

Not Sorry Works

The Real Question

Hard Conversations

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Casper ter Kuile [00:00:01] Vanessa, we've known each other 9 years - which does not feel actually as descriptive as how much I *feel* like I've known you, which is more like 20 or 25 - but one of the things that I love about having you as a friend is that I have learned from you to be more communicative in how to be my friend. Like: what it is that I need when I'm feeling something? Because I feel I feel like you do that really, really well. And it's something that is a skill. First of all being able to figure out for yourself what you need, and then to be able to communicate it, and then to receive it from people. There's many, many skills involved in all of that 'being friends' experience, and that's something we get to talk about a lot in today's episode with Lindsay.

Vanessa Zoltan [00:00:46] In this episode, we will be talking about an abusive relationship, so we just want to warn people to please take care of themselves. And if this does not feel like an episode that you can listen to, please do what you have to do. And we also want to just shout out a wonderful resource, which is the National Domestic Violence Hotline. You can always reach them at 800-799-7233, and we put a link in the show notes as well.

[Intro music begins]

Casper [00:01:13] I'm Casper ter Kuile -

Vanessa [00:01:15] - And I'm Vanessa Zoltan -

Casper [00:01:17] - And this is The Real Question. [Intro music fades out]

Vanessa [00:01:37] Today, we're joined by Lindsay Wilson. She's an epidemiologist working on her PhD, studying treatment guidelines for pregnant people who use opioids. She lives in Vancouver and loves talking about TV, and traveling when it's safe. Lindsay, thank you so much for joining us!

Lindsay Wilson [00:01:54] Well, I'm so excited to be here.

Vanessa [00:01:56] So can you tell us just a little bit about what brought you here?

Lindsay [00:02:00] Yeah, for sure! So, I guess kind of the gist of it, the short version, is that probably about three years ago at this point, I left what I now recognize as an abusive relationship. And at the time, I definitely thought... I was surprised to find how loyal I sort of felt to him as I left that, and part of that was me feeling like I can't really tell anybody exactly what happened. And so friends who were friends with both of us, I found myself being like, "no, no, it would be character assassination to tell them exactly what happened, so I'm just going to say that we're not friends anymore and that's it."

There was one friend in particular (who was a mutual friend of both of us), and he's kind of the one that I think about when I think about this sort of neutral position. And over time, as I've sort of worked through this, I've become increasingly not okay with the fact that he is still friends with my abuser. [affirmation] And I think what sort of crystallized this question for me was he is getting married this year. And he was like, "yeah, I'm definitely going to invite you." And I had the realization that he's going to invite both of us. And it became sort of more important to me to know that he knows what he is asking of me, if he's going to invite both of us to this wedding.

And he's tried to adopt kind of a willful ignorance thing, where he just doesn't ask. And so I guess my question really is whether to tell him exactly what happened, sort of dredge that up after a few years, or whether it's a kind of let that go, let him maintain that neutral position that he has tried to adopt over the last few years. And if I do tell him, how do I tell him?

Vanessa [00:03:31] First of all, I'm just so sorry that you were in that situation, and I'm really glad that you were able to get yourself out of it.

Lindsay [00:03:39] Thank you.

Vanessa [00:03:41] Can you walk me through the worst case scenario of telling your friend, and your worst case scenario of not telling him?

Lindsay [00:03:53] Yeah. I think the worst case scenario of telling him would be him choosing to continue to be friends with him. And I guess worst case scenario, also not necessarily believing me [affirmation] or sort of invalidating the extent of the abuse, versus I think the worst case scenario of not telling him is just continuing to have this sort of chasm between us where there's this big thing that we're never talking about. Yeah. And then going to a wedding with this person that I had hoped never to see again.

Casper [00:04:28] That's such a helpful question, Vanessa, because part of me is wondering what have other friends... or like, how have other friends reacted? Like, is that kind of cause for concern that folks would, you know, invalidate your experience or that they that they'd be like, "well, that's what happened to you, but I'm still really good friends with him and I'm not going to leave that friendship." Like, yeah - What happened with other friends that you did share the the whole story with?

