

Ian: *So it's my great pleasure to welcome Alex from Cluj-Napoca in the northern part of Romania. I visited Cluj-Napoca a couple of times and I really enjoyed my stay there. When we first met a few years ago you introduced yourself to me as an entrepreneur and since then you became certified as a trainer in Nonviolent Communication and we've had the opportunity to spend some time together. I was really impressed with the quality of connection between you and your wife. There was a sweetness and a partnership there I sensed a lot of love and respect between the two of you. I also spent some time with you and your daughter and I really enjoyed watching how you both relate to your daughter.*

So I was really curious to learn more about some of the secrets to the success of your relationship - as I see it from the outside.

I'm wondering, how do you make the big decisions between you and your wife.

Alex: I have a very similar description about you and your wife and daughter. When I got back from that retreat when I first met you, I said how I met this wonderful family, they interact so nicely and it's something I'm looking up to. In a way it might seem you need to have these glasses to recognise it.

Ian: *yeah I think that's absolutely right. We can see in others what is missing in ourselves or that we have ourselves.*

Alex: Or what we aspire to, which is kind of the same.

So - taking decisions. I just want to tell you the last experience we had. I know this interview should be eternal and not in the context of today but I think it's important to say we're in June 2020, a few months into Coronavirus and Covid-19 is still very present in our lives. We just had already five or six weeks in the apartment and we remembered our old dream of moving to the countryside or a house. Now it was so obvious not having a separation from each-other during this isolation in the apartment and it would be very different if we were living in a house.

So this issue came back again, this master strategy of moving to a house that would solve so many of our needs. We had a conversation kind of expressing regrets. In fact it was not exactly a conversation more like dropping in there comments like, 'Oh ... You know, if only we' expressing regrets but not really having a conversation about it. So it was just hanging there.

Then I have the opportunity to test a mediation game from GROK. I said OK well let's give them feedback I'd like to see it with something real. So I proposed to my wife let's do this using this GROK game and talk about this topic which is a big decision - do we move or not. It was a process that went on for two days because the first day it got a little bit late. This mediation process, even if it was a game, was very similar to what we had in the past. Which was not knowing that we were actually talking about needs. So we were talking about our principles. What brought us together? What do we want to do for our life together? And that's how we usually start a conversation.

And now with NVC (Nonviolent Communication) we realise we always talked about our needs. If we get really grounded in that realm of needs then strategies come very easily and alignment and support for keeping this decision is also very strong and it's something we commit to. It's not something I give up now, in order to win the next time. It's not about keeping score. So we take big decisions in the same way that we take small, every day decisions. Just being aware of serving ourselves as individuals and serving ourselves as a family.

lan: That sounds like you take the decision to a deeper level so you're not just staying on the surface. You're kind of diving in quite deep into what's important to you both. The picture I get is the decisions then kind of make themselves.

Alex: Yes even with this decision with the house, we look that certain needs will not be fulfilled if we do move to a house. We don't know yet, but probably some other needs will be fulfilled. So we realise how can we in this context meet the best of our needs. We got very wonderful strategies which took us very gracefully throughout Covid-19. You cannot say that you actually like it, but we saw we did a lot of work on ourselves and we literally got out stronger then when we got in.

So I think this matter of not just debating about a solution and finding reasonable arguments to convince the other which always leaves some scars. Or you just use not who you are but how good you are as a negotiator or as a sales person. Looking to this deeper level we really take into consideration that we want to be together. We're in this for the long run so it's no use to trick the other party into submitting to my suggestion or to convince the other.

lan: This keeping this 'wanting to be together' - I really love this expression this wanting to be together. It's a conscious decision to be together that comes from a wanting. How do you keep that wanting, that desire to be together, the attraction for each-other? How do you keep those alive?

Alex: I'm not sure if we're mainstream or not with our perspective but I have to admit that I don't recognise it that often when we talk with other couples. This concept of having to do something to keep the flame going.

My perception is after 16 years together, we definitely got together because we like each other. We got married because we were attracted to one another. We did not marry after one month, we married after 3 years so we kind of went through different stages. Definitely the desire and passion was there sometime, right?

Then you see that life just flows. It's so natural. It's not like you need to put logs on the fire but just not to stop the fire and not to prevent the desire to manifest. That's the work that we do - not looking for it but rather cleaning up or rather not to have something to prevent or stop it, because naturally it happens.

So we have this type of cleaning the things that might deter us from our path or our desire to be together. we have warning signals quite often and in this way we see that the desire and the passion and we just don't have to work on it is. It just comes as life itself.

