for helping us get out of narcissistic relationships, having a language, identifying. We all knew something was wrong, but we didn't have the words. Look, you had the words. Yep.

You gave us the words. That's all I've ever wanted. So many women have, and we see this in all the communities we work in. There is no more glorious moment when a survivor for the first time sees themselves in the world as themselves and not someone who's constantly running interference against this person who's harming them and

sees the possibility of themselves in the world. And I've seen this happen in survivors through art they've created and poetry that they've written and songs that they've written and books that they're writing. And I mean some are going back to school and training as therapists, you know, some are just going back to school for the first time.

It's it's quite remarkable. And and when I stop and really think of how much human potential got stolen by toxic relationships, it actually makes me sick to my stomach. And if even a handful of people can come out, the winner on this is the world because we then get those discoveries and that wisdom and all of that. And so that is why we've got to give, you know, power to the voices that are often silenced in the name of all this toxic nonsense. It's it's getting harder, but I still think we just going to have to keep doing it. And that young women also hear this because I think more and more young women are getting this and maybe it's going to protect them from getting into relationships that aren't good for them. But listen, I've known 78-year-olds to go back and get their PhDs. I've talked to 82-y old women who are filing for divorce. I mean, I'm seeing this on all ages. And so for women to find that voice and to recognize that there's many acts in a woman's life, we can get very stuck into one narrative. And um and that the different acts like for me, like I said, this empty nest, I can actually move around the world a little bit now. That was unfathomable to me when I had young children. And it's not easy now, but it's a revelation. So, thank you. Oh my goodness. And you know that's how your work and my work are so interfaced because this is how we grew up to be silenced to be submissive and that's how we enter these narcissistic relationships because we were taught that. So we're going to talk about that more on your podcast but thank you so much for being here. Tell everybody about your amazing membership programs.

Absolutely. So we've got two membership programs. We've got the Dr. Romany Network and the Dr. Romany Network. So, first of all, folks, the great thing about that membership is Think Podcast, but zero ads, number one, but also what's so great about it is that not only do you get to hear from a whole variety of expert guests, we've had Mel Robbins on, we've had Matt Hussy on, I mean, we've had Christine Coachiola, we have Dr. Shafali on, but there's also weeks where people in the Dr. Romney network can come up like come up on screen like you and I, and ask their questions, too. And that's its own teaching moment. Not everyone does it that way. Some people submit their questions and I answer them. But it's a very interactive space where we can talk to each other, where I give many lessons on how to navigate these relationships.

That's one. The second is our healing program for survivors of narcissistic relationships. Now, this is a deeper dive. So, people are like, "Okay, this Dr. Romney outer is great. I'm getting a lot of information from that, but I really want to focus on specific elements of healing." That's where our healing program is great. Every month, like a 90-minute workshop, you get a 90-minute Q&A session. you get a like a texting Q&A session. You get a guided meditation. There's like 12 13 journal prompts a month. So, if you're doing all the work of that program, it's there's a it's very robust. Every month, we have a different topic in the program. We're three years in. We have an amazing community and we have a secure community platform that really acts as a tremendous support space which we monitor to make sure that nothing unoured is happening there. And then I tell folks like some people say I don't know if I can swing either of those financially or I don't want to make that commitment. YouTube every day we have new content. But I would suggest that you check out our programs because if you are going through narcissistic relationship come see you might find that the discourse the conversation and the lessons are things that are opening your eyes in a way. also especially in healing program. It's a chance for you to

like really lean into your story by doing the journaling and other activities we do together in that program. And then you know if you go to our website we also have live events from time to time and all of that. So all of that's there. So we have levels and levels of different ways that people can do this. And of course my book it's not you is available and I have other books on the topic and that can also round out some of you know your healing journey. I don't know a single woman literally who has not read your book or doesn't own it. Oh, thank you. So the book is it's not you. Everyone should read it just to help themselves but help others who are caught up in such relationships. Dr. Romani, thank you for everything you do. It's an understatement to say that you have changed people's lives. But you certainly changed mine. So thank you again. Thank you so much Dr. Shafali.

It's always such a pleasure to see you. For everyone who's read Dr. Romani's book. So, I've heard about her. I'm sure you've learned so much from this conversation. I know I have. And don't forget to check out her best-selling book, *It's Not You*, and her two amazing membership programs. They are the Dr. Romani Network, which is full of amazing information that you can use in your daily relationships, and the incredible healing program, which is for survivors of narcissistic relationships. Check out both of them on her website and get all the information there. Thank you again for listening and I will see you on the next episode of parenting and you with me Dr.

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