Lindsay [00:04:52] Yeah, that's a great question. I think most of the friends who knew what was going on or the people who asked questions would then be like, *wow, of course I will never see this person again. I don't want people like that in my life.* But then there has been some element of people who I was less close with, people being like, *Oh wow, I had no idea he was like that. That sucks.* And then sort of continuing. But these are people who I'm less close with. The people who I consider to be my friends and my good friends have all sort of come down on my side of this, and no one has actively invalidated what I have said. And I also don't think this friend would do that in my heart of hearts.

Vanessa [00:05:32] Which changes the most likely worst case scenario, right?

Lindsay [00:05:37] Yeah. I think the most likely scenario would be him being empathetic and validating it, but also continuing to be friends with both of us. I think I could see that happening. [affirmation]

Casper [00:05:50] It was so interesting that you said he chose ignorance in that he hasn't asked questions about the relationship. Does he have a sense that things were bad and then he's kind of chosen to avoid it? Is that right?

Lindsay [00:06:03] Yeah, I think so. He was one of the ones that was sort of closest to both of us during the relationship where I feel like he kind of had an up close look at what was kind of going on, but was able to brush things off to a certain extent. And then following that it was like, "Yeah, I know that things were not great and I'm going to be here to support both of you." But at the time, to me it felt super mature and I was like, "what a case study in good friendship." And now I'm like, "man, this feels not great, actually."

Casper [00:06:31] What do you wish he had done instead?

Lindsay [00:06:34] I think I would have appreciated just him asking the question. Like, I think we have a tendency to think that people don't want to talk about things that are hard, especially when they're coming out of it. And I think he was trying to be sensitive and not bring up something that would be painful for me to talk about, but instead I was just sitting there being like, "please ask me. I want to tell you. Wouldn't it be great if you knew and we could talk about this openly instead of me feeling like I had to hide it because it's going to make you uncomfortable?" [affirmation]

Vanessa [00:07:05] So, Lindsey, you've said that there are sort of two reasons now that I'm hearing that you want to tell your friend. One is that you want him to know what he's asking of you by being in the same room as your ex at this wedding. But another thing that I'm hearing you say is: I want him to stop being friends with my ex.

Lindsay [00:07:25] You know, I think my instinct is to hope that he would say, "oh my God, I had no idea; I will never talk to him again. We are best friends forever" [laughs]. I think definitely that is what I would hope for, is that he would come down on the side of me. Yeah. And I think the choice is sort of an important part of it, where I want to feel like he has chosen my truth.

Vanessa [00:07:51] And is there a way for him, in your mind and heart, is there a way for him to believe your truth and stay friends with your ex?

Lindsay [00:08:01] I think there maybe would have to be in order for us to have any kind of relationship. I think I would have to be okay with the idea that maybe they still talk once in a while, but their friendship is not what it once was or something. Like, if there is a bit of a distancing at least, is something that I would like to see, as opposed to just everything's going on as normal. [affirmation]

Casper [00:08:26] You want to know that he understands and that he believes you and that that behavior of your abuser has consequences in their friendship. Yeah.

Lindsay [00:08:36] Yeah, and I think if things just continued as normal, that would feel pretty bad. It's like, well, then why did I tell you? Like, I did dredge this up, and why did I tell you?

Vanessa [00:08:46] So, Lindsay, the real question to me is not *should I tell my friend?*. That seems pretty clear to me, right? That you want to tell him. You want him to know how hard this wedding will be. Your friendship is kind of stuck because he doesn't know this thing about you. So the actual question to me now is: Is there a reaction that I can get from him that will make me feel good, and if not, do I stay friends with him? Or what happens if he reacts in a way that makes me feel bad?

Lindsay [00:09:27] Yeah. Yeah, and I think that that is probably the real question that we are asking is what does that look like if he doesn't give me the reaction that I want? And I guess what is the reaction that I want? And I think you're right; I think it is that I would love for him to be like, "I'll never speak to him again," but I don't know that that's a likely outcome.

Vanessa [00:09:47] Right. And so what response can you live with? [affirmation] So Lindsay, what is the first text that you've brought us?