Ian: Sounds like it's a river flowing through the relationship and and you just have to clear away the debris that might stop it flowing

Alex: Exactly. Or like dams in the river.

Ian: How did starting a family impact that? In my experience and talking to other couples, starting a family does introduce particular challenges in this area and I'm wondering how did that appear for you? How did you navigate that?

Alex: It was a difficult time I have to admit the first few years since our daughter came with us on this journey. It was somehow, not consciously, but what helped us was that I had my baby too. My wife had our baby which I was not necessarily invited that often between her and my daughter. I started a new business the exact year when she came to us. So I had my mind and my attention put into that. I saw the connection in terms of how this would provide and support for our family. I realised that for the time being, that's my role and even a few years later I realised that those first two years of our daughter helped me be, not so much of a father, but as a better husband. My role in educating my daughter in the first two years was to be a better husband for my wife.

Then, of course, as my daughter grew up our relationship changed and now we have our own time. We have the Adventure Time, the Exploration Time. It's very different. Now it's enriching our relationship. One thing that did not put us on a track of considering our daughter as an obstacle to our relationship, considering her age, we try to involve her any time to take part in the decisions that we make. So as much as possible, according to her age of course, I will try to get her opinion and to see that this is us together. So it's not me and my wife and she is somebody who is an obstacle. In saying that let's not forget that she is passing by. She's not here to stay. Let's give her the best that we can in terms of education and resources and of love and care - but we know that she's leaving so not to get too much attached to her.

Ian: So you're already preparing for that. In a way.

Alex: Yes. It's more like the idea rather than the fact. I know things will be different when she's twenty or something.

Ian: You say that you have time with your daughter and she's now 10 years old, so those first two years were quite some time ago. It sounds like you found some ways to devote time for you and her. How do you do the same with your wife? How do you create that couple relationship time?

Alex: When we met I was working mainly at the weekends. So leaving Friday to Sunday -when she was free. So she was working during the week. This carried on for quite some

years. We didn't have the weekend like most couples have for themselves. Rather than see this as an obstacle, my wife started a time in the evening, no matter how tired we were, just the two of us to talk. Just to know who you are, where you are, what's on your mind. I just want to see and hear your world.

It's not to control, not to teach you anything - which was actually my bad habit to try to solve her issues which I stopped some time ago. Rather just to know each other. Even if throughout the day or throughout the week we barely see each other and don't talk that often, having this time was an anchor in our relationship. It was a matter of profound intimacy about another human being not just as a man and woman or a husband and wife. Having that, according to our phases in our life this habit did not serve us anymore so we changed to having our Wednesday's as our weekend. So Wednesday was off work not doing anything other than going to the movies, having a walk in the park. Things like people do at the weekend.

Ian: Wednesday was your date day?

Alex: Yes. We're not getting stuck with a strategy but rather looking for the best way to meet our need for connection looking at our life situation. Putting aside Covid-19 period, we have a tour of restaurants in Cluj - every time something new. We even had a joke that we can have a blog where we write experiences and curate all the restaurants in Cluj. So we have that as a habit. It feels like a date and we even sometimes go from home and sometimes we go for a date and the other is taking us to a secret place. It's fun. It might sound silly but it's something that sparks having play and having some playfulness in our relationship. Then we like board games and there some hard emotions might stir up. We play with some friends and also in the family.

Also what we like, what we really enjoy is cooking but we are doing cooking in a different way. She's ordering me what to do in the kitchen. I say "tell me what to do" and whatever she says I'm doing. For me, recognising myself more as an alpha leader and pushing things in my regular life, this is a way seeing the other side and seeing another type of leadership and how we can things together. It's something we can enjoy.

Actually we don't need very special things. That's what I realised. I just talked with her a couple of days ago that you can have sacred moments in the most basic and simple everyday things. How we do the everyday simple things, we do the big grandiose moments of my life. We don't search for big celebrations or big events but rather noticing how I see her in the morning when we wake up as I haven't seen her for the last 12 hours. These things I think are more important than the big events

Ian: I love this picture that I'm getting of bringing the sacred, and also the love and joy of being together, into the day-to-day stuff. It's not about the big things like big plans or trips or spending lots of money - it's in the day to day the small things like preparing food together or everyday sitting down and talking to each other and sharing what's going on. I love this picture. I'm wondering with this communication. It sounds like your communication is working in many different forms and in many different ways. You've talked about decision making,

you've talking about sharing. How has Nonviolent Communication added to the quality of your communication - if it has - I'm assuming that it has. In what ways has it supported your relationship?