Lindsay [00:09:57] Yeah, so the first one that I have brought is from Carmen Maria Machado, her incredible book *In the Dream House*. It was extremely important to me throughout this healing process. She goes into great detail into the ways in which she works through an emotionally abusive relationship, and she delves into lots of different sorts of genres to explore that in her own journey. And that was so incredibly helpful for me, just to hear someone else's experience. The line that stood out to me from there was: "abusers do not need to be, and rarely are, cackling maniacs. They just need to want something and not care how they get it."

Vanessa [00:10:35] What about this line speaks to you?

Lindsay [00:10:39] Yeah, I think sort of the biggest part of it is that this guy—and I think often abusers are like this—come across as very charming and funny and friendly and charismatic to people when you first meet them, and that was the case with my abuser. He very much comes off like that, and I think that feeds into this question of being believed and being validated where you're describing someone doing horrible things to you. And then I think there's an instinct to be like, "no, he's not like that," but he's not a cartoon character: he's a real person. And just because he doesn't look like maybe we would imagine a stereotypical abuser doesn't mean that he wasn't horrible. [affirmation]

Vanessa [00:11:21] So this quote sounds like something you want your friend who's having the wedding to know, right?

Lindsay [00:11:30] Yeah, definitely.

Vanessa [00:11:31] You're preemptively... like, this is something you might want on a flash card when you're having this conversation with your friend, because you're guessing he's going to say, *was he really an abuser? But he's such a nice guy*. And you can be like, *actually, abusers do not need....* Right? Is that - is that what this is for you? Is this sentence like armor?

Lindsay [00:11:55] Yeah. [laughter] I think the word 'preemptive' really struck me as you said that, Vanessa, where I really feel like it is me anticipating his pushback in advance and being like, *No! He's not a cackling maniac, but he's still a monster.* Yeah, definitely. I think that a flash card is probably a good idea. Yeah.

Casper [00:12:15] Well it feels like Vanessa, you're pointing to that word specifically, right? Because the way we label behaviors, I can imagine that the person who's between these two people who've had a messy breakup, right? Like, I'm seeing it from that perspective. They both made mistakes, right? There's ways in which you can tell that story where it's like, *I'm not taking sides. I love them both.* But you're insisting on a specific language to describe what happened. And it's not language that you use straight away, but it's patterns of behavior that you now look back on and say: that was abuse—and I'm going to use that word intentionally. And so it feels like that word specifically is the key to you being believed. Is that right?

Lindsay [00:12:56] I think so. And I think that was a word I really shied away from very intentionally at first. [affirmation] And I think that is something that a lot of people do, where I think we're all afraid to claim trauma in case it's not ours or something. And that was definitely my experience, where it took a while before I was willing to use the word abuse because I felt like such a loaded term and no one's going to believe that about this guy in particular. But I think reclaiming it has been important, and I think that's going to be important. And actually naming it instead of I think my instinct in this type of thing would be to be like, *I had a bad time and this guy sucks,* but I think naming it makes it way more powerful and is going to be an essential part of telling this friend.

Vanessa [00:13:41] Lindsay, correct me if I'm wrong, but this question just keeps shifting to me a little, and it sounds like what you want from your friend is for him to use this word, 'abuser.'

Lindsay [00:13:54] Yeah. And I think that, like, even hearing you say that, it feels like that would never happen. [affirmation] Like that feels like a stretch. It would be great, but it does feel like something that I can't picture happening very easily.

Vanessa [00:14:10] Could you be friends with someone who wasn't willing to use the language that you use?

Lindsay [00:14:18] I think it would kind of depend a little bit on what the... like, if someone said to me, *I don't think that that's him,* I think no, I think I would not be able to let that go. And if I was invalidated to that extent, then that would kind of be a deciding factor for me. I think if it felt like the beginning of a process that would ultimately lead to a distancing or an end to that friendship, maybe we could think about that. But it would definitely need to be clear to me that they recognize that this goes further than just 'this guy sometimes had a bad day.' [affirmation]

Casper [00:14:59] Lindsay, let me add another recipe to the menu book of, like: what if he says that *was* abuse, and I want to stay friends with him because I love him and I don't want him to do that ever again. And I want to help him.

Lindsay [00:15:18] Mhm.

Casper [00:15:18] Like, he both validates your experience and uses the language *and* wants to stay in relationship with this man.