Alex: I think I mentioned before that this realisation and this awareness that we talk about needs. This awareness of needs brought us a lot of clarity. In that way, it's very rare hearing us having a conversation about "you don't do that" or blaming the other for doing something. Even if it happens, the next second we realise that's not the way to go. So we look at the needs. We're glad that both of us have this awareness - so if one of us is losing his temper the other one is present to bring us back. So that's one level.

Another level about our relationship which was the conflict times which was something like me raising my voice or slamming the door or for her to start crying and stop talking. It was very frustrating for both of us. As we developed our understanding of Nonviolent Communication we came to the point where we can have a conflict with an open door, which means our daughter can hear us. It means we are not ashamed or afraid of anything that this conflict will bring out there. There are emotions there and there might be some decibels going up, but with the help of Nonviolent Communication and awareness of expressing our feelings and empathizing and listening to one another we can go through a conflict much faster and with very sustainable results. That for us is huge.

lan: So I'm wondering about your life as parents. You've talked a little about how you are relating and how your wife is relating to your daughter who's 10 now. I'm curious what are the most important things for you, what are the foundational principles for you of being parents

Alex: When she was pregnant I saw some TeD talk and we realised how school had left a mark on us. Actually we missed until very late the school of life. That's something we promised to do for our child. I don't think we knew at that time we had a daughter. And that was to show her, to teach her but mainly to live a healthy lifestyle - to know about how to keep herself healthy, to care about herself, know about herself and how to share her gifts with the world.

This was something we still craved as young adults. We realised, Oh man, if I knew those things earlier that would help me so much right now. That's something that we had on our minds to keep our child healthy and happy and to teach her these principles by living them. So through that we kept that line somehow.

Even through this Covid we kept that line so we started for example, some apartment gymnastics and saw our daughter doesn't like it so much. I said, you know, if we force her that would be the wrong approach. How about we just show up, she sees a model and the time will come when she'll see the benefits and she'll do it from her own calling. We saw this thing through so many expectations as a parent you have for your child. To read faster, to read better, to clean after herself, or herself with things of hygiene. We realised if we push, nothing happens. If we just encourage and support her, the time will come when she will do

those things we were so eager for her to do 2 years ago. And it's no different if she does it now or then - but actually it is different because now she believes in it.

That's why I think the third guiding principle for us is no matter what we try to show her or teach her, first of all let's live it. Let's be aligned with what we're asking her that's better. So if she's staying too much on her tablet, let's check our time on our devices. This was quite a big deterrent for major conflicts with our daughter. She's literally doing in her own world what she's seeing from us.

Ian: *Also this removes the hypocrisy of parenting where we are telling our children to do one thing and we're doing the opposite. I'm getting a picture of being very aligned with your wife on how you raise your daughter. Was it always like that or was there a process that you needed to go through to align what was important for you as parents?*

Alex: Right now I can say that we have a disagreement about how much effort our daughter should do in scoring good grades at school. Even if both she and I were A grade students and top of the class, both of us realised that what we truly learnt and helps us to help other people - we can call jobs or business - was learnt on our own after school or after the school was over. Self-development.

So here is the debate between us which is very present between us. My belief is that if my daughter doesn't really want to study geometry then let her be. She's passionate about drawing. She can be a great designer someday and she doesn't need geometry or maybe she does. I don't know. My wife goes the other way and says creativity is based on very solid foundation. She needs to know the abc's. If she doesn't understand the basics she can't be creative in more complex things. Rationally I agree with her, but then when I see she is putting so much patience with her explanations over and over again and still my daughter is resisting.

I'm cheering for both. I'm saying go on Anna, speak for yourself. Or Raluca, please be patient because you're doing the right thing. I'm looking from outside as a trainer where I don't like to speak or teach people who don't want to be there. This is one principle that applies to a lot of things in our life. If it doesn't bother me, and the other one is willing to do it or she likes it, then let her do it. So it doesn't bother me because I see the progress. I'm staying present and not abandoning.

Right now she's just had a week of tests - every day she had a test. And it's obvious that it's 20% difference just being fully present to the task. If she's just fully present it's like a 60 to 80% jump just like that. Last night we had this conversation because yesterday she was a bit disappointed. She said, *"Oh! I didn't see that"*. I thought of a story because I like metaphors and to bring myself into this context to help her. So I asked what's her favourite food and she said it's sushi. I said, *"How about next time when you eat sushi you take half a byte, and you savour it and you like it and the other half you throw away. How would that be for you?"* She said, *"No! You don't throw away sushi!"*. So I said it's the same with this test. When you have it, it's just 30 or 40 minutes. Just enjoy it and stay there as much as possible. Maybe there are some pieces that you don't know and that's just normal. You're going to learn them. But

at least what you can eat, do it until the end. Like sushi. So today she had a test and she came out storming through the door saying I ate all the sushi. She got a score close to 90% but even before she knew the score she had a satisfaction of her being present there at the test and enjoying it.

So coming back to your original question, I think we are quite aligned with our principles. You know deep down we vote in for the same party, cheer for the same team. We kind of like the same games and even some of the same books. So we know on our core we are very similar. Even if people who meet us think that we are very different - deep down we are similar. It's important to see that and notice that our strategies complement each other. At the right moment I can be of support and at the right time she can be a great support and we know the common purpose.

Ian: So I'm going to use this river metaphor again as the picture I'm getting is that you as a couple and as parents are a single stream but from time to time you branch off and go on parallel tracks. The river itself has space for both. the story that you were telling about your daughter, it sounded to me like there is no fundamental misalignment, you have different approaches but you're both bringing both of them at the same time with enough space for both.

Alex: Yes. And I mentioned this is one the core things that helped us a lot in whatever we define as harmony. I think it's between in general people but now we're talking about couples. In the early stages of our relationship and even since then we are very aware of it, is not getting stuck behind any evaluations like this is a woman's job or this is what men have to do or anything like that. Our principle is let's look at what one person likes to do and that person who has the fulfillment to do, that let that person do it. If it is not something that either of us enjoy but it's something important let's see if one of us is not bothered by it. If it's a thing that both of us are bothered by, then let's see if we can delegate it or eliminate it.

I can give an example of how we clean our clothes. So we just have a bin where we put the dirty clothes. My wife enjoys to separate them by colour and put a certain amounts in the washing machine with the right program. I'm quite tech savvy but the washing machine is still a mystery to me. As soon as the washing cycle is over it's my pleasure to take the clothes out and put them on the hanger. It has become something that me and my daughter is doing and it becomes our own thing. If my wife is putting the clothes to dry I realised that it's so 'bad'. Then we take the clothes and I like to fold them and separate them - my wife doesn't like that at all. Even if I don't like it, I can iron my shirts. It takes me about 30 to 35 minutes - it's not a joke, it is literally how long it takes me. I'm not skillful, is not like I hate it, it's just that's how I know how to do it. And my wife, of course, she irons 3 or 4 shirts in 30 minutes. She's doing the ironing not because it's the woman job to do it, it's if you see through all this process each one of us is doing something for the common purpose. So it's not like "It's your clothes you should clean them". It's the same with cleaning, with cooking. It's the same with education for Anna. The same with how we spend money. All these things.

Ian: Sounds like you have everything synchronised and integrated. I guess not everything and you mentioned some things where there are differences. It sounds overall like a well oiled machine.

Alex: Yes it works

Ian: I've got one final question for you. Tips and tricks. If you could give three quick tips for a successful relationship from your experience, what would they be. Like 3 one-liners?

Alex: The first one is to really know one another. This started from my university thesis which was on the role of positive illusions in couple relationships. It just shows if we don't have the ability to construct images or illusions in order to fill in the holes, you cannot have in the first interaction with another person - we would not procreate. We need this to have the chemistry to do the things for us.

This might be useful in the beginning but if you really want to have a relationship put love aside. Take love as a bonus. Really know the other person and see if you can accept to live together and if you can live together even with the things that you don't like in the other person. So know thyself and the other person in a very detailed way in order to see if I will not love this person, I would still like to spend time with him or her and they would be my best friend. In a way that's one of the most important things to build on.

The second one is not to get stuck in the past and to always re-evaluate and adapt to where you are right now. To take into consideration that even right now, at this moment in our lives, we're not helping each other to go along. It doesn't have to be separation or divorce but even this choice should be a conscious one that we're not supporting each other anymore. If you always check. It can be a ritual once a year to ask would I marry you today if I know you how I know you now. If you have doubts about it then have a really serious conversation, then we can choose to either fix it or lift us up.

The third is something that glues us is to find ways to truly communicate. I have to admit when I was a former communication trainer when I came across non-violent communication I didn't realise that I knew so little about communication. Even if you don't want to have a career in communication look at different models of communication. Find one that's suitable and that helps you to keep the constant contact and energy flowing between the two of you.

Ian: On that note I would like to give you a big thank you. For me this was fascinating and I just love this conversation. It was something really striking for me and I'd like to take away and think about and apply it in my relationship. So thank you for your time, your energy and your heart.

Alex: Thank you for the invitation, it was really fun.