Lindsay [00:15:26] Yeah, I think in that case, there would then be a follow-up conversation of: okay, now if you do in fact understand what has happened and appreciate what happened, you need to recognize that you can't invite us both to the same things, or you need to be willing to work with me on establishing boundaries around this. [affirmation]

Casper [00:15:47] Yeah. You have so clearly done so much work with... I mean, honestly, I'm just really... you're so clear, Lindsay. That comes across very, very clearly. Just what you need to feel safe, what you are asking of the people who you love and who love you. That clearly, to me, at least, indicates a huge amount of reflection and healing, and that doesn't happen easily, so I just want to acknowledge that because it doesn't just happen by itself.

Vanessa [00:16:20] Yeah, and... I don't know, I just think it's fair for us to demand things from each other. So I love what it seems as though you're circling in on with this quote, right, is, *I'm going to demand certain things of him. I'm going to demand that my friend acknowledge that my ex was an abuser. And if he doesn't, that's going to have consequences.*

Lindsay [00:16:43] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:16:44] I think that being a friend involves courage, and it sounds like you are demanding some courage from your friend.

Lindsay [00:16:51] Yeah, and I think that that's really a great way of putting it, is sometimes friendship demands courage and I think that is something that I am looking for that I hadn't necessarily tapped into, just like I am asking you to take a stand on this and do something that makes you uncomfortable. And I had to go through something very uncomfortable, and I think this is your moment to step up.

Vanessa [00:17:14] Right. And this is language we're learning across all sorts of spaces, right? It's not enough for you to not be racist; I need you to be anti-racist. It's not enough for you to not be an abuser; I need you to be anti-abuse.

Lindsay [00:17:28] Yeah, and I do like that we've tapped into this. I want him to use that language, because I do think that that dictates so much of what's going to come next. Where even if he says, 'I want to continue that relationship and I still want to be friends with this guy', I think that if he can own it and acknowledge it and say this was abuse, that's going to be an incredibly important part of us being able to move forward together.

Casper [00:17:56] I just keep seeing the connection, Lindsey, between what happened at the breakup and what might happen now, which is that—at least from what you've shared with us—our instinct is that he's going to be seeking a pathway where he can stay in a relationship with both of you and where he's not going to ask too many questions, because that's what he did last time. And he did it because he thought that was the right thing to do.

Like, I wonder if to help get towards the outcome that you're looking for, you might want to be more prescriptive of like: this is what I'm asking of you. And if this, then that. And if not this, then that. And not in a way where it's like, 'and this is a contract that if you break this contract to blah, blah, blah,' [laughter] but just to like help him know what you want from him. Because I think his instinct will be to do exactly the opposite of what you want. [laughter] And not because he doesn't care about you, but because that's how he knows how to care about you.

Lindsay [00:18:55] No, and I think that's incredibly insightful, where I do think that it was coming from a good place of: I am trying not to retraumatize you or hurt you by bringing this up with you, but that was, as you said, exactly the opposite of what I needed at the time. And I think giving sort of clear parameters of like: *here is how we need to move forward* will, I think, be incredibly helpful for both of us. [affirmation]

Casper [00:19:19] As you look back on how your friend navigated these two friends who had a break up (from his perspective), are you hurt by the way he did that?

Lindsay [00:19:30] I think now maybe a little bit. I think at the time I was very much, as I said, I was feeling like: this is a mature way to handle this. He's, you know, sitting squarely in the middle and doing a good job of being friends with both of us. But I think now it hurts me a little bit to think that he never followed up about it. Like, 'maybe this is what you needed at the time; how are you doing now?' could have been a helpful conversation, maybe a few months out, and that never came. And I think that's the part that hurts more, is that we've just never had a check-in really since then.

Casper [00:20:06] Can I challenge you on something you just said, Lindsay?

Lindsay [00:20:08] Yes, please.

Casper [00:20:09] Is it exactly what you needed at the time? What if he had come in all guns blazing and was like, 'this guy was abusing you.?'

Lindsay [00:20:20] Yeah, I think definitely there were times where I would have pushed back on that and said that's not what's going on here. And I think one of the biggest challenges for me in working through it, especially at the beginning, was this feeling of *that would never happen to me*. And I think that that is the experience for a lot of people who go through abuse, where I was like, *Well, I would never let that happen to me. Like, of course I would know not to let that happen*. Or I was using a lot of very like shame-y, judgmental language about myself. Where it was like, *I'm a feminist and I'm smart! That would never happen to me!* And then looking back, I'm like, Oh, no, that's not how that works. You can be as prepared as you want—or feel as prepared as you want—and that still can happen, because these people aren't always cackling maniacs.

Casper [00:21:07] Right. Right. I think, Lindsay, you're pointing, I mean, even beyond your own specific experience, to such a big part of friendship, which is like: when things happen in the moment we want people there, but it's not like it's suddenly done. That just feels like such an instructive message for how we can all be better friends to each other more generally. If your parent dies, it's not like I just want to not talk about it anymore after six months or six years, you know? Like, if I whatever, like anything that happens - because we're changing and *you*

have changed over these last three years and you want to talk about it, and that has never been invited in this friendship.

I mean, I'm hearing something really important there in what you want to communicate to him generally in the friendship as well, is like: *I want you to ask. Maybe not even just about this, but about all parts of my life*, you know? And not asking questions is the way in which we get made to feel small or invisible in a way. And it feels like maybe we want more curiosity from him, just in your friendship.

Lindsay [00:22:11] Yeah, I think that's right, and I agree. I think it's a bit of a way of making you feel like you're not heard. Or I think by not asking, it's suggesting you don't want to talk about it. And so I think by him not asking me about it, it doesn't leave any room for me to bring it up either.

Vanessa [00:22:31] Lindsay, I don't know if this is helpful or not, but I just want to share that I really see myself in your friend. I mean, I see myself in both of your shoes, right? Like, I don't go around thinking about how I want people to ask about whatever big thing is going on in my life, but when they ask, I'm like, 'Oh my God!', right, and it feels like such a nice relief to be able to talk about it.

And then I also really see myself in the friend who's like, 'I don't want to pry. And like, if she wants to talk about it, she'll tell me.' Which isn't to say that you weren't right to be hurt, right, like, that's hurtful. But do you feel like it's fair to say that potentially that was hurtful but not *wrong* of him? Because it seems to me that so much of friendship is just like teaching each other how to love us well.

Lindsay [00:23:21] [affirmation] Yeah, and I think that that's very insightful too, where I think part of my hesitation in bringing it up is that I'm struggling a bit with how *not* to make it sound like an accusation. [affirmation] Where I'm not necessarily saying, 'You should have done this differently.' [affirmation] It's more, 'This is what I need now.' [affirmation] And so I think that that's definitely part of it, where I would like to have that conversation not being fueled by an accusation or saying you did something wrong, because I don't necessarily think he did do something wrong. I think at the time I just needed someone to show me that things could continue in a normal way. And so probably that was valuable at that time, even if it's not really serving me anymore.

Vanessa [00:24:00] Yeah. Alerting him to a really big shift.

Lindsay [00:24:04] Yeah.

Casper [00:24:05] Which is such a generous thing to do as a friend! Like, you don't want to make him feel bad. That is not the point of sharing this information. Oh, I'm just seeing how much care you have about this friendship. That's really... that's really beautiful.

Lindsay, should we look at our second text?

Lindsay [00:24:23] Yes, definitely. [transition music plays]

Casper [00:24:45] So what did you choose as your second text to help us think this through?

Lindsay [00:24:50] So the second one I think does really speak to this idea of me not wanting it to feel like an accusation and not wanting to say anything to push this friend away, and it comes from the incredible Roxane Gay, who I also am obsessed with. She has her memoir called *Hunger: A Memoir of My Body*, and the line is, "Part of the reason relationships and friendships can be so difficult for me is because there is a part of me that thinks I have to get things just right. I have to say the right things and do the right things, or I won't be liked or loved anymore."

Casper [00:25:24] So why did you choose this text and this quote in particular?

Lindsay [00:25:29] I think specifically it's because I am afraid of the consequences a little bit or it's like I'm not just having a normal conversation. It's like I'm going to bring this incredibly vulnerable piece of me to you and sit here while you react to it. And I think it just feels like such a vulnerable conversation to be having that it feels like I'm giving him a lot of power to potentially say, 'I reject what you're saying and we're not friends anymore.' Which is an extreme, of course, but I think that that's what is at the heart of my hesitation.

Casper [00:26:05] It's such a strong line. "*I have to say the right things and do the right things or I won't be liked or loved anymore.*" That's a lot of pressure in each interaction, and especially in something like this where you're addressing something of significant consequence.
[affirmation]

Vanessa [00:26:26] Lindsay, the other thing that I'm hearing in this is how high the stakes are for you of getting this conversation just right. [affirmation] That you're like: I want him to not feel accused, but I also want him at the end of it to say the word 'abuser', right? Like part of what Gay is pointing us to here is the perfectionism, right, and the really high and specific expectations.

If you didn't quite know what you needed from the conversation, right, it might still feel high stakes, but not quite as fraught. But you have specific hopes and specific desires that makes this feel—as if it wasn't high stakes enough!—even higher stakes.

Lindsay [00:27:12] Yeah, and I think the stakes just feel so high where I have definitely attached additional weight to it, where I think I'm framing it as *if this doesn't go exactly as I want it to, this is just another thing that this abusive ex has taken from me*. And I think that that's part of what's complicating it, where it's like: at least this way I still have him in my life, versus if this conversation goes poorly, is that just another casualty of our relationship?

Casper [00:27:40] That's big. Because now suddenly this isn't about you and your friend; this is about you and your abusive ex [affirmation], and this conversation is a test of who actually has the power in your life at this point, three years on. That's a very different thing.

Lindsay [00:27:57] Yeah, and I think saying 'who has the power' makes it sound maybe like... I guess we've talked a bit about it maybe being a test for this guy, of who is he going to pick, but I do think that there is some element of me being like: am I going to come out of this having lost even more? And would that, you know, set me back or something? Would that make me

feel like it's bringing things to the surface again in ways that I thought I had worked through or something? [affirmation]

Vanessa [00:28:27] I mean, my other question is just: is there a way to lower the stakes of this for you? Not because it isn't high stakes, but just for your mental health. [affirmation] Because it's a lot to put on one conversation. [Affirmation] And so do you think that there's a way for you to be like, 'I'm not going to get things just right, and I'm not going to say exactly the right things, and he's not going to say exactly the right things, and that doesn't mean that I won't be liked or loved anymore.'

Lindsay [00:29:03] [affirmation] And I think that's going to be an essential part of it, is trying to lower these stakes - where I think in my mind, I view it as like, *okay, I have to plan for this one big conversation* [affirmation] *and this is make or break time for our friendship versus this could be an ongoing conversation and we could work through this over time and this could be a back and forth*, where I think I definitely have it built up in my head of like, okay, when do I do it? How do I do it?

Casper [00:29:31] Okay, but there's two parts to that. I love this, but there's also this wedding which has a date. [affirmation] When is the wedding?

Lindsay [00:29:39] Sometime this summer. Nebulous date.

Casper [00:29:40] Okay, so it's a matter of months. I love where Vanessa was going with this, because I feel like there's two parts. There's one part which is like, can we take this from one moment, one perfect conversation, one decision moment-like, you know, the whole stage is set; the world is watching [laughter]-can we take that and make it more of a chapter in a book, so there's like multiple pages, not just one page?

But then with that is this very specific thing of: this wedding is happening, I need to choose (A) whether to go or not, and (B) if I'm going, what's happening around me? And are there ways that, you know, this friend can make decisions about what happens in this physical space? So I'm wondering if there's... what can you ask of him for the wedding specifically that would make that decision right-sized in terms of the fullness of what you need to tell him in that moment, but not to put pressure on him doing everything that will hopefully come, you know, over months or weeks of conversation.

Lindsay [00:30:45] Yeah, I think that's a compelling way of reframing it. It's more like this is the beginning of a conversation and just ensuring that my needs and safety are accounted for at this specific event and then we can make it into a bigger conversation after that. I think that that's an interesting way of reframing it. I think I get a bit hung up on how to even introduce the conversation if it's not going to turn into this bigger thing of like, here's why this makes me extremely uncomfortable. But I think that there probably is some sort of middle ground there where it's like this is at least opening it up.

Vanessa [00:31:22] How would it feel to say to your friend, 'I love you, and I'm so sad to say this, but I don't think I can come to your wedding. My ex is going to be there. He was abusive. I think this is the longer conversation you and I need to have, but I just want you to know I can't come to your wedding', and make that decision your decision rather than his decision. Would

that feel like taking ownership of it, or would that feel like *God, I'm just expecting so little of him and my abuser keeps taking shit away from me. He's even taking away my friend's wedding!*

Lindsay [00:31:57] Yeah, I think that's the part I get hung up on. Or I'm like, 'I want to go! How come he gets to go instead of me?' So I think that I do get a bit stuck on that, of like, *Oh, he keeps getting to do fun things!* So I think that part catches me up a little bit, but I do feel compelled by this idea of presenting it as more of like a decision statement of like, 'I have decided this because he abused me,' rather than floating it out there and just letting it hang while he has to respond, and I have like all of the weight of his potential responses just hanging over me. I think there is something definitely compelling in me framing it as like, 'Here's the deal, I am going to do this. We can talk about that specific thing,' as opposed to everything is riding on his reaction.

Vanessa [00:32:47] Right. And if that is something you decide to do, like the day of the wedding planning a super fun event for yourself and another friend. Being like, 'This is the excuse for us to go out and get those tattoos! And it's not going to be the day I miss my friend's wedding. It's going to be the day that I got this Snoopy tattoo!' [laughter]

Lindsay [00:33:09] Finally!

Vanessa [00:33:10] I've been waiting! [laughter]

Casper [00:33:14] Vanessa, I love that you're pointing to other friends, and it's suddenly hitting me that this quote is plural—relationships and friendships. And you know, Lindsay, this may be late in the day to ask this, but are there other friends who don't know who you wish did know about the abuse that you experienced?

Lindsay [00:33:31] Not really. I feel like it has only been sort of a challenge for people who are friends with both of us, and many of my friends are just my friends and it was easier to have those conversations. And then many of our friends who were mutual friends were like, 'Perhaps I should explore why this was such a drastic cut-off and why she never wants to see him again. Perhaps we should have a conversation.' And in those cases, people sort of unanimously came down on, 'Yeah, of course, I don't want to be friends with someone like this—'

Vanessa Oh, that's wonderful!

Lindsay —I'm cutting that person out as well.' Which is, yeah, which was incredibly validating and special, and this is really the one person who I'm like, 'Oh, you're just the one holdout I got to get.' Yeah.

Casper [00:34:15] I ask that question because one of the themes in Gay's book is that sense of wanting to tell her story to be seen and to feel free, and it feels like you are actually super free, which is awesome. It's just this like one piece of string [laughing] and it's just, you know, I don't want to mischaracterize your friend as a piece of string [laughter], but just that sense of like, this is less of a huge mountain that needs to be climbed and it's more like the last of the dishes that need to be done after you have cleaned up the entire house. Like, you can do this! I guess is what I'm saying, because you've done it so much already. [affirmation] And so it's

just like walking into whatever you choose to do with a sense of, like, incredible confidence in yourself, because it's just one more. And I just see it as such a testament to the work that you've done in the relationships that you have.

Lindsay [00:35:12] Yeah, I love that analogy so much where it's like it is kind of the one last thing that trips me up from time to time where I'm even forced to think about that ex in a sort of day-to-day mundane sort of way, where everything else I have kind of done that house cleaning and then there's just this one last person and it's like, 'Ugh, you keep bringing this back for me.' And I do feel like it is that one that you just keep putting off, never wanting to actually deal with that last chore.

Casper [00:35:44] So in fact, whenever you choose to have the conversation, *that's* the freeing moment, I'm suddenly seeing. Like it's less about his response. It's: you have done the thing that you can do. And so he can join you in that—or he or he won't or it'll take him time—but it's not really about him, it's about you, because you've had the conversation that you've wanted to have or you shared the information that you want to share. That feels so different to me than about him choosing one thing or another.

Lindsay [00:36:16] Yeah, I love that. I think that's a great reframing of... and it also feels more empowering than just like, *let's dangle this out there and let him take my feelings in his hands and maybe crush them*. But it definitely feels like more of a *I am controlling that narrative or I am owning the conversation*, and that feels definitely less scary and more empowering.

Vanessa [00:36:39] Yeah. I love that too, right? Of taking control of this and trying to the best of your ability to lower the pressure on yourself, that there's a right way to do it and a right way for him to respond, right? There isn't a right way for you to do this, and you still will deserve to be liked and loved by him, even if you don't do it in the right way, because there's no right way. You were put in a bad situation, and there's no good way out of a bad situation.

Lindsay [00:37:14] Yeah.

Vanessa [00:37:16] Lindsay, would it be fair for me to say that to some extent you've also decoupled this conversation from the wedding, at least a little bit? They may be hanging on to each other by hinge? Does that feel good, or—

Lindsay [00:37:32] Yeah, I think so. I think the wedding was almost more of, like, the catalyst for this, [affirmation] where I think I was sitting there feeling like, *oh, yeah, like I'm totally good!* and then being confronted with this idea of like, *oh, you guys might be in the same room together. How does that feel?* And I found myself just being so anxious and feeling like I was very much back in kind of the early days of working through this. [affirmation] And it took me a little bit to be like, 'Why am I feeling like this?' And then I realized it was this impending dread, and I think that acted as sort of as a catalyst where I was like, 'Oh, we need to talk about this.' [affirmation]

One of the things that has been really sort of illuminating coming out of this conversation is just I don't think I had gotten it down to: *I want him to use the word 'abuser'*. And I think that it does feel more clear to me in terms of being able to control my own role in this conversation and what I'm looking to get out of it, it feels like having an end point or having something that

I'm looking for just makes it feel a little bit more clear and less nebulous, where I think we can work toward this outcome if I know what that is that I am working toward, rather than being like, 'I don't know what I want, I just need to tell you.' Like, I think having that outcome makes it feel a little bit more manageable.

Vanessa [00:38:50] And I just got to say, as a friend, I *love* when my friends tell me how to love them!

Casper [00:38:56] 100%. 100%! Because he *does* care about you. We know that. And so, again, we can't control him, but like, he cares about you and he wants, he wants the best for you. So I feel hopeful about the friendship in the future, for sure.

Vanessa [00:39:12] And you've worked so hard to figure out what you want, right? So this is also a celebration of that, right? Because often we don't know how to help our friends, in part because our friends don't know what kind of help they need, right? It's like, 'I'm sad and I just got dumped and I'm sad and I don't know what to do' or, you know, 'I just didn't get this big promotion', and I don't know what will make me feel better. And you're like, 'Nope, I *know* what will make me feel better.' [affirmation] And even just knowing what to ask for, I feel like, is a huge accomplishment. [affirmation]

Lindsay [00:39:48] Yeah, that makes me feel hopeful too, where I think once he kind of has this information, I think that he does care about me and is going to want to work with me on this. And it feels like getting through that one last conversation or getting through this one last hurdle feels like an important part of moving forward and not being stuck in this anymore. Like it feels like an important sort of final-ish step in like this chapter of this relationship.

Casper [00:40:17] Which I hope you celebrate that, Lindsay. This is a monumental feat of healing and freedom that you have been working towards in these last three years, and I hope you celebrate it and let the people who love you celebrate it with you because it's a huge thing. It's a huge thing.

Lindsay [00:40:34] Thanks.

Casper [00:40:35] Well, Lindsay, thank you so much for sharing your question with us and working through it together. I admire you so much and I really hope it goes well when you choose to have a chat with him. [affirmation]

Lindsay [00:40:45] Thank you. And this has been so helpful. I really appreciate both of your insights on this.

Casper [00:40:54] [music fades in] As a maxim this week, we have a wonderful quote by Antonio Machado from Jillian Rutherford in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which is, "traveler, there is no path. The path is made by walking."

Vanessa [00:41:07] You've been listening to The Real Question. Please check out our Patreon at Patreon.com/RealQuestionPod. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. You can also follow us on Instagram and Facebook at Real Question Pod and Twitter at The Real Q Pod.